**What Your Clothes Might Be Saying About You**

First impressions are often more significant than you might think….

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*She’s not my type. He couldn’t hang. She looks friendly. He looks smart. I can tell she’s a good worker.*

We make snap judgments about people from the clothes they wear. On what basis?

There is much more to our clothing choices than we might imagine. For many people, what they wear is merely a matter of habit, but when we dress in the morning it might pay us to be a little more careful in the choices we make. [Doing something different](http://www.dsd.me/) with your clothes might be a way of changing the impression others have of you.

A study [just published](http://www.emeraldinsight.com/journals.htm?articleid=17078156&ini=aob) by our [team](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/teamwork) in the UK shows some of the very subtle ways in which clothing influences all kinds of impressions about us. Our clothes make a huge difference to what people think about us – and without us knowing or in ways we couldn’t even imagine. People make their assessments in the first few seconds of seeing another; assessments that go way beyond how well you are dressed and how neat and tidy you might look.

We carried out the research with over 300 adults (men and women). They looked at images of a man and a woman for just 3 seconds before making 'snap judgments’ about them. In some of the pictures the man wore a made-to-measure suit. In others he wore a very similar off-the-peg suit bought on the high street. The differences in the suits were very minor – we controlled for all the big differences such as color and fabric, as well as making sure the face of the model was pixilated so that there could be no hidden messages in the facial expressions.

**After just a 3-second exposure people judged the man more favorably in the bespoke suit.  And the judgments were not about how well dressed he was.**

They rated him as **more confident, successful, and flexible and a higher earner** in a tailor-made suit than when he wore a high street equivalent. Since the model’s face in the pictures was blanked out these impressions must have been formed after quickly eyeing what he was wearing.

So, our clothes say a great deal about who we are and can signal a great deal of socially important things to others, even if the impression is actually unfounded. Research suggests that these impressions about us can start in [childhood](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/child-development) - one study found that teachers made assumptions about children's academic ability based on their clothing.

In another study we have investigated in our lab an issue that women often report encountering in the [workplace](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/career) - differential gender-biased standards and being judged as less competent than men, even by other women. What role does dress play in this?

We made minor manipulations to female office clothing to see how this affected [first impressions](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/first-impressions) of them. We also researched whether the occupational role of the woman made any difference to these impressions. We tested this with 129 female participants who rated images of faceless (by pixilation) female models, on six competence based dimensions ([intelligence](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/intelligence), confidence, trustworthiness, responsibility, authority, and organization). In all cases the clothing was conservative but varied slightly by skirt length and an extra button being unfastened on a blouse. The models were described as having different occupational roles, varying by status (high – senior manager, or low - receptionist). The images were only presented for a maximum of 5 seconds.

The assessment of the competencies we measured should surely not be affected by these minor clothing manipulations? Surely people use proper evidence to make such judgments?

I am afraid we found that the clothing did matter. People rated the senior manager less favorably when her dress style was more ‘provocative’, and more favorably when dressed more conservatively (longer skirt, buttoned up blouse).  I reiterate that the clothing in the ‘provocative’ condition was still very conservative in style and look – it was not a short skirt and a revealing blouse, but a skirt slightly above the knee and one button on the blouse undone.

The rating of the receptionist role was not affected by these clothing manipulations suggesting that there may be more leeway for some jobs than others. So even subtle changes to clothing style can contribute toward negative impressions of the competence of women who hold higher status positions. Wearer beware!

It is important to choose our dress style carefully because people will make all sorts of assumptions and decisions about us without proper evidence. We are unlikely to know what these assessments are too, so it is quite possible that our clothes reveal more than we thought.

Sartorial laziness is an easy habit to slip into. We may think that fashion is just profligate indulgence and our sunny [personality](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/personality) will eclipse our dull attire or detract from the soup stains on our dress shirt. Untrue. What we wear speaks volumes in just a few seconds. Dressing to impress really is worthwhile and could even be the key to success.