Internal Locus of Control and Knowledge of Etiquette as Antecedents to Business Attire Affect: An Exploratory Study into Causal Relationships

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Abstract

This study measured student self-perceptions of business etiquette knowledge and internal locus of control associated to positive feelings (affect) of wearing business attire. Higher Internal Locus of Control, or positive feelings associated with individual control over events surrounding one's life, was most strongly associated with Business Attire Affect (β=.696, p≤.05). Thus, the more individually in control of their life a student felt, the better they also felt when wearing business attire. The results of this study confirm the implication that student's higher perceptions of control over their own behavior or personal characteristics reinforce an outcome of higher affect. Higher affect toward business attire was significantly predictable as a consequence of higher internal locus of control and not a function of chance, luck, or fate, which would be associated with higher external locus of control.

Keywords: business, attire, affect, internal, locus, control, empirical

1. Introduction

Students in today's business schools face a quagmire of expectations as they pursue professional training. On one hand, they hear reports of how their generation does not understand or appreciate expectations of the workplace and how their generation "thinks" the workplace should change to accommodate their needs. On the other hand, they read reports of how work environments that recognize and nurture individual differences in employees actually add value to employees and create work that is intrinsically rewarding (Goffee &Jones, 2013). Should students conform to expectations or should they leverage their unique differences in enhancing a company's work environment?

While the answer to this question is really dependent on the individual student and on specific company needs, it is interesting to note the struggle between traditional workplace norms and societal trends. For example, traditional dress code for office workers is known as business dress.

This tradition was altered with the introduction of casual Fridays and now with the acceptance of "business casual" in many companies (Peluchette & Karl, 2007). While it is not as formal as business dress, business casual still maintains the tradition of not being casual in traditional business settings. With this said, some companies, like Google, are renowned for a causal environment that throws traditional workplace norms out of the window.

The concepts of traditional attire versus casual attire have therefore become subject to contextual interpretation at the individual and company levels more than ever before.

Adding to these changes in workplace norms are social trends that are changing the way people interact with each other. Given the availability of smart phones, texting, etc., interpersonal communications have become more casual and now influence the approach younger people take towards business interactions. Thus, there is growing sentiment that today's college students are more casual and less familiar with professional standards of business etiquette.

However, in the professional world the clothes we wear often not only have a power over others, but also over ourselves through social identification (Hajo & Galinsky, 2012). While one company cannot change the way a generation interacts with peers, can companies expect college graduates to enter the workplace with knowledge of how to behave in specific business situations? Should collegiate business schools be charged with developing this type of knowledge? This research study addresses this issue by investigating student perceptions related to professional dress etiquette and locus of control (Rotter 1954; 1990) as they relate to positive feelings, or affect, associated with wearing business attire.

2. Literature Review

Research on this topic is surprisingly thin, particularly as it relates to student self-perceptions of attire. However, Peluchette, Karl, and Rust (2006) investigated beliefs and attitudes regarding workplace attire within a sample population of MBA students. Results of their study indicated that those who value workplace attire use it also to manage impressions of others. In another study, Peluchette and Karl (2007) also reported that respondents believed workplace attire positively impacted the way they perceived themselves and contributed to positive workplace outcomes. Cardon and Okoro (2009) also investigated professional characteristics communicated by formal versus casual workplace attire and found that professional dress awareness is associated with authoritativeness and competence in the workplace.

Previous research also supports the notion that individuals use attire as a way to build their image in the workplace (Frith &Gleeson, 2004; Goffman, 2002; Peluchette et al., 2006; Rafaeli & Pratt, 1993; Trice & Beyer, 1993). Rafaeli and Pratt (1993) noted that workplace attire serves as a symbol to others and also influences their reactions to the wearer. However, much of this research has focused primarily on the perception of dress in others. For example, some studies have investigated instructor attire and student perceptions of teaching ability and engagement (Carr, Lavin, and Davis, 2009). Chowdhary (1990) investigated the notion of control and self-esteem in the workplace and found positive associations between these two variables and a preference for wearing professional clothing. Other studies have focused on recruiters and their positive or negative perceptions related to the professional dress of interviewees (Christman &Branson, 1990; Jenkens & Atkins, 1990). Still others have investigated supervisor perceptions of employees in performance reviews (Galin &Benoliel, 1990; Peluchette et al, 2006).

As noted by Peluchette and Karl (2007), however, most of these studies often ignore the role of the wearer and their own self perceptions of the "affect" of clothing on their appearance and performance in group work environments. This gap in research is particularly true at the entry level such as impending college graduates about to enter the workforce full time. This study therefore defines "Business Attire Affect" as a positive associated emotional feeling of confidence related to wearing business attire. One study conducted by Solomon and Schopler (1982) that did investigate this topic found that both males and females responded favorably when asked whether their appearance and attire influenced others impressions of them (Peluchette & Karl, 2007).

Related to those gaps in research, this study measures student self-perceptions of work place attire and locus of control related to wearing business attire in the workplace. Locus of control has its theoretical basis in Rotter's (1954) social-learning theory of personality. "Locus" is conceptualized as either *internal* or *external*. Internal locus relates to an individual's belief that they can control their life.

External locus relates to an individual's belief that their life is primarily controlled by others or other environmental influences over which they have little influence. In Rotter's (1990, p. 489) words, "internal versus external locus of control refers to the degree to which persons expect that a reinforcement or an outcome of their behavior is contingent on their own behavior or personal characteristics versus the degree to which persons expect that the reinforcement or outcome is a function of chance, luck, or fate, is under the control of powerful others, or is simply unpredictable".

Therefore, this study hypothesizes:

H_1: *Higher levels of Internal Locus of Control will positively relate to Business Attire Affect.*

While Peluchette and Karl (2007) noted that individuals often use the their attire to build their image in the workplace, it is also important for the individual to understand social and company norms as they relate to appropriate attire in the workplace. One individual's perception of appropriate etiquette for business attire in the workplace may differ significantly from another. In the case of students who have yet to enter the workforce full time, there may be a total lack of knowledge about business attire etiquette. Therefore, this study also hypothesizes:

H2: *Higher levels Business Etiquette Knowledge will positively relate to Business Attire Affect.*

3. Methodology

Given the limited research related to this topic, this study is primarily exploratory in nature. This research measures awareness of business dress codes and business etiquette, individual perceptions locus of control, and business attire "affect", or the level of positive associated emotional feelings associated with wearing business attire. A questionnaire was administered to students majoring in various areas of business at four (4) universities in the southern and southwestern areas of the United States.

In addition to seven demographic control questions, the questionnaire also included thirty-two (32) questions, nineteen (19) of which were Likert type questions pertaining directly to this study. Respondents were asked their levels of knowledge about dress code issues, dining etiquette, e-mail etiquette, office behavior, and job interview procedures. Total anonymity was followed, and no attempts were made to trace responses to any individual student. Responses were received from a total of 378 students.

3.1 Measures

The following measures were used in this study.

Business Attire Affect. Business attire affect (i.e. positive associated emotional feelings) was measured by a seven item, five point Likert style scale that showed excellent reliability (alpha coefficient = .90) with answer choices ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree". Two samples item in this measure are "The thought of putting on business attire makes me feel professional" and "The thought of putting on business attire makes me feel confident".

Internal Locus of Control. Internal Locus of control was gauged with a five item, five point Likert scale with answer choices ranging from "Never" to "Very Often" (alpha coefficient = .77). Two sample items in this measure are "How often do you feel you have little control over things that happen to you" and "How often do you feel that what happens to you in the future depends on you".

Business Etiquette Knowledge. Business Etiquette knowledge was tapped using a seven item, five point Likert style (alpha coefficient = .87) with answer choices ranging from "Nothing at all" to "A significant amount". Two examples of the items are "How much do you know about business dress expectations in the workplace?" and "How much do you know about business casual dress expectations in the workplace?"

4. Results

Table 1 shows a descriptive statistic breakdown of the respondents. As can be seen from the table, the respondents were almost evenly-divided with respect to gender. Concerning ethnic origin, the large majority of the respondents were Caucasian, with African-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, Asian-Americans, and Arabs coming next, respectively. There were slightly more marketing/hospitality management majors than management majors, followed by finance, accounting, majors outside the college of business administration, management information systems, and economics, respectively.

With respect to academic classification, there were more respondents who were seniors than any other classification, with juniors coming next, followed by sophomores, graduate students, and freshmen, respectively. Respondents' ages ranged from nineteen (19) to forty-four (44), with an average age of slightly more than twenty-two (22), and the standard deviation was 3.68. The median and modal age was twenty-one (21), which of course was in the largest of the three age categories (in fact, to be a bit more specific, the majority of the respondents were in the age category of 21 to 22 years old).

More than ninety (90) percent of the respondents had cumulative grade-point averages of 2.50/4.00 or better, with almost twenty (20) percent having cumulative grade-point averages between 3.50 to 4.00, (4.00 was the very highest grade-point average any student could earn). Lastly, more than sixty-four (64) percent of the respondents had before-tax annual incomes of less than fifteen thousand dollars ($15,000).

4.1 Data Analysis and Model Testing

To test initial item and construct discriminate and convergent validity, the authors conducted a principal-axes factor analysis using a Varimax rotation on the dependent variable and the 2 independent variables. The original set of 19items in the 3 measures was examined for overlapping items (Hair et al. 2013). Three discriminant factors were extracted. The results of this exploratory factor analysis are illustrated in **Table 2**. Initial Pearson Correlation Analysis also implied that locus of control and business etiquette knowledge were significantly and positively related to business attire affect in the study population

The hypotheses were then tested using multiple linear regression analysis in SPSS 21 software. The results of the regression model are shown in **Tables 3, 4, and 5** (r^2=.531, F=207.37, p$\leq$.01). The regression model supported the direction of results implied by the Pearson correlations. Internal Locus of control was positively related to business attire affect (β=.696, p$\leq$.05) supporting Hypothesis 1. Business etiquette knowledge was also significantly related to the dependent variable of business attire affect (β=.106, p$\leq$.05), thus supporting Hypothesis 2.

5. *Discussion and Conclusions*

This study measured student self-perceptions of business etiquette knowledge and internal locus of control associated to positive feelings (affect) of wearing business attire. Higher Internal Locus of Control, or positive feelings associated with individual control over events surrounding one's life, was most strongly associated with Business Attire Affect(β=.696, p$\leq$.05). Thus, the more individually in control of their life a student felt, the better they also felt when wearing business attire.

High internal locus of control has also been associated in research with higher levels of self-esteem (Rotter 1990). However, high Locus of Control also relates to knowledge of a situation, which creates comfort in one's ability to manage it. Thus, the results of this study appear to confirm the implication by Rotter (1990) that student's higher perceptions of control over their own behavior or personal characteristics reinforce an outcome of higher affect, or positive feelings associated with wearing business attire. Within this study, higher affect toward business attire is therefore significantly predictable as a consequence of higher internal locus of control and not a function of chance, luck, or fate, which would be associated with higher external locus of control.

Given the still positive, albeit not as strongly associated relationship between Business Etiquette Knowledge and Business Attire Affect (β=.106, p$\leq$.05), an implication of this study is that structured training, education and initiation regarding appropriate situations related to business attire in the workplace would be useful in many business colleges. While this may seem an intuitively basic implication, it is worth noting that the majority of business colleges do not provide formal courses in soft skill areas such as business etiquette and appropriate attire in the workplace. This important skill set is often left as an ancillary optional seminar provided by career services with limited participation. In addition, these seminars are often limited in their career or company culture based specifics (such as differences in workplace attire for accountants, engineers, nurses, etc.), which can be substantial and confusing when entering the work world.

While the linkage between the construct of business etiquette knowledge and positive emotions associated with wearing business attire in the workplace was not strong, there are implications which can be logically derived from the positive association. Within this sample, an increased level of business etiquette knowledge did relate positively to an increased level of positive feelings while wearing business attire in the workplace.

This association implies that better education of students as to appropriate business etiquette will impact their psychological pre-disposition to positive self-esteem and comfort when wearing business attire. For example, something as simple as educating gentlemen on the various and most appropriate ways to tie a tie and match accessories with business attire for specific business functions would positively affect their emotions toward those environments. An implication from this study could therefore be that there is a need for business schools to not only formally educate students within technical disciplinary topics, but also in "soft skills", such as business etiquette and appropriate attire.

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Table1: Sample Descriptive Characteristics (N = 378)

Demographic Characteristic	Percent of Respondents
Gender:	
Female	49.1
Male	50.9
Academic Major:	
Accounting	10.9
Management Information Systems	4.5
Economics	2.9
Finance	14.3
Management	26.6
Marketing & Hospitality Management	34.2
Other	6.6
Classification:	
Freshman	0.3
Sophomore	9.6
Junior	34.2
Senior	54.3
Graduate Student	1.6
Age Category:	
19 - 20 Years Old	24.2
21 - 22 Years Old	50.3
23 Years Old or Older	25.5
Average Age = 22.28 Years Old; Standard Deviation = 3.68; Median age = 21; Mode = 21; Range: from 19 to 44 Years Old	
Ethnic Origin:	
Caucasian	79.4
African-American	11.5
Hispanic-American	4.0
Asian-American	4.6
Middle Eastern	0.5

Table 2: The Measurement Item Rotated Component Matrix

Rotated Component Matrix[a]

	Component		
	1	2	3
BAA1	.835	.037	.027
BAA2	.867	.083	-.088
BAA3	.803	-.007	.155
BAA4	.833	-.025	.143
BAA5	.716	.070	-.001
BAA6	.704	.028	-.136
BA7	.721	.044	-.050
LC1	.002	-.060	.708
LC2	-.059	-.038	.768
LC3	.046	-.052	.765
LC4	.059	-.105	.703
LC5	-.029	-.087	.648
BEK1	.212	.759	-.082
BEK2	.093	.743	-.093
BEK3	-.024	.646	-.008
BEK4	.007	.734	-.053
BEK5	-.001	.811	-.108
BEK6	.007	.787	-.098
BEK7	-.015	.722	-.025

Note: BAA= Business Attire Affect, LC=Internal Locus of Control,BEK=Business Etiquette Knowledge
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.
Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

Tables 3-5: The Linear Regression Model

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.721[a]	.520	.519	.51044
2	.728[b]	.531	.528	.50542

Method: Stepwise

a. Predictors: (Constant), Locus of Control

b. Predictors: (Constant), Locus of Control, Business Etiquette Knowledge

ANOVA[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	103.818	1	103.818	398.452	.000[b]
	Residual	95.884	368	.261		
	Total	199.702	369			
2	Regression	105.950	2	52.975	207.377	.000[c]
	Residual	93.751	367	.255		
	Total	199.702	369			

a. Dependent Variable: Business Attire Affect

b. Predictors: (Constant), Internal Locus of Control

c. Predictors: (Constant), Internal Locus of Control, Business Etiquette Knowledge

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	-.041	.205		-.198	.843
	Locus of Control	.977	.049	.721	19.961	.000
2	(Constant)	-.354	.230		-1.542	.124
	Locus of Control	.943	.050	.696	18.904	.000
	Business Etiquette Knowledge	.121	.042	.106	2.889	.004

a. Dependent Variable: Business Attire Affect