



Appearance Management by Teachers: A COVID-19 Pandemic Exploration

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Background and Purpose: Previous research on beliefs and attitudes regarding to workplace attire has focused on the role of attire in workplace settings on managing the impressions of others as well as changing self-evaluations. Early conclusions included that woman expend more effort in what has been termed appearance, resulting in a source of workplace stress not experienced to the same degree as men, who reported expending less effort (Peluchette et al., 2006). Much of the subsequent research has included the concept of ‘formality’ in the exploration of appearance management and has included people from diverse professions including the medical field, retail, the service sector, and hospitality (Cardon & Okoro, 2009; Yan, et al., 2011). Teachers are another professional group whose attire has been examined from various angles, both inside and outside the profession. For example, the public perceptions of teachers’ dress in the US schools as presented in newspaper and how this will influence career and technical education teacher preparation (Freeburg & Workman, 2010). The impact of teachers’ dress on students has also been considered (Sampson, 2016), including how teachers’ professional attire will influence students seeing them as teachers (Shoulders et al., 2017), and how teachers use dress to construct their professional identities (Tsaousi, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted every aspect of life, including professional dress, as researchers have begun to document the impact of remote working on professional attire (Baily et al., 2022). But, given the research that appearance management represents a potential source of stress, research is deficit on teachers’ perceptions on the professional dress specifically and their efforts putting into managing their appearance in workplace. During many parts of the pandemic teachers at all levels worked via remote modalities such as: completely online with/without live sessions, hybrid which meeting both online and on ground. Along with the increasing stress and burnout during a prolonged and uncertain situation, remote working may have added burden to teachers who were trying to manage their appearance while using various teaching modalities (Cardullo et al., 2021; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2020). While some teachers are provided with specific dress codes, its own source of potential stress, there is still a lack of uniform standard or definition for formality of teachers’ attire. Some have asserted that teachers at certain levels (e.g., college professors) are largely free from guiding dictates when it comes to managing their appearance (Tsaousi, 2020).

Therefore, *the purpose of this research* is to explore, in the COVID-19 context, teachers’ perceptions of their use of dress to communicate, the formality of their professional attire, their impression of students’ perceptions of teachers’ dress with related to their professional identities, and teachers’ effort and planning involved in dressing appropriately for work (appearance labor); with an emphasis on comparing different teaching modalities and different levels that they teach. An argument could be made that the shift to remote teaching during the pandemic drove teachers

to adopt a version of dress that simulates their in-classroom appearance to emphasize the continuity of education. However, the sample included a significant number of ‘hybrid’ teachers who spend around half of their time in each modality, confounding the ability to make hypotheses about the specific impact of remote versus in-person teaching modalities. For this reason, the hypothesis is made simply that differences will exist across the modalities without specifying the direction of these differences. The following hypotheses were proposed: **H1a-d:** Teachers who teach in different modalities will score differently on (a) student perceptions, (b) using dress to communicate, (c) perceptions of formality on their professional attire, and (d) appearance labor. **H2a-d:** Teachers who teach in college level or above (vs. K-12 teachers) will score higher on (a) student perceptions, (b) using dress to communicate, (c) perceptions of formality on their professional attire, and (d) appearance labor.

Method and Results: This study was conducted nationwide in the US in early 2022. Participants included teachers (from K1 to K-16) recruited through Amazon MTurk. The questionnaire included questions about the percentage of work remotely vs in-person, their vaccination status, and how would they compare the outfit they wore for teaching prior to and during the pandemic. In addition, an 8-item scale of formality of dress (Jayasooriya, 2021), an 8-item scale of communication of dress (Jayasooriya et al., 2020), a 6-item scale of student perceptions (Joseph, 2017), and the 8-item scale which includes 4 items measured the attention and 4 items measured the extent of dislike of appearance labor (Peluchette et al., 2006) were adopted or adapted from previous research. After a 10-days data collection period, 174 completed responses were obtained, and 157 responses were kept for data analysis after cleaning unengaged responses. Participants, 51.6% of whom were women, were currently employed full-time or part-time in the US as teachers. The age range for the participants are from 23 to 67 (Mean=34), with 52.2% equal to or younger than 30 years old. Participants’ ethnicity included 8 African American, 4 Asian/Asian American, 127 Caucasian, 7 Hispanic/Latino, and 14 Native American, 2 Mixed.

Respondents were split based on their current teaching modality (more in **Person** = 25, more **Remotely** = 58, and relatively equal in **Hybrid** = 74) and the level that they teach (**College level or above** = 92, **K-12 teachers** = 65). Cronbach’s alpha for each scale ranged from .737 to .815. MANOVA was conducted with teaching modalities and teaching levels as independent variables and student perceptions, using dress to communicate, perceptions of formality, and appearance labor as dependent variables. Results were as follows for teaching modalities [F(8,323), $p < .002$] and levels they teach [F(4, 152), $p < .000$]. ANOVA revealed teachers in teaching modalities differed in student perceptions ($M^P=3.78$; $M^R=3.578$; $M^H=4.118$), using dress to communicate ($M^P=3.80$; $M^R=3.70$; $M^H=4.091$), perceptions of formality ($M^P=3.90$; $M^R=3.826$; $M^H=4.110$), and appearance labor ($M^P=13.56$; $M^R=11.645$; $M^H=14.772$). Therefore, H1a-d were all supported. ANOVA also revealed teachers in teaching different levels differed in student perceptions ($M^C=4.025$; $M^{K-12}=3.505$), using dress to communicate ($M^C=4.072$; $M^{K-12}=3.560$), perceptions of formality ($M^C=4.077$; $M^{K-12}=3.752$), and appearance labor ($M^C=14.745$; $M^{K-12}=10.785$). Therefore, H2a-d were all supported.

Discussion/implications: Teachers working half time in both modalities reported significantly higher levels of appearance labor and perceptions of formality as well as more emphasis on using dress to communicate and concern with students' perceptions of their dress. This suggests that the hybrid teaching modality may provide many benefits for teachers and students, but a reduction in concern about appearance management and dress is not one of these benefits. Additionally, the higher levels of appearance labor and emphasis on formality, student perceptions and communication by college level teachers suggests they may have been impacted more severely by the pandemic than imagined. Implications for managers include supporting teachers in hybrid modalities in modifying dress policies to reduce stress related to appearance management. Theoretically, this study extended the understanding of appearance management of for teachers including the impact of different teaching modalities and educational levels where that they taught during the COVID-19 context.

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