



# Lost OPPORTUNITY

When I received an email from a journalist from a state-wide monthly magazine regarding an article they were planning about quirky young librarians, I was most intrigued. A chance to show the world how wonderful and exciting it is to work in libraries and break some of the stereotypes about who librarians are? Yes, please.

## THE TROUBLE STARTED WHEN PLANNING FOR THE PHOTO SHOOT BEGAN.

The stylist's idea was to style us as various book characters against a background of an historic library. I was initially allocated Lolita. I was shocked at this suggestion and of course balked at the idea. I did not think it was appropriate to style myself, a young professional librarian, as such a character, however loosely, and I made this clear. I was then allocated a Jane Austen character such as Emma. I appreciated that this was somewhat better but I still felt uncomfortable. I felt it was important that as librarians we were presented as strong, intelligent, professional individuals, rather than referencing literary characters, particularly vacuous adolescents.

I wanted to be confident in my presentation, as I was representing myself as a librarian and my workplace, and I was conscious of the professional impact this could have. I was promised that the styling was just to be a loose guide. I was told that the role and journey would be the focus and it would not be a 'dress-up style' situation. The accompanying article would promote us as strong, positive young people who do not fit the average stereotype of the librarian.

On the day of the photo shoot I carefully chose an outfit that made me feel strong, confident and professional. I arrived to find a styling team with no interest in my personal style or opinions for the shoot. To me, the makeup and hairstyle were excessive and did not suit me or my personality. I was not allowed to wear my own outfit, yet the outfit chosen for me was not something I would wear and I felt most uncomfortable, and I think the photos reflect that. As a vegan I never wear animal print, so being forced to wear it to fit in with a stylist's idea made me feel very unhappy. I felt as if I was being punished for being difficult because I did not want to be styled as Lolita.

When the piece finally came out I was rather upset. I was misquoted and felt misrepresented. It seemed like just replacing one stereotype with another by pigeonholing us in a certain way that we would not have chosen for ourselves. We were each given a two-word title (Taste Maker, Musical Wunderkind, Global Adventurer, Digital Diva) which seemed to dictate the way the profiles were written. This made us seem like one-dimensional caricatures and barely touched on our passion for libraries and learning.

The images made me feel quite sad. I did not look like me at all and I was wearing an outfit that I hated and did not represent me at all. Many of my friends and family also commented that the photos didn't look like me or represent me appropriately. To me, overall this was a missed opportunity to promote the fabulous work that we all do in libraries.

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## IS IT AN IMAGE CRISIS?

When I saw that INCITE would be looking at stereotypes this month I thought, why does this topic still have traction? Why the navel gazing? Perhaps it is the wrong question. Rather than angst over a stereotype, perhaps it is more about a crisis of professional image. For a profession that works closely with other professions, librarians do tend to blend in. Is that a bad thing? Librarians are judged by the work they do, not how we dress, just like other professions.

Professional image should reflect the culture of the workplace. What is the dress culture of your workplace—formal, smart casual, trendy, fashionista, a mix? A librarian/archivist working at Vogue will have a different dress style to a librarian working for the High Court library. A children's librarian will have different dress requirements than that of a librarian working for a corporate organisation.

In her blog Librarian In Black, Sarah Houghton wrote a post titled Wear What You Want: Dressing To Lead In Libraries. This was a response to a Twitter discussion centring on changing your dress when becoming a library leader. Did Sarah change her appearance? No!

Some people commented that dressing "like you were going to an interview every day" was essential. Others said that they could never get away with wearing what they wanted in their conservative environments. Sarah did acknowledge that where she worked wasn't as conservative as other workplaces but, on the whole, there are simple dress rules that apply in all work environments.

I saw an episode of The Fugitive called The Witch recently which featured a teacher/librarian. Oh ho, I anticipate you thinking—here's a good one! Well, there is nothing to comment about really because she is a city girl, smart and attractive, and just as well turned out as the other women of the town. This was filmed in 1963. Fifty years later, an announcement on ABC News Online regarding a new book about body art noted that it featured National Library of Australia staff. Why those librarians and their tattoos? I would guess that they are included because the researcher was on site accessing the collections and, as almost every workplace has employees with tattoos, it was more opportunistic than a comment about librarian dress or decoration habits.

Dress and decoration is of endless interest but, at the end of the day, we dress for ourselves, informed by what we want to represent, our mood and what the day entails.

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