

# **The Impact of Appearance Management Training, Work Status, and Plans After High School on Opinions Regarding Appearance at Work and School**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The purpose of this study was to measure the effect of appearance management training, work status, and plans after high school on students' opinions about appearance at school and at work. A nonprobability sample of 132 high school juniors and seniors in a consumer education class were administered the Appearance Management Survey before and after appearance management training as part of a four-lesson life skills curricular unit. The Wilcoxon Signed-Rank test revealed that participants' opinions about appearance for school and work were significantly different before and after appearance management training. The Kruskal-Wallis test revealed that work status and plans after high school did not impact opinions about the influence of appearance on school and work. Implications for life skills education, specifically appearance management, within career and technical education are discussed.*

Life skills education addresses "...problems that confront students in their current as well as their future everyday lives" (Makela, 2007, p. iii). In Illinois, career and technical education (CTE) courses include life skills courses, one of which is called consumer education that is delivered in 753 high schools and is required for graduation ("Data Analysis & Progress Reporting," 2007). Schools may offer the consumer education course, include the content in other courses, or administer the *Illinois Consumer Education Proficiency Test* (n.d.).

Consumer education includes multiple topics related to resource management (*Illinois Consumer Education Proficiency Test*, n.d.). These include (a) using resources and consumer information by applying goal setting and decision making skills and (b) preparing individuals for entering the job market through job searching, resume building, career research, and interviewing. Implicitly embedded in the curriculum is the management of one's appearance. Appearance management includes dress choices and the behaviors of hygiene, dieting, exercise, cosmetics use, hair grooming, and cosmetic surgery (Rudd & Lennon, 1999).

Appearance has a strong and immediate effect on individuals in a broad range of life contexts (Johnson & Lennon, 1999). Proper appearance is related to positive evaluations of job performance (Freeburg & Workman, 2008), employee commitment and time consciousness (Norton & Franz, 2004), and perceptions of competency of higher education students (Rainey, 2006). Thus, determining appropriate appearance for different contexts, such as at school and work, is an important life skill and is teachable.

The first step in building appearance management skills is increasing awareness about impact of appearance on school and work readiness and subsequent success (Butterwick &

Benjamin, 2006). The purpose of this study was to measure the effect of appearance management training, work status, and plans after high school on opinions about the influence of appearance at school and at work.

## **Conceptual Framework**

Life skills education contains curriculum that “calls for the development of a set of life skills that are positioned as central to students’ employability” (Butterwick & Benjamin, 2006, p. 75). It is based in practical problems and part of a trend to help students develop work skills necessary to obtain employment and build their future lives (Gramble, 2006; Ishizuka, 2003; Makela, 2007). Life skills are grounded in “...the international consensus about what generic or core skills all workers must have, regardless of their specific jobs or work contexts, to survive in the new economy” (Butterwick & Benjamin, 2006, p. 76). Gramble (2006) inferred that life skills are more challenging to teach than core academic skills.

## **Work Readiness and Appearance**

Work readiness is defined as being prepared to seek employment. To that end, meaningful transitions from high school to work require that schools integrate business and industry expectations into school curriculum (Knight, 2001), including standards for appearance. These standards are often presumed to be internalized through socialization or maturation whereby individuals learn societal expectations for their behavior (Workman & Freeburg, 2009). More frequently, they are taught directly.

Standards for appearance are expressed through the description of mode of dress (Norton & Franz, 2004). Mode of dress includes: (a) casual or informal attire such as sweatpants, shorts, and jeans; (b) business casual, between casual and informal including khakis and knit shirts; (c) fashion attire that tends to be more current; and (d) professional dress, including formal, traditional suits, ties, jackets, and skirts. Norton and Franz (2004) found that expectations for dress at work were most frequently business casual (72.5%) and least frequently formal business attire (17.6%).

Research studies investigated the relationship between work readiness and appearance. Workplace dress codes facilitate projection of a professional image, related to getting and keeping a job (“Work your image”, 2001). Freeburg and Workman (2008) found that proper workplace appearance was related to positive evaluations of job performance, including oral and written communication, initiative, and both quality and quantity of work. Norton and Franz (2004) reported that employees with more formal dress policies were more conscientious, time committed, intense, satisfied with their job, and less stressed. Alternately, in a nationwide study of 1,000 office workers, 60% reported that business casual wear increased their productivity, and 58% said it improved on-the-job morale (“National Casual Businesswear,” 2001). Open communication patterns between managers and employees have been attributed to casual clothing (Gutierrez & Freese, 1999). However, in a survey of work-study student supervisors Hughes (2002) found that casual dress does not positively or negatively impact workplace performance.

Appearance is an important employability skill of work readiness. DeLegge (2007) reported nearly 75% of employers who participated in the Job Outlook 2006 Survey indicated a job candidate's appearance would have the strongest influence on their opinion of the candidate. According to Bray, Green, and Kay (2010) more than 42 percent of employers believe that new entrants to the workforce with only a high school diploma are *deficient* in their work readiness. A discrepancy in knowledge of those planning to enter the workforce concerning the impact appearance has on employment needs to be addresses.

## **School Readiness and Appearance**

School readiness is defined as being prepared to succeed in educational endeavors. Standards for appearance are first established in primary, middle, and secondary school student handbooks. Along with other guidelines for student behavior, these rules seek to "...provide an appropriate educational environment while allowing students to dress comfortably within limits to facilitate learning" (Dowling-Sendor, 2005, p. 33). Post secondary standards for appearance are not as explicit as secondary school rules, but are based in school events (Crosby, Kim, & Hathcote, 2006), social group membership, (Taylor, 2005), religious beliefs ("Bob Jones University, 1 Abercrombie & Fitch, 0," 2006), and future work roles (Healey, 2006; Vertreace, 2004).

Judgments about students' competencies, attributes, and attitudes are tied to appearance. Vertreace (2004) related appropriate dress choices to students' job interview preparation. Prospective employers' and interviewee's determination of job fit in part are based on appearance. Healey (2006) viewed "dressing appropriately is a way of getting an edge in the competitive market" (para 7). Social group membership is influenced by appearance. For example, the process of selecting sorority members includes a strict dress code so that "pledges will be seen on a level playing field" (Taylor, 2005, p. 25). School spirit, desire for comfort, and desire for uniqueness of college women have been equated to clothing choices for athletic games (Crosby et al., 2006). Inappropriate hair choices, specifically dreadlocks and extreme hair color, have been related to judgments of incompetency (Rainey, 2006).

## **Research Questions**

1. How does life skills curriculum, specifically regarding appearance management, influence students' opinions about appearance for school and for work?
2. What is the relationship between work status and students' opinions about appearance for school and for work?
3. What is the relationship between plans after high school and students' opinions about appearance for school and for work?

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Participants were a nonprobability sample of high school juniors and seniors (n = 132) enrolled in a consumer education class in an Illinois high school (enrollment 522) in a rural area outside a Metropolitan Statistical Area (“Data Analysis & Progress Reporting,” 2007). Individual follow-up interviews were conducted with 13 (10%) students, who were randomly selected from the study participants.

## **Materials**

A four-lesson unit of instruction, part of the consumer education life skills curriculum, was developed. The purpose of the instruction was to increase learners’ awareness of the role of appearance management in readiness for work and school (see Table 1). A two-part, 16-question *Appearance Management Survey (AMS)* was adapted from Hughes (2002). Part One included eight demographic questions: (a) grade in school; (b) ethnicity; (c) gender; (d) age; (e) students’ employment status – yes or no, (f) dress requirements at work – uniform, casual clothes, professional clothes, other; and (g) their plans after high school – community college, 4-year school, work, other. Part Two included eight statements about which participants were to give their opinion (1 = strongly agree to 5 = strongly disagree). Five statements related to appearance at work were components of Hughes’ six-question *Work Performance Survey* (validity and reliability data not available). Three additional statements related to appearance at school (see Table 2).

## **Procedure**

Procedures to collect data from minor participants were approved through a human subjects review by the researchers’ university and from the principal of the participants’ high school. The *Appearance Management Survey (AMS)* was administered as a pretest. Then, the five appearance management lessons were completed in five 75-minute class periods. After instruction, participants completed the *AMS* as a post test. Demographic data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Descriptive statistics and plot boxes revealed that the independent (nominal scale) and dependent (ordinal, ranked scale) variable data were not normally distributed. Therefore, researchers used the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank nonparametric test to analyze data to answer Research Question One. The Kruskal-Wallis Test was used to analyze data to answer Research Questions 2 and 3. As a confirmatory component, researchers used the *AMS* questions to conduct 13 individual interviews lasting about 20 minutes each after the post test was administered. Transcripts of the interviews were analyzed to further clarify quantitative findings.

## **Results**

### **Demographic Data**

Participants were 53% male (n=70) and 47% female (n=62), categorized as juniors (n=78; 59.1%) and seniors (n=54; 40.9%), with an average age of 17.89 years. The ethnicity of participants was characterized as: White (n=129; 97.7%), Black (n=2; 1.5%), and Asian (n=1; 0.8%). Fifty-five (41.7%) were employed: 9.8% (13) 6-10 hours per week and 11.4% (15) 11-15 hours per week. Students who worked categorized their workplace appearance standards as:

uniforms (21; 15.9%), casual (19; 14.4%), professional (2; 1.5%), and other (11; 8.3%). Seventy-seven students (58.3%) planned to attend a 4-year college or university after high school; 23 (17.4%) planned to attend a community college after high school; and 19 (14.4%) planned to work after high school.

### **Influence of Appearance Management Training**

Reliability or internal consistency of the *Appearance Management Survey (AMS)* was acceptable (Chronbach's alpha = .69). The Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test was used to compare participants' pretest and post test opinions regarding the eight statements on the *Appearance Management Survey (AMS)*. Analysis revealed that participants' opinions were significantly different after training than before training on seven of the eight statements in the *AMS* (see Table 2).

Participants' opinions reflected significantly stronger agreement after appearance management training with four statements – *Dress affects the quality of performance in the workplace*, *Dress codes are necessary for ensuring a professional performance at work*, *Professional dress promotes efficiency in performing tasks*, and *Workplace performance is affected by the required level of dress formality (i.e., uniform, casual dress, professional dress)*. There was no statistically significant difference in before and after training awareness for one statement – *Casual dress in the workplace negatively affects the quality of work*.

Interview data revealed students' opinions about dress and success at school. Success related to dress that was appropriate for school and not different from other student peers. Two students provided insightful comments.

- *If I am dressed differently than everyone else, [it] could be distracting because people are looking me, might be talking about me. I feel more confident and receive more respect if dressed appropriately for school.*
- *If you're wearing something revealing people will be staring and possibly commenting and make jokes.*

Students disagreed that they could wear whatever they want to school. One commented that:

- *You aren't allowed to wear tank tops or short shorts; if that would happen, the school would be uncontrollable.*

Likewise, students reported that dress impacted workplace performance, that is, impressions of responsibility and seriousness. For example, two participants commented that:

- *You feel professional when you dress professional, dress affects how customers look at you, and it shows how clean and responsible you are and that you take your work seriously.*
- *If you are dressed professionally, you will succeed better. I think that when you dress appropriate, you show responsibility and work well at your job.*

Students reported preferences for casual dress at work. One participant observed that:

- [Casual dress] *calms down the work atmosphere, and [I] might work better if comfortable.*

### **Work Status, Plans after High School, and Opinions about Appropriate Appearance**

The Kruskal-Wallis Test was used to determine the relationship of independent variables (a) participants' work status – employed or not employed and (b) plans after high school – community college, 4-year college or university, or work – with the post test dependent variables – opinions regarding the influence of appearance at school and work, as measured by the eight statements on the *Appearance Management Survey (AMS)*. Analysis revealed a significant relationship ( $p < .05$ ) between plans after high school and the statement, *Dress codes are necessary for ensuring a professional performance at work*. A post hoc unplanned comparison of the means revealed that students planning to go to a community college or a 4-year college or university did not differ with each other in their opinions about (i.e., agreement with) the statement, but had significantly different opinions (i.e., stronger agreement;  $p < .05$ ) with the statement than did students planning to work after high school. Analysis revealed no statistically significant relationships for work status with any of the eight statements reflecting participants' opinions regarding the influence of appearance on success at school and at work.

Several interview comments suggested reasons why students planning to work after high school viewed the necessity of dress codes differently than did students planning to further their education at a community college or 4-year institution. Several students equated a dress code with wearing a work uniform. For example, one commented that:

- *...a uniform at a workplace [McDonald's/Wal-Mart] identifies worker from a customer.*

Another student noted that professionalism does not come from appearance, but *...comes from individuals and bosses.*

### **Discussion**

Results of the study confirmed the notion that appearance management is a teachable life skill that is central to employability, further schooling, and future lives of high school students (Butterwick & Benjamin, 2006; Gramble, 2006; Ishizuka, 2003; Makela, 2007). This skill is part of the life skills education area of personal management (Butterwick & Benjamin, 2006) and is significant in both work and school contexts. Although Gramble (2006) noted that these skills are more challenging to teach than core academics, students' awareness of the importance of appearance at work and school increased (as indicated by their change of opinion) after the four appearance management lessons.

Study participants reported a neutral opinion about the effect of casual dress on their quality of work. While this result is consistent with Norton and Franz (2004) and Hughes (2002), it contrasts with other research suggesting that casual workplace clothing increases productivity,

improves on-the-job morale, and enhances communication between managers and employees (Gutierrez & Freese, 1999; “National Casual Businesswear,” 2001). The neutrality of this result may be, in part, due to the age and limited work experience of the study participants.

Based on these results coupled with other research findings (Freeburg & Workman, 2008), these high school students and others like them who adhere to proper workplace appearance standards will be more likely to have positive evaluations of job performance, including oral and written communication, initiative, and quality/quantity of work performance. Hopefully, these study participants and others like them will be just as conscientious, time committed, intense, satisfied with their job, and experience less stress as Norton and Franz’ (2004) study participants who adhered to appropriate workplace dress standards.

Study participants reported a change in opinion about their school dress codes. Before appearance management training, they reported not being sure about dress restrictions. After training, they disagreed that their dress code allows them to wear whatever they want to wear to school. These rules set the standard for appropriate dress in the context of learning (Dowling-Sendor, 2005). In fact, these high school students agreed that dress choices affected the quality of their work at school. This is consistent with research findings that related correct dress choices to individuals’ competencies, attributes, attitudes, and future preparation (Healey, 2006; Rainey, 2006; Taylor, 2005; Vertreace, 2004). Hopefully, loyalty, desire for comfort, and uniqueness reflected in clothing choices for school events (Crosby et al., 2006) will extend to job activities.

## **Implications**

High school has been considered the final preparation for entering the world of work or college (Donaldson, Hinton, & Nelson, 1999). Within the secondary consumer education curriculum, the concept of dress is often only discussed in relation to the interview (e.g., what to wear) thus giving the assumption that the realm of appearance management is *given* knowledge among students. Research confirms that there is a relationship between work and school readiness and appearance specifically; first impressions, productivity, and performance evaluations are tied to proper appearance (Freeburg & Workman, 2008; Norton & Franz, 2004). Appearance encompasses much more than just modes of dress and students need to be educationally informed of the impact appearance plays in their lives now and in the future.

Career and technical education has a distinct role in delivering life skills education in preparation for the workforce and/or postsecondary education. One example of a transferable life skill is appearance management. This skill, learned in preparation for school or work after high school can influence a student’s chosen path.

The product of this research study was a pilot-tested unit of instruction on appearance management for career and technical education courses in Illinois. The appearance management training that was delivered did increase high school students’ awareness of the importance of appearance as part of work and school readiness as evident in the statistical findings. Increasing student awareness is the first step in building appearance management skills.

Future research should include: (a) an expanded study with a more culturally and ethnically diverse population; (b) a follow-up study of study participants to determine if their training transferred to post secondary school and work; and (c) a study of the impact of learning of other behaviors within appearance management, such as hygiene, dieting, exercise, cosmetics use, hair grooming, and cosmetic surgery on work and school readiness of high school students.

The appearance management curriculum provides career and technical education teachers with a personal and career development course curricula. Thus, the proposed implementation of this curriculum in 753 Illinois high schools can potentially impact thousands of students' success. The results of this study indicate the importance of the development and use of career and technical education initiatives in preparing all students for work and school.

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Table 1  
*Life Skills Curriculum: Appearance Management Unit of Instruction*

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Lesson Title	Time	Objectives
Lesson 1: Appearance Management Basics	75 minutes	Students will gain background information regarding appropriate appearance at work and school. Students will participate in discussion topics regarding basic appearance terms and issues, the importance of appropriate appearance, situational dress codes, and how perceptions of dress influence behavior towards individuals.
Lessons 2 & 3: Readiness for Work and School	150 minutes	Students will develop practical skills in learning to identify appropriate appearance and apply this knowledge to the educational and workplace environments. Students will research dress-related topics and analyze case studies and demonstrate their understanding of these concepts through simulated workplace activities.
Lesson 4: Developing an Appearance Management Plan	150 minutes	Students will develop an appearance management plan by compiling individualized wardrobes related to their future specific goals, as well as appropriate clothing styles and selections for other occupations and professional roles. By developing this plan, students will document their understanding that appropriate dress is a transferable skill instrumental in workplace and personal success.

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*Note.* Curriculum is available from the Life Skills Curriculum website, <http://lifeskills.wed.siu.edu>

Table 2  
*Appearance Management: Opinions Before and After Training*

Statement			Pretest <i>M</i>	
Post test <i>M</i>	<i>Z</i> <sup>a</sup>	<i>p</i>		
1. My school dress code is very strict.			3.54	3.45
2. My school dress code allows me to wear whatever I want to wear to school.			3.15	3.48
3. How I dress affects the quality of my work at school.			3.64	2.23
4. Dress affects the quality of performance in the workplace.			2.81	1.78
5. Casual dress in the workplace negatively affects the quality of work.			3.35	3.48
6. Dress codes are necessary for ensuring a professional performance at work.			2.75	2.05
7. Professional dress promotes efficiency in performing tasks.			2.67	2.04
8. Work performance is affected by the required level of dress formality (i.e., uniform, casual dress, professional dress).			3.11	1.87

N = 132; \* Scale: 1 = Strongly Agree; 2 = Agree; 3 = Not sure; 4 = Disagree; 5 = Strongly Disagree

<sup>a</sup>Indicates if and the extent to which Pretest and Post test scores are different from each other.

<sup>b</sup>Based on positive ranks. <sup>c</sup>Based on negative ranks.