

The ‘Halo Effect’ and School Uniforms
Caitlin Genord
EN 386 Dr. Colavito
Final Essay

The way a person chooses to dress communicates rhetorically in large volumes. Every individual’s style is created by the influence of others and by society. An individual’s style determines more than just physical appearance and creates for them a stereotypical identity. Consequently, there is no faster way to make a first impression than through personal style choices. Schools around the world have enforced a uniform policy that requires students to conform to a particular standard of dress. School uniforms may jeopardize student opportunity for individuality. For example, it is much more difficult to differentiate between students when they are required to wear uniforms. Dorothy Behling uses the term ‘halo effect’ to describe how uniforms can change a teacher or peer’s initial perspective about an individual. She defines the ‘halo effect’ saying, “a ‘halo effect,’ whereby a student in uniform is seen as better behaved, a high academic achiever, and someone with academic potential, particularly when they wear a dress uniform” (Behling 728). Behling’s ‘halo effect’ is a form of nonverbal communication that has a positive affect on a school environment. The benefits can be seen in peer relationships, teacher-student relationships and in the school’s identity as a whole. This ‘halo effect’ creates emotional and ethical appeals allowing students and teachers to associate uniformity with the high achiever.

There are several theories to support the ‘halo effect’ that student uniforms produce. Rosemary and Thomas Ryan identify two emotional and ethical appeals that arises in the school community as a result of uniforms, titled the Hawthorne Effect and an esprit de corps (83). The

Hawthorne Effect is the theory that people change their behavior when they are part of an experiment or when they are treated in a special way. Ryan describes the Hawthorne Effect in relation to uniforms in schools saying, “If more is expected of students in uniform the students are more likely to work harder to live up to new, higher expectations” (83). This aspect of the ‘halo effect’ is a positive ethical appeal because students will change their behavior for their own goodwill. For this change of behavior to occur, students must accept their new expectations. Then students will come to realize it is in the their best interest to change their behavior so they may be perceived as more successful. With new perceptions, students may feel as though they are treated differently, which can act as an intrinsic motivator for them to learn. The other theory that Ryan acknowledges relating to the ‘halo effect’ is esprit de corps. An esprit de corps is defined as, “feelings of loyalty, enthusiasm, and devotion to a group” (Webster Dictionary). Ryan believes that an esprit de corps arises from the use of uniforms in schools because students are seen equally. The “positive feeling of student belonging” that arises from students dressing similarly creates an emotional appeal that boosts student self-esteem (Ryan 83). The social pressures to fit in a school environment can be reduced when all students are forced to appear in a similar way.

Barry Brummett author of *The Rhetoric of Style* believes that style is a form of communication. He says, “Style refers to the ways in which actions, objects, events, gestures, and commodities as well as the properties of language are used to create aesthetically charged rhetorical outcomes in self and others” (Brummett 2). In other words, everything we do is subject to the evaluation of ourselves and of others. All of our actions help to form our identity but our identity is not formed solely on our own. In the school environment, students are often forming

their identity based on style choices. Although it is important for adolescent's to form an identity during these years, their identity should not be centered on clothing or material goods. Ryan defends this ideal saying,

“In theory, when students are dressed similarly, the issue of trendy new clothing is set aside as the students form new friendships and discover what lies on the inside of their potential friend.” (83).

This statement supports Ryan’s belief that an esprit de corps can arise from school uniforms. Students will form their identity based on more then just physical style. These deep-rooted identities can help build a school community where students feel they belong. Uniforms may minimize the stereotypical perceptions that form a student’s identity.

The ‘halo effect’ brought on by school uniforms benefits students and teachers alike. It is understandable that teachers view students who are dressed formally with a positive lens because, “Physical appearance is an important variable in the perceiver’s judgement of such things as an individuals character or abilities” (Behling 723). It is difficult for teachers not to attach stereotypical expectations to students based on how they dress. However, with uniforms teachers have less biased first impressions of their students because they appear similarly. Ryan also supports the positive perceptions of students in uniforms saying, “Teachers also admittedly have a tendency to treat students in uniforms with more respect than those in regular clothes” (83). This means a teacher’s perceptions of individual students will be based on personality rather then dress. Ideally, there will be less bias in a classroom where students are required to wear uniforms.

Students perceptions of each other are substantially effected by physical appearance.

Style often supports a materialistic competition in the school setting amongst students. Students want to wear the ‘cool’ jeans or have the ‘popular’ brands. Wilken discusses this issue saying, “teenagers have a habit of competing amongst one another, especially regarding the way they are dressed” (Wilken 171). This competition causes students to organize their social world by determining where they do and do not belong. Since students are exposed to large audiences, they must pay close attention to how their style conveys a message about them. However, when students are required to dress similarly there is much less pressure to meet certain social standards of style. There are more opportunities for academic achievement because students become less distracted. The “decrease in non-academic distractions” is a clear benefit of uniformity among students. This is an example of how the ‘halo effect’ is beneficial to students perceptions of each other because they are less likely to compete with each other.

There are less divisions amongst students when they are required to dress similarly. The esprit de corps that is developed from uniforms allows students to feel a sense of belonging. Students are all required to follow the same set of rules and must submit to a certain standard of dress. The use of uniforms supports what Brummett describes as political style. Brummett says political style is an, “Intentional action to bring about desired outcomes in public settings, usually with results that redistribute power and resources” (Brummett 78). By requiring students to wear uniforms, schools have a way of directing student perceptions of each other. The ‘halo effect’ that makes students appear as high achievers is beneficial to students judgements of each other. The uniforms are in the students best interest because they benefit the way students regard each other.

One of the most important results of the ‘halo effect’ is the way students perceive themselves. As a result of teacher and peer approval, students may feel more confident about their learning. This is directly related to the Hawthorne Effect. If students feel they are appreciated and supported they will likely push themselves to meet higher standards. Ryan makes the bold claim that, “Students with a high self-esteem preform better in the classroom” (82). Uniforms cause students to be more academically focused because of the reduction of social pressures due to clothing. Ryan supports his claim saying, “When the pressure to wear something ‘cool’ is removed from the school atmosphere, the students are then able to be more confident in themselves, something all students are able to benefit from” (82). There is a direct relation here between student uniforms and the ethical appeal. Uniforms are not only in the schools best interest but in the students best interests as well. They are more likely to see themselves as achievers and are given motivation to live up to the high standards expected of them.

When students dress similarly it is more difficult to make superficial judgements about them. Brummett summarizes these judgements saying, “Racial and cultural groupings are aesthetically marked by certain styles that then come to be stereotypical expectations for that group, even if many members of a given set do not display such markers” (43). This is present in the school setting because students are often grouped together based on their style choices. For example, it is much easier to distinguish between the varying social and economic classes of students when they are permitted to wear what they want. Ryan disapproves of allowing students to communicate with style because of the divisions it encourages. He writes,

“School is a learning environment, and has no place for negative social stratification.

Uniforms only try to bridge the gap between social classes, through attempting to have everyone on the same common ground” (Ryan 84).

School uniforms could be an easy way to reduce the intensity of the racial and cultural groupings that are a part of the school environment. Students are less likely to be categorized into groups based on the way they dress. With less stereotypical divisions amongst student's, schools will promote the esprit de corps. Students will feel a sense of acceptance when they are not classified by particular racial or cultural style groups.

There is a direct relationship between freedom of speech and clothing choices that causes schools to be concerned about their student's style. Style is a form of nonverbal language that humans represent on a daily basis. The court case *Canady v. Bossier Parish School Board*, deals directly with the issue of school uniforms preventing student expression. The court identified three significant connections between speech and style:

1. Clothing as pure speech when there is a written message conveyed by clothing
2. Clothing as a representation of ones ethnic heritage, religious beliefs, and political and social views.
3. Clothing as an indication of belonging to a certain social group, activity, or attitude toward society and the school environment

(Vopat 206).

These three connections are important because they define how clothing choices are significant in a school setting. A school strives to accomplish a respectable environment where students are well-mannered. Many schools believe that the use of uniforms can help foster a positive school

environment. Wilken believes the uniform speaks a lot about the school itself writing, “A school uniform...is indicative of the values, beliefs, ethics, traditions, identity and general image that the school maintains, as well as the discipline sustained” (159). It is important to notice the rationale behind the implementation of uniforms and how this benefits or inhibits student expression. The standards that a school sets for its students reflect the prosperity of the institution as a whole. Therefore, the ‘halo effect’ is also applied to the school as a whole when they decide to require uniforms.

President Clinton was an avid supporter of school uniforms during his presidency. He had strong opinions about improving America’s schools to foster more learning focused environments for students to prosper. In his 1996 State of the Union speech, President Clinton said,

“I challenge all schools to teach character education: good values and good citizenship. And if it means teenagers will stop killing each other over designer jackets, then public schools should be able to require school uniforms” (Ryan 81).

President Clinton believed it was in everyone’s best interest to require students to wear uniforms because it will bring the focus of schools back to learning. In a radio address President Clinton is even quoted saying, “Uniforms teach our young people one of life’s most important lessons- that what really counts is who you are and what you can become on the inside, not what you are wearing on the outside” (Ryan 83). This is an example of how the rhetoric of school uniforms has a firmly grounded aesthetic rationale. When the president makes such a substantial claim in support of this style, the audience of the issue is suddenly broadened. This also creates an

emotional appeal for the cause of uniforms because President Clinton holds a tremendous position of authority in contemporary society.

It is essential to realize that the ‘halo effect’ that is caused by student uniforms is not always prominent. Students will continue to make judgements about one another. Teacher’s will continue to bring personal biases into the classroom. Behling identifies four different things that effect the perception of school behavior. She writes, “Perception of school-related behavior and scholastic ability will vary according to style of dress, type of school attended, sex of model, and status of the perceiver” (725). The ‘halo effect’ generated from school uniforms will behave differently in every situation. Some schools may see a drastic change in student behavior while others will not notice such tremendous outcomes. Either way, the emotional and ethical appeals that result from school uniforms are what continue to influence school districts to make the change towards uniformity.

The ‘halo effect’ that stems from school uniforms can have a positive influence on schools, students, teachers, and individuals. The Hawthorn Effect and the esprit de corps are theories that support the positive perceptions of students in uniform. Students may put forth more effort on their school work if they are held to higher standards of dress. They may also feel a better sense of belonging amongst their peers because of the lack of stereotypical groupings tied to clothing. Uniforms have been a controversial global issue in education for years. When all students appear uniformly, it will be more difficult to draw conclusions. This ethical appeal of uniforms is that it will eliminate teachers and students from making bias decisions based on style. Instead, uniforms would cause a ‘halo effect’ for all students rather than a selected group of students with superior style.

References

Brummett, Barry. *A Rhetoric of Style*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2008. Print.

Dorothy Behling (1994) School Uniforms and Person Perception. *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 17: 723-729

Rosemary P. Ryan & Thomas E. Ryan (1998) School Uniform: Esprit de Corps. *The School Community Journal*, 8:2 81-84

Ilani Wilken & Annette Van Aardt (2012) School Uniforms: Tradition, benefit or predicament?, *Education as Change*, 16:1, 159-184

Mark C. Vopat (2010) Mandatory school uniforms and freedom of expression, *Ethics and Education*, 5:3, 203-215