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The relationship between the first impression that dress creates and college students' reactions toward it

Quang Ngo* and Kathleen Smith[†]

ABSTRACT

Dress preserves history, embraces traditions, and links different generations together. With the ability to communicate non-verbally, dress conveys a picture or sends a message about its wearer to those who observe the individual. Therefore, dress can create first impressions for the beholders. Previous research reveals that professional dress creates more positive first impressions. The goal of this study was to identify whether college students would react differently to different types of dress and whether specific types of dress would have influences on college students' first impressions of a male or female peer. Results of the study indicated that college students did not form positive first impressions upon looking at professional business dress. They preferred casual and business casual attire, which was supported by their indications that they were more willing to have a conversation with those who were dressed in these styles. Both male and female college students expressed their preferences for casual and business casual clothes. The study reinforced findings of previous studies that dress and first impressions are related.

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†   Kathleen Smith is the faculty mentor and an assistant professor in the School of Human Environmental Sciences.

MEET THE STUDENT-AUTHOR

Quang Ngo

I was born and raised in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. After my graduation from Tran Dai Nghia high school, I decided to study abroad at the University of Arkansas. I graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Human Environmental Sciences with an emphasis in Apparel Studies and a Bachelor of Arts in French. During Spring and Summer 2012, I studied abroad in Paris, France and then in Prague, Czech Republic. I was the treasurer of the Agricultural, Food and Life Sciences Honors Program Student Board, and a member of Phi Upsilon Omicron National Honor Society. I was accepted to present my honor thesis at the annual Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association (PCA/ACA) conference in Washington, D.C. in March 2013. After completing my internship in Fall 2013, I intend to apply for a Ph.D. program in the United States studying Communications. I would like to do more research on the topic of media, cultures, and dress. I would like to express my deep gratitude toward Dr. Kathleen Smith for her guidance and support. I also appreciate the help from my committee members, Dr. Laurie Apple, Dr. Curt Rom, Dr. Leigh Southward, and Ms. Lorna Harding. Finally, I would like to thank Dr. Duane Wolf and Dr. Nick Anthony who had assisted me to narrow down the topic for my research.

INTRODUCTION

Common knowledge holds that whenever people first meet, they know nothing or very little about each other. Nevertheless, Gille and Mittag (2008) managed to find the relationship between dress and perceptions of intelligence. Comparing conservative (smart) and provocative (sexy) clothing on female students, they suggest that those who dress provocatively are perceived to be less intelligent than those who clothe themselves conservatively. Females who dress conservatively provoke a positive image of intelligence. Nevertheless, dressing provocatively illustrates a higher level of liberalism, openness to sexuality and self-expression (Gille and Mittag, 2008). Research additionally shows that students discern university professors wearing casual or semi-formal attire to be less credible that ones in formal dress (Lightstone et al., 2011).

What exactly are first impressions? They usually refer to the way others perceive an individual for the first time by applying opinions to certain characteristics that the individual possesses. Indeed, the first impression contributes to how a person reacts to another or the types of relationship that will be created between them (Hubbard, 1994). People's dress, or their specific ways of dressing, probably leads others to judge, guess or interpret something about their characteristics (Miller-Spillman et al., 2012).

According to the article "Life: Relationships First Impressions Tell the First 30 Seconds of an Interview Often Determines if You Get Hired or Not" (anonymous, 2012), people have approximately 30 seconds in order to make a good impression on others, meaning that the impression that they create in such brief period of time establishes the opinion of that person. Indeed, books and articles have been published with the purpose of discussing, providing fashion tips or emphasizing dressing to impress others in different occasions.

It is not difficult to notice the increasing significance of dress. Indeed, individuals' dress plays a great part in conveying an impression (whether negative or positive) that influences how others perceive someone. Those who took the survey conducted by TheLadders.com thought that casual dress tended to be unsuited to the workplace; they even believed that others were less likely to consider them professional (Esbenshade, 2011).

Universities across the nation recognize the importance of how their students dress for professional events, leading to the establishment of programs and campaigns that focus on helping their students dress to create a positive image. The Career Closet program from universities such as Kansas State University (http://www.k-state.edu/ces/students/calendar.html), the University of Texas at San Antonio (http://utsa.edu/careercenter/) and the Sam M. Walton College of Business Career Development

Center (http://waltoncollege.uark.edu/career/closet.asp) is a quintessential illustration of such activity. Fundamentally, this program asks for donations of professional attire for students in need to borrow since they solely believe that professional dress can help their students in projecting a positive image towards job recruiters (KSU, UAWC, and UTSA, 2012).

An important component in the research was to identify three different types of dress used in the survey; they included: (1) *business professional dress*: formal, conservative suits for both genders, good grooming, and suitable accessories; these dress codes are usually applied to individuals working in law, finance or public relations; (2) *business casual dress*: well put together ensembles but not a very conservative look when compared to business professional dress; clothing items that belong to this group include sportswear, including slacks or chinos, button-down shirts, collared sport shirts and casual skirts or dresses and (3) *casual dress*: unprofessional and non-conservative clothing items that are worn on a daily basis such as sweatpants, T-shirts, jeans, flip-flops, shorts, sleeveless tops, cut-out jeans, etc. (Magloff, n.d.; BYU, 2012).

This study attempted to examine how far the first impression can affect people's point of view about a person during brief encounters. The purpose was to determine whether college students were willing to have a conversation with someone they have never met before based on how he or she dressed. Being 18 and older, participants were mostly college students of a large, mid-southern, tier-one research institution. Questions about the demographics included gender, major, ethnicity and class levels. Data were collected to determine how college students considered a specific type of dress (business professional, business casual, or casual) to form a positive or negative impression. Results of the study helped determine whether such impressions created by dress influenced college students' willingness to talk to the wearer.

Research questions included: (1) Do college students respond more positively to business professional dress or to casual dress?; (2) Do college students respond more positively to business casual dress or to casual dress?; (3) Do first impressions impact college students' willingness to have a conversation with others based primarily on their dress?; and (4) Do male and female college students form different impressions about the same individuals wearing the same outfits?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A first impression is subjective because it is based on personal perceptions and preferences. A survey design method was used to determine how people react to another person, with whom they are not familiar, during their first encounter. The survey, which contained 14 multiple-choice questions, was developed and piloted by the researcher prior to being administered. Three different combinations of dress were included in the survey. Each combination, two pictures of the same person with his or her face hidden and wearing different clothes, was used for comparison. This method was to test whether or not the reaction of college students to the same individuals differed based solely on their dress. To avoid bias and distraction from the background, photos were taken in front of white walls. Clothing selected fell into three different categories: business professional, business casual, and casual.

The first combination included the same female wearing casual: t-shirt and short flower-printed dress (Fig. 1a), and business professional: suit jacket and pants dresses (Fig. 1b). The second combination showed another female dressing in casual: t-shirt and jeans (Fig. 1c), and business casual: blouse, jacket and pants (Fig. 1d).

The final combination had the same male dressing in casual: shirt and shorts (Fig. 1e), and business casual: shirt, tie and black pants (Fig. 1f).

Participants were asked to view each combination, to rate each photo on the scale of 1-5 (1 = negative, 2 = somewhat negative, 3 = neutral, 4 = somewhat positive, 5 = positive), and then to decide based on the attire whom they would want to talk to if the person in these photos approached them. Some questions about demographics, including age, gender, ethnicity, major, and class level were included in the survey as well. The survey allowed the researcher to measure the essence of the first impression.

A total of 653 college students, from randomly selected courses, participated in the survey. Surveys were distributed manually in classes by the researcher with professors' consent. Participants, ages 18 and older, came from different departments at the University of Arkansas. Despite being limited to college students who enrolled at a large, tier-one, mid-southern research institute, respondents of the survey made up a representative sample of the population.

Institutional Review Board approval was obtained before surveys were distributed. Data were collected and were then entered into an Excel spreadsheet. Using SPSS software, descriptive statistics were used to analyze data. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was also applied to age, ethnicity, majors, and class level. Pair sample t-test was conducted to determine differences in responses between genders. The statistical significance of the data was set at $P \le 0.05$.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Out of the 653 participants who completed the survey, 100 were male and 553 were female, resulting in the response rate of 15.3% and 84.7%, respectively (Table 1). Over 81% of the respondents were 18-21 years old; the remaining 19% were over 22 years old. One hundred seventy apparel studies majors (26.3%), 23 business majors (3.5%), 137 hospitality majors (21.0%), 153 other human environmental sciences majors (23.4%), and 168 other university majors (25.7%) were recorded. Data regarding ethnicity indicated that 543 respondents were Caucasian (83.2%) while only 16.8% identified themselves as American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian, African American, Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, Hispanic/Latino, and other. Results of class level indicated that 15.6% were freshmen, 29.1% were sophomores, 31.4% were juniors, 22.5% were seniors, and 1.4% were graduate students participating in the survey.

Research Question 1: In combination 1, college students were asked to rate two photos of the same female wearing casual dress (t-shirt and short flower-printed dress) (Fig. 1a) or business professional dress (black suit jacket and pants) (Fig. 1b). Nearly 40% of participants had somewhat positive impressions when observing casual dress (Fig. 1a), while approximately 30% had neutral impressions (Table 2). Business professional dress (Fig. 1b) was considered somewhat negatively and neutrally.

Research Question 2: After viewing photos of combination 2 and 3, college students compared casual (Fig. 1c) and business casual dress (Fig. 1d) of a female, and casual (Fig. 1e) and business casual dress (Fig. 1f) of a male. In combination 2, nearly 39% of participants formed neutral impressions when observing the casual dress worn by the female (Fig. 1c) (Table 3). The percentage of college students reacting somewhat positively to business casual dress (Fig. 1d) was approximately 46%. In combination 3, over 37% of respondents said that they had somewhat positive impressions toward the male dressing casually (Fig. 1e; Table 4). Approximately 31% of college students demonstrated that their first impressions toward the male's business casual dress in Fig. 1f were neutral.

Research Question 3: In combination 1, participants were asked whether they would be more willing to talk to the female in casual dress (Fig. 1a) or the one in business casual dress (Fig. 1b). More than 66% of the respondents chose the person in casual dress (Table 5). The result of the paired *t*-test was statistically significant ($P = 0.015$), meaning that college students reacted the same way toward the casual dress. In combination 2, 49% of participants considered that they would talk to both if approached by the female in casual dress (Fig. 1c) and the one in business casual dress (Fig. 1d; Table 5). The paired *t*-test's indication of the result being statistically significant ($P = 0.002$) validated the same reaction that college students of the study had. In combination 3, 48% of respondents indicated that they would like to talk to the male regardless of his casual (Fig. 1e) or business casual dress (Fig. 1f; Table 5). Results of the paired *t*-test of combination 3 were not statistically significant ($P = 0.289$).

Research Question 4: In combination 1, 45.0% of male college students indicated that they had somewhat positive impressions toward the casual dress of the female (Fig. 1a; Table 6). More than 38% of female college students had the same reaction. Nevertheless, when observing business professional dress of the female, male college students had neutral impressions while female participants indicated having neutral and somewhat negative impressions (Table 6). In combination 2, 41% of male college students considered the female's casual dress somewhat positively, while 40% of female college students indicated neutral first impressions (Table ??). Sixty-three percent of males indicated somewhat positive impressions upon observing business casual dress. Female college students formed somewhat positive and neutral first impressions toward the female's business casual dress with 42.7% and 41.8%, respectively (Table 6). In combination 3, 33.0% of male college students looked at the male's casual dress (Fig. 1e) and formed a neutral impression while 38.3% of female participants had a somewhat positive impression. Participants of both genders were neutral in their first impressions of the male's business casual dress (Fig. 1f) with percentages of 31.0% and 30.6%, for males and females, respectively (Table 6).

The project's main purpose was to examine influences of dress on college students in their forming first impressions and in their inclination to start a conversation with strangers. Eighteen to twenty-one-year-old college students made up the biggest portion of participants. Freshmen, sophomores, juniors, seniors and graduate students were able to take part in the study. Majors that contributed to the study came from many different departments at the University of Arkansas. Upon looking at others' dress and clothes, college students of both genders immediately formed first impressions.

Both male and female college students did not react positively to business professional dress. This might be explained by the idea that business professional dress tended to be less friendly than other types of dress. It was possible that formal dress made wearers appear more confident and professional as stated in other studies (Gille et al., 2008; Lightstone et al., 2011; Olguin and Stankus, 2011). Nevertheless, this type of dress was limited to specific types of professions, such as lawyers, politicians, professors, or even librarians that required respect and credibility (Lightstone et al., 2011; Olguin and Stankus, 2011).

Because college students have not entered the workplace yet, they may tend to react more positively to casual dress (t-shirts, jeans, short skirts, and shorts) and dress that does not look so severe and conservative. Therefore, results of the study tended to disconfirm findings that formal and professional dress would allow others to think of the wearer more positively most of the time. This could also explain why many colleges and universities across the nation attempt to set up programs teaching how to dress appropriately prior to entering the workplace.

More than half of college students did not prefer to have a conversation with students who were dressed in business professional clothing. College students' positive impressions toward casual and business casual dress prompted their likelihood to talk to those who wore this type of dress. This would seem to indicate that college students were more comfortable with individuals who were clothed in more nonprofessional attire. Thus, results of the study did not support literature regarding how business professional dress was perceived better than nonprofessional dress (casual and business casual) (Tahmincioglu, 2011; Prescott, 2011). Casual and business casual tended to hold more influence on how willingly college students would start a conversation.

This group of male and female college students tended to share the view that business professional dress was not very well received among them. They considered this type of dress somewhat negatively and neutrally. However, most males and females reacted somewhat positively and neutrally toward casual and business casual dress. Male and female college students did not differentiate about dress and their impressions. This tended to indicate that regardless of gender, college students preferred nonprofessional attire to that of professional attire.

CONCLUSIONS

In this research study, it was demonstrated that college students form first impressions toward others by observing other college students' clothing; such a finding strengthens previous research (Johnson et al., 2002; Miller-Spillman et al., 2012). College students also do not seem to react positively to business professional dress; they instead prefer talking to individuals dressing in more casual and business casual attire. Both genders have similar perceptions toward impressions that these three types of dress create. Results of the study differ from opinions of professional experts who stress wearing business professional attire in job interviews and in the workplace (Tahmincioglu, 2011; Hemmerdinger, 2011). Nevertheless, such results indicate the necessity for colleges and universities across the U.S. to establish

programs where their students understand the importance of business professional clothing and how to dress professionally prior to starting their career. This may be a result of college students not understanding how to dress professionally and not being confortable with professional dress. The study should be expanded to individuals who have already entered the workplace in determining whether they would respond to these questions differently. Further research should be conducted to include data from other ethnicities and students from other colleges and universities across the nation. The study also needs to include additional business majors as professional attire may prove more important in other professional fields.

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Fig. 1. Combination 1: (a) casual dress; (b) business professional dress. Combination 2: (c) casual dress; (d) business casual dress. Combination 3: (e) casual dress; (f) business casual dress.

Table 1. Participant characteristics.

Demographic variable	Number	Percent
Gender		
Male	100	15.3
Female	553	84.7
Total	653	100
Age		
18-19	251	38.4
20-21	281	43
22-23	63	9.6
Over 24	58	8.9
Total	653	100
Major		
Apparel Studies	172	26.3
Business	23	3.5
Hospitality	137	21
Other Human Environmental Sciences	153	23.4
Other University of Arkansas Majors	168	25.7
Total	653	100
Ethnicity		
American Indian/Alaska Native	9	1.4
Asian	13	2
African American	35	5.4
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islanders	1	0.2
Caucasian	543	83.2
Hispanic/Latino	29	4.4
Other	23	3.5
Total	653	100
Class Level		
Freshman	102	15.6
Sophomore	190	29.1
Junior	205	31.4
Senior	147	22.5
Graduate	9	1.4
Total	653	100

Table 2. Frequencies for participants' response and dress in Combination 1 (female wearing causal and business professional dress).

Questions	Number	Percent
What is your first impression about the person in		
Fig. 1a and her dress? (Casual)		
Negative	12	1.8
Somewhat Negative	58	8.9
Neutral	198	30.3
Somewhat Positive	257	39.4
Positive	128	19.6
Total	653	100
What is your first impression about the person in		
Fig. 1b and her dress? (Business Professional)		
Negative	53	8.1
Somewhat Negative	209	32
Neutral	209	32
Somewhat Positive	127	19.4
Positive	55	8.4
Total	653	100

Table 3. Frequencies for participants' response and dress in Combination 2 (female wearing causal and business casual dress).

Questions	Number	Percent
What is your first impression about the person in Fig. 1c and her dress? (Casual)		
Negative	26	4
Somewhat Negative	133	20.4
Neutral	253	38.7
Somewhat Positive	167	25.6
Positive	74	11.3
Total	653	100
What is your first impression about the person in Fig. 1d and her dress? (Business Casual)		
Negative	3	0.5
Somewhat Negative	15	2.3
Neutral	92	14.1
Somewhat Positive	299	45.8
Positive	244	37.4
Total	653	100

Table 4. Frequencies for participants' response and dress in Combination 3 (male wearing causal and business casual dress).

Questions	Number	Percent
What is your first impression about the person in Fig. 1e and his dress? (Casual)		
Negative	16	2.5
Somewhat Negative	67	10.3
Neutral	207	31.7
Somewhat Positive	244	37.4
Positive	119	18.2
Total	653	100
What is your first impression about the person in Fig. 1f and his dress? (Business Casual)		
Negative	43	6.6
Somewhat Negative	136	20.8
Neutral	200	30.6
Somewhat Positive	172	26.3
Positive	102	15.6
Total	653	100

Table 5. Frequencies for each combination.

Combination 1 (female wearing causal and business professional dress).
Frequencies for participants' willingness to have conversation based on dress.

Questions	Number	Percent
If person in Fig. 1a and person in Fig. 1b approach you, which one would you prefer talking to?		
Person A	432	66.2
Person B	41	6.3
Both	180	27.6
Total	653	100

Combination 2 (female wearing casual and business casual dress).
Frequencies for participants' willingness to have conversation based on dress.

Questions	Number	Percent
If person in Fig. 1c and person in Fig. 1d approach you, which one would you prefer talking to?		
Person C	50	7.7
Person D	283	43.3
Both	320	49
Total	653	100

Combination 3 (male wearing casual and business casual dress).
Frequencies for participants' willingness to have conversation based on dress.

Questions	Number	Percent
If person in Fig. 1e and person in Fig. 1f approach you, which one would you prefer talking to?		
Person E	241	36.9
Person F	98	15
Both	314	48.1
Total	653	100

Table 6. Frequencies for comparison between male and female college students' reponses.

	Gender	
	Male (%)	Female (%)
Combination 1 (female wearing causal and business professional dress):		
What is your first impression about the person in Fig. 1a and her dress?		
Negative	3.0	1.6
Somewhat Negative	5.0	9.6
Neutral	27.0	30.9
Somewhat Positive	45.0	38.3
Positive	20.0	19.5
Total	100	100
What is your first impression about the person in Fig. 1b and her dress?		
Negative	9.0	8.0
Somewhat Negative	25.0	33.3
Neutral	31.0	32.2
Somewhat Positive	24.0	18.6
Positive	11.0	8.0
Total	100	100
Combination 2 (female wearing casual and business casual dress):		
What is your first impression about the person in Fig. 1c and her dress?		
Negative	1.0	4.5
Somewhat Negative	16.0	21.2
Neutral	31.0	40.1
Somewhat Positive	41.0	22.8
Positive	11.0	11.4
Total	100	100
What is your first impression about the person in Fig. 1d and her dress?		
Negative	0.0	0.5
Somewhat Negative	5.0	1.8
Neutral	19.0	13.2
Somewhat Positive	63.0	42.7
Positive	13.0	41.8
Total	100	100
Combination 3 (male wearing casual and business casual dress):		
What is your first impression about the person in Fig. 1e and his dress?		
Negative	4.0	2.2
Somewhat Negative	17.0	9.0
Neutral	33.0	31.5
Somewhat Positive	32.0	38.3
Positive	14.0	19.0
Total	100	100
What is your first impression about the person in Fig. 1f and his dress?		
Negative	7.0	6.5
Somewhat Negative	21.0	20.8
Neutral	31.0	30.6
Somewhat Positive	28.0	26.0
Positive	13.0	16.1
Total	100	100