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Dress For the Job You Want: An Examination of the Relationship Between Work Attire and Perceived Level of Education

Emily Johnston, Stacie Jackson, and Meredith Kelley

ABSTRACT *The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between formality of dress and perceived level of education. This association is important for work environments, especially with trends moving towards more casual dress codes. One hundred and fifty-five participants were shown a picture of a man in eight different outfits of varying formality. Participants were asked to indicate the highest level of education they believed he had achieved. Education levels were measured using the Simon Scale of Educational Achievement. A Spearman correlation was used to calculate the strength of the relationship between the variables. A significant positive correlation was found. Therefore, we conclude that individuals dressed in more formal attire are perceived to have a higher level of education.*

Throughout the 1990s, work attire became progressively less formal, and for the most part has remained that way (Yates & Jones, 1998). From 1992 to 1995 the number of American workplaces offering employees a casual dress day jumped 24 percent, rising to an astounding 97 percent by the year 2000 (Yates & Jones, 1998; Kaplan-Lieserson, 2000). These changes are important because research shows that the formality of attire is a significant factor in impression formation (Kwon & Johnson-Hillery, 1998; St-James, de Man, & Stout, 2006). Specifically, studies have determined that a more formal style of dress contributes to a higher association with qualities such as expertise, credibility, and professionalism (Kwon & Johnson-Hillery, 1998; Sebastian & Bristow, 2008; Adomaitis & Johnson, 2005).

Kwon and Johnson-Hillery (1998) had business students evaluate an individual on 14 positive professional qualities - 10 social attributes and four occupational attributes - based on the formality of the person's attire (formal, semi-formal, or informal). They concluded that participants were more likely to "strongly agree" that an individual possessed the positive occupational attributes (authoritative, credible, businesslike, and responsible) if

the individual was dressed in formal attire.

Ten years after Kwon and Johnson-Hillery's research, Sebastian and Bristow (2008) confirmed their evidence. Sebastian and Bristow's study had business students rank professors on credibility, trustworthiness, likability, and attractiveness based on the professor's style of dress (formal or informal) and the delivery of the professor's message (formal or informal). Results suggested that students found professors dressed in formal attire to be less likeable and more credible overall, while results for trustworthiness were dependent upon the delivery style of the message and results for attractiveness were not statistically significant.

Although other studies (Kwon & Johnson-Hillery, 1998; Morris, 2005) have evaluated the association between attire and various individual characteristics, such as self-discipline, job performance, and occupational attributes, the relationship between work attire and perceived education level has not been examined. In this study, perceived level of education was selected because educational level is a significant factor in the development of respect for individuals (Pusateri & Latané, 1982). Pusateri and Lantae found that the level of education was a better predictor of respect than age. By selecting education as a variable to examine, it is expected that an association can be drawn between formality of work attire and respect. Furthermore, formality was selected because research has indicated that formality of dress is one of the most utilized cues in perception formation (Mast & Hall, 2004).

The association between perceived level of education and formality of dress may be a determinant in situations where a short, initial first impression is a factor in the future attention an individual receives. These situations may include the initial interactions between a potential employee and employer at a job fair, or a person delivering a persuasive argument, among others. The results of this study will be of particular interest to students apply-

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ing for internships and jobs, or employers determining dress codes for their companies.

Research by Adomaitis and Johnson (2006) indicates that the results of this research may have significant implications for company dress codes. Their study of the evolving dress codes for flight attendants indicated that participants felt more confident and capable of fulfilling their duties when they were dressed more formally. This research may therefore indicate that dress codes instigating formality may increase employee confidence and efficiency. Research by Peluchette and Karl (2007) also indicates that formal attire causes individuals to perceive themselves as more authoritative, trustworthy and competent.

The present study asks respondents to indicate a perceived level of education for an individual dressed in apparel of varying formalities. For the purpose of this study, work attire is operationally defined as clothing, consisting of pants, shirt, and jacket, including tie (if applicable), socks, shoes and belt, but no other accessories, that are most commonly worn to work for a variety of professions. To measure the perception of education, the Simon Scale of Educational Achievement was used, which ranks eleven levels of educational achievement common within the United States.

As trends move toward more casual clothing in the workplace, this study seeks to investigate a relationship between two factors inherent in the occupational sphere. Therefore, this study seeks to examine attire and education as established elements of any workplace and therefore investigates whether these factors have any correlation. The results of this study may provide important information in determining whether the trend has changed the traditional associations between formal attire and positive attributions (Kwon & Johnson-Hillery, 1998; Adomaitis & Johnson, 2005). We hypothesize that formality of work attire and the perceived level of education will be positively correlated.

Methods

Participants

One hundred fifty-five participants evaluated eight photographs of the same male individual in various forms

of work attire. Of all respondents, 69 percent were female and the average age was 22.9. Sixty-two percent of individuals completed at least some college including 11 freshmen, 16 sophomores, 45 juniors, 30 seniors, and 7 graduate students.

Design Type and Rationale

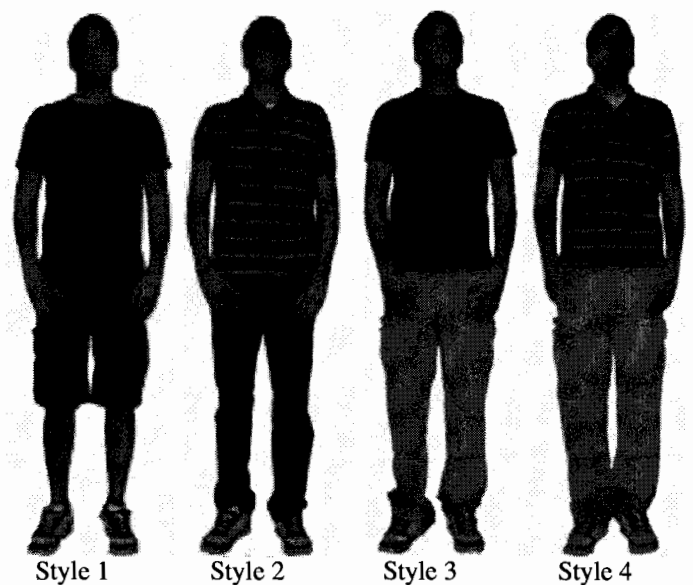
The independent variable was the formality of the attire worn in each photograph. The dependent variable was the perception of education level selected by the participant that he or she felt best corresponded with each picture provided. A repeated measures experimental design was used to determine the effect of formality of dress on perceived level of education. The repeated measures design was selected so that each participant could be tested on every level of the independent variable.

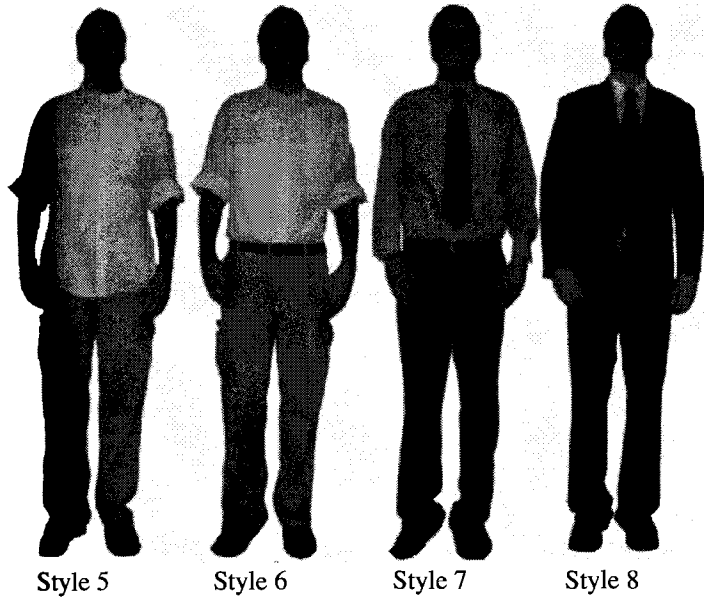
Description of the Measure

The formality of clothing was measured using the Formality of Dress Scale (FDS). It was created for this study in order to rank the specific outfits depicted in the questionnaire. As seen in Figure 1, The FDS is an ordinal scale, which assigns ascending numerical values to each outfit, with anchors of 1 (least formal) to 8 (most formal).

A male individual was photographed in each of the eight experimental outfits - one picture for each level of formality (see Figure 1). Participants were shown the photographs one at a time, in a randomly determined order.

Figure 1. Photographs of male individual in increasingly formal attire.

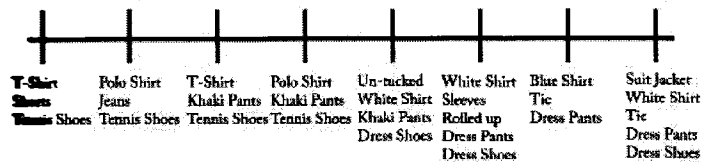




The order is as follows: Style 6, Style 1, Style 2, Style 7, Style 8, Style 4, Style 5, Style 3 (see Figure 1). The results, however, were recorded based on the order presented in the FDS scale (see Figure 2), developed by the research team.

The levels of education were selected from a scale of educational achievement (SEA) created by the research

Figure 2. Formality of Dress Scale (FDS).



team for this study. It is based on the structure of the United States Education System as defined by the U.S. Department of Education (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). The SEA is an ordinal scale used to record the dependent variable (see Figure 3) and is an adaptation of categorical scales with anchors from 0 (No Education) to 10 (Post-Doctorate Education). This ordinal measure was designed as a descriptor of educational achievement in the United States because no such scientific measure currently exists.

Figure 3. Scale of educational achievement (SEA).



Test Administration

In order to efficiently administer the test, the measure was created using Qualtrics, an online survey instrument that allows users to create electronic surveys for easy distribution. The online survey was administered through BYU's online research management system, SONA Systems, to participants recruited through e-mail, professors, and social networking sites. Participants first responded to demographic questions concerning age, gender, and highest educational level completed. Next, participants viewed eight photographs of an individual in work attire of varying formality (see Figure 1). Images were presented one at a time, in random order. Each photograph had the entire head and face of the individual blurred until unrecognizable, in order to control for confounding variables, such as attractiveness, hairstyle, or age. The background was removed in order to control for environmental cues. While being shown each picture, participants were asked to indicate the level of education they thought corresponded with the individual in the photograph.

Statistical Procedure

A Spearman correlation coefficient was used to measure the strength and direction of the relationship between the formality of dress and perceived level of education. A Spearman correlation was selected because it is used to statistically measure associations between ordinal scale variables, which were used in this study. Relationships were also assessed between descriptive statistics (personal level of education achieved and age) and participant response.

Results

A Spearman correlation was computed to determine the strength of the relationship between the formality of attire and the level of education indicated for each image. A significant correlation was found ($r(1229) = .68, p < 0.001$), demonstrating a positive relationship between the formality of work attire and perceived level of education. The style associated with the highest average perceived level of education was Style 8, which was the most formal ($M_{Style 8} = 8.91, SD = 0.97$). The style associated with the lowest average level of education was Style 1,

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which was the least formal (MStyle 1 = 4.12, SD=1.70). Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for each condition

TABLE 1

Statistics for Perceived Level of Education by Formality of Dress

Style of Dress	Mean	Mode	SD ^a
Style 1	4.12	4	1.70
Style 2	4.99	4	1.52
Style 3	4.55	4	1.55
Style 4	5.27	6	1.42
Style 5	5.39	6	1.52
Style 6	5.83	6	1.37
Style 7	8.05	8	0.95
Style 8	8.91	9	0.97

Note. Styles are listed in order from least formal to most formal. Mean values are the mean response as reported on a 10-point scale of educational achievement.

^a Standard deviation

of the independent variable.

Additionally, a negative correlation was found between the formality of clothing and the standard deviation of the responses for perceived level of education ($r(7) = -0.89$, $p = .003$), indicating that as the attire became more formal there was less variation in the answers of the respondents.

Figure 4. Standard deviation of the perceived level of education by formality of work attire

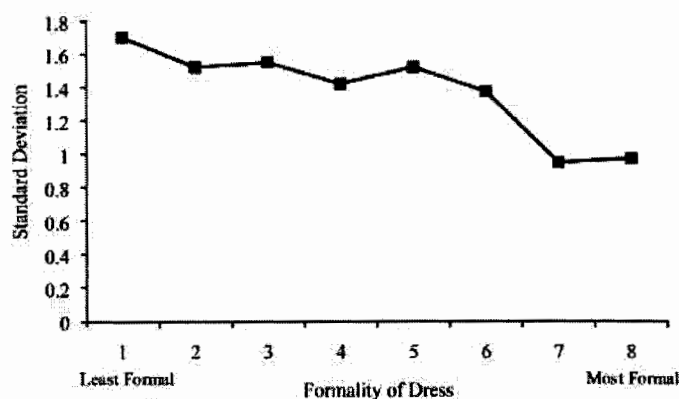


Figure 4 illustrates the decrease in standard deviation of response as the level of formality increases.

There was no significant association between the participant's age or personal level of education and the average level of education the participant indicated for the individual pictured in the questionnaire (age: $r = 0.11$, $p > .05$; personal level of education: $r = 0.14$, $p > .05$).

Discussion

As predicted, the results of this study indicate that there is a positive correlation between formality of dress and perceived education level. The strength of the correlation indicates that formality of dress and perceived levels of education are relatively indivisible. The results may be strong because perceptual cues automatically trigger strong attributions and perceptions. The positive curve of the correlation indicates that attire high in formality is not very likely to be related with perceptions of low educational levels. This may be due to the attributions individuals give to certain professions in which high education is necessary. One typically does not expect a CEO to be wearing shorts and a t-shirt or a fast food worker to be wearing a suit and tie. This study did not look for educational attributions to particular careers, but the results indicate that if the workplace, whatever it may be, does not require high formality in attire, it is perceived that the same work must not require high levels of educational achievement.

Recognizing that current trends lean towards more casual attire in professional workplaces, our findings may demonstrate why this trend could have negative implications (Yates & Jones, 1998; Adomaitis & Johnson, 2005). Specifically, because formality of dress is positively correlated with perceived education level, casual dress may lead employees to appear less educated. According the results of this study, by dressing in more formal work attire, individuals portray higher levels of academic achievement, which may be influential in client decision-making processes.

In addition to dress codes, these results indicate that an interviewee should choose more formal attire in order to portray a higher level of education. In job interviews, despite the fact that potential employers are provided

with more information about an applicant than his or her appearance may imply, employers may often judge applicants on their appearance. Research shows that attire is an important aspect in the formation of perceptual cues (St-James, de Man, Stout, 2006).

Politicians or others may wish to dress in more formal attire when trying to persuade the public. Previous research indicates that there is an association between higher education and respect (Pusateri & Latané, 1982). Because our results indicate formal attire is associated with higher levels of education, politicians could dress more formally to elicit respect from the public.

The results of this study do not indicate that there is a significant association between a participant's level of education or age and the perceived level of education the participant attributed to the photographs. This may indicate that the participants did not perceive varying levels of education based on their own experiences, but on schemas built from some other source. This unknown source may be a point of research for future studies.

Interestingly, the results do indicate that as formality of dress increases, variation of perceptions decrease. The results show that individuals, no matter their own education level or age, are more inclined to associate high formality with high academic achievement than low formality with low academic achievement. These findings may indicate that individuals are more likely to make strong attributions about the academic requirements for professions that entail formal dress codes than for professions that permit informal dress codes.

Limitations

There are some limitations in regards to generalizing the results of our study. First, only males were used in the photographs provided for participants, limiting our conclusions to only male apparel. Furthermore, due to the distribution of the survey online, participants may have confused work attire for daily or "street" attire if the instructions were not read carefully. The decision to distribute the questionnaire online was made in order to reach a diverse population, however 66 percent of participants were currently enrolled in their undergraduate education. Assuming that these participants are not currently employed in the professional workforce, this study may be more applicable to business professionals if the sample consisted of business professionals as opposed to

undergraduate students.

Indications for Future Research

This study may have important implications for future research regarding gender, targeted populations, alternate visual cues, and improved efficiency of distribution. Other researchers may consider focusing on correlations between female apparel and perceived educational levels because the results of this study found a significant correlation based on male apparel. Furthermore, in order to generalize to a different population, researchers could study business professionals seeking to improve their dress code policies. Extended research may potentially investigate how perceptions of education, based on formality of attire, may specifically influence hiring decisions in a business environment. For some career settings, perceptions of the level of education may be substituted for perceptions of the level of experience.

This study sought to control for confounding variables, such as attractiveness, ethnicity, race, age, and environmental cues. However, these variables may confirm the importance of other visual cues on perceptions of educational achievement and perhaps refine which exact visual cues have significance. The findings of this study have important implications for any research investigating the relationship between visual cues and perception, particularly in regard to studies primarily interested in attire and perceived levels of academic achievement.

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