While it appears that companies are moving toward a more liberal dress code, students are well-advised to err on the side of tastefully conservative business attire.

References

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THE SEMIOTIC FUNCTION OF CLOTHING AND GENDER ROLES ON BROADCAST BUSINESS NEWS
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IN TODAY’S FAST-PACED, competitive society, attracting the attention of viewers has become increasingly challenging. Consequently, in broadcast business news, the communicative function of newscasters’ and presenters’ overall appearance may be highly significant in securing and sustaining viewership in more than one way.

The following article arose out of a preliminary, exploratory study of mediated business news as part of a larger project that aims to develop and use computer-based technology for modeling, analyzing, and retrieving qualitative meaning from multimodal phenomena. The Events in the World project is concerned with describing
the multimodal portrayal of key events in the world in print media, television, and the Internet by developing and using prototype software for the multimodal analysis of images, video texts, interactive digital sites, and 3-D reality. The preliminary study is part of the first author’s PhD research, which focuses on the multimodal portrayal of business news as mediated on the Internet and television by 24-hour business networks such as Bloomberg, CNBC, and Fox Business, and involved the analysis of select screen shots of video clips captured from these networks’ Web sites at regular intervals in December 2008 and January 2009.

A Social Semiotic Approach

In this article, we approach the current topic from within a social semiotic perspective on the premise that any kind of semiotic system (clothing included) functions to make three kinds of meanings simultaneously (although one type of meaning may take precedence over another): (a) experiential meaning, which is concerned with how we represent experience; (b) interpersonal meaning, which expresses the relationship between communicating parties and their audiences; and (c) textual or compositional meaning, which is concerned with how the text is structured to make meaning as a whole (Halliday, 1994; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; O’Toole, 1994).

In our preliminary study, the business suit, or “power suit,” was the preferred clothing choice for most newscasters. Comprising a dark-colored jacket and a pair of long pants, or a skirt for women, the business suit conveys a sense of formality and purpose and has long been recognized as the quintessential attire for both men and women in the corporate world. According to Allan (1998), newscasters, in particular, should represent figures of authority who are credible and believable. He suggests that the communicative function of clothing not only helps to create an impression of personal integrity and trustworthiness in the minds of viewers but, indeed, ratifies the authenticity of the message conveyed as a whole (see also Coupland, 2001). Newscasters attired in formal business suits thus communicate an air of professionalism and authority, assuring viewers that they are experts in their field and sufficiently qualified to carry out their specific roles in the public domain.
The Meaning Potential of the Male Corporate Image

In our preliminary study, male newscasters always wore a tie, even when they dispensed with the business suit jacket on some programs. The tie, as it is worn today, has often been credited to Jesse Langsdorf, a New Yorker who introduced “ties cut on the bias” (Fink & Mao, 1999). As noted by Rubinstein (1995), the tie has strong associations with the male corporate image, which can be traced back to the Industrial Revolution in European and American societies in the mid-19th century (Kaiser, 1998). As such, the tie may carry with it sufficient experiential meaning to communicate an acceptable level of professionalism and authority for male newscasters on broadcast business news.

Apart from conveying a sense of professionalism and authenticity, the ubiquitous business suit also functions to create a certain level of homogeneity in terms of appearance. The experiential meaning potential conveyed by the similarity in male newscasters’ appearance—well groomed, polished, and sophisticated—nevertheless has the potential for male newscasters being cast as a generic type (that is, serious business professionals) rather than as individuals. While such anonymity may run counter to the cause of attracting viewers’ attention, the uniformity of male newscasters’ appearance may in fact serve to foreground the news itself, offering viewers the assurance of quality and authenticity in business news reporting, without drawing attention away from the gravity of the news itself.

The Meaning Potential of Female Attire on Business News

In contrast to their male counterparts, female newscasters in our preliminary study wore a greater variety of corporate apparel, including dresses and V-neck long-sleeved blouses, as well as brightly colored business suits. Accordingly, in terms of the experiential meaning potential conveyed, female presenters’ clothing choices tend to accord them more individuality and personality. It would nevertheless be fallacious to conclude that female newscasters who do not wear formal business suits lack the professionalism
and authority needed to present business news on television. Rather, the difference in clothing choices between male and female newscasters may perhaps be traced to the differing social roles that were historically accorded to men in the public sphere and women in the private domain (Luck, 1996; Rubinstein, 1995).

Moreover, in our preliminary study, female presenters on American business networks appeared to exhibit a preference for the color red in their choice of clothing. On television, the color of a piece of apparel may itself fulfill a particular communicative function, especially in terms of the interpersonal response it may be designed to evoke in the viewer. In addition to attracting viewers’ attention, female newscasters’ choice of the color red may serve as an interpersonal tool to negotiate on-screen power relations. Juxtaposed against her counterparts dressed in more muted, darker colors, a female anchor dressed in red stands out visually in terms of salience, allowing her to enforce her status and power as a female anchor in the social hierarchy of network television. Also, the female anchor distinguishes herself in terms of inter-textual relations, in that she becomes the news itself, as the color red is commonly used to signify “breaking news” on network television.

**Conclusions and Implications for Further Research**

In summary, the core communicative function of female newscasters’ clothing—to attract and sustain viewers’ attention—operates primarily on an interpersonal level. By contrast, the primary communicative function of male newscasters’ attire—to grant viewers the assurance of quality and authentic news reporting without drawing attention away from the news itself—consequently functions to evoke predominantly experiential meaning potential.

Beyond the pragmatic functionalities of clothing, clothing has immense meaning potential and can communicate innumerable messages concerning individuals and their surrounding contexts. Our preliminary analysis of the differing clothing choices of male and female newscasters on broadcast business news has tried to reveal the subtle differences in their respective communicative functions as well as their differing gender roles.
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