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**Dress for Success?!**  
**Effect of female and male lecturers' attire-style on students' perceptions**  
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<b>Abstract:</b>	<p>Background: Appearance, especially clothing, affects self-perception and society's perception of individuals in different settings, such as academia. While it is known that faculty members' dress code is a form of non-verbal communication to students, to date, research into the correlation between faculty members' work attire and students' perception of faculty members' professionalism and teaching quality, is scarce.</p> <p>Objective: This study examines the correlation between faculty members' work attire and students' perception of their professionalism and teaching quality.</p> <p>Methods: 238 freshman undergraduate students from various academic institutions in Israel completed an online survey that was based on a questionnaire that had been used in a similar research (Lavin, Davies, &amp; Carr, 2010) and was found to be internally valid and reliable (<math>\alpha=.82</math>). The survey examined students' perceptions of faculty members' professionalism and teaching quality as a function of their attire. Work attire was classified as either formal or informal, following the definitions of Lavin, Davies &amp; Carr (2010).</p> <p>Results: Formally attired faculty members receiving higher teaching professionalism and quality scores, compared to informally attired faculty members. A gender bias was observed, with informally-dressed male faculty members receiving higher teaching professionalism and quality scores, than informally dressed female faculty members (<math>t(236)=1.852, p&lt;0.05</math> and <math>t(236)=-3.19, p&lt;0.01</math> respectively).</p> <p>Conclusion: faculty members' attire was found to have an influence on students' perceptions of teaching quality and professionalism, with evidence indicating that compared to informal attire, formal attire leads students to perceive faculty members as more professional and more able to deliver high quality education.</p>
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# **Dress for Success?!**

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**November 2020**

## Abstract

**Background:** Appearance, especially clothing, affects self-perception and society's perception of individuals in different settings, such as academia. While it is known that faculty members' dress code is a form of non-verbal communication to students, to date, research into the correlation between faculty members' work attire and students' perception of faculty members' professionalism and teaching quality, is scarce.

**Objective:** This study examines the correlation between faculty members' work attire and students' perception of their professionalism and teaching quality.

**Methods:** 238 freshman undergraduate students from various academic institutions in Israel completed an online survey that was based on a questionnaire that had been used in a similar research (Lavin, Davies, & Carr, 2010) and was found to be internally valid and reliable ( $\alpha=.82$ ). The survey examined students' perceptions of faculty members' professionalism and teaching quality as a function of their attire. Work attire was classified as either formal or informal, following the definitions of Lavin, Davies & Carr (2010).

**Results:** Formally attired faculty members receiving higher teaching professionalism and quality scores, compared to informally attired faculty members. A gender bias was observed, with informally-dressed male faculty members receiving higher teaching professionalism and quality scores, than informally dressed female faculty members ( $t_{(236)}=1.852, p<0.05$  and  $t_{(236)}=-3.19, p<0.01$  respectively).

**Conclusion:** faculty members' attire was found to have an influence on students' perceptions of teaching quality and professionalism, with evidence indicating that compared to informal attire, formal attire leads students to perceive faculty members as more professional and more able to deliver high quality education.

Key words: occupational performance, dress code, academia

## Introduction

Appearance in general, and attire in particular, influences the way people perceive themselves and the way others perceive them. Research reveals that people that use the same style of attire on a regular basis, generate a distinct perception of themselves [1]. Frequent use of a certain style of attire is viewed as impression management – controlling the way others perceive us and think of us. Attire style doesn't only contribute to social impression management. It also influences how people perceive themselves.

Many human perceptions, both initial and acquired, are shaped by observing and evaluating attire. These perceptions impact human performance in a variety of environments, and among them the work environment. Within the work environment, research points to the appropriateness of formal attire, as it contributes to a professional impression [1]. Indeed, formal attire has been found to contribute to a perception of the self as ambitious, organized, professional, determined, and punctual. It is less related to perceptions of the self as friendly and creative. Informal attire, on the other hand, is more related to perceptions of the self as being accessible and communicative [1]. Informal attire is defined as skirt or slacks with a buttoned or knitted shirt for women, and slacks and a buttoned shirt for men [2]. Formal attire is defined as a classic dress for women and a business suit for both genders. In Israel attire is less formal than in Europe and the United States, with slacks and buttoned shirts serving as formal attire in most cases.

The distinction between attire styles serves the investigation of researchers from a variety of disciplines and fields of research. For example, Ruetzler et al. [3] found that in job interviews, among all possible influencing factors, personal grooming and formal attire have the strongest positive influence on interviewers. Formally attired individuals are perceived as reliable, intelligent, authoritative and as experts. Within academia, Mosca and Buzza [4] found that out of the 250 students participating in their research, 86% declared that they noticed the attire of teaching assistants, and that it could influence their own mood, motivation to learn, and the importance they attribute to their studies. A study that explored students' perceptions of teaching quality, found that students perceived lecturers as more professional when they were formally attired, compared to when they were informally attired. Formally attired lecturers were perceived as organized, knowledgeable and better prepared for class [5]. However, formal attire was also negatively correlated with several characteristics that are essential for effective teaching, including the willingness to answer questions and listen to students' opinions, and the ability relate the studied material to useful practices in the field. Informally attired lecturers, on the other hand, were perceived as more friendly, flexible, pleasant and fair [5].

Craig and Savage's research [6] revealed that students perceive formally attired lecturers as more organized, knowledgeable and better prepared for class, compared to informally attired lecturers. In addition, students that studied with formally attired lecturers exhibited higher class-attendance levels and their average grades were higher. Another study that investigated the influence of faculty members' attire style on students' perceptions, found a relationship between attire style and the perception of lecturers as reliable [7]. In this research, 257 participants were requested to rate faceless figures of male and female lecturers. The results revealed that the lecturers that were

formally attired were perceived as the most reliable. Furthermore, formally attired male lecturers were perceived as more reliable, but less likeable than formally attired female lecturers. The researchers examined the hypothesis that regardless of attire-style, female lecturers are perceived as less reliable than male lecturers, however this hypothesis was disproven [7]. The findings of this research raise the question whether gender-related distinctions shape student perceptions regarding lecturer attire. Lavin, Carr and Davies [8] investigated this point by examining the impact of female lecturers' attire-style on the perceptions of male and female students, with regard to teaching quality and overall satisfaction with the course. They found that formally attired female lecturers are perceived differently by male and female students. Specifically, female lecturers received higher scores from female students than from male students. According to Lavin et al. [8], these findings support the results of previous research that shows that students give higher scores to lecturers of their own gender.

In the world of work, attire-related gender bias is a known phenomenon, with women facing harsher judgementalism towards their attire than men do. For example, research has found that women attired in a manner that is perceived as provocative, are deemed to be less competent than women that are dressed more conservatively [9]. Clothes serve as social agents of female sexuality, a fact that elicits incessant criticism by women towards themselves and towards other women [10]. Moreover, the female body is objectified in the western world [11]. Women are used to present themselves as objects, based on the belief that their appearance determines their social worth [12-14]. This state of affairs turns clothing into a catalyst of judgement towards females, their sexuality, and their professionalism at the workplace.

Professionalism is a subjective concept that is not easily defined [15]. In the literature, professionalism is associated with an array of traits and characteristics [16].

Brehm et al. [17] divide this term into three main categories: professional parameters, professional behavior, and professional responsibility. Professional parameters include legal and ethical topics; professional behavior relates to knowledge and skills that are related to discipline, to appropriate relations with customers/students or other professionals, and to an acceptable and appropriate appearance; professional responsibility relates to a responsibility towards oneself, the profession, the customers, the workers, and the community. Dieter, Hudak, & Robinson [18] explain that the professionalism of faculty members includes setting boundaries for lecturer-student relations, self-reflection, ensuring they are prepared for performing their work, and keeping confidentiality when needed.

Since the above-mentioned definitions seem to limit the scope of professionalism to appropriate and ethical conduct, we add to our analysis an important dimension of teaching – teaching quality. Teaching quality is defined as a professional capability that combines teachers' knowledge and understanding, their teaching abilities and skills, their beliefs, and their values [19]. Teaching quality is considered to have several dimensions including instruction and guidance, course organization, feedback to students and encouragement of active learning and participation (20-21).

In summary, research has demonstrated the connection between lecturers' attire style and the lecturers' perception in the eyes of their students. The current research aims to deepen the academic knowledge in this topic and, in addition, to examine the existence of gender-related differences with regard to attire. Specifically, we explore possible differences in students' perceptions of the teaching professionalism and quality of male and female lecturers whose attire is at the same level of formality. Furthermore, we examine whether male students perceive lecturer teaching professionalism and quality differently than female students do. Doing so, this research attempts to clarify



what type of connection exists between attire and the perception of lecturer teaching professionalism and quality, providing faculty members with insight into the unspoken message that their attire conveys to students and the impact that this message has on students' learning experience.

## Method

### Population

In this research 238 students participated, two thirds of which were female. The participants' average age was 27.5, nearly 50% were unmarried, and most were secular Jews. At the time of the study, the students had completed an average of 12.7 years of education, with about 80% of the students attending academic studies for the first time, mostly in colleges. The participants were students from four faculties – health professions, law, business management and music. The number of students was evenly distributed among the four faculties. See table 1 for complete demographic data.

### **Table 1**

### Measures

For the purpose of this research, a questionnaire was developed for examining the connection between lecturer attire and the way students perceive lecturers' teaching capabilities. The questionnaire used, was based on a questionnaire that had been used in a similar study [2], showing content validity and internal consistency ( $\alpha=.82$ ). The questionnaire had a preliminary section that explained the goals of the study, stressed the anonymity of the data, and included an informed consent form. The next part of the questionnaire included demographic questions. The last part included four figures of a

man and a woman, each of whom is attired either formally or informally. The figures presented were of individuals that were photographed for the purpose of the research and not lecturers by profession. With each figure, 12 statements were presented, reflecting aspects the displayed figures' alleged teaching professionalism and quality. For example, respondents were asked to rate the different figures' tendency to encourage asking questions, to explain the questions' relevance to the studied topic, to set clear rules of conduct, and to be a role model for the students. In addition, respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they assume the displayed figures tend to clarify procedural details related to the course they teach, facilitate active learning, provide feedback on student performance, and demonstrate knowledge of the studied topic.

### Process

The study was conducted throughout the 2018 academic year, as part of a "Research Seminar" course that is part of the curriculum of the occupational therapy course of studies at the Ono Academic College. The supervisor of the study is the lead author of this article. Following the development of the questionnaire and the confirmation of its content validity and internal consistency, it was submitted to the institutional ethics committee that granted it an approval (number 201806ono). Following approval, the questionnaire was distributed via social networks, using the Google docs format. The data collected were loaded directly to the SPSS 22.0 software that was used for data processing and analysis.

## Results

The results reveal that formally attired lecturers received higher teaching professionalism and teaching quality scores ( $t(237)=1.852$ ,  $p<.05$  and  $t(237)=-3.19$ ,  $p<.01$ ) respectively) than informally attired lecturers (see tables 2 and 3 below).

### **Table 2**

### **Table 3**

The data also reveals gender-related differences in the perception of male and female lecturers. Specifically, informally attired male lecturers received higher teaching professionalism and teaching quality scores ( $t(237)=-4.22$ ,  $p<.01$  and  $t(237)=-3.19$ ,  $p<.01$  respectively) than female lecturers that were also informally attired. This difference between male and female lecturers was not observed with formally attired lecturers. An additional gender-related difference was observed between female and male students. Specifically, informally attired female lecturers received higher scores from female students than they did from male students (see tables 4 and 5 respectively). This difference between male and female students was not observed with formally attired lecturers.

### **Table 4**

### **Table 5**

## Discussion

The present study examined the connection between lecturers' attire style (formal or informal) and students' perceptions of the lecturers' teaching professionalism and quality. In addition, the research explored differences in these perceptions between male and female students. The research results reveal that lecturers of both genders that

are formally attired convey to students higher teaching professionalism and quality. However, informally attired male lecturers received higher scores for teaching professionalism and teaching quality than informally attired female lecturers. No differences were found with regard to formally attired lecturers.

Formal attire is known to be a symbol of professionalism and status in the world of work [22]. The academic world seems to operate along the same lines. This conclusion corresponds with the conclusions of Roach's research [23], that examined the perceptions of 355 students that studied communication in a university from the state of Texas. In Roach's research [23], the influence of formal vs. informal attire was examined with regard to teaching assistants, finding a strong correlation between the formal attire of teaching assistants and a positive evaluation of their teaching skills by students. Our results are also in line with Francis's conclusions in his 2016 research [24] that examined the relationship between lecturer attire (formal, informal, or informal business attire) and students' satisfaction from lecturer professionalism, teaching quality, program quality and the academic institution's image. Their results revealed that formally attired lecturers were ranked highest, followed by lecturers that wore informal business attire, with the informally attired lecturers receiving the lowest scores. These results support the findings of an additional study Francis participated in [7] that found that formally attired academic faculty members were perceived by students as more reliable than faculty members that were informally attired.

Our research highlights an interesting gender difference. Female students gave informally attired female lecturers higher scores for teaching professionalism and quality than male students did. This result strengthens previous findings (e.g. the findings of Lavin, Carr & Davis [5]) that demonstrate that students give lecturers of the same gender higher scores. This phenomenon can be understood by considering

people's natural tendency to identify with people of their own gender. Similar results were found in Bachen, McLoughlin & Garcia's research [25] that examined the perceptions of 500 students regarding academic faculty members in five teaching categories – being caring, professional, communicative, organized and easy going. This research found, in line with our findings, that female students gave female lecturers higher scores.

In attempt to explain our findings, we propose that lecturers' self-presentation through formal attire, stresses their professional identity and this inspires trust on the part of the students. Just as patients trust medical staff wearing professional uniforms [26], it can be assumed that students trust and value figures that are perceived by them as more professional. It can further be assumed that high levels of professionalism close gender-related gaps and so differences are not found in the perception of female and male lecturers that are formally attired. It should be stressed that formal attire also conveys a sense of social distance, especially in a small country like Israel, where the dress code is for the most part informal. In this regard, formal attire may strengthen the students' appreciation of the lecturers teaching professionalism and quality but could also undermine students evaluation of other characteristics that are important to lecturers, such as the willingness to respond to questions and listen to student opinions, and also the lecturers' ability to relate the studied material to useful practices in the field [5]. Informal attired lecturers, on the other hand, convey more openness to free interpersonal communication, as well as a sense of fairness and attentiveness, and so create a climate in which students can bring forth personal and gender-related considerations. Furthermore, from the students' perspective, it can be seen that students' relationship with lecturers, and the consequences of this relationship, is impacted by lecturers' attire.

Another point that should be considered is the experience of the individual wearing different styles of attire, and the impact of his or her experience on the class. Research has found that attire doesn't only impact the people that observe it, but also the self-perception of the people that wear it. Karl, Hall, and Peluchette [1] sought to find how attire impacts the self-perception of workers of different professions in the public sector. Research participants that were formally attired perceived themselves as ambitious, organized, professional, determined, punctual, but, on the other hand, also as less friendly and creative than their informally attired colleagues. In addition, these individuals reported that they felt physically less comfortable and that this had a negative influence on their performance. Participants that were informally attired perceived themselves as more accessible and communicative. In line with these findings, it stands to reason that attire style also impacts lecturers' work style, body language and ways of expression, and that these verbal and non-verbal forms of expression have a significant impact on the learning experience of the students. Specifically, it can be assumed that formally attired lecturers feel professional, authoritative and punctual in class, and that this experience impacts the learning experience of their students. Informally attired lecturers, on the other hand, can be assumed to experience themselves as more friendly, and again it stands to reason that the atmosphere in class would follow suit.

## Conclusions

Lecturer attire style is related to students' experience in class, and of-course also to the lecturers' own experience. In this regard, clothing serves us both ways. Attire can be chosen in line with our professional perception and the way we would like to feel at work. As lecturers facing students, formal attire can assist us in assuming an authoritative and professional role. In the other direction, students find it easier to trust

the professionalism and teaching quality of formally attired lecturers. However, we should take into account the importance of conveying other relevant characteristics that are important to our relationship with our students, without foregoing our professional image. In a country like Israel, it can be assumed that a style of attire that is formal, but not overly so, can maintain a perception of professionalism without hindering interpersonal accessibility.

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## Conflict of interest

None to report

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### Table Captions

Table 1 - *Research Participants' Demographic Data*

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Table 4 - *Differences between Male and Female Students' Perceptions of Male and Female Lecturers' Teaching Professionalism, by Attire Style (N=238)*

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Table 1  
*Research Participants' Demographic Data*

<b>Gender</b>		<b>N</b>	<b>Frequency (%)</b>
Men		87	36.55
Women		151	63.45
Total		238	100.0
<b>Marital status</b>		<b>N</b>	<b>Frequency (%)</b>
Unmarried		116	48.7
Meaningful relationship		53	22.3
Married		65	27.3
Other		4	1.7
<b>Religion</b>		<b>N</b>	<b>Frequency (%)</b>
Jewish		233	97.9
Christian		2	0.8
Muslim		2	0.8
Other		1	0.4
<b>Religious observance level</b>		<b>N</b>	<b>Frequency (%)</b>
Secular		151	63.4
Traditional		41	17.2
Religious		41	17.2
Ultra-orthodox		1	0.4
Other		4	1.7
<b>Previous academic institution</b>		<b>N</b>	<b>Frequency (%)</b>
None		192	80.7
College		27	11.3
University		19	8
<b>Current academic institution</b>		<b>N</b>	<b>Frequency (%)</b>
College		210	88.2
University		28	11.8
<b>Study Major</b>		<b>N</b>	<b>Frequency (%)</b>
Music		58	24.4%
Health professions		60	25.2%
Law		60	25.2%
Business Management		60	25.2%
<b>Age</b>	<b>Minimum (years)</b>	<b>Maximum (years)</b>	<b>Average (M, sd)</b>
	18	68	27.5 (2.34)
<b>Years of education</b>	<b>Minimum (years)</b>	<b>Maximum (years)</b>	<b>Average (M, sd)</b>
	12	20	12.7 (1.01)

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Table 2

*Student Perception of Lecturer Teaching Professionalism by Attire Style (N=238)*

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	<b>Formal Attire (M, sd)</b>	<b>Informal attire (M, sd)</b>
<b>Lecturer (female)</b>	3.07 (0.65)	2.68 (0.64)
<b>Lecturer (male)</b>	3.01 (0.63)	2.86 (0.63)

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Table 3

*Student Perception of Lecturer Teaching Quality by Attire Style (N=238)*

	<b>Formal Attire (M, sd)</b>	<b>Informal attire (M, sd)</b>
<b>Lecturer (female)</b>	3.00 (0.62)	2.82 (0.62)
<b>Lecturer (male)</b>	3.04 (0.62)	2.94 (0.62)

Table 4  
*Differences between Male and Female Students' Perceptions of Male and Female Lecturers' Teaching Professionalism, by Attire Style (N=238)*

	<b>Lecturer (Female) Formal attire (M, sd)</b>	<b>Lecturer (Female) Informal attire (M, sd)</b>	<b>Lecturer (Male) Formal attire (M, sd)</b>	<b>Lecturer (Male) Informal attire (M, sd)</b>
<b>Male students N=87</b>	3.02 (0.66)	2.62 (0.68)	3.06 (0.65)	2.90 (0.69)
<b>Female students N=151</b>	3.03 (0.59)	2.81 (0.59)	2.99 (0.58)	2.88 (0.60)
<b>Differences</b>	NS	p<0.05, t <sub>(237)</sub> =-2.211	NS	NS

Table 5  
*Differences between Male and Female Students' Perceptions of Male and Female Lecturers' Teaching Quality, by Attire Style (N=238)*

	<b>Lecturer (Female) Formal attire (M, sd)</b>	<b>Lecturer (Female) Informal attire (M, sd)</b>	<b>Lecturer (Male) Formal attire (M, sd)</b>	<b>Lecturer (Male) Informal attire (M, sd)</b>
<b>Male students N=87</b>	2.99 (0.67)	2.67 (0.68)	3.05 (0.65)	2.89 (0.65)
<b>Female students N=151</b>	3.00 (0.59)	2.90 (0.57)	3.04 (0.60)	2.97 (0.58)
<b>Differences</b>	NS	p<.05, t(237)=-2.76	NS	NS