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Instructor attire and student performance: Evidence from an undergraduate industrial organization experiment



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ABSTRACT

Four classes of the same Industrial Organization class were compared. The test group was taught by the instructor dressed in business attire, while the comparison group was taught by the instructor dressed casually. Results show that the attendance for test students was 8.50 percentage points higher than comparison students and this increase is associated with an improvement in their final exam score of 0.69 percentage points. Final exam scores for test students were 2.33 percentage points higher than comparison students. Together, the indirect and direct effects indicate that the total effect on learning from instructor attire is 3.02 percentage points.

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1. Introduction

New faculty and other educational professionals are often advised to “dress for the job you want” or to “dress professionally”. Moreover, most business schools and several Economics departments have implemented, or experimented with, professional dress codes for faculty. The literature on physical appearance in the classroom supports this advice to some extent by suggesting that students

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perceive faculty members dressed in formal attire to be better organized, better prepared and more knowledgeable than casually dressed faculty (Rollman, 1980; Leathers, 1992; Morris et al., 1996; Roach, 1997; Lavin et al., 2009a, 2009b). However, while it may provide a credibility signal from the faculty member, and improve their evaluations in student opinion surveys, the effects of instructor attire on actual student learning are largely unknown, particularly in the teaching of Economics. This study presents empirical findings from an ongoing research program examining the effects on student performance from the instructor dressing in Western business attire (“business attire”).

Four classes of an undergraduate Industrial Organization (IO) class at the University of Colorado, Boulder, one of the most business-orientated classes in the University's Economics program, were randomly assigned to comparison and test groups. The 158 students in these classes were taught by the same instructor but the students were not explicitly aware that they were participating in an evaluation. The sample students were observed to be representative and any differences in student characteristics between the comparison and test groups were accounted for in the empirical model of student performance. All other things being equal, there are three reasons why the test group may be expected to perform better than the comparison group in the evaluation. The first reason, which we call the “indirect effect”, is that students perceive a more professional attitude regarding teaching from the instructor dressed in business attire and attend more classes. The second reason, which we call the “direct effect”, is that instructor business attire positively influences student attention in the classroom through the perception that classroom concepts and activities are more important. Finally, because the instructor is knowingly participating in an experiment, the instructor may improve the quality of his teaching when dressed in business attire. We formally test for the indirect and direct effects with ordinary least squares (OLS) estimates from an empirical model with suitably specified control variables. The potential endogeneity of student attendance and experimenter bias, through a quality of teaching improvement, are ruled out with a robustness test and with an additional source of external evidence.

Model results show that the effect on student performance from instructor attire is both indirect and direct, and it is nontrivial. The attendance for students in the test group was 8.50 percentage points higher than comparison students and this increase is associated with an improvement in their cumulative final exam score of 0.69 percentage points. Controlling for attendance, final exam scores for test group students were about 2.33 percentage points higher than comparison students. Together, the indirect and direct effects indicate that the total effect on student learning from instructor attire is 3.02 percentage points, which, on average, is the difference between earning a C+ and a B– on the final exam. Although estimated from a relatively small subsample of female students, e.g., 26 out of 158 students, our results suggest that instructor attire does not significantly impact the attendance and/or final exam scores of female students and male students differently.

In the following section we review the recent literature and state the questions of interest. We then describe the data, outline the empirical model of student performance and present results.

2. Literature review and questions

Many perceptions of an individual are formed by observations of the clothing another is wearing. Whether accurate or not, these perceptions provide the observer with a foundation for relationship formation, communication and judgment making about the source's credibility (Morris, 1977; Rosenfeld and Plax, 1977; Bassett, 1979; Roach, 1997). Student–teacher interactions provide an interesting illustration of the importance of attire on perceptions. When a faculty member dressed in professional or business attire is perceived to be a more competent or credible instructor, students may rate that faculty member, and the course, more favorably. Such effects have heightened the evaluative importance in recent years of student opinion surveys, as universities move increasingly toward their use to evaluate the competence of faculty when determining salary, promotion, and tenure.

More generally, Haefner (2008) presents evidence that shows many employers believe that employees who dress more professionally were more deserving of being promoted. In related literature, Allan (1998), Coupland (2001) and Tan and See (2009) argued that television newscasters choose a formal business suit to signal authenticity and professionalism. This impression encourages

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