A New Look for a New Role; Challenging Stereotypes of Librarian Style

Dina Youssef Salib
Specialized Cultural Organizations Department, Bibliotheca Alexandrina, Alexandria, Egypt.

Abstract:

"Libraries Transform Societies"―to what extent could the way a librarian look like affect this fact. Is it possible that librarians are stereotyped? How would that be done? How librarians are being perceived now in terms of―how they look?

This paper aims at giving a glimpse on the psychological influence of a professional look, and on how people's judgments are affected by the first impression they get from the look of another person. Both appearance and non-verbal communication speak of a person's personality, and they are reflected on how people react to him/her.

The appearance is how a person dresses, how he/she talks (voice and choice of language), and how they behave. All these come first then comes the importance of their professional competence.

The paper will also show examples of professional looks that by themselves would give an impression about someone as an authority before even uttering a word or behaving.

In addition, the paper will examine the looks of librarians taking different roles in the profession, depending on the age group of the users they are dealing with, the users' social and intellectual background, and the librarian job objectives.

Moreover, the study will reflect on the developments in the role of librarians over the past years. By drawing a comparison between librarians in the past and nowadays, the paper will discuss how the look of librarians should change with the change in their roles in the society.

Moving on from this point, the study will highlight some aspects that may affect the look of librarians; like traditions, religious constraints, social and financial barriers.

The paper will conclude by providing some examples of successful library professionals who advocate for the library and information field at all levels.

Introduction

Libraries and Librarians play a vital role in the society since the world started knowing the importance of knowledge from early ages.

The role of librarians faced great changes throughout the days and since librarianship was first introduced in the 8th century BC.

A great development in the role of libraries was realized since the establishment of the International Federation of Library Association (IFLA) in 1927.

Since that date, IFLA worked at promoting the role of libraries and librarians in the society, by promoting high standards of library services, encouraging widespread understanding of the value of good library and information services, and become Libraries Global Voice.
The role of libraries kept developing from just simple book keepers, until we reached the current state where we can say confidently that "Libraries Transform Societies".
Libraries are key partners in development through its main role, access to information and knowledge. In addition, libraries with the use of new information and communication technologies developed their role and services to support sustainable development and improve people's lives.

"Libraries Transform Societies" – to what extent could the way a librarian look like affect this fact?

Do people and governments see or value libraries as partners of development to *Transform Societies*?

Librarians felt a big shift from libraries after the evolution in technology and noted the big need to challenge old stereotypes of libraries.

Libraries need to be more dynamic, visible, updated, creative, interactive with the community, user-oriented, and need to be on the agenda when governments put their national development plans.

To achieve this, librarians must think beyond traditional methods of recruiting non-traditional clients and nurturing existing users and stakeholders. They should adapt marketing concepts to help them increase their presence and visibility.

One of the main marketing elements is communication, and communication starts from the looks.

You never get a second chance to make the first impression.

There is a psychological influence of a professional look and on how people's judgments are affected by the first impression they get from the look of another person.
Both appearance and non-verbal communication speak of a person's personality, and they are reflected on how people react to him/her.

Basics for a professional appearance

There are basic requirements for every professional appearance.

Clothes should be fit, clean, pressed, in good condition, and professional (depending on the job requirements).

Hair should be well trimmed and well groomed.

Personal hygiene as general cleanliness and good dental hygiene is an unnegotiable basic requirement for a professional look.

Footwear should be clean and in good repair.

The right look for the right situation

Out of the basic requirements, we can go into depth in how a librarian should look like to better fulfil his job and achieve his target.

In the old days, it was easy to stereotype librarians even if they work in different library types. If you would have asked a young kid to draw a library and a librarian, he would draw a set of shelves stuffed with books and a librarian in classical clothes, with eyeglasses, and a serious look. However, nowadays, young and new professionals have rebelled against the traditional look of the librarian. The new role they are playing made them more vivid and creative.
I consider clothes can be powerful, some can be fun, and so on; so I believe in the concept of the right look for the right situation.

A librarian working in a children library for example, would be better perceived by the children coming to the library if he looks casual, modern and wear colourful clothes rather than a librarian wearing dark and traditional clothes.

On the other hand, a librarian working in a national library should look semi-formal or formal to better suit this library type.

Also, some librarians should consider certain restrictions when dealing with some kind of users, especially those who suffer of certain disabilities. Like for example autistic people who prefer colours like red, blue and pink better than yellow and brown.

As for LIS professionals working on a higher decision making level, those should keep a powerful and authoritative look. A librarian advocating for the importance of his profession and for the valuable role of libraries in the community, should start by his looks.
One main highlight and opportunity came out of IFLA's Global vision discussion that involved over 31,000 participants from 190 UN Member States across all seven continents, was that:

We need more and better advocates at all levels

Everyone in the field needs a deeper understanding of the need for advocacy to improve perceptions and ultimately achieve our goals. **Every librarian an advocate!**

One of the main steps in advocacy is assess resources, choose tactics and implement the advocacy plan. In this context, resources first include the human factor starting from his looks to his character, his personality, knowledge and professional efficiency.

Some believe that it is not what they wear, but how they perform that matters. I, however, respectfully disagree, as I believe that libraries, especially now, need to prove the value of their product and their existence and that their look would garner the respect of their users and add credence to the information dispensed.

In fact, dealing with different stakeholders, like, decision makers, government officials, funding institutions, civil society institutions, etc. desires a suitable look to be effective, before even going into details of the conversation.

A *librarian transfo*rming societies should look like one who does before explaining the details of his action plan to do it.

Librarians at this level should appear in formal suits, ties (for men), classical shoes with their hair well-trimmed (no weird or unusual hairstyles), clean and tidy overall look. We can say, a more businessmen/women like look.

It is very inappropriate to appear with obvious tattoos or piercing in official meetings or for women to show up in extreme make up, strong perfume or short / revealing outfits.
These aspects are enough to distract the audience from the main message you want to deliver and your meeting will end up unsuccessfully.

The firm look gives the impression of self-confidence, seriousness and efficiency and allows you to deliver your message without any distraction to the person you are addressing.
In addition, it gives you personally inner satisfaction and levers your self-esteem and as some say: "Look good, Feel good".

Also non-verbal communication factors like facial expressions, body posture, gestures and eye contact integrate with the looks.
Tone of the voice and language used must be also taken into consideration when thinking of verbal communication factors.

Before you go to a meeting, you need to focus on the language you will use in your conversation to make it valuable to the person you are addressing, i.e. you have to find the words and points of interest to him/her to attract his/her attention.

Using a decent language, being short, clear, precise and consequent reflects your level of intelligence, education, capabilities, confidence and professionalism.

Also, the tone you use has an amazing effect on the content you are conveying. An enthusiastic tone would show your passion and belief in the case you are introducing.

Religious discrimination

Some religions impose certain dress and grooming requirements on their members. For example, some Muslims must wear beards and certain garments. Although libraries should

support human rights and the right of freedom of expression including the looks, we cannot neglect that this wouldn't work in all situations.

For a job that does not require direct contact with users, like catalogers, IT specialists, administrative personnel, HR, etc., religious dress or grooming requirements would not raise any problem.

However, for professionals dealing with different categories of people, it is not preferred to have any **extreme** obvious religious discriminating appearance that would reflect negatively on the person you are dealing with.

Religious beliefs and requirements themselves do not contradict with the professional look, it is the extreme fanatic look that does. A Christian wearing a small cross pendent is Ok, a Muslim woman wearing a simple hijab is also acceptable, a Muslim man with a well-trimmed beard is fine.

The moderate look in this case is always tolerable, but people would not feel comfortable talking to someone with a big bushy beard or a woman covering completely her face. It will be as distracting as the inappropriate look I mentioned earlier.

Some non-verbal extreme religious constraints can cause trouble dealing with people, like for Muslims not shaking hands when saluting or women not talking to men (the voice of a woman should not be heard by a strange man).

These aspects are not preferable at all for a librarian dealing directly with users / stakeholders.

Country Traditions

Country traditions don't affect the professional look of a librarian, on the contrary, a librarian keeping the traditional look of his country shows his high respect to his national values and a great sense of belonging.

Country traditions draw unconsciously a person's behaviour, beliefs and looks, even in an open universe like today with the effect of globalization, national traditions will still be deeply rooted in each one of us.

In official meetings where people from different nations take part, it gives them a powerful and solid look when they show up in their country traditional costume.

A professional librarian should always share a good image for his country and his profession and as we see in international conferences, librarians tend to wear their country traditional clothes especially during the official opening ceremonies and the cultural evenings, as an identification of their country.

Financial and social effect

I also believe that the social and financial backgrounds do not play a significant role in achieving the desired professional look.

For a professional look, you only need to be clean, fit and simple. Expensive brands, jewellery and outfits do not add to a professional librarian. Any exaggeration in any of the looks factors would reflect negatively on the person you are dealing with.

Imagine a library director sitting in a meeting with a government official discussing an increase of budget for the library while wearing a branded suit, watch and jewellery. The first thing that would occur to the official's mind is that the staff at the library is overpaid which affects their budget. In the same situation, a sloppy or cheap look would have the same negative effect on the meeting and it will end up unsuccessfully.

Uniforms can work sometimes as a solution to standardize the look and equalize social and financial standards, but on the other hand, it can become a financial burden on the institutions suffering from limited budgets.

Conclusion

For some, being professional might mean dressing smartly at work, or doing a good job. For others, being professional means having advanced degrees or other certifications, framed and hung on the office wall. Some also believe that working hard and efficiently is professional enough, but actually, professionalism encompasses all of these definitions.

IFLA is always providing a professional image for the Library and Information professionals. As the international leading body for the library and information field, IFLA has represented the interests of the profession in many important occasions and could successfully realize great achievements.

At the UN, IFLA sent a high profile delegation including, Dr Donna Scheeder, IFLA President, and Dr Stuart Hamilton, Deputy Secretary General, to present the Lyon Declaration for the Post 2015 UN goals. They were great advocates for libraries emphasizing the importance of Access to Information and Knowledge as a key element for sustainable development. They were professional in their look, so they were well perceived, professional in the content and message they delivered so they were well heard. It was a great achievement and, yes, Access to Information was stated in the UN 2030 Agenda for sustainable goals, goal 16 target 10.

We also cannot neglect the great effort IFLA is doing in the issue of copyright limitations and exceptions for libraries and archives and their honourable representation at WIPO.

At the regional level, the Arab Federation of Libraries and Information (AFLI) and its President, Dr Khaled El Halaby, play a significant role in advocating for the library and information profession. They represent the library voice and share an honourable image for professionals in the region. AFLI has made great achievements and is well heard by the highest level of official in the region. We can obviously see that from the constant representation of high officials in the region at the different events that AFLI organizes.

At the national level, we see the Director of the Library of Alexandria, Dr Mostafa El Fekki, speaking up for the values of libraries in many official occasions and during meetings with highest officials; so that the President of Egypt, Mr. Abdel Fattah El Sissi, paid the library a visit in July 2017 and praised the role the library is playing in the Egyptian community.
Also the government got enough confidence in the Library of Alexandria and handed it one of the magnificent ancient castles from the royal era, Princess Khadija Castle, to transform it to a cultural building affiliated to the library and Dr El Fekki decided to transform it to a Museum of all religions known on the Egyptian soil, starting from the Pharaonic, Greek, Roman eras and including the Jewish, Christian and Islamic heritage.

First impressions last, so professional librarians should not neglect this fact and I believe that each library should necessarily include a dress code for its employees in its statutes.

References

Grandgeorge, Marine, and Nobuo Masataka. 2016 :1976. "Atypical Color Preference in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder." Frontiers in psychology (7). doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01976.

IFLA. 2018. Global Vision. The Hague: IFLA. https://www.ifla.org/files/assets/GVMultimedia/publications/gv-report-summary.pdf.

Rule, Nicholas, Erik Dietl, and Gerhard Blickle. 2018. "Core self-evaluations mediate the association between leaders' facial appearance and their professional success: Adults' and children's perceptions.." The Leadership Quarterly (Elsevier Science). doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2018.01.002.

Voigt, Richard. Fairfield County Business Journal. 3/22/2010, Vol. 49 Issue 12, p25-25. 1p. , Database: Regional Business News