Teacher Attire and Student Impressions: A Closer Look

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SUMMARY

Our choice of clothing has a great impact on how we are perceived by others. The official dress code of the university has changed a lot. From a more formal and exquisite dress code to a range of informal styles, such as business casual and smart casual. This change raises the question of whether dress has an impact on how students develop first impressions and opinions in our campus community. This study, which took place in November and December 2022, involved 414 individuals from a heterogeneous sample who responded to an online questionnaire provided on campus. The basis of this study is the sample, which was carefully selected to represent the age and gender distribution of the university. The main objective of this study is to investigate how students' perceptions and opinions are influenced by lecturers' dress. The results show a complex relationship between what people wear and the perceptions they create. Specifically, a preference for athletic or informal clothing is associated with qualities such as flexibility and directness, while a preference for more elegant and formal clothing conveys qualities such as care and attention to detail. These findings highlight the complexity associated with our assessment and interpretation of teachers' classroom dress codes and shed light on the different facets of first impressions in a university setting.
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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, it has become increasingly difficult for university teachers to motivate students and keep their attention. New teaching strategies that empower Generation Z students to actively participate in the classroom and foster a sense of engagement and responsibility for their own learning are being implemented. Knowledge that can be applied is valuable to Generation Z (Vlasenko et al., 2019). According to Garai-Fodor et al. (2021), these young people are most motivated to grow in the workplace, to express themselves, their knowledge and their ideals. Since childhood, members of Generation Z have been exposed to information and communication technologies, which has led to new socio-cultural changes that affect their personality. Certain specificities need to be considered when designing the learning environment at universities, especially when modern learning outcomes such as the development of entrepreneurial intentions (Gubik & Bartha, 2018) are considered. Generation Z, also

referred to as "screenagers" (Tanzilo, 2016), needs to find a balance between their personal and professional lives (Rachmadini & Riyanto, 2020). Witcher et al. (2003, in: Lavin, Davies and Carr, 2010) categorised the qualities of successful university teaching from the students' perspective into the following nine qualities, ranked from most to least important: (1) student-centred; (2) knowledgeable about the subject, (3) professional, (4) enthusiastic about teaching, (5) effective in communication, (6) accessible, (7) competent in teaching, (8) fair and respectful, (9) provides appropriate feedback on performance.

We investigated how students' perceptions are influenced by the appearance of university lecturers during their studies. Do clothes make the man? Do students have a different opinion if the lecturer is sporty or, on the contrary, elegant? Since national scholars have not yet studied this question, most of the literature on this topic comes from other countries. We are curious about the common and recognised attire of a university researcher and teacher because there are some professions that, when we hear them, we automatically

associate with a certain attire. According to protocol experts, "smart casual" or "casual" clothing is preferred over jeans because it is more refined (heilemann.hu, 2018). In the workplace, casual wear expresses one's style, respect, and commitment. The key to success is to demonstrate professionalism and reliability with a neat and acceptable appearance. There is a dress code that is expected at work, that represents the image of the company and is compatible with the company culture. In fact, clothing contributes to the overall image of the company and helps to establish the corporate identity. A uniform appearance strengthens team spirit and promotes a sense of belonging. According to Locksmith (2020) creating your own style is a fantastic way to express yourself, while it is actually a very useful communication tool, almost like a language of your own that conveys a lot about you to others, either instead of language or in addition to it.

The aim of our study is to find out what styles of dress students prefer and how the appearance of their lecturers influences their perception of the university. We developed the following research questions:

Q1: Does the way teachers dress play a role in the first impression they make on students? Does the instructor's clothing influence the student's perception? Does the student care about the instructor's dress?

Q2: What impression do the different styles of dress of the trainers make on the students?

Q3: What types of clothing do students consider appropriate for female and male teachers?

LITERATURE REVIEW

First impressions are formed quickly and influence people's attitudes, expectations, and behaviour (Baranski et al., 2021). During the first encounter, people form an opinion about others in a short time, which often determines their further interactions in the long term. Clothing plays a fundamental role in how a person is perceived (Hester & Hehman, 2023). There is a long history of research in the fields of psychology and sociology on how clothing choices express personality. People's choice of clothing and style of dress conveys a great deal of information about personality traits, emotional states, and interests. Clothing is an important means of expressing personality and identity. From a sociological perspective, clothing is an expression of social norms, roles, and group membership. Certain social groups and cultures have specific styles of dress that contribute to their identity and sense of belonging to a community.

Clothing is an important aspect of communication that can influence perceptions of the wearer's credibility and attractiveness (Dunbar & Segrin, 2012). Perceptions of competence and professionalism are influenced by the style of clothing (Furnham et al., 2013). Clothing reflects a person's personality, lifestyle, and social status. Clothing often contains symbols that represent economic status. Clothing has a significant impact on cognition and influences the processing process that changes the way we interpret objects, people, and events (Slepian et al., 2015). Certain professions, such as healthcare, construction, agriculture or even business, are traditionally associated with certain dress codes. Of course, individual preferences, style, taste, current fashion, and other factors also play a role in the choice of daily clothing. Children in Western countries infer social status from the status of the items worn by the person - for example, blue jeans, backpack - and associate higher status with higher competence and better health (Shutts et al., 2016).

Lecturers' style of dress influences students' perceptions of the quality of teaching in the academic work environment (Slabbert, 2019). An experiment with university students found that when they were shown pictures of people who happened to wear cheap or expensive outerwear, they rated those who wore more expensive clothes as more competent, even though they were asked to ignore the clothes (Oh et al., 2020). A well-dressed lecturer was perceived as knowledgeable, organised, and well-prepared, while an informally dressed lecturer was perceived as friendly, flexible, personable, fair, and enthusiastic (Rollman, 1980 in Kashem, 2019). Regarding the appearance of university lecturers, formal dress was much more frequently used by men as a sign of high status than by women (Mast & Hall, 2004). Formal dress increases perceptions of competence but decreases feelings of friendliness, which lowers interest in attending a course (Oliver et al., 2021). Research by Shepherd and Yeon (2022) shows that students prefer to see their lecturers in what is mentioned as business casual dress, and this is true for both men and women. Furthermore, the findings confirmed that business casual is best for student learning and perceptions of lecturer competence and availability (Shepherd & Yeon, 2022). Mosca and Buzza's (2013) research findings are consistent with this. They show that 72% of students prefer lecturers to wear a casual style and that many feel intimidated by lecturers who wear overly formal clothing. Interestingly, shoes provide more information about certain dimensions of identity than other items of clothing (Gillath et al., 2012).

METHODOLOGY

To answer the research questions, a questionnaire survey (quantitative research) was conducted. The questionnaire was structured in such a way that the specific questions related to the research questions presented earlier were weighted approximately equally. A five-point scale was generally used for the Likert-type questions, except for the rating of impressions of different styles of dress, for which a seven-point scale was used, allowing for a wider range of responses. After

the ten "professional" questions, we concluded the questionnaire with demographic questions. 81.6% had a bachelor's degree and 6.3% had a master's degree. In terms of faculties, the largest proportion of students came from the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering and Informatics (29.5%), followed by the Faculty of Economics (24.4%), the Faculty of Law (14.3%), the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (13.3%) and the Faculty of Health Care Sciences (10.1%). The smallest proportions of students in the sample came from the Faculty of Earth and Environmental Sciences and Engineering (5.1%), the Faculty of Materials and Chemical Engineering (2.2%) and the Béla Bartók Faculty of Music (1.2%). The majority of respondents live in a city (37.4%), one third in a county seat (34.1%), one quarter in a municipality (24.2%) and a very small proportion of students come from the capital (4.3%). Data was collected between 1 November and 3 December 2022 using an online questionnaire. Data analysis was mainly carried out with the programmes Excel and SPSS.

ANALYSIS

In the introductory part of the questionnaire, we asked three general questions to find out how important the students found dressing. On a five-point Likert scale, they rated the importance of dressing for first impressions at an average of 4.00 (SD=0.99), the extent to which they are influenced in their opinion by their lecturer's dress (SD=1.15) at 3.39, and the extent to which they care about their lecturer's dress (SD=1.24) at 3.14. This indicates that students consider dressing important, especially for first impressions, but that they care only moderately about their lecturer's dress. To investigate the differences between genders, a t-test for independent samples was conducted, which revealed a significant difference between the opinions of male and female students: the female students are the ones who consider the clothes more important (M_{woman} =4.24; M_{man} =3.76; t(412)=5.085 p < 0.001), they are the ones who are more influenced by their teacher's clothes (M_{woman} =3.62; M_{man} =3.15; t(412)=4.231 p < 0.001) and they are more interested in their teacher's clothes (M_{woman} =3.33; M_{man} =2.94; (t(412)=3.246 p < 0.001).

The next question was about the impression that the more casual/sporty and the more serious/formal dress of the lecturers made on the students. The question was rated on a 7-point Likert scale, where 1 stood for "not at all typical" and 7 for "definitely typical".
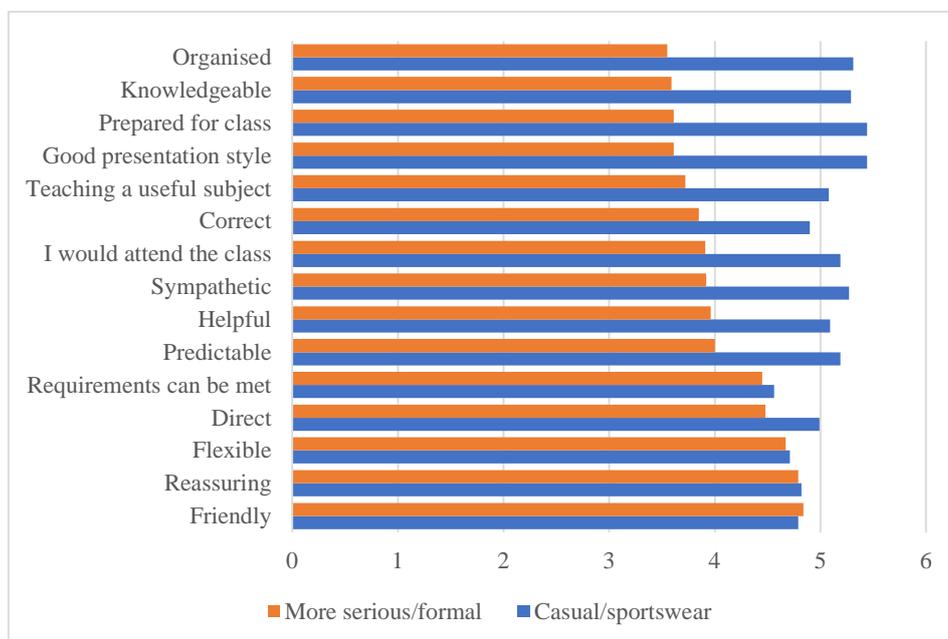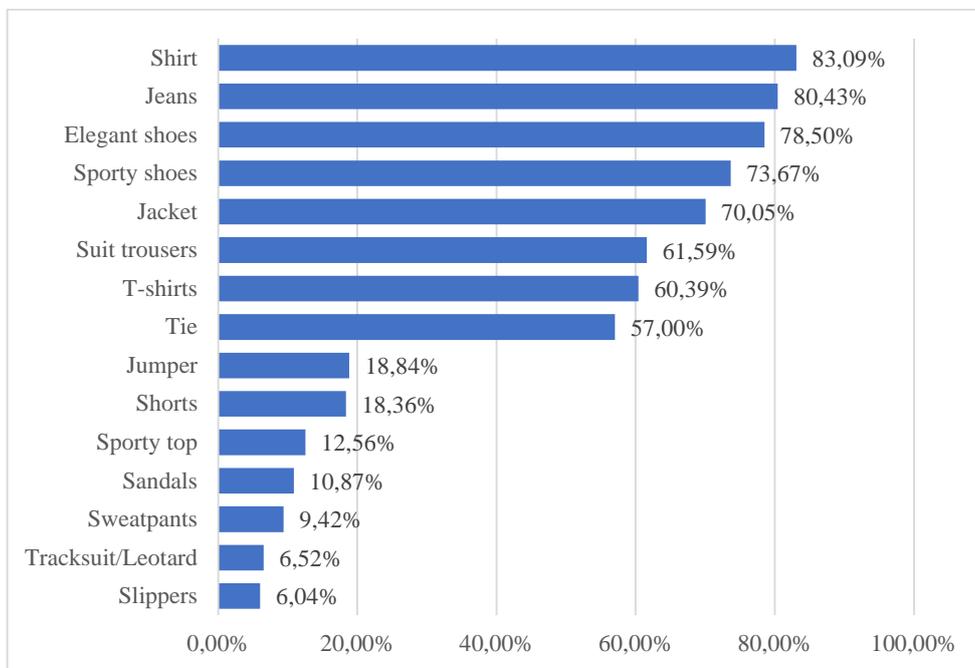

Source: Own editing

Figure 1. What impression do you get when your teacher wears more casual/sportswear or more serious/formal clothes?

The 5 highest average scores for casual/sporty (informal) dress were for flexible, direct, friendly, reassuring and sympathetic. Conversely, the lowest mean scores were for the qualities of teaching a useful subject, being prepared for class, being organised, knowledgeable and predictable. The opposite of casual/sporty dress was considered serious/formal (formal) dress and we also explored what qualities were and were not associated with this style in students' minds. The results show that serious/formal dress is associated with the following qualities: organised, knowledgeable, prepared for class, a good presentation style, teaching a useful subject. This style of dress is least associated with the following qualities: friendly, reassuring, direct, flexible and requirements can be met. It is also important to note that a sporty looking teacher is perceived as teaching a useful subject, having a good presentation style, being prepared, knowledgeable and organised to about the same extent as a formally dressed teacher. The real difference lies in the other characteristics where casual/sporty dress tends to score better (i.e., a formally dressed teacher is not seen as better organised, informed, or prepared than a casually dressed teacher, but as friendlier, more reassuring or more flexible than the former).

Respondents were then asked to indicate the type of dress they considered appropriate for their teachers. The question was examined separately for male and female teachers where appropriate.
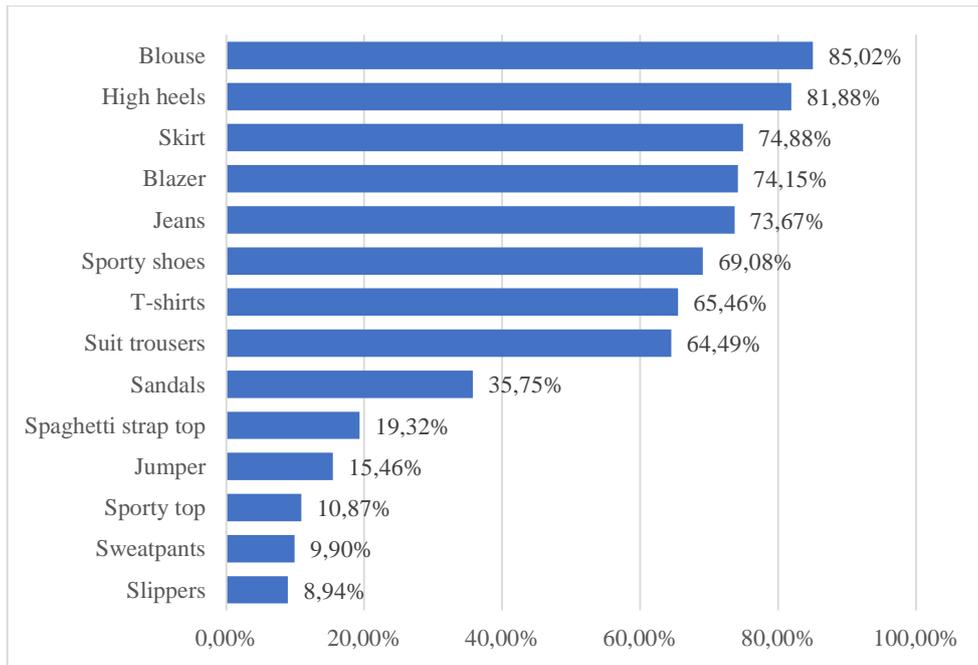

Source: Own editing

Figure 2. What are the types of clothing you would consider appropriate for a male lecturer?

Appropriate dress for male instructors: Shirt with or without tie, possibly T-shirt with suit trousers or jeans, elegant shoes or sporty shoes or jacket. The following items of clothing should be avoided at all costs: jumpers, shorts, sporty tops, sandals, sweatpants, tracksuits, slippers.
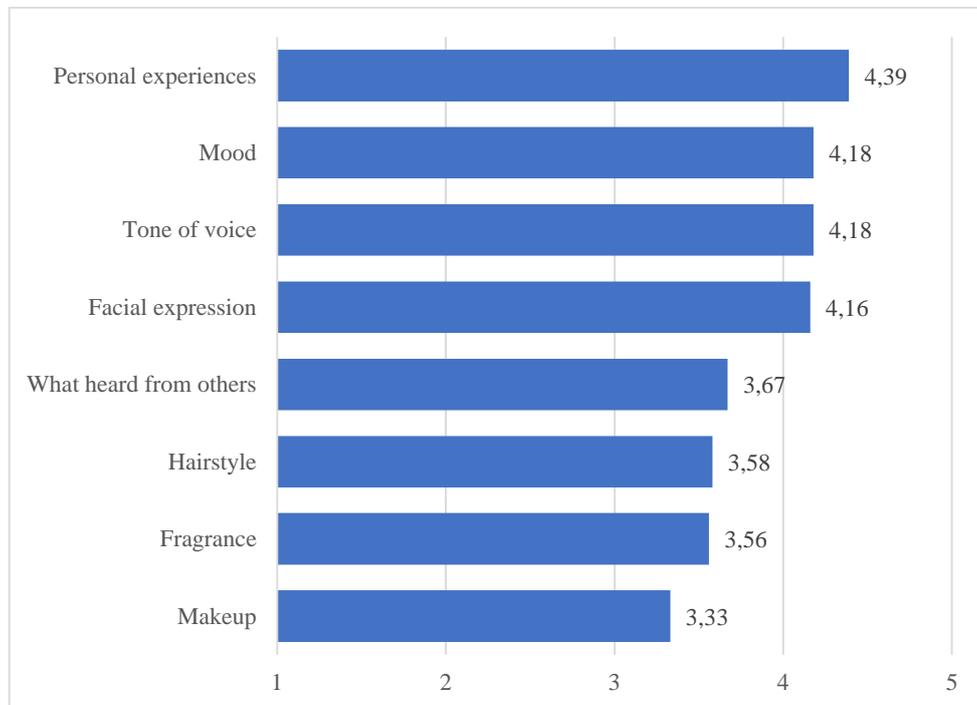
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Figure 3. What are the types of clothing you would consider appropriate for a female lecturer?

We can also make a recommendation for women: blouse or T-shirt with skirt or jeans or suit trousers, high heels, or sporty shoes with blazer. What to avoid with female lecturers: sandals, spaghetti strap top, jumper, sporty top, sweatpants, slippers.

Obviously, clothing is only one of the factors that influence students in forming their opinions. In our research, we asked ourselves what other factors play a role in this regard.

Source: Own editing

Figure 4. Apart from dress, what are the factors that influence your opinion of your teacher?

The importance of personal experience is undeniable, but so is the tone of voice, and facial expression of the teacher. More important than the medium, but relatively less important, are what we can hear from others, hairstyle, fragrance and make-up (for female lecturer).

RESULTS AND CONCLUSION

In forming students' opinions, teachers' clothing is only one element among many other factors. Personal experience, the opinion of others and other external and internal personality traits of the teacher are also influential factors. Students perceive the teacher's dress differently. Our research confirms that female students are more interested in the appearance of their lecturer. The style and dress of the lecturer has the potential to make the relationship between students and lecturers more informal, but of course this is only a small factor in the learning process, along with the nature and subject of the institution, the teaching environment, and the course. When dressing, lecturers should consider the patterns and expectations of the institution. It is important that lecturers dress appropriately for the context and cultural norms, as this can be an expression of professionalism and appropriate assertiveness.

The results of the survey show that students associate sportier clothes mainly with flexibility, directness, friendliness, reassuring and likeable. With more formal dress, students associate 'respectability', meaning that the lecturer is knowledgeable and well prepared, has a good presentation style and teaches a useful topic, but there is no significant difference in these factors compared to casual dress.

For both men and women, students expect both casual and smart casual clothing. Casual dress means casual, comfortable clothing that conveys an assuring, informal appearance. This style does not usually follow a strict dress code and allows for the expression of creativity and personal style, while still carrying informal and comfortable traits.

The smart casual trend, which combines informal and formal elements, is also popular. This is an in-between style that is suitable for events or situations where formal wear is not necessary but informal wear would be too casual. Women should wear suit trousers or skirts with a blouse, while men should wear similarly suit trousers with a shirt. Smart casual style essentially aims to provide an elegant and neat look without sacrificing informal comfort. The business casual style differs from this in that a blazer is additionally recommended for women and a jacket for men.

SUMMARY

Our research shows similar results to those of the authors listed in the literature review:

- Rollman (1980), in terms of orientation, organisation (formal dress) and friendliness, flexibility, sympathy (formal dress),
- Shepherd and Yeon (2022), that a style closer to formalism, which they call business casual, facilitates the perception of the teacher's competence.
- Oliver et al. (2021) who found a decrease in feelings of friendliness associated with formal dress. In our study, students associated friendliness with informal dress.

Overall, there are many factors other than appearance that contribute to a good, inspiring relationship between teachers and students. However, the study by Lavin, Davies, and Carr (2010) confirms that the characteristics associated with the teacher have a significant impact on credibility, regardless of the teacher's dress. From this we can conclude that it is not only the clothes that make a person. As a continuation of our research, we want to investigate the role of brands in influencing the image of teachers.

Author's contribution

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