



Dress to Impress?

The Impact of Instructor Appearance on Student Evaluations

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Abstract

Student evaluations of teaching are influenced by factors beyond instructional quality, including instructor gender and attractiveness. This study investigates whether an instructor's appearance affects student evaluations through a field experiment conducted among first-year political science students (N = 251) at the University of Copenhagen. During week two of the Fall 2024 semester, I taught four identical exercise classes. In two classes, I dressed professionally, while in the other two, I dressed casually and unkempt. The results suggest that instructor appearance does not significantly impact student evaluations. These findings offer new insights into the limitations of appearance-based biases in student evaluations and their implications for evaluating teaching performance.

Introduction

Student evaluations of teaching (SETs) are widely used across universities as a key metric for assessing teaching quality and informing decisions about promotion, tenure, and even pay raises. These evaluations provide students with a voice in shaping academic institutions and help instructors understand how their teaching is received. Yet, the validity of SETs has been subject to growing scrutiny. Increasing evidence suggests that factors unrelated to teaching quality, such as the instructor's gender, attractiveness, or even race, can influence the ratings they receive. This raises important questions about the fairness and objectivity of student evaluations as a tool for measuring teaching performance. One understudied factor that could influence student evaluations is the appearance of the instructor. Research in social psychology suggests that physical appearance, including attire, affects how individuals are perceived in professional settings, with more formal or professional dress often associated with competence and authority. It is plausible that similar biases could affect how students evaluate their instructors, potentially skewing evaluations based on factors unrelated to teaching quality. Despite this, the role of instructor attire in shaping student evaluations has not been thoroughly investigated.

This study addresses this gap by examining whether an instructor's appearance influences student evaluations. Through a field experiment conducted with first-year political science students at the University of Copenhagen (N = 251), I experimentally manipulated my attire during four identical exercise classes. In two classes, I dressed formally; in the other two, I dressed casually and unkempt. After each class, students completed standardized evaluations.

The findings indicate that instructor appearance does not impact student evaluations. This result challenges the assumption that formal attire conveys greater professionalism in educational settings.

Research Design

In the second week of the Fall 2024 semester, I taught four similar exercise classes on democratic theory. In two of the classes, I dressed relatively formally, wearing a polo shirt, jeans, and sneakers. In the other two, I wore leisure clothes: an old t-shirt, sweat pants, and flip flops. My appearance in the two classes is shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Treatment Conditions

To ensure a controlled environment, where only my appearance differed between classes, I was very careful in structuring the four classes identically. I discussed the same questions in all classes and highlighted the same key takeaways. Also worth noting is that it was the first time I met these students.

There were some aspects of the classes that I was not able to control, however. Most obviously, I couldn't deliver all classes for the first time, which may bias the results if my teaching improved with more repetitions. To avoid anti-conservative estimates, I implemented the "well-dressed" condition first, so any bias of improving my own performance over time would go against finding an effect of the appearance of the instructor. Another aspect I was not able to control was when the classes were held. In the "well-dressed" condition classes took place on Tuesday immediately after the lecture (10.15-12.00) from 13.15-15.00 and from 15.15-17.00. In the "sloppy-dressed" condition classes took place the day after the lecture from 8.15-10.00 and the following Monday, again from 8.15-10.00. This may also bias the treatment effect if I or the students were more energetic either in the morning or the afternoon.

At the end of each class, I asked the students to fill out a short questionnaire containing questions about the learning outcome and environment, which 251 students completed. The questions were based on the university's standard set of student evaluation questions, and they can be seen in Table 1.

| Variable | Question wording | Scale |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Learning outcome | How much do you feel you have learned from this class? | 1=Nothing, 5=A very large amount |
| Learning support | How well did the teacher help you learn the content of the class? | 1=Not at all well, 5=Very well |
| Inclusive environment | How well did the teacher ensure that everyone felt they could ask questions and raise academic issues in class? | 1=Not at all well, 5=Very well |

Table 1: Evaluation Questions

Results

The results of the experiment are displayed in Figure 2 and summarized below.

- Regarding the students' (perceived) learning outcome, Figure 2 shows that the students felt they had learned more from the class when I was sloppy-dressed. The difference is about 0.25 points on the one-to-five-point scale and statistically significant.
- Similarly, the students felt that I was better able to help them learn the content of the class in the "sloppy-dressed" condition. Again, the difference is about 0.25 points on the one-to-five-point scale and statistically significant.
- On the final question, regarding how well I ensured an inclusive learning environment, the students, once again, felt I performed better in the "sloppy-dressed" condition, though the difference in ratings between the conditions is not statistically significant here.
- These results suggest that the appearance of the instructor has no effect on student evaluations; if anything, the results would suggest that dressing sloppy improves the rating of the instructor.

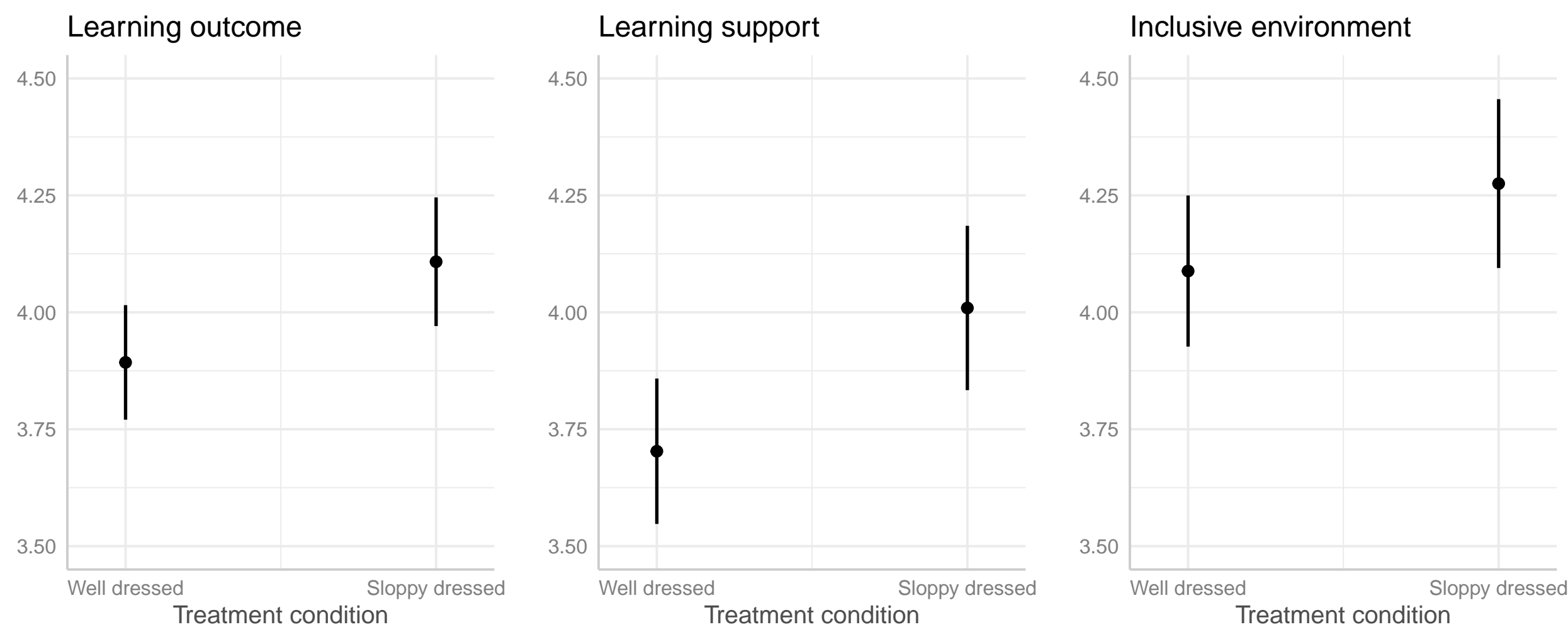


Figure 2: Treatment Effects

Discussion

The results of the field experiment suggest that the appearance of the instructor does not matter for student evaluations, but how sure can we be about this inference? There are at least three reasons why I would treat these results with great caution:

- It is possible that my performance as an instructor improved over time, which may explain the better ratings in the "sloppy-dressed" condition, which took place after I had already taught the class two or three times. On the other hand, even in the "well-dressed" condition, the content of the class was not new to me, as I had also taught it in the previous two years.
- It is hard to rule out that fatigue among the students might have negatively impacted their learning experience. As discussed, the classes in the "well-dressed" condition took place (late) in the afternoon, after the students had already attended a lecture. By contrast, in the "well-dressed" condition classes took place first thing in the morning.
- After debriefing the students two weeks after the field experiment took place, one student informed me that they did not even notice I was sloppy-dressed during their class. This suggests that the difference in the two treatment conditions may not have been stark enough to impact the evaluations of the class.

Conclusions

- Student evaluations are used widely across universities to measure the quality of the teaching, yet many other factors also impact student evaluations, such as the gender or the attractiveness of the instructor. In this study, I conducted a field experiment among first-year political science students at the University of Copenhagen (N=251) to assess the impact of the appearance of the instructor on student evaluations.
- Across four similar exercise classes, I varied the clothes I wore: In two classes, I was well-dressed, while in the other two I was sloppy dressed (see Figure 1).
- The results of the experiment suggest that dressing nicely does not impact student evaluations; at least, the effect appears to be too weak to dominate other effects, such as when the class is held.
- The study does have a range of limitations, however, which means we should treat the results with caution. To improve our knowledge on the topic, future research should ensure maximal variation (within appropriate bounds) in the appearance of the instructor and try to keep the timing of the classes constant.