

That's funny ... you don't look like a lecturer! dress and professional identity of female academics

Tsaousi, C

Author post-print (accepted) deposited by Coventry University's Repository

Original citation & hyperlink:

That's funny ... you don't look like a lecturer! dress and professional identity of female academics', *Studies in Higher Education*, vol. 45, no. 9, pp. 1809-1820.

<https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2019.1637839>

ISSN 0307-5079

ESSN 1470-174X

Publisher: Taylor and Francis

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Studies in Higher Education on 08/07/19, available

online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/03075079.2019.1637839>

Copyright © and Moral Rights are retained by the author(s) and/ or other copyright owners. A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or study, without prior permission or charge. This item cannot be reproduced or quoted extensively from without first obtaining permission in writing from the copyright holder(s). The content must not be changed in any way or sold commercially in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.

This document is the author's post-print version, incorporating any revisions agreed during the peer-review process. Some differences between the published version and this version may remain and you are advised to consult the published version if you wish to cite from it.

That's funny ... you don't look like a lecturer! dress and professional identity of female academics

Christiana Tsaousi

School of Business, University of Leicester, Leicester, UK

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on how female academics in UK universities use dress to construct their professional identity. The paper draws on the current literature on dress, body and academic identity and uses a theoretical framework of Goffman's work of performance and Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital and habitus to explore these women's attempts to construct themselves as professionals. The aim of this paper is to give insights into these women's perceptions of 'what it takes to dress to impress' for the 'professional project' within a constantly shifting university workplace environment. The themes of analysis include issues such as the challenges of being a female academic and establishing yourself in the class, using dress to establish a feeling of belonging in the department and institution as a whole and a critique of how the various aspects of dress are incorporated in this idea of visual gratification of the 'consuming' students.

Introduction

There has been a growing literature recently focusing on the (re)construction and experiencing of the academic identity in higher education. The *Studies in Higher Education* alone has published several articles that explore how identities are shaped and experienced in academia, which in many cases came about as a result of changes occurring in the higher education (HE) sector in a local context (see, for example: Archer 2008; Ylijoki and Ursin 2013; Degn 2015). Specifically for the UK's HE system, this is particularly evident with the increasing changes, such as its massive expansion, the introduction and increase of tuition fees and the changes in the UK universities' public funding with the introduction of different assessment exercises such as the Research Excellence Framework and Teaching Excellence Framework. All these changes have turned British universities into elitist sites of consuming knowledge. Students are in many cases thought to be consumers rather than learning subjects and a lot of emphasis is given to getting value for their money. The value expectations from students extend to visual consumption as well, i.e. how students expect their lecturers and tutors to dress in the class. Thus, within this line of debate, the idea of visual consumption comes to play a big part in how academics construct their professional identity via dress.

This paper draws on the current literature on dress, identity and professionalism and on empirical data to examine how identities of female academics 'move' and 'shift' in these women's attempt to construct themselves as professionals. The aim of this paper is to give insights into these women's perceptions of *what it takes to dress to impress* and how identities can be (re)constructed around the professional project within the university workplace environment. The professional project here supposes that dress is mobilised in the everyday representation and negotiation of a web of multiple and sometimes contradictory identities in the workplace.

This paper focuses on *female* academics' dress and identity for several reasons. First, the data presented in this research come from a larger project on dress and the female professional identity; the university environment proved to be a particularly interesting working site where women try to play out different roles, the professional academic being one of them. Second, gender is a key element in identity construction. We define ourselves as male or female, masculine or feminine, every day and

particularly when encountering others. Gender is a 'primary mechanism' (Gherardi 1994; Brewis 2005) through which individuals classify others, at least in the West. The everyday social process of 'doing gender' (West and Zimmerman 1987 as quoted in Gherardi 1994, 595) becomes, then, a fundamental foundation in the identity project, not undermining, though, the importance of other classifications like race, class, etc. Finally, the connections between women, fashion and dress are undeniably far larger than those for men. This has been the subject of much interdisciplinary academic discussion (see, for example: Finkelstein 1991; Brydon and Niessen 1998; Entwistle and Wilson 2001; Guy, Banim, and Green 2001; Keenan 2001; Bolich 2006; Entwistle 2015). Entwistle (2015) argues that the association between fashion and women is historically strong. Not only have women in the West, and particularly in Europe, been involved for centuries with sewing and the making of clothes at home, but there was a metaphorical association as well with the relationship between perceptions of fashion and social expectations of femininity appearing as early as medieval times (Breward 1995). Religion also had a great influence in associating women with dress and fashion and particularly associating women's dressed bodies with sin, thereby introducing imperatives around modesty and prudence when it came to women's dress. Thus dress has been historically seen as a marker of gender differences and so has become one of those key links between identity and the gendered body.

Dress, body and identity

Dress and identity have been the topic of a considerable amount of literature, especially in the areas of women's dress and identity construction. Dress is a 'situated bodily practice' (Entwistle 2015, 52), and 'forms part of the micro-social order of most social spaces and when we dress we have to orientate ourselves to the implicit norms of these spaces' (52). As part of the micro-social order, dress is closely connected to the various identities we are called to play out each day, e.g. professionals, partners, parents, etc. (Tsaousi and Brewis 2013; Tsaousi 2016). Dress, with all its mundane aspects, i.e. shoes, underwear and so on, forms the link between body and identity, since it provides the raw material for creating and performing identities (Entwistle 2015). Failing to conform to the rules governing a particular field or social situation threatens our perceptions of the particular identity performed.

School teachers have also been in the scope of such investigation, i.e. the link between teachers' appearance and their sense of identity, as well as students' perceptions of teachers (e.g. Weber and Mitchell 1995). This line of research suggests that certain stereotypes of teachers as serious, conservative, know-it-all role models, who are above all 'asexual [and] concerned only with the mind' (1995, 71), still linger in people's minds, especially when it comes to students' perceptions of what a teacher should look like. On the other hand, in higher education, academics appear to be 'positioned' in a looser and more flexible environment in terms of appearance, but still with a long rhetoric around the symbolism of being an academic. Higher education is a particularly highly contested field and, as Bourdieu (1988, 14) states, is highly dependent on 'the representation which its agents have of it'. It is, though, implausible to talk about the self and identity without referring to the body. The body constitutes the environment of the self and the body and, in most social situations, it is a dressed body (Turner 1996; Entwistle 2015). In public, at least, we are required by social conventions to be appropriately dressed and presented. It is a dress, in its various forms and representations that gives the body social meaning, starting from providing it with aspects of identity, e.g. gender. Thus getting dressed is an ongoing, individual, but also a social practice that we learn as soon as we are born and we keep on learning how to get dressed according to the different social situations and contexts we are present in our everyday lives.

Academics are very often faced with different situations that may require different ways of dressing up. For example, having a meeting with the Head of College or the Dean, or spending a day in the office trying to meet a deadline for a research grant or perhaps marking, could perhaps necessitate different clothing. Being appropriately dressed thus becomes part of the micro-social order of the everyday conventions of an academic and these conventions seem to have different elements. For example, teaching 100 or more students in a large lecture theatre, attending an operations com-

mittee or going about the corridors of one's department would seem to require a different micro-management of the dressed body. Bell (1992) notes how often we speak of the dress using terms that link with morality, for example 'good' or 'correct', which has immediate connections with the self and identity at *that* particular time.

Performing the 'academic identity'

This paper sets out to explore how female academics present their selves in the different conventions of their everyday life at work and how they use dress to play out these roles. Goffman's work on face-to-face interactions in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1990) is a helpful tool for this paper as it describes how people manage how they present themselves during those interactions with others and calls this process a theatrical performance. According to Goffman, people carefully construct and enact roles in the interactions they have in a public setting in order to elicit a desired response. Thus, just as actors, people take on a role in order to create an impression of their selves which also results in giving off impressions. This impression management is particularly important for academics as they face different audiences during any workday, for example teaching colleagues (junior, senior and line manager), administrative colleagues (again with different seniority and different roles), students (undergraduates, postgraduate and post-experience) and sometimes parents or family members. These interactions require different impression management and a careful consideration of what Goffman calls front-stage performance (1990). A front-stage performance is conducted by an individual (actor) in public space with the intention that the displayed impression is in line with the people there (audience) and that a desired response will be received (Goffman 1990). When not in a public space, Goffman suggests, people withdraw to a back-stage performance, which is an act within their comfort zone. For Goffman, impression management is a 'repertoire of faces each activated in front of a different audience' (Tseëlon 1992, 116). In each performance, the aim is to suppress aspects of the self (Goffman 1990), or conceal irrelevant information (Tseëlon 1992), in order to create or maintain a self-representation that accords with the audience. This is not to suggest, though, that people are constantly manipulating their presentation at a front stage, that is have a false self (performing a false self), and a true self at a back stage performance. For Goffman, this is only a different type of stage and simply 'a game of *representation*' (Tseëlon 1992, 116, emphasis in original). In his later work, Goffman extended this idea of representation to how the self can be a sign vehicle that people use in order to appear 'normal' (1971). Thus Goffman's work on dramaturgy can provide a framework of analysis for understanding how academics present themselves in front of their different audiences and also, I argue, how they use dress to support this persona in each performance. Some of the limited work that has used Goffman's analytical framework to discuss academics' social interactions includes Thesen's (2009) work on lecturers' process of *becoming* via their interactions with their constantly changing student audience; Roxå and Mårtensson's (2009) work on how lecturers 'talk' about teaching in a back-stage performance; and Newton's (2000, 2002) analysis of how academic staff are 'schooled' and prepared to manage impressions during external quality assessment.

However, while Goffman's analysis of social interactions and dramaturgical performance explains how female academics might manage their self-presentation when interacting with others or simply being in their offices, it does not explain *how* they are able to do that, or *how* they *acquire* the skills to do that. Even though critical of Goffman's interactionist epistemology (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), Pierre Bourdieu's work on how any attempts at self-presentation are expressions of the society's structures (1984) might also be helpful here in understanding how female academics see dress as a tool for skilfully understanding situations of power and how to 'play the game'. For example, while Goffman's work explains how a female academic might take on the role of a programme leader who sits on an examination board with external reviewers and how she interacts and manages that particular front-stage performance, Bourdieu's work can help us explain how that academic's acquired dispositions, skills, abilities and bodily responses allow her to do just

that. Universities are distinctive cultural settings where academics perform their social positions as well, i.e. their qualifications, academic status, class, gender, race and so on.

Bourdieu's notion of habitus explains how social structures and practices are embodied – in other words, how the social world exists *in* the body (Bourdieu 1977; Reay 2004). Crucial in his work of social structures and space is his analysis of how people learn to embody and carry with them volumes of different capitals, which will then determine their 'cultural competence'. Cultural competence, according to Bourdieu (1984), is the habitus's 'capacity to produce classifiable practices and works and the capacity to differentiate and appreciate these practices and products' (170). Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital in particular explains the different embodied behaviours and experiences of agents in the field because it is defined as legitimate knowledge of a particular field (Bourdieu 1984). It is the interaction of a person's habitus with their social and cultural capital that positions them in the field. Academics very often find themselves in different situations within the social field of the university and sometimes even in different universities, and thus have to reposition themselves according to the new field. For example, Pherali (2012) explains that in the case of transnational academics, their position within the field seems to be incomplete because their 'distinctive habitus and cultural capital become largely extraneous in the transition to a new field' (323).

This paper will show that Goffman's analysis of interactions and Bourdieu's analysis of the social structures that make those interactions possible can be a useful framework to understand how the dress is used by female academics to support them in different situations. As Hansen (2004) argues,

[o]ur lived experience with clothes, how we feel about them, hinges on how others evaluate our crafted appearances, and this experience in turn is influenced by the situation and the structure of the wider context [...]. In this view, clothing, body, and performance come together in dress as embodied practice (373).

Methodological considerations

The empirical data for this research were collected from four focus groups, each comprising four to five participants (see Table 1). The focus groups took place at three British higher education institutions between December 2015 and March 2017. Two of these universities are in the Midlands and the third is a university in the south-west of England. Moreover, two of these focus groups were conducted at the same university but in different departments/schools. Because the data presented here are part of a larger research, the departments/schools were not a criterion in this research, but the availability of participants and the challenges in recruiting participants resulted in having three focus groups with female academics from management/business schools and one with females from a media department. The data from the management/business schools, though, were particularly interesting, as will be discussed below, because of the perception of both students and staff that academics who teach business, including finance and marketing, ought to be dressed in business-like attire. My participants were recruited using mainly a snowballing method and my own network. The focus groups took place in pre-booked university rooms, lasted from 1 h and 15 mins to 2 h, were recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed verbatim. Table 1 presents all the participants.

Focus groups here mean much more than group interviews; they were chosen as a research method because of the dynamic interaction between the participants who 'define, discuss and contest issues through [this] social interaction' (Seale 2012, 228). This dynamic interaction between participants can lead to richer and more meaningful data (Morgan 1997; Wilkinson 1998, 2004). It creates, as Stewart, Shamdasani, and Rook (2007, 43) suggest, a 'synergistic effect' as participants respond to and build on each other's views and ideas. This interaction between the people in the group, Wilkinson (2004) argues, co-constructs reality just as normal social life, where meanings are assigned to practices and experiences within this specific social context. Moreover, the ethical concern over the researcher's power that limits qualitative research (Morgan 1988; Wilkinson 1998, 2004), while it does not disappear in focus groups, it is reduced to a huge extent. Since the participants arguably have more control over the interaction between them, the balance of power shifts.

The focus groups comprised female academics working together in the same department/school.

Table 1. List of participants.

Focus group 1 (F1) – Management/Business – Midlands				
Name	Age	Academic title	Levels teaching	Ethnicity
Jen	36–45	Professor	PhD	White British
Sophie	26–35	Lecturer	UG/PG/MBA	Asian
Lian	36–45	Lecturer	MBA	White other
Julie	36–45	Lecturer	PG	White other
Catherine	46–55	Lecturer	UG/MBA	White British
Focus group 2 (F2) – Management/Business – South England				
Marian	36–45	Senior Lecturer	UG/PG/MBA	White British
Kay	36–45	Lecturer	UG/PG/MBA	Asian
Christine	26–35	Lecturer	UG	White Other
Claire	36–45	Professor	PG/MBA	White British
Sarah	46–55	Reader	PG/MBA	White British
Fatma	26–35	Lecturer	UG	Asian
Focus group 3 (F3) – Media – South England				
Annie	36–45	Lecturer	UG/PG	White other
Vicky	36–45	Research Fellow	UG/PG	Black British
Amy	26–35	Lecturer	UG	White Other
Jenna	46–55	Lecturer	PG/UG	White British
Focus group 4 (F4) – Management/Business – Midlands				
Vivian	36–45	Professor	UG/PG/MBA	White Other
Joanne	26–35	Assistant Professor	UG/PG/MBA	White British
Susan	36–45	Assistant Professor	PG	White British
Lucy	46–55	Lecturer	UG/PG	White Other

While arguably that might be considered a limitation because of the dynamics that can develop in the interaction of a pre-existing group, i.e. women who already know each other and work together, I see this as an advantage for this research because they might have already discussed the topics of the focus group, which makes the group, as Kitzinger (1994) suggests, a site of ‘collective remembering’ (105), as the women in focus group 4 (F4) suggest:

Vivian (F4): Yeah, we talk about what each other wears in the corridors, don’t we?
 Joanne (F4): And we get carried away ...
 Lucy (F4): Hmm [clears throat] ... sometimes! [All laugh]

Lucy’s facial expression and vocal noise, together with the emphatic *sometimes* she noted, followed by laughter from all, clearly demonstrates how she tapped into that ‘collective remembering’, where possibly these women have not only talked about dressing at work before quite often but also made jokes and given other possible meanings to this particular practice. Thus I agree with Kitzinger’s (1994) argument that when a researcher uses pre-existing groups, they are ‘sometimes able to tap into fragments of interactions which [approximate] to “naturally occurring” data’ (105). I am not suggesting that focus groups can produce a ‘naturally’ occurring reality; I argue, though, that the collective remembering might help to provide a more comfortable environment for the people in the group to produce that ‘inherently interactive and communicative nature of social action and social meanings’ (Tonkiss 2004, 198), which is difficult to capture with any other research method that attempts to analyse individual responses.

Data were analysed using NVivo 7 with free coding as the initial state, analysing the transcriptions and filtering meaning around the areas concerned for this paper. Some of these general areas included dressing for teaching, looking professional/professional project, cultural capital, the various micro-conventions of being an academic, dressing according to the university, and also the struggles of dressing the female body and being a woman academic. I proceeded then to a second

round of coding, and collapsed the above categories into three main themes: *looking professional*, *being a female academic* and *shopping for a professional identity*.

Looking professional

Professional identity is a widely explored area in the literature but professionalism itself as a concept is difficult to define (Bowen 2016). After a systematic review of the literature, Trede, Macklin, and Bridges (2012) found that the concept of professional identity centres around issues such as learning and making sense of the practice, having the attitudes and values of the profession, and continuous negotiation of roles and selves within work, among others (374). Professional identity for my participants were seen as the interplay of several aspects of the everyday, micro-conventions of being an academic. Teaching was a big part of this identity, but these women also acknowledged that being a researcher, a conference presenter or just doing administrative work is all part of that identity and they had different nuances as to how 'they dress' for these different roles. Indeed, there were subtle links between how the literature discusses professional identity and how these women talked in relation to their dress. While at no point during the focus groups were they asked what professional identity is or what being professional means to them, it was precisely through them talking about how they dress that themes around professional identity were uncovered.

For some of these women, how they dress depends on the institution they work in, that is, how formal, casual or unconventional on some occasions a department is in terms of how staff dress. The women in group 1, for example, emphasised the casual manner and style in which at least most of the people in their school were dressed. In fact, they described this as the identity/style of the department and thus dressing more casually made them feel part of it and it felt almost like a privilege to have that freedom. As Jen (F1) emphatically states:

I talk to colleagues from other places, [...] they're like oh my God, 'I come to your place and you're in jeans and nose rings and tattoos and whatever, boys with earrings' and such and such. Even in the environment that they're in, which is supposed to be this reasonably free-flowing or whatever context, they just don't perceive that they have that freedom at all. Even if someone didn't actually discipline them, they have a sense that there would be raised eyebrows and tut-tutting behind their backs.

The flexibility and the casual-dress style in this particular school, as discussed in F1, were considered something extraordinary – a workplace environment that they would not encounter in other universities and which was thought to be the equivalent of the unconventional research interests of their colleagues. All of the women in this group emphasised that they could not imagine any of their colleagues being dressed in more formal clothing – at least during a normal, everyday workday – when considering their research interests. Dress was thus linked to the researcher aspect of the academic identity and it was discussed as if people's clothes and overall dressing (including aspects of body decoration) represented their academic interests and political standpoints. Dress thus becomes part of these people's embodied cultural capital and, as Bourdieu notes, 'most of the properties of cultural capital can be deduced from the fact that, in its fundamental state, it is linked to the body and presupposes embodiment' (Bourdieu 1986, 244).

Jen's assertion that there are particular expectations about how academics should be dressed was also mentioned by other participants. For example, in F2, Rachel, Christine and Fatma mentioned that they felt 'talked about' when they first joined their current school.

Claire (F2): Remember when we first came here?

Christine (F2): Oh my God, yes. It was horrible, 'cause we both came from [...] which is so relaxed in terms of how we dressed, and anyway we were PhD students ...

Claire (F2): Yeah and when we taught we didn't really pay attention, 'cause you think, I'm a PhD student, no one can make me dress any better. But Here![emphasis]

Christine (F2): Yeah we really felt it didn't we? The first few days everyone was looking at me wearing jeans, students And colleagues! [emphasis]. One of my students the first day I walked in the class said to me: 'Oh, funny you don't look like a lecturer.' I laughed then but I started wearing black trousers and blouses which is way more than what I think casual smart is. People here

think they work at ... I don't know, KPMG or something ... they dress so formal [emphasis]. OK for a business school it's sometimes expected but I just felt it wasn't me. I just had to play along.

Fatma (F2): Yes, I agree. You just learn how to dress accordingly. You just learn! But I don't think that it's the same for men. My husband started working at [...] and there everyone dresses really formal too but he didn't really care. I don't think we could get away with it here, especially us women.

The exchange between these women brings several themes to light. Firstly, they note that not all universities, or schools more specifically, are the same. Indeed, in some management/business schools the expectations of how staff should dress, from both staff and students, were that it needed to be more formal, thereby drawing parallels with more traditionally masculine, business professions such as that of accountancy. This confirms some of the findings of Rafaeli et al. (1997), which suggest that dress in business schools was more formal than other parts of universities, not just for staff but for students as well. Perhaps this explains the emphasis that women in group 1 gave to the flexibility and 'freedom' they had to dress casually in their department. Indeed, Julie from F1, echoing Jen, commented: 'I think this place is really interesting, because I think there's very, very few of us in the school, men or women, who probably meet whatever the students expect'. My participants agreed, therefore, that there are certain expectations that they need to be dressed in a particular way as academics and that academics who dress in a more unconventional manner might be subject to informal scrutiny. However, for the women in F1, resisting students' expectation meant they had a particular identity as a community of colleagues that made it, as Julie continues, 'really valuable and special'. For Christine in F2, though, moving to a new university and school meant she had to learn to dress differently in order to present herself to the new audiences she was to encounter. Interestingly, she emphasises that '[i]t isn't me' and, just like Goffman's dramaturgical self, she had to learn to perform this front-stage role.

Being a female academic

Going back to F2's exchange above, Fatma's reflection that women in particular are almost required to 'play' the game is particularly important and the struggles of being a woman in a traditionally masculine profession like academia were discussed in other groups as well, a theme in the data that was given many different connotations. All groups, for example, discussed the challenges they face with being a female in a class. Dress was particularly important in this context: some found that dress would help them establish themselves as serious academics in the class and some found that they had to carefully think about what they had to wear just because they were women. The participants in F4, talking about how they dress when teaching, said:

Vivian (F4): I think with women it's more ambiguous I think because the female body is quite gendered and sexualised ...

Lucy (F4): I think men get away with it. You see I wouldn't – I actually am almost quite careful that I don't wear the same outfit for my teaching. I've got about 10 weeks' worth of – and actually at certain points when I was really struggling with my memory when the kids were little, I almost had to try and write down what I wore.

Susan (F4): I'm exactly the same; every lecture has to be a different outfit.

Vivian (F4): A different outfit! Whereas with men, nobody would notice if they wore the same.

Lucy's remark that men can get away with it resembles Fatma's comment that men do not face the same difficulties and challenges when it comes to dress, and according to Vivian this comes down to women's body being more gendered and sexualised. Although in academia, aspects of identity, such as gender, might not always be so visible, for example when sending a paper for a blind peer review, women have often found that it is impossible to go 'unmarked' by gender (Moreno 1995; Brewis 2005). The fact that my participants agreed that they needed a different attire for each time they taught shows the level of mental work that female academics undertake to perform the front-stage role of teaching. The self that they present in front of students was a really important aspect

of their professional identity and they used dress to support that professional image. The participants in F3 spent much of their discussion talking about how they dress during teaching and how they use it to establish themselves in the class. Both Annie and Jenna from group 3 stressed that they dress more formally during the first few weeks of teaching so that they appear smart, serious and professional in front of the students but then they gradually go more casual or don't think so much about what to wear because they think that they have already established themselves in the class. The participants in group 4 also stressed a similar point, with the exception of Susan who noted that when she teaches undergraduates she wears modern, slightly casual clothes, like jeans so that she appears more youthful in front of her 20-year-old students. All of them thus agreed that they had to adjust their dressing to fit the appropriate conditions under which they were performing an important aspect of their professional identity. They all seemed to have a clear understanding of what was expected from them, and whether they adhered to that or made some adjustments to their dress, all in some way or another seemed to have a 'feel for the game' (Bourdieu 1984) and thought about dressing 'correctly'. For those participants in management/business schools who taught MBA students, this was a particularly difficult process as they admitted that the MBA students have very specific expectations of academic staff. Being a woman, or worse a young woman, as Sophie (F1) and Claire (F2) mentioned, meant they had to work harder to establish themselves in the class and many others agreed that they changed their dress for this particular audience. Sarah (F2) discussed how challenging it was for her to teach an MBA class and how she used to spend a lot of time thinking about what to wear because she looked young compared to other colleagues. In her own words, 'I was younger, blonde and female', a combination of attributes that made male MBA students challenge her in the class.

I used to feel so exhausted when I left the class, so much energy spent in trying to make them think I know my stuff! And then take off the business suit ... (laughs). (Sarah, F2)

The female business suit for Sarah was more than just dressing correctly for an MBA class; it was about giving herself social and professional worth because, after all, she was a female academic. For other participants too, this process was thought to be more important for women academics:

I absolutely believe in that we need or at least I need to establish myself as a certain kind of person; the thing that I always trot out to students is that Victorian thing about 'lecturers help those who help themselves'. But I think that's something that women do much more regularly and perhaps much more consciously than men, because I just think by virtue of our physical equipment we somehow have to manage ourselves in very different ways from, I would say, the vast majority of men, except the men who don't fit the normative model. (Jen, F1)

Thus, 'establishing' themselves in the class was an important aspect of these women's professional identity, and the dress is used as a way to manage the female body in a way that it appears 'professional' and 'non-gendered'. This was also confirmed by Lucy and Susan in F4, who said that they try to wear very plain clothes when teaching so that their body is as invisible as possible.

Shopping for a professional identity

The data so far have shown that women academics consider dress an important tool for supporting their professional identity and the different roles they need to perform as academics. Shopping for dressing at work in general was a big theme in the focus groups as the participants shared their experiences with dressing for their different audiences. In this discussion, the female body was once again the protagonist. Some women talked about shopping according to their body shapes and others about shopping according to their style and taste while it also had to fit the appropriate circumstances of their workplace. Marian (F2), for example, talked about her shopping experience and the clothes she wears at work:

The clothes I wear at work are usually the clothes I wear for any other occasion I leave my house for. So smart casual ... but wait I don't mean all clothes, I would never wear short skirts at work. I can't even begin to imagine

the looks! (laughs)

Similarly to Marian, women in other groups also agreed that they hardly ever shop for clothes specifically for work. Vivian (F4) was an exception and admitted buying clothes for work when she became the MBA director of her school. She felt that for that particular role she ought to have a businesslike attire to wear for any time a student walked in her office.

I bought myself a few items that looked more formal and chose a navy-blue blazer jacket to keep in my office at all times, just in case any of them came in, or my colleagues also. I became a professor at the same time so I didn't feel like you all did with the MBAs but still felt I had to wear the jacket to look at least businesslike.

Vivian's experience with the MBA students was different from what the other women in her group had, and she felt this was due to her status as a professor. Her title gave her the professional worth the other women lacked and thus more respect from the MBA students. However, she felt that dress was still an important mechanism to 'maintain' the role of the MBA director. Having a navy-blue jacket at any time in her office, therefore, gave her the confidence that she could transcend from a back-stage to a front-stage role by simply putting in on.

For some of the other women, the conversation revolved around other aspects of dress, such as underwear and jewellery, with Christine (F2) admitting that she had bought a plain, cream bra to wear specifically at work because she felt that her usual, colourful bra might be drawing too much attention to her body. Thus, going back to the discussion around the female body, it seems that women academics feel the need to buy, not so much specific work clothes, but other more mundane aspects of dress that still support their body and give them the psychological comfort of being gender neutral (Tsaousi and Brewis 2013).

Comfort was an important issue that women discussed and mostly this related again to other aspects of the professional self, such as working in the office or going to meetings with other colleagues. The women in group 2 commented:

Christine (F2): I think I just need to feel comfortable in my own skin, and even though sometimes I don't because I wear high heels, if I've got a meeting with the Dean ... which is every week now (laughs), all the other times it's really important for me to feel like ... you know ... I can do my job without consciously thinking about my body and my clothes. Like when you are in a conference in the summer, you don't really care if you wear shorts because everyone does!

Fatma (F2): I disagree. Conferences are the only time in the year I think that I shop exclusively for work. I feel I'm more exposed ... I don't know ... like people are going to judge my paper based on how I look. I know it's stupid, but that's how I feel! I might just shop for a nice suit or a dress for that because I need to feel comfortable with myself that I look OK ... my posture, my overall aura.

In this exchange, comfort was discussed in different ways, with Christine stressing that it is more about physical comfort whereas for Fatma, clothes would give her the psychological comfort that she needed to perform another aspect of professional identity, that of a researcher and conference presenter. Physical comfort was important for Christine, and other women who had had similar experiences said it was important for being able to perform the various aspects of their academic identity. Wearing high heels or tight-fitting clothing, as mentioned by other women, made these women feel distracted and they found it difficult to concentrate. As Lian (F1) notes,

If I'm marking 20 essays that day, I want to be able to concentrate and not feel my tammy being squashed by my tight-waste jeans (laughs), so I went and bought a new one, you know!

Even during a back-stage performance, that is, being in their offices marking or doing other academic work, without interacting with others, comfort was an important element of choosing their dress. While physical comfort was easier to manage with the right clothes, psychological comfort was much more ambiguous and a much more complex process. For Fatma (F2) in the exchange above, dress becomes her embodied cultural capital, which gives her the assurance and the psychological comfort that her body and overall 'aura' or professional, academic identity is presented in the right way in the

context of an international conference. The strong need for psychological comfort through dress was also expressed as a need for feeling good about themselves and their interactions with others:

All of us dress very differently, but all of us, I think, have an individual style that you could almost describe if you wanted to. I also think that the vast majority of us, if not all of us, have evolved and carved that style out, as in we've worked out what works for us. Whether we're completely misguided about our own body shapes is kind of irrelevant. We've worked out for us what we feel comfortable in and when we look in the mirror we don't go oh my god, I'm not going out like that. (Jen F1)

Thus, for Jen, and for other women in all four groups, managing the body and self through dress in the university workplace environment is a daily ritual that they use in order to reflect their professional identity and the different roles they are performing each day. Looking good, for them, was an inward process that reflected their professional identity when performing both front- and back-stage. It is an inner psychological process that constructs their professional identity.

In contrast, discomfort was felt when these women thought they were being judged because of their appearance by either staff or students. As Catherine (F1) said, 'Because I'm in my 50s I'm really conscious when the undergrads are looking at my clothes ... gets me thinking am I dressing too bad, do I look awful in this?' Similarly to Catherine, other women felt that students in particular are fed with higher expectations about their overall student experience, which has implications for how these women feel about their overall appearance in class or outside.

Joanne (F4): I think students ... as consumers now, demand the whole package ... a lecturer that not only teaches well, looks good as well ... and gives good marks (laugh). It's a joke really but I feel like that all the time lately, they look at you in a way and it's so uncomfortable.

Lucy (F4): No, it's true ... the whole package, it's value for money isn't it?

Susan (F4): OMG, should I go and buy myself new clothes then? (all laugh)

The anecdotal attitude that these participants tried to bring to the discussion was a reflection of how expectations around academics, and female academics in particular, have changed with the increasing marketisation of HE. Suggesting buying new clothes in order to satisfy students was viewed as a funny remark at that point, but it was a subtheme that was found in all four groups. The visual gratification of students was something that these women felt is increasing and is due to the fact that students are treated increasingly as consumers, which in turn has implications such as narcissistic behaviour (Nixon, Scullion, and Hearn 2018). My participants believed those expectations extend to the visual aspect of their professional identity and felt they were being judged on that in their interaction with students.

Discussion and conclusions

While the construction of a professional academic identity has been the focus of some recent literature (see, for example: Archer 2008; Ylijoki and Ursin 2013; Degn 2015), professional academic identity has not been defined in strict terms in this paper. It was slowly uncovered through the nuances of my participants about how they view themselves as professional in the academic workplace and how they see themselves as 'academics' in the class, office, in meetings or even conferences. Dress, however, seemed to be an eminent 'part' of this definition.

This paper has attempted to show how female academics use dress as a vehicle for presenting themselves in their everyday interactions in the academic environment and how dress becomes a part of how these women (re)construct and (re)shape their professional identity. By using three main themes around professional identity and dress, I have highlighted some of the tensions and challenges these women face in their everyday interaction with the various 'stakeholders' of academic life. These challenges include coping with being a female academic and how they use dress to establish themselves in class, some stressing that gender discrimination inside the classroom is still ongoing. Moreover, dress seems to be important in how these women feel about the overall intellectual community of their departments/schools and how they fit into this, or not. Some of these women felt

that they had to learn to ‘play the game’, literally and in Bourdieusian terms, and said that they felt subject to both staff and students’ gaze precisely because of how they dress. Dress and all its components, as discussed in the introduction, also seem to become important in ensuring physical and psychological comfort for these women, which is important in regard to how they feel about their (gendered) bodies and overall appearance in front-stage interactions with others but also on some occasions in back-stage self-presentation.

This paper by no means claims to have presented the views of all female academics in the UK and it certainly has several limitations. Widening the research to different departments/schools across different (in size, research or teaching orientation) universities in the UK would definitely reveal more interesting nuances around the importance of dress in the ‘professional project’. Further research on dress and academic identity, and not just with female academics, is certainly needed in order to understand identity negotiations and experiences in the constantly shifting field of higher education, which is now characterised by supercomplexity (Barnett 2003) and the new ‘corporate’ universities (Archer 2008).

Academic autonomy, in terms of personal autonomy and academic freedom, is increasingly being eroded as business principles such as quality control, managerialism, performativity and profitability are applied in the running of universities. This has implications for how academics believe they are being perceived by the ‘student gaze’. Visual gratification seems to be increasingly becoming a big part of the student experience and has severe implications for how academics prepare themselves for this. This paper suggests that dress is a major factor in the construction of professional identity and on many occasions necessary ‘equipment’ for displaying one’s professional worth.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

References

- Archer, L. 2008. “Younger Academics’ Constructions of ‘Authenticity’, ‘Success’ and Professional Identity.” *Studies in Higher Education* 33 (4): 385–403.
- Barnett, R. 2003. *Beyond all Reason : Living with Ideology in the University*. Buckingham: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.
- Bell, Q. 1992. *On Human Finery*. London: Allison and Busby.
- Bolich, G. G. 2007. *Crossdressing in Context, Vol. 1 Dress & Gender*. Raleigh, NC: Psyche’s Press.
- Bourdieu, P. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Translated and edited by R. Nice. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. 1984. *Distinction : A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Bourdieu, P. 1986. “The Forms of Capital.” In *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, edited by J. G. Richardson, 241–258. New York: Greenwood Press.
- Bourdieu, P. 1988. *Homo Academicus*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bourdieu, P., and L. J. D. Wacquant. 1992. *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bowen, T. 2018. “Becoming Professional: Examining how WIL Students Learn to Construct and Perform Their Professional Identities.” *Studies in Higher Education* 43 (7): 1148–1159.
- Breward, C. 1995. *The Culture of Fashion: A new History of Fashionable Dress*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Brewis, J. 2005. “Signing my Life Away? Researching sex and Organization.” *Organization* 12 (4): 493–510.
- Brydon, A., and S. A. Niessen. 1998. *Consuming Fashion : Adorning the Transnational Body*. Oxford: Berg.
- Degn, L. 2015. “Identity Constructions and Sensemaking in Higher Education – a Case Study of Danish Higher Education Department Heads.” *Studies in Higher Education* 40 (7): 1179–1193.
- Entwistle, J. 2015. *The Fashioned Body : Fashion, Dress, and Modern Social Theory*. Oxford: Polity Press.
- Entwistle, J., and E. Wilson. 2001. *Body Dressing*. Oxford: Berg.
- Finkelstein, J. 1991. *The Fashioned Self*. Oxford: Polity Press.
- Gherardi, S. 1994. “The Gender we Think, the Gender we do in our Everyday Organizational Lives.” *Human Relations* 47 (6): 591–610.
- Goffman, E. 1971. *Relations in Public: Microstudies of the Public Order*. London: Allen Lane.
- Goffman, E. 1990. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

- Guy, A., M. Banim, and E. Green. 2001. *Through the Wardrobe : Women's Relationships with Their Clothes*. Oxford: Berg.
- Hansen, K. T. 2004. "The World in Dress: Anthropological Perspectives on Clothing, Fashion, and Culture." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (1): 369–392.
- Keenan, W. J. F. 2001. *Dressed to Impress : Looking the Part*. Oxford: Berg.
- Kitzinger, J. 1994. "The Methodology of Focus Groups: The Importance of Interaction between Research Participants." *Sociology of Health and Illness* 16 (1): 103–121.
- Moreno, E. 1995. "Rape in the Field: Reflections from a Survivor." In *Taboo: Sex, Identity and Erotic Subjectivity in Anthropological Fieldwork*, edited by D. Kulick, and M. Willson, 219–250. London: Routledge.
- Morgan, D. 1997. *Focus Groups As Qualitative Research*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Newton, J. 2000. "Feeding the Beast or Improving Quality?: Academics' Perceptions of Quality Assurance and Quality Monitoring." *Quality in Higher Education* 6 (2): 153–163.
- Newton, J. 2002. "Views From Below: Academics Coping with Quality." *Quality in Higher Education* 8 (1): 39–61.
- Nixon, E., R. Scullion, and R. Hearn. 2018. "Her Majesty the Student: Marketised Higher Education and the Narcissistic (dis)Satisfactions of the Student-Consumer." *Studies in Higher Education* 43 (6): 927–943.
- Pherali, T. J. 2012. "Academic Mobility, Language, and Cultural Capital." *Journal of Studies in International Education* 16 (4): 313–333.
- Rafaeli, A., J. Dutton, C. Harquail, and S. Mackie-Lewis. 1997. "Navigating by Attire: The use of Dress by Female Administrative Employees." *Academy of Management Journal* 40 (1): 9–45.
- Reay, D. 2004. "'It's all Becoming a Habitus': Beyond the Habitual use of Habitus in Educational Research." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 25 (4): 431–444.
- Roxå, T., and K. Mårtensson. 2009. "Significant Conversations and Significant Networks-Exploring the Backstage of the Teaching Arena." *Studies in Higher Education* 34 (5): 547–559.
- Seale, C. 2012. *Researching Society and Culture*. London: Sage Publications.
- Stewart, D. W., P. N. Shamdasani, and D. W. Rook. 2007. *Focus Groups: Theory and Practice*. London: Sage Publications.
- Thesen, L. 2009. "Researching 'Ideological Becoming' in Lectures: Challenges for Knowing Differently." *Studies in Higher Education* 34 (4): 391–402.
- Tonkiss, F. 2004. "Using Focus Groups." In *Researching Society and Culture*, edited by C. Seale, 193–206. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Trede, F., R. Macklin, and D. Bridges. 2012. "Professional Identity Development: A Review of the Higher Education Literature." *Studies in Higher Education* 37 (3): 365–384.
- Tsaousi, C. 2016. "'What Underwear do I Like?' Taste and (Embodied) Cultural Capital in the Consumption of Women's Underwear." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 16 (2): 467–492.
- Tsaousi, C., and J. Brewis. 2013. "Are you Feeling Special Today? Underwear and the 'Fashioning' of Female Identity." *Culture and Organization* 19 (1): 1–21.
- Tseëlon, E. 1992. "Is the Presented Self Sincere? Goffman, Impression Management and the Postmodern Self." *Theory, Culture & Society* 9 (2): 115–128.
- Turner, B. S. 1996. *The Body and Society: Explorations in Social Theory*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Weber, S., and C. Mitchell. 1995. *That's Funny, you Don't Look Like a Teacher! :Interrogating Images and Identity in Popular Culture*. London: Falmer Press.
- Wilkinson, S. 1998. "Focus Groups in Feminist Research: Power, Interaction, and the co-Construction of Meaning." *Women's Studies International Forum* 21 (1): 111–125.
- Wilkinson, S. 2004. "Focus Group Research." In *Qualitative Research : Theory, Method and Practice*, edited by D. Silverman, 177–199. London: Sage Publications.
- Ylijoki, O., and J. Ursin. 2013. "The Construction of Academic Identity in the Changes of Finnish Higher Education." *Studies in Higher Education* 38 (8): 1135–1149.