

Do clothes really make the man or woman?

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Introduction

Research indicates interview dress, shoes and accessories are a significant form of nonverbal communication (Gillath, O., Bahns, A., Fiona, G., & Cranda, C., 2012). *Social learning theory* recognizes that a person will evaluate and assign ideas concerning the performance of others in public areas (Bandura, 1977). This theory may be applied to potential employer impressions based on the applicant's clothing and shoes during interviews.

Selection of appropriate interview attire is necessary, although little theoretical research has detailed the importance of nonverbal cues of interview attire. Person perception research suggests there are many factors to perception and we analyze many aspects of a person at once, rather than one dimension. Categorization allows interviewers to determine who is hired. We also analyze a person through personal biases, these could be relevant when choosing interview attire based on organization culture and formality of the interviewer (Karl, Hall, & Peluchette, 2015).

Interview attire may trigger and target reactions from employers impacting impressions and opinions, and thus respect for the candidate. Interview and work attire, are currently more casual, certain types of clothing top the list of human resource manager complaints and remain unacceptable in the office (Kong, C., 2016). Research on personal appearance cues allow professional interviewers a statistical basis for disseminating information concerning interview interactions (Damhorst, Miller-Spillman, & Michelman, 2005).

Research Questions

This research seeks to determine the importance of interview clothing and footwear to undergraduate college students and professionals conducting interviews.

1. Are pre-professionals able to recognize appropriate interview attire for a retail management position?
2. Are shoes included in the non-verbal communication of candidates' abilities to meet the prospective employers' expectations?

Methodology

Surveys for professionals and undergraduate students were posted on SurveyMonkey®. Both surveys contained pictures of five men and women in various types of dress ranging from casual to professional. Each picture contained Likert scale statements related to the appropriateness of dress for interviews, influence of dress on hiring decision, and whether the dress was professional. Another question included a statement as to whether or not the clothing, the clothing and shoes, or just the shoes were appropriate for interviews.

General questions about professional dress included participants' general perceptions on the influence of appearance on hiring decisions, personal biases, traditional versus fashion forward outfits, and whether dress was an indicator of competence.

Analysis of Photographs

Of students surveyed, 90.8% said the outfit in Photo A and 90.6% said the outfit in Photo G would be appropriate for a retail management interview. They felt interviewees were well prepared for the interview and best illustrated their ideas of professional clothing.

Among professionals surveyed, 92% believed the clothing in Photo A was most appropriate for a retail management interview. Ninety-one percent agreed the candidate was well-prepared, and that this photo best illustrated the idea of professional dress. Ninety percent of professionals surveyed indicated that clothing influences hiring decisions, and 54% believed clothing influenced whether or not an applicant was capable.

Photos A and G contained more traditional, conservative forms of professional dress in black or combination of black and white. In Photo A, a pantsuit, black and white jacket with black trousers, with a white blouse and black heels was worn by the candidate while Photo G wears a simple black dress that falls below the knee with black heels. Candidates are wearing either very simple jewelry or none at all.

The outfit in Photo H was believed to be the least appropriate for a retail management interview by students and professionals. Students and professionals felt the person was not well prepared for the interview and would not ask the candidate back for a second interview.

Conclusions

Results indicate that clothing and footwear do influence hiring decisions for management positions in retail. Human resource professionals and upper management expect pre-professionals to recognize and wear professional dress when interviewing. The undergraduate students surveyed did not always agree with what garments and shoes would be considered professional dress, and these results give educators information to include when preparing pre-professionals for interviews.

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