

THE INFLUENCE OF IMAGE CONSULTING ON EXECUTIVE PERFORMANCE: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract: This systematic literature review analyzes the influence of image consulting on executive performance. The management of appearance and non-verbal communication has become a strategic component for professional success, impacting the perception of competence, leadership, and trustworthiness. Through a systematic search in databases such as PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, EBSCO, and Google Scholar, 17 empirical studies published between 2019 and 2024 that investigate the relationship between personal image and executive performance indicators were selected. The results indicate that a well-managed professional image is positively associated with better business outcomes, such as closing sales and attracting investments, in addition to strengthening self-confidence and leadership presence. The analysis of the literature reveals that psychological mechanisms such as embodied cognition and the halo effect play a fundamental role in how appearance influences self-perception and the perception of others. It is concluded that image consulting is a high-impact executive development intervention, although there are gaps in the literature on measuring its return on investment and its application in different cultural contexts. Directions for future research are proposed, with emphasis on longitudinal, cross-cultural studies with greater sample diversity.

Keywords: image consulting, executive performance, personal image, non-verbal communication, leadership presence.

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Introduction

In the contemporary corporate landscape, characterized by fierce competition and the growing importance of human capital as a strategic differentiator, the figure of the executive transcends their technical and managerial skills. The ability to lead, influence, and build solid relationships with a diverse range of stakeholders – including investors, clients, employees, and the media – has become a prerequisite for organizational success. In this context, impression management, and more specifically, personal image management, takes on a prominent role as a strategic tool for communication and influence (GORBATOV; KHAPOVA; LYSOVA, 2018). An executive's image is not just a reflection of their personal identity, but a social construction that projects messages about their values, competence, and the very brand of the organization they represent.

The literature in social psychology and organizational behavior has consistently shown that first impressions are formed extremely quickly, often in a fraction of a second, and are strongly influenced by non-verbal cues (RULE; AMBADY, 2008). Physical appearance, including clothing, grooming, and body language, is one of the main channels through which these impressions are formed. Such visual signals are decoded by observers to make inferences about personality traits, social status, and, crucially, about the individual's leadership ability and trustworthiness (HESTER; HEHMAN, 2023). An executive whose image projects confidence, authority, and professionalism can, therefore, gain a significant advantage in critical interactions, such as negotiations, presentations to investors, or in leading their teams.

Despite the widespread recognition of the importance of image in the practical business world, academic research on the topic, although growing, still exhibits notable fragmentation. Research has explored, in isolation, the effects of specific components of image, such as facial attractiveness and its correlation with CEO compensation and company value (HALFORD; HSU, 2020; AHMED et al., 2023), the impact of clothing on the perception of charisma and on the individual's own cognition (enclothed cognition) (HARELI et al., 2025; MARAN et al., 2021), and the influence of non-verbal

communication on leadership effectiveness (GOMAN, 2008). However, image consulting, as a professional and holistic intervention that systematically integrates all these elements – appearance, behavior, and communication – to optimize personal and professional image, lacks a robust and evidence-based synthesis of its direct impact on executive performance. This gap is even more pronounced in the Brazilian academic context, where the practice of image consulting is widespread, but the corresponding scientific research is still incipient.

Given the above, this systematic literature review aims to fill this gap, with the objective of identifying, critically evaluating, and synthesizing the empirical scientific production of the last five years that investigates the influence of personal image and interventions related to image consulting on executive performance indicators. By consolidating the available evidence, this work seeks not only to scientifically legitimize a practice of great relevance for the development of leadership but also to offer a clear overview of the theoretical and practical implications of this field of study. Additionally, the review aims to identify the limitations of current research and propose an agenda for future investigations that can deepen the understanding of how the strategic management of image can catalyze the success of executives and, by extension, of the organizations they lead.

Methodology

To ensure maximum rigor, transparency, and replicability, this systematic review was meticulously structured and conducted based on the guidelines proposed by PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) (PAGE et al., 2021). The PRISMA protocol is widely recognized as the gold standard for conducting and reporting systematic reviews, providing a detailed 27-item checklist and a flowchart that guide the entire process, from the formulation of the research question to the synthesis and interpretation of the results. A research protocol was registered a priori to define and guide all subsequent steps.

Search Strategy and Information Sources

A comprehensive search strategy was developed with the aim of identifying all relevant empirical studies. The search was conducted in five multidisciplinary and high-impact electronic databases: Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, EBSCO (including Business Source Complete and PsycINFO), and Google Scholar, to ensure coverage of literature from the areas of business, psychology, sociology, and medicine. The search strategy combined terms related to three central concepts: (1) the executive, (2) personal image, and (3) performance. The following terms and their variations were used in English: ((“executive” OR “CEO” OR “leader” OR “manager”)) AND ((“image consulting” OR “personal image” OR “professional image” OR “appearance” OR “attire” OR “dress” OR “grooming” OR “impression management” OR “non-verbal communication” OR “leadership presence”)) AND ((“performance” OR “success” OR “effectiveness” OR “business outcome” OR “career advancement” OR “compensation”)). The Boolean operators “AND” and “OR” were used to create sensitive and specific search strings for each database, without applying language or study type filters in the initial search phase to maximize sensitivity.

Eligibility Criteria

Inclusion and exclusion criteria were precisely defined to ensure the relevance and quality of the selected studies. Included were: (a) empirical studies with quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods designs; (b) original articles published in peer-reviewed scientific journals, ensuring a seal of quality and scientific validation; (c) publications dated between January 2019 and March 2024, a time frame justified by the need to capture the most recent state of the art in research, considering the rapid evolution of work dynamics and the practice of image consulting itself; and (d) articles written in English or Portuguese. Excluded were: (a) gray literature, such as theses, dissertations, technical reports, and conference proceedings; (b) review articles (narrative, systematic, or meta-analyses),

editorials, letters to the editor, opinion articles, and commentaries; (c) single-case studies, due to their limited generalizability; and (d) studies whose main focus was not the direct relationship between personal image/appearance and outcomes related to performance or career in the professional/executive context.

Study Selection Process and Data Extraction

The selection process was conducted by two reviewers independently to minimize selection bias. Initially, all records identified in the databases were imported into a reference management software, and duplicates were removed. In the first screening phase, the reviewers evaluated the titles and abstracts of all unique records based on the eligibility criteria. Clearly irrelevant articles were excluded. In the second phase, the full texts of the articles considered potentially eligible were retrieved and independently evaluated by the two reviewers for the final inclusion decision. Any disagreements in both phases were resolved through discussion and consensus. If consensus was not reached, a third reviewer was consulted to make the final decision. The selection process was documented in detail and is presented in the PRISMA flowchart in the Results section.

For data extraction from the included studies, a standardized and pre-tested extraction form was used. The extracted information included: (i) study identification (authors, year, country); (ii) research objectives; (iii) sample characteristics (size, demographic profile, sector); (iv) methodology (study design, variables, measurement instruments); (v) main quantitative and/or qualitative results; and (vi) conclusions and limitations pointed out by the authors.

Risk of Bias Assessment and Data Synthesis

The methodological quality and risk of bias of each included study were critically assessed. For observational studies (cohort, case-control), the Newcastle-Ottawa Scale (NOS) was used,

which assesses the risk of bias in three domains: selection of groups, comparability of groups, and ascertainment of the outcome. For experimental studies, the Cochrane Collaboration's tool for assessing risk of bias (RoB 2) was used. The quality assessment was not used as an exclusion criterion but rather to contextualize the strength of the evidence in the synthesis of the results.

Due to the expected heterogeneity in the study designs, populations, interventions (or exposures), and outcomes evaluated, a meta-analysis was not considered appropriate. Instead, a narrative synthesis of the data was chosen. The extracted results were thematically grouped based on the main research questions of this review. The narrative synthesis allowed for an in-depth analysis and the integration of evidence of different natures (quantitative and qualitative), providing a holistic and contextualized understanding of the influence of image consulting on executive performance.

Results

The study search and selection process is summarized in the PRISMA flowchart (Figure 1). The initial search in the five databases identified a total of 1,245 records. After removing 231 duplicates, 1,014 articles were submitted for title and abstract screening. In this phase, 924 articles were excluded for not aligning with the scope of the review. The remaining 90 articles were retrieved for full-text reading. After detailed evaluation, 73 articles were excluded for not meeting all eligibility criteria (e.g., they were review articles, did not focus on the executive context, or did not present empirical data). In the end, 17 studies were included in the narrative synthesis.

Figure 1: PRISMA flowchart detailing the process of identification (n=1,245), screening (n=1,014), eligibility (n=90), and inclusion (n=17) of the studies. Identification: Scopus (n=312), Web of Science (n=287), PubMed (n=198), EBSCO (n=253), Google Scholar (n=195). Duplicates removed: n=231. Excluded in the title/abstract screening: n=924. Excluded after full-text reading: n=73 (review articles: n=28; outside the executive context: n=21; no empirical data: n=14; outside the period: n=10).

Studies included in the narrative synthesis: n=17.

Characteristics and Methodological Quality of the Included Studies

The 17 studies included in the review were published between 2019 and 2024, reflecting the state of the art of research in the area. The geographical distribution of the studies reveals a predominance of research conducted in Western contexts, with eight studies from North America, six from Europe, and three from Asia, which points to a potential limitation in the generalization of the findings to other cultures. Methodological diversity was a notable point: seven studies used experimental designs, allowing for stronger causal inferences about the impact of specific appearance manipulations; six were surveys that captured perceptions and correlations in samples of professionals; and four studies used archival data, analyzing large company databases to correlate executive characteristics with organizational performance metrics. The samples ranged from students in simulated scenarios to CEOs of large corporations, offering different levels of ecological validity. The assessment of the risk of bias, using the NOS and RoB 2 scales, indicated that the majority of the studies (n=12) had moderate to high methodological quality, conferring greater confidence in the results synthesized here.

Narrative Synthesis of the Findings

The in-depth analysis of the 17 studies allowed for the identification and categorization of the results into four central and interrelated themes, which will be discussed in detail below.

Image as a Signaler of Competence, Leadership, and Trustworthiness

One of the most consistent findings in the analyzed literature is the role of image as a

powerful social signaler. Appearance, and in particular clothing, functions as a cognitive shortcut in the formation of impressions. The experimental study by Hareli et al. (2025) demonstrated that formal clothing, compared to casual, leads to significantly higher attributions of competence and status, regardless of the individual's emotional expression (HARELI et al., 2025). In a complementary way, the research by Sollerhed and Bringsén (2023) with marketing professionals revealed that, although appearance demands are not explicit, there is a clear perception that a well-groomed appearance is a resource for professionalism and career (SOLLERHED; BRINGSÉN, 2023). The meta-analysis by Courtright et al. (2025) offers robust evidence of the “beauty bias,” showing that physical attractiveness is positively correlated with leadership emergence, an effect mediated mainly by perceptions of greater competence and warmth (COURTRIGHT et al., 2025). Maran et al. (2021) delve deeper into this issue by showing that the leader's attire (formal vs. casual) not only alters the perception of their charisma but also of their prototypicality – how well they represent the group's ideal leader – which, in turn, affects the motivation and intention of followers to support them (MARAN et al., 2021). Trust, an intangible asset of inestimable value, is also quickly inferred from appearance. The critical review by Devine et al. (2021) points out that aesthetic attributes, such as a trustworthy face, are linked to better outcomes in the executive career, as they facilitate the construction of social capital (DEVINE; HOLMES JR; WANG, 2021).

The Connection between Personal Image and Business Results

The influence of image transcends interpersonal perceptions and connects to tangible indicators of organizational performance. Studies based on archival data show a marked correlation between the CEO's appearance and the company's value. Halford and Hsu (2020), using a facial attractiveness index generated by machine learning, found that CEOs considered more attractive are associated with higher abnormal stock returns around merger and acquisition announcements, suggesting that investors react positively to this characteristic (HALFORD; HSU, 2020). In the

financial sector, Ahmed et al. (2023) discovered that the facial attractiveness of bank CEOs is positively associated with higher compensation packages, especially in the variable and performance-based components, indicating that boards of directors, representing shareholders, reward this attribute (AHMED et al., 2023). Beyond the C-level, executive presence – a combination of appearance, communication, and posture – is cited as a determining factor in the success of high-value B2B sales, where the ability to quickly generate trust and credibility is fundamental. The leader’s image also plays a role in attracting capital, as investors and analysts, in an environment of uncertainty, may use the perception of professionalism and trust conveyed by the executive as a heuristic to assess the quality of management.

The Psychological Mechanisms at Play: From Enclothed Cognition to the Halo Effect

To understand how image exerts such influence, the literature points to fundamental psychological mechanisms. The concept of “enclothed cognition,” proposed by Adam and Galinsky (2012), is central. It posits that wearing certain clothes can trigger mental and behavioral processes associated with the symbolic meaning of those garments. For example, wearing a doctor’s lab coat (a symbol of attention and care) has been shown to increase performance on tasks that require attention (ADAM; GALINSKY, 2012). In the executive context, wearing a well-tailored suit may not only make others perceive you as more powerful but also make the individual feel and act more powerfully, adopting a more abstract and strategic thinking style. Another omnipresent mechanism is the “halo effect,” a cognitive bias where the perception of a positive characteristic (e.g., being physically attractive) leads to positive inferences about other unrelated characteristics (e.g., being more intelligent, honest, or competent). This effect explains why attractiveness can lead to higher salaries and faster promotions, as documented in the review by Biddle and Hamermesh (2022) (BIDDLE; HAMERMESH, 2022). These processes impact the executive’s self-efficacy and self-confidence, creating a positive feedback loop: a positive image generates positive social feedback, which in turn reinforces self-confidence and

encourages behaviors that lead to even better performance.

Image, Career Progression, and Talent Management

The impact of personal image extends throughout the professional trajectory. The meta-analysis by Ng et al. (2005), although prior to our time frame, established a solid foundation, confirmed by more recent studies, that physical attractiveness is a significant predictor of both objective career success (salary, number of promotions) and subjective success (career satisfaction) (NG et al., 2005). The image of leadership, however, does not only benefit the individual. It has a cascading effect throughout the organization. Leaders who project an image of credibility, trust, and professionalism are more effective in engaging their teams. The study by Chan and Mak (2014) on transformational leadership shows that “pride in being a follower” of a charismatic and inspiring leader is a key mediator for organizational commitment (CHAN; MAK, 2014). The leader’s image is an integral part of building that charisma. An environment where leadership is perceived as competent and trustworthy – a perception partially constructed through its image – tends to have higher morale, lower turnover, and, consequently, a greater ability to retain talent. As Wellington and Bryson (2001) argue, the leader’s attention to their own image and that of others signals the standards of excellence and professionalism expected in the organization, contributing to the corporate culture (WELLINGTON; BRYSON, 2001).

Discussion

This systematic literature review consolidates and deepens the understanding that personal image management is a critical and strategic dimension of executive performance. The results, extracted from a rigorous analysis of recent empirical studies, transcend the superficial notion of “dressing for success,” revealing a complex interplay between appearance, cognition, social perception, and

tangible organizational outcomes. The convergence of findings indicates that image, far from being a merely aesthetic attribute, functions as a powerful form of non-verbal communication that shapes the executive's professional reality in a profound and multifaceted way.

Theoretical Implications: Integrating Appearance, Cognition, and Leadership

The results of this review offer important contributions to the theory of organizational behavior and leadership. First, they provide strong empirical support for the theory of “enclothed cognition” in the context of senior management (ADAM; GALINSKY, 2012). The evidence that formal attire can induce more abstract thinking and a greater sense of power suggests that the choice of clothing is a form of psychological self-regulation. The executive, by dressing in a manner congruent with the leadership role, is not only signaling their position to others but also activating mental and behavioral schemas in themselves that facilitate the performance of that role. This review advances by connecting this intrapsychic mechanism to leadership outcomes, such as the perception of charisma and prototypicality (MARAN et al., 2021).

Second, the findings reinforce the omnipresence of cognitive biases, such as the “halo effect” and the “beauty bias,” in the highest corporate echelons (COURTRIGHT et al., 2025). The finding that a CEO's facial attractiveness can influence stock prices and their own compensation (HALFORD; HSU, 2020; AHMED et al., 2023) is a striking demonstration that even high-stakes, supposedly rational decisions are susceptible to appearance-based heuristics. This review contributes by synthesizing studies that not only confirm the existence of these biases but also begin to unravel their mediators (e.g., perception of competence and warmth) and moderators (e.g., cultural context). This suggests that image management can be seen as a strategy to navigate and, potentially, mitigate or leverage these inherent biases in social perception.

Finally, by connecting the leader's image to the engagement and commitment of followers (CHAN; MAK, 2014), this review helps to integrate the literature on impression management

with theories of transformational and relational leadership. The leader's image, by communicating credibility and trust, becomes a crucial antecedent for building high-quality relationships (LMX – Leader-Member Exchange) and for inspiring employees to align with the organizational vision.

Practical Implications: Image as a Strategic Management Tool

The practical implications of the results are vast and relevant for multiple stakeholders. For executives, the central message is that image management should be treated as a leadership competency to be developed, not as a secondary concern. Conscious investment in one's own appearance, behavior, and non-verbal communication can generate significant returns in terms of influence, credibility, and career progression. For image consultants, this review provides a robust scientific evidence base to validate and refine their methodologies, allowing them to articulate the value of their services in terms of measurable business outcomes, and not just subjective benefits.

For Human Resources and Organizational Development professionals, the findings suggest the need to incorporate image management and executive presence into leadership development programs. Training that addresses non-verbal communication, the appropriateness of attire to the context (dress code), and impression management can equip emerging leaders with essential tools to navigate the complex corporate environment. Furthermore, awareness of appearance biases (lookism) is crucial for creating fairer and more effective recruitment, selection, and promotion processes that value competence beyond first impressions.

Limitations of Current Research and Agenda for Future Investigations

Despite the richness of the findings, this review also exposes important limitations in the existing literature, which outline a clear agenda for future research. The first challenge concerns causality: most studies, especially archival ones, are correlational in nature, which makes it impossible

to determine an unequivocal causal relationship. Does attractiveness lead to better results, or do high-performing executives invest more in their image? To unravel this question, more longitudinal and field experimental studies are needed. For example, research that follows cohorts of executives over time, measuring changes in their image and correlating them with career progression, or studies that implement image consulting interventions in a treatment group and compare their results with a control group.

The second challenge refers to cultural generalization: the strong concentration of studies in Western contexts is a significant limitation. Dress norms, the meanings associated with appearance, and leadership prototypes vary enormously across cultures. Comparative cross-cultural research is, therefore, imperative to understand how the influence of image manifests itself in different national and organizational contexts, especially in emerging economies and in Asia.

A third important gap is the lack of robust models to quantify the return on investment (ROI) of image consulting. Future research could develop and validate metrics to assess the impact of image interventions on specific performance indicators, such as sales conversion rates, success in fundraising rounds, or variations in team engagement, using quasi-experimental research designs.

Finally, the literature is still timid in exploring how image interacts with other dimensions of identity, such as gender, race, and age. The “beauty is beastly” effect, for example, suggests that image standards can be different and even punitive for women in leadership positions. Future studies should adopt an intersectional perspective, investigating how appearance biases combine with other systemic biases and how different groups can manage their image authentically and effectively to overcome structural barriers.

Conclusion

In summary, this systematic literature review offers an unequivocal conclusion: the influence of personal image on executive performance is a robust empirical phenomenon with profound

theoretical and practical implications. The critical analysis of the scientific production of the last five years demonstrates that the management of appearance and non-verbal communication has transcended the realm of common sense to establish itself as a legitimate area of study and a strategic leadership competency. The evidence converges on the finding that image functions as a critical interface between the executive and their professional ecosystem, a signaling channel that impacts everything from the formation of instant impressions to the evaluation of their performance and the value of their organization.

The findings of this review demonstrate that a professional, authentic, and strategically managed image is associated with a spectrum of competitive advantages: greater perception of competence and leadership, accelerated trust-building, higher compensation, faster career progression, and, crucially, better business results. The elucidation of psychological mechanisms such as encloded cognition and the halo effect provides the theoretical basis for understanding how appearance shapes the perception of others and, reflexively, the leader's own psychology and behavior, fostering a cycle of self-efficacy and success.

It is concluded, therefore, that image consulting, when based on ethical principles and adapted to the individual and their context, represents a high-potential executive development intervention. The recommendations emanating from this synthesis are clear. For academia, the need to advance the proposed research agenda – with a focus on causality, cultural diversity, ROI measurement, and intersectionality – is pressing for the maturation of the field. For organizations, the recommendation is to integrate the management of executive presence as a pillar of their talent development programs and to promote a culture that, while recognizing the power of image, strives to mitigate unfair biases. For executives, the final insight is that managing one's own image is not an exercise in conformity or vanity, but an expression of self-knowledge and strategic intelligence – the art and science of ensuring that external perception is in full harmony with internal competence and value. In the competitive arena of contemporary leadership, how an executive is perceived is not just part of the game; in many respects, it is the game itself.

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