

**What Not to Wear: An Exploration of How Teacher Attire Shapes Students' Perceptions**

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### **Introduction/Theoretical Framework**

The primary job of agriculture teachers is to impart knowledge regarding specific concepts to students (Talbert, Vaughn, Croom, & Lee, 2007). Studies have shown “teachers can gain more credibility from their students when they dress more formally” (Dunbar & Segrin, 2012, p. 3). The responsibilities of the agriculture teacher differ considerably from those of other teachers, and include regularly delivering instruction in laboratories outside of the traditional classroom (Shoulders & Myers, 2012). Studies in career and technical education found the teacher’s attire should align with the occupational attributes expected of a leader in that setting in order to display interest and willingness to participate in the subject (Gordon, 2010).

This study was designed according to the tenets of expectancy violations theory (EVT), which states both societal and individual expectations contribute to perceptions of those whose behavior deviates from cultural expectations (Dunbar & Segrin, 2012). Societal norms lead students to expect teachers to dress with a “moderate degree of formality” (Dunbar & Segrin, 2012, p. 3). Violations of these expectancies, such as overly formal or informal attire, can draw attention due to their novelty (Dunbar & Segrin, 2012). The unique roles of the agriculture teacher deviate from the roles of the typical teacher (Terry & Briers, 2010). Therefore, a question regarding students’ perceptions of agriculture teacher dress is presented: do students view the moderate formal attire expected of teachers as a violation of their expectations of the agriculture teacher? Alternately, do students’ expectations of the agriculture teacher deviate enough from their expectations of other teachers to lead to acceptance of less formal attire?

### **Purpose/Methodology**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore high school students’ perceptions of agriculture teacher attire. We utilized a method of examining clothing effects adapted from Butler and Roesel (1991) and Morris, Gorham, Cohen, and Huffman (1996), wherein sixteen photographs (older male, older female, younger male, and younger female, each wearing formal, business casual, casual, or ultra-casual outfits) of adults were used to represent agriculture teachers dressed in different “levels” of attire. We conducted focused interviews, used to determine the influence of “a uniform stimulus...on an interviewee” (Flick, 2006, p. 150), with students at two high schools in Washington County, Arkansas over the period of two weeks, at which point we determined data saturation was reached and interest in participation had waned. Teacher dress codes in the schools were similar, with agriculture teachers regularly wearing casual or ultra-casual attire. Both schools had two male agriculture teachers, while one also had one female agriculture teacher. Students at each school were asked to randomly select a number between one and 16, which determined the photograph shown to the student. Questions following the research-developed focused interview guide were asked; students were asked to identify the role the model had in the public school system, then after some follow-up questions, were told the model was a teacher, and once again after follow-up questions, were told the model was an agriculture teacher. The interviews concluded with a final set of follow-up questions after identification of the model as an agriculture teacher. Responses were audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim. Data was analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) methods of evaluating qualitative research were used to ensure rigor. To ensure credibility, triangulation of sources (Denzin, 1978; Patton, 1999), namely students between schools, was conducted. Thick description, specifically involving

conducting interviews until data saturation was reached, established transferability. An internal inquiry audit was performed to ensure dependability, while triangulation between researchers' findings was conducted to establish confirmability.

### **Findings/Conclusions/Recommendations**

All students interviewed used attire to establish impressions regarding the models' role in the school, knowledge level, and interactions with students. Students with direct experiences with agriculture classes, those aware of but not enrolled in agriculture classes, and those not aware of agriculture classes, shared perceptions regarding about teachers dressing both formally (wearing slacks or a skirt and a dress shirt or blouse) and informally (wearing jeans and a polo or t-shirt). From all students, formally dressed models elicited impressions of strict classroom management, a disconnected and impersonal manner with the students, and high levels of subject-based knowledge. Informally dressed models elicited impressions of an easy going nature, a connected and personal manner with students, and as leaders of easy classes, again from all students. The perceptions they held regarding agriculture teachers dressed formally and informally, however, regardless of age or gender of the models, differed by students' relationships with agricultural education. Those enrolled in agriculture classes viewed formally dressed agriculture teachers as lacking knowledge about agriculture. They held little respect for the formally-dressed agriculture teacher and frequently refused to accept this model as an agriculture teacher. Students that were aware of but not enrolled in agriculture classes perceived the formally-dressed agriculture teachers as knowledgeable, but different than the formally-dressed core teacher in that he or she was more connected to the students and more easy-going, leading to a higher level of respect from these students. Students unaware of agricultural education expressed no difference between their perceptions of the formally dressed core teacher and the formally dressed agriculture teacher. Regarding the informally-dressed agriculture teachers, students enrolled in agriculture classes perceived these models as highly knowledgeable in agriculture and indicated holding a high level of respect for them. Both students that were aware of but not enrolled in agriculture classes and students that were not enrolled in agriculture classes maintained that the informally dressed teacher, regardless of subject taught, was connected to the students, established an easy-going class atmosphere, and led an easy class.

As has been established by previous studies (Dunbar & Segrin, 2012), attire was utilized by all participants to establish impressions of teachers. Students' relationships with agricultural education influenced their impressions regarding teacher dress. Viewing these conclusions through the tenets of EVT, we posit agriculture students' expectations of agriculture teachers differ from their expectations of traditional teachers, causing them to view the agriculture teacher dressed in the attire expected for a traditional teacher as a violation of their expectations. For those aware of but not enrolled in agriculture classes, students' expectations of the agriculture program are different from their expectations of other academic programs, but not so much so that they expect agriculture teachers to violate traditional teacher wardrobe behaviors.

Students build their expectations of the agriculture teacher and program through their experiences; teachers should be cognizant of their attire and purposefully select clothing that elicits the impressions they seek to build. Researchers are encouraged to quantitatively determine the impact of agriculture teacher attire on students' perceptions of the agriculture program, as this qualitative study should not be generalized beyond the context herein.

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