

Decoding Organisational Dress: Institutional Control and the Transformation of Dress Communication

ABSTRACT

Dress is widely recognised as a potent medium that conveys important messages. Yet prior research has centred largely on *what* dress communicates—signals about identity or status—rather than on *how* these communicative processes unfold. In particular, the role of organisational dress remains under explored, as does its distinction from non-organisational dress. Data was collected via 50 semi-structured interviews in two different Chinese organisations. Findings indicate that the organisation, takes on the role of primary “information sender,” while the individual becomes an interpreter. This study makes several theoretical contributions. First, establishing that institutional control is the essential characteristic of organisational dress, fundamentally distinguishing it from non-organisational dress. Second, introducing a model that employs the intensity of organisational control as an analytical axis, thereby enabling various forms of organisational dress to be examined as a unified construct. Finally, demonstrating that the mechanisms of information conveyance in organisational vs. non-organisational dress.

INTRODUCTION

Although organisational dress is pervasive in social life and constitutes a significant economic sector, its importance remains substantially underestimated in academic research. A growing body of empirical studies has confirmed that dress profoundly shapes social perceptions of the wearer and simultaneously influences the wearer’s own psychological states and behavioural patterns (Rafaeli & Pratt, 1993). Across service, education, and organisational management contexts, both experimental and field studies consistently demonstrate that subtle variations in uniforms—such as colour, formality, and brand display—can systematically alter customers’ perceptions of employee friendliness, service quality, and authority (Bruder, Lechner & Paul, 2021; Kamata et al., 2020; Srna, Barasch & Small, 2022). Simultaneously, organisational dress exerts substantial internal influence on the wearer. Employees’ satisfaction with the aesthetic qualities of their uniforms significantly predicts their self-esteem and job performance (Kim, Holtz & Vogel, 2023). Well-designed uniforms not only enhance job satisfaction and self-confidence but also effectively reduce workplace harassment and unwelcome attention (Choy & Shih, 2022; Moody, 2022; Nelson & Bowen, 2000). Further evidence indicates that appropriate dress strengthens role identification, improves task focus, and promotes time discipline (Morita & Servátka, 2013; Konheim-Kalkstein, 2006). In sum, organisational dress functions as a behaviourally directive material symbol that simultaneously shapes others’ social impressions of the wearer and persistently influences the wearer’s internal psychological experience and behavioural responses.

Despite the richness of existing empirical evidence at the phenomenon level, research remains limited in explaining the underlying mechanisms. Most current studies emphasise the statistical associations between dress and social perceptions or behavioural outcomes, yet few have systematically unpacked how dress influences individual cognition and psychological processes. The absence of detailed accounts of mediating pathways and psychological mechanisms not only constrains theoretical advancement but also weakens the design of effective organisational interventions. Moreover, the core concept of ‘organisational dress’ remains theoretically ambiguous. Existing literature employs diverse and loosely defined terms—including uniforms, formal dress codes, style guidelines, grooming requirements, and even self-presentation—without a

shared understanding of its essential nature or its distinction from everyday dress. This conceptual vagueness complicates empirical operationalisation and hampers theoretical dialogue across organisational studies, social psychology, and semiotics.

To address these gaps, this paper advances three key contributions. First, it offers a reconceptualisation of organisational dress, arguing that the boundary should be drawn based on the locus of decision-making authority. Unlike everyday dress, which is predominantly guided by individual aesthetic autonomy, organisational dress refers to clothing choices that are partially or fully regulated by the organisation. In this context, the wearer ceases to be the autonomous encoder of symbolic meaning and instead becomes the carrier and amplifier of organisational intent. On this basis, classic semiotic theories of fashion, such as those developed by Roland Barthes—originally focused on individual expression and everyday cultural encoding within the urban middle class—encounter significant boundary limitations in organisational settings. This paper contends that the theoretical foundations of semiotics require substantial adjustment and expansion when applied to contexts where organisational control is structurally embedded.

Second, this paper develops a progressive mechanism model—organisational dress → symbol set → information set → individual and organisational outcomes—to systematically elucidate the multi-layered pathways through which organisational dress shapes cognition and behaviour. Starting from the physical properties of dress as a set of codable symbols, the model traces how these symbols are regulated by organisational rules and embedded within cultural contexts to form shared information sets. These, in turn, influence individual role identification, task focus, and time discipline through perceptual and psychological assimilation processes, ultimately generating observable behavioural outcomes and organisational performance. By integrating the encoding–decoding logic from semiotics, social identity mechanisms of affiliation, and the motivation–outcome linkage in organisational behaviour, this model offers a coherent causal chain. It provides a more comprehensive explanation of how organisational dress exerts its influence and offers systematic guidance for the refined design, dynamic evaluation, and ongoing adjustment of organisational dress policies.

Finally, this paper proposes the ‘organisational control strength–dress salience continuum’ to capture the diversity of dress regulations across organisations. Organisational dress and non-organisational dress are not dichotomous categories; rather, there are meaningful variations in the degree of organisational control. The stronger the organisational control, the more salient the organisational representation embedded in dress; the weaker the control, the closer the dress resembles individual choice. This continuum provides a systematic strategic positioning framework for organisational dress, helping to bridge the long-standing theoretical divide between semiotics and organisational studies. It also opens new avenues for exploring the dynamic interplay among organisational control, identity construction, and material symbols.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Impact of Organisational Dress

In recent years, organisational dress has attracted increasing scholarly attention. Numerous studies have demonstrated that organisational dress significantly influences a wide range of organisational outcomes (Etalong & Chikeleze, 2023). Empirical evidence indicates that dress enhances an organisation's public image (Bruder, Lechner & Paul, 2021; Rafaeli & Pratt, 1993; Simpson, 2017; Tynan, 2013), conveys and reshapes organisational culture (Rafaeli & Pratt, 1993; van Wijk & Finchilescu, 2008), and establishes roles, responsibilities, and hierarchies within organisations (Vonk, 2024; Simpson, 2017). Additionally, dress reinforces in-group identity and promotes positive evaluations of in-group members (Brewer, 1999; Crane et al., 2004; Joseph & Alex, 1972; Kodžoman, 2019; Taylor, 1981). Furthermore, organisational dress has been empirically linked to key outcomes such as work motivation (Cheng, 1998; Konheim-Kalkstein, 2006), job satisfaction (Gordon, Tengler & Infante, 1982; Kamata et al., 2020), customer satisfaction (Kamata et al., 2020), service quality attributions (Smith, Chandler & Schwarz, 2020), performance quality (Kim et al., 2022), employee mood (Solomon & Schopler, 1982), organisational commitment and productivity (Bowman & Hooper, 1991), tardiness and absenteeism (Konheim-Kalkstein, 2006; Queenan, 1996), turnover (Cheng, 1998), employee attitudes (Ham et al., 2020; Lee & Bolton, 2020; Wardhana & Harsono, 2020), and the demarcation of professional boundaries (Timmons & East, 2011; Siebert, 2020). These extensive findings raise a critical question: how does organisational dress produce such widespread and enduring effects?

The Communicative Power of Dress

Some studies suggest that the cognitive and behavioural effects of dress primarily stem from its communicative function. Bickman (1974) demonstrated through field experiments that individuals wearing police-like uniforms elicited significantly higher compliance rates compared to those in civilian clothes or other uniforms. This effect was not driven by the physical attributes of the clothing but by the observer's interpretation of the uniform as a symbol of authority. Similarly, Adam and Galinsky (2012) found that even when participants wore identical white coats, their attentional performance differed significantly depending on whether they were told the coat represented a doctor or a lab assistant. These findings indicate that the social impact of dress arises not from its physical form, but from the information it conveys and the cognitive schemas and social expectations it activates within specific settings.

Theoretical Perspectives on Dress as a Signal

This phenomenon can be explained by *signalling theory*. Signalling theory posits that observable characteristics—such as education, behaviour, and dress—help information recipients reduce uncertainty (Spence, 1974). Organisational dress, as a highly visible, low-cost, and easily interpreted signal, is widely employed to convey key information regarding authority, professionalism, and group affiliation (Drover et al., 2018; Golubeva et al., 2018).

Impression management theory further suggests that individuals and organisations often consciously or unconsciously use dress to shape social impressions, gain acceptance, or maintain role expectations (Goffman, 1959; Rosenfeld et al., 1995). From this perspective, dress serves not only as a medium for information conveyance but also as a strategic tool in social interaction.

Symbolic interactionism offers an important perspective for understanding the role of dress in social interaction. Veblen's (1899) theory of conspicuous consumption highlights that luxurious dress functions as a social marker of wealth and status. Building on this, Blumer (1969) emphasised that clothing choices are dynamically constructed through ongoing social processes of imitation, negotiation, and differentiation.

The *semiotics of dress* emphasises that clothing operates as a system of symbols that produces social meaning (Nengsi & Azhar). Barthes (1967) argued that the fashion system constitutes a network of signs that encode identity, status, and social recognition. Subsequent studies have shown that observers infer numerous attributes from dress, including attractiveness (Hoult, 1954; Lewis, 2015), authority (Bickman, 1974), socioeconomic background, trustworthiness, status, moral character (Thourlby, 1978), aggression (Johnson & Downing, 1979; Vrij, 1997), competence, intelligence, and professionalism (Mauro, 1984; Singer & Singer, 1985; Furnham et al., 2013; Slepian, 2015).

Summary and Theoretical Gap

In summary, existing studies have consistently confirmed the extensive impact of organisational dress on social perceptions, employee behaviours, and organisational outcomes. However, most of the current literature remains at the level of statistical associations and lacks systematic theoretical integration. Notably, few studies explicitly identify information conveyance as the key mechanism through which organisational dress exerts its influence on individuals and organisations, and even fewer have unpacked the specific pathways of this communicative process. Current explanations remain fragmented and fail to establish a coherent causal chain. Further theoretical development is essential to uncover the underlying logic of organisational dress as a control mechanism and to enhance its managerial relevance.

Moreover, the core concept of organisational dress itself remains poorly defined. This conceptual ambiguity hinders empirical operationalisation and complicates theoretical integration, while raising substantial uncertainty about whether existing theories from broader dress studies can be directly applied to organisational settings. For example, classic fashion theories, such as those proposed by Barthes, primarily focus on informal, individualised dress and may have limited explanatory power in highly institutionalised organisational contexts. Clarifying the theoretical scope and conceptual boundaries of organisational dress is therefore essential for advancing research in this field.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative approach to explore the communicative mechanisms of organisational dress. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 50 employees across two Chinese organisations: a petroleum storage base (comprising corporate staff and firefighting personnel) and an agricultural administrative enforcement agency. These organisations were deliberately selected because both exhibit relatively strong organisational control over employee dress, ensuring that the cases studied represent prototypical forms of organisational dress, rather

than loosely regulated or marginal instances. Importantly, while both organisations enforce formal dress codes, they differ meaningfully in the degree of organisational control. They also differ substantially sector, structure, and operational demands thus required substantial number of interviews to reach saturation (Corbin and Strauss, 2008; Suddaby, 2006). This is considered above the norm in terms of data collection in qualitative studies (Saunders and Townsend, 2016).

Participants included frontline staff, managers, firefighters, enforcement officers, and administrative personnel. This purposive sampling (Corbin et al., 2014) allowed the exploration of how hierarchical levels, functional roles, and departmental identities influence the interpretation of organisational dress.

Interviews, lasting 20–40 minutes, covered topics such as perceived autonomy, identity conflicts, intended vs. actual information, and experiences of wearing institutionally prescribed garments. Verbatim transcripts were analysed using Nvivo 14. In line with Saldaña's (2021) guidelines.

Throughout the coding process, a constant comparative method (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) was employed to refine categories, and coding reliability checks were performed among the research team. Ethical protocols included informed consent, confidentiality assurances, and the removal of identifying details. At this stage we develop a data structure (Gioia et al., 2013) and our emerging model.

DISCUSSION

Preliminary analysis suggests that in both cases of tightly controlled organisations, members primarily assume the role of interpreters when engaging with the information conveyed through organisational dress. Contrary to traditional dress theories that position the wearer as the principal decision-maker in meaning construction, this study finds that within highly institutionalised contexts, wearers are often relegated to a more passive position of reception and constrained interpretation. This challenges the long-standing emphasis on wearer agency in dress research and calls for a re-evaluation of such assumptions in environments characterised by strong organisational control.

Moreover, wearers do not necessarily fully perceive, comprehend, or attach significance to the messages deliberately embedded by the organisation within the dress code. In some cases, members exhibit a striking lack of awareness regarding key symbolic elements of organisational attire. Simultaneously, external observers, organisational members, and management frequently produce divergent, and at times conflicting, readings of the same dress practices. The intended organisational meanings are therefore neither universally recognised nor consistently internalised.

Furthermore, while seminal sociological and communication theories (e.g. Blumer, 1969; Hall, 1980) have long asserted that the interpretation of symbols is inherently open and resistant to monopolisation, this study reveals the complexities of organisational dress as a symbolic medium. Unlike symbols that are highly controllable—such as broadcast images or scripted messages—dress is a material, everyday object, produced and worn in vast quantities, rendering its micro-level details inherently resistant to full organisational control. Even under highly disciplined regimes, structural gaps in regulation persist. Subtle features often escape managerial surveillance. Organisational members actively draw upon these seemingly trivial details to construct alternative meanings.

REFERENCE

- Adam, H., & Galinsky, A. D.** (2012). *Enclothed cognition*. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 48(4), 918–925.
- Barthes, R., Lavers, A., & Smith, C.** (1967). *Elements of semiology* (p. 11). London: Cape.
- Bickman, L.** (1974). The social power of a uniform. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 4(1), 47–61.
- Blumer, H.** (2012). Symbolic interactionism [1969]. In *Contemporary Sociological Theory* (p. 62).
- Bowman, J. S., & Hooper, H. L.** (1991). Dress and grooming regulations in the public service: Standards, legality, and enforcement. *Public Administration Quarterly*, 15(3), 328–340.
- Brewer, M. B.** (1999). The psychology of prejudice: Ingroup love and outgroup hate? *Journal of Social Issues*, 55(3), 429–444.
- Bruder, M., Lechner, A. T., & Paul, M.** (2021). Toward holistic frontline employee management: An investigation of the interplay of positive emotion displays and dress color. *Psychology & Marketing*, 38(11), 2089–2101.
- Cheng, C.** (1998). Uniform change: An ethnography on organisational symbolism, volunteer motivation, and dysfunctional change in a paramilitary organisation. *Leadership & Organisation Development Journal*, 19(1), 22–31.
- Choy, M. W. C., & Shih, C. C. C.** (2022). The effect of employee uniform on job satisfaction: A case of the housekeeping department in a luxury five-star hotel in Hong Kong, China. *Tourism and Hospitality Management*, 28(3), 559–574.
- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A.** (2014). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Crane, T. C., Hamilton, J. A., & Wilson, L. E.** (2004). Scottish dress, ethnicity, and self-identity. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management: An International Journal*, 8(1), 66–83.
- Drover, W., Wood, M. S., & Corbett, A. C.** (2018). Toward a cognitive view of signalling theory: Individual attention and signal set interpretation. *Journal of Management Studies*, 55(2), 209–231.
- Etalong, T. A., & Chikeleze, F. O.** (2023). Effect of organizational culture on employee performance: A survey of selected public sector organizations in Enugu. *European Journal of Business and Innovation Research*, 11(7), 73–86.
- Furnham, A., Chan, P. S., & Wilson, E.** (2013). What to wear? The influence of attire on the perceived professionalism of dentists and lawyers. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 43(9), 1838–1850.
- Gioia, D. A., Corley, K. G., & Hamilton, A. L.** (2013). Seeking qualitative rigor in inductive research: Notes on the Gioia methodology. *Organizational Research Methods*, 16(1), 15–31.
- Goffman, E.** (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Garden City, NJ: Doubleday.

Golubeva, J., Koris, R., & Kerem, K. (2018). The dress I wear says more than a thousand words: Conspicuous choice of garment among Estonian elite. *Journal of Management and Change*, 36(37), 78–98.

Gordon, W. I., Tengler, C. D., & Infante, D. A. (1982). Women's clothing predispositions as predictor of dress at work, job satisfaction, and career advancement. *Southern Speech Communication Journal*, 47, 422–434.

Hall, S. (1980). Encoding/decoding. In S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe, & P. Willis (Eds.), *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972–79* (pp. 128–138). London: Hutchinson.

Ham, S., Kim, Y., Lee, S. M., & Kim, W. G. (2020). The impact of employee uniforms on customer perceptions and brand image in the hospitality industry. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 88, Article 102533.

Hoult, T. F. (1954). Experimental measurement of clothing as a factor in some social ratings of selected American men. *American Sociological Review*, 19(3), 324–328.

Johnson, R. D., & Downing, L. L. (1979). Deindividuation and valence of cues: Effects on prosocial and antisocial behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 37(9), 1532–1538.

Joseph, N., & Alex, N. (1972). The uniform: A sociological perspective. *American Journal of Sociology*, 77(4), 719–730.

Kamata, K., Kuriyama, A., Chopra, V., Saint, S., Houchens, N., Petrilli, C. M., ... Tokuda, Y. (2020). Patient preferences for physician attire: A multicenter study in Japan. *Journal of Hospital Medicine*, 15(4), 204–210.

Kim, J. K., Holtz, B. C., & Vogel, R. M. (2023). Wearing your worth at work: The consequences of employees' daily clothing choices. *Academy of Management Journal*, 66(5), 1411–1437.

Kodžoman, D. (2019). The psychology of clothing: Meaning of colors, body image, and gender expression in fashion. *Textile & Leather Review*, 2(2), 90–103.

Konheim-Kalkstein, Y. L. (2006). A uniform look. *American School Board Journal*, 193(8), 25–27.

Lee, S., & Bolton, L. E. (2020). Mixed signals? Decoding luxury consumption in the workplace. *Journal of Business Research*, 117, 331–345.

Lewis, D. M., Russell, E. M., Al-Shawaf, L., & Buss, D. M. (2015). Lumbar curvature: A previously undiscovered standard of attractiveness. *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 36(5), 345–350.

Mauro, R. (1984). The constable's new clothes: Effects of uniforms on perceptions and problems of police officers. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 14(1), 42–56.

Moody, L. (2022). Exploring the relationship between uniform and perceived employee happiness and productivity. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, 27(4), 311–334.

- Morita, H., & Servátka, M.** (2013). Group identity and relation-specific investment: An experimental investigation. *European Economic Review*, 58, 95–109.
- Nelson, K., & Bowen, J.** (2000). The effect of employee uniforms on employee satisfaction. *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, 41(2), 86–95.
- Nengsi, E. G., & Azhar, A.** (2025). Fashion as a form of self-identity: A semiotic analysis of millennials' dress style. *Pedagogic Research–Applied Literacy Journal*, 2(1), 182–186.
- Queenan, J.** (1996). Office casualties. *Chief Executive*, 110, 15.
- Rafaeli, A., & Pratt, M. G.** (1993). Tailored meanings: On the meaning and impact of organisational dress. *Academy of Management Review*, 18(1), 32–55.
- Rosenfeld, P., Giacalone, R. A., & Riordan, C. A.** (1995). *Impression management in organizations: Theory, measurement, practice*. Routledge.
- Saldaña, J.** (2021). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Saunders, M. N., & Townsend, K.** (2016). Reporting and justifying the number of interview participants in organization and workplace research. *British Journal of Management*, 27(4), 836–852.
- Siebert, S.** (2020). Symbolic demarcation: The role of status symbols in preserving inter-professional boundaries. *Journal of Professions and Organisation*, 7(1), 47–69.
- Simpson, R.** (2017). The Police Officer Perception Project (POPP): An experimental evaluation of factors that impact perceptions of the police. *Journal of Experimental Criminology*, 13(3), 393–415.
- Singer, M. S., & Singer, A. E.** (1985). The effect of police uniform on interpersonal perception. *The Journal of Psychology*, 119(2), 157–161.
- Slepian, M. L., Ferber, S. N., Gold, J. M., & Rutchick, A. M.** (2015). The cognitive consequences of formal clothing. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 6(6), 661–668.
- Smith, R. W., Chandler, J. J., & Schwarz, N.** (2020). Uniformity: The effects of organizational attire on judgments and attributions. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 50(5), 299–312.
- Spence, M.** (1974). Competitive and optimal responses to signals: An analysis of efficiency and distribution. *Journal of Economic Theory*, 7(3), 296–332.
- Srna, S., Barasch, A., & Small, D. A.** (2022). On the value of modesty: How signals of status undermine cooperation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 123(4), 676–695.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. M.** (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Sage Publications.
- Suddaby, R.** (2006). From the editors: What grounded theory is not. *Academy of Management Journal*, 49(4), 633–642.

Taylor, S. (1981). A categorization approach to stereotyping. In D. L. Hamilton (Ed.), *Cognitive Processes in Stereotyping and Intergroup Behavior* (pp. 83–114). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Thourlby, W. (1978). *You are what you wear: The key to business success*. Sheed Andrews and McMeel.

Timmons, S., & East, L. (2011). Uniforms, status and professional boundaries in hospital. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 33(7), 1035–1049.

Tynan, J. (2013). *British Army Uniform and the First World War: Men in Khaki* (p. 3). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Van Wijk, C. H., & Finchilescu, G. (2008). Symbols of organisational culture: The case of the South African military. *South African Journal of Psychology*, 38(1), 166–183.

Veblen, T. (1899). Mr. Cummings's strictures on "The theory of the leisure class." *Journal of Political Economy*, 8(1), 106–117.

Vonk, L. (2024). Identity regulation and aesthetic control: The affordances and restraints of uniforms in service work. *Current Sociology*, 00113921241275683.

Vrij, A. (1997). Wearing black clothes: The impact of offenders' and suspects' clothing on impression formation. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 11(1), 47–53.

Wardhana, D. Y., & Harsono, H. (2020). Employees' perceptions of work attire in the workplace, does it matter? *KINERJA*, 24(2), 205–220.