Ritual costumes and status transition: The female business suit as totemic emblem

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[ to cite ]:

[ direct url ]:
http://acrwebsite.org/volumes/6407/volumes/v12/NA-12

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A ritual is a formal behavior system used to express striving for social status, sexual identity, and so on (cf. Rook 1984). It belongs to a category of social mechanisms termed "generalized symbolic media of social interaction" (Parsons 1963). Although ritual is often associated with ancient religion is observations, it is important to note that it is not exclusive to primitive cultures, but is expressed in a variety of secular social activities. However, as Rook (1984) has noted, although rituals pervade daily life, they have gone largely unnoticed by marketers.

Products as Ritual Artifacts

The primary relevance of ritual to marketers lies in the use of ritual artifacts. Products are employed in their symbolic capacity to operationalize the ritual (Parsons 1963). As Rook (1984) has suggested, it may be useful to conceptualize many product groupings in this light (e.g., the accoutrements of a child's birthday party).

A ritual artifact takes on the form of a totemic emblem - it is the "outward and visible form" of the moral authority of the community (Durkheim 1954, p. 206). Rook (1984) speculates that products which serve as ritual artifacts may endure beyond the normal product life-cycle. [In the present context, it is worth noting that this is a possible explanation for the existence of "classic" styles, which persevere in the face of fashion's vicissitudes. This endurance hints at the social significance of such symbols, a symbolism which transcends aesthetic or normative considerations.]

Rites de Passage

Rites de passage, or initiation rites, are a significant form of ritual in our society. These are events which mark an individual's social status transition. They are structured to socialize the novice to the ways of the group, and often involve exotic dress and/or arational behaviors (Campbell 1972; van Gennep 1980).

To the present day, such rites remain a cornerstone of society. In addition, many products and even entire industries are significantly affected by involvement in rites de passage. The makers of training bras and razors are affected, as are the businesses whose livelihood depend upon signifying and recording transition: caterers, formal-wear manufacturers, commercial photographers, makers of academic regalia, officers of the court, undertakers, and so on. In many cases, the potent denotative power of clothing is harnessed to demarcate such changes:

...every change in a significant life situation - birth, entering school, graduation from school, getting a job,
The notion that many symbolically-laden products are in fact consumed as ritual artifacts merits closer scrutiny by consumer researchers. It is proposed that such determined and widespread involvement with such products reflects a need of the consumer to employ material goods in the basic process of self-definition and social behavior (cf. Solomon 1983). In the present context, the female business suit is approached as a modern manifestation of a timeless occurrence: A ritual artifact integral to a contemporary rite de passage.

**BUSINESS DRESS: I WEAR, THEREFORE I AM**

Today, concern about dressing for business occupies the energies of many consumers. In some quarters, the question of what to wear to work has taken on the character of an obsession. Executives and would-be executives, goaded on by the flurry of "dress for success" books, wardrobe consultants, store promotions, and so on have discovered what they hope to be a competitive edge in the business world.

While women have traditionally been engaged in the pursuit of fashion, the present hoopla regarding appropriate clothing configurations to wear to work transcends fashion issues. There is in fact some indication that female executives are markedly unconcerned with being in fashion, while simultaneously reporting an inordinate interest in and sensitivity to clothing (Douglas and Solomon 1983).

Fashionability is simply not the basis used to evaluate or purchase in this category. In fact, fashion attributes may be antithetical to the needs of the female executive. Like men, these women now realize that clothing is vital to the communication of credibility, competence, achievement and professionalism. This goal often dictates criteria which would be anathema to the stereotypic fashion plate: conformity, standardization, sensibility, drabness -- in short, the business uniform.

It is often not clear how women should go about satisfying the demands of this professional template. This dilemma was voiced in a representative guide to females entering the corporate "battlefield":

An executive's work clothes are not guided by comfort, looks, attractiveness, taste or novelty - they are responses to the dress orders of the day. His voluntary compliance can be crucial to his success. Upcoming women are also being judged for future potential on the basis of dress. The trouble is, nobody knows what criteria to use - not men or women, not management policy-makers... (Harragan 1977, p. 332).

Given this ambiguity, the dominant strategy appears to be to minimize risk by adopting very conservative options. In real terms, this decision often translates into mimicry of the male uniform -- the conservative business suit. In fact, a recent national survey of female executives' perceptions of clothing appropriateness revealed that the presence or absence of a jacket was the single most important factor driving these regardless of whether it was accompanied by a suit or a dress (Douglas and Solomon 1983). In essence, this masculine cue functioned to legitimize a wide range of costumes.

Women are counselled to scrupulously avoid any taint of the "little girl look" (Harragan 1977, p. 339) if they hope to maintain control over subordinates and exert authority. Those who adhere to what has been termed a managerial grooming style (especially male evaluators) as possessing less sex-typed personalities and greater management potential (Cash 1985), and as being more credible Harp, Stretch and Harp 1985. Clothing appropriateness, then, seems to be viewed as a significant determinant of managerial effectiveness. This linkage is especially robust for those who have the most invested in being effective; a recent study found a positive relationship between preferences for a "businesslike costume" (i.e., male-like conservative) and achievement motivation (Erickson and Sirgy 1985).

**Coming of Age in Manhattan**

The need for credibility, to be accepted, or to be seen as efficacious is probably at its zenith during stages of status transition. At such times, the consumer is entering a new role with new demands and expectations (Zaltman and Wallendorf 1979). This situation certainly characterizes the nascent executive. Role-appropriate clothing is often purchased (or conferred) at such times to signify such a transition. Significantly, rites de passage are also likely to be performed during periods of status transition.

An evolving rite. If rites de passage are indeed so pervasive in our culture, why have we chosen for the present to concentrate on one particular manifestation -- the novice female executive? The answer lies in the relatively turbulent nature of this specific metamorphosis.

Most rites de passage are well-defined and fairly static; they are embedded in the pattern of culture and are thus for all intents and purposes, invisible. It is only when doubts arise as to their execution that the precise manifestations of the rite are questioned. [This speculation is similar to a basic assumption of ethnomethodology, which holds that latent social norms can best be studied by violating them (cf. Garfinkel 1967).] This, we believe, is the case with the progression of women into executive ranks.

The widespread advent of the executive woman is a fairly new phenomenon. Numerous stores, positioning strategies, ad campaigns, specialty magazines and so on are springing up to cater to this growing segment. It is clear that the values and lifestyles of such women now merit such segmentation (cf. Joyce and Guiltnan 1978).

What is not clear is the role these women are expected to play. Since, unlike men, aspiring executive women do not yet have a professional template (i.e., adequate role models, norm routinization) the confusion over exactly what type of role to project, and particularly, the optional mixture of masculine and feminine properties -- has contributed to the anxiety level regarding the appropriate deportment, dress, and even eating behavior (e. what to order, who should pay and even the new obsession with so-called "power lunching") in a business context.

As opposed to males, rites de passage for females in primitive cultures have been paid less attention in the anthropological literature (Eliaide 1958). These rituals tend to be less widespread and developed, and their enactment tends to be triggered at a more individual level (usually by the onset of menarche).

It is interesting to note that sex-role identity is often a key component of such rituals -- during the ceremony, novitiates may wear men's clothing and the theme is often one of temporary androgyny. This amorphous state is terminated at the ritual's conclusion. Like a butterfly, the initiate emerges from a societal cocoon with appropriate gender labeling. Most societies stress the reproductive powers of women in such rites, while for men the emphasis is on working, fighting, etc. Apprehension over fitting into corporate culture may then be traceable to the phylogenetic lack of appropriate work rituals for women.

When the social definition of roles is in flux, such uncertainty is often reflected in radical clothing changes (Bush and London 1960). In the late 1960's and early 1970's, for example, the questioning of sex and social roles led to the testing of new forms of dress with often jumbled meanings (Roach and Eicher 1979). Although the current revolution in corporate settings is a bit more sedate, traumas concerning self-identity and acceptance are no less painful.

**The Organization Person**
Regardless of the novitiate’s sex, the organizational behavior literature points to the critical nature of the first year in a company for a manager’s career (cf. Becker and Strauss 1956; Buchanan 1974). The entry of a new manager is usually treated as a problem of socialization whereby the organization shapes attitudes and behavior to fit the requirements of a new role (Izraeli 1977). This process has been described in terms similar to initiation rites in primitive societies. Becker and Strauss, for example, note that “The passage may involve trials and tests of loyalty, as well as the simple accumulation of information and skill” (1957, p. 259). Corporate success depends upon a process of incorporation-learning the ropes—similar to the rites employed by more ancient “tribes”:

Initiation introduces the candidate into the human community... He learns not only the behavior patterns, the techniques and the institutions of adults but also the sacred myths and traditions of the tribe, the names of the gods and the history of their works... (Eliade, 1958, p. x)

The retooling process. Rites de passage accentuate the permanent quality of a status change (Rook 1984). Nowhere is this more evident than in the often full-scale retooling of the wardrobe upon the completion of college or the M.B.A. This transformation is de rigueur and is often accompanied by school-sponsored seminars, demonstrations and so on conducted by various (self-appointed) arbiters of business dress—such short courses are often the best attended at a business school! This attention to the need to shed an old skin and adopt a new one for the long-awaited passage is exemplified by the following account:

One woman executive told me that the first thing she did when getting a promotion to a managerial position was to go to the bank and make a $1,000 loan which she immediately spent on clothes... An appropriately expensive wardrobe is likely to be a better investment in your future than a college course in some technical subject (Harragan 1977, p. 341).

The Pin-Striped Talisman

Why is the preoccupation with acquiring the “correct” set of ritual artifacts often raised to a level of near-hysteria? Symbols associated with ritual are intimately connected with the specific aims and imperatives of the actors. The iconic properties of such artifacts allow them to embody the hopes and fears of the wearer. Thus, it is not surprising that those who have a lot to lose by failing to be properly initiated attach such import to correct clothing symbolism. In fact, symbolic instrumentation was treated by classical anthropological theory as magic—“an irrational or mistaken means of attempting to achieve specified ends that presupposed a false relation of identity or substance between symbols and the objects to which they refer” (Munn 1973, p. 592).

Such faith (misplaced or not) in the magical ability of proper clothing to pull one up the ladder of success appears to be endemic to the “dress for success” mania. Clothing is used by novices as a way to ward off the evil spirits of failure. In a sense, it forms a protective exoskeleton which may deflect social injury. In fact, the neurotic nature of ceremonials was noted by Freud, who observed that “...a ceremonial starts as an action for defense (sic) or insurance, a protective measure.” (Freud 1956, p. 123, italics in original). Thus, it is proposed that rigid adherence to conservative masculine clothing is a way to minimize risk and insulate absorption into corporate culture—to again borrow from Freud, the process resembles one of identification with the aggressor.

This compulsive reliance upon clothing for role-defination is particularly marked among those who must employ such cues to compensate for a lack of internal assurance (cf. Solomon and Douglas 1985). The function of the suit as a magic amulet is illustrated by the following observation:

Instinctively for most of my working life I preferred two-piece women’s suits to one-piece dresses. For reasons I couldn’t explain there was a feeling of defenselessness or nakedness about dresses when all the men in the room wore jackets...a man’s jacket is his “mantle of authority.” (Harragan 1977, p. 338).

It is precisely this “feeling of defenselessness or nakedness” which is obviated by the cloak of proper clothing symbolism. Furthermore, this aversive psychic exposure is probably most profound for those who have yet to develop internal defenses to ward off the evil elements. In other words, relatively new role occupants are the most prone to reliance on external cues for role support (cf. Solomon 1983: Wicklund and Gollwitzer 1982).

Symbol instrumentality—the business ensemble as totemic emblem—is thus posited to attract its most fervent believers among those who need to believe. In short, it seems likely that the ritualistic value of clothing is at its height for those who are being initiated into new social roles.

Some Empirical Evidence

In the context of an ongoing study, data were collected in pilot form to explore relationships between internal role-definition and perceived symbol instrumentality. Although a full report of the study is beyond the scope of this paper (cf. Anand and Solomon 1984), it is useful to refer to some preliminary results in passing.

Ninety graduate business students completed a questionnaire that included a variety of measures related to the constructs of interest. Among these measures was a scale designed to assess role disparity (in this instance, the gulf between self-image and estimated co-worker perceptions of the self). Subjects also rated the perceived instrumentality of clothing (i.e., the degree to which clothing is perceived as facilitating the attainment of such goals as social acceptance and career advancement). In addition, demographic data bearing on actual experience in work environments was collected.

In brief, it was predicted and found that “belief” in symbol instrumentality was positively related to role disparity (r = -.26, p<.01). In other words, the greater the gulf between what one is and what one would like to be, the more faith is placed in the power of material symbols to narrow this gulf. This reasoning is conceptually similar to much work on self/product image congruence (e.g., Grubb and Hupp 1968) and the notion that consumers with a disparity between real/ideal self-concept are more susceptible to fantasy in advertising appeals (Assael 1981).

The relationship between role disparity and career experience was supported in the predicted direction (r = -.38, p<.01). Specifically, the gulf between self-image and estimated co-worker perceptions of the self is the widest during status transition or in the early stages of one’s career. This process of identity formation is well documented in the role theory literature (e.g., Sarbin and Allen 1968).

CONCLUSIONS

Consumer behavior researchers are increasingly acknowledging the various psychic functions played by products in society. Possessions are viewed by many as an integral aspect of self, and several writers have urged a greater concentration on the meanings attached to possessions (e.g., Belk 1984; Csikszentmihalyi 1982; Levy 1959; Solomon 1983)

One result of this interest is a focus on the status of products as facilitators of social norms and processes. The current anthropological perspective is influenced by the recent attention paid to products as social currency in such contexts as gift-giving (Sherry 1983), myth (Levy 1981) and ritual (Rook 1984; Rook and Levy 1983).
A focus on the ritualistic aspects of business clothing — and the broader question of role acclimation — is potentially of great value for marketing practice as well. If people are in fact consuming various products because they act as guideposts to correct behavior, then this is a tangible product benefit which possesses untold promotional value.

Also, a consideration of the plight of the role novice appears to be worth pursuing. Although most workers in this area concentrate on the role of products in perception formation (i.e., the strategic use of products by the user to influence others' perceptions), this approach suggests that in some cases the consumer passes through "windows of vulnerability" where products and services are more likely to exert an a priori effect on behavior. Parenthetically, this phenomenon may even take on clinical significance, as excessive reliance on and attachment to various objects results in manifestations of fetishism.

Extending the anthropological metaphor, greater attention should be paid to the various "village elders" who guide the novice on his/her path to self-definition. In our society, such mentors are traditionally personified by role models; superiors at work, sports figures, parents, etc. More recently, however, a cottage industry has sprung up which seeks to take their place. A host of image advisors, wardrobe consultants, personal shoppers, books and magazines offer "definitive" guidelines about what to wear to insure success in the business world and elsewhere. Inasmuch as the information sources which legitimize the meaning of ritual artifacts are themselves in flux, this issue — the dynamics which determine the encoding of product symbolism — is also worthy of attention by consumer researchers and other social scientists.

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as totemic object of empowerment; while high cultural men aim to emulate the craftsman’s identity for which they acquire and employ specific working attire and professional brands of power tools. Å Ritual costumes and status transition: The female business suit as totemic emblem. Advances in consumer research, 12(1), 315-318.

Summers-Effler, E. (2006). Please Note: This is the version of Totemic in the Yogscast Complete Pack. The latest version is for Minecraft 1.7.2, and its mechanics are drastically different. Totemic adds a totem system to Minecraft. Using life essence, totems can perform various functions, such as feeding players, stopping rain, damaging nearby entities, and breeding animals. Totemic includes in-game documentation. Simply craft yourself a Totem Pedia. Note that its name, due to a bug, is item.totemic:totempedia.name. H. Solomon.