

The Power of Professional Dress: Competence, Confidence, and Generational Shifts



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Emma Dillon is a December 2024 graduate of East Carolina University, where she studies Fashion Merchandising and Business. This past summer, Emma had the opportunity to assist Dr. Muhammad, the chair of her department with research on industry perceptions of professional dress and how they compare to the expectations of students entering the workforce. This literature review assisted the development of a longer study to survey students' perceptions of professional dress. Emma also has combined retail experience of over five years working at businesses such as Baileys Fine jewelry and Coastal Fog. After graduation, Emma is excited to leverage her fashion merchandising major, business minor, and experience to launch an exciting career in the industry!



Abstract

This literature review explores the significant role of professional attire in shaping perceptions of competence and confidence across various industries. It examines the influence of industry standards, generational shifts, and individual career aspirations on professional dress expectations. Findings indicate that attire is not only a reflection of personal identity but also a strategic tool for communicating credibility and professionalism in workplace interactions. Furthermore, the review highlights the complex balance between traditional industry expectations and the evolving preferences of younger generations entering the workforce, who often seek a blend of individuality and professionalism. This analysis aims to inform students and professionals alike on the impact of professional dress and its implications for workplace culture and personal branding.

Industry Perceptions

Professional work attire directly impacts an individual's perceived level of competency among industry professionals, potential clients, as well as individuals (Fetscherin, 2020). When dressing for the work environment, individuals should prioritize professionalism with the goal of representing the company. Employee dress reflects both the organization's culture and brand image. This emphasizes competence and credibility with clients and colleagues. Industries want their employees to appear trustworthy and confident when interacting with clientele, and dress can communicate this message. This is true to the point that some companies use their expected professional attire as a marketing technique or a projection of their image (Guinn,

2022; Goldner, 2020). Companies strongly want their professionals to appear trustworthy and adequate; this can mean dressing to conform to a professional identity as a representative of the company.

When dressing for a professional setting, it is more important to prioritize perceived competence over approachability. In this context, approachability is defined as perceived friendliness or warmth. Although approachability can be beneficial, perceived competence leads to a higher level of hireability and confidence from clientele. In the context of an interview, dress has the power to control perceptions of competence; even accessories such as glasses or a necktie can widely vary an interviewer's perceptions. Glasses can increase both

perceived competence and friendliness. Wearing a necktie differs by increasing a candidate's perceived competence while simultaneously decreasing their perceived approachability. In the workforce, lawyers and dentists are overall perceived as more trustworthy and capable while wearing their most official and professional attire. Although each company's dress code policy will be unique, all companies aim to align with customer expectations and to promote a positive workplace culture (Fetscherin, 2020; Furnham, 2013; Goldner, 2010).

Industry Standards

It is common to find both business casual and professional clothing expectations across all industries, and these expectations can have beneficial outcomes. Although each company decides the dress expectations for their organization, there are still some general expectations as to what constitutes as business casual and business professional dress.

Business casual is intended to blend a more casual and comfortable style with traditional business attire. This can promote a relaxed but productive office culture that can be suitable for many industry office environments. The business casual dress code consists

of slacks, chinos, knee-length skirts, or dark denim jeans. Button-down shirts, blouses, polo shirts, and sweaters are also suitable. Footwear should remain closed-toed and can include loafers, Oxfords, boots, flats, or pumps (Headen, 2023). Business casual attire is often seen in education, engineering, IT, fashion, retail, and sometimes business offices, healthcare, and law firms.

Business professional attire can consist of a pant, or skirt, suit set or a darker gray or black suit. A button-down shirt or blouse is the most suited for business professionals and should be properly pressed to look professional. Shoe styles should remain classic, such as loafers, Oxfords, flats, or low heels (Indeed Editorial Team, 2023). Professional business attire is often more common in law firms, financial firms, and business organizations. Dress code requirements throughout the business industry have always been diverse just because of the broad nature of the industry. However, now they are even more so because younger generations are pushing more casual dress environments. Many businesses are also finding that clients prefer more casual business interactions. However, this is not yet true for most companies, and business casual or professional dress is still more common. It is

all dependent on a company's workplace culture. (Hirneise, 2016). The fashion and retail industry can often be an outlier when it comes to professional dress trends due to its inherent nature. The fashion industry is often very beauty and style-focused, with specific appearance expectations, usually pertaining to keeping up with evolving trends and styles (McInnis, 2021).

The size of the healthcare industry allows for many variations in professional dress standards. Either business casual or professional would be suitable for a healthcare industry interview and depends on the organizational norms. Also, daily work attire can vary greatly and is influenced by job position and tasks. For example, nurses often wear specific scrubs so that they can be easily identified by patients (Pullam, 2024), while dentists may favor lab coats and more "official" attire due to perceptions of competent when wearing these garments in comparison to scrubs (Furnham, 2013).

Professional attire is also important to consider in the education industry. The way a teacher is dressed is linked to the effectiveness of a lesson. Most students prefer semi-professional dress, which has been proven to be the most effective (Shepherd & Yeon,

2022). Although teachers are taught that they are free agents and there is no specific dress code, there is evidence that administrators show dress code bias. Administrators showed strong feelings of professional dress being related to school success (Lang, 1986). Local teachers in a rural middle school in Georgia found that dressing in more professional attire improved student's learning and behavior (Sampson, 2016). In another study, it was found that students viewed more casually dressed teachers as being less likable than professional attire (Oliver, 2021). It is important to consider when dressing professionally in the education industry not only how seriously employers will perceive clothing attire but also students' perceptions.

Grooming and Hygiene

Research suggests that in addition to professional attire, grooming, and hygiene appearances can also impact an individual's perceived level of competency (Fetscherin, 2013). Many workplaces outline grooming and hygiene standards in their dress code policies. Common policies include clean, combed hair, neatly trimmed facial hair, and overall exceptional hygiene. Another notable aspect that has a substantial impact

on appearance perceptions is the proper ironing and pressing of garments. This creates a more presentable and polished look (Goldner, 2010). In some industries, such as healthcare and food service, additional grooming and hygiene requirements may need to be met.

Student's Perceptions of Professional Dress

Attire is not a high consideration for students when evaluating the credibility of their professor. What impacted their views of the professors were attentiveness, preparation, appreciation of effort, and respect. The main factors students viewed as being credible were level of preparation, knowledge of the subject matter, and ability to prepare students for a career (Carr, 2009). However, first impressions can always be altered by appearances; research supports that students do view lecturers who are dressed more formally as more competent (Slabbert, 2019; Morris, 1996). Business casual was found to be best for students' perception of the instructor's competence and perceived approachability. Business formal attire can enhance an instructor's overall effectiveness (Shepherd, 2022). Students often use their perceptions of a professor's competency when considering

their professional wardrobes. This also shows that students understand the importance of professional attire through their perceptions of others.

Some college programs have specific professional dress expectations; students may have to dress a certain way for class to prepare for future career expectations. Many students viewed their school's dress code as an equalizer and felt that the uniform created discipline. However, some students expressed concerns about expressing individuality. Also, many students felt fear of discrimination based on their clothing (Naughton, 2016).

Conformity is a very common theme throughout young college men's perceptions of their day-to-day clothing. Investigations interest in what fashion and clothing mean to college men. The main motivators behind their clothing choices are often comfort and appearance to norms. They want to be comfortable, confident, and meet the standards of their surroundings. College men often show their likes, hobbies, and interests through their clothes. There is also a strong avoidance of clothing that does not adhere to their conformities. Many of the participants noted not wanting to look gangster or gay or too alternative. The

participants were aware that their dress reflects their identities (Noh, 2015). Many post-graduate females described professional dressing as a skill and something you could be good or bad at. These recent graduates experienced tensions while managing wardrobe choices required to establish a professional identity (Rubinger, 2013). Although it can be difficult for students to know how to dress, students do understand the importance of professional dress in the workplace and throughout the interview process. The barriers of availability and price can contribute to many students' accessibility to professional clothing (Ruetzler, 2012).

Generational Differences in Perceptions

When discussing industry standards, it is important to consider the preferences of older generations because older generations have often been in the workforce for longer and can have more power to set industry standards. However, this is not always true. Older generations and younger generations view professional dress very differently than Generation Y and Z. Older generations tend to put more of a focus on consistency when it comes to workplace attire (Guinn, 2022). Older women often wear more clas-

sic and traditional styles than younger generations (Roth, 2017). Baby boomers prioritize conformity to a company or client's values and conservatism when it comes to selecting professional clothing. The demographic Gen X usually includes individuals who are mid-level in their careers. Gen X exhibits behavior that conforms to colleagues' dress tendencies rather than their superiors. It is also interesting that Gen X was more willing to try new fashion trends than the Baby Boomers (Guinn, 2022).

Currently, generations Y and Z are entering the workforce and applying for jobs; they differ from previous generations and often prioritize individuality in their professional attire rather than conformity. Their dress comes from a place of self-expression and how they wish to present their personality in the workplace (Guinn, 2022). These younger generations are changing the standard when it comes to professional dress in business by making it much more casual. Companies are starting to change their policies to appeal to younger employees (Hirneise, 2016). Younger businesswomen tend to wear more innovative or trendy fashion-forward styles in the workplace than older generations, as they tend to be more fashion-conscious over-

all (Roth, 2017).

Note that those with a high level of employment orientation often prioritize their professional appearance more. Those with a high level of self-identity in their career allot more time to dress in a way that aligns with the norms of the industry (Roth, 2017; Kang, 2011). This shows that the more an individual prioritizes their career, the more effort they will put toward their professional appearance.

Professional Dress and Self-empowerment

Professional dress can boost employee morale and productivity (Goldner, 2010). In turn, increased morale and productivity can increase company sales. However, dressing professionally benefits not only the employer but also the employee. It is a crucial part of personal branding (Guinn, 2022). Dressing to impress also increases positive self-perception, which can enhance overall confidence and competency (Peluchette, 2006). When women felt more of both psychological and physiological comfort in their clothing, it positively correlated with their confidence in tasks (Roth, 2017). It is important to consider that although casual dress can increase productivity, sometimes a more formal and profession-

al dress code can be beneficial to create confidence and a powerful presence (Hirneise, 2016). The results of a study regarding men's intentions behind their professional dress provided evidence that many participants used dress to feel more confident and have positive outcomes. They perceived it as a way of enhancing themselves and a way to seem more capable, called upward mobility. This was a way for participants to control their self-perceptions and confidence levels (Kang, 2011). It was also found that participants used attire to control the way. Individuals with others perceived them as having "high self-monitoring" and felt more confident when they put more effort into their professional appearance

(Peluchette, 2006). These articles show that professional dress truly can make an impact on personal self-confidence and task performance.

Conclusion

The industry puts a dress code into place to promote a productive workplace culture and create a representation of the company. The research shows evidence that Gen Y and Gen Z often view professional dress as an expression of how they want to be perceived in their workplace and their individuality. The industry views professional dress from a more utilitarian perspective and as an extension of the company's image. There is a tension between the younger, incoming generations wanting to ex-

press their individuality in the workplace and the industry wanting to project the company image. This is not true for all companies or younger employees, but it is an interesting observation. This defines the gap between how the industry sees professional dress and younger individuals joining the workforce. It is also important to teach students how to groom themselves and take care of their hygiene properly. This was a consistent theme throughout the research and made a big impression on industry professionals as well as clients. Industries are changing as generations shift within the workforce, older generations are retiring, and younger generations are setting new standards for professional dress. 📌

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