# Smart and Sexy? Major and Clothing's Influence on Perceptions of Intelligence

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# ABSTRACT

First impressions have been found predictive of both immediate and sustained beliefs as well as the behavior of the perceiver. One hundred and seventy one undergraduates at a public mid-sized university rated a photographed female on perceived levels of intelligence and personality based on clothing style (conservative or provocative dress) and attributed major (female- or maledominated). A significant correlation between intelligence and GPA prediction showed that GPA can be considered an accurate indicator of the intelligence. Clothing style and attributed major showed significant main effects and an interaction for ratings of intelligence. A female dressed provocatively in a female-dominated major. Females who dress provocatively in their femaledominated roles may be seen as less intelligent because to succeed in a female-dominated profession, one would need to conform to the expected conservative dress. Results from this study provide women with a better understanding of how their chosen collegiate major and clothing style affect the opinions of others, allowing women to portray themselves more clearly, intelligently, and professionally in academia.

## INTRODUCTION

It is the first day of class and students file into the classroom wondering what is in store for the rest of the semester. What they may not realize is how their clothing choice of the day may impact the judgments of their intelligence and personality by both their classmates and professors. Individuals make rapid judgments about new stimuli based on the attributes of the stimulus; for example, when the perceiver quickly judges off both verbal and nonverbal cues. Research has found first impressions to be predictive of immediate opinions and beliefs (Behling & Williams, 1991; Davis, 1987; Francis & Evans, 1988; Greenlees, Buscombe, Thelwell, Holder, & Rimmer, 2005; Johnson, Schofield, & Yurchisin, 2002; Marcus & Lehman, 2002; Satrapa, Melhado, Coelho, Otta, Taubemblatt, & Siqueira, 1992), later impressions (Bar, Neta, & Linz, 2006) and the behavior of the perceiver toward the target (Rucker, Taber, & Harrison, 1981).

First impressions also become lasting impressions. Bar et al. (2006) found that consistent impressions of intelligence were formed within 39 milliseconds (ms) of seeing a face and threatening impressions are formed in only 26-ms. The impressions formed after only 39-ms of exposure were also highly correlated with the impressions formed after 1700-ms of exposure. Since impressions about personal characteristics are formed so quickly and tend to remain unaltered, first impressions are vital to how we present ourselves in certain situations.

Johnson et al. (2002) investigated the perceived accuracy of first impressions based on appearance and dress cues. They found that 77% of participants felt that their impressions were accurate at least some of the time. When asked if impressions formed by others about them based on appearance and dress would be accurate, the majority of participants, 69%, felt that impressions made of them would be at least somewhat accurate.

First impressions are affected by a variety of different cues including body language (Greenlees et al., 2005), sex (Behling & Williams, 1991; Marcus & Lehman, 2002), race (Behling, 1995), physical ability (Christman & Branson, 1990), and facial features (Bar et al., 2006). The current study focused on perceptions of intelligence in regard to two types of cues – collegiate major and clothing style.

#### Collegiate Major

Davis (1987) explored the concept of sex-linked occupations and their influence on perceptions. Sex-linked occupations are those where at least 80% of the persons employed are of the same gender. Participants were informed of a model's occupation and then asked to rate the model on occupational success (Davis, 1987). Results

showed that occupational success was rated highest for the masculine jobs followed by the gender-neutral jobs. Feminine jobs had the lowest perceived occupational success.

Academic majors can be used as a proxy for occupational achievement when utilizing college students as respondents. Satrapa et al. (1992) found that models from a variety of majors were rated differently on several personality attributes, including introversion, charm, attractiveness, and sympathy. However, no significant difference was found for intelligence ratings in their study. The current study used a description of either a maledominated or female-dominated major and then asked college students to rate the model for intelligence and collegiate success.

## Clothing Style

Many researchers have evaluated the influence clothing styles have on impression formation. Although some research does not support a clothing style effect on perceptions (e.g., Francis & Evans, 1988; Greenlees et al., 2005), most of the research supported a significant effect. When focused on perceptions related to occupational success and achievement, most findings indicated that success is positively correlated with formality of dress (Davis, 1987; Francis & Evans, 1988; Kwon & Johnson-Hillery, 1998; Rucker et al., 1981). In a study examining the effect of clothing style on high school success ratings, students and teachers rated formally dressed female models as more intelligent than more casually dressed models (Behling & Williams, 1991). In the Behling and Williams' study, the formal clothing consisted of a skirt suit and heels, whereas the casual clothing consisted of jeans, a t-shirt, and tennis shoes. Models in the formal dress were also rated higher than those in casual dress for academic achievement as defined by estimated GPA and perceived level of achieved education. In addition, as the formality of the dress increased, the occupations were generally considered more male-dominated professions (Kwon & Johnson-Hillery, 1998; Rucker et al., 1981). Both males and females rated the formal look to be associated with high status masculine occupations.

Models in provocative clothing are taken less seriously yet judged as more attractive and assertive (Cahoon & Edmonds, 1989; Edmonds, Cahoon, & Hudson, 1992). In addition, according to Glick, Larsen, Johnson, and Brenstiter (2005), a female who is dressed in a sexy manner in a high status, managerial position is perceived as significantly less competent and intelligent than a conservatively dressed female in the same position.

#### Purpose and Rationale

Currently, research on the interaction between clothing style and collegiate major on perceived academic success is nonexistent. Studies have investigated the two variables independently, but without investigating the potential interactions. The current study has potential benefits to female students in order to maximize the positive impressions they receive from both peers and teachers. By acknowledging the influence of appearance and clothing cues on the impressions formed by others, students can "dress to impress" and maximize their intelligence. Simply knowing how to dress to make a lasting first impression could influence acceptance into a dream job or graduate school.

This study evaluated college students' perceptions of intelligence based on clothing style (provocative or conservative), and major description (male-dominated or female-dominated). The independent variables were type of dress (provocative or conservative clothing) and major description (male-dominated or female-dominated major). The hypotheses were that (a) women wearing more conservative clothing styles would be judged more positively (on personality and intelligence) than women wearing provocative clothing, that (b) women labeled as having female-dominated majors would be rated more positively (on personality and intelligence) than women in male-dominated majors and that (c) the female model wearing provocative clothing with a description containing a male-dominated major would have lower ratings of success than the same model with a female-dominated major description.

## METHOD

Participants were 171 undergraduates at a public mid-sized university taking a public speaking course (63% were female, with a mean age of 18.60 years). Ninety-four percent of the participants were Caucasian, 3.5% were Asian, 1.2% African American, and .6% for both Latino and "other." Regarding the participants' year in school, the majority (79.5%) were Freshmen, with 15.2% Sophomores, 4.7% Juniors, and the remaining were Seniors or above. The students showed a relatively proportionate distribution to the academic colleges on campus. In this sample of 171 participants, 67 were College of Science and Health, 48 were undecided, 22 were Business Administration, 20 were College of Liberal Studies, 11 were School of Education, and the remaining 3 were School of Arts and Communication students.

This study consisted of a 2X2X2 between subjects design. Upon arrival at the study, participants were randomly assigned to a condition where they were shown either a picture of a provocatively dressed or conservatively dressed model. The same model was used for both pictures and all aspects of the photo were held constant except for the type of clothing, see Figure 1 and 2. The picture was accompanied by a description of the model where only the type of major was varied. The major was either Pre-Sports Management (male-dominated) or Early Childhood Education (female-dominated). Finally, the third independent variable was participants' gender.



Figure 1. Photograph used for the provocative condition.



Figure 2. Photograph used for the conservative condition.

The male- and female-dominated majors were chosen from the fall 2006 census of the same mid-sized public university where this study was conducted. Pre-Sports Management consisted of 102 men out of 130 total students; whereas, Early Childhood Education included 117 females out of 125 students. A pilot study confirmed that these majors are perceived male- or female-dominated. Out of 30 participants, 24 perceived Pre-Sports Management as male-dominated, 6 as neutral, and no participants perceived the major as female-dominated. For Early Childhood Education, 27 participants perceived the major as female-dominated, 3 neutral and once again, no participants perceived it as the opposing gender.

The picture and description of the model were displayed to participants for 25 seconds and then removed. Participants were then asked to fill out a questionnaire form. On the questionnaire, participants rated the model using a semantic differential scale which included 18 bi-polar pairs of adjectives regarding personality aspects such as intelligent/unintelligent and caring/uncaring. In addition, participants predicted the GPA of the model and her chances at occupational success. Basic demographics were also collected on the participants.

## RESULTS

A MANOVA was used to test the effects of clothing style, attributed major and participant's gender on their perceptions of intelligence. A Pearson Product Correlation showed that intelligence ratings (M = 5.02, SD = .92) are significantly correlated with predicted GPA (M = 3.33, SD = .30), r = .39, p = .00. The main effects for clothing style and attributed major were significant for ratings of intelligence. Clothing style also had significant main effects for conservativeness, as well as morality. Provocative dress, with a mean intelligence rating of 4.84 (SD = 1.08) showed significantly lower intelligence ratings than the conservative dress, with a mean intelligence rating of 5.16 (SD = .74), where a 1 represented "unintelligent" and a 7 "intelligent," F = 6.25, p = .01. Provocative dress, with a mean rating of 4.04 (SD = 1.19) showed significantly higher liberal ratings than the conservative dress, with a mean liberal rating of 3.60 (SD = 1.06), where a 1 represented "conservative" and a 7 "liberal," F = 4.59, p = .03. Provocative dress, with a mean rating of 4.86 (SD = .96) showed significantly lower morality ratings than the

conservative dress, with a mean morality rating of 5.24 (SD = 1.01), where a 1 represented "immoral" and a 7 "moral," F = 4.89, p = .03.

Attributed major also showed a significant main effect for intelligence. Female-dominated major, with a mean rating of 4.83 (SD = .91) showed significantly lower intelligence ratings than the male-dominated major, with a mean intelligence rating of 5.21 (SD = .89), F = 12.30, p = .00. Four significant interactions were also obtained, see Table 1.

**Table 1.** MANOVA of the Intelligence Rating Scale upon Clothing Style, Attributed Major, and Participant's Gender.

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Source of Variance	df	F	р
Clothing Style			
(Unintelligent/Intelligent)	1,163	6.25	.01
(Conservative/Liberal)	1,163	4.59	.03
(Immoral/Moral)	1,163	4.89	.03
Attributed Major			
(Unintelligent/Intelligent)	1,163	12.30	.00
Clothing Style x Attributed Major (Unintelligent/Intelligent)	1,163	7.22	.01
Participant Gender x Attributed Major			
(Attractive/Unattractive)	1,163	5.09	.02
(Charming/Irritating)	1,163	5.16	.02
(Feminine/Masculine)	1,163	4.13	.04

One interaction involved intelligence ratings based upon the clothing style and the attributed major of the model. A post hoc analysis on the relationship between clothing style and attributed major regarding intelligence showed significantly lower intelligence ratings for the model who was provocatively dressed and in a female-dominated major (M = 4.39; SD = 1.05) than the same provocatively dressed model in male-dominated major (M = 5.24; SD = .94), F = 7.22, p = .01. There was no significant difference within the conservative dress regardless of major, see Table 2 and Figure 3.

**Table 2.** Means and Standard Deviations of Unintelligent/Intelligent dependent upon the Attributed Major and Clothing Style.

	Provocative M (SD)	Conservative M (SD)
Pre-Sports Management	5.24 (.94) <sup>a</sup>	5.18 (.84) <sup>ab</sup>
Early Childhood Education	4.39 (1.05) <sup>b</sup>	5.14 (.64) <sup>ab</sup>
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Note: Means in the chart with different superscripts are significantly different.



**Figure 3**. Intelligence ratings based on attributed major and clothing style. A female dressed provocatively in a male-dominated major is perceived as significantly more intelligent than that same female attributed to a female-dominated major. Points depict the mean ratings of the model.

The other three interactions involved ratings based on participant gender and attributed major. The three dependent variables were ratings on attractiveness, charming nature, and femininity. Post hoc analysis on the

relationship between participant gender and attributed major regarding unattractiveness, showed significantly higher unattractiveness ratings in the male-dominated major, when rated by a female participant (M = 3.67; SD = .17) rather than when rated by a male participant (M = 2.95; SD = .18), F = 5.09, p = .02, where a 1 represented "attractive" and a 7 was "unattractive." No significant differences were seen within the female-dominated major; see Table 3 and Figure 4.

Table 3. Means and Standard Deviations of Attractive/Unattractive depender
upon the Attributed Major and Participant's Gender.

	Male M (SD)	Female $M(SD)$
Pre-Sports Management	2.95 (.18) <sup>a</sup>	3.67 (.17) <sup>b</sup>
Early Childhood Education	3.35 (.23) <sup>ab</sup>	3.19 (.15) <sup>ab</sup>
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Note: Means in the chart with different superscripts are significantly different.



**Figure 4.** Attractiveness ratings based on participant gender and male- or female-dominated major. A model in a male-dominated major is perceived as significantly more unattractive when rated by a female participant rather than by a male. Points depict the mean ratings of the model.

Post hoc analysis on the relationship between participant gender and attributed major regarding the level of irritating, where a 1 represented "charming" and a 7 "irritating," was seen as significantly more irritating by a female participant viewing the male-dominated major (M = 3.74; SD = .16), as well as male participants viewing the female-dominated major (M = 3.43; SD = .14) and male participants were viewing the female-dominated major (M = 3.43; SD = .14) and male participants were viewing the male-dominated major (M = 3.47, SD = .18), F = 5.16, p = .02. See Table 4 and Figure 5.

**Table 4.** Means and Standard Deviations of Charming/Irritating dependent upon the Attributed Major and Participant's Gender.

	Male M (SD)	Female M (SD)
Pre-Sports Management	3.47 (.18) <sup>ab</sup>	3.74 (.16) <sup>ab</sup>
Early Childhood Education	3.96 (.22) <sup>b</sup>	3.43 (.14) <sup>a</sup>

Note: Means in the chart with different superscripts are significantly different.



**Figure 5.** Charming or irritating ratings based on participant gender and male- or female-dominated major. Females perceive other females in a male-dominated major as more attractive than the males perceive that same model. Points depict the mean ratings of the model.

Post hoc analysis on the relationship between participant gender and attributed major regarding masculinity ratings, where a 1 was "feminine" and a 7 was "masculine," showed significantly higher masculinity ratings by a female participant viewing the male-dominated major (M = 2.12; SD = .14), as well as male participants viewing the female-dominated major (M = 2.20; SD = .19). The model was given significantly higher femininity ratings when female participants were viewing the female-dominated major (M = 1.81; SD = .13) and male participants were viewing the male-dominated major (M = 1.81; SD = .13) and male participants were viewing the male-dominated major (M = 1.81; SD = .13) and male participants were viewing the male-dominated major (M = 1.81; SD = .13) and male participants were viewing the male-dominated major (M = 1.81; SD = .13) and male participants were viewing the male-dominated major (M = 1.81; SD = .13) and male participants were viewing the male-dominated major (M = 1.81; SD = .13) and male participants were viewing the male-dominated major (M = 1.81; SD = .13) and male participants were viewing the male-dominated major (M = 1.81; SD = .13) and male participants were viewing the male-dominated major (M = 1.81; SD = .13) and male participants were viewing the male-dominated major (M = 1.81; SD = .13) and male participants were viewing the male-dominated major (M = 1.81; SD = .16), F = 4.13, p = .04. See Table 5 and Figure 6.

Table 5. Means and Standard Deviations of Feminine/Masculine dependen
upon the Attributed Major and Participant's Gender.

	Male $M(SD)$	Female M (SD)
Pre-Sports Management	1.88 (.16) <sup>a</sup>	2.12 (.14) <sup>b</sup>
Early Childhood Education	2.20 (.19) <sup>b</sup>	1.81 (.13) <sup>a</sup>
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Note: Means in the chart with different superscripts are significantly different.



Figure 6. Feminine/Masculinity ratings based on participant gender and male- or female-dominated major. Males perceive females in a male-dominated major and females perceive females in a femaledominated major as more feminine than males see females in a female-dominated major and a female sees a female in a female-dominated major. Points depict the mean ratings of the model.

## DISCUSSION

The hypotheses of this study were that (a) women wearing more conservative clothing styles would be judged more positively (on personality and intelligence) than women wearing provocative clothing, that (b) women labeled having female-dominated majors would be rated more positively (on personality and intelligence) than women in male-dominated majors and that (c) the female model wearing provocative clothing and described as having a male-dominated major would have lower ratings of success than the same model with a female-dominated major description.

Results confirm the hypothesis that women in conservative clothing were seen more positively in aspects of being more intelligent, conservative, and moral. Results disconfirm the hypotheses stating that women in a maledominated major are perceived as more intelligent than women in a female-dominated major. Results also disconfirm the hypotheses stating that a female dressed provocatively in a female-dominated major was perceived as significantly less intelligent than that same female attributed to a male-dominated major.

In academic settings, GPA is often a proxy for a student's academic achievement. A significant correlation between intelligence and GPA prediction showed that GPA can be considered an accurate indicator of the intelligence level for college students.

### Clothing Style

Looking at the influence of provocative or conservative dress alone on females, significant relationships were seen for ratings of her intelligence, liberalness, and morality. First, provocative dress showed significantly lower intelligence ratings than conservative dress. This may be explained by the stereotypes that females who dress more provocatively are doing so in order to get their way by dressing sexy. Alternatively, when dressing conservatively, a woman is looking to make a good impression based on her intelligence, not looks. Cahoon and Edmonds (1989) support this finding through their interpretation that models wearing sexy clothes are often interpreted as more likely to use sex appeal to a greater extent for personal gain in their academic or career goals.

In addition to intelligence, provocative dress showed significantly higher liberal ratings than conservative dress. This may be explained because wearing conservative clothing is seen as being traditional, cautious, and conforming to societal norms. On the other hand, provocative clothing expresses more of a sexual openness which implies the liberal ideas of freedom and change.

Provocative dress also showed significantly lower morality ratings than conservative dress. This may be explained by the stereotype of provocatively dressed females being more open with their sexuality and less likely to conform to standard social norms for sexual behavior. Therefore, the conservatively dressed model was seen as more moral since she was adapting to the norms and conventions for morality in society by covering herself up.

#### Collegiate Major

Perceptions of the female model not only varied by the type of dress, but also by the major attributed to the model. Type of major influenced intelligence ratings of the female model regardless of clothing style. The model in a female-dominated major was rated as having significantly lower intelligence than the same model in a male-dominated major. This is likely because western society favors the male gender. Traditionally, females in all occupations are expected to have to compete with their male counterparts and fight an endless battle against the glass ceiling. The glass ceiling describes a situation encountered by a qualified female who is unable to attain the same level of advancement and status as her male counterpart. To achieve status in a male-dominated field, the female must become more qualified and outperform her male colleagues. Therefore, a female attempting success in a male-dominated major was seen as having to be more intelligent than the "average" female to overcome the challenges of the glass ceiling (Wood, 2005).

#### Clothing and Collegiate Major

Significant interactions between clothing style and collegiate major were also found for intelligence, attractiveness, perceptions as irritating, and femininity. A female dressed provocatively in a female-dominated major was perceived as significantly less intelligent than that same female attributed to a male-dominated major, see Figure 3. Females who dress provocatively in their female-dominated roles may be seen as less intelligent because to succeed in a female-dominated profession, one would need to conform to other females with the expected conservative dress. Wearing provocatively dressed clothing is not adapting to the cultural, conservative norms associated with female roles. Since this model was not adjusting to the stereotypes and expectations of the field, she was seen as less intelligent. However, adding the provocative dress did not affect her success in a male-dominated major. The model in the male-dominated field was possibly perceived as already intelligent because of her chosen academic field, so the style of dress did not effect the participants' perceptions.

#### Participant Gender and Collegiate Major

Perceptions of females in the male-dominated major vary by the sex of the observer. Female participants perceived the model in a male-dominated major as less attractive than the males perceived that same model, see Figure 4. This may result from females perceiving a female in a male-dominated major as less attractive since she was not conforming to society's expectations. Female socialization has taught females that their role is to abide by societies standards and do what is expected to become a wife and mother (Wood, 2005). Overachieving and

entering into the male role is unattractive because it disregards the female role as a wife and mother. Males, on the other hand, are socialized to value competition. They see a female who is able to endure the competition of a male-dominated field as attractive because of her success and ambition. Therefore, the varied gender socializations create a different perception of what is attractive for the male and female perceiver.

Males perceived a female in a female-dominated major as more irritating than a female perceived the same model, see Figure 5. This may be because males see her as conforming and perhaps dumbing herself down to fit within society's low expectations for females. As seen with attractiveness, males value competition; therefore they see the female as settling with society's low expectations and not taking on a new challenge. On the other hand, females perceived the female model as someone who was meeting her expectations as a female. From the female perspective, adapting to the norms is all that is expected and is therefore all that the female will expect from other females.

Perceptions of the model's femininity vary based on the sex of the perceiver. Males perceived females in a male-dominated major as more feminine than those in a female-dominated major. On the other hand, females perceived a female model in a female-dominated major as more feminine than the same model in a male-dominated major, see Figure 6. Males see females in a male-dominated major as more feminine possibly because of a contrast effect. Since the field was male-dominated, the female was seen as more feminine in comparison to her male classmates, and the male perceiver. Alternatively, females saw another female in female-dominated roles as more feminine because this female was adapting to the cultural norms of femininity. Therefore, to be considered more feminine one would need to be in the same stereotypical field as the observer, and vice versa.

#### Future Research and Applications

The selection of Early Childhood Education as the female-dominated major may have put an extra push on the provocatively dressed model being perceived as less intelligent since the teacher role is expected to be a conservative role model for students. Sex appeal would be seen as "trashy" or inappropriate around the younger audiences the Early Childhood Education major works with. In future research, it would be interesting to use different major choices, particularly for the female-dominated major, to ensure this effect was not simply due to the additional expectations placed upon Early Childhood Education majors. Glick et al. (2005) provided a useful rating of appropriateness of clothing to major within their survey. In future research, this tool may be useful in a pilot study in order to catch any glitches due to stereotypes for appearance based on the academic major. By catching any stereotypes this way, a better selection can be made for appropriate collegiate major choices. While looking at both perceptions and collegiate major enrollments to verify gender domination is important, it is also important to catch stereotypes for dress within the academic major.

This research can be further interpreted by applying previously conducted research. Behling and Williams (1991) compared perceptions of both students and faculty participants on impressions of intelligence based on clothing style. Students and faculty agreed on their perceptions of the student models, both male and female. Because of this finding, it may be possible that the findings from the current study may generalize to faculty perceptions of students in public, mid-sized universities. In further research, it would be interesting to test these assumptions by gaining a more diverse population of participants in terms of age and race. It would also be interesting to test these results with male models.

Results from this study provide women with a better understanding of how their chosen collegiate major and clothing style affect the opinions of others, allowing women to portray themselves more clearly, intelligently, and professionally in academia. If these results are applicable to male- and female-dominated professions, it is important for females to hold a good understanding of how their appearance affects the perceptions of others based on their occupation. It is also important to understand that perceptions vary based on the gender of the observer in addition to the stereotype of the profession as male- or female-dominated. Paying attention to the gender of supervisors, coworkers, and clients is valuable in creating a lasting, positive first impression. When attempting to "dress to impress" a female must evaluate her environment, both stereotypes of the field and gender of those she encounters, to make the best possible impression. So, the question remains: can a woman ever actually be smart *and* sexy?

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