Abstract

Often appearance is a controversial issue with regard to the cliché: don't judge a book by its cover. Perception and memory were examined in a survey of perception of a woman dressed casually or professionally regarding appearance. There was significant difference in the perception of a photo of a person professionally dressed and a person casually dressed. The person in the photo that was professionally dressed was perceived to be more timely, successful, conscientious, emotionally stable and older than the person in the photo that was casually dressed. Our research shows that there is an effect on how people perceive you based on your appearance. The findings also suggest that females remember more details from the photo they were shown in contrast with how many details males remembered.

Keywords: perception, memory, appearance, professionalism, dress code

The Impact of Appearance on Memory and Perception

The overall fashion in college students today displays an effortless and very casual look—the messier their hair, the more layers of clothing and the more unlaced their shoes the better. Ironically, college students are preparing to become professionals, yet their attire would say otherwise. Realistically, appearance, as well as other characteristics, will change when transitioning from a college graduate to a professional in the work force. The purpose of this study was to see if college students perceived a woman dressed professionally differed from the same woman dressed effortlessly, or sloppy.

According to Baltes (2004), the tolerance for casual or sloppy dress is decreasing in the workplace and the standard to dress professional is increasing. This study was conducted in a professional workplace setting in Des Moines, Iowa. A more specific study found that an employee's appearance and compliance with dress code was highly valued in the workforce, especially in financial fields (Easterling, Leslie, & Jones, 1992). Easterling et al. (1992) also found out of the 81% of participants who agreed appearance was highly valued only 19% had a written dress code policy. This should raise awareness to future professionals as they will likely be expected to dress professional, but guidelines may be ambiguous.

Although the majority of jobs may put more emphasis on policies and procedures than dress code, it is wise to dress up rather than dress down for work. 80 undergraduates who participated in Kerr and Dell's (1976) study agreed that a person dressed, as a professional was more likely an expert in his or her field compared to someone casually dressed. The study also suggested that behavior has an affect on the perception of a person's expertise and attractiveness. Another study done with a group of college students found that body satisfaction affected interpersonal function (Forand, Gunthert, German & Wenze, 2010). This study used only female

participants, which may provide an opportunity for further study in the opposite gender.

A main focus was put on the female gender in many prior studies relating to appearance and perception. Kleinke's (1977) research suggested that a male was more likely to lend a dime to a professionally dressed female compared to a casually dressed female. This study was conducted at an airport where all four females helping in the study were trained to address the male participants the same way. Another study found that women see a link between successfulness and attractiveness more so than men, and more negatively (Gillen, & Lefkowitz, 2009). Lubker et al. (2005) found, among athletes, found females with a lean build and athletic clothing were perceived to be more desirable as a consultant for performance enhancement, opposed to larger built females in academic clothing (Lubker, Watson,Jack, Visek & Geer, (2005).

In contrast to the female focus, Yoo (2009) conducted a study on adolescent boys and how the may perceive risky behavior depending on appearance management. Yang and Stoeber (2012) provided a physical appearance perfectionism scale and looked at how individuals' perception of perfectionism could affect their appearance and self-esteem. Along with perfectionism comes professionalism, which is one area our study looked into.

Rehman and Wiggins both performed studies looking at physicians and professionalism according to patients perception (Rehman, Nietert, Cope, & Kilpatrick, 2005; Wiggins, Coker & Hicks, 2009). Both studies found that a majority of patients prefer a professionally dressed physician to casual dress.

In this study we used a photo of a woman casually dress and professionally dressed to measure perception of timeliness, successfulness, conscientiousness, emotionally stable and older than the person in the photo that was casually dressed, as well as memory. We measured a

combination of different things as different college students perceived the two looks of the woman presented in the photo. First, we looked at conscientiousness, and perceived emotional stability of the woman using the Big five short form scale (Gosling, Rentfrow & Swann, 2003). In addition to the Big Five, we added five questions focused on professionalism. We measured participants' memory by asking him or her to list as many characteristics after the photo was removed. We predicted the more professionally dressed photo would be perceived as more dependable, conventional, successful, trust worthy and timely, as well as memorable in comparison to the casually dressed photo.

Method

Participants

Participants were all Fort Lewis College students enrolled in either introduction to psychology or elementary statistics who were voluntary participants in the study. These participants were randomly assigned and conveniently selected males and females (14 males and 38 females) ranging from the ages of 17 to 32. The mean age of participants was 20.73 (SD= 3.52).

Design

The independent variable was appearance, manipulated by the photos presented to the participants; one being of a woman casually dressed and the other was of the same woman dressed professionally. The dependent variables were the participants' perception of the photo with regard to professionalism, conscientiousness, and emotional stability. We also measured how memorable each photo was.

Materials

The picture of the individual portraying a relaxed look had a neutral expression on her face, looking down and to her right. The individual was a female and wore sweatpants with slipper-boots, which had stains, a skirt, a long-sleeve t-shirt and a short sleeve sweater over. She had no make-up on and her hair was not styled. In the background of the photo was a brown door, a tan floor with a black and tan rug.

The same individual was then changed from a sloppy look to a more professional look. In this photo she had highlighted and styled hair. She wore a nice black blouse with black slacks and black pumps. Her facial expression was similar to the previous picture and she looked in the same direction. The door in the background was white with a red wall and a wood floor. (Pictures provided in Appendix B).

The survey in this study consisted of fifteen question total. The first ten questions were from the Big Five Scale (Gosling et al.2003). In addition to this we constructed five more questions to measure perceived age of the woman in the photo, timeliness, and successfulness. All participants were asked to rate the personality traits on a scale from one to seven—one representing disagree strongly and seven representing agree strongly. On the back of the survey participants were asked to list as many characteristics about the person in the photo. A full sheet of paper was provided to do this task. (Survey provided in Appendix C).

Procedure

The data were collected in a quiet classroom environment from voluntary students in both an introduction to psychology class and an elementary statistics class. First, we addressed the consent form. Then participants were asked to count off by one's and two's for the purpose of random assignment. After the class was equally divided half of the class was escorted outside and shown one picture whereas the other half of the class remained in the classroom and was

shown the other picture. Surveys were then passed out with the direction to not look at the back side of the survey. The participants were asked to complete the first side of the survey (perception section) and then once everyone had completed the first side the picture was removed from sight and the participants completed the back side of the survey (memory section). Participants were given as much time as they needed to fully complete the perception section of the survey and then approximately a minute and a half for the memory section of the survey. Once the survey was completed, students passed their surveys in and were debriefed. During debriefing, the students were thanked for their participation in the study and it was explained that the research being done dealt with both perception and memory.

Results

An independent t test with alpha set at .05 was used to determine if there was a difference in the perception of timeliness between the professionally 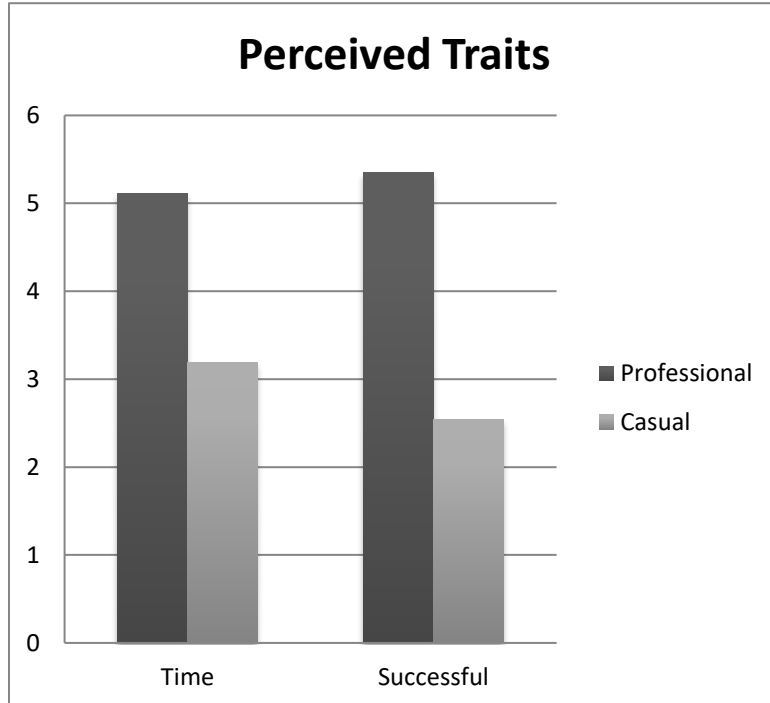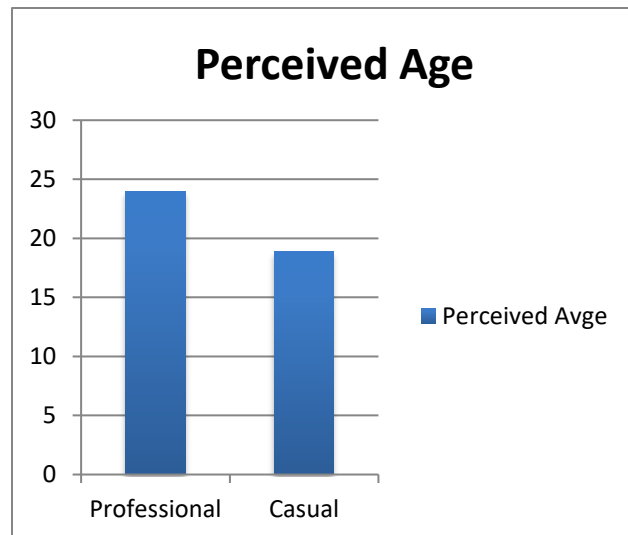dressed photo and the casually dressed photo. Results suggested that there was a difference between the perceptions of timeliness, $t(50)$ =5.831, p=.000. The participants who rated the professionally dressed photo had a mean of 5.115 (SD= 1.275) while those who rated the casually dressed photo had a mean of 3.192 (SD= 1.096).

Perceived Traits

Research suggested there was a difference in the perception of how successful the person in the picture was. Results

suggested that there was a difference in the perception successfulness, $t(50) = 9.066$, $p= .000$. The participants who rated the professionally dressed photo had a mean of 5.346 (SD=1.198) while those who rated the casually dressed photo had a mean of 2.538 (SD= 1.029).

There was a difference in the perceived age of the person dressed professionally and the person dressed casually. Results suggested there was a difference in the perception of age, $t(50)$ = 1.337, $p= .000$. The participants who

Perceived Age

rated the professionally dressed photo had a mean of 23.96 (SD=4.377) while those who rated the casually dressed photo had a mean of 18.85 (SD=2.908).

The data suggested that there was a difference in the perceived conscientiousness of the person dressed professionally and the person dressed casually. Results suggested that there was a difference in the perception of conscientiousness, $t(50) = 7.260$, $p=.000$. The participants who rated the professionally dressed photo had a mean of 10.6154 (SD=2.1369) while those who rated the casually dressed photo had a mean of 6.077 (SD=2.365). The means for this research used the totals of two other distinctive personality traits to create the big five personality trait of conscientiousness and therefore the mean scale ranges from 2 to 14.
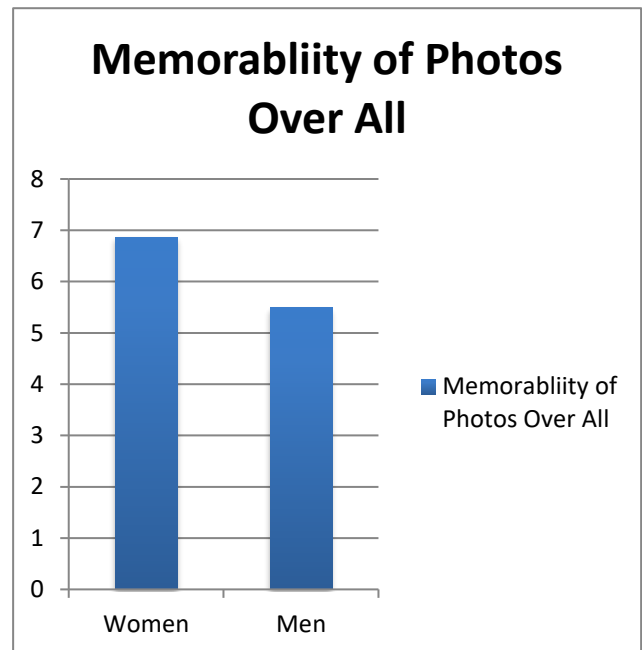
Research suggested there was a difference in the perceived emotional stability of the person dressed professionally and the person dressed casually. Results suggested that there was a difference in the perception of emotional stability, $t(50) = 2.784$, $p=0.008$. The participants who rated the professionally dressed photo had a mean of 7.654 (SD=2.417) while those who rated

the casually dressed photo had a mean of 5.885(SD=2.160). The means for this research used the
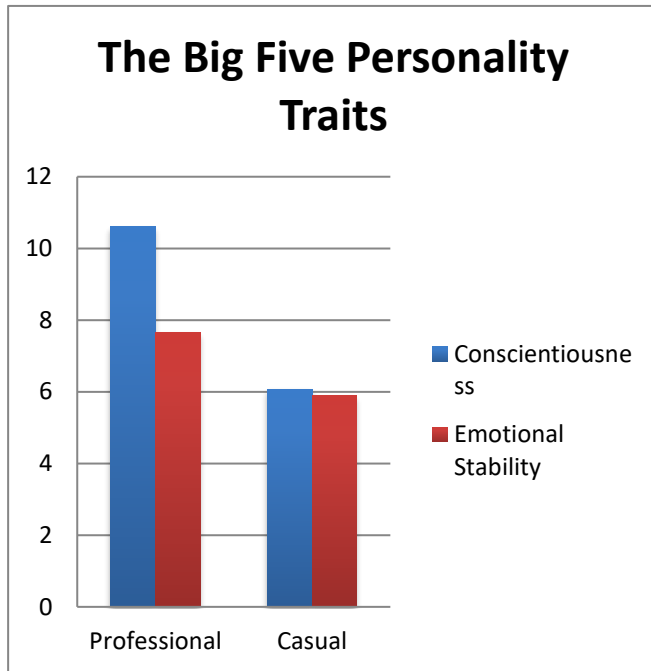
The Big Five Personality Traits

totals of two other distinctive personality traits to create the big five personality trait of emotional stability and therefore the mean scale ranges from 2 to 14.

It was statistically suggested that there was a difference in the memorability of the photos between men and women. Results suggested that women remembered more characteristics from the photo than men, t (50) =2.168, p=.035. The women who rated the photo listed a mean of 6.869 (SD=2.0817) in memorable characteristics, whereas men who rated the photo listed a mean of 5.5(SD=1.829) in memorable characteristics.

Memorabliity of Photos Over All

There were multiple personality traits that were analyzed in our research and the significant characteristics that showed a statistically sufficient difference between the perception of the person casually dressed and professionally dressed include, timeliness, successfulness, their perceived age, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and the difference in men and women's memorability of the photo. On the other hand there was no statistical differences in the

perception of the person in the photo's extraversion, agreeableness or openness to new experiences.

Discussion

As outlined previously, there were multiple personality traits that were analyzed in our research and the significant characteristics that showed a statistically sufficient difference between the perception of the person casually dressed and professionally dressed include, timeliness, successfulness, their perceived age, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and the difference in men and women's memorability of the photo. On the other hand there was not a statistical difference in the perception of the person in the photo's extraversion, agreeableness or openness to new experiences. These results are mostly consistent with the prior literature studies that emphasis a positive reaction to professionally dressed attire (Baltes, 2004; Easterling, Leslie & Jones, 1992; Kleinke 1997; Rehman, Nietert, Cope & Kilpatrick, 5005).

I feel that our study, along with Kerr (1976), show that undergraduates still have the same consensus about a person dressed professionally; and that is that you are perceived to be more of an expert when you are dressed in a more professional manor. It is interesting to compare the results of our research with a study that was conducted 36 years ago and conclude with the same idea. This helps to concrete our results further because the same results have been confirmed throughout time.

The other results of this research that suggests that women find both of the photos more memorable than men expands on Gillen & Lefkowitz's (2009) research in that there is not only a women's link between successfulness and attractiveness more so than men but that women tend to remember more characteristics of the person they are analyzing compared to men.

In the future it may be to our benefit to include a larger scale of attire to fully address the perception and memorability of people. An example of this being in Rehman, Nietert, Cope & Kilpatrick's (2005) study of 4 physicians; the first doctor was dressed in casual attire, the second doctor was dressed in business attire, the third doctor was dressed in scrubs and the fourth doctor was dressed in a white coat. We could have four pictures of the same girl; the first one dressed in pajamas, the second one dressed in casual attire, the third one dressed in business casual attire, and the fourth one dressed in extremely professional attire.

There is also the critique of gender in this research. In future research we could include two or four pictures of men in specific attire as well, to see if men are perceived overall different from women, or are possibly more memorable than women.

It is known that more research will need to be done with new research designs in order to fully understand the effect of attire on perception and memory of a person. The information founded in this experiment does however show that the proper procedures were done in order for participants to accurately access the information that was intended to be perceived and remembered and there was significant statistical evidence that further confirms the importance of a professional persona.

References

Baltes, S. (2004). Dressing for success can be puzzling, but rewarding. *Des Moines Business*

    Record, 22(49), 15. Retrieved from http://www.businessrecord.com/

Easterling, C. R., Leslie, J. E., & Jones, M. A. (1992). Perceived importance and usage of dress

    codes among organizations that market professional services. *Public Personnel*

    Management, 21(2), 211-219. Retrieved from http://www.ipma-hr.org/node/21487

Forand, N. R., Gunthert, K. C., German, R. E., & Wenze, S. J. (2010). Appearance investment

    and everyday interpersonal functioning: An experience sampling study. *Psychology of*

    Women Quarterly, 34(3), 380-393. doi: 10.1111/j.1471-6402.2010.01583.x

Gillen, M. M., & Lefkowitz, E. S. (2009). Emerging adults' perceptions of messages about

    physical appearance. *Body Image*, *6*(3), 178-185. doi: 10.1016/j.bodyim.2009.02.002

Gosling, S.D., Rentfrow, P.J., & Swann, W.B., Jr. (2003). A very brief measure of the Big-Five

    personality domains. Journal of Research in Personality, 37, 504–528.

Kerr, B. A., & Dell, D. M. (1976). Perceived interviewer expertness and attractiveness: Effects

    of interviewer behavior and attire and interview setting. *Journal of Counseling Psychology,*

    23(6), 553-556. doi: 10.1037/0022-0167.23.6.553

Kleinke, C. L. (1977). Effects of dress on compliance to requests in a field setting. *The Journal*

    of Social Psychology, 101(2), 223-224. Retrieved from

    http://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/psp/index.aspx

Lubker, J. R., Watson,Jack C.,,II, Visek, A. J., & Geer, J. R. (2005). Physical appearance and the

    perceived effectiveness of performance enhancement consultants. *The Sport*

    Psychologist, 19(4), 446-458. Retrieved from http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/sport-

    psychologists.aspx

Rehman, S. U., Nietert, P. J., Cope, D. W., & Kilpatrick, A. O. (2005). What to wear today? Effect of doctor's attire on the trust and confidence of patients. *American Journal of Medicine, 118*(11), 1279-1286. doi:10.1016/j.amjmed.2005.04.026.

Wiggins, M. N., Coker, K., & Hicks, E. K. (2009). Patient perceptions of professionalism: Implications for residency education. *Medical Education*, *43*(1), 28-33. doi: 10.1111/j.1365-2923.2008.03176.x .

Yang, H., & Stoeber, J. (2012). The physical appearance perfectionism scale: Development and preliminary validation. *Journal of Psychopathology and Behavioral Assessment, 34*(1), 69-83. doi:10.1007/s10862-011-9260-7.

Yoo, J. (2009). Peer influence on adolescent boys' appearance management behaviors. *Adolescence, 44*(176), 1017-1031. Retrieved from http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/journal/01401971

Appendix A

<div align="center">Consent Form</div>

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study. Your participation is completely

voluntary, and there are no direct benefits to participants, but we appreciate your time and effort.

You will be asked to fill out a short questionnaire about **what you remember from the photo**

you will view.

This survey should only take a few minutes to complete, and you can feel free to leave any

questions blank if you would prefer not to answer. There are no foreseeable risks to your

participation. To protect your confidentiality, only aggregate data will be reported and no names

will be collected.

If you have any questions about this research, or would like to know the results of the study,

please contact **Dr. Ava Santos at Santos_a@fortlewis.edu.**

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, contact Richard Miller at

247-7426.

Appendix B

Appendix C

Age_____ Gender_____

Big five short form

Here are a number of personality traits. Please write a number next to each

statement to indicate the extent to which <u>you agree or disagree with that statement</u>.

You should rate the extent to which the pair of traits applies to the individual in the

photo, even if one characteristic applies more strongly than the other.

1 = Disagree strongly
2 = Disagree moderately
3 = Disagree a little
4 = Neither agree nor disagree
5 = Agree a little
6 = Agree moderately
7 = Agree strongly

<u>I see this person as:</u>

1.   _____   Extraverted, enthusiastic.
2.   _____   Critical, quarrelsome.
3.   _____   Dependable, self-disciplined.
4.   _____   Anxious, easily upset.
5.   _____   Open to new experiences, complex.
6.   _____   Reserved, quiet.
7.   _____   Sympathetic, warm.
8.   _____   Disorganized, careless.
9.   _____   Calm, emotionally stable.
10. _____   Conventional, uncreative.
11. _____   Successful, Professional
12. _____ Approachable, friendly
13. _____ Trust worthy, accountable
14. _____ How old do you think the person in the photo is?
15. _____ Timely, Punctual

Now, how many characteristics about the person in the photo can you list?