Corporate Fashion – a fashion concept between individuality and standardization

Regina Henkel, University of Dortmund, Institute of Comparative Textile Sciences

I am going to talk about the results of my thesis on the topic Corporate Fashion, which has been part of the research project “Uniforms in motion” of the Universities of Dortmund and Frankfurt am Main. My thesis focuses on the clothing practice in the three companies Daimler Chrysler, Deutsche Bank and Lufthansa and it is based on an ethnographic research with qualitative interviews and participant observation.

Corporate Fashion represents a phenomenon which increasingly accompanies our everyday experiences. It describes a special kind of working clothes which are collectively worn in an organization. Their main purpose is to promote the identity of the organization and company-specific aims, rather than to satisfy functional physiologic criteria or traditions of specific professions like classic working clothes do. Corporate Fashion is often described as the ‘textile business card’ of an organization which contributes to a positive image in the public world. In the literature as well as in interviews during my research, there seemed to be only these external reasons for using Corporate Fashion and only external effects seemed to be expected.

However, for the next fifteen minutes I am going to concentrate on the impact of Corporate Fashion within an organization. This might be interesting for two reasons: first, Corporate Fashion is a technique to uniform the bodies of the employees. Therefore the intended external effects of Corporate Fashion are based on internal structures with important consequences on the employees and the Corporate Life of an organization. And second, uniformity conflicts with
society, that builds on ideals of individuality and nonconformism. So, by focusing on a view inside the organization, important indications about the limits and possibilities of Corporate Fashion for the company itself and for its wearers, the employees, can be revealed. Although Corporate Fashion has become a common phenomenon, there is very little research on this internal perspective.

**Corporate Fashion as a leadership instrument**

By focusing on the interaction with the customer, the potential of Corporate Fashion as a management tool and leadership instrument is often overlooked. Therefore Corporate Fashion is connected closely with the concepts of Corporate Identity and Corporate Culture. Both can be described as concepts to establish a unifying system of values which supports a sense of community and coherence within the organization. Thereby, positive impulses on work performance and motivation of the employees are expected. The special potential of solving internal problems by promising new and more sublime possibilities of employee control, set up the worldwide breakthrough of Corporate Identity and Corporate Culture.

In the same sense Corporate Fashion provides possibilities of employee control through the creation of a homogeneous collective appearance and by establishing a common sense and team spirit. This standardization of the employees’ body makes relevant work processes more efficient, because it enables the organization to regulate the interaction between customers and employees by taking control over the customers’ perception. This standardization process works on horizontal and vertical hierarchy levels of the employees aswell. By means of the clothes the employee is recognizable at any time. Therefore, the function of standardization is always accompanied by that of control. Control means not only the adaption of the physical appearance to a certain picture but also the control of
behaviour. This intensification of the employees’ visibility represents a sublime technique to increase the efficiency of labour by enforcing self discipline.

Even the clothes themselves represent a control authority. By creating a standard, difference becomes visible and punishment possible. Wearing the uniform properly is just as important as wearing it at all. It signals understanding and obeying rules. It also means, that difference transfers into delinquency, and individual distinction from the collective identity provokes conclusions on the degree of loyalty and the identification with the organization.

This demanded equality follows the main rules of the modern industrial production: it is not only the intended result of the standardization process, it is its main condition. While industrial standardization has to guarantee the sameness of the products, in the area of the human service it attempts to achieve just as constant results.

Exactly this proximity to totalitarianism explains the criticism of Corporate Fashion and the concepts of Corporate Identity and Corporate Culture. The physical standardization of the employees through clothes appears as an authoritarian takeover on the employees body and as a refined micro technique of power. Here, the association of Corporate Fashion with the military uniform becomes the legitimate shock picture which stirs up fears of deindividuation and gleichschaltung. Uniformity in general conflicts with a social system which focusses on the norms of individuality and plurality. It seems even more alarming if it is used by a powerful institution, an organization.
Corporate Fashion as resource of community and resistance

This standardization shows only one aspect of the impact of Corporate Fashion. It remains one-dimensional and a simplification because it is overlooked, that the uniform wearer constructs his own meanings and uses the uniform for his own purposes. While the classic work and protective clothing, as well as the military uniform, can build on accepted functions of protection, on traditions and on social authorities, Corporate Fashion is missing such a powerful resource of legitimacy. It even conflicts with our social norms. Hence, there have to be strong reasons for employees to accept uniformity and make it plausible for themselves.

As mentioned before, the external impacts of Corporate Fashion like standardization and the reference to the customer’s needs, represent the main tasks of Corporate Fashion for the organization. Whereas the internal impacts, like the potential to support and maintain social community seem to be mainly unintended side-effects. However, these social effects are obviously existing and contributing to the construction of community. Although the employees I interviewed during my study did not identify social aspects as an essential reason for establishing Corporate Fashion, the majority of them described a community promoting effect of their clothing. Especially newcomers feel the integrating power of the uniform. It marks the employees’ authority towards the customer, defines their status and simplifies the interaction. In professions, where employees are frequently confronted with unknown co-workers, the uniform indicates the first sign of their unity.

To meet the expectations and necessities of the uniform wearers, most companies develop the uniforms in co-operation with the employees. This process requires and generates social skills on both sides and helps to stabilize a sense of community. Participating
employees take responsibility for their colleagues and feel obliged to act in the interest of the whole group. Uniforms can even become objects of value because they symbolize and materialize common experience and time. Since uniforms are usually replaced every three to ten years in companies, they represent a particular period of the companies and employees history. As a symbolization of time, Corporate Fashion offers a technique to experience company tradition as well as ones individual past. For example, many flight attendants save their old uniforms to recall their individual history and to wear it again at company celebrations. By wearing the clothes of the past for special corporate occasions, the memory of the time spent together and the company history can be materially and physically re-vitalized and re-experienced.

But Corporate Fashion also influences the everyday life. Since wearing Corporate Fashion helps to structure the day, it brings a special kind of order into everyday life. Most of the interviewed uniform wearers appreciate it as a possibility to separate between work and leisure time. Taking off the uniform is repeatedly described as a symbolic practice to end the workday and concentrate on the family and personal needs. Therefore none of the interviewed workers intended to wear the uniform outside of the organization. This part-time character of Corporate Fashion represents one essential difference to the military uniform. The military uniforms’ aim is to prevent this separation between the private and working sphere, between individual and official constructions of meaning. The military uniform is not taken off after work, it is merely replaced by a leisure uniform. In contradiction to Corporate Fashion, the military uniform intends to integrate the soldier completely in the military apparatus to gain and guarantee unquestioning obevance and fulfillment of duty.
As I tried to explain, Corporate Fashion serves both, the organization and the employee. Therefore it is characterized by ambivalent meanings and connotations. Finally, I would like to discuss the role of the body itself in this process of unification. The clothing practice in our culture is based on subjective everyday knowledge. Every subject creates its own imaginations and rules of appearance. Additionally, it establishes its own body knowledge and sets up criteria for convenience and comfort.

Despite of ambitioned attempts to achieve consent, total agreement between the companies’ and the employees’ needs or even among the employees themselves remains unattainable. Uniforms will always be perceived to be uncomfortable and unsuitable by at least a part of their wearers. Therefore they have the potential to permanently stress and stimulate the difference between the individual and the organization. The uniform itself mobilizes the wish for resistance and becomes the obstacle and counterbalance for organizational efforts of standardization.

So maybe exactly this bodily resistance against unification and standardization explains why the internal impact of Corporate Fashion often remains uncertain. Even though its potential for standardization is evident, the practical experience of Corporate Fashion in organizations shows clearly its ambivalent and contradictory results. Therefore Corporate Fashion can hardly be used as a strategic tool to establish unification and identity within an organization, because the internal effects of Corporate Fashion remain hard to be influenced.