

Understanding women's identity and appearance navigation in the fashion industry using narrative inquiry

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Introduction and Significance. Appearance management has been widely studied in relation to gender roles (Cahill, 1990), social comparison (Rudd & Lennon, 2000) and objectification (Szymanski et al., 2011). Though there is existing research surrounding appearance management and obstacles for women in the workplace, respectively, there is a gap that needs to be filled to address the explicit narratives of women who navigate these issues and how the barriers are related to appearance within male executive led industries, specifically fashion brand corporate offices. Of the top twenty-five highest paid fashion retail executives in 2018, only five are female (Clark, 2018). Conversely, many women are also consciously or sub-consciously unaware of this power inequity (Purcell, 2012). The purpose of this research is to uncover the experiences women face in relation to appearance management and career advancement in fashion brand corporate offices. This research is guided by the following research questions: (1) What are the stories surrounding experiences of appearance management for women in fashion corporate workplaces? (2) Which internal, external, and contextual factors influence narratives of career navigation for women in fashion corporate workplaces?

Theoretical Framework. The present literature surrounding appearance management explains the perspectives of White upper middle-class women (Cahill, 1989; Rudd & Lennon, 2000, Lin & Raval, 2020), but the experiences of women with other non-additive forms of oppression and experiences with appearance management are underexplored (hooks, 2000). To address these issues, critical social theory, feminist theory, and intersectionality were adopted as theoretical lenses. Specifically, critical social theory describes the ways in which humans navigate the social world and construct their own reality, specifically through systems of hegemonic practices and privileges, which influence members of society in different ways (Hughes & Pennington, 2017). These practices are prevalent in the fashion industry, especially with fashion retail companies (Williams & Connell, 2010; Mears, 2014; Walters, 2018). Research on fourth-wave feminism demonstrates the ways in which feminism be used as a lens for producing knowledge and dismantling sexist structural norms (Bell et al., 2019). It is important to provide space for feminist knowledge in the fashion industry because the entry level positions, where knowledge production is often made, are female dominated (Purcell, 2013; Brown et al., 2018). There is also a need to understand the ways in which intersecting layers of identity influence careers in fashion, as well as to uncover the discrimination faced by BIPOC, LGBTQ+, and other marginalized individuals as they are discriminated upon in the workplace (Reddy-Best, 2018; Walters, 2018).

Methodology. This study utilized narrative semi-structured interviews (Hollingsworth & Dybdahl, 2007) and visual narrative (Bach, 2012). A constructivist epistemology was utilized, which dictated the theoretical position of the researcher and methods (Hollingsworth & Dybdahl, 2007). The population included any person who identifies as a woman who works in a fashion brand corporate office that creates and sells women’s products (including those who sell men’s, kids’, etc.). Women who work for fashion brand corporate companies were chosen because the executive and management sectors of these fashion companies are overtly male-dominated and are particularly difficult for women to progress up the corporate ladder (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Semi-structured interviews and follow-up conversations were conducted with participants and the narratives were co-constructed between the researcher and narrator to maintain the original intentions of the participant. Participants included a variety of ethnicities, ages, job levels, etc. Because the interviews and conversations were between one and a half and two hours each (McAdams in Wells, 2011) and were needed to weave a life narrative of the participants’ career and appearance experiences, six participants were enough to meet theoretical sufficiency (Dey, 1999; Wells, 2011).

Findings.

Four major themes are presented in the table below. Our analysis provided insight into the ways in which Women of Color (WOC) experienced invisible labor and undue burden on their physical appearance, in addition to the stringent way in which women in fashion are pressured to align with their company’s brand image. This pressure influences the organization culture of the company, and often cultivate a more structured and less product centric brand. Additionally, our findings demonstrated that the lack of available executive positions for women in fashion fostered an environment of competition and *backstabbing* that manifested through daily power struggles. Overall, the COVID-19 epidemic has both shifted appearance expectations and humanized relationships amongst female colleagues within the fashion industry.

Themes	Definition	Example Excerpts
WOC Are Disadvantaged and Disempowered	Advantages for White females that leave WOC feeling mistreated	“I felt like I was targeted because of my South Asian background... I feel like I was pushed out of the role even though I worked really hard and did everything I could possibly do.”
Looking the Part and Dressing Like the Brand	Employees strive to fit brand appearance expectations	“You have to wear something that looked at least like the brand, there's like a certain vibe.”
Fast Paced Pressure Breeds Competitive Environment	Added pressure employees encounter in fast paced female environments and daily power struggles	“Yeah. I mean, it's like we're living in the worst industry where it's just that's like every day backstabbing, gossip.”

An Epidemic Shifts
Priorities

Shift in priorities and
importance of appearance

“I think there was this idea that your work quality was tied to how you looked and I think we all now understand that your work is your work ethic and like it's not necessarily tied to that.”

Discussion and Implications. The male executive led, female dominated fashion industry comes with many societally mirroring challenges for women in relation to appearance and competition, especially for those with intersecting forms of marginalized identity. Each participant brought identity into the industry, which cultivate obstacles and/or privileges as they navigate their careers. Throughout their career, they navigate competition and power struggles as they seek to break through the male-dominated glass ceiling into executive leadership. Their career mobility is dictated by their educational training, identity, ability to conform to the brand look and their navigation of power struggles. This cycle continues throughout their careers and influences their experiences and narratives of being a female corporate fashion employee.

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*Additional references available upon request .

