

Study indicates college students prefer casual dress

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Quang Ngo, a Bumpers College honors graduate in apparel studies, completed research showing college students do not respond favorably to business professional dress.

Articles and books are continuously written suggesting how to dress

appropriately. However, Quang Ngo, a recent University of Arkansas honors graduate from the Bumpers College of Agricultural, Food and Life Sciences, has completed research on how first impressions of college students vary from the norm regarding apparel.

Previous research indicates professional dress creates a positive first impression. Universities understand the importance of how students dress for professional events and have established programs focused on helping students dress to create a positive image.

Ngo's study examined how much a first impression can affect a student's point of view about a person in a brief encounter. More specifically, it focused on three questions: Do [college students](#) respond more positively to business professional dress, business casual dress or to casual dress? Do [first impressions](#) impact a college student's willingness to have a conversation with others based primarily on dress? Do male and female college students form different impressions of the same individuals wearing the same outfits?

"The first impression that dress creates has a significant effect on people in today's society," said Kathy Smith, an assistant professor in apparel studies. "An individual's dress plays a great part in conveying a negative or positive impression that influences how others perceive them. With the ability to communicate non-verbally, dress conveys a picture or sends a message about its wearers to those who observe them."

Results are based on feedback from 653 students on campus – 100 male and 553 female. Eighty-one percent are between 18 and 21 years old. The results indicate:

- Male and female college students did not react positively to business professional dress.
- Male and female college students tended to react more positively

to casual and business casual dress.

- College students preferred talking to individuals dressed in business casual and casual dress to those in business professional dress.
- Male and female college students have the same impression of business professional dress.

"The results show that college students prefer to have conversations with individuals wearing casual and business casual clothes," said Ngo. "The results are different from the opinions of professional experts who stress the importance of business professional dress in professional fields."

"The fact that college students do not seem to react positively to business professional dress is not surprising," said Smith. "Both genders have the same opinions toward impressions that dress creates."

One reason the findings are not surprising, according to Smith, is college students have yet to enter the workplace. Both Smith and Ngo agree students need guidance prior to graduation.

"It's possible that college students are influenced more by the popular culture of their peers when making decisions about dress," said Smith. "Such results indicate the necessity for colleges and universities to develop programs for students to understand the importance of business professional clothing and how to dress professionally prior to beginning their career."

"The results were surprising because I believed business professional dress would create positive impressions on students," said Ngo.

Kathryn Miller, a 2000 graduate in apparel merchandising, understands why students feel more comfortable speaking to a professional dressed casually, but thinks the results of the study would have been different

when she was in college.

"At that time, I think students expected business professionals to dress more formally since business casual attire was not as common as it is today," said Miller, who is an associate at Walmart.

Brooke Burton, a 2011 graduate in apparel studies, thinks the results would have been the same when she was on campus.

"College students are exactly that, students," said Burton, an assistant buyer in the Junior's Collection brands at Macy's in New York. "Many are not yet professionals and have no reason to dress formally. T-shirts and baseball caps are the norm. The only time I dressed in business professional in college was for a career fair or interview. Those events are uncomfortable because you want to portray yourself perfectly. Understanding and becoming relaxed in a professional environment takes exposure and time."

Both see the need to educate students on the importance of business professional dress.

"The way you present yourself in a professional environment defines the perception of your work ethic and professional capabilities," Miller said. "I believe that it is important to demonstrate through your professional attire at work that you are committed and take your job seriously."

"Working in the fashion industry, I have learned that when someone perceives you as being well-dressed and trendy, they are more apt to listen to your opinions and recommendations," said Burton. "When one's appearance is polished, they conduct themselves more confidently and ultimately gain trust and respect, leading to success. Educating students on the do's and do not's of professional dress is valuable. In any case, confidence is always the perfect accessory."

Ngo, who was a member of the AFLS Honors Student Board, presented his findings at the American Pop Culture Association meeting in April in Washington, D.C. Ngo's proposal was one of 75 selected. The presentation provides a foundation for future research in addition to a networking opportunity with peers and professionals in similar fields.

Ngo, who is from Ho Chi Minh City in Viet Nam, was an apparel studies and French double major with a minor in European studies. He participated in two study abroad programs in 2012 – one in Paris, France, and the other in Prague, Czech Republic.

Ngo spent the spring of 2012 in France, studying the language and the culture. During the summer, he was in Prague studying central European politics. He lived with a host family in France and attended Catholic University, and shared an apartment with other students in Prague while attending Charles University.

"I had the opportunity to experience a Parisian life," he said. "We conversed in French during dinner and we discussed many interesting issues in France and in the world. We did not know Czech, but that didn't stop us from enjoying the city and the culture. We went on several excursions and I was shocked to learn that Vietnamese is the third-largest population in Prague."

"Both experiences helped him gain a diverse global perspective in an ever-changing apparel industry, setting him apart from many of his peers in his field of study," said Smith. "His efforts both in and out of the classroom will enable him to achieve success throughout the remaining portion of his academic career and in his future graduate study. His Vietnamese background gives him a unique international perspective, which has aided him in adapting to new situations and surroundings. He has the work ethic and motivation to succeed in multi-cultural and diverse learning environments."

Ngo's desire to study abroad is what led him to Arkansas.

"I had wanted to study abroad since I was young," said Ngo. "I chose Arkansas because of its affordability. I grew up in a big city and wanted to get away from that for a while."

Ngo was active in the Apparel Studies Student Association, Golden Key International Honor Society and Phi Upsilon Omicron. He plans to study communication or media studies at the graduate level.

"I would like to study media and focus on how dress seen on the Internet or in the media influences someone's style and consumption of clothes," said Ngo.

Ngo has also been active in the community, volunteering for Make A Difference Day, at a local food pantry and helping with the renovation of a thrift store.

"The Bumpers College is great and I have enjoyed every second being a student here," said Ngo. "It has given me many wonderful opportunities to love, to learn and to explore. My professors are wonderful and friendly. The classes have been interesting and useful. I think I made the right decision in choosing to study here."

Provided by University of Arkansas

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