

# The Similarity Effect

## Its Influence on Job Interviews and Performance Appraisal

Extended Abstract

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The aim of our two research studies was to investigate the similarity effects on managerial decision-making, in general, and in particular, similarity of subordinates' style of dressing on supervisors' performance appraisal, as well as the impact of dressing style similarity on job interviewer decision making. Despite increasing research attention on the influence of similarity on various types of organizational decision-making, only a handful of empirical studies have focused on the impact of a candidate's attire on selection interviews. Even fewer studies have dealt with the influence of subordinates' dressing style on performance appraisal.

### The similarity effect

According to similarity effect theory, people tend to prefer those who are similar to them (Galin, 2016). Previous studies suggest that applicant-manager similarity plays a significant role in selection decisions. Applicants who are similar to the manager are evaluated more positively by managers than dissimilar applicants. Pulakos and Wexley (1983) found that perceptual similarity between supervisors and subordinates accounted for a sizable percentage of performance rating. Significantly lower performance appraisals were found in dyads in which there was mutual perceptual dissimilarity between supervisors and subordinates. Zalesny and Kirsch (1989) found that supervisor-subordinate educational similarity was significantly related to a subordinate's higher performance rating. Graves and Powell (1995) found that perceived similarity and interpersonal attraction mediated the effect of gender similarity on female recruiters' assessments of applicants' qualifications, while male recruiters' interview outcomes were not affected by gender similarity. Lin et al. (1992) found that race similarity has a significant influence on job interview results. All these findings are consistent with the idea that perceived similarities or dissimilarities generate managerial decisions - in favor of the similar person.

Studies that examine the influence of similarities on organizational behavior may be derived from several theories:

- **The “symbolic interaction” theory** - This theory is a framework for understanding how individuals interact with each other through the meanings of both verbal and nonverbal symbols (Herman-Kinney and Reynolds, 2003). Thus, according to the “symbolic interaction” theory, individuals mediate their communication with others by interpreting

symbols, such as voice (Korsgaard and Roberson, 1995), facial expressions, physical gestures and, in our case, attire. Accordingly, clothing is a symbol interpreted by the perceiver during the process of impression formation. Moreover, it influences not only perceptions about behavior, but also about the perception of intentions.

- ***The theory of “attractiveness”***- According to this theory, people often prefer attractive individuals over those who are less attractive. The “*attractiveness impact*” has been reported to influence the process of HRM selection, biasing to favor attractive applicants of both sexes. In their meta-analysis review of experimental studies concerned with the effect of physical attractiveness on a variety of job-related outcomes, Hosoda et al. (2003) found that attractive individuals were found to perform better than unattractive individuals in terms of a number of such outcomes. They also found that attractiveness was as important for men as for women, and that professionals were just as susceptible to the attractiveness factor as college students. Chiu and Babcock (2002) found that applicants’ perceived attractiveness had a higher predictive value than other selection criteria, and that the considerable experience of HRM specialists did not act in neutralizing the attractiveness bias. Their study also supports the proposition that there is a universal attractiveness effect, despite the fact that attractiveness varies from culture to culture. Accordingly, it is reasonable to assume that HRM decision makers may also tend to favor those who are attractively dressed. However, physical attractiveness or presentability of attire may also serve as an obstacle for women or men attempting to cross traditional gender barriers. For example, attractively dressed women can be perceived as too feminine for tasks believed to require masculine characteristics.

### **The studies**

In two research studies, the influence of similarity in dressing style on managerial decisions was investigated. In the first study, the impact of dress similarity on supervisors’ performance appraisal was investigated. In the second study, the effects of dress similarity on interviewers’ job interview decisions were investigated.

We hypothesized that the more formally dressed subordinates the more attractive they are perceived and therefore are better evaluated during performance appraisals. In the same way, more formally-dressed interviewees the more attractive they are perceived and therefore receive higher evaluations from job interviewers. Moreover, the more formal the supervisors dress, the higher their appraisal of a formally-dressed subordinate will be. Likewise, the more formally the interviewer is dressed, the higher the chances are that the job will go to a formally-dressed job candidate. We further hypothesized that subordinates’ performance appraisal and job candidacy will also be influenced by gender similarity.

### **The first study**

This study was conducted by using clips showing the performances of two tasks – a newscast and the presentation of a stock exchange report (Galin & Benoliel, 1990). One man and one woman acted as the ratees in both tasks and each performed both tasks twice - once dressed in casual clothing and once in formal business attire. Thus, 8 clips were

used: four for the male ratee and four for the female ratee. A total of 127 executives acted voluntarily as raters of the ratees' performance - 65% were male and 35% were female. Each of the raters was asked to fill out a performance appraisal questionnaire. Each rater was exposed to one out of the 8 clips. Meanwhile, the raters' attire was also categorized - either as *formal* or *casual* - by the researchers who observed the dressing style of the rater-executives. Ratees' dress style, raters' dress style, task type, raters' gender, and ratees' gender were the independent variables, while performance appraisal was the dependent variable.

### **Results of the first study:**

The findings supported some of our hypotheses. They did not support the hypothesis relating to the impact of ratees' dress style on their performance appraisal. Neither the task nor the ratees' dress yielded any significant effect on performance appraisal. However, the combination of dress similarity and gender similarity significantly influenced the ratees' performance appraisal.

### **The second study**

In the second study, our hypotheses were based on the findings of our first study, and the findings of other studies (Hosoda et al. 2003, Forsythe, 1990). This second study attempted to investigate the impact of interviewees' dress style (attractiveness) on the results of a job interview. A total of 182 executives - 55% women and 45% men - participated in the research. They belonged to various organizations (such as banks, communication organization, and high technology organizations), and an integral part of their job was to interview new candidates for their organization. Each executive randomly received one of three pictures of the same candidate (a man), who was dressed differently in each picture. In one picture, the man (the "candidate") was dressed formally (a formal shirt and a tie); in another, he was dressed in a sporty, elegant way (a polo shirt). In the third photo, he was dressed casually (in a very simple T-shirt). After looking at the picture, all of the executives filled out a questionnaire in which they were asked, among other irrelevant questions, whether they would like to hire this man (the candidate) to work in their organization. At the same time, the researcher observed the executives' dress style and categorized them into three categories: formal, sporty / elegant or casual.

### **Results of the second study:**

Once again, the results supported our similarity hypothesis. Executives dressed similarly to the "candidate" were willing to hire the "candidate" to work in their organization significantly more than executives who were dressed differently from the candidate.

### **Conclusions**

Our conclusions are as follows: a) Dress style has an effect on both performance appraisal, and job interview decisions. However, this effect is not simply related to the ratee's or job candidate's style of dress or task. b) It is the similarity effect that mainly

influences performance appraisal decisions as well as the decision to recruit a job candidate. Specifically, in the first study we found that the similarity between the rater's dress style and the ratee's dress style, and the similarity between the ratee and rater's gender, significantly influenced the performance appraisal. In the second study, it was found that only candidate-executive dress similarity influenced the candidate's chance to receive the job. Gender similarity did not have any significant influence on the interviewer's decision to recruit the candidate. Thus, in general, the "*similarity effect theory*" might be very important in explaining various decision-making processes within organizations.

To conclude, the bottom line for candidates and subordinates seems to be: "It's not about how YOU dress; it's about how your manager or interviewer likes to dress".

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