

When Clothing Style Influences Cognitive Style

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It's common knowledge that clothes have a strong influence over the way other people perceive us; you may be talented and qualified, but sweatpants at a job interview probably won't communicate your ambition to a potential boss.

But clothes don't just shape the way other people see us. New research from a team of psychological scientists from California State University, Northridge and Columbia University finds that the clothes we wear can also influence the way we think.

Across five experiments, study authors Michael Slepian, Simon Ferber, Joshua Gold, and Abraham Rutchick found that dressing to impress enhanced people's ability to engage in abstract thinking.

"The formality of clothing might not only influence the way others perceive a person, and how people perceive themselves, but could influence decision making in important ways through its influence on processing style," the researchers write.

Slepian and colleagues were interested in studying how formal clothing, much like formal language, can enhance social or psychological distance between people. For example, people often address an unfamiliar person by title, rather than by first name, even when they have the same social status.

Recent research has shown that social distance in the form of politeness can increase abstract thinking; for example, one study found that people used more abstract language when asked to address someone politely. Essentially, events that are psychologically "distant" are conceived of in a more abstract way, while events that are psychologically "near" are thought of more concretely.

Formal clothing is typically introduced in settings that are explicitly not intimate—essentially making formal clothing "socially distant" clothing.

“Specifically, as formal clothing is associated with enhanced social distance, we propose that wearing formal clothing will enhance abstract cognitive processing,” the researchers write in the journal *Social Psychological and Personality Science*.

In one series of experiments, students wearing their normal clothes were asked to rate the formality of their attire relative to that of their peers. They then performed a series of standardized tests to measure their cognitive processing style.

The students were given a list of actions and asked to choose between abstract and concrete explanations for the action. For example, the description for “voting” could be either a broad term for “influencing the election” or a more concrete interpretation as “marking a ballot.”

Even after controlling for socioeconomic status, students wearing more formal clothing showed stronger inclinations towards abstract processing.

In another experiment, 54 college students were asked to bring two sets of clothing to the laboratory for a study ostensibly about how people form impressions based on clothing.

The formal attire was described as being something they would wear to a job interview, while the more casual set of clothing was described as something the students would wear to class. Participants were randomly assigned to change into either their formal or their casual clothes.

The students then completed a test of their cognitive processing to determine whether they were more focused on the big picture or on more fine-grained details. After being shown a series of large letters made up of smaller letters (a large letter L or H composed of eight smaller Ls and Hs) participants had to identify each stimulus as either the big letter or the series of small letters using a computer keyboard.

As predicted, participants wearing formal clothing favored global processing (the big letters) over local processing (the smaller letters) more often than the students wearing their street clothes.

Processing style can influence many important factors in the workplace, from the way people approach decisions to the way people focus on a task. But don’t cancel casual Fridays just yet – the researchers note that further research with larger, more diverse samples is needed to better understand the extent to which formal attire can influence cognition.

Reference

Slepian, M. L., Ferber, S. N., Gold, J. M., & Rutchick, A. M. (2015). The Cognitive Consequences of Formal Clothing. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*. doi: 10.1177/1948550615579462