Female Students' Clothing Style Effects on College Professors' Grading and Personality Ratings

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Abstract

College professors (*N*=45) read a law school personal statement accompanied by a photo of the female student applicant (casual attire, formal attire, or red dress) or no photo. Professors assigned the essay a higher grade and rated the female student higher on positive personality dimensions when no photo was included. Implications for classroom assessments and online course grading and discussed.

Introduction

First impressions are crucial opinions created about people based on limited information (Gilovich, Keltner, & Nisbett, 2011).

Clifford and Walster (1973) investigated how students' attractiveness influenced teachers' perceptions about their intelligence. Teachers rated attractive children as more intelligent and more positively overall. Some teachers stated that they based their predictions about the student's IQ on their "clean-cut" look (Clifford & Walster, 1973, p. 255). Like physical attractiveness, clothing is something people use to form first impressions.

In another study, Behling and Williams (1991) had students and teachers rate photos of students wearing four different styles of clothing. The results indicated that the dressy look was perceived as the most intelligent look and the lowest rated look was the "hood" look. These findings were the same among teacher and student ratings. Consequently, physical appearance of students may affect the grades college professors assign.

Another factor that influences perceived attractiveness is how sexually alluring the clothes are and the color of the clothes. Elliot and Niesta (2008) found that men rated women wearing red shirts as more sexy than those wearing blue shirts. Also, women on a red background were rated as more attractive than women on white, grey, or green backgrounds.

Current Study Hypotheses

In the current research, we predicted that an essay with a photo of a female student dressed in a formal manner would be given a higher score than the same female dressed casually, in a red dress, or when no photo was provided. We also expected differences in personality ratings of the student when a photo was and was not included with her essay.

Method

Participants

University professors from the sciences, humanities, and education departments in a mid-sized public university in the southeastern U.S. were invited to participate in an anonymous, online survey about grading and student impressions. Forty-five professors (25 men, 20 women) replied to an email invitation and completed the survey materials. Thirteen percent of the participants had a Master's Degree, 71% had a Ph.D., and 13% had a professional degree (such as MD or JD). Nine percent of professors were part of the College of Education, 42% were part of the College of Humanities and Fine Arts, and 44% were part of the College of Science.

Materials & Procedure

Professors read a one page personal statement written by a hypothetical college student applying to law school. The statement was randomly paired with a photo of a college-aged female wearing a formal outfit (dress suit), a casual outfit (jeans and a t-shirt), a red dress, or no photo (see **Model Photographs**). Professors then rated the student's essay, rated the student on intellectual, social, and physical dimensions, rated the estimated grade the student would earn in the professor's class, and completed demographic questions about educational background and teaching experience. Essays and estimated class grades were assigned based on a 4-point scale (A=4, B=3, C=2, D=1, F=0). Professors rated the photo on attractiveness, intelligence, self-confidence, reliability, sincerity, cheerfulness, individualism, and sociability using a 5-point Likert scale (1=*Strongly Disagree* and 5=*Strongly Agree*).

Model Photographs

Results

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to compare the four dress conditions for each of the dimensions rated.

There was a marginally significant difference between conditions for essay grade, $F(3, 41)=2.28$, $p=.09$. The red dress condition received the lowest grade, followed by the formal attire condition, followed by the casual attire condition, followed by the no photo condition. Individual comparisons showed a significant difference between the red dress and no photo conditions ($p=.02$). Professors provided a higher grade when the essay was presented alone compared to when it was paired with any of the three photo variations. Professors also assigned a higher anticipated class grade to the no photo condition over the red dress ($p=.04$). See **Figure 1**.
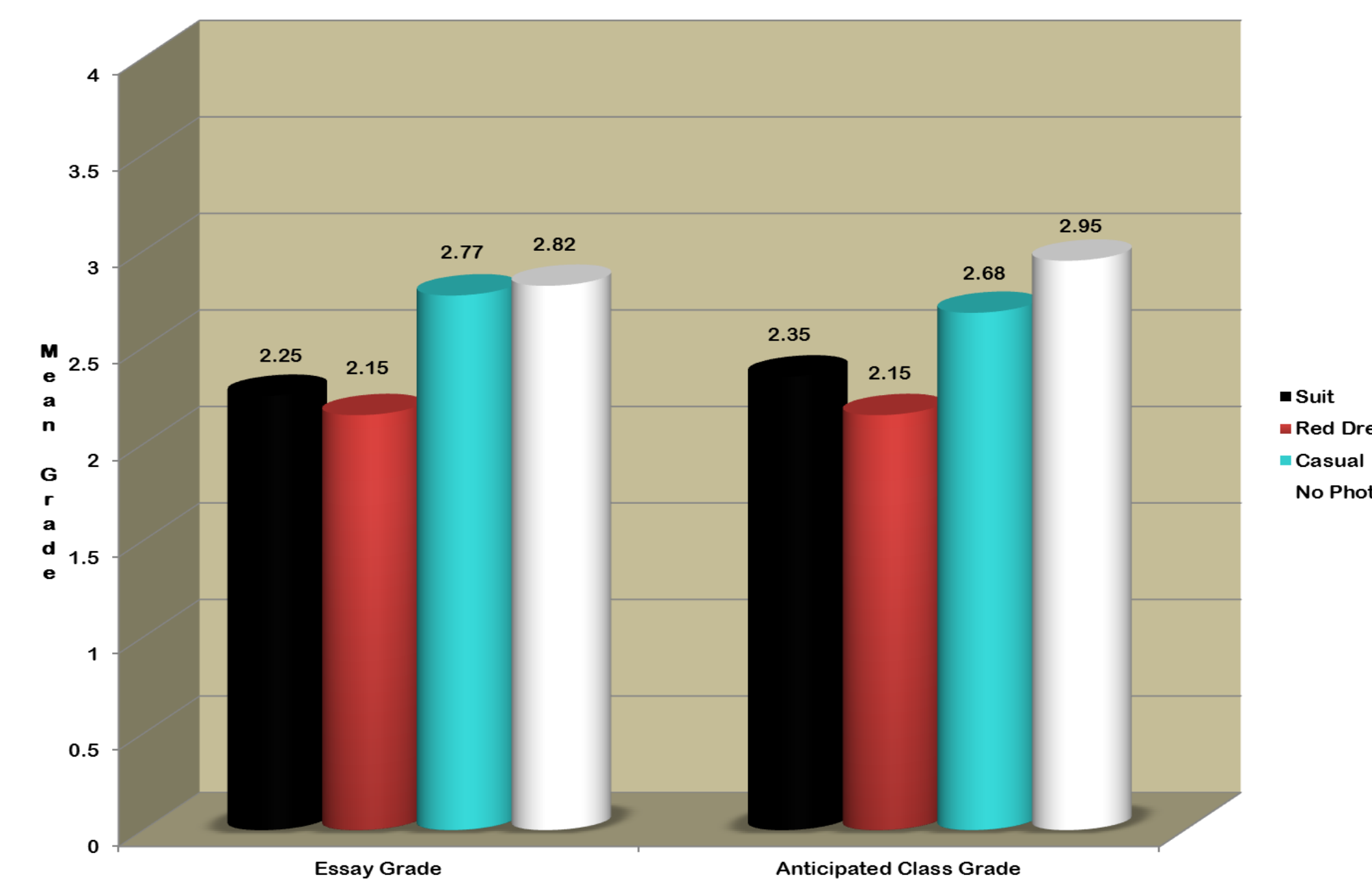

Figure 1. Mean Rating of Essay Grade and Anticipated Class Grade by Dress Condition. A=4, B=3, C=2, D=1, F=0.

Professors rated the student higher on the dimensions of intelligence ($p=.07$), self-confidence ($p<.001$), reliability ($p=.06$), sincerity ($p=.07$), cheerfulness ($p<.001$), individualism ($p=.01$), and sociability ($p=.03$) when no photo was provided compared to when any of the three photos were included. Further individual comparisons revealed significant differences between the red dress condition and the no photo condition in ratings of self-confidence ($p=.003$), cheerfulness ($p=.009$), individualism ($p=.013$). See **Figure 2**.
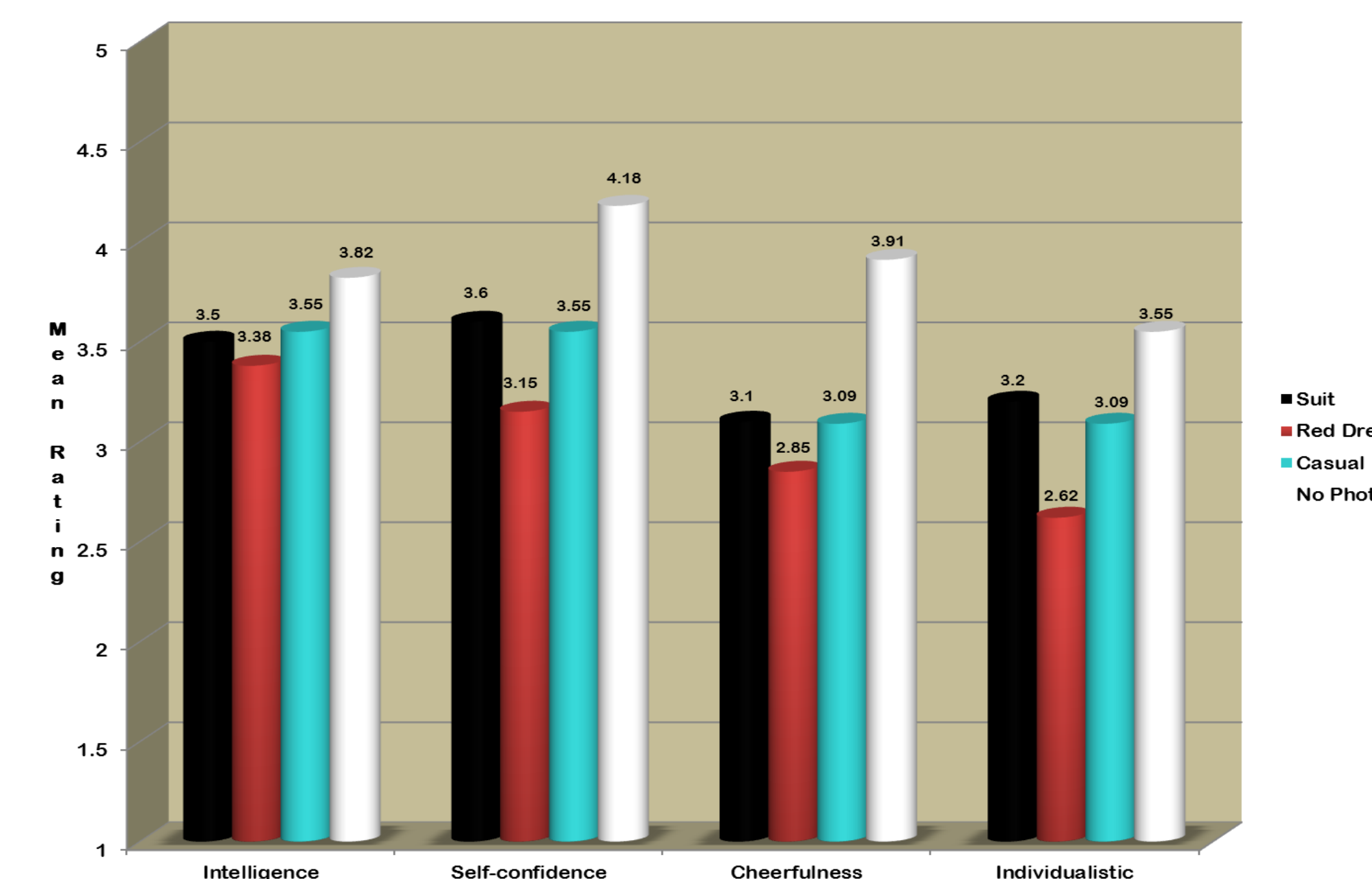

Figure 2. Mean Ratings of Selected Individual Difference Dimensions by Dress Condition. Higher mean scores indicated great perceptions of the indicated trait.

Discussion

Contrary to predictions, formal attire was not rated as the most intelligent among the four conditions. The red dress condition received the lowest mean ratings and the no photo condition received the highest ratings, consistently. While it may be difficult for professors to assign grades to students they do not know well, these results suggest additional appearance information, especially a red dress, may detract from professors' assigned grades and intellectual and social ratings.

These results are inconsistent with previous studies, but there are several possible explanations. A number of studies were conducted nearly a decade ago. Previous results may be outdated as social perceptions about intelligence and clothing have changed. The majority of the studies were conducted in middle and high school settings. Because this study used college professors, they may not have the same attitudes and perceptions as other samples. Professors may also be less likely to show appearance-based biases than other evaluators.

As more classes are offered online, and social interactions with professors are limited, these results may be more important to consider. Future research may consider male student ratings, college student ratings of other students, and how more direct interactions between professor and students wearing different dress in traditional classroom settings impact grading practices.

Selected References

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Author Note & Contact Information

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