

# The Effect of Appearance on First Impressions

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## Background

First impressions are formed rapidly and are often highly accurate. After seeing a face for just one second, people make judgments about another's personal and occupational attributes. How much does a person's dress style affect these judgements? Our study tests three hypotheses: 1) that people make rapid judgments of others based on clothing alone 2) that a minor manipulation of the man's clothing (e.g. the cut of a suit) will influence these rapid judgments and 3) that manipulation of the masculine-feminine dimension of the woman's clothing will affect the impressions formed.

## Method

In an on-line study 306 participants rated 8 images (4 male, four female) on 5 dimensions important for social and economic interactions (*confidence*, *success*, *trustworthiness*, *salary* and *flexibility*). The man was depicted wearing a bespoke (made-to-measure) and a regular (off-the-peg) suit, in two poses. The suits were both dark blue and of herringbone cloth. The woman was depicted wearing a skirt suit and a trouser suit, both navy and of the same fabric, in two poses. All facial features were removed by pixilation. Participants saw the images for a minimum of three and a maximum of five seconds.

## Results

The man was rated more positively on all five attributes when wearing the bespoke suit. Paired samples t-tests found the ratings for the man in the bespoke suit were significantly higher on *confidence*,  $t(303) = 3.47$ ,  $p = .00$ ; *success*,  $t(302) = 2.10$ ,  $p = .04$ ; *salary*,  $t(302) = 3.17$ ,  $p = .00$ ; and *flexibility*,  $t(304) = 2.26$ ,  $p = .03$ . The mean ratings for *trustworthiness* also approached significance,  $t(302) = 1.74$ ,  $p = .08$ . When all dimensions were combined the mean composite rating for the bespoke suit was significantly higher than the off-the-peg suit.

The woman was rated more positively on *confidence*,  $t(304) = 2.13$ ,  $p = .03$ ; *salary*,  $t(303) = 1.92$ ,  $p = .06$ ; and *flexibility*,  $t(305) = 3.06$ ,  $p = .00$ , when wearing the skirt suit.

## Conclusions

Apparently minor clothing manipulations gave rise to significantly different first impressions of the man, with a more positive impression being created by the bespoke than the off-the-peg suit. The change was very subtle, both suits were formal, the same colour and the same fabric, yet nonetheless they had a very different impact upon perceivers. Most previous research has experimented with manipulating the overall style of clothing, for example comparing formal clothing with causal wear. This study demonstrates that people are influenced also by subtle features, such as the cut of a suit, which has a powerful impact on judgements of personality and professional status.

The woman in the study was perceived more positively in a skirt suit than in a trouser suit, although this effect was limited to fewer dimensions. Women generally have a wider choice of dress style for work than men, but still have to maintain an identity that balances professionalism with attractiveness and the skirt suit may achieve that balance without appearing provocative.

This study is the first to use images that were devoid of any facial features or expressions, therefore it can be concluded with confidence that the impressions arose from the clothing alone and were not confounded by the physical appearance of the model. We conclude that even apparently minor adjustments to clothing style will have a major impact on first impressions. People are judged on their overall head-to-toe appearance and the fundamental role that dress style plays in creating a positive first impression cannot be underestimated.