PROFESSIONAL CHARACTERISTICS COMMUNICATED BY FORMAL VERSUS CASUAL WORKPLACE ATTIRE

Peter W. Cardon
University of South Carolina
Ephraim A. Okoro
Howard University

EMPLOYEES ARE FREQUENTLY advised to dress for success to build their careers. Surveys of employers frequently illustrate the importance of dressing up in many companies. For example, a recent survey found that 41 percent of employers stated that employees who dressed more professionally were more likely to be promoted. This figure rises to 55 percent in certain industries, such as financial services (Haefner, 2008). Furthermore, many of these articles describe the long-lasting impressions formed by professional dress. For example, a recent article about dressing for success began by stating, "Most people make initial decisions about you in the first five minutes they meet you. . . . Does your [clothing] say, 'I'm an up-and-comer' or 'I'm inept'?" (Lorenz, 2008).

From the corporate perspective, employees who are well dressed are believed to form better impressions with colleagues, clients, and customers. Many companies create dress codes in order to gain the benefits of a professionally appearing workforce. Developing effective dress codes, however, can be problematic. In some cases, employees resist dress codes, and in other cases, dress codes rigidly associate more formal dress with increased professionalism (Haefner, 2008).

Ultimately, dressing for success is not such a simple matter as portrayed in many *how to* columns because varying levels of formality in attire project various professional characteristics. For example, while some characteristics such as authoritativeness may be projected by more formal business attire, other characteristics such as friendliness may be projected by more casual business attire (Peluchette & Karl, 2007; Peluchette, Karl, & Rust, 2006).

In this article, we describe ongoing research about the professional characteristics projected by formal versus casual workplace attire. We also describe our research about preferences for company norms and standards regarding typical workplace attire.

Study Method

We surveyed business students at two universities on the East Coast. Thus, our surveys are reflective of attitudes of those about to enter the workplace and younger professionals. Since one of the universities was a predominantly African American institution, we were able to make comparisons not only for gender but also for ethnicity. Altogether, we surveyed 77 European Americans (43 males, 32 females) and 199 African Americans (89 males, 110 females).

The survey used was a modified version of Peluchette and Karl's (2007) measure for identifying professional characteristics associated with workplace attire. On the survey, respondents were asked to rate the degree to which casual versus formal attire in the workplace projected various images. Altogether, there were 16 characteristics grouped into six scales: (1) authoritative scale: authoritative, influential, powerful; (2) competent scale: self-confident, competent, professional; (3) productive scale: hardworking, productive; (4) trustworthy scale: trustworthy, dependable; (5) friendly scale: agreeable, friendly, cheerful, approachable; and (6) creative scale: creative, inspired. Respondents ranked each of the 16 adjectives on a scale from 1 (*casual attire*) to 5 (*formal attire*) to indicate how attire projected these various characteristics. We also asked respondents about their attitudes toward corporate norms and standards for workplace attire with the following two statements: "I would prefer to work for a company where the typical attire is (a) casual; (b) business casual; or (c) formal business (norm)," and "I believe that companies should have dress codes (standard)."

Study Findings

Students overwhelmingly stated that they preferred to work for companies where typical dress is business casual, with between 64% and 73% of respondents preferring it (see Figure 1). There was little difference across ethnicity and gender. African Americans were more
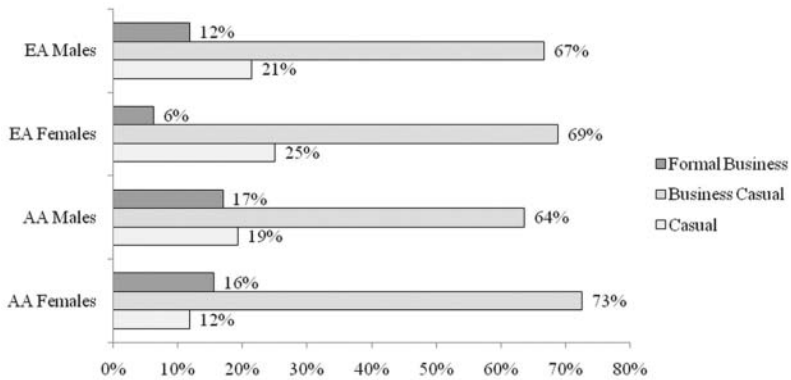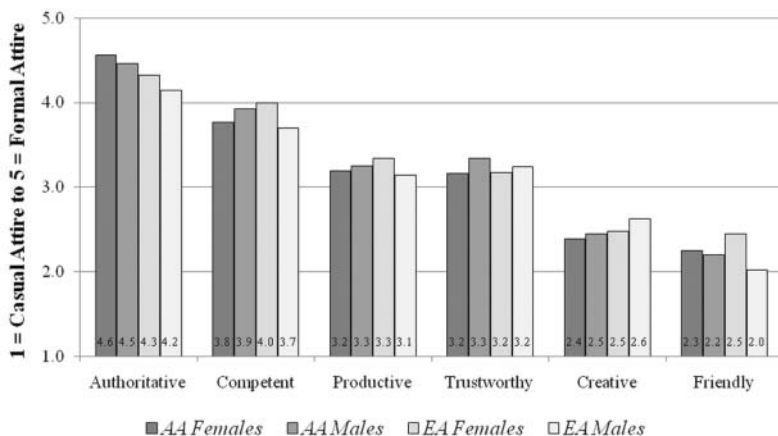
Figure 1. Professional Attire Preference
NOTE: AA = African American; EA = European American. Based on results from the following survey item: "I prefer to work for a company where typical attire is (a) casual; (b) business casual; or (c) formal business."

likely to prefer formal business attire (16-17%) compared to European Americans (6-12%), and European Americans were more likely to prefer casual workplace attire (21-25%) compared to African Americans (12-19%). Females were more likely to prefer business casual (69-73%) compared to males (64-67%). However, each of these differences is minimal.

When asked if companies should have dress codes, females were slightly more supportive of such a policy. Approximately 59% of African American females and 67% of European American females in our samples agreed with the statement. By contrast, 54% of African American males and 49% of European American males agreed. The strongest gender difference was among European Americans, with females (67%) far more likely to support a corporate dress policy compared to males (49%).

Our findings indicate that business students see strong contrasts in professional characteristics associated with the degree of formality in workplace attire (see Figure 2). Formal business attire projects authoritativeness and competence, somewhat formal business attire is associated with productivity and trustworthiness, and less formal business attire is associated with creativity and friendliness. These characteristics are interpreted in similar manner across ethnicity and gender.

Figure 2.   Professional Characteristics Projected by Formal Versus Casual Attire
NOTE: AA = African American; EA = European American. In an analysis of variance test of significance, only one significant difference occurred between groups: African American females associated authoritativeness with a higher degree of formal attire than did European American males.

Discussion and Recommendations

Many young professionals are perceived as wanting to dress down. To a certain extent, this may be true. However, our study shows that business students about to enter the workplace strongly prefer business casual over casual workplace attire. Furthermore, a majority support corporate dress codes.

Of particular importance, there is strong agreement across ethnicity (although only African American and European American students were included in this study) and gender that various professional characteristics are communicated along a continuum of formal to casual workplace attire. Younger professionals clearly associate authoritativeness and competence with more formal business attire, productivity and trustworthiness with somewhat formal workplace attire, and creativity and friendliness with more casual workplace attire.

This creates a confounding logic for *dressing up* for the workplace. On the one hand, business students new to the workplace may want to project competence. On the other hand, they may want to project creativity. This confounding logic may apply to supervisors and executives as well. While ordinarily they would want to be perceived as authoritative, they might also hope to be perceived as friendly by subordinates.

Based on our research findings, we make the following recommendations:

1. Professionals should develop an awareness of the various professional characteristics associated with dressing up more formally and more casually. They may want to prioritize the professional characteristics they intend to project and to strategically adjust their workplace attire periodically to project certain images.
2. Human resources (HR) managers and other corporate executives should assume that although they manage a multicultural domestic workforce, employees of both genders and various ethnic backgrounds may have strikingly similar attitudes toward appropriate workplace attire.
3. HR managers and other corporate executives should operate under the assumption that younger professionals do associate authoritativeness and competence with more formal business attire.
4. HR managers and other corporate executives should assume that there is support for dress codes among younger professionals. In crafting these dress codes, however, they should be careful not to overly emphasize formal business attire for two reasons: (a) There is an extremely strong preference for business casual among younger professionals; and (b) many desirable professional characteristics are associated with less formal workplace attire.

References

Haefner, R. (2008, July 30). *How to dress for success for work*. Retrieved January 27, 2009, from http://www.cnn.com/2008/LIVING/worklife/07/30/cb.dress.for.success/index.html

Lorenz, K. (2008, July 25). *Do you dress for success?* Retrieved January 27, 2009, from http://www.careerbuilder.com/Article/CB-929-The-Workplace-Do-You-Dress-for-Success/

Peluchette, J. V., & Karl, K. (2007). The impact of workplace attire on employee self-perceptions. *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, *18*, 345-360.

Peluchette, J. V., Karl, K., & Rust, K. (2006). Dressing to impress: Beliefs and attitudes regarding workplace attire. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, *21*, 45-63.

Peter W. Cardon is an assistant professor of business communication and international programs director for his college at the University of South Carolina. Address correspondence to Peter W. Cardon, College of Hospitality, Retail, and Sport Management, University of South Carolina, 120 Carolina Coliseum, Columbia, SC 29208; email: pcardon@sc.edu.

Ephraim A. Okoro is an assistant professor at Howard University. Address correspondence to Ephraim A. Okoro, Department of Marketing, School of Business, Howard University, 2600 Sixth Street, NW, Washington, DC 20059; email: eaokoro@howard.edu.

DRESS CODES IN POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICAN WORKPLACES

Terri Grant
Gaontebale Nodoba
University of Cape Town

THERE ARE MANY factors that influence dress code decision making in formal and informal business arenas. In South Africa, with its colonial and apartheid history followed by an exuberant resurgence of Africanism, factors such as diversity of race, ethnicity, religion, and culture play a critical role in lifestyle and worldview. These many and often competing influences and interests may enrich our lives (and dress sense) but may have served to confuse and confound. Historical context, climate—both physical and cultural—and globalization also play a crucial role in how we choose to present ourselves.

In this article, these overarching and interrelated issues of diversity and climate and their perceived impacts on business attire will be explored.

Role of Cultural Diversity

South Africa, like much of Africa, has a deeply divided and traumatized missionary and colonial history. The church and state frowned on the dress (often state of undress) of the "primitive natives" and sought to "civilize" them by introducing and insisting on Western dress (Ramaite & Mdhluli, 2008, p. 106). Men more than women