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The Impact of Student Outfit Choice on Class Participation

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The psychology of clothing has been much researched, yet remains a very complex subject. Studies have shown that clothing can influence people's perceptions of others (Howlett, Pine, Orakcioglu, & Fletcher, 2012), even regarding expectations related to intelligence and academic achievement (Behling, 1991). Studies have also shown that the clothing a person wears has a profound impact on their cognitive performance. Scientists have found that people perform more attentively when wearing a white coat when it is called a doctor's coat, and less attentively when wearing the same coat when they are told it is a painter's coat (Adam, 2012). High school students participate less in social settings when they feel they have less desirable clothing than their peers (Francis, 1992) and women perform worse at math when they are wearing bikinis (Fredrickson, 1998). These studies and others demonstrate the significant power that clothing has on people's lives. It raises questions about the impact of a person's clothing choices on their behavior, when others are not involved.

In this pilot study an experiment was performed to uncover the ways in which a student might be impacted by the clothing they chose to wear to class every day. This information could be particularly significant and influential in the lives of students by providing some insight to their own behavior and performance based on their clothing decisions and not necessarily related to how others perceive them. A study by Gentile and Imberman (2010) suggested that the use of school uniforms accompanied an increase in attendance and test scores. The main hypothesis for this study was that the clothing that a student wears can impact their performance at school.

A convenience sample of 20 students enrolled in a fashion product development course in a southeastern college was observed during this study. The course was taught in a computer classroom, so each student had a computer at their desk, with the professor lecturing and demonstrating at the front, often using a projected image of her own screen to help students follow along. The class teaching assistant (TA) sat at the back of the classroom at an elevated desk which allowed her to view all the students and their computer screens during class. Data was obtained during every class day regarding the students' clothing choices, their participation during class, note taking activities and computer browsing behavior (when obviously off topic). Data was recorded in 5 minute intervals during lectures and demonstrations.

The study also included a segment where the students were asked to wear leisure wear to class one day and business attire on another day, when no formal presentations were being required. In addition to the normal observations gathered by the TA, a short survey with open ended questions was conducted to gather information relative to how the students felt in the clothing they chose to wear on the special days. Students were told that the TA was conducting a

study on students' clothing preferences and were unaware that the TA was recording observations regarding their class participation and behavior.

The results of this experiment were consistent with the hypothesis that students' classroom participation would be impacted by their outfit choice. There was a noticeable difference in participation depending on what students wore during class. On the day students were directed to wear leisurewear, participation was extremely lacking. When the professor would prompt the class with a question, it was a struggle to get any student to answer. The opposite result was observed during the day of the experiment when students were asked to wear business formal clothing. The students asked questions and actively participated in class with ease. A difference was also observed on the days when the students were provided no clothing instructions. The students who dressed more professionally participated in class much more than the students who were dressed more casually.

The results of this study were also consistent with the hypothesis that a student's attention level would be impacted by the outfit they were wearing. There was a noticeable difference in number of instances of students being on different websites or programs on the days when the students were instructed to wear business attire and leisure wear. During the day when the students were instructed to wear business attire the students were less frequently doing other things on their computers. They were also observed to be more on task during group work after the lecture. The results of the everyday observations were less consistent due to personal differences in student's behavior, self-esteem, and relationship with clothing.

The information found through this study provides another level of understanding regarding the significance of dress in everyday activities, not only in how others see us, but also in how we may perform. It could be beneficial for students to understand this anomaly, since a change in clothing habits might actually improve their class performance, preparing the way for a more fruitful career.

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