

Clothing And The Affects On A Teacher's Image: How Students View Them

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ABSTRACT

Clothing is an essential element of our daily lives that is basically an expression of who we are. People shop to buy clothing for a variety of reasons, such as enjoyment and socialization. It is fundamental that participating in social activities and life satisfaction are related to well-being. Our well-being is influenced by education, income, health, and how we see ourselves. Clothing is a means by which we see ourselves (Mee Joung and Miller, 2007). The purpose of this study is to try and determine what affect clothing has on students' comfort zone and whether instructors' clothing creates images of friendly, trustworthy, and approachable; it is not to measure the impact of instructors' attire on students' perceptions of teaching competence.

Keywords: Socialization; Trust; Perception; Personality; Sophistication; Image; Self-confidence; Acceptability; Appropriateness; Sensitivity

INTRODUCTION

Bill Sherman and Linda Armen were in the faculty lounge talking about how their first classes went for the beginning of the new semester. Their conversation went like this:

Wow Linda, my students seemed to be so quiet and timed; it was like pulling teeth to get them to speak.

Yes, Bill, I experienced the same thing and I all but stood on my head to get my students to tell me their names and a little about themselves - you know little ice breaker for the first day of class.

As they approached the coffee machine, Bill said, "Well, we will have to put some thought in how we are going to get our students to loosen up."

After Bill's class, one of his students said, "Mr. Sherman, can I speak to you a moment?"

Sure Harry, what can I do for you?

Well, Mr. Sherman, I can tell that you are trying hard to get us to be comfortable with you in the classroom when you said, "I am open for discussions, feel free to ask questions, I welcome anyone who may disagree with any topic, and I encourage dialog.

Yes, Harry, I want all my students to have trust in me and to feel free to ask questions.

OK, Mr. Sherman, let me tell you something then.

What is it Harry?

See how you dress, Mr. Sherman? You have that dark suit on, white shirt, cuff links, and dark necktie; well, that is a nice get-up for a wedding or something, but in class you make us feel overpowered.

Gee, Harry, I never thought of that.

Well, we feel the same way with Miss Armen too and students think you and Miss Armen are the best.

I really appreciate you telling me, Harry; I will discuss this with Miss Armen.

Will she be angry with me or the students?

Trust me, Harry, this will prove that you can rest assured that Miss Armen and I are trustworthy and that you have helped us both.

The following day, Bill was in the parking lot and saw Linda parking her car. He waited as she parked and approached him; then Bill said, “Linda, do have some time to talk?”

Yes, my first class is not until 11:00 AM. What’s up?

Harry Coe is one of your students right?

Yes, he has potential, she said.

We had a conversation yesterday whereby he told me you and I were a student’s choice as really likeable but our clothing was too formal and intimidating; therefore, we don’t come across as warm and friendly.

LITERATURE

Kronin (1988) refers to Cinderella asking, “Would Cinderella have found her Prince Charming if her Fairy Godmother had not outfitted her so elegantly?” The question then remains, “Is fashion destiny?” In this day and age, clothing is no longer in the category of necessity. Then again how do we interpret necessity, such as needing to look good for our peers, our employers, our loved ones, and ourselves. The meaning we can apply is the need to look good, so then we can go further by interpreting looking good as dressing in the style in which we see ourselves and in which we desire that other people see us. Kronin goes on to say, “Whatever you wear, your clothes tell something about you and demonstrate your personality.” In addition, your clothes send out a message about your economic status, hint at your level of sophistication and savvy of time, place, environment, and what you want to project.

Back to Cinderella, she wanted to project the image of royalty by obtaining a beautiful gown and becoming a princess. Many people have a history of clothing in their closets, such as a special outfit that brings back nice memories or clothing of a style gone by. All individuals must go through the ritual and renewal of their clothing. Therefore, there are many elements that make up our images; they hang in our closets - some there to just hang, some to be used, and some to be altered. Kronin’s conclusion is, “I will let my clothing speak for me, but mostly, I must speak for myself.”

The following is a collection of comments relating to clothing gathered by Kelly and Thomas (2009):

1. A teacher from Maryland comments: “I love hair accessories, such as barrettes, headbands, flower pins, clips, many colors, and many designs.” However, as a high school teacher, she wonders if sparkly, shiny, and anything not matte or monochromatic would not be appropriate to achieve a professional look. She does not want to look as if impersonating a teenager, nor does she want to appear as frumpy and boring.

Kelly and Thomas (2009) reply: “Hair accessories are definitely a trend for spring time of the year, but do not use anything too sparkly or shiny while teaching.”

2. Gainesville, Florida: “What is the best way to add color to a basically black wardrobe?”

Kelly and Thomas respond with: “For a female, black can be brightened up with jewelry, hoop earrings, and items of pink; and shoes can compliment as well. A male can always add a white button-down shirt, pastel colored shirts, and business casual shoes.”

3. A question from Alexandria: “What could one purchase for spring to make me more fashionable?”

The reply: “It all depends on which trends appeal to you, so try some to see what flatters you. Look for a slim-fitting blazer and wear it with jeans.”

4. A general response: “For the individual who wants to be more fashionable, the least inexpensive thing to do is inject a couple of items that reflect that season’s trend, such as color.”

According to Glickman (2008), it is possible for one to impede your career or personal life by dressing inappropriately and giving the wrong signals, so dress like a winner and you will be treated like one. Glickman’s advice is, “There is something everyone can do to change one’s image. Learn to package yourself to achieve specific goals and become happier. It has been said that what one wears on the outside is a reflection of which one is on the inside. When dressing for your job, one needs to understand what type of wardrobe your job requires. Knowing how to use clothing and image can effectively help individuals gain confidence in themselves and have others gain confidence in you. One must always keep in mind that some colors flatter your skin tone while others do not.”

Kittrels (2008) discovered an article called “The History of Pants and Women Wearing Them” by Carol Krauss, which indicated that Persian women wore pants in the fourth century. Through the 1880’s and 1890’s, there was the introduction of a bicycle outfit that consisted of knee-length knickerbockers with split-wide skirt and stockings and was still considered as inappropriate for women. During World War I, men were off to war, depleting the factory work force, so women replaced them. When these women went to the factories, they replaced their skirts with loose pants and those similar to riding pants. This style also carried through for women during WW II.

According to Kittrels (2008), women starting to wear pants in the workplace became popular in the 70’s. This new trend was so disturbing that in some government workplaces, legal action was required for women to wear pants.

When pants were approved for women to wear to work, there was one specific requirement – that a woman could not simply wear pants and a blouse of sorts; it had to be a pants suit. In today’s environment, women can wear pants without a jacket and it is acceptable. However, it took longer for female teachers to be able to wear pants and be acceptable in the classroom. Just a little history...in the 50’s and 60’s, women teachers were not seen wearing jeans or tee shirts. Oh yes...they wore suits, dresses, and skirts, and many wore hats and gloves.

Charendoff (2008) explains that people began to go to work in whatever clothing they felt was acceptable and, to some, that meant dressing in the way one would dress to attend a sporting event. Now we have a free-for-all in how employees dress for work. The reason there are no rules for proper work attire is perhaps that, until now, there was no need for them. People should dress for lifestyle, not age, and what that means is that a mature male need not dress in a traditional dark suit and tie but can consider a more youthful look. Mature men can wear flat-front trousers, jeans that are not tight fitting, and colored shirts. Dressing for the classroom environment is to be stylish in an age-appropriate way and what looks good on them, keeping in mind that tight clothing is not fashionable for mature males.

Peluchette, Karl, and Rust (2006) indicated that research revealed that those who are more generally interested in clothing are more likely to see its value in terms of having a positive impact on various work place outcomes and their own perception of themselves. In addition, both males and females indicate that the appropriateness of their clothing affects the quality of their work performance and mood. Those who describe themselves as properly dressed believe that it makes them appear knowledgeable, professional, honest, hardworking, and trustworthy; so self-monitoring behavior may explain why some people are more sensitive than others to how they choose their clothing. What has been discovered is that impression management - the idea that individuals

actively monitor their environment for clues on how others view them - is motivated to purposely change this perception.

There is significant anecdotal evidence that sensitivity to manipulating one's clothing can generate positive work place outcomes, but there is limited empirical evidence to support this. Research study results indicate that there is a high interest in using attire to manage the impression of others.

Frith and Gleeson (2004) conducted a study indicating that men value practicality when choosing clothing. According to the responses of their survey, men felt that clothes should not be chosen for aesthetics, but should fit a purpose and be practical for everyday living. Another male indicator is prioritization of comfort, while some males reject the importance of appearance regardless of body shape; they implied that what they looked like did not matter.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study will be survey-based utilizing college-age students, both graduate and undergraduate. The surveys will be identical for each group and will contain multi-item scales to enhance data quality.

Sample hypotheses for this study include, but are not limited to:

H1: Students notice how professors dress, whether it be casual, business casual, or following fashion trends.

H2: Students feel more at ease when professors dress casual.

H3: Students are somewhat intimidated when professors' attire is too formal.

The average age was 25 years, comprised of 52% female and 48% male students, with 10% at the graduate level and 90% at the undergraduate level. The instrument was a 10-question survey that allowed students to respond to Agree, Strongly Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree, or N/A. The sample was 250 students who responded to the survey.

RESULTS OF THE SURVEY

Interpretation of results on the affect of the clothing survey is as follows:

Q1: I notice how my professors dress: 86% agree and 14% disagree.

Q2: I prefer that my professors dress casually: 58% agree, 21% disagree, and 1% no preference.

Q3: I prefer that my professors dress in business casual: 72% agree, 26% disagree, and 2% no preference.

Q4: I prefer that my professors follow fashion trends: 27% agree, 72% disagree, and 1% no preference.

Q5: I feel at ease when my professors dress casual: 65% agree, 34% disagree, and 1% no preference.

Q6: I feel at ease when my professors dress in business casual: 50% agree, 49% disagree, and 1% no preference.

Q7: I prefer that my professors follow fashion trends: 24% agree, 75% disagree, and 1% no preference.

Q8: I get intimidated when my professors dress too formal: 42% agree, 57% disagree, and 1% no preference.

Q9: I prefer a more relaxed classroom environment: 96% agree, 3% disagree, and 1% no preference.

Q10: I prefer a formal classroom environment: 16% agree and 84% disagree.

DISCUSSION

Dressing for success allows teachers to gain the respect needed to set a positive example for their students. Imagine the image you are sending to your students if you fail to follow the established dress code policy that has been established in the district. Many times, students adamantly oppose their dress code policy for various reasons. For example, some feel that they should have the opportunity to wear hats to school. An important point to remember is that children are very good at modeling the behavior of the teachers they observe. Dressing for success has three main effects:

1. To maintain respect
2. To establish credibility
3. To establish yourself as an authority figure

Dressing for success and following the established teacher dress code policy will help you obtain the respect and credibility necessary from students and parents alike. Students will tend to model the behavior and appearance they have seen in the classroom. An effective teacher will dress appropriately as a professional educator to model success. Your respect in the classroom begins with your appearance and you should strive to be a positive role model for each student. In addition, our research has shown that teachers must dress professionally for all parent interactions. Establishing yourself as an authority figure by following the dress code and the established rules of the school will help instill a sense of integrity with each student.

Clothing can say quite a bit about the individual as much as it says about the teacher. There certainly is a psychology here – a method to the madness. Also, there are certain characteristics germane to how a person dresses in ANY work place environment. People say that you should not judge the contents by the packaging, but people still do. Living, breathing, and working in an image-based society brings the concept of how we dress to the forefront. So what do the different forms of dress really mean? Do the clothes truly define the man? There are many personalities out there and many forms of dressing, so let's examine a few and the message it sends to our students.

The **Business Casual Dresser** can show signs of a confident, well-meaning teacher that has respect for himself and his fellow students.

The **Casual Dresser** is a “jeans” person who shows students he has his priorities set in a different direction. He might give the impression that students should only worry about what is important to the teacher and not what is important to them. This is a person lacking flair; therefore, don't overwork and over-present your assignments.

The **Flashy Dresser** sends a message of setting one apart from the norm. A teacher can silently tell his class that he has the desire to show his personality and get noticed. The flashy approach shows that you might have a bit of a ‘wild side’ that you will not show during lecture time.

The **Sloppy Dresser** sends the message that he doesn't really care - maybe telling students you don't care about your job, certainly your appearance, or your future. Wrinkled, stained, or unmatched clothes tell students, in a figurative sense, that you just don't care.

The **Goth Dresser** signifies a sign of depression, a sign of anger, and a sign of insecurity. Dressing in all black, fishnet stockings, studs, and too much jewelry are all expressions of a unique personality that wants to send a definitive message – and an evil one at that.

The **Athletic Dresser** is a teacher who wears sweats, running shoes, and workout gear to a classroom, perhaps wanting to show his students his pertinence for health when all he may be doing is showing his ego and his attempt to compete with the younger set on their level. It could get very convoluted, especially if this type of dress is construed as sloppy.

In reality, the psychology of teacher dressing is a mixed bag. Most teachers wear a variety of clothing styles that sometimes reflect a mood or, most times, simply reflect timing. Some of it also has to do with motivation - when we dress (a flattering outfit) to send a message of direction (go to the gym!) to all involved.

Our research has shown that teachers can dress in a way that is beneficial to themselves, beneficial to their outlook, and can show a perception of their feelings toward the class and the world in general.

Teachers should always keep the following in mind:

- Do not be afraid to show your personality by using color, unique clothing styles, or accessories.
- Wear clothing that makes you “feel good” about yourself.
- Dress for the occasion – more or less given the day’s schedule.
- Wear clothing that is flattering without being suggestive.
- Don’t worry about trying to keep up with trends; the students will surely out position you in this area.
- Get rid of clothing that you might associate with negative thoughts. Sometimes we wear something that can set our mood (negatively) for the rest of the day.
- Step outside your fashion comfort zone on occasion; it might (and should) add a new dimension to your personality for the day.
- Finally, have fun with your clothing and don’t take a student’s observation too seriously.

CONCLUSION

Many times in life, a person is judged completely upon how well dressed they appear. The same holds true for teachers, whether in the classroom setting, during a job interview, at a PTO conference, or at an open house. Teachers should dress for success every day of the week unless a stated dress code policy allows you to dress casually on a given day. Many days throughout the school year, a teacher is allowed to dress casually if there is a pep rally or scheduled event during the normal school day. First-year teachers should always consult their mentor regarding the established dress code of the school. Failure to dress appropriately can impact the way an administrator, other teachers, students, and parents perceive the teacher in question. What is most significant is the way students perceive their teacher. Inappropriate dress will negatively affect the learning process.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Dr. Joseph B. Mosca, Associate Professor and Chair of the Management and Decision Sciences Department in the Leon Hess Business School at Monmouth University earned his doctorate at NYU. Dr. Mosca specializes in Human Resource management, Human Relations, and active teaching methods, and is the recipient of seven teaching awards and three distinguished paper awards. His current research interests focus on developing hybrid courses, employee behavior, and jobs in the 21st Century. E-mail: mosca@monmouth.edu

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NOTES