

Exploring How People Express Their Identities During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Introduction: Work-from-home (WFH) fashion headlines have been ubiquitous during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to a survey conducted by the National Bureau of Economic Research, about half of the U.S. population worked from home in 2020. This statistic includes 35.2% who reported that they were previously commuting and have recently switched to working from home (Brynjolfsson et al., 2020). Some workers have chosen to wear casual garments to virtual meetings, while others have continued to wear formal, professional attire due to dress code policies (Murray, 2020). How do workers decide what to wear when they work from home? Will the recent spate of WFH arrangements help to establish new dress codes and protocols? As the struggle to understand this new work environment unfolds, some employees might experience a fashion identity crisis. However, others might turn to sustainable choices that align with their values now that daily work practices have changed. The purpose of this study is to explore whether WFH clothing can reinforce sustainability practices while also leading to fashion identity crises among employees during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research Framework: Dress has been recognized as a non-verbal communicator of personal traits as well as a visual symbol of identity (Kang & Sklar, 2011). Kwon (1994) argued that there is a direct correlation between dress and self-perception, especially in terms of occupational attributes. People who identify as being properly dressed perceive themselves to be more professional, responsible, competent, intelligent, knowledgeable, trustworthy, efficient, reliable, hardworking, and honest than those who are not.

Adam and Galinsky (2012) established the theory of enclothed cognition, which proposes that the symbolic meaning of clothing can affect the wearer's psychological processes and behavioral tendencies. Therefore, clothing can influence the way people think, perceive, and function. Hence, enclothed cognition was used as a theoretical framework to understand how employees select clothing for their new WFH environments during the COVID-19 pandemic and how WFH clothing affects the worker's sustainable clothing values and sense of identity.

Research Method: Data were collected through an online survey created in Qualtrics. Survey participants were recruited by using snowball sampling. The survey was distributed to individuals aged 18 years and older who were working from home or had previously worked from home during the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey consisted of both close-ended and open-ended questions. The items for the five-point Likert scale questions used in this survey were adapted from previous research (Bjerke et al., 2007; Kang et al., 2011; Sklar & DeLong, 2012).

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A total of 153 responses were received. After screening the data, 147 responses were used for this study. The respondents were mainly women (95.1%), and the mean age was 25.8. The majority of respondents (74.8%) were from Generation Z (born between 1997-2012) and 15% were millennials (born between 1981-1996). The respondents identified as Caucasian (79.6%), Asian (12.2%), African American (4.8%), and Other (3.4%). Regarding a geographical region and division in the United States that was identified by the U.S. Census Bureau (The United States Census Bureau, 1994), 58.3% of respondents lived in the South, 36.1% lived in the Northeast, and others (8%) lived in the Midwest or the West. The respondents were engaged in different career fields such as retail trade (22.1%); educational services (11.7%); arts, entertainment, or recreation (9%); accommodation or food services (6.2%); scientific or technical services (3.5%); and “other” occupations (35.2%). Prior to COVID-19, 92.5% of the respondents had never worked from home regularly.

Results and Discussion: 69% of the respondents responded that business attire made up less than 20% of their wardrobes. Approximately 52% of respondents indicated having a dress code at work. Out of these, 68.5% were required to wear business casual or smart casual clothing. Despite these dress codes, 16% of respondents reported that WFH made them dress more casually: some had changed their grooming practices or eliminated jewelry, makeup, or stylish clothing.

The respondents reported feeling more professional (mean: 4.5/5) and confident (mean: 4.5/5) when dressing up while working from home. Most tried to dress appropriately for work (mean: 4.7/5) and use their work attire to project a personal image (mean: 4.1/5). Recurring desired images included “professional” (20%), “responsible” (16%), “comfort” (9%), “clean” (8%), “creative” (7%), “trustworthy” (6%), “knowledgeable” (6%), “casual” (6%), “confident” (6%), “approachable” (3%), “honest” (3%), “stylish” (3%), “organized” (2%), “creativity” (2%), “mature” (2%), and “presentable” (1%). The fact that some respondents stated “mature is noteworthy because most respondents were young millennials or from Generation Z.

Out of the 147 respondents, 18 mentioned that they attempted to express their desired images through having clean clothes and a clean face or body, whereas 14 reported doing this by looking “put together.” Furthermore, the respondents mentioned how they compromise between “individuality” and “professionalism” by dressing in a manner both fashionable and stylish yet modest and appropriate. A professional image was portrayed through simple and neat black clothing paired with understated jewelry and makeup. For instance, one respondent reported that she always wore “neutral or black and white colors, nothing flashy or with big prints.” Those wishing to express their individuality through fun, stylish, and creative work attire focused more on colors, textiles, and accessories. One respondent stated, “I think the most important adjective is creativity. Workplace attire can be boring and dull but adding your own fashion inspiration while still dressing appropriately creates confidence.”

In terms of shopping and dressing habits, respondents reported significant shifts regarding “shopping less” and doing “more online shopping.” “Shopping less so repeating outfits more” and “Shopping in my closet” were examples given by respondents. One respondent said,

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“COVID has affected my shopping and dressing habits in positive ways. I have definitely upped my fashion game since this time last year, and I learned a lot about the fashion industry and sustainability.” Only three respondents stated that they now shop more due to boredom.

Conclusion

This study highlights the momentous changes work practices are currently undergoing by capturing the early stages of WFH in the context of clothing and identity, specifically focused on sustainable values and informal versus business clothing. Consequently, the findings of this study contribute to the literature by providing additional data on consumers' WFH clothing preferences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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