



Career Arts Students' Perceptions of Credibility Based on Instructor Attire and Gender

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Keywords: Faculty dress, faculty gender, student perceptions

Clothing is a form of nonverbal communication that transmits information about the wearer to the viewer, and it is human nature to formulate judgments and attitudes about others based upon first impressions of appearance and clothing (Major, Hayase, Balderrama & Lefor, 2005). Dress norms and the perception of appropriate work attire have changed over the last decade (Lightstone, Francis, & Kocum, 2011). As American employees have moved from formal to informal styles of dress over the past several decades, instructors at higher education institutions have often followed suit (Sebastian & Bristow, 2008). Mehrabian (1968) noted that less than 10% of communication is sent verbally; body language and appearance can create impressions of the viewer on the receiver. While people produce many nonverbal communication cues, their dress and appearance tend to be unchanging for the majority of the day (Damhorst, 2005).

Previous scholarly research studies (Lightstone et al., 2011; Sebastian & Barlow, 2008) have attempted to ascertain student perceptions of faculty dress (casual, business casual, or professional) in relation to variables such as instructor likeability, attractiveness, or expertise (Carr, Davies, & Lavin, 2009). However, the majority of these research studies (Carr et al., 2009; Lightstone et al., 2011) have utilized business students from mid-size to large universities as the primary research sample population. At the time of this publication, no research studies were found that examined student perceptions of faculty dress at a career arts institution involving students with non-business related majors (i.e. Audio Production, Culinary Arts, Graphic Design, or Fashion & Retail Management).

The purpose of this research study was to discover whether students at a career arts institution perceive instructors' credibility differently when instructors are wearing casual, business casual, and professional attire and whether the gender of the instructor makes a difference in students' perceptions. This research study offers insight into how students at a career arts institution perceive faculty as a result of dress identified as casual, business casual, or professional attire.

Data were collected from 112 students enrolled in a Southeastern careers arts institution in July 2013. The researcher-developed survey included demographic questions and a primary question with six parts. Each part included a photograph of the same male or female instructor dressed in either casual, business casual, or professional attire. Under each photograph was a linear numeric scale where respondents rated perceptions of credibility based upon dress. All questions, except demographic questions, used a linear numeric scale of "1" to "6" for analysis of the data.

A two-way ANOVA was used to determine the effect of dress on instructor credibility; the effect of gender on instructor credibility; and the effect of dress and gender on instructor credibility.

The data support the position of statistical significance in students' perceptions of the credibility of instructors based upon instructor attire ($F_1 = 171.247$; $p = .000$; $\eta_p^2 = .340$). A moderately strong effect, data analysis revealed students rated instructors in professional attire ($M = 4.88$; $SD = 1.169$) as more credible than instructors dressed in business casual attire ($M = 3.92$; $SD = 1.299$). Instructors in casual attire ($M = 2.72$; $SD = 1.338$) were rated as significantly less credible than instructors dressed in professional or business casual attire. In examining the effect of gender on instructor credibility, the data support the position of statistical significance in students' perceptions of the credibility of instructors based upon instructor gender ($F_1 = 26.532$; $p = .000$; $\eta_p^2 = .038$). While the effect size was small, data analysis revealed students rated female instructors as less credible ($M = 3.59$; $SD = 1.507$) than male instructors ($M = 4.08$; $SD = 1.547$). The data support the position of statistical significance in students' perceptions of the credibility of instructors based upon instructor attire and gender ($F_1 = 7.481$; $p = .001$; $\eta_p^2 = .022$). While the effect sizes were small, participants indicated casually dressed instructors of both genders were the least credible (Female $M = 2.73$; $SD = 1.315$; Male $M = 2.71$; $SD = 1.367$), and professionally dressed instructors were seen as most credible (Female $M = 4.53$; $SD = 1.23$; Male $M = 5.22$; $SD = .993$). Participants ranked male instructors in business casual dress ($M = 4.32$; $SD = 1.042$) and professional dress ($M = 5.22$; $SD = .993$) as more credible than female instructors in business casual dress ($M = 3.52$; $SD = 1.408$) or professional dress ($M = 4.53$; $SD = 1.23$). Female instructors in casual dress ($M = 2.73$; $SD = 1.315$) were rated as slightly more credible than male instructors in casual dress ($M = 2.71$; $SD = 1.367$).

This research study offers insight into how students at a career arts institution perceive faculty as a result of dress identified as casual, business casual, or professional attire. This study additionally provided further insight on the topics of student perceptions of the qualities of faculty with examinations of the impact dress can have on perceived instructor credibility.

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