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Corporate Suits: Perceptions of Female Executive's Suits during the last twenty years

by
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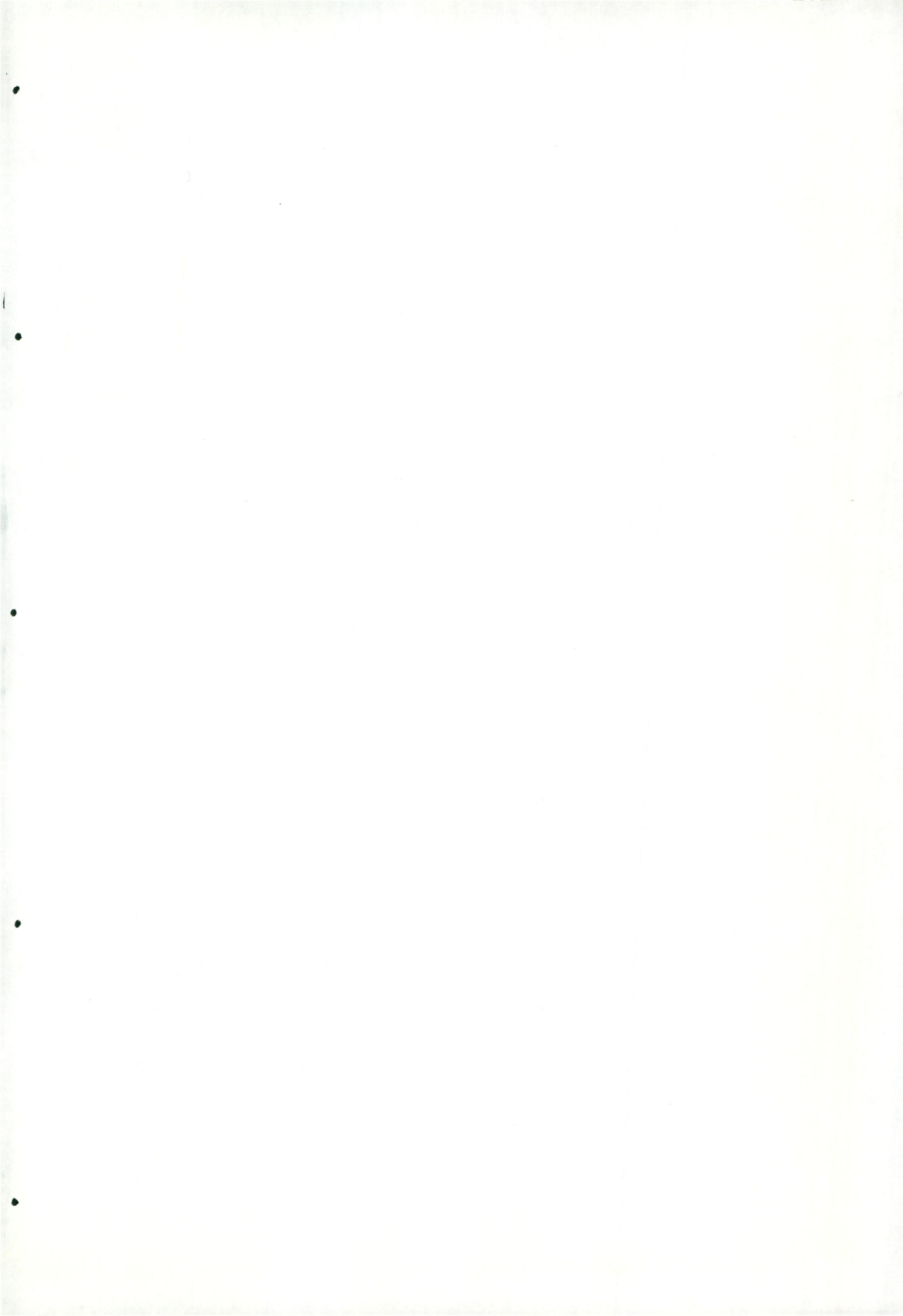
A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T S

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C O N T E N T S

INTRODUCTION

The female executive corporate suit which has become an icon of the working woman, has developed and changed in style and shape over the last twenty years. The perceptions allied to the suit in this forum is the subject to be discussed forthwith.

"Perceptions: To have or obtain knowledge or awareness of, by the senses, an immediate or intuitive recognition." (Lixicon & Webster Dictionary, 1977, p.749). Perceptions are psychological reactions or assumptions involved in the communication of personal characteristics. This process is a complex one and so indirect association is necessary to evaluate the information communicated. Clothing is an important medium involved in how we determine our perceptions and so provides this indirect association. In business the communication of personal characteristics associated with management is crucial for success, and since clothing is relatively easy to control, a woman, through her clothing, can manipulate to a large extent perceptions in her favour.

The 'Corporate Suit' as discussed in this thesis is that of a classical conservative skirt suit (Fig.1) which provides a female executive with an image of professionalism, authority and competence. While business women have many acceptable forms of executive dress other than the suit, the thesis focuses on the suit as it is the most stereotypical dress form for working women.

Women have always obtained executive positions, but increased progression into professional areas has largely occurred during the last three decades. As a result of this influx a new market segment emerged where specific requirements were dictated by the restraints these professional females encountered. This thesis specifically refers to the corporate wardrobe for management executive positions as opposed to the wardrobe of business secretaries who are allowed greater freedom. Restrictions placed upon the dress of female executives combined with the intrinsic role it plays in business success makes it a problematic area especially when the influence of fashion on the suit is considered. The white-collar working environment, such

Instant Clothing Power for the Businesswoman

DOING IT RIGHT

—— Feminine felt hat

—— Shoulder-length hair

—— Contrasting scarf

—— Tailored blouse

—— Briefcase

—— Slightly below knee length

—— Natural colour tights

—— Simple pumps
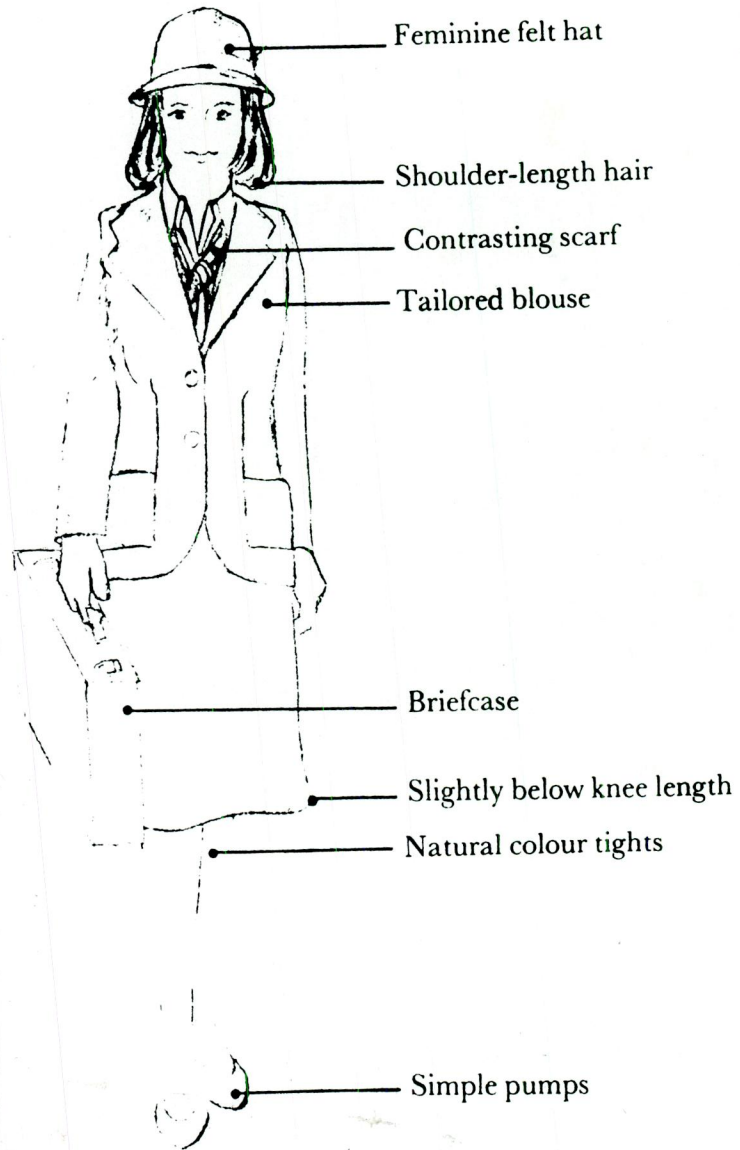
Fig.1 Molloy's example of a classical corporate suit. (Molloy, 1980, p.37).

as Finance and Accounting, which was traditionally male dominated is one of the areas of business which are associated with the corporate suit. It is specifically the more conservative areas of this environment which will be referred to as opposed to more liberal areas of business such as Advertising and the Arts where dress is more susceptible to change.

Women's changing role in the 'male dominated' environment of business during the last three decades will be examined in Chapter I, through the medium of the 'Corporate Suit'.

Closer examination of perceptions in relation to the communication of personal characteristics of management will be undertaken in Chapter II.

The final chapter will analyse the way in which corporate dressing affects success. It is hoped to establish the difficulties women encounter, in gaining equal managerial positions with men, through the lasting complications and issues of corporate dressing today. Above all, this thesis will attempt to analyse the evolvement of perceptions through changing styles of the suit and social attitudes.

Work experience at two Dublin manufacturers such as 'Louis Copeland Tailors' and 'Moorlaine Clothing Ltd.' led to my initial interest in the subject of 'The Female Corporate Suit'. Louis Copeland Tailors specialised in the traditional hand method of men's tailoring manufacture while Moorlaine Clothing Ltd. directed its manufacturing base at the main volume womenswear market of chainstores such as 'A-Wear' and 'Cassidys'. While neither specialised in women's corporate suits, both tackled them occasionally, revealing special requirements and limitations which were not present in other garments produced. A focus on the analysis of these corporate suits for women rather than one which is indicative of the male version evolved due to the fact that women are assessed more than men by what they wear. These elements along with further research into 'Perceptions of Business Dress' caused me to realise that impression formation in business as in life is not constant. This, however, is a fact that is seldom dealt with, yet it affects not only the female executive wearing the corporate suit but also manufacturers and designers producing them. In response to these elements, contact

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with personnel within the firms allowed me to seek their views on matters important to this thesis.

The corporate suit constitutes a proportion of the projection of perceptions. Since perceptions also consist of overall appearance and pre-existing experience, a personal survey would not reveal an accurate account of the developments of the corporate suit today. Combined with this a personal survey would also be limited by scale and funds.
Scarcity of alternative written analysis concerning 'Perceptions involved in Business Dress' consequently reiterated the importance of chapters of The Psychology of Fashion (Solomon, M(Ed), 1985.) dealing with the subject. Problems associated with corporate dressing have been a subject of interest to many authors especially regarding the 'Dress for Success' theme. Molloy's Women Dress for Success 1980, is one of the most extensive and indepth publications on advice concerning this subject. This book is particularly helpful in understanding problems involved in corporate dressing and consequently I have made several references through the thesis. A comparison of quotes from Molloy's earlier book Dress for success published in 1976 (Steel, V., Dressing for Work, Men and Women Dressing the Part, 1989 p.87) with later publications revealed changes in circumstances and perceptions. History of the suit which can be referenced in Wilson's Twentieth Century Suits, (Harpers & Queen, Oct., 1994, p.162-165). Business articles and television programmes concerning 'Women in the Business Environment' particularly management, as well as talking to some working women has allowed me to develop an insight into the lives and working requirements and ultimately to gain a better understanding of the corporate suit. These sources of information have also been supported by personal observations and notes concerning perceptions involved in executive dress during the last twenty years.
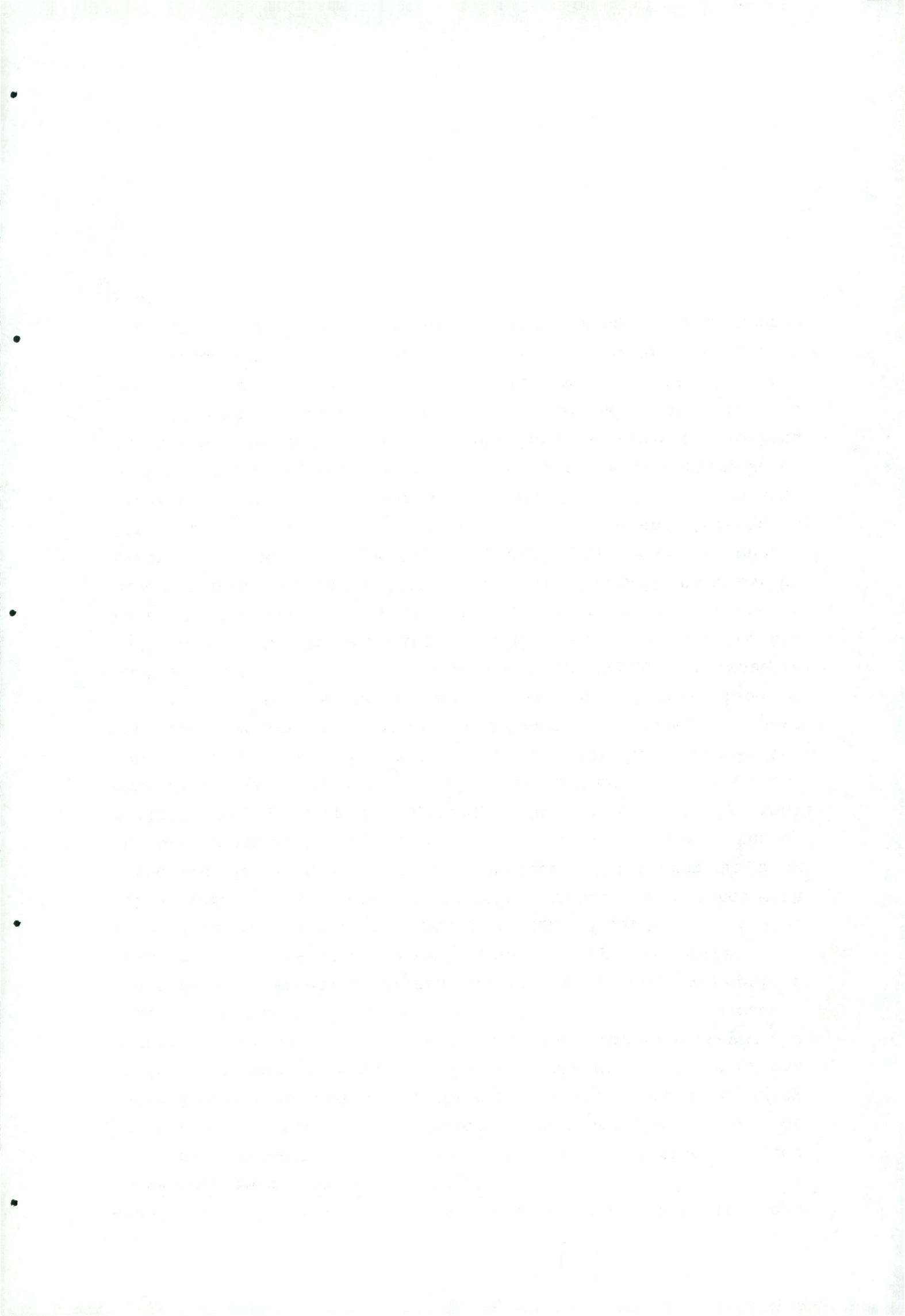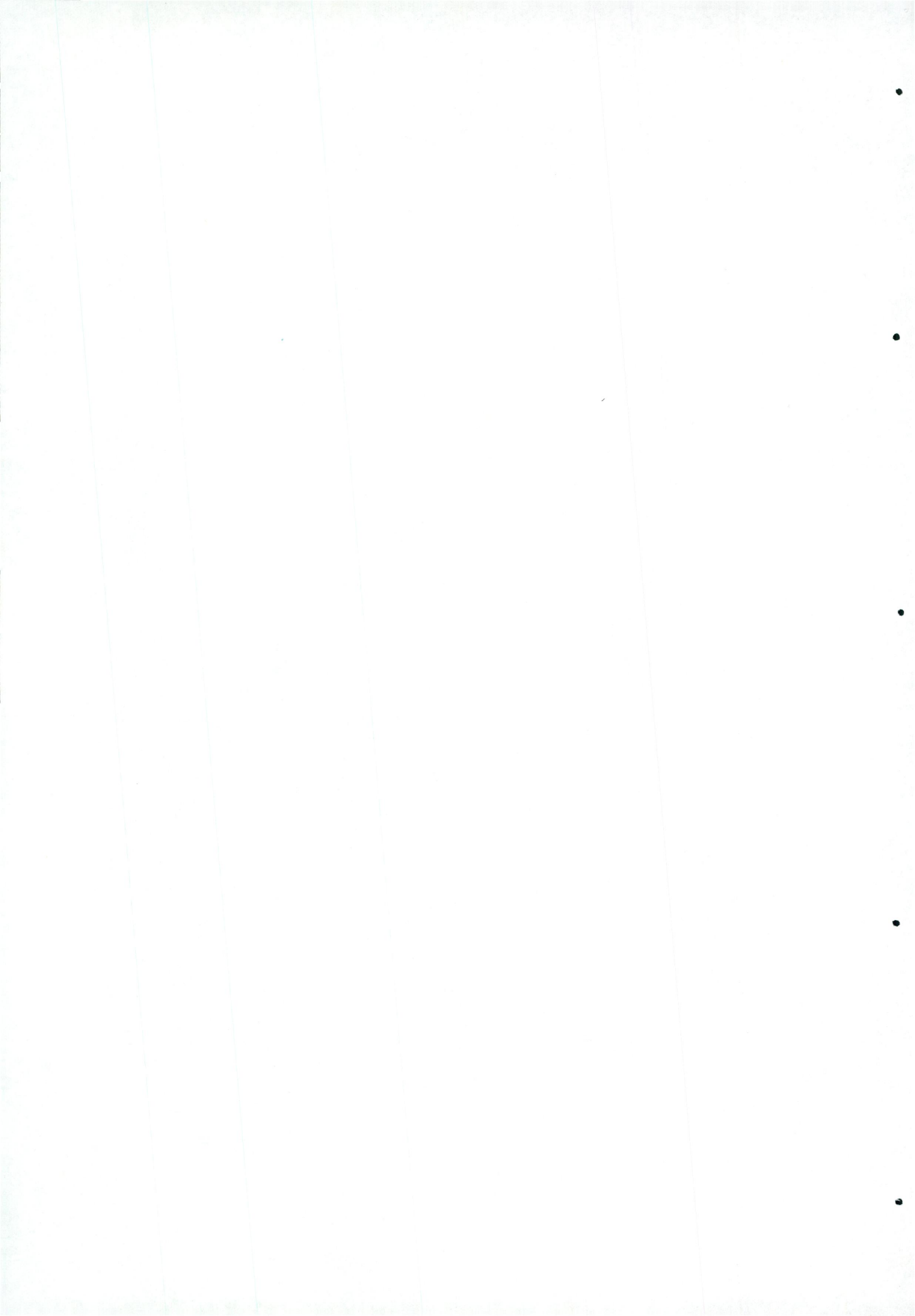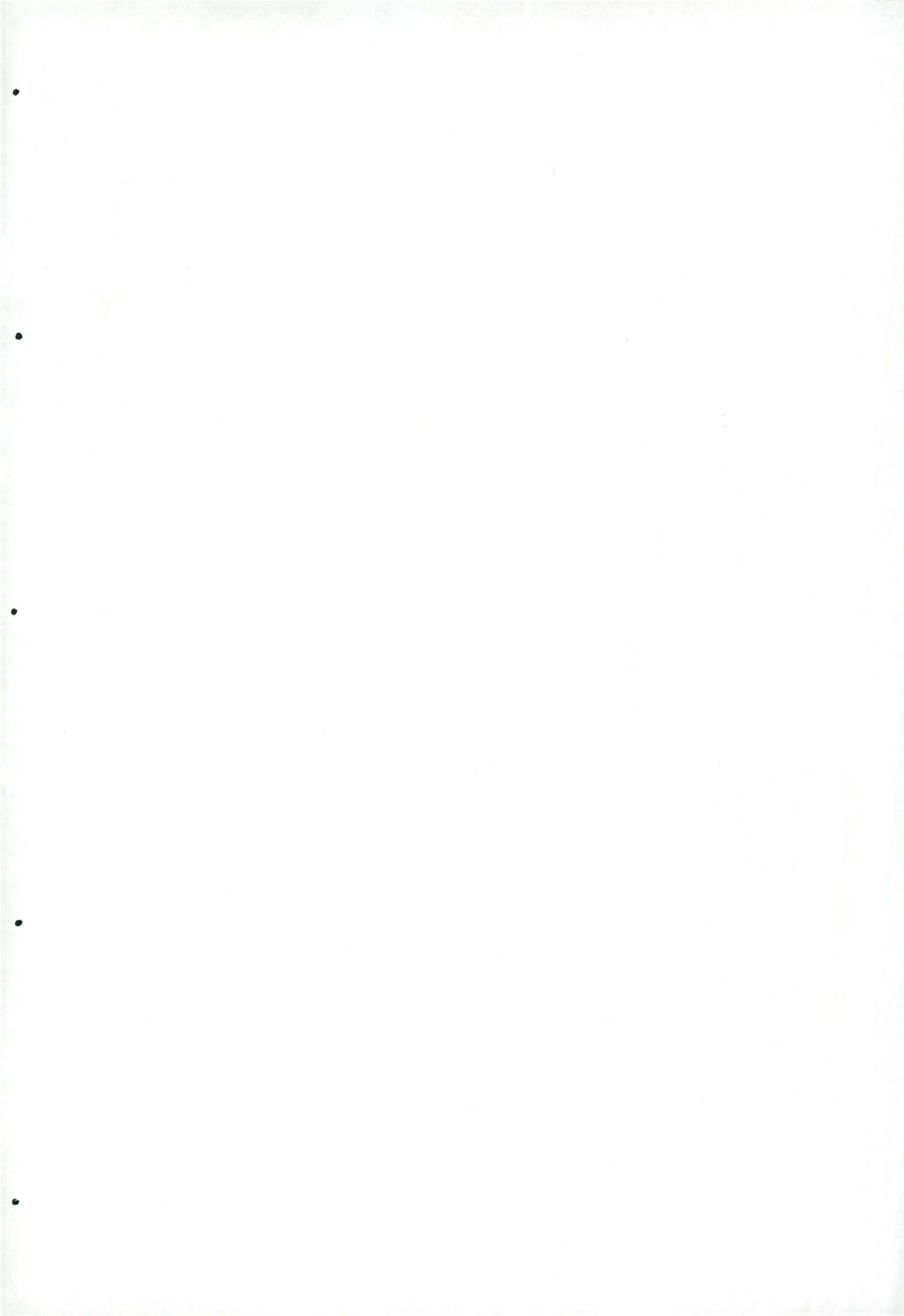
Chapter I
CHANGING ROLES IN BUSINESS

Executive dress in the form of the skirted suit has become stereotypical of female professionals since 1970. This chapter examines developments in women's changing role in the business environment in relation to the corporate suit. This will also be discussed in order to discover how perceptions of their image have changed and why these changes occurred. Developments in manufacture during the period will be analysed to discover how manufacturers and designers have progressed in relation to the business suit. This chapter will also discuss through examples of suits, those most successful in projecting perceptions of management characteristics, and how women today have adopted this knowledge of perceptions.

Previous to the 1970 s women occupied traditional positions such as School Teachers, Waitresses and Telephone Operators. Even if women were to enter into the business world it was generally as secretaries in their stereotyped 'pink collar' employment. Working women were labelled 'cake winners' as opposed to men who were 'bread winners'. In this period a working women might reflect that her husband was a 'bad provider', in that she had to work as a result of her husband's inability to support his family. As a result of the possibility of casting a derogatory slander on their husbands, combined with other factors, executive women were rare. In turn, corporate dressing affected few women and so its associated problems were not obvious to many.

Historically clothing has been used by women to indicate the "evaluation of social placement", and of course as a means of enhancing attractiveness. Research also has found that as a result, "aesthetic taste considerations have maintained ... and remained more central to the female definition of self-concept than men". (Solomon, & Douglas, 1985, p.392). Combined with this, women traditionally derived their position in society mainly from their relationship with men, resulting in the necessity of clothes to attract these men. Alteration in the social stratification with the female executive however, allowed

Fig.2 The 1940's Film <u>His Girl Friday</u>.
(Glynn, P., 1982, p.118).
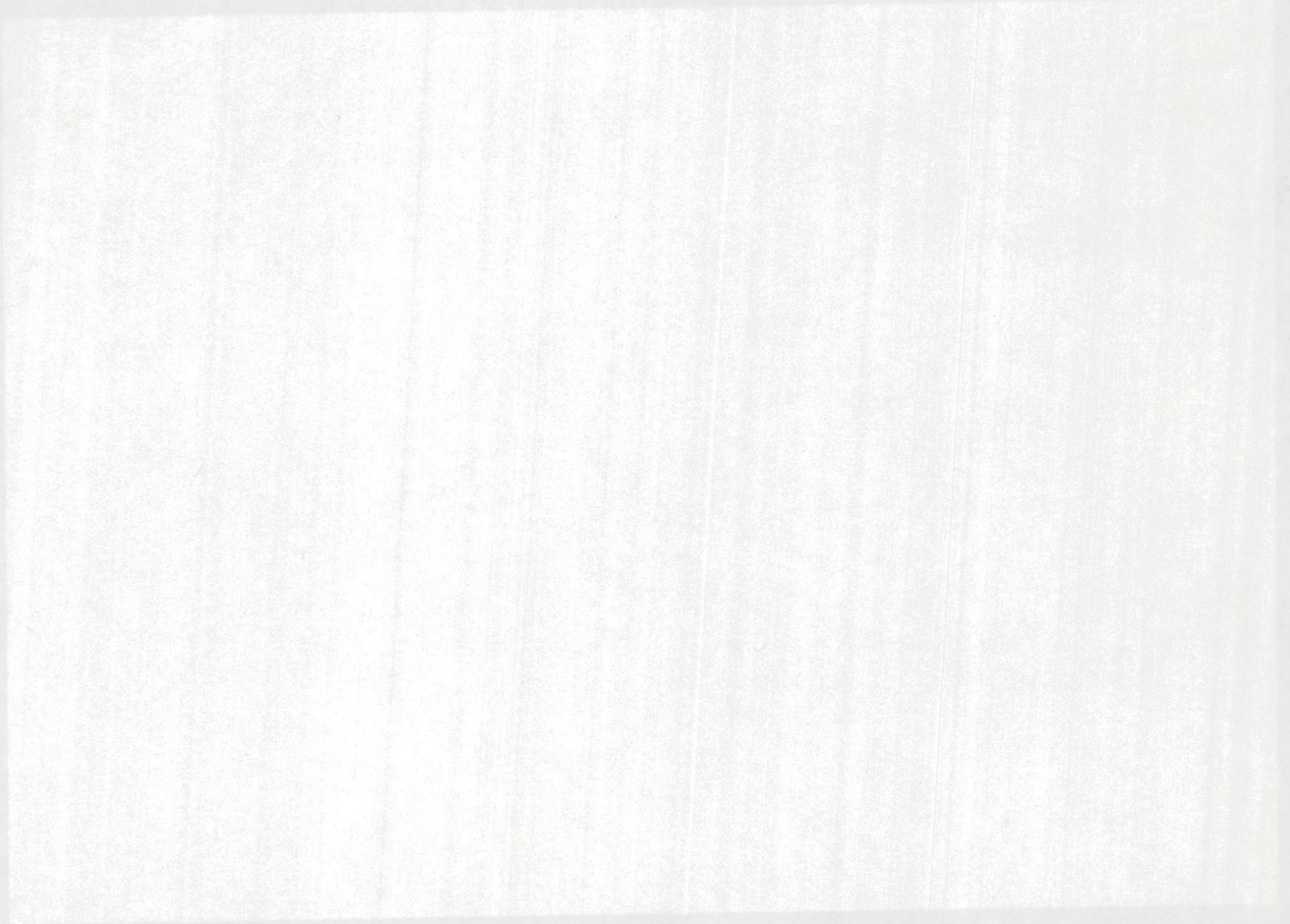
women to be acknowledged on their own merits, which in turn decreased the necessity of clothing to attract men, and also the necessity of feminine dress.

In the area of business, as in life, self promotion is particularly crucial and clothing plays a fundamental role in this;

> Clothing is not only an important external cue connection social position and role with self-image and identity, but also a key element used in forming impressions and internal cues. (Solomon, & Douglas, 1985, p.389).

Personal characteristics are therefore projected through dress. Studies concerning appropriate business dress found that formal styles particularly suits, obtained the highest rating for female executive wear. (Ericksen & Sirgy, 1985, p.358). This is consistent with conventional wisdom as well as the 'Dress for Success' theme. The suit possess' an image of authority that symbolises personal characteristics necessary for management and also the reason for its success. Characteristics such as forcefulness, aggressiveness, reliability and discipline symbolised in the suit give the female executive preconceived qualities that often encourage confidence and can enable her to perform tasks more successfully. Early guides such as the 1953 guide by Jacqueline du Pasqui'er's, <u>A Guide to Elegance</u> realised how corporate dress reflected on the character of a business woman;

> A well cut suit, of neutral colours ... hair well done without being extravagantly 'new'. No jewellery ... silent shoes ... a ladder in your stocking equals a blot of ink on a manuscript ... remember that your appearance will be taken as a good or a bad indication of your capabilities. (Armstrong, L. <u>Vogue</u> Oct.'93, p.196).

Direct competition between male and female employees of a 'man's job' first occurred on film in the 1940's <u>His Girl Friday</u>. (Glynn, P., 1982, p.118) Rosalind Russell typified the "new breed of emancipated woman" accomplishing her goal with the aid of a direct adaption of the business man's suit (Fig.2). The illustration however reveals that some feminine elements such as fit and line were retained to allow differentiation between the sexes. These feminine elements in an adapted male style suit again appeared by Katherine Hepburn in <u>Woman of the Year</u> 1942
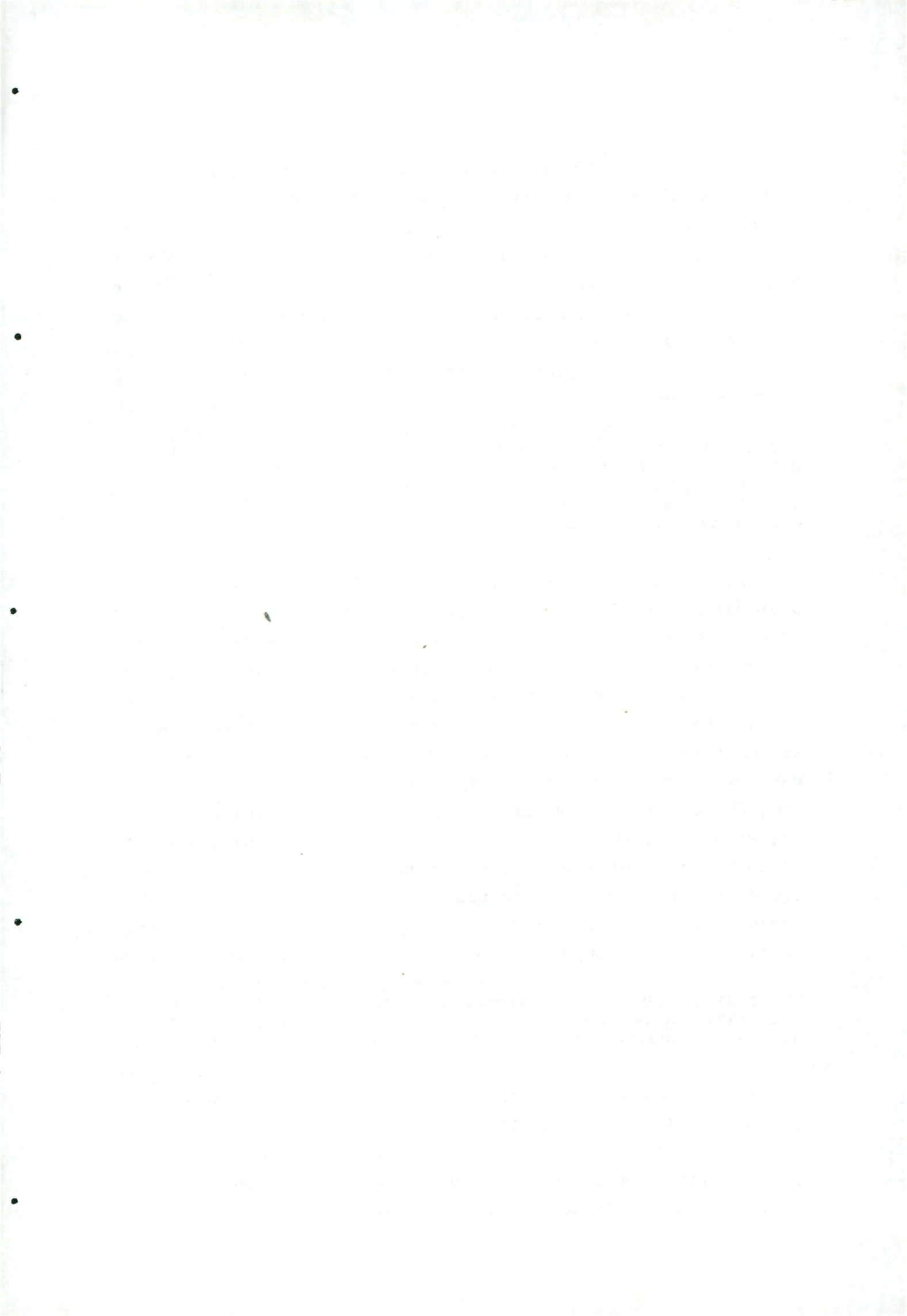
Fig.3 The 1942 Film <u>Woman of the Year.</u>
(Vogue, October 1993, p.199).

IMITATION MAN LOOK

Never wear—

Man's felt hat

Shirt and tie

Pinstriped or
chalk-striped suit

*This drawing shows movement,
unlike our test drawings,
which never do.*

Fig.4 Examples of a direct adaption of the male suit.
Margaret Thatcher early 1970 s.
(Harpers & Queen, 1994).

(Fig.3) (Vogue Oct.'93, p.199). An interesting factor in these illustrations is that these suits would still largely be fashionable and acceptable today, fifty years on, a fact that is highly improbable to other forms of business dress. In adapting the male suit for business wear these actresses also adopted the constancy and reliability necessary for business.

While women have always achieved positions of distinction in business, it was not until the 1970 s that an increase of numbers of women moving into male dominated employment occurred. This occurrence was largely as a result of the Sexual Revolution of the 1960 s, and women's increasing standards of education. As a result of this liberation from the home, women were generally speaking 'breaking new ground' when they entered the business environment. Lack of confidence and lack of role models resulted in these women adopting many of the rules that spelt success for men. This consisted of a direct adoption of the male suit into female executive wardrobes (Fig.4). The corporate suit of the early 1970 s consisted of straight or pleated skirt, tailored jacket and blouse accessorised by a floppy bow tie, with a basic blue, generally being the most popular colour suit, accompanied by a white blouse. The extreme masculinity and severity of the suit was also combined with a lack of individuality through lack of selection. Executive suits of the period were designed "largely to camouflage women in a man's world" (Vogue Oct.'93, p.196) and as Harper's and Queen recalls of the periods; "for lack of a better uniform, they adopted the man's suit but with a skirt. And a uniform it was." (Harpers & Queen, Oct.'94,p.164). Margaret Thatcher (Fig.5) as the first female British Prime Minister typified the corporate identity that spelt success during the decade.

During the decade a study was undertaken by Margaret Henning and Anne Jardim of Harvard Business School on executive women who had reached the top by the early 1970 s. (Apter,T.,1993,p.204).

Their results revealed a notable consistency in the lifestyles of these women. Executive women during this period tended to be the older daughter in an all girl family. They also tended to be closer to their father than their mother. For these early professionals it was unlikely that they married and if they
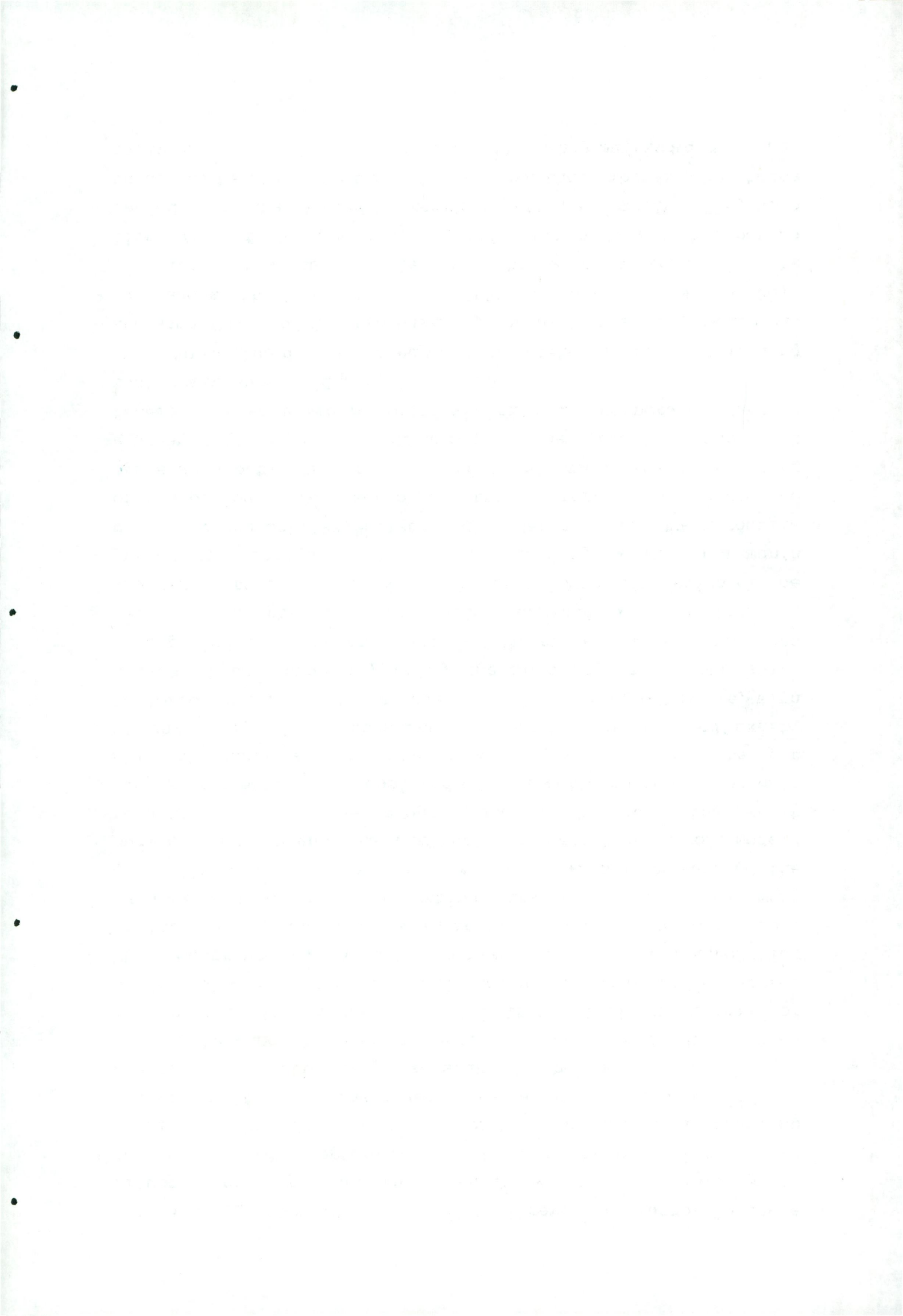
Fig.5 Margaret Thatcher in 1979.
(Harpers & Queen, 1994).

did it was later in their lives as compared with traditional standards. Marriage was a notable factor in women's lives at this time. A marriageless state was seen as a "lonely insecure state" and as a result the view was held that; "The career woman was that by default: she succeeded in a career because she failed in her femininity." (Apter,T.,1993,p.205). Working mothers were still considered to be 'bad mothers', and 'Marriage Bars' against hiring married women or firing single women as soon as they got married still existed in the decade. Personal recollections of the period confirm this, recalling the opinion that 'a married woman's place was in the home' and that several did in fact lose their jobs, - For example in the County Council.

Combined with this the absence of the Marital Protection Act of 1981, which ensured that pregnant women were entitled to fourteen weeks leave of absence during their pregnancy, deterred women executives of the 1970's from starting a family. Female executives at this stage;

> described themselves as being trained and training themselves to think like men in the workplace ... They did not believe they could have it all: They believed they could have what they wanted, success, by giving up what other women had. (Apter,T.,1993,p.206).

Personal commitments that could undermine their ambitions were therefore avoided. Rigidity such as this acknowledged the danger of feminine roles in the lives of these women, a fact revealed in their severe corporate dress of the period.

The increase infiltration of women into the 'old boys network' during the decade placed women in direct competition with men. The unfamiliarity men experienced with female executives, caused them to perceive these women as a professional threat. The adaption of the male suit and its severity therefore served to counteract these negative perceptions and project an image of 'one of the boys' and blend into their male environment.

Social and economic factors influenced the corporate suit and fashion in general during the 1970's. The decade commenced with an economic boom, but by 1973 the Middle East War brought an end to this. Gradual eroding living standards caused by inflation made good quality clothes expensive. Fashions following the war became longer and more mature looking with
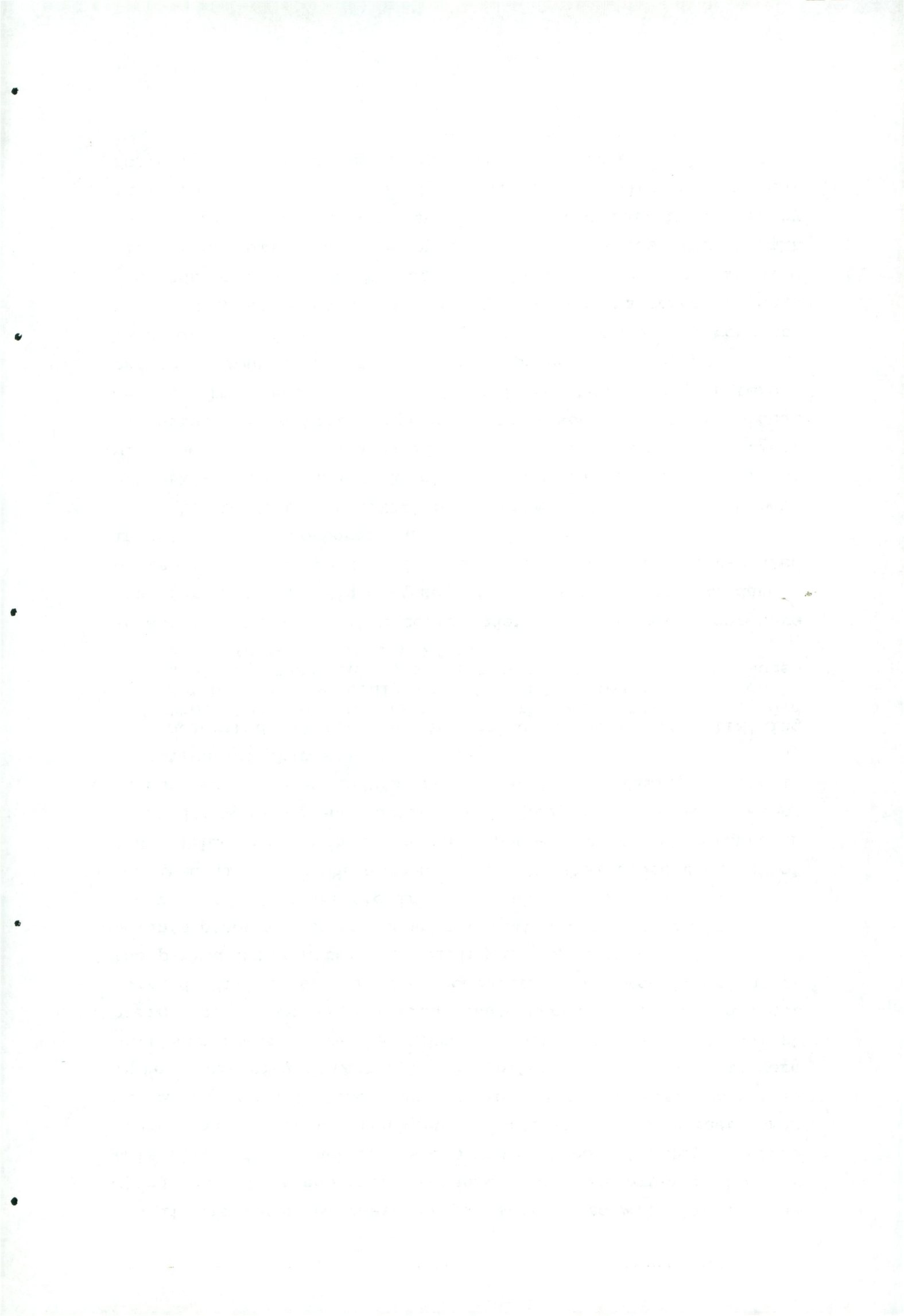
fall winter 1978/79

spring summer 1979
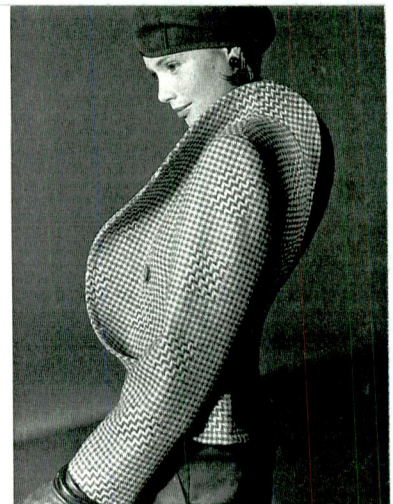
fall winter 1983/84
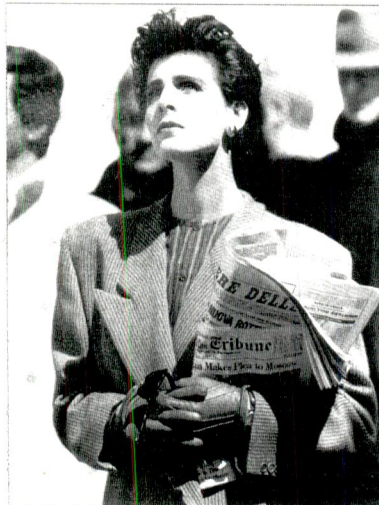
fall winter 1984/85
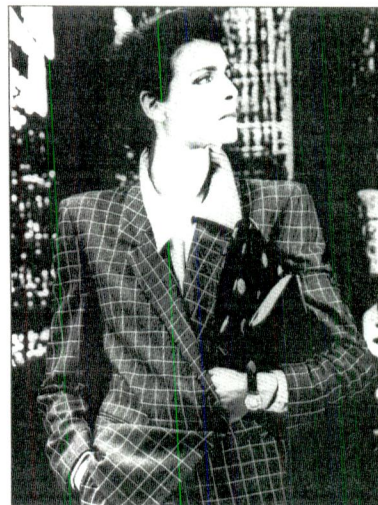
spring summer 1985

spring summer 1988

fall winter 1988/89

spring summer 1989
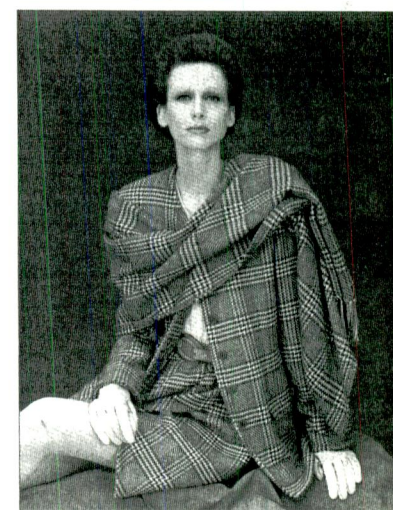
fall winter 1989/90

GIORGIO ARMANI

178, Sloane Street, London

Fig.6 Armani Winter 1978-1990 Advertisement.
(Vogue, 1991).

softly pleated or flared skirts. Designers slimmed down the silhouette and more definite styles lines appeared. As a result of the fact that corporate dressing was just beginning to be recognised as a distinct market segment, designers were generally unfamiliar with the territory resulting in a few designers specialising in business wear. Developments in fabric research was also limited in the 1970 s further restricting selection.

Perceptions of the suit of this period reveal that women possessed a general lack of confidence in their ability. This combined with the general unfamiliarity of the business environment led to the stereotyped corporate suit being strictly adhered to. There is a certain fear revealed in the suit of the early 1970's through the strict avoidance of femininity in their professional lives. Changes in perceptions and style of the suit had begun to appear by the end of the decade however, towards a softer silhouette (Fig.6,eg.Winter,'78) allowed through more fluid fabrics being developed and shoulder pads. This broad shouldered silhouette of the late 1970's revealed elements of the 'Power Look' which was to later dominate the 1980 s. Alterations in style largely occurred as a result of female executive's growing confidence and their increasing acceptability with the business sector.

By 1980 the female executive had overcome many of the problems of her predecessors. While the decade was greeted with less optimism than any since the 1950's, it was in time to prove one of the most prosperous decades of the century. Women no longer believed that they had to "think like men" (Apter,T.,1993,p.205) in order to succeed. Increased confidence in their role allowed a certain flexibility and individuality to emerge. In contrast to the 1970's female executives, they began to believe that they could 'have it all'. Harpers and Queen recalls of the decade; "women tackled the boardroom and stayed there". (Harpers & Queen, Oct.'94,p.164).

The decade involved; "scaling the corporate ladder and working fifty to sixty hours a week" (New Woman, April,1992). Cities became dominated by the new breed of Yuppie - young, urban, Professionals to whom consumerism created a world of 'must haves'. Margaret Thatcher dominated the decade as the leading

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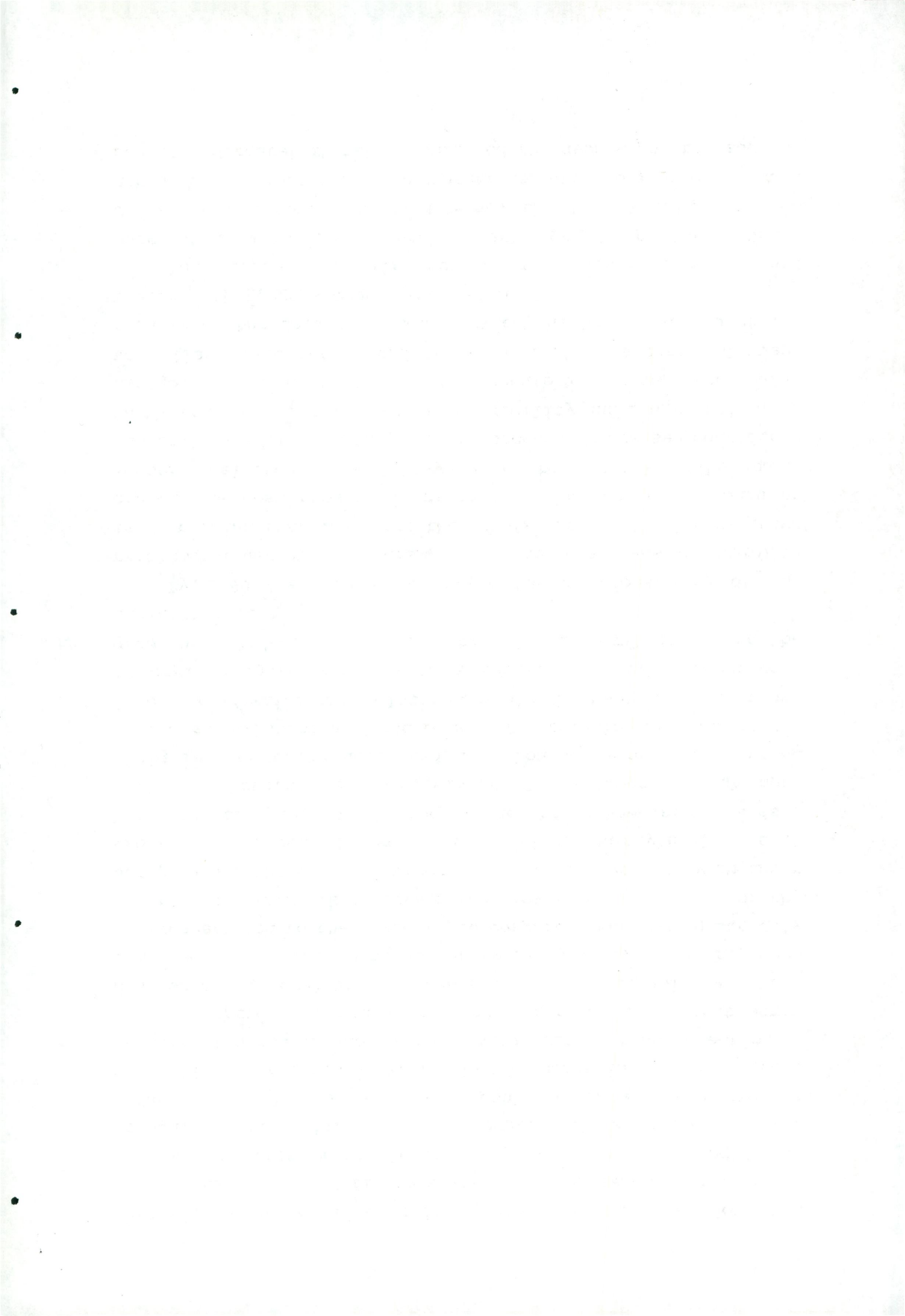
Fig.7 Power Suit of the 1980's.
(New Woman, April 1992, p.49).

Fig.8 70's Suit compared with the stereotypical 80's version.

Fig.9 The 1988 Film <u>Working Girl</u>.
(Vogue, October 1993, p.198).
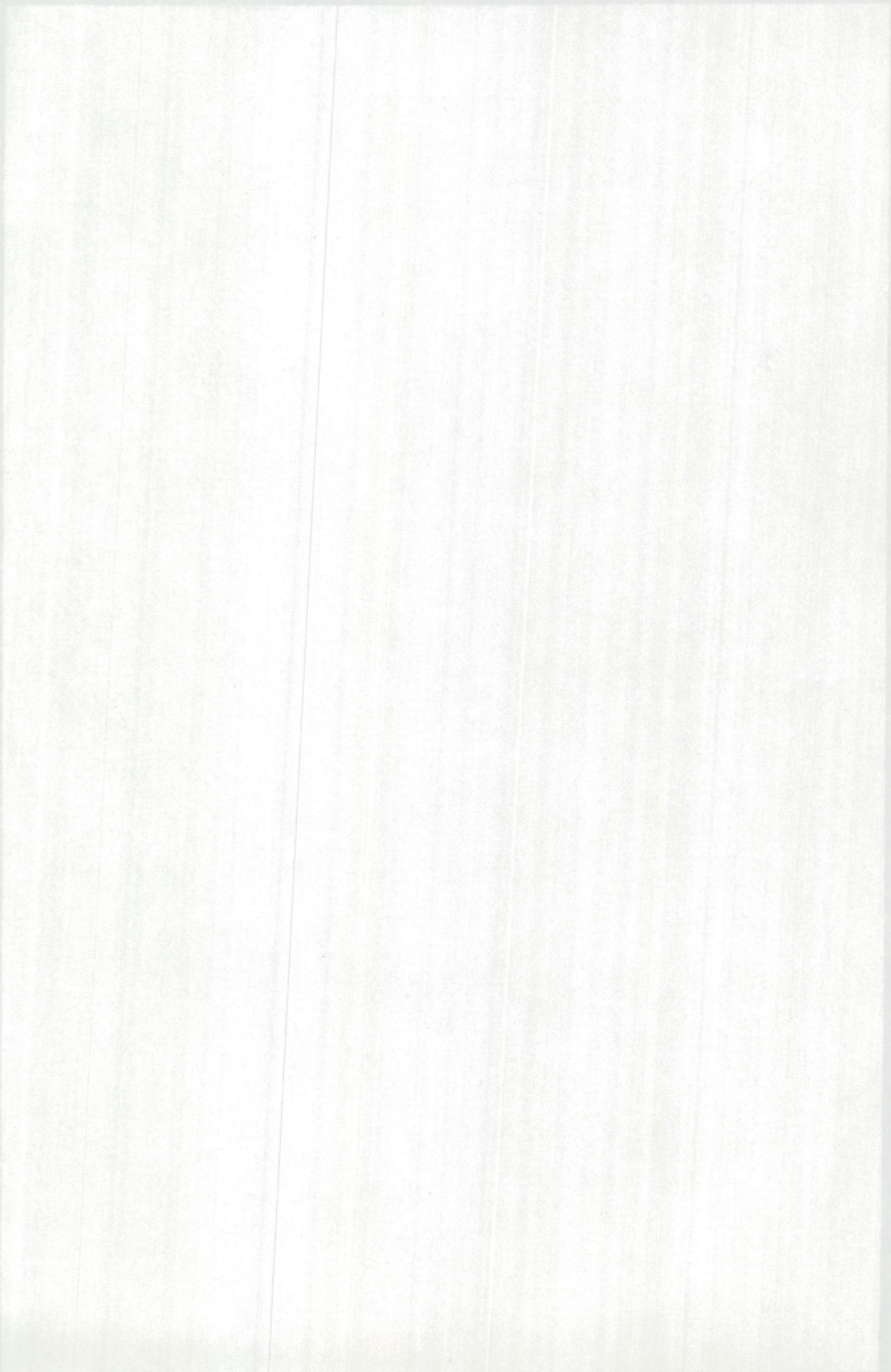
Fig.10 Bow Ties of the 1970 s.
(Kidwell & Steele, 1989, p.89).

female executive where 'Thatcherism' and the consumerism it promoted was widespread and 'power' became the catchword. This consisted of large padded shoulders, designer labels, aggressive jewellery and the essential filofax (Fig.7). This illustration reveals a short skirt, aggressive high heels combined with large padded shoulders. The power suit was more feminine than its 1970's predecessor (Fig.8) but it did contain paradoxes. These paradoxes consisted of masculine style padded shoulders combined with a somewhat unprofessional style short skirt. When Melanie Griffith declared in the 1988 film <u>Working Girl</u> "I've got a head for business and a bod' for sin", she defined the paradox of the decades power suit. These paradoxes often resulted in confused perceptions, in the suits attempt to combine a 'sexy' look with a business-like one epitomised attitude as well as the look of the decade (Fig.9). Griffith's transformation from secretary to executive revealed the differences in style between a successful business woman with her classic style and a secretary who was more open to fashion looks.

Following Griffith's transformation the style of the secretary is portrayed in a less positive light than that of the corporate executive, and Griffith's character also begins to adopt this attitude. The film acknowledges the rise during the decade of the female executive on the corporate ladder.

Publications during the period stressed the importance of the corporate suit. A 1985 front page article in the 'New York Times' was entitled "Women Dressing to Succeed Think Twice About the Suit" and opened with a quote from Molloy; "The skirted suit should become the uniform for almost all business and political situations". (Kidwell & Steele,1989,p.88). While the power look had always existed in corporate dressing, it wasn't until the 1980's that it became recognised as a single international image, 1987 being the year (<u>Vogue</u> 1993,p.197) when this became widespread. Differences in perceptions from the 1970 s included bow-'ties. Bow ties which were indicative of success in the 1970's became 'looser ties' in the 1980 s (Fig.10). "Women who are true professionals wouldn't be caught dead in them" (Kidwell & Steele,1989,p.89) and they became indicative of secretaries wear. Women's recognition of the perceptions of professionalism
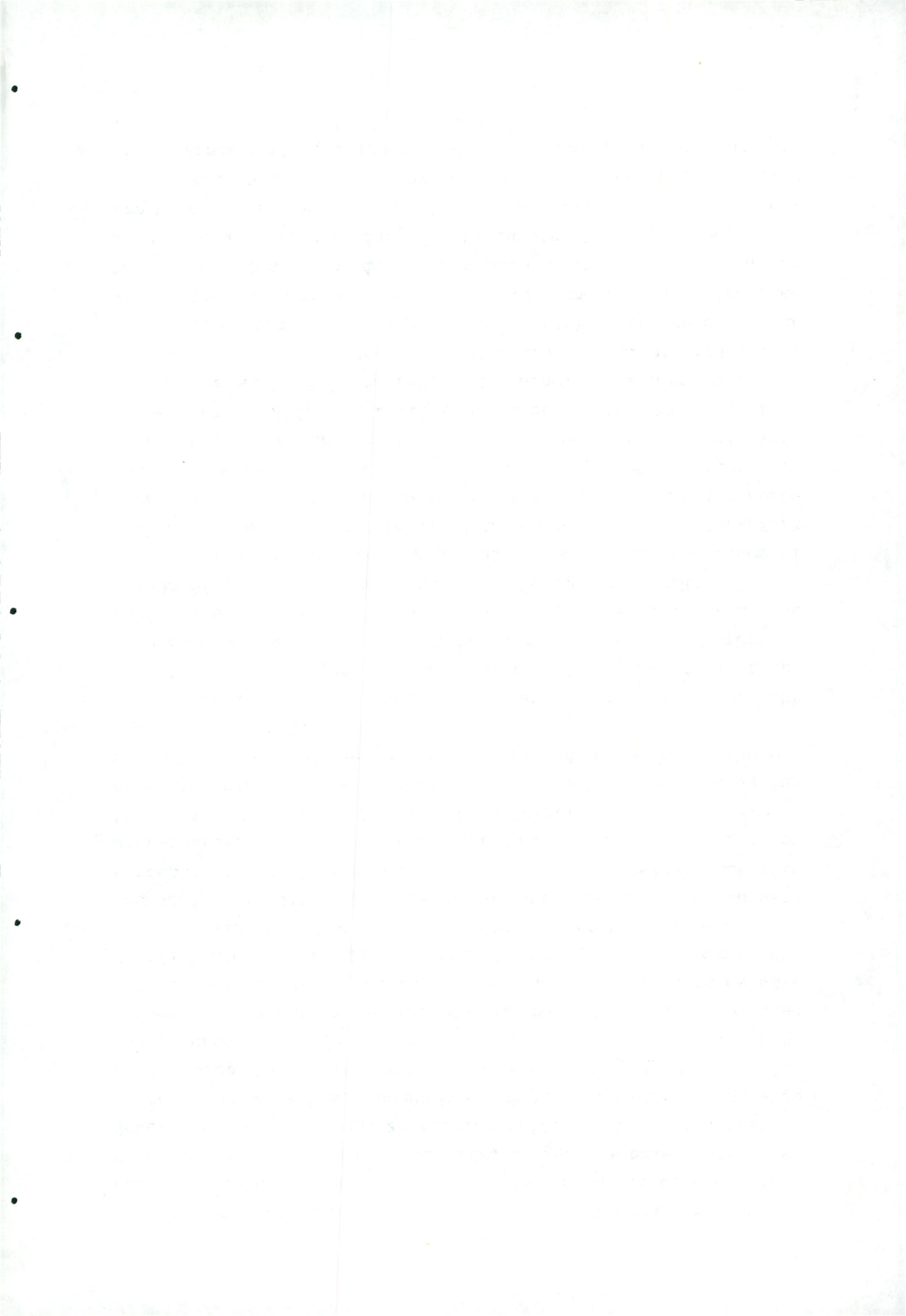
Fig.11 Dynasty.
(Vogue, October 1993, p.197).
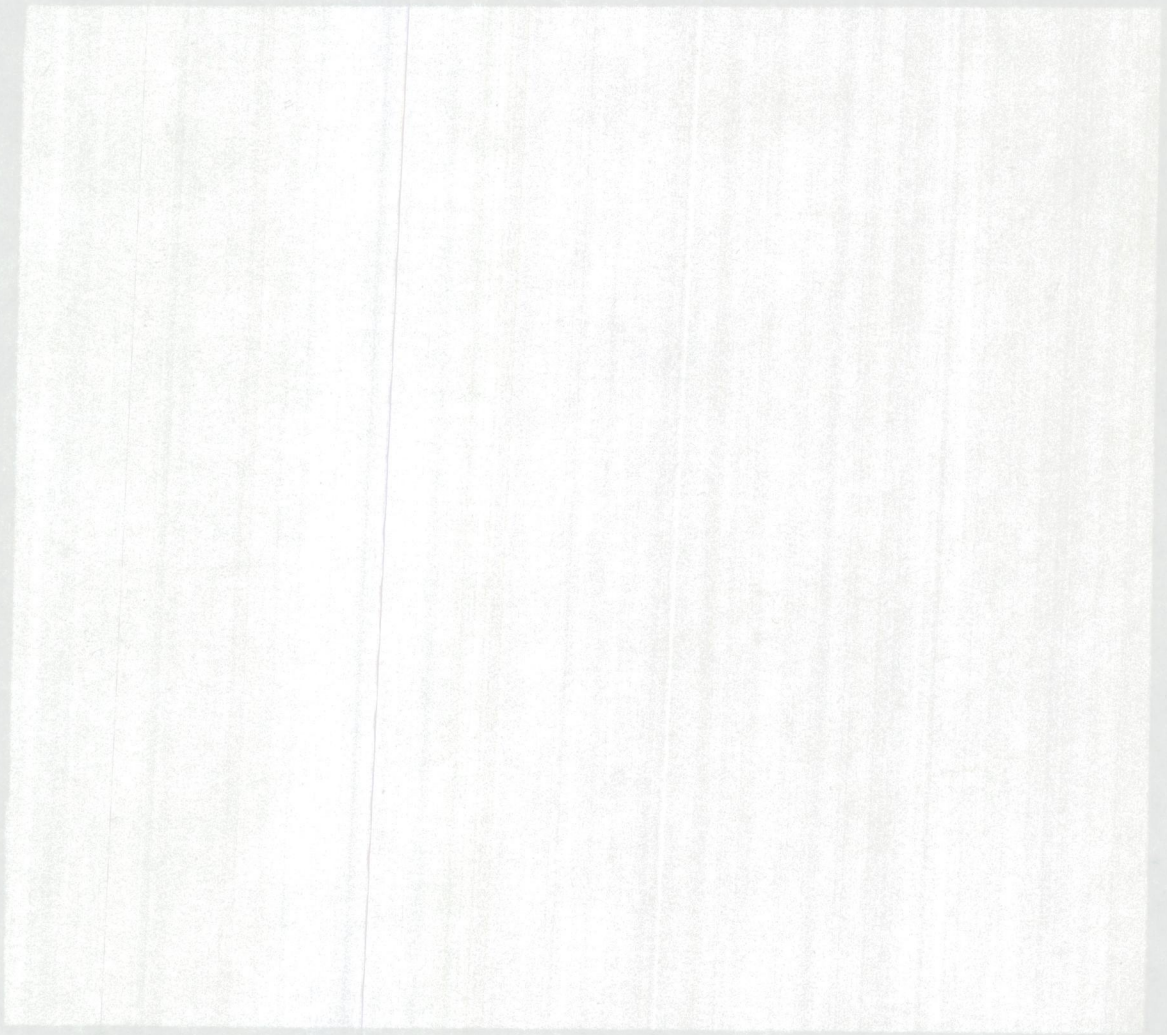
The skirted suit and briefcase were once the Woman Executive's unquestioned badge of authenticity. These days, she might find herself surrounded by imposters.

Fig.12 Over-exposure of the Corporate Suit.
(Kidwell & Steele, 1989, p.89).

and authority possessed in the suit largely occurred during this decade. This partly resulted in the suits development into mainstream fashion. Television Soaps such as 'Dallas' and 'Dynasty' (Fig.11) epitomised the lifestyle and power icons of the decade with their presentations of money and designer dressing. These elements combined with role models such as Nancy Regan the wife of US President, Ronald Regan and the Princess of Wales made the corporate suit into acceptable daywear for women and girls. The 1984 Dress for Success book, <u>A Girl's Guide to Executive Success</u> recalled;

> The skirted suit and briefcase were once the woman executive's unquestioned badge of authenticity. These days she might find herself surrounded by imposters. (Kidwell & Steele,1989,p.89).

Combined with this trendy American youth adopted the suit for street-wear, and the 'Garconne Look' which later found their way to London. This overexposure revealed in Fig.12 caused the corporate suit to become devalued and less effective in projecting perceptions of management characteristics.

In comparison to the 1970 s, female executive's lives had improved considerably. Women were now more likely to marry and have their partners share in childcare and domestic tasks. The Employment Act of 1977 and Anti Discrimination Act of 1974 had helped to increase equality, even though the ideal was still a long way off. This factor on prejudices against women was also revealed in the 1988 film <u>Working Girl</u>. The film acknowledged the view that in order for women to succeed, they generally had to have an unlikeable personality and yet paradoxically if a woman played dirty she was seen as over-aggressive, if a man played dirty, he was ambitious. This factor is true of real life and sometimes used to deter women from being ambitious.

While the '<u>New York Times</u>' acknowledged that "Big shoulders project power" in the 1980 s, it also recognised a change was emerging in 1985 away from the power look to a more feminine silhouette; "strong shoulders are receding in favour of a rounder look" (Kidwell & Steele (Eds),1989,p.13). Armani's publication (Fig.6) also reveals an emergence of a more feminine corporate suit towards the beginning of the 1990 s. By the end of the 1980 s consumerism and the power suit had disappeared giving way

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Number of Female Managers
% Percentage of total in sample
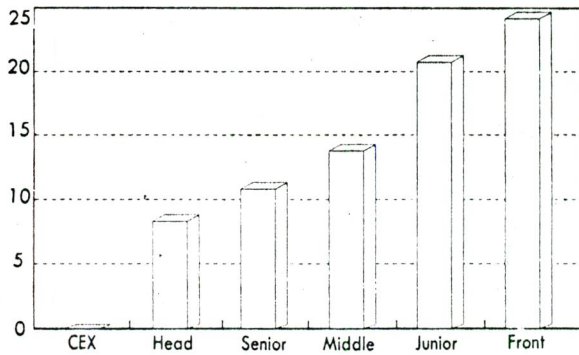
Source: IMI Salary Survey

WOMEN IN MANAGEMENT

FUNCTION	1994%	1993%	1992%
Top Management	3.5	2.6	2.0
Personnel	32.0	27.6	34.9
Sales	8.8	9.9	9.1
Finance	22.6	20.1	16.7
Marketing	21.0	28.8	23.9
Manufacturing	10.4	9.5	12.7
Technical	3.7	7.6	2.6
I.T. & Data Processing	31.0	21.6	21.0
Distribution	8.7	6.1	6.2
Materials	16.3	11.5	13.5

HOW THEY'RE PAID

RANK	Basic Salary (Ir£) 1994 Men Women		% shortfall 1994% 1993%	
Managing Director	*	N/A		N/A
Head of Function	38932	33113	14.95	19.06
Senior Manager	31194	26470	15.14	14.37
Middle Manager	22804	20608	9.62	11.53

Fig.13 Imbucon Survey.
(The Sunday Independent, October 30, 1994).
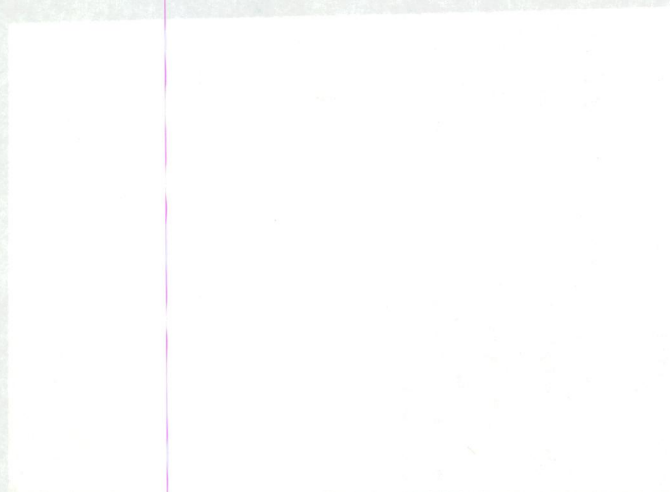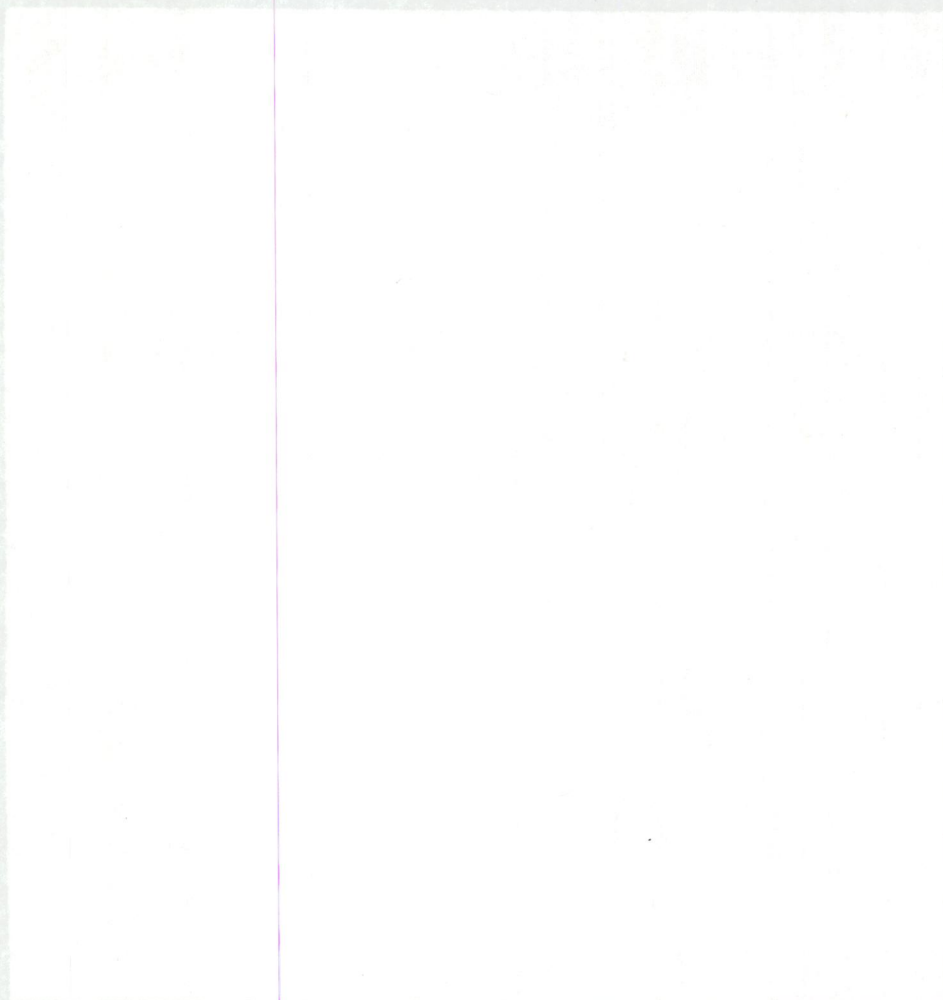
to a return to nature and a more natural look for the 'caring sharing 1990 s'. In recollection of the 1980 s however, one obvious advantage of the power suit was that it made women realise the importance of looking credible, and also noted the end of the 'male imitation' look of the 1970 s.

Today success in life, personal fulfilment, accomplishment, security, etc are all interlinked with work, which increasingly in modern industrial society is becoming the centre of life. This naturally proposes corporate dressing as a more important and successful market segment today as in recent decades. Occupation also serves as an indicator of living standards and while some women may use corporate dressing as a display of success and wealth, to others it is an investment to help their careers.

Following the excesses of the 1980 s, the 1990 s originated with a recession that affected the professional progress of both men and women. The decade was forecast as "the decade of women in the workplace", (Vogue Oct.1993,p.199) and began here in Ireland with Mary Robinson becoming the first Irish Female President in 1990 overcoming tough male opposition. While as yet, only halfway through the decade women's place in the working environment has not yet - and not likely for the rest of the decade - reached an equal footing with men. Accountancy Ireland found that in business, women still find themselves in a "primarily male dominated environment", (Accountancy Ireland,Oct 1992,p.6) where female managers account for only 20% of the total. The Institute of Directors in Ireland also have a total membership of 33,500 where only 2,600 are women. Equality in pay has also not come into practice as revealed by a survey in the Sunday Independent (Oct.30,1994,p.20). Neither have they achieved a 'firm grip' on upper management levels, as the Irish firm, Imbucon Survey on Women in Management, (Fig.13) clearly reveals. This survey related how the average female executive today is 35, usually in the marketing, finance or data processing sectors. Her earnings as a senior manager in her firm would be approximately £26,500 which is 15% less than a male colleague in the same position. It was found that only 9% of female executives in Ireland reach head of function categories, and
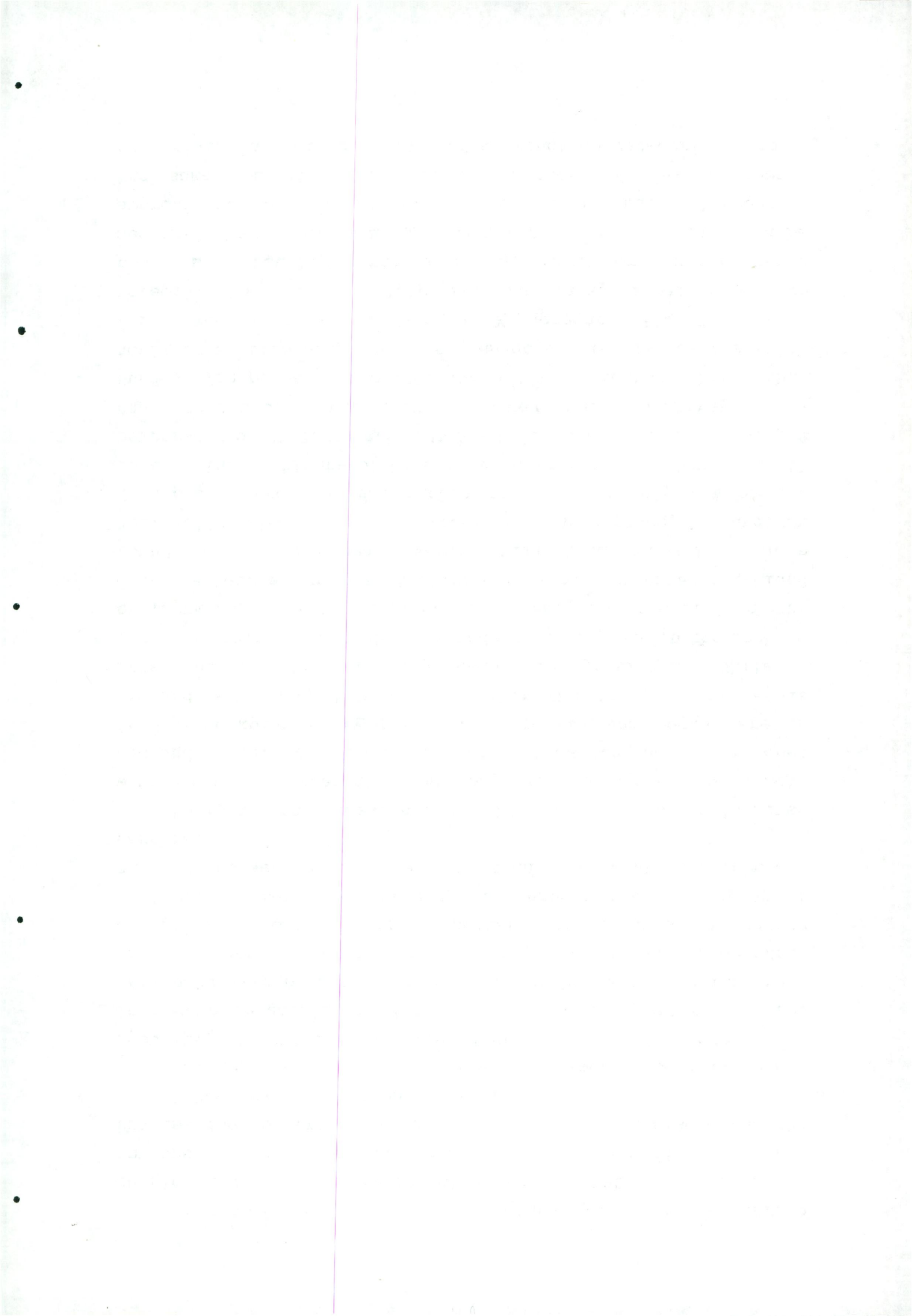
Fig.14 Armani Trouser Suit 1993.
(Vogue, October 1993, p.197).

DONNAKARAN
NEW YORK

IN WOMEN WE TRUST

DONNAKARAN
NEW YORK
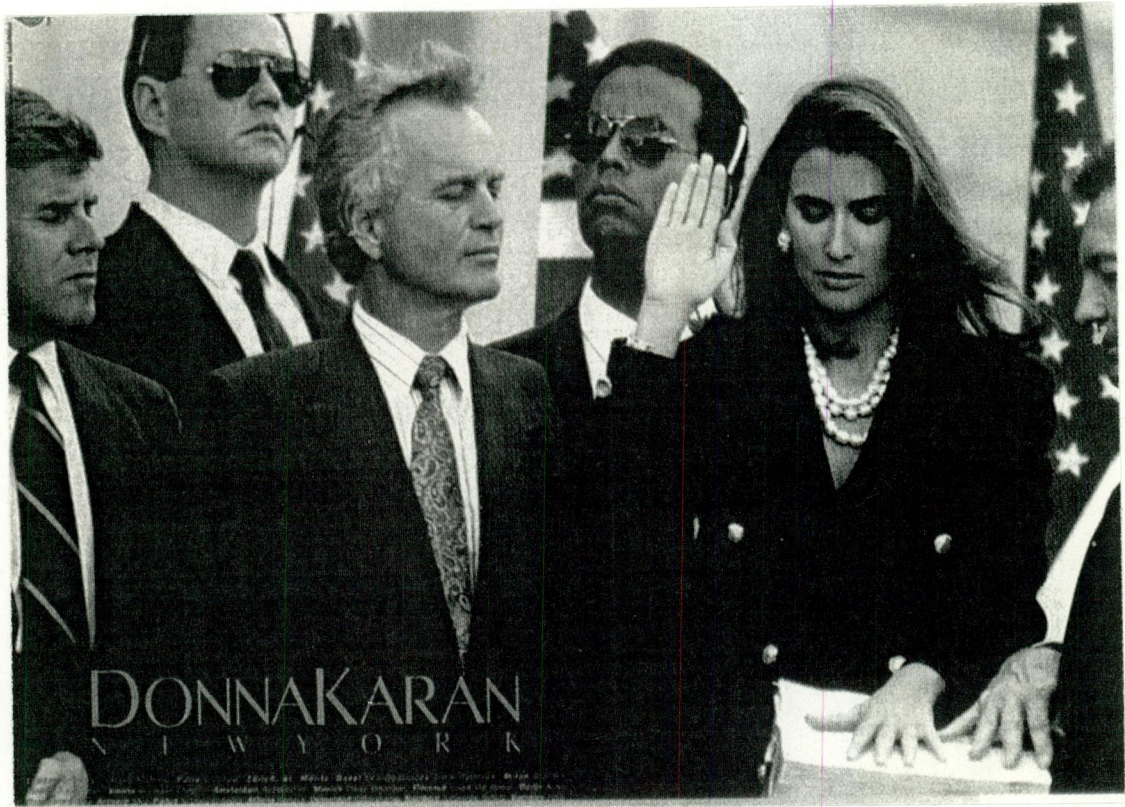
Fig.15 Donna Karan 1992 Advertising Campaign.
(Vogue).
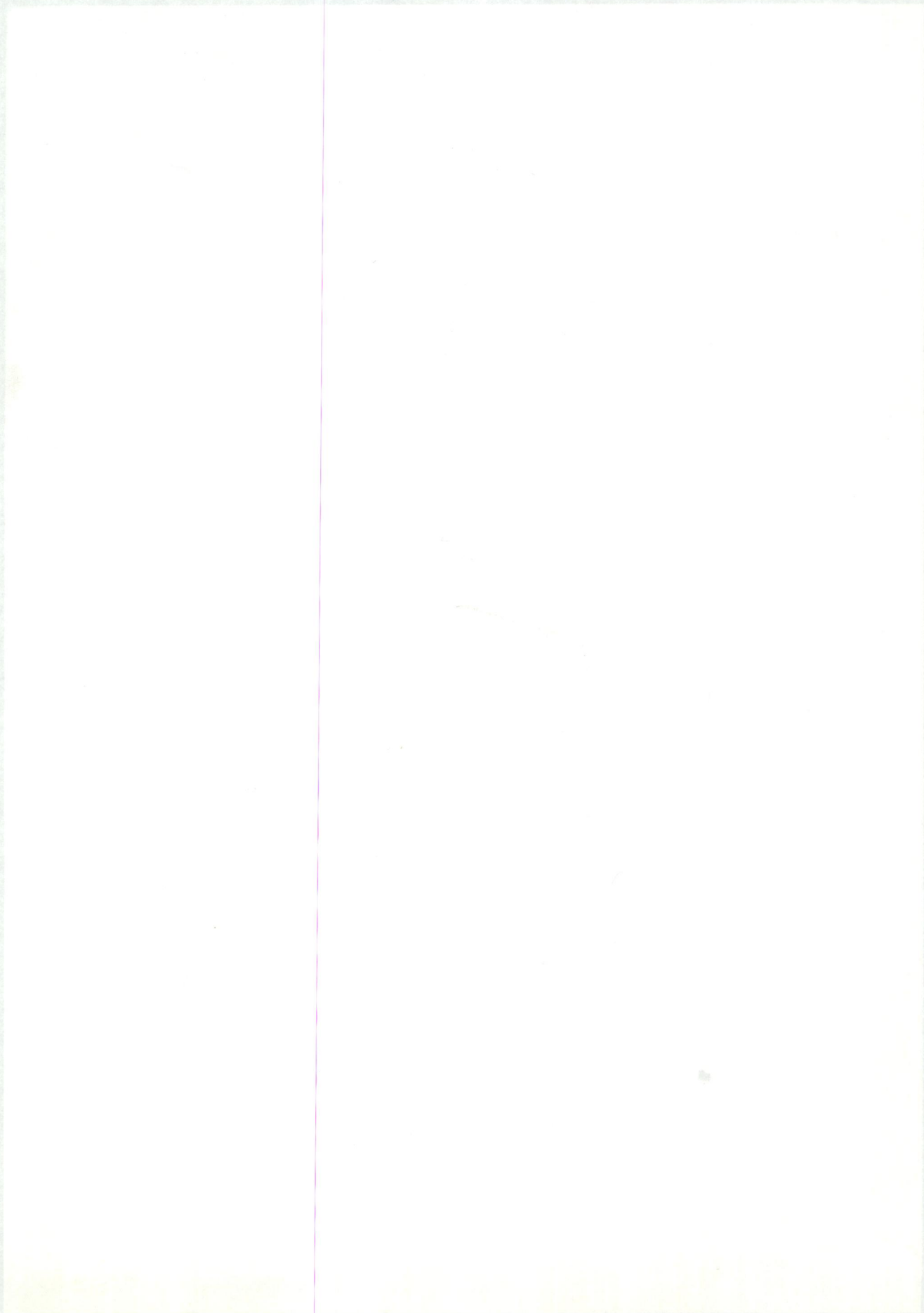
while they may be having some success at lower and middle levels of management, the "samples is pitifully lacking in the higher levels". (<u>Sunday Independent</u>, Oct.30,1994,p.20). Professional Progress revealed in 1993;

> The corporate ladder is no longer as stable as it once was, and also has fewer rungs ... Corporate life is rapidly changing and what was once a 'male domain' is no longer as secure ... Everyone's career expectations have changed and that makes everyone wary of membership.
> (Apter,T.,1993,p.210).

This change is partly due to the recession but also involves the changing attitudes of people in general. Men as well as women are no longer as secure in their employment with the traditional salary paid employment and 'lifetime job' giving way to a more freelance style of employment with professionals likely to change two to three times in their life.

This general confusion in life not only reflected on the corporate suit but fashion in general during the initial two to three years of this decade as;

> layers of droopy linen and chiffon entered the fashion picture and the suit left it, leaving working women with nothing businesslike to wear. (<u>Harpers & Queen</u>, Oct.1994,p.165).

In the previous two years however the classic two-piece suit has returned to corporate wardrobes. The suit today is more feminine with an increased softer silhouette (Fig.14). Knee level skirts are most common, but the classic trousers suit is also gaining prominence today. In an interview on dressing for work Donna Karan summed up the 1990 s as "long, lean, linear liquid". She goes on to say;

> what we experienced in the 70's was the expression of the body, the freedom of the woman and her body language, I think in the 80's we were talking about money and power ... The power is different now, it is an intellectual power, it's a more sensitive power ... She's not giving up power, she's just softening it ... She's becoming more comfortable with her status, comfortable with her body, comfortable with who she is. (<u>The Irish Independent</u>,Sheridan,Kathy, April,1993).

Donna Karan's 1992 advertising campaign (Fig.15) revealed a more feminine corporate image projecting women into the highest levels of executive position - Presidency of the US. This advertising campaign preceded the Clinton partnership into Presidency but

May 1993

summer 1993

Hillary Rodham
Clinton: with Bill,
in 1978,
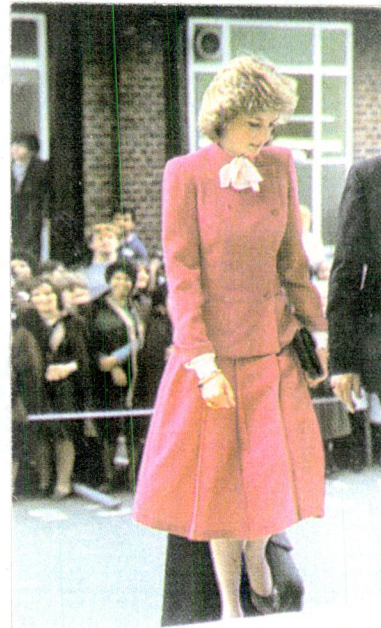
The Princess of Wales,
in 1984,

Fig.16 Hilary Clinton & The Princess of Wales-Changing Styles.
(Vogue, October 1993, p.196).
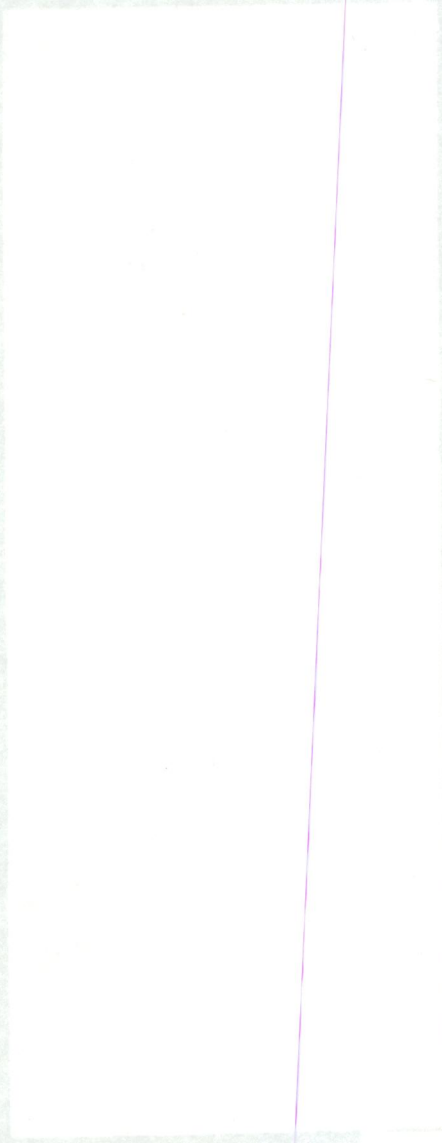
Hilary Clinton later epitomized the 1990 s executive woman for both Donna Karan and corporate dressing. Illustration (Fig.16) related how both Hilary Clinton and the Princess of Wales have altered their images from previous decades. Alteration of styles also reveals evolvement and development as well as keeping up to date, which in turn relate to evolvement of perception.

Developments in technology have greatly improved today resulting in improved fabrics and fit. Fibres such as lycra and wool mix allow ease of movement and combine comfort with ease of care. As well as fabrics, new developments in elements such as fusing and interlings are now more streamline in manufacture and wear of the suit while also ensuring that the jacket of the suit is more durable and retains fit better. Compared to earlier examples of general tailoring, sleeve heads also fit better into shoulder sockets with developments in machinery providing a quicker and better finish around pockets and lapels. One fact relating to the 1970 s however shows while selection of fabrics in general has greatly improved the quality of tweeds and wools during was of a better standard and consistency. People in general expect a higher quality of finish on garments today than in the 1970 s. Women's professional requirements are also beginning to be taken seriously by fashion houses who carry out extensive research into this distinct market segment. Shops such as 'Jaeger' and 'Principles' combine clothes that work with affordable prices. Certain styles are mutating from the identical skirt and jacket to a two, three or even four piece combination, co-ordinated by colour and cloth. Many corporations now tolerate trouser suits and even Vogue recognises the fact that it is now "permissible - thanks to the Princess of Wales - to go without tights on a hot day". (Vogue, Oct.93,p.199): Women are also beginning to go to male tailors for their corporate suits, but since the durability is not as important in female wear as men, tailors remain as more of a luxury for women.

In 1993 Vogue declared that "Women can now afford to look fore feminine", (Vogue, Oct,93,p.195) and while at the beginning of the 1990 s many executive females might have become dissatisfied and bored with the stereotypical (Fig.17) corporate suits, newer feminine versions caused a return to corporate

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Fig.17 Stereotypical Corporate Suit of the early 1990 s.

suits. As one shop owner related to <u>Vogue</u>, women "come in thinking that they never want to wear another suit, and leave with a brand new one" (<u>Vogue</u>, Oct,1993,p.199).

While office wear codes continue to alter and perplex today, appropriateness of styles are more relaxed with greater variety to choose from. Resulting from the examination of women's changing role in the business environment, in relation to the medium of the suit, during the last twenty years this chapter has revealed how perceptions associated with the corporate female image have evolved and developed. Female executives are still judged more than men on their appearance and choice of clothes. Increased confidence in their positions and the growing number of positive role models however mean that this causes less problems than in previous decades. Through the emphasis on different style suits during the period, this chapter has also revealed how perceptions of necessary management characteristics have altered. Perceptions concerning the corporate suit today are more involved in the expression of individual characteristics as opposed to the stereotypical personal characteristics of management during the 1970 s. Women are also more aware of these perceptions they project in dress and generally suit themselves according to their position or client, and know how to dress appropriate to different categories. While women's role is not yet on an equal footing with men in the workplace, the femininity of suits today reveal a growing appreciation in women's contribution to the business sector. The following chapter will assess the role of perceptions in the communication of personal characteristics through the medium of the corporate suit.
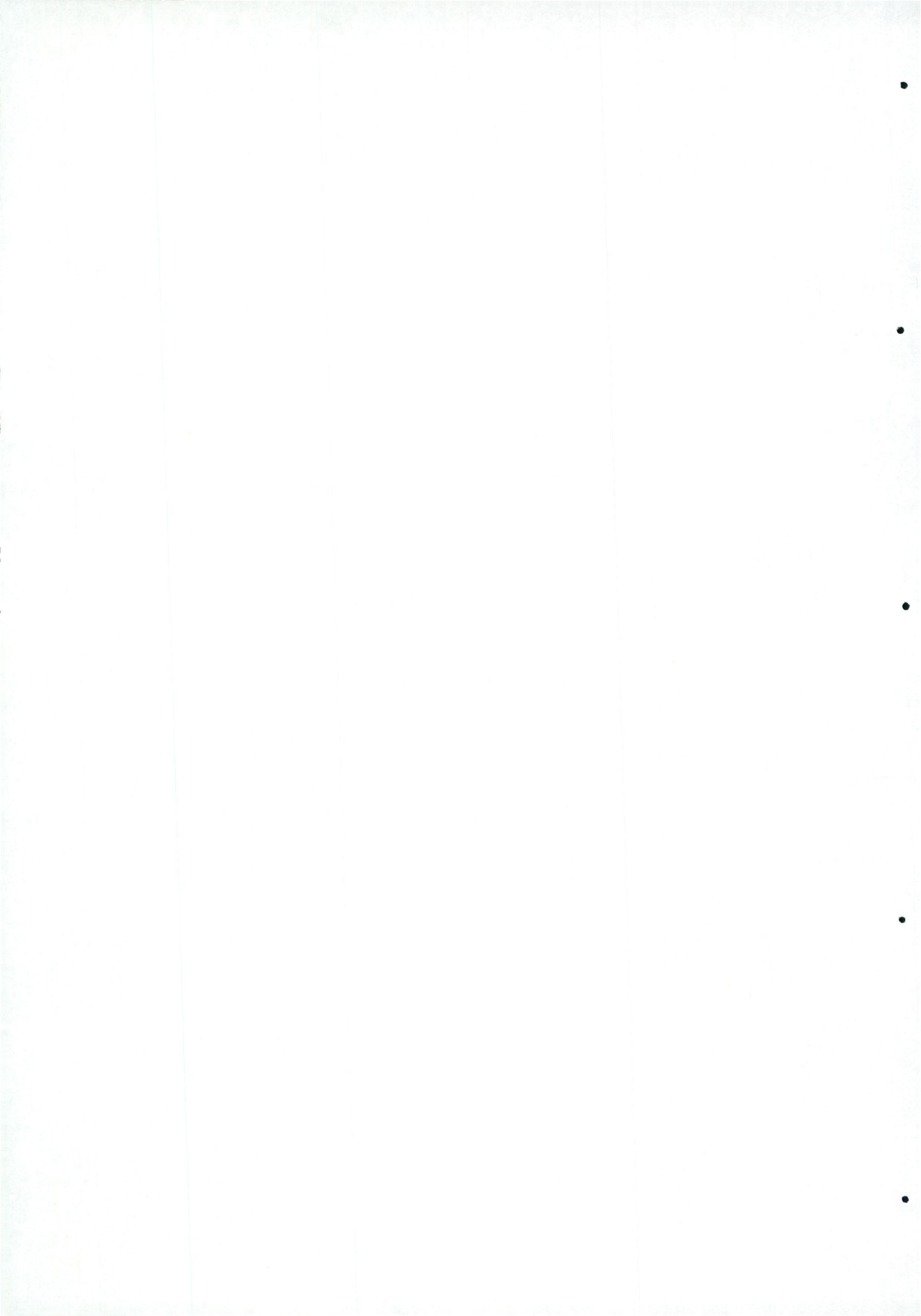
Chapter II

PERCEPTIONS AND SOCIAL PROCESSES

Whether we like it or not, fashion exerts a powerful hold over people, even those who try to deny it. One objective of the suit is to project characteristics of professional management qualities, and the communication of these personal characteristics requires elements involved in perception to form judgements. Perceptions are psychological reactions, therefore more tangible elements such as communication of the suit, impression formation, and masculinity and femininity are necessary to attempt to discover how, and why, the corporate suit projects these qualities. This chapter takes a closer examination at these elements of perceptions. To assist this discussion, attention has also been given to elements such as colour, style and grooming which contribute to an overall appearance. This examination also attempts to reveal why certain examples of the suit are more successful than others and analyse this difference.

Communication is a means of conveying information of both a personal and factual nature. As well as having many verbal languages, communication also has many non-verbal forms, one of them being clothing. Research by Solomon has revealed that "clothing is closest metaphorically to the self", and because it; "covers what is to be private and shows the world the presentation a person wants to make", (Solomon,1985,p.6). It serves as a package that is assumed to be the female's true self. In terms of perceptions of management characteristics, communication is the means of conveying these qualities necessary for success. As a result, the female business suit serves to communicate a direct message, which is one of professionalism, authority and confidence. If the female is perceived to possess these qualities, she is more likely to receive preferential treatment, which in time may add to her success within the business sector. Naturally for women, these perceptions projected in female clothing must be further substantiated by the necessary elements such as intelligence, ambition, etc as much as their male counterparts. The purpose of corporate clothing

therefore is to acknowledge and communicate these elements more clearly.

Alison Lurie, in the Language of Clothes describes clothing as a; "Non-verbal symbol that in turn enhances clues of personality in communication" (Lurie,1981,p.6). As a result, the corporate suit assists the formation of perceptions in that it communicates clues to the female's personal taste preferences and attitudes which may or may not lead to success in her position. These clues are displayed through elements such as colour, masculinity and femininity of the suit, style, etc which are examined further in this chapter. This was realised by Liz O'Donnell, member of the Progressive Democrats;

> Clothes are very political, whether we like it or not we are sending out messages, making statements about ourselves through the clothes we wear. (The Irish Independent, Sheridan, April 1993).

Due to the fact that perceptions are psychological reactions, Lurie acknowledges that the communication of characteristics observed in dress may not always be verbally explained but that the information is registered nevertheless, even if only on an unconscious level. This also reveals that these clues are often impressions and not concrete information.

Everyday human interaction causes us to make judgements whether accurate or not on one another. While acknowledging that judgements encompass the whole appearance a large proportion is constituted by clothing. Forsythe's research has revealed that the meanings attributed to clothing cues are culturally acquired and are generally shared by the members of a society (Forsythe, 1990, p.1589). Furthermore clothing is an element more easily manipulated than some other areas of the appearance. Control of these images, both conscious and unconscious is referred to (Solomon,1985,p.309) as Impression Management. This management of impressions is important in areas such as the business interview and workplace, where communication of personal characteristics are critical and impressions which are directed at pleasing are of an advantage to the overall outcome. When concrete personal information is lacking, clothing takes on greater significance in attributing management characteristics to the individual. In Accountancy, clients usually have few

means of assessing the accountant's efficiency and professionalism. The female accountant's suit therefore plays a large part in her professional image. Furthermore, this acknowledges the suit and clothing as a form of communication, and as an influence on first impressions.

Forsythe's research has shown that first impressions do in fact count. (Forsythe,1990,p.1590). Previous experiences sometimes cause us to make snap judgements of people and these impressions are based on fragmented evidence. These first impressions can considerably affect future perceptions and outcome for an individual. Most believe that you should not judge a book by its cover, but this is rarely the case and is a fact that happens in our daily lives constantly.

"It has been generally acknowledged that visible consumption patterns including dress style selections affect first impressions of other people" (Solomon,1985,p.309). Clothes make the man, or woman and it often happens that we are assessed by what we wear rather than by what we are. One journalist and T.V. presenter on Newsnight commented; "the depressing thing is that you can agonize over your script for hours but what people comment on is your jacket" (_Vogue_,Oct.,1993,p.196). Effective communication therefore requires the female executives to dress appropriately. While other characteristics such as eye contact, posture, etc are also influential on initial impressions, personality impressions are selective and can be distorted. These impressions can be used in assessment situations such as an interview, however their influence on the final decision varies among individuals. In employment situations, the first five minutes of encounter have been known to largely determine whether the applicant will be seriously considered or not. Research has shown that this may not always be a conscious decision but as a result of this first impression, the interviewer will then look for clues to substantiate this first impression. Closer acquaintance however provides counter-evidence, which allows a more accurate opinion than first impressions. As a result superficial acquaintance can often cause common stereotyping on appearance, nationality and accent, which are based on pre-conceived impressions. The corporate suit

therefore serves an important role when business people are unacquainted until further contact allows them to form a more accurate assessment. In turn, dependency on the communication of clothes decreases as knowledge of their personal characteristics increases. In 1980 Business Week acknowledged the importance of the suit in impressions;

> Impressions count! Although they don't substitute for performance, they back it up. Women in business don't have to mimic men anymore but they still need to look right. (Business Week,Oct.,27,1980).

One of the main reasons for the use of the classic suit in corporate life is the symbolic perceptions it possesses and creates. Forsythe acknowledges that because of the symbolic nature of clothing it is the message, that is reacted to rather than the object (Forsythe,1990,p.1580). Traditionally men dominated the business sector and in turn their three-piece suit came to represent, and be associated with characteristics of management. When an increase in numbers of women began to enter this section, like other subordinate groups, they adopted the clothing of another group in order to gain new and equal status. For this reason it was because of the symbolic nature of men's clothing, that women adopted the male suit into their wardrobe. In the 1980's it was the symbolic identity - of independence, career, orientated, etc - of the female executive that became fashionable and in turn led to the over-exposure of the corporate suit in fashion. These symbolic elements are therefore important to understand - in relation to the nature of responses to clothing - in order to influence impressions in the desired manner. This in turn leads to an examination in the design elements of the corporate suit.

As stated earlier, men have traditionally dominated managerial positions and sectors of business. Therefore male qualities have become associated with success in the business sector. Characteristics such as aggressiveness, forcefulness and reliability are only some of these elements which are crucial for success. Perceptions involved in dress are associated with pre-existing connections and as a result characteristics necessary for success in business have come to be symbolised in the male three-piece suit. These traits are seen as more masculine than

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feminine so in turn, men are more likely to be perceived to possess these characteristics and as a result hired for the position. Traditionally, codes of masculinity have been acquired and displayed through codes of action while codes of femininity have been acquired and displayed through elements such as clothes and appearance. Therefore, feminine clothing traditional expresses qualities that are of a subordinate role and unsuitable for success in business. In turn the object of women adopting the male suit, was to attain new credibility and authority in the business world by adopting characteristics of management present in the suit.

> This research is part of the symbolic Interaction Theory;
>
> Symbolic Interaction refers to interaction between human beings who define or interpret each other's actions instead of merely reacting to them. This communication is mediated by the use of symbols. (Forsythe,Drake & Hogan,1985, p.267).

It is the interpretation of these clothing symbols of masculinity, femininity, etc which must be interpreted by the perceiver before the information necessary for impression formation can be conveyed. To categories these elements associated with masculinity and femininity the chinese terms for classification are often used by researchers such as Forsythe, Drake and Hogan. Men traditionally possess a wardrobe associated with Yangness. Yang refers to;

> Long unbroken, straight and continuous line, straight or modified straight silhouette, large scale, heavy, stiff and coarse texture, few details, dark bold colours, strong, contrast in values and warm hues. (Forsythe,Drake & Hogan,1985,p.269).

These qualities of dress denote strength, forcefulness and dignity which are traditionally masculine terms and also perceived to be the most useful in occupational roles. The traditional feminine side of this is classified in terms of Yinness. Yin is classed as;

> Short broken or curved lines, a round silhouette with soft delicate textures, medium to light colours, soft intensities and cool hues. (Forsythe,Drake & Hogan,1985,p.269).

These elements denote gentleness, tactfulness and warmth, which when translated into a suit disqualify women from active equal participation in the workplace;

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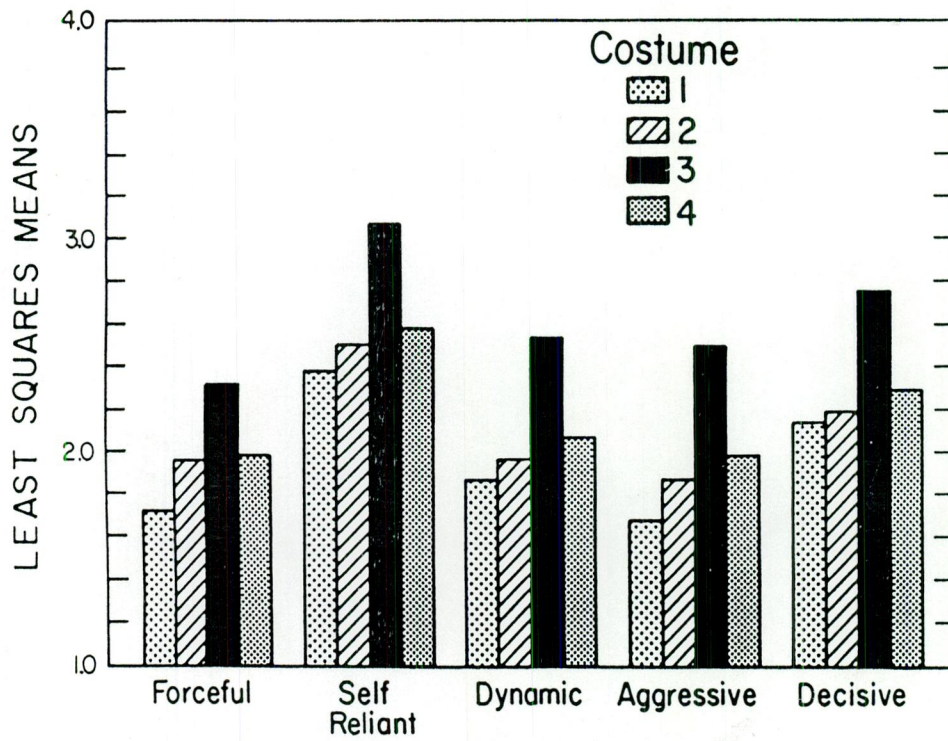
Figure 24–1. Personal Characteristics Means for Costume

Fig.18 Success of different style Suits.
(Forsythe, Drake & Hogan, 1985, p.272).

Feminine traits while more appealing are often regarded as anything from annoying distractions to severe barriers to success. (Solomon & Douglas,1985,p.393).

In Forsythe, Drake and Hogan's research into the Influence of Clothing Attributes on Perception of Personal Characteristics (1985,p.267) they examined elements of Yinness and Yangness in relation to the success or otherwise of four different style corporate suits. These suits were representative of each different style available in dress which could possibly be worn in the business sector. The first applicant wore a light beige dress in soft fabric, round lines and gathered skirt and sleeves. A bright aqua coloured belted suit with a large draped bow was worn by the second applicant. The third wore a beige tailored suit with a narrow bow at the neck and the fourth applicant wore a dark navy tailored suit with a white blouse. Fig.18 reveals the first of these outfits contained the most elements of Yinness and therefore femininity in dress is not suitable for success in the workplace. While the second did contain some notes of professionalism, elements such as the large draped bow, contributed to its Yinness. The third was the most successful style, combining elements of Yangness with the retention of a few feminine details. The fourth applicant emphasised only young elements. This often results in being seen as too severe and 'imitation man' and could prove counter-productive to a female executive. Their research proved that;

> Within an acceptable range the more Yang the clothing, the better it conveyed personal characteristics important for managers and elicited favourable hiring recommendations for women applying for middle management positions. (Forsythe, Drake & Hogan,1985,p.274).

They found also that suits which retain some feminine elements also received the most favourable hiring recommendations. Men, it was found accept women more readily into the business sector if their femininity and sexuality is not directly obvious. This was particularly important in the 1970 s when women were initially entering the business sector. The combination of these elements of Yinness and Yangness reveals that;

> The professional woman's business outfit neither effaces femaleness nor exaggerates it ... It seeks instead to give businesswomen a 'look of authority'. The authority look for women's business wear is an attempt to isolate certain of the properties of male business clothing, and incorporate them into the female fashion. (McCracken,1985,p.393). (?)

Today, designers and consultants attempt to isolate and incorporate qualities of Yangness into the female suit in order to give them an authoritative look necessary to aid them to succeed.

While suits were found to be the most successful dress form to "elicit favourable impressions and hiring recommendations" (Solomon,1985,p.223), accounts differ on the actual form of the suit. Solomon and Douglas (1985,p.390) revealed that their research found that the pant suit was the most successful and made women feel less discriminated against men. Molloy, on the other hand, found that the pant suit did not rate very highly in success terms and was shown to be generally favoured by less educated women from rural areas. (Molloy,1980,p.71). Even though secretaries first began wearing trousers to the office in the 1960 s, it is mainly only in the last twenty years that pants became acceptable women's wear for both leisure and office. Originally the trousers served to shock and women in trousers were not allowed into the Royal Enclosure in Ascot until 1970. Perceptions of this time associated trousers with women 'wearing the pants' in other words, dominating men. To many men initially, women in trousers posed a direct conflict with themselves for promotion. This caused men to be defensive and trousers were seen as 'too much, too soon'. Trousers can also give females either a 'male imitation' look or a sexy image as revealed by Molloy (1980,p.71). These elements especially in the early 1970 s could damage a woman's career even before it had properly begun.

Conservative areas of employment, due mainly to their emphasis on stability and reliability are extremely slow to change, for example areas such as banking and law. These areas encourage a more masculine, conservative style of dress for women. In the 1970 s and early 1980 s trouser suits in the business environment were seen as 'shocking' and as a result

proved to be too radical for the more conservative areas of business. Liberal areas of employment such as advertising and the arts are more susceptible to change in general and therefore accepted the trouser suit earlier. During the 1980 s a unisex look for men and women became fashionable and women's adoption of a masculine look was viewed as;

> heralding women's growing social equality with men, because men's clothing was seen as more comfortable and practical. (Hix, & Burdine, Suiting Yourself,1978).

Men's clothing at this time also adopted more feminine details, and as a result it was no longer necessary for women to imitate them specifically to be taken seriously. Therefore today trousers, tailoring and short hair are seen as feminine in themselves and are no longer seen as masculine. Today trousers have also lost their power to shock and in fact are often adopted in certain professions to project an image that can dominate a situation. One example of such an area is Law. Law is generally considered to be most conservative than some other professions. As a result of it being an aggressive, masculine profession, lawyers need to dominate a courtroom. Law is often compared to acting and female lawyers are required to dress to make themselves credible with the judge and jurors. In these respect dressing for the profession of Law, differs from the mainstream corporate dressing, and the projection of increased masculine characteristics of management are necessary to compete. The trouser suit therefore is particularly effective in this area, providing an image that is classical and conservative, while at the same time serving as a tactical weapon.

Research has related that for female executives the secrets of successful suits were detail of cut, style, quality and authenticity which denoted professionalism and credibility. (Solomon,1985). To be in fashion is seen as to be out of style. Style is also seen as a woman's signature, a; "reaction against mass society and a rediscovery of individuality". (Solomon, 1985,p.30). Style is also an indicator of personal tastes and individualism and these are important functions of the suit today. Style indicates personal traits and is an expression of personality which is influenced by social as well as cultural

norms. In fulfilling the function required by society the style of the suit indicates that "one is in the race and one hasn't been passed over" (Solomon & Baker,1985,p.30). In turn, suits which appear as out of date are often perceived as not participating. One particular element in the style of corporate is that it is required to look smart and feminine while down-playing sexuality. Molloy agrees that; "succeeding in business and dressing to be seductively attractive are almost mutually exclusive". (Molloy,1980,p.21). The psychological impact of the suit is affected by the overall appearance, therefore elements such as blouses and accessories should be in agreement with the overall professional look. Grooming also plays a part in this, in that it complements the image the suit creates. While grooming may not always be obvious, its effect when lacking suggests unprofessionalism. As well as avoiding extreme examples of 'Yangness', short skirts also pose a problem for many women. The majority of executive women manage to look less than professional when wearing a short skirt. Liz O'Donnell, T.D. for the Progressive Democrats found that;

> Short skirts can be disastrous ... They look fine while you are standing up but sit down and you are in trouble ... Even for the simple task of walking up the steps of the Chamber in Leinster House to vote, a longer skirt is advisable. (The Irish Independent,Sheridan,April,1993).

As well as the style of the corporate suit, colour is an important element, often being the most directly expressive quality. Forsythe, Drake and Hogan concluded that colour may be used as a cue in the perception of personal characteristics (Forsythe, Drake & Hogan,1985,p.269). The ability to convey emotions and likewise particular impressions was found to be usually linked with a particular colour and hue, and changes in both colour and hue in turn, influenced the perceivers impression. This ability is usually a result of pre-existing associations which in turn influence our judgements. When impressions are crucial as in interviews, the colour and hue of the professional suit should project the necessary impression. Forsythe, Drake & Hogan also revealed that for applicants dressed in darker colours, interviewers tended to rate them higher on competence. (Forsythe, Drake & Hogan,1985,p.269). This is

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because colour is also related to the elements of Yinness and Yangness. Molloy agrees with these theories recognising that some colours and styles are more effective in image formation than others, the most successful being charcoal grey, navy and blue. He also found that the adoption of the 'pinstripe' into women's professional suits was not effective mainly as a result of being a too 'male imitation' in its look. Colours of the accompanying blouse also affect the overall perception with the combination of different colours creating different perceptions. For example, a yellow blouse with a grey suit was found to weaken the female's authority but increase her image of likeability, credibility and trustworthiness. A black blouse when combined with a grey suit was also found to offend 15-20% of the executive population particularly men over 45, but at the same time was found to increase the woman's authority. The most successful colours for blouses were found to be white and light blue. (Molloy,1980,p.53). These colours were found to be relatively consistent over time and characteristics of Yinness and Yangness allow designers a framework within which to work. Both colour and style, among others, play an important role in the language of clothing. As well as clothing being an element that is easily manipulated, colour and style in turn allow more variety and selection which contribute to the amount of control a female executive can exert over her appearance.

This chapter has revealed how impression formation and the communication of clothing can project perceptions. This is attained through evoking a feeling where the corporate suit serves as a symbol and medium through which characteristics of professionalism, reliability and competence may be communicated. This in turn serves to assist the success of a female executive in her role. Through examining which corporate styles are most successful in projecting perceptions of management characteristics, it was found that a masculine style skirted suit with the retention of a few feminine characteristics is the most successful. This is partly because perceptions today are still associated with some of the pre-existing associations with the traditional male elements of Yangness. This discussion also revealed how perceptions are generated in dress. Further

examination into elements such as colour and style allowed for a more comprehensive examination of the perception process involved in corporate dressing. It is necessary to understand these elements in order to further examine how these elements affect a female's success, or otherwise, in the workplace.
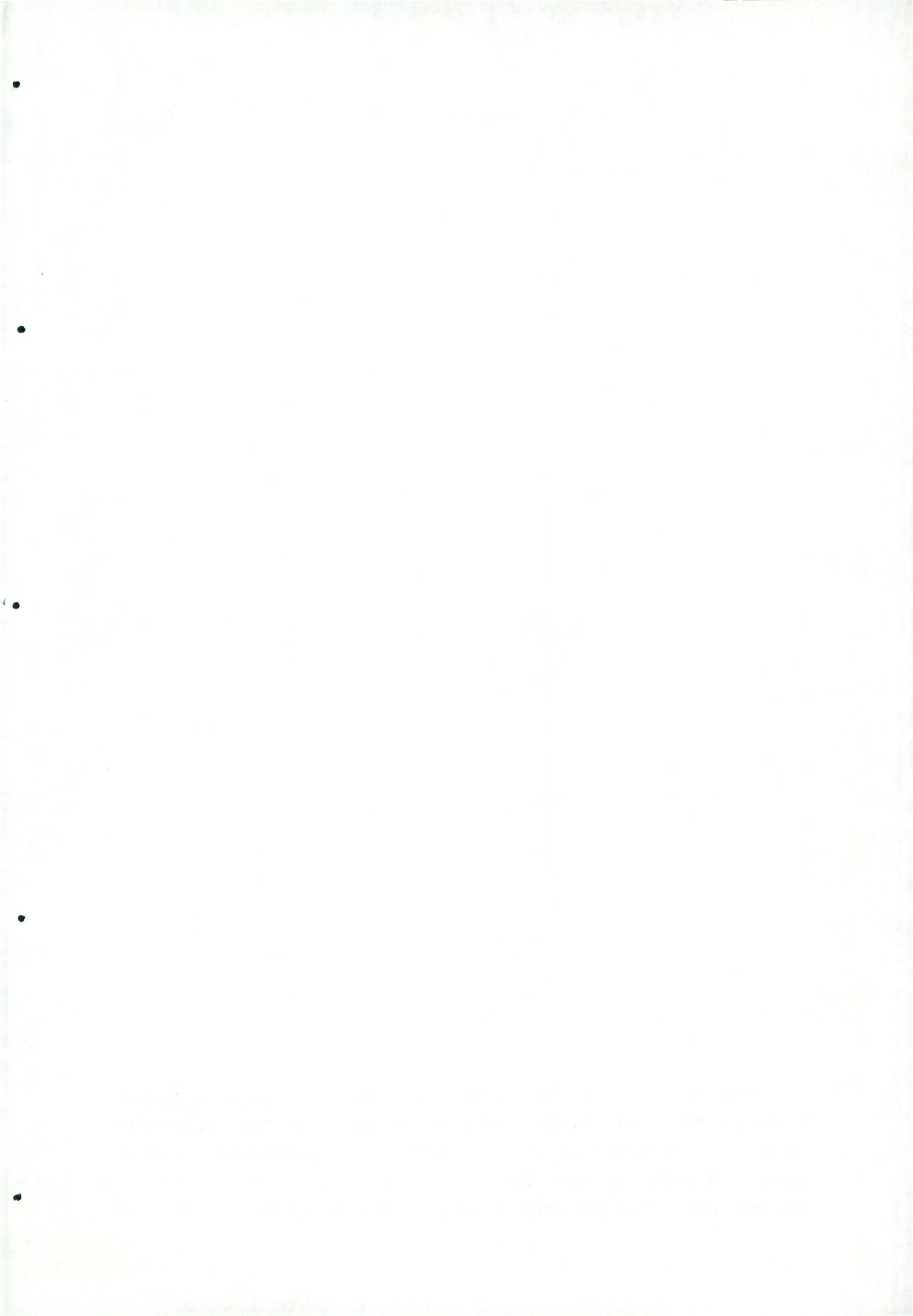
Chapter III

DRESS FOR SUCCESS

This chapter sets out to question how perceptual elements present in the suit can assist a female executive's success in her position. This discussion also reveals barriers women face in the business sector today, what corporate dressing contributes to counteract these barriers, and the role the corporate suit plays. Examination of advice on how women were to dress in order to achieve success will be analysed to reveal how women overcome these problems associated with corporate dressing. How these problems were answered and how women adopted this knowledge will also be discussed under elements of uniformity, individuality and equality present in the suit. Through establishing these elements, it is hoped to reveal the difficulties women encounter in gaining an equal managerial position as men.

While perceptions may not always be reality, they play a fundamental role in the formation of judgements of personal characteristics. As stated earlier, in the business sector, communication of characteristics associated with management are necessary for future success within that area. If a female executive is perceived to possess these qualities, it provides her with "a basis for social power and influence", (Lord, Maher & Baumgardner, 1991, p.98) within the business sector. Therefore she is more likely to accomplish and have her aims carried out. The corporate suit assists in this area, in that through its adoption of elements associated with previous managerial qualities of success, it provides a basis with which perceptions of management can be projected. As well as clothing, perceptions of management are also interpreted through a variety of sources such as formal communication stories on management or assessment of the female's organisational performance. Clothing however, provides a basis that is more directly visible within the business sector. As well as this, if a female executive is

required to rely on the influence tied to her perceptions of the managerial qualities she possesses, clothing provides the confidence and psychological framework to assist her. A quote from Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe (Re-print, 1968) provides a clear example of clothing's projection of these perceptual managerial elements;

> For if any come to office without these characteristics, his environment equips him with them, as surely as a diet of royal jelly transforms a worker into a queen bee. (Daniel Defoe, Robinson Crusoe, 1968).

This quote reveals how a female executive's dress may assist her career. This realisation is not ideal;

> As early as 1901, The Ladies Home Journal, printed an article on the subject, How Business Women Should and Should Not Dress. (Kidwell & Steele, 1989, p.64).

In 1918 Dearborn realised the connection between business dress and its role as an indicator of business success when he asked a group of subjects to write on the relation. The report that; "consciousness of good appearance freed the individual from fear of criticism", (Solomon & Douglas, 1985, p.390) was realised by over one half of this group. Furthermore, in 1955 researchers found that in white collar working positions of employment, employees believed that their dress cast a judgement on how others viewed their work performance which in turn was important for advancement. Men have always known the vocabulary of successful business dress, that is the male three piece suit. Yet for women this vocabulary and how far they could deviate from it was not as clear. The theme and objective of this vocabulary of successful business dress was to establish a form of executive female dress that would; "move you up socially and in business, not hold you back" (Molloy, 1980, p.30). During the 1970's, when an increase of numbers of female executives began to enter the traditional 'old boys club' problems associated with business dress gained prominence. It was during this period that the term

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'Dress for Success' was coined. This term refers to the management of presenting positive impressions of management characteristics through the medium of clothes, namely the corporate suit. This term was further adopted by consultants and researchers to promote their publications on how women could overcome problems present in corporate dressing. One of the most extensive and successful example of those was Molloy's Women Dress for Success, 1980, where he advised female executives how to manipulate their dress form in order to draw favourable responses in the business sector.

During the last three decades, the theme of dressing for success has become a phenomenon appearing everywhere from advice in magazines to the correct style of filofax. The establishment of this phenomenon gave female executives a set of rules to help them overcome problems of what was acceptable and how far they could deviate.

The skirt suit was found by several researchers such as Molloy (Molloy, 1980, p.49) and Solomon & Douglas (Solomon & Douglas, 1985, p.388) to be the most successful and appropriate corporate dress form for women. As previously mentioned The New York Times quoting Molloy carried a front page article entitled:

> Women Dressing to Succeed Think Twice about the Suit ... The skirted suit should become the uniform for almost all business and political situations. (Kidwell & Steele, 1989, p.88).

Research has also revealed that for female executives wearing skirted suits, orders and decisions they gave were more readily acknowledged. This naturally creates a feeling of mastery in their position and consequently helps them gain respect from others. As well as this, dressing for success also helps differentiate executives from employees of lower positions thus confirming their position in the social hierarchy of the organisation. (Solomon & Douglas, 1985, p.388). In this form the corporate suit serves as the professional women's uniform and tactical weapon to help her gain acceptance and confidence in her role. These elements will further be

examined in this chapter. Deviation from normal attire can therefore be viewed as a negative signal especially in certain conservative areas of business where conformity is crucial. Certain positions of employment are therefore more dependent on dress than others. For example, reporters have to be taken seriously yet not intimidate their source. Lawyers have to be credible with the judge and jury, and since it takes years to build a career, dressing is particularly important in the beginning. An upper-middle class image works best on judge and jury. Molloy also noted that jurors who dressed fashionably are particularly hard on lawyers who are not. (Molloy, 1985, p.111).

While the corporate suit is not designed specifically to be a functional item, it has at least three functions; "utilitarian, aesthetic and symbolic of the wearer's role". (Ericksen & Sirgy, 1985, p.357). This theory also supports the research that each social class was found to adopt clothing styles symbolic of their position and often found deviations from these norms to be in bad taste. This was revealed by Melanie Griffith in the film <u>Working Girl</u> (1988). Where, following her transformation to executive dress, she began to see the lifestyle and dress style of secretaries as unattractive. Dressing according to rank however is one area that causes problems for executive women today. Many women are afraid of looking too self-assured, feeling that dressing according to their rank could prove counterproductive. This is mainly because lack of confidence in abilities of dressing lead them to play safe. Research has proven however that;

> for white collar working women, businesslike costume is positively related to achievement motivation, ... and non-achievement motivated women wear more casual, sexy and feminine costumes more often than achievement motivated women. (Ericksen & Sirgy, 1985, p.366).

Therefore women who do not want to hinder their career, generally have to adopt appropriate business dress. Success in the sense of corporate dressing not only refers to promotion, but also the general daily accomplishment of a female executive's position. This relates to how

readily the executive's intentions are acknowledged and allow her to compete equally with men.

If a female executive is to successfully compete with a man on a managerial level, she first has to achieve and attain that position. The first step towards attaining employment or often upward progress throughout a company is the selection of a suitable candidate for a position. The interview as a form of employee selection is still considered to be the most efficient method. The interview creates a system whereby an interviewer can set out what it is they are looking for in a specific position. While this may be adequately fulfilled by a number of people in their qualifications and job experience, first hand information is necessary to assess the suitability of each candidate for the position. The interview therefore fills in information gaps such as appearance, speech, competence, etc which only direct association can provide. One objective of the corporate suit to project managerial qualities is therefore reinforced in the interview situation. Forsythe researched the Effect of Applicant's Clothing on Interviewer's Decision to Hire, in relation to women's appointment for managerial positions, (Forsythe, 1985, p.1579). This research agreed with findings in chapter II that found that success in corporate suits is related to the masculine elements they project; "Clothing masculinity was significant in predicting the perception of all the management characteristics examined, (Forsythe, 1985, p.1579) and applicants received preferential treatment when wearing more masculine elements in their style of corporate suit. In the interview situation, Molloy advised women;

> It is best to dress as if you were applying for a position, one or two steps higher than the one you are applying. Therefore you will appear to be a bargain. (Molloy, 1980, p.106).

Throughout the 1970 s and early 1980 s, the adoption of a 'masculine style' suit in female executive's wardrobes often appeared to be a form of uniform and uniformity for female corporate executives. In general a uniform is a form of identical dress which is adopted by a group. The

uniform displays membership to a group and collectively gives a corporate identity. The corporate suit of this period was seen as a uniform because female executives belonged to the business sector and due to a lack of styles, all appeared to be wearing identical suits (see Fig.4). This uniformity was mainly due to the lack of different styles and silhouettes and also limitation on synthetic fabrics which were not readily available at the time due to lack of developments in fabric research. Corporate suits of this period were regarded as a uniform because they possessed the ability to de-personalise the individual into a seemingly zombie like state. This is largely as a result of the corporate suit appearing somewhat serious and cold and in turn appeared to be a professional machine. In contemporary language usage of the term 'suit' is often used to describe this anonymity. This de-personalisation is largely as a result of the collective appearance of the amounts of business people commuting to work each morning. The structure and lack of individuality in their dress reflected in categorising them as having a common personality also.

While it may appear a uniform to outsiders however, members of the corporate society were able to clearly distinguish differences in a selection of styles, fabrics, etc. Members of the business society were more aware and familiar in the language of the corporate suit and were therefore able to read and assess the role the wearer possessed. This plays an important role in perceptions of managerial characteristics in that it projected associations with the business sector to outsiders and allowed for closer assessment to be made by members of the working environment.

One characteristic that is attributed to the suit of the 1990 s is that it allows women more expression of individuality. This individuality is the singling out of a female executive because of the personal characteristics she expresses that lead to her necessity within the firm. While human individuals often strive to belong to a group with whom they can relate and associate themselves with, they also want to be recognised as individuals within this group. This is associated with human individual's need to establish a unique identity. The corporate system requires its members to

adhere to certain standards of presentation. While in the past certain companies laid out strict guidelines as to how their members were to dress, they are less likely to dictate to their employees today. Therefore this corporate identity provides the group system with which a female executive can belong. With increased volume of people however, a female executive needs some individual quality to distinguish her from the group to assist her advancement. It is in this areas of the business sector that elements that express individuality are important. This is because these elements can be symbolic of personal traits and provide the personal signature of the female executive that sets her apart. Comparison of Fig.4 with Fig.14 reveals that Armani's relaxed 1990 s trouser suit is in stark contrast to the masculine style uniform of the 1970 s. The corporate suit today serves this requirement in that it acknowledges the female as being part of the business sector and through its personal details such as style and accessories, allows the expression of personal qualities and tastes. Scarves are regarded as being very successful in the expression of individuality as well as acting as an 'attention grabber' in situations such as interviews. It is important to note however that scarves with designers names on them can be counterproductive; "these scarves are not status symbols ... with some they will reduce your status" (Molloy, 1980, p.78). The best scarves are made of silk in a neutral colour. They add individuality to a corporate suit in that they add details that are an expression of personal choice and taste. These personal details allow for a more comprehensive assessment of an individual to be perceived which acknowledges the importance of accessorising the corporate suit for a complete look.

Accessories such as jewellery and necklaces have an influence on the overall perceptions of an individual and affect perceptions of female authority (Kidwell & Steele, 1989, p.90). Jewellery acts as an indication of wealth and status symbol. Neckwear is often regarded as an important non-verbal sign of personal characteristics;

For the Power Look, choose [neck-ties] with the same consideration you would devote to selecting a business letterhead or a spot ad. on T.V. (Kidwell & Steele, 1989, p.89).

Kidwell & Steele acknowledged that a man's tie or a 'crisp' bow was not well received because of an unfavourable 'masculine impression'. (1989, p.90). The best neckwear was found to be a "long narrow scarf, similar to a man's tie but with a softness that identified the scarf as that of a woman's. Neckwear is one area which clearly illustrates changes in perceptions of managerial qualities. As stated in chapter I, bow-ties became the symbol of successful corporate dressing in the 1970's yet by 1985 these had become 'looser ties' and only worn by secretaries; "secretaries wear bow-ties; women who are true professional wouldn't be caught dead in them" (Kidwell & Steele, 1989, p.89). Changing social attitudes and the adoption of the corporate suit into popular fashion are only some of the reasons why these bow-ties became unsuccessful but their rejection illustrates the importance and necessity of keeping up to date in corporate dressing.

In the early 1970's, a lack of different styles in suit forms limited individuality for the working woman. While this meant conformity to the norm was easier to attain than today, the lack of cut and detailing available in choice hindered the expression of individuality. Comparison between the 1970's and 1980's illustrates the emergence of individuality and self-expression expressed in the suit. Today however, increasing selection of styles and fabrics allow females more leeway. This is of an advantage in that it allows for more expression of individuality but this increase in selection also brings with it increased problems on the suitability or otherwise of a style. Individuality in corporate dressing is important therefore, because it provides for a clearer understanding of the projection of personal characteristics of a female and reinforce here the importance of a female's personal contribution within the business sector.

This emphasis on individuality in the 1990's however can cause colleagues to be more judgemental. Many, especially men, still have strong prejudices on the way executive women should dress. Biases and

stereotyping often give preconceived opinions which can affect each stage of a female's career. Myths such as 'the fairer sex', 'they're not as smart as men', 'they're weak' and 'they might use sex to compete for jobs' are just some examples. As a result of gender-related stereotyping, men and women are often categorised and expected to behave in a certain manner. This stereotyping can in turn cause biases to emerge in the business sector, as well as in general areas of life which can detract from a female executive's attempt at establishing perceptions of management characteristics throughout her career.

This stereotype can also be in the form of pre-existing associations with what a 'successful female executive' should be like. Forsythe's research revealed that;

> applicants whose appearance is not consistant with one's expectations is evaluated less favourably than a female executive who adhers with the expected image. (Forsythe, 1990, p.1590).

In first impressions such as the business interview, stereotypes often 'fill in the gaps' in the evaluation of a female executive and so can determine future interactions. For these reasons corporate dressing should; "move you socially and in business - not hold you back" (Molloy, 1980, p.30). This is also the reason why the expression of sexuality in business wear can be harmful to a female executive's career; "dressing to succeed in business and dressing to be sexually attractive are almost mutually exclusive". (Molloy, 1980, p.21). The expression of sexuality in a corporate suit increases the observers likelihood of stereotyping the female executive on a gender-related basis, therefore weakening the recognition of managerial qualities she might possess. Lord, Maher & Baumgardner's research confirmed that;

> Sex-related stereotypes weaken recognition based leadership processes because gender related categories are more easily accessed by perceivers than leadership categories are. (Lord, Maher & Baumgardner, 1991, p.112).

Stereotyping on a gender-related basis is often an automatic process rather than an intentional one and for this reason, corporate dressing should ensure than an observer's perception is not automatically directed at lessening the recognition of her abilities. This is achieved by the retention of a professional look which provides an image of authority and competence.

Corporate dressing is particularly important in the initial stages of a female executive's career. At this stage observers have little means of evaluating a female's credibility other than her appearance. Clothing is one of the first visible status differences that allow the new female executive to be distinguished from secretaries, previously the only other female employee, and necessary to prevent colleagues treating her in an inferior manner. At this stage, stereotypes based on leadership categories are crucial until further contact can allow for a more comprehensive assessment of the executive's personal characteristics and contribution. These stereotypes of leadership categorisation therefore are projected in the corporate suit, and allow for the initial perceptions based on stereotyping to be formed until more accurate information is available to review these perceptions.

Occasionally, despite the professionalism of both a female executive and her style of corporate dressing, gender-related stereotypes can lead to people perceiving her to have less professionalism and credibility than she actually possesses; "Even though a woman may exert power and influence, this may not always be perceived by others" (Lord, Maher & Baumgardner, 1991, p.110). This is due to traditional barriers women face in the business sector, barriers which are very slow to change. If a woman is seen to achieve her position because of a 'token woman' she is also more likely to be assessed in a sex-related category which can affect her performance and success.

Therefore, while it is not entirely within the power of corporate dressing to alter these stereotypes, but rather social attitudes, it can provide the professional woman with the confidence to assert her position.

Stereotyping of female executives can lead to negative evaluations and misperceptions throughout her career. These barriers still remain and may weaken a female's performance and establishment of managerial qualities. Corporate dressing however, provides a framework and basis to allow women to acquire the skills necessary to manage perceptions of management, while also attempting to counteract the limitations, biases and stereotyping bring to a female's career.

While it is illegal to discriminate against women, the result is often far from the ideal. Today, women have not yet been totally acknowledged by men in the workplace and this conflict is revealed in the suit - in the way corporate women are still largely judged more than men on their credibility, through their dress; "people are far more critical of women's professional appearance than of men's". (Vogue, 1993, p.196). The fact that men still largely dominate the power structure in business, government and education, means that to a large extent female executives still have to dress with their opinions in mind. This is a reflection of the inequality that still exists in the business sector today.

Although legislation in the 1960 s and 1970 s declared that women are entitled to equal employment and affirmative action, social attitudes are slow to change. As far back as 1792, women fought for better education, better pay and equal rights to employment. The Second Women's Rights Convention in 1848 voted for new employment in areas such as business where women were not acceptable or allowed, admission to all educational institutions and equal pay for equal work. It was not until the Negro struggle for equality on the basis of physical characteristics in the 1960's which highlighted discrimination, that the women's movement gathered any monumentum. This resulted in the 1974 Anti-Discrimination Act along with the Equal Employment Act of 1977. A recent survey by the Irish Institute, Imbucon (Fig.13) reveals that female managers in the middle income categories still earn significantly less than their male counterparts with only 9% of Ireland's higher levels of management going to women (Sunday Independent, Oct. 30, 1994, p.20). This survey is

relatively consistant throughout Europe and the U.S. as acknowledged by Business Week, June 8, 1992. In white collar society, men and women experience different rates of success both individually and as a result of their gender. Examinations by Lord, Maher & Baumgardner proved that in order to reach higher levels of management, women are expected to possess fewer faults and prove their ability more than their male counterparts of equal standing, (Lord, Maher & Baumgardner, 1991, p.96) before they are presumed capable of handling the next assignment. This increases the necessity for the corporate suit to project an image that assists female executives being taken seriously. By adopting an image of authority and credibility, present in the suit, women are better equipped to establish their position within the business sector. The corporate suit therefore serves as a form of tactical weapon.

In relation to clothing, a tactical weapon relates to the personal protective armour an individual adopts, to assist them to gain an advantage and success in a situation. If the business sector is perceived to be a 'battle', the corporate suit is therefore the 'personal, protective, armour' with which to assist success and progress. Wall Street is a direct example of this battle ground. As a tactical weapon, the corporate suit serves to indicate the female's position within the firm and also help her to gain acceptance. It is therefore based on symbolic elements rather than totally aesthetic elements to indicate and assist the female executive. The corporate suits relation to a tactical weapon is to provide a strategy to assist a female's career. As a technical weapon, the corporate suit often assists a female executive's career in the initial stages of employment, when internal clues are often lacking, and unfamiliarity with the role causes a lack of confidence in ones ability. In this area, the corporate suit empowers many women with the prestige of wearing an executive uniform and provides a basis where people's general attitude and respect is improved towards a female wearing a corporate suit. Research by Solomon & Douglas found that;
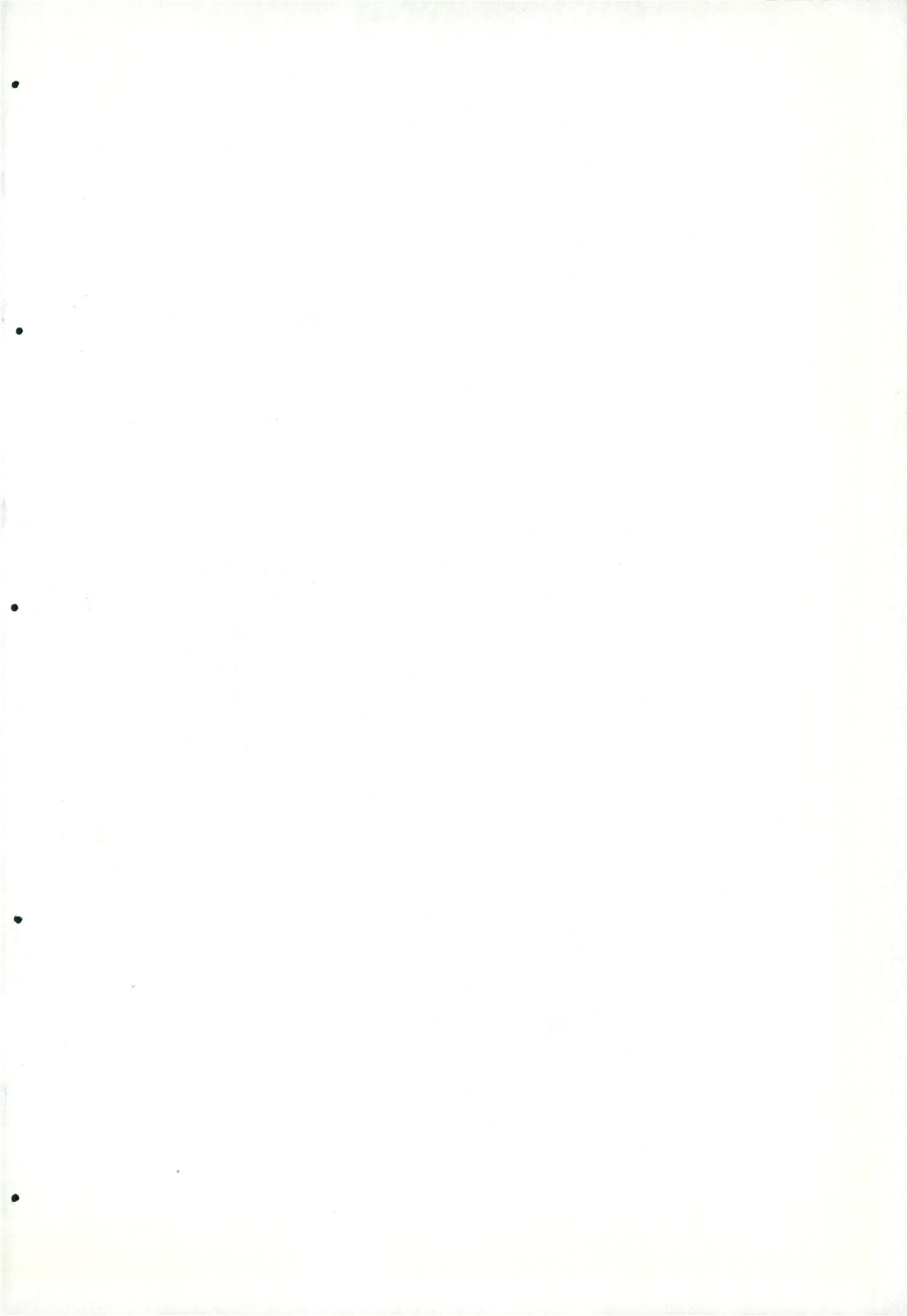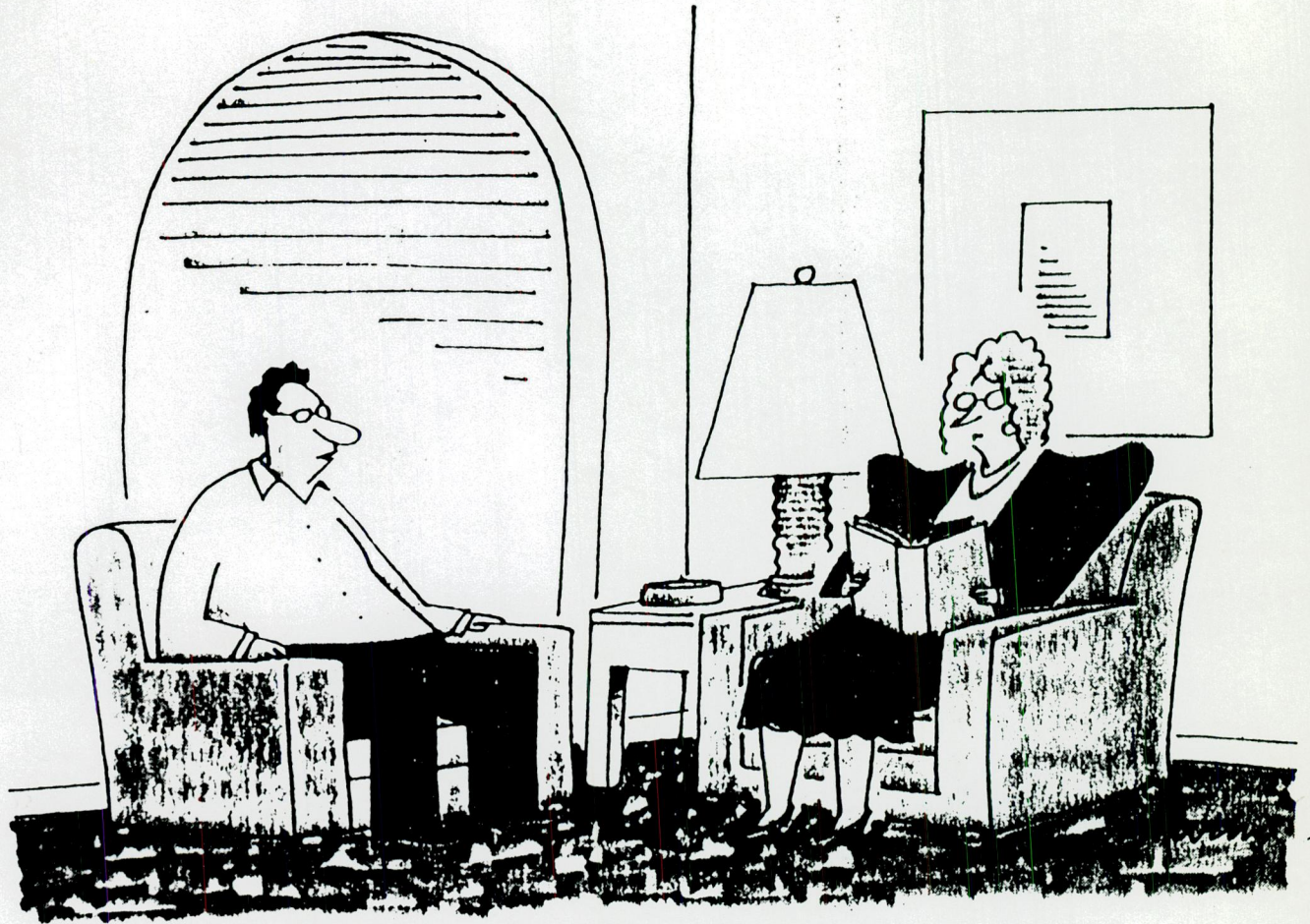
"You're home now, Adele. Why don't you take off your shoulders?"

Drawing by M. Stevens; © 1990 The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.

Fig.19 Punch on Powershoulders of the 1980 s.
(Fashion Modernity & ID, p.48).

> Irrespective of whether an outfit is perceived as attractive or elegant, the knowledge that it is appropriate to a given role may enhance self-assurance and the ability to perform the role. (Solomon & Douglas, 1985, p.389).

The corporate suit therefore is a tactical weapon that reinforces a female executive's self-confidence and feeling of competence in her role which in turn leads to an improved performance in her position. The power shoulders of the 1980 s provided an image that was both symbolic and physically aggressive. These shoulders were sometimes exaggerated to a large extent as Fig.19 reveals. The fact that observers are likely to judge work performance on corporate dress means that a good quality suit is likely to be beneficial to a female's career;

> women regarded clothes as part of their career strategy and began to spend a lot of money on them ... began to be seen as a legitimate career investment. (Vogue, 1993, p.197).

When corporate dressing is therefore used as a tactical weapon, it largely depends on whether the female executive regards herself as having mastered her role or not. Therefore, when a female executive possesses more clear and direct examples of success in her position, she is more confident, and less concerned with gaining acceptance from her colleagues. In this, clothing is no longer as necessary to illustrate and evaluate the female executive's role to herself or other which in turn allows for more freedom in dress; "The more experience I got the more irrelevant my costume becomes ... either I know more or it no longer matters" (Kidwell & Steele, 1989, p.90). Business Week also acknowledges this as illustrated in Fig.20; "You can ditch that tailored navy blue suit you've been wearing to work, after a few promotions", (Business Week, Oct. 27, 1986).

This illustration reveals how for older female executives, the use of the corporate suit as a tactical weapon is no longer as necessary as in the beginning of their career. It reveals that while these women are still required to look professional they can take liberties. Quality of
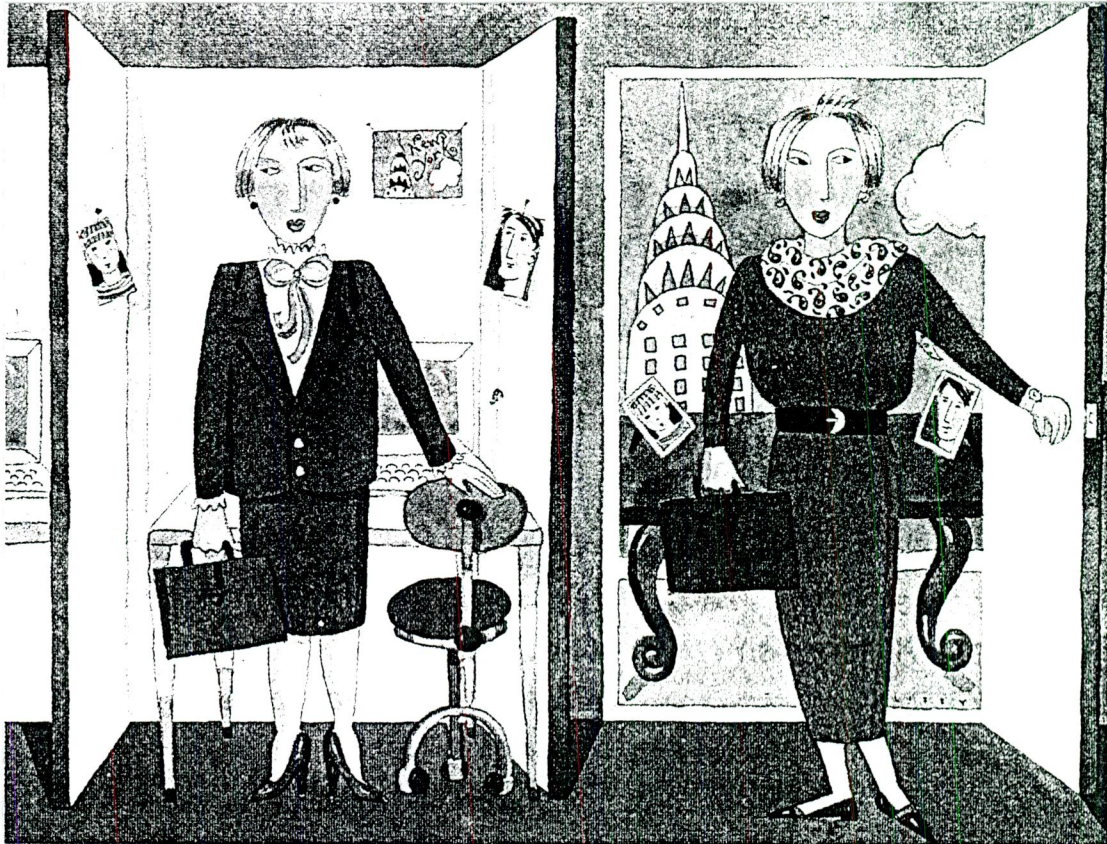
AS YOU CLIMB IN RANK YOU CAN DRESS WITH MORE VARIETY—BUT NO SCREAMING COLORS, PLEASE

Fig.20 The corporate suit of older female executives.
(Business Week, 1986, p.27).

manufacture and design in corporate dressing not only acts as a reinforcement of ego but can also act as a 'fountain of youth' for older female executives. The corporate dressing and grooming which are necessary to look professional in business, as well as the psychological and physical activity involved, helps to ensure that older female executives are more readily able to compete with their younger counterparts. In turn, this leads to a more fulfilled life and can physically allow these women to remain youthful.

Throughout this chapter, the examination of difficulties is that women encounter and reveal that difficult perceptual barriers still remain to affect and lessen a professional woman's success within the business sector. Examples of these barriers are in the form of biases, stereotyping and inequality. Dress for Success is part of the process to counteract the limitations, biases and stereotyping cause to the executive woman's performance of her role. This revealed how the corporate suit can assist a female success in her position in that it provides perceptions associated with managerial qualities to be adopted by the female through dress. The corporate suit therefore provides the tactical weapon that provides women with the strategy to assist her success. In conclusion, this reveals that while a woman's success within the business sector is not always hindered if she does not possess the corporate dress her progress is assisted through the perceptual contributions the suit projects in the form of managerial characteristics.

CONCLUSION

The increased migration of female executives into the more traditional 'male domain' of business during the last twenty years, has been a topic of interest of many individuals, especially in relation to their rate of progress, eg. Accountancy Ireland, 'Oct.1992,p.6-8. Examination of this progress has often resulted in the scrutiny of female executive dress. This is because the corporate suit is often the most visible account of executive women's advancement and because interest in dress is generally associated with women. This thesis has discussed developments in women's changing role in relation to the corporate suit. An analysis of the corporate suit of the 1970's revealed that female executives of the decade felt that they largely had to imitate men in dress style (Fig.4) and personality if they were to achieve any rate of success. Growing confidence in their roles in the 1980's largely eliminated this masculinity of the adopted male suit, but the stereotyped suit of the decade revealed a certain business aggression in the power look (Fig.7). The relaxation and increased acceptability of femininity in corporate suits today however, has revealed that while women have not yet been fully acknowledged as equal participants in the business sector, revealed by the persistence of women being assessed more than men on their appearance, they are more aware of their abilities and contribution to business.

The initial aim of this thesis was to attempt to examine the change in perceptions associated with the professional suits during the last twenty years. These perceptions relate to the projection of personal characteristics in management. As a result of the reliance of perceptions on pre-existing associations, which are ever changing, it was realised that perceptions are also susceptible to change. The development of women's changing role was examined therefore to discover how perceptions of their image have changed in the decades. This revealed not only changes in perceptions of the suit, but also changes in perceptions of professional women and in general changing social trends and attitudes. Chapter II analysed further technical elements involved in perceptions through the

PRADA

PRADA

PRADA

CALVIN KLEIN

PRADA

PRADA

DONNA KARAN

ISAAC MIZRAHI

Fig.21 Selection of corporate suits from
contemporary designers.

medium of the suit eg, style, colour and communication. Examination in this area attempted to reveal how women could control the projection of management characteristics through their dress, and why the corporate suit possessed perceptions of managerial qualities. It was also revealed that changing social attitudes resulted in a change in personal characteristics of management. This in turn reflected in the change in perceptions of required business dress. While a certain uniformity of the suit still exists today, companies now avoid direct dictation to these corporate women. To what extent Molloy's advice on dressing for success was adopted, is difficult to access. It is clear however that role models such as Margaret Thatcher, Nancy Regan and the Princess of Wales have, and continue to influence corporate dressing. For the rest of this decade a diversity in the styles of the corporate suit (Fig. 21) is portrayed by contemporary designers, as indicative of the modern female executive.

This thesis has analysed how the projection of managerial characteristics in corporate dressing were adopted by women in order to prevent adverse perceptions occurring which could in turn affect their careers. During the last three decades women have become more aware of the necessity to project a credible image. This was assisted by developments, as related in chapter I, in manufacture and selection of fabrics, style and cut, by designers and retailers. Their acknowledgement reveals increased awareness of the projection of perceptions of management characteristics through the corporate suit. While it is unlikely that the unequal emphasis on corporate women's dress will crease in the immediate future, changes are beginning to appear. This change is beginning to be revealed in the apparent amalgamation of the previously unacceptable and opposing feminine personality with the executive personality.

To diverge from this examination one interesting factor that emerged was in the area of older executive women dress. This market segment differs from the traditional corporate client in that these women have usually established their careers, and even though they are still required to look professional, they are allowed greater freedom to experiment in different styles and

fashion. This sector is beginning to emerge as a distinct market segment from the traditional professional client but its importance and potential has not yet been fully acknowledged. Combined with this, this area would involve fewer problems, associated with the main corporate client to designers and manufacturers. The reason for this is that main corporate clothing is dictated to in many ways, by the restrictions of assisting the females career. In addition to the purpose of this thesis, the development of a market for the older female executive is necessary and also very likely to be addressed during this decade. In time, this is likely to influence the main sector of corporate dressing bringing increased freedom with it.

Projections for the beginning of the next century (New Woman, April 1992) predict that women who, by this time will outnumber men ,will constitute the bulk of the workforce. Equality between men and women will result in each being valued for their personal contribution to the business environment. Perceptions of required managerial characteristics will also have changed at this time which will hopefully be reflected in the final solution to the problems of female corporate dressing. In conclusion of this thesis a requote of Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe from the 18th century reflects how the corporate suit projects perceptions of managerial characteristics today;

> For if any come to office without these characteristics, his environment equips him with them, as surely as a diet of royal jelly transforms a worker into a queen been. (Daniel Defoe, Robinson Crusoe, 1968).

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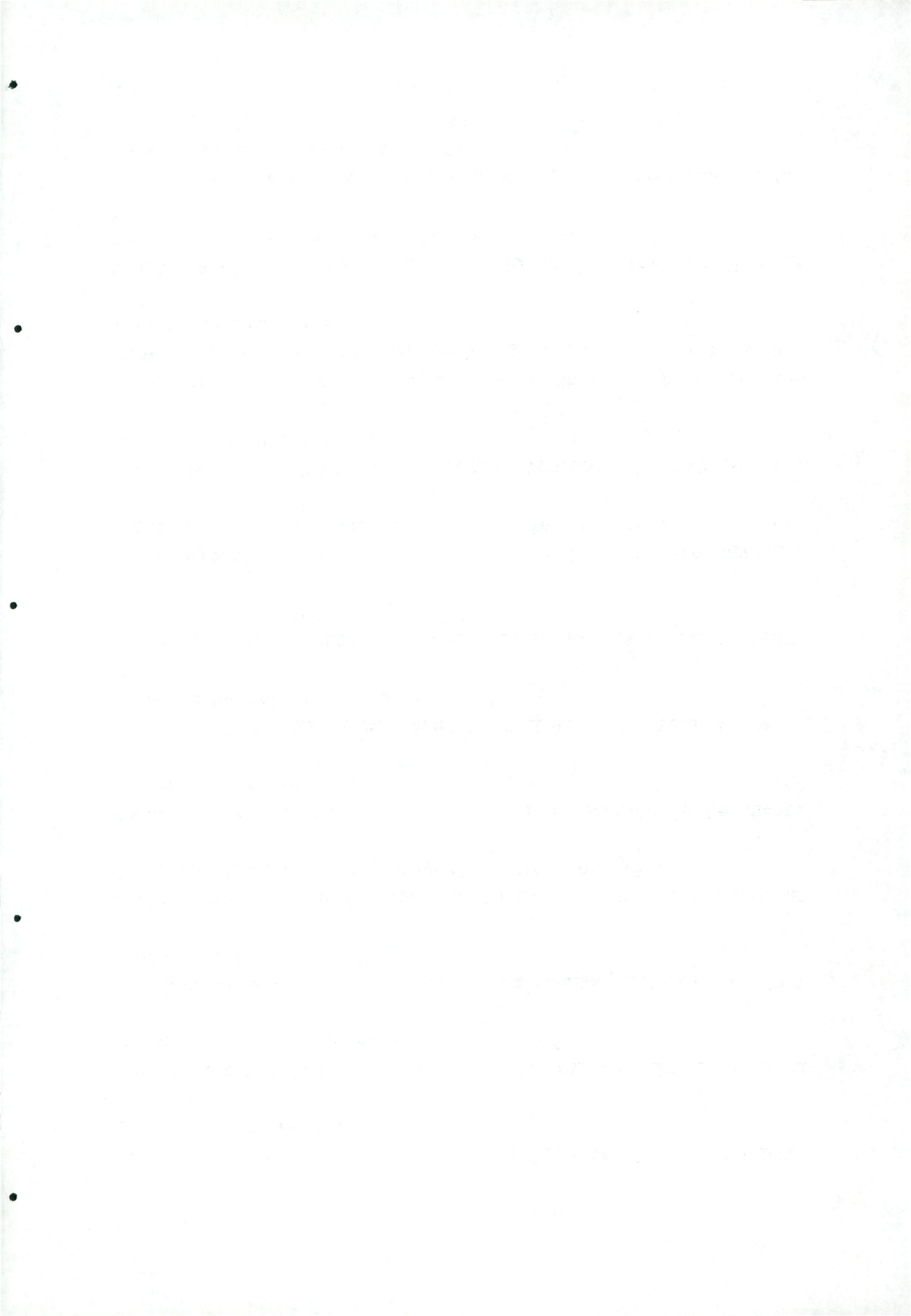
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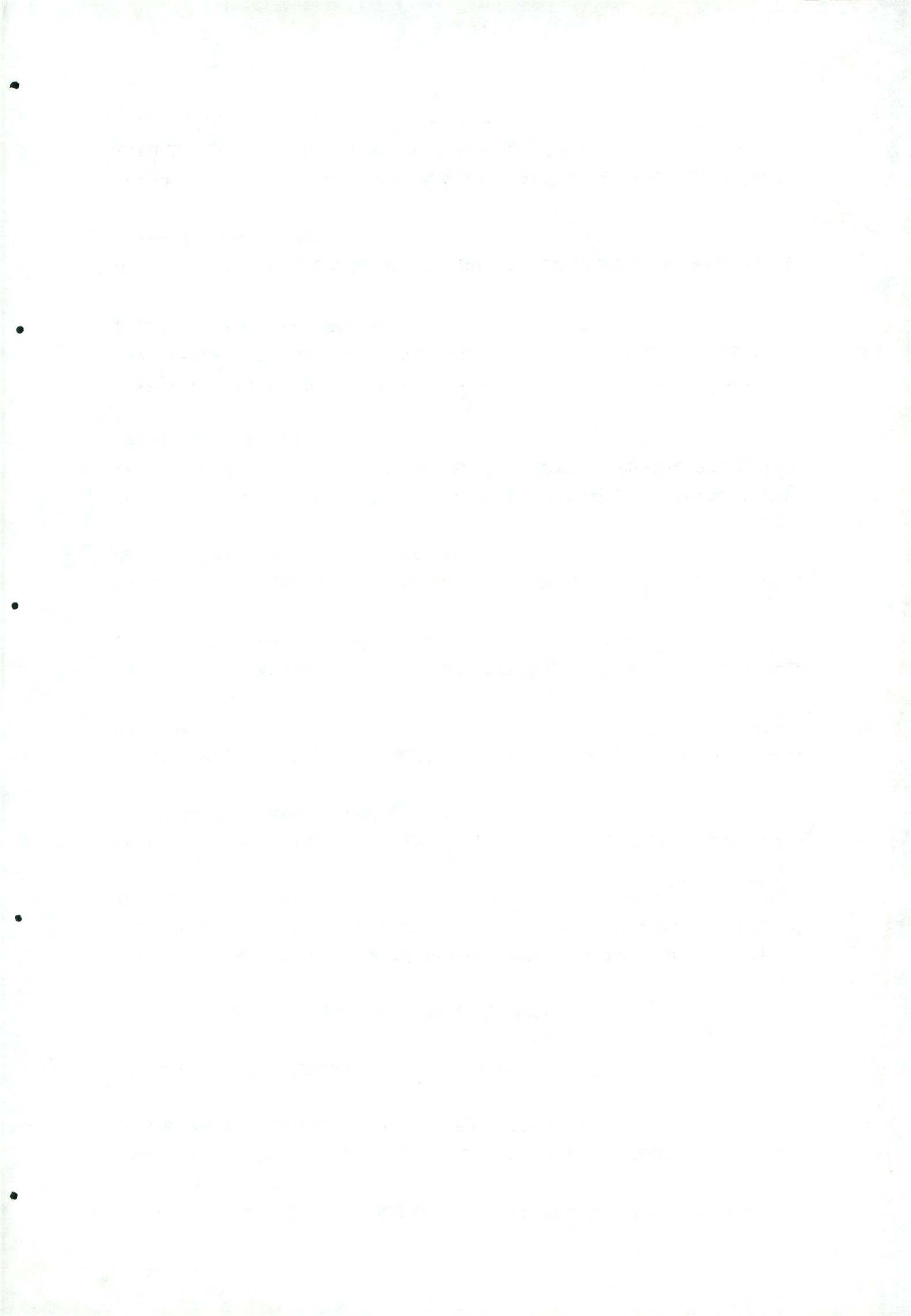
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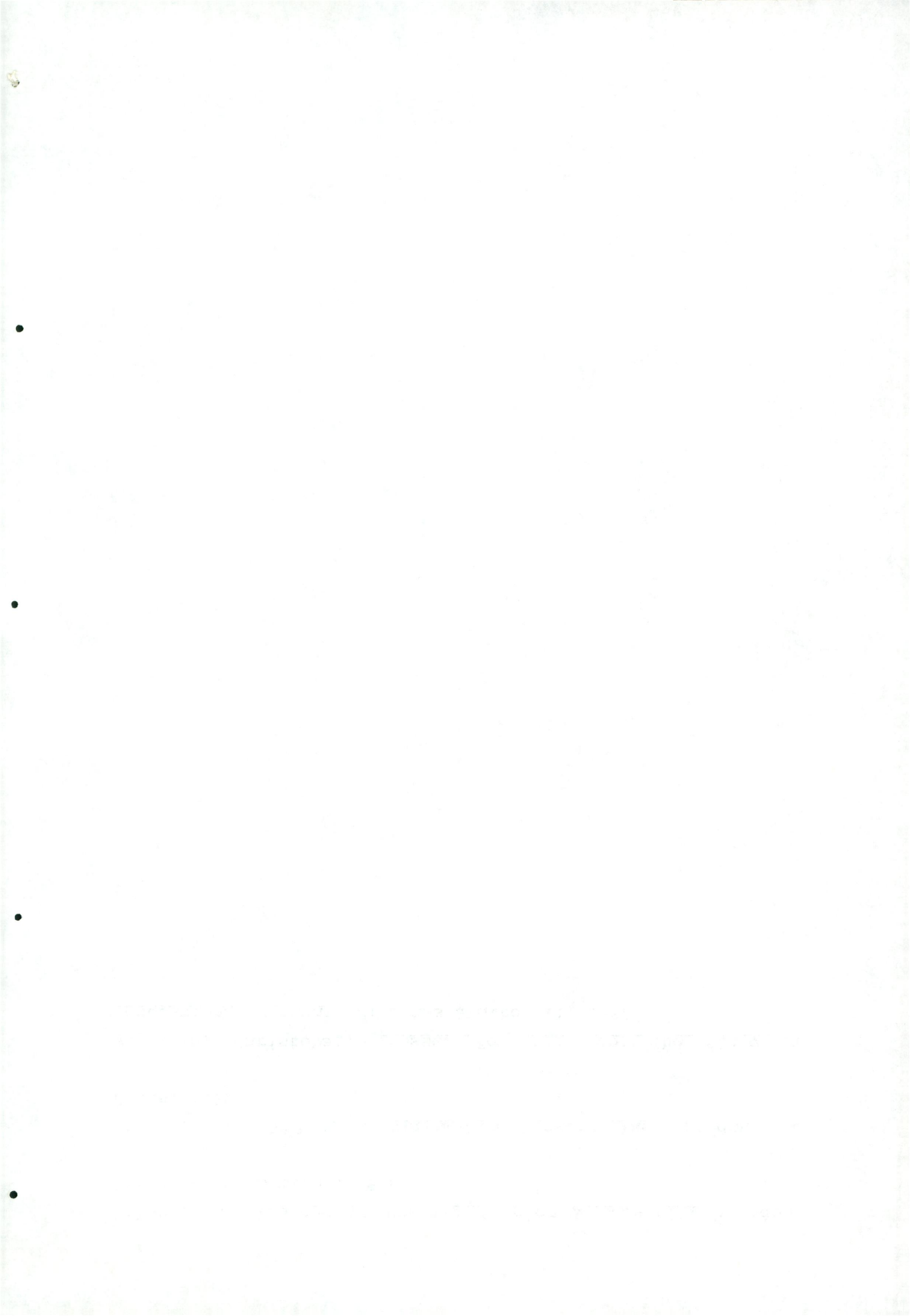
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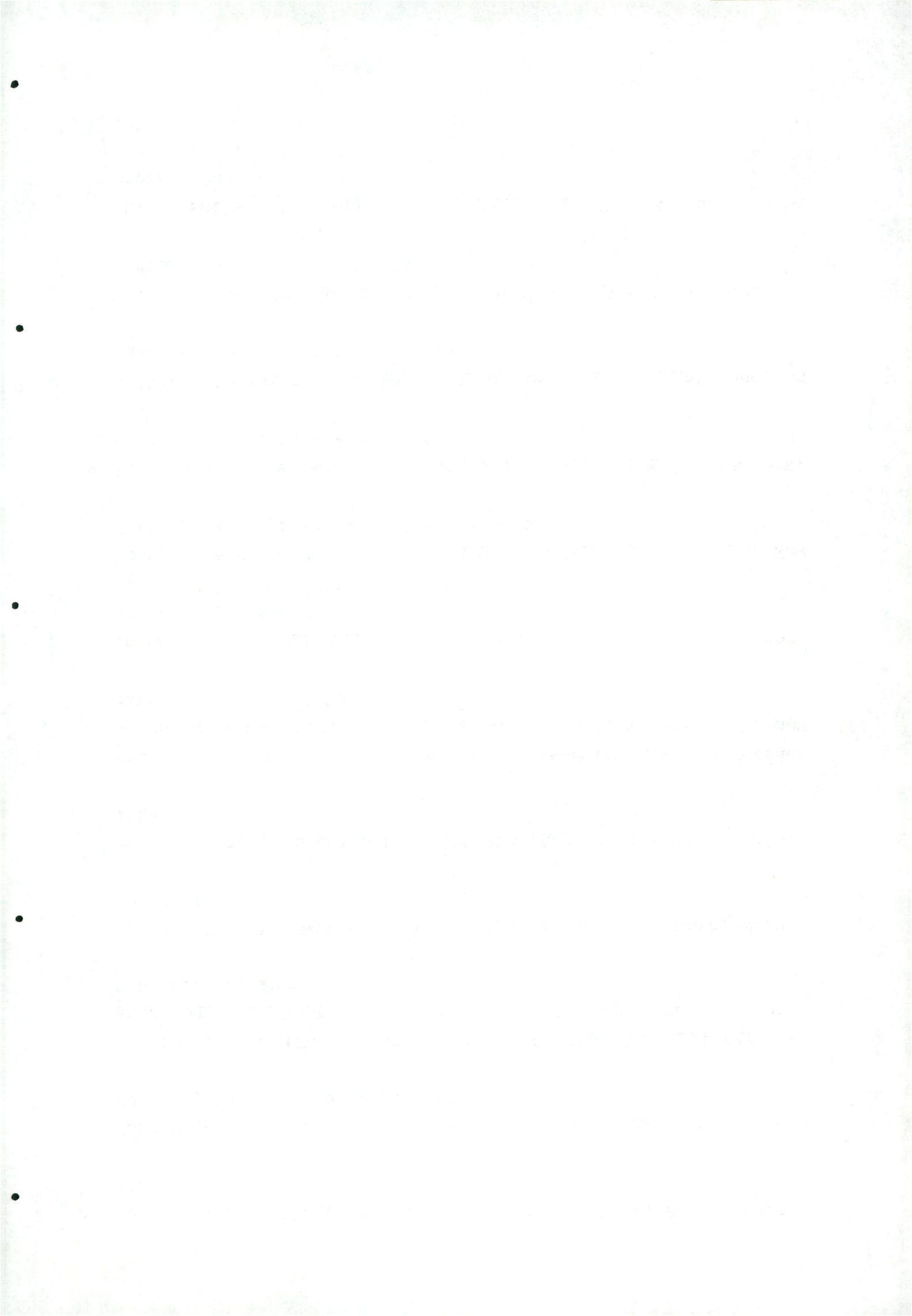
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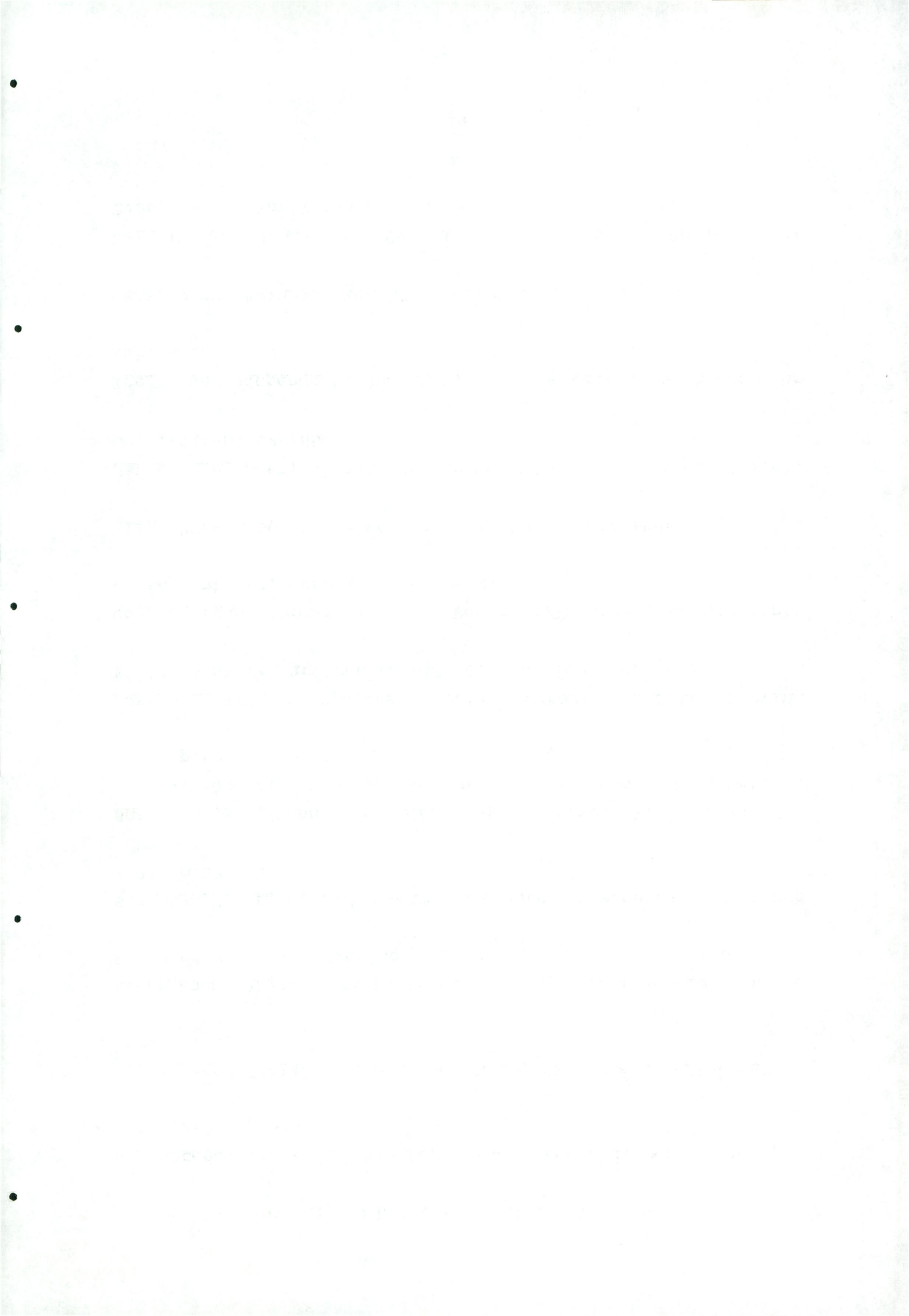
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