Effects of a Sexy Appearance on Perceived Competence of Women

MELISSA L. WOOKEY
NELL A. GRAVES
J. COREY BUTLER
Southwest Minnesota State University

ABSTRACT. The present study replicates P. Glick, S. Larsen, C. Johnson, and H. Branstiter’s (2005) previous research showing that a sexy appearance may be detrimental to women in high-status jobs. The authors used a larger sample and different stimulus materials and evaluation measures. As in the original experiment, participants rated sexually and professionally dressed women in both low- and high-status positions on perceived ability. The results were consistent with the original study and showed that high-status, sexually dressed women receive lower ratings in competence.

Keywords: appearance, gender, sex roles, stereotypes

GLICK, LARSEN, JOHNSON, AND BRANSTITER (2005) found that professionally dressed women are viewed as more intelligent and capable than are sexually dressed women for high-status jobs, but not for low-status jobs. In a conceptual replication of that experiment, we used different job titles, dependent variables, and photographs, instead of videotape, of women. We followed the example of the original authors and hypothesized that women wearing sexually
provocative clothing would be perceived as lower in ability than women dressed in more professional attire, but only for high-status positions.

**Method**

Participants were 102 university students (48 men, 54 women; $M_{\text{age}} = 20.45$ years, $SD_{\text{age}} = 3.63$ years). We showed each participant one of two photographs. One photo depicted a professionally dressed woman wearing a business jacket and slacks. The other photo emphasized sex appeal, showing a woman wearing a low-buttoned blouse and no jacket. In an independent sample, the sexually dressed woman was rated as significantly more “sexy” than was the professionally dressed woman, $t(16) = 6.15, p = .000$, but as no more attractive, $t(16) = 0$. Half the participants were told that the woman in the picture was an office assistant, whereas the other half were told that she was the CEO of an advertising agency. Participants were then asked to rate the woman on her likely college grade point average, ability to set a good example, ability to interact with others, intelligence, leadership, communication, job knowledge, organization and supervisory skills, initiative, dependability, and professional attitude. The variables were converted into $z$ scores and—after principle components analysis—were combined to form measures of general competence ($\alpha = .92$) and social competence ($\alpha = .81$). These two measures were analyzed with a 2 (career of target) × 2 (appearance of target) between-subjects analysis of variance.

**Results and Discussion**

For general competence, the predicted interaction between clothing and career fell just short of statistical significance, $F(1, 98) = 3.72, p = .057$. The effect size was $r = .19$, whereas Glick et al. (2005) obtained a corresponding value of $r = .26$. In the present experiment, the sexually dressed CEO received the lowest competence rating ($M = –0.58$, $SD = 0.78$), which was significantly lower than the rating for the professionally dressed CEO ($M = 0.46$, $SD = 0.61$), $t(49) = 5.39, p = .000, r = .61$, and the professionally dressed office assistant ($M = 0.30$, $SD = 0.73$), $t(47) = 4.12, p = .000, r = .52$. The sexually dressed CEO was not rated significantly lower than was the sexually dressed office assistant ($M = –0.24$, $SD = 0.53$), $t(48) = 1.86, p = .070, r = .26$. On social competence, the interaction of clothing and career was statistically significant, $F(1, 98) = 7.85, p = .006, r = .27$. The sexually dressed CEO was perceived as having the lowest social competence ($M = –0.61$, $SD = 1.16$), the sexually dressed office assistant was perceived as having the highest social competence ($M = 0.49$, $SD = 0.53$), $t(48) = 4.23, p = .000, r = .53$.

This experiment replicates the overall pattern of results obtained by Glick et al. (2005). In the present study, on both measures of competence, the sexually dressed CEO received the lowest mean ratings. The most surprising result was
the high social competence rating of the sexually dressed office assistant. Our data suggest that sexiness is associated with social ability in low-status jobs, but when a woman is in a position of power, sexiness may be viewed as dysfunctional and inappropriate.

AUTHOR NOTES

Melissa L. Wookey is currently pursuing a master’s degree in counseling psychology from Northwestern University. Her professional interests include career counseling and veterans’ issues, especially concerning career and readjustment to civilian life. Nell A. Graves is working on a master’s degree in counseling and human resource development, with a specialization in student affairs, at South Dakota State University. She is currently an intern in the Admissions department and is interested in continuing to working in the area of student personnel. J. Corey Butler is an associate professor of psychology at Southwest Minnesota State University. His research interests include physical appearance stereotypes, interpersonal relationships, social rejection, personality traits, and authoritarianism.

REFERENCE


Received September 29, 2007
Accepted November 7, 2007