

The Effect of Attire on Forensic Competitors and Judges: Does Clothing Make a Difference?

*M. Anway Jones**

John T. Molloy's book *Dress for Success* (1975) and his companion text, *The Women's Dress for Success Book* (1977), have become the bibles of business dress for many corporate executives and working professionals across the United States. Although his fundamental premise in each of the books is not new, his advice about the particulars of business dress may be (Davis, 1984). Research conducted prior to and after Molloy published his "definitive" studies on business attire gives strength to his position that attire as a nonverbal component of communication plays a significant role in our daily encounters with others. For example, researchers have reported that attire is influential in first impression formation (Buckley, 1983; Conner, Peters, & Nagasawa, 1975; Hamid, 1969; Darley & Cooper, 1972; Hendricks, Kelley & Eicher, 1968; Lennon & Miller, 1984; and Rucker, Taber & Harrison, 1981); that a relationship exists between attire and personality (Dubler & Gurel, 1984; Hoult, 1954; Rosenfeld & Plax, 1977; and Taylor & Compton, 1968); that people tend to exhibit similar attitudes toward preferred clothing styles (Buckley & Roach, 1974; DeLong & Larntz, 1980; DeLong, Salusso-Deonier & Larntz, 1983; and Dillion, 1980); and that attire affects the credibility of individuals (Bassett, 1979; Forsythe, Drake & Cox, 1985; Korda, 1975; and Lang, 1986).

These particular research findings should be of interest to those concerned about adequately preparing our students to communicate effectively in real-world settings. One activity in particular that serves as an effective training ground for those real-world settings is forensic competition in public speaking, oral interpretation, and debate. One evaluation criterion common to all three competitive genres is delivery, and a component of delivery is appearance.

Although many leading texts in public speaking offer general advice about the need to create an effective appearance in order to gain credibility, no research to date has been conducted

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M. ANWAY JONES is Assistant Professor of Communication Studies at New Mexico State University, Las Cruces, NM 88003.

to determine specific guidelines or "rules" to follow when students confront different types of speaking occasions.¹

To validate the previous research findings and to make explicit the standards for attire in intercollegiate forensic competition, the author surveyed both competitors and judges at two national intercollegiate forensic tournaments. Prior to conducting the survey, several hypotheses were made: 1) that attire standards exist for both students and judges engaged in competitive speech communication events; 2) that a student's attire may affect the outcome of his or her rank and rating; 3) that a student's performance is affected by the chosen attire of competitors and judges, as well as his or her own attire; 4) that standards for attire conform to the "dress for success" models suggested by Molloy and others.

Procedure

Instrument

Two questionnaires were developed, one for students and one for judges. Students were asked sixteen direct questions eliciting attitudinal responses about the relationship between attire and performance. Additionally, students were requested to rank, from male and female attire, descriptions of their preferences for the proper attire of male and female judges as well as male and female competitors. Further, male and female competitors were asked to rank, from those same descriptions, their preferences for the attire that best enhanced their individual performances. The attire descriptions were developed from three categories identified as conservative, sport, and casual (Lang, 1986). The conservative descriptions were those types commonly found in real-world corporate settings or semi-formal social situations (Bixler, 1984; Jones & Kneblak, 1986; Mitchell & Burdick, 1983; Molloy, 1975; Molloy, 1977).²

Males were asked to rank from the following articles of clothing: 1) a long-sleeve shirt, slacks and tie (sport); 2) a blazer, shirt and tie (sport); 3) a complete matching suit with shirt without a tie (sport); 5) a shirt and jeans (casual); and 6) a long-sleeve shirt and slacks without a tie (sport).

Females were also asked to rank six descriptions developed from the three identical categories. Their choices were the fol-

¹ Though texts stress the need to adapt to particular audiences, they do not offer specifics with the exception of popular magazines such as *Success*, *MS*, *Management Solutions* *Management World*, and *Working Woman* which primarily address standards of attire for business presentations.

² The author argues that the models for appropriate dress have developed from the influence of Molloy and others. The influence is most obvious in the ideal look of the "Yuppy," an image marked by a conservative attire.

lowing articles of clothing: 1) a blouse and pants, not jeans (sport); 2) a dress (conservative); 3) jeans and a blouse (casual); 4) a blazer, skirt and a blouse (conservative); 5) a matching skirted suit (conservative); and 6) a matching pants suit (sport).

Judges were asked to respond to ten direct questions eliciting their attitudes toward the relationship of attire to a competitor's performance and to rank, from male and female attire descriptions, their preferences for the proper attire of the male and female competitor. Their options were identical to the students' options.

Methodology

Questionnaires were distributed to students and judges attending the 1986 Cross Examination Debate Association National Tournament sponsored by Wichita State University and the 1986 American Forensic Association National Individual Events Tournament sponsored by the University of Texas at Arlington. Students and judges who attended both tournaments were asked to respond only once to the questionnaires.

Four questions from the Students' Questionnaire were discarded because they were redundant, and those responses from both questionnaires that failed to follow our requested procedures were also eliminated.

Results

Students' Questionnaire

Combined percentages reveal that a majority of respondents not only believe that individual attire selections affect individual performances, but also the attire selections of judges as well as competitors influence a competitor's performance. With the exception of Question #2, however, no majority support a significant relationship of attire to performance (See Table 1).

Seventy-one percent of the 141 students who responded to Question #1 believe that the apparel and grooming of their judges affected their performance levels; only 28% of the respondents claim no effect at all. Eighty-six percent of those who answered Question #2 stated that a professionally dressed judge positively affects their performances, but only 14% believe the effect is negative. Of the 136 responses to Question #3, 71% assert that apparel and grooming of their fellow competitors in individual rounds affect their performance levels; the remaining 29% profess no effect. Only 8% of the 133 respondents claim no effect on their individual performance ratings because of their personal attire selections (See Question #4).

Male and female competitors prefer sports attire for male judges and conservative attire for female judges. Cumulative rankings of male and female students indicate that a blazer with slacks, shirt, and a tie rank first as the proper attire for male judges; a blazer, skirt, and blouse rank first as the proper attire for the female judge. The conservative male type ranks fifth among the six descriptions, yet the three conservative female types—the blazer, skirt, and blouse; the dress; the matching skirted suit—ranked first, second, and third respectively. Both sexes rank casual attire last (See Table 2).

Both male and female students prefer sports attire for male competitors; their first choice is the blazer with slacks, shirt, and tie. The conservative types for females ranks first, second, and third. Students prefer the matching skirted suit for female competitors.

Students rankings for the least preferred attire are consistent; casual attire ranks sixth (See Table 3). The cumulative rankings of male and female competitors are also consistent with their individual first choices. Males prefer the blazer with slacks, shirt, and tie; females prefer the matching skirted suit (See Tables 4 and 5).

Judges' Questionnaire

Combined percentages of the judges' responses reveal that they acknowledge a relationship of attire to performance, but no majority claim a significant effect of attire on performance (See Table 6). Eighty-five percent of those who responded to Question #1 believe that their perceptions of students' performances are affected by the competitors' attire; only 15% claim no effect. Whereas 90% of the 103 respondents to Question #2 think that a poor appearance harms a competitor's rank/rating, only 61% of the 117 respondents to Question #5 penalize a student's rank/rating because of poor appearance. On the other hand, 91% who answered Question #3 believe that a good appearance helps a competitor's rank/rating, but only 87% admit to coaching their students on proper appearance and grooming habits for competition. Of those, only thirty-six of the eighty-seven respondents (41%) coach students significantly about proper appearance and grooming habits (See Question #6).

Sixty-one percent assert that apparel and grooming standards differ between debate and individual events, but the researcher could not generalize nor categorize those differences due to contradictions. For example, some profess that debate is inherently more formal; consequently, it demands a more professional attire as described by Molloy and others for the corpo-

rate executive. Yet there are others who adamantly state that debate requires no standardization of attire. Still other judges believe that debaters should dress neatly, but informally.

A large number of judges think that individual events contestants should be more formal in their attire than debaters, but that speakers should not be restricted to a conservative model. Public speakers should select attire appropriate to their personality and personal preference while oral interpreters should not only consider personality and personal preference, but they also should consider the personae in the text(s) performed.

Judges are consistent with students in ranking preferences for male and female competitors' attire. With the exception of one inversion tabulated for the male attire, the preferences are identical (See Table 7).

Conclusion

The results of this study confirm all but one of the original hypotheses. Both students and judges claim that attire is influential, that attire standards exist in forensic competition for male and female competitors as well as for male and female judges (though the standards for students are more conservative than they are for judges), and that standards for female judges and competitors are more conservative than they are for male competitors and judges. Furthermore, a student's attire may affect his or her rating and may influence other competitors' performances.

As predicted, both students and judges prefer the conservative descriptions for female competitors; however, students and judges do not prefer the male conservative type as the proper attire for competitors and judges. Though many might consider the blazer with slacks, shirt, and tie a conservative style of dress, the description does not conform to the preferred "dress for success" model in many major corporations nor does it conform to the expected standard of dress for semi-formal functions (Bixler, 1984; Jones & Kneblak, 1986; and Molloy, 1975).

Although the results certainly support the notion that attire is an important component of performance, one cannot conclude that a successful or unsuccessful performance depends significantly upon attire nor can one view attire as an independent variable with carries greater importance than other variables within a round of competition. Thus, further research is warranted to determine the significance of attire in relation to other variables in performance as well as to test the free-choice preferences of competitors and judges for clothing styles, colors, prints, and fabrics.

Table 1**Students' Study Questions and Results**

		Male Responses		Female Responses		Total	
1. Do apparel and grooming of your judge affect your performance level?	Significantly	2	2%	4	8%	6	4%
	Somewhat	31	34%	24	48%	55	39%
	Very Little	26	29%	14	28%	40	28%
	Not at All	<u>32</u>	<u>35%</u>	<u>8</u>	<u>16%</u>	<u>40</u>	<u>28%</u>
	Total	91	100%	50	100%	141	100%
2. If your judge is professionally dressed, how is your performance affected?	Positively	52	91%	27	87%	79	86%
	Negatively	<u>9</u>	<u>9%</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>13%</u>	<u>13</u>	<u>14%</u>
	Total	61	100%	31	100%	92	100%
3. Do apparel and grooming of your fellow competitors in your round affect your performance level?	Significantly	7	8%	7	15%	14	10%
	Somewhat	31	34%	24	52%	55	40%
	Very Little	19	21%	9	20%	28	21%
	Not at All	<u>33</u>	<u>37%</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>13%</u>	<u>39</u>	<u>29%</u>
	Total	90	100%	46	100%	136	100%
4. To what degree does your attire affect your performance level?	Significantly	17	20%	24	49%	41	31%
	Somewhat	39	46%	16	33%	55	41%
	Very Little	19	23%	7	14%	26	20%
	Not at All	<u>9</u>	<u>11%</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>4%</u>	<u>11</u>	<u>8%</u>
	Total	84	100%	49	100%	133	100%

*Percentages were rounded off.

*Not all students responded to all questions

Table 2
Students' Cumulative Rankings of Male and Female Judge's Attire

Male Attire	M	F	Cum	Female Attire	M	F	Cum
Long sleeve shirt, slacks with tie	2	1	2	Blouse and pants (not jeans)	4	2	4
Blazer, slacks with shirt and tie	1	2	1	Dress	3	3	2
Complete matching suit, shirt and tie	5	5	5	Jeans and blouse (shirt)	6	6	6
Blazer, slacks with shirt and no tie	3	3	3	Blazer, skirt and blouse	2	1	1
Shirt and jeans	6	6	6	Matching skirted suit	1	4	3
Long sleeve shirt and slacks without tie	4	4	4	Matching pants suit	5	5	5

**Cumulative rankings were determined by adding the total rankings of male and female rankings prior to determining the final individual group rankings.*

Table 3
Students' Cumulative Rankings of Male and Female Attire for Competitors

Male Attire	M	F	Cum	Female Attire	M	F	Cum
Long sleeve shirt, slacks with tie	3	3	3	Blouse and pants (not jeans)	5	5	5
Blazer, slacks with shirt and tie	1	1	1	Dress	3	3	3
Complete matching suit, shirt and tie	2	2	2	Jeans and blouse (shirt)	6	6	6
Blazer, slacks with shirt and no tie	4	4	4	Blazer, skirt and blouse	2	2	2
Shirt and jeans	5	5	5	Matching skirted suit	1	1	1
Long sleeve shirt and slacks without tie	6	6	6	Matching pants suit	4	4	4

Table 4
Male Preference for Attire that Best Enhances Performance Level

	Number	Percentage	Rank
Long sleeve shirt, slacks with tie	15	18%	2
Blazer, slacks with shirt and tie	39	47%	1
Complete matching suit, shirt and tie	15	18%	2
Blazer, slacks with shirt and no tie	0	0	5
Shirt and jeans	12	15%	3
Long sleeve shirt and slacks without tie	2	2%	4

Table 5
Female Preference for Attire that Best Enhances Performance Level

	Number	Percentage	Rank
Blouse and pants (not jeans)	0	0	4
Dress	11	25%	2
Jeans and blouse (shirt)	0	0	4
Blazer, skirt and blouse	5	11%	3
Matching skirted suit	28	64%	1
Matching pants suit	0	0	4

Table 6
Judges' Study Questions and Results

		CEDA		AFA		Total	
1. Does the attire of competitors affect your perception of their performance?	Significantly	2	6%	11	14%	13	12%
	Somewhat	14	40%	40	52%	54	48%
	Very Little	12	34%	16	21%	28	25%
	Not at All	7	20%	10	13%	17	15%
	Total	35	100%	77	100%	112	100%
2. How much can a poor appearance harm a competitor's rank/rating?	Significantly	1	4%	9	12%	10	10%
	Somewhat	10	38%	34	44%	44	43%
	Very Little	11	42%	27	35%	38	37%
	Not at All	4	16%	7	9%	11	10%
	Total	26	100%	77	100%	103	100%
3. How much can a good appearance help a competitor's rank/rating?	Significantly	2	6%	7	8%	9	7%
	Somewhat	18	51%	49	58%	67	56%
	Very Little	11	31%	22	26%	33	28%
	Not at All	4	12%	7	8%	11	9%
	Total	35	100%	85	100%	120	100%
4. Do apparel and grooming standards differ between debate and individual speaking events?	Yes	24	71%	46	57%	70	61%
	No	10	29%	35	43%	45	39%
	Total	34	100%	81	100%	115	100%

Table 6 (Continued)
Judges' Study Questions and Results

		CEDA		AFA		Total	
5. Do you penalize a student's rank/rating because of a poor appearance?	Often	1	3%	5	6%	6	5%
	Sometimes	8	24%	19	23%	27	23%
	Seldom	10	29%	28	34%	38	33%
	Never	15	44%	31	37%	46	39%
	Total	34	100%	83	100%	117	100%
6. To what extent do you coach your students on proper appearance and grooming habits for competition?	Significantly	13	43%	23	40%	36	41%
	Somewhat	6	20%	16	19%	17	20%
	Very Little	7	23%	7	28%	23	26%
	Not at All	4	13%		12%	11	13%
	Total	30	99%	57	99%	87	100%

*Percentages do not always equal 100 because the numbers were rounded off.

*Not all judges responded to all questions.

Table 7
Judges' Cumulative Rankings of Male and Female Attire for Competitors

Male Attire	Rank	Female Attire	Rank
Long sleeve shirt, slacks with tie	4	Blouse and pants (not jeans)	5
Blazer, slacks with shirt and tie	1	Dress	3
Complete matching suit, shirt and tie	2	Jeans and blouse (shirt)	6
Blazer, slacks with shirt and no tie	4	Blazer, skirt and blouse	2
Shirt and jeans	6	Matching skirted suit	1
Long sleeve shirt and slacks without tie	5	Matching pants suit	4

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