Article

On Inclusive Dress Codes: Exploring Student Perspectives in State Universities and Colleges in the Davao Region

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Abstract

An inclusive dress code is a policy that promotes a safe and inclusive environment for binary and non-binary students, allowing them to wear the school dress code based on their preference and gender identity. This study explores the perception and level of support of university students on inclusive dress codes. A quantitative research design was applied, utilizing a survey questionnaire to gather data from 300 respondents from six State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) in the Davao Region, the Philippines. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data. The sampling technique used is simple random sampling, which is suitable for selecting the respondents who are currently enrolled in SUCs. The researchers utilized online media techniques, particularly Google Forms, to transmit and gather information for the study. It was found that most university students believe an inclusive dress code would help students feel confident at school, with the highest mean of 4.31 and a standard deviation of 0.79. Furthermore, university students have a high level of support in implementing the inclusive dress code policy, with an overall mean of 4.03 and a standard deviation of 0.68. In alignment with SDG 4: Quality Education, implementing inclusive dress codes can foster a fair learning environment that respects diversity and ensures inclusivity. Additionally, it aligns with SDG 5: Gender Equality, which ensures that this policy will reduce gender-based discrimination by allowing students of all genders to wear a uniform that aligns with their identity. In this way, schools can support gender equality and empower students.

Keywords: gender neutral, inclusive dress code, LGBTQ+, students, sustainable development goals

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INTRODUCTION

Educational inclusion entails the recognition and accommodation of students of diverse backgrounds, identities, and forms of self-expression within the school environment. Fostering diversity and valuing each student's unique preferences, particularly in relation to gender identity, creates a setting where all individuals, regardless of their gender identity, are welcome, respected, and supported. An inclusive dress code plays a key role in this process by promoting a sense of belonging and allowing students of all gender identities to feel comfortable and represented. However, when dress code policies are unclear or inconsistently enforced, it may cause confusion and frustration among students, weakening the overall goal of maintaining a respectful and focused learning space. As Kees (2017) stated, the lack of clarity can undermine their effectiveness, especially if students feel targeted or excluded by inconsistent implementation. Therefore, establishing a clear, inclusive, and consistently applied dress code is essential in promoting equity, respect, and student well-being in educational institutions.

According to Cumming-Potvin (2023), Western countries have encountered issues with dress codes, which have drawn attention to the impact these police have on students' well-being, particularly in relation to gender identity and expression. The study highlighted that traditional dress codes often reinforce gender binaries, which can marginalize students who do not conform to these expectations. These issues emphasize the need for gender-neutral dress code policies that support a more inclusive environment. Creating a society that eliminates the unjust treatment faced by certain individuals necessitates the establishment of a gender-neutral environment. Our environment must prioritize inclusivity and fairness, dismantling any existing disproportionate approaches. Instead of spreading stereotypes and biases about how people should dress based on their gender, constructive changes should be implemented. A gender-neutral environment encourages individuals to express themselves authentically without fear of judgment or discrimination based on their gender identity. This approach can contribute to fostering a more inclusive and equitable society (Booneiam, 2019).

At Bulacan State University, college students emphasized the essential role of dress code policies in shaping students' motivation and confidence levels. According to Soriaga et al. (2019), dress codes play a vital role in motivating students and building their confidence by promoting discipline, self-awareness, and equality. However, research also shows that strict dress code policies, particularly those that limit self-expression, can negatively impact students' motivation to attend class. When students feel restricted in expressing their individuality, their motivation may decrease (Soriaga et al., 2019). This highlights a gap in the current literature, as there is limited exploration into how gender-neutral dress codes might better support self-expression and, in turn, improve students' motivation and well-being. The way people dress is a significant aspect of nonverbal communication, influencing how they are perceived by others, both positively and negatively. A dress code serves as a means of expressing individuality and can also contribute to the projection of a particular identity (Pinto, 2016). The conflict between personal freedom and institutional authority presents a considerable challenge when formulating dress code policies that promote inclusiveness. Eliminating gender-based restrictions on clothing could help reduce discrimination and promote self-acceptance among students who feel marginalized by traditional dress codes and binary norms. Booneiam (2019) emphasized that adopting gender-neutral dress codes contributes to a more inclusive academic environment by recognizing diverse gender identities and minimizing prejudice. According to Asido (2022), Cagayan State University is advocating a policy that allows students to wear uniforms that align with their gender identity; it aims to promote student comfort and self-expression. As noted by the Human Rights Campaign (2017), dress codes should allow students maximum freedom while avoiding the creation of a hostile environment and without stifling their individuality.

In Cebu, Philippines, individuals within the LGBTQ+ community expressed that they suffer from strict regulations. These school policies have restricted the freedom and rights of LGBTQ+ members to openly express themselves (Human Rights Watch, 2023). These policies often hinder their ability to authentically represent their identities, which can lead to feelings of exclusion. Such issues highlight a significant gap in the literature regarding the need for inclusive dress codes that support the diverse identities of students, particularly in State Universities and Colleges (SUCs). This initiative seeks to accommodate the diverse identities of students within SUCs, promoting an environment of equality and safety where diversity is celebrated and each student's unique contributions are valued. In an inclusive learning environment, all students will feel comfortable knowing that they belong in a truly inclusive environment. A gap has become visible concerning the need to provide students in all state colleges and universities with greater rights and freedom regarding their dress code, enabling them to express their identities more fully.

This research contributes to the existing gap in knowledge, as there is a notable absence of studies on this topic. Considering the perspectives of university students in this study could provide a greater understanding of their awareness and observations of the inclusive dress code and their acceptance and support of it. This study aims to determine the university students' perspectives on an inclusive dress code with the following objectives: (1) determine the socio-demographic profile in terms of: age and gender; (2) determine the perspectives of university students on inclusive codes; and (3) determine the levels of support of university students on inclusive dress codes.

Theoretical Lens

The Theory of Reasoned Action, anchored on Ajzen and Fishbein (1980), as cited by Nickerson (2023), provides a valuable perspective that will give an understanding of the dynamics surrounding inclusive dress codes in school settings. It underscores the rational decision-making of individuals before adopting a behavior. It provides insight into how students and the institution assess the potential benefits of inclusive dress codes. Moreover, the theory emphasizes the significant role of social influences and norms in shaping individuals' attitudes and behavioral intentions. In the context of inclusive dress codes, it is crucial to consider how societal attitudes toward diversity, inclusion, and personal

expression impact students' acceptance of these policies. Furthermore, knowing the students' perceptions of the consequences of adopting an inclusive dress code will promote inclusivity and could foster a sense of belonging that can inform strategies for effective communication and implementation. The Theory of Reasoned Action guides this study in exploring the multifaceted factors influencing attitudes, beliefs, and decision-making processes regarding inclusive dress codes in educational settings.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Study Sites

This study used a descriptive quantitative method to determine students' perceptions about inclusive dress codes. The descriptive design is employed since the data is presented in numerical and descriptive form. It is to provide new perceptions about the attributes of the sample (Thomas & Zubkov, 2023). It was conducted in the SUCs within the Davao Region, the Philippines. The researchers chose all SUCs in every province in Davao Region: Davao Del Norte State College (DNSC), Davao de Oro State College (DDOSC), University of Southeastern Philippines – Obrero Campus (USEP), Davao Oriental State University (DOrSU), Southern Philippines Agriculture, Business, Marine and Aquatic School of Technology (SPAMAST), and Davao del Sur State College (DSSC). The SUCs were the target population since all SUCs have relatively the same policy that they adhere to in terms of the school dress code policy.

Sampling Technique

The sampling technique used is simple random sampling, which is suitable for selecting the respondents who are currently enrolled in SUCs. This method ensures that each respondent has an equal chance of being chosen to participate in the study, regardless of age, year level, gender, and program. Given the total student population across the six SUCs in Davao Region, a uniform sample size of 50 students per university was adopted for this study. This approach ensures that each institution is equally represented, regardless of the differences in enrollment size. Simple random sampling is a technique of selecting a subset from a larger population; this sampling is used to allow every student to have an equal chance of being selected, thereby reducing potential sampling bias and increasing the generalizability of the findings within each institution. Utilizing this method guarantees that each person within the organization has an equal chance of being chosen as a participant. This sampling is supported by the principles outlined in the work of Delice (2018), which suggested that researchers should determine an appropriate sample size based on several considerations, including the nature of the research topic, the characteristics of the population, the study's objectives, and the analytical methods to be used. Taking these elements ensures that university students from both small and large schools are given equal opportunity to express their views.

Respondents

Table 1. Distribution of student respondents per state university and college.

State Universities and Colleges	Participants
Davao del Norte State College (DNSC)	50
Davao de Oro State College (DDOSC)	50
University of Southeastern Philippines – Obrero Campus (USEP)	50
Davao Oriental State University (DOrSU)	50
Southern Philippines Agriculture, Business, Marine and Aquatic School of Technology (SPAMAST)	50
Davao Del Sur State College (DSSC)	50
Total	**300**

Research Instrument

The researchers modified the questionnaires to fit the students' perspectives on the dress code. It is a two-part questionnaire that was modified and adapted from the study of Kees (2017). Questionnaires are widely used, especially in descriptive survey studies. The proponents utilized online media techniques, particularly Google Forms, to transmit and gather information for the study. To help protect the confidentiality of the respondents, this study adheres to the

principles outlined in Republic Act No. 10173, also known as the Data Privacy Act of 2012. Any information that the respondents provide is strictly utilized for research purposes and is not to be revealed by the researchers for personal benefit. Information obtained during this research is not held or stored beyond the completion period of said research.

Cronbach's alpha was calculated through the conduct of pilot testing to test the reliability and dependability of the results and to measure the validity of the results confirmed through expert review, with an agreement and adherence score of 0.92. The instrument showed strong dependability, increasing the likelihood that the study's findings and recommendations according to the answers to the tools were trustworthy and legitimate (Adriano et al., 2023). Furthermore, the reliability coefficients for each construct were computed: Perception yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.916, and Level of Support had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.913. These values confirm that each subscale is independently reliable and contributes to measuring the intended constructs. The data gathered is tabulated and analyzed with various statistical tools. Mean was used to determine by summing all the scores and dividing by the number of students' responses on their perceptions and the level of support for the inclusive dress code, and then dividing this sum by the total number of university students' responses. Standard Deviation (SD) was employed to identify the spread or range of the mean and determine how the scores relate to the average value of the sample.

Ethics

One concern regarding data collection is the potential for the refusal of respondents to participate in the research. This reluctance may arise from various reasons, including fear of their information being misused, discomfort with the topic, or a general distrust in the research process. Participants may feel obligated to participate in a study due to their sense of duty or trust in the researcher's integrity. Hence, it is crucial to obtain informed consent in a manner that avoids forcing participation and ensures participants' voluntary involvement in the study.

The researchers emphasized that their participation is optional, and they are free to withdraw their consent at any time, and the data collected will be deleted. The researchers emphasize the utmost importance of participants' confidentiality. The participants' identities and responses were kept confidential, with pseudonyms and data securely stored physically and electronically. Access to electronic data was restricted via password protection, which was known only to the researchers. These ethical practices ensured that the study adhered to ethical standards and guidelines for conducting responsible and respectful research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Socio-Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Table 2 presents that the respondents aged 18-22 years old garnered the highest percentage of response (88.33%), ranging from 18 to 36 years old. According to Santos & Marasigan (2021), at the age of 18 to 23, students can monitor their behavior and adopt standards of good and bad. People aged 18-23 are highly motivated and disciplined in engaging in social issues, making this age important for understanding broader social trends and behaviors.

Table 2. Distribution of Participants according to Age.

Age	Frequency	Percentage
18-22	265	88.33%
23-27	33	11.00%
28-32	1	0.33%
33-37	1	0.33%
Total	**300**	**100%**

Table 3 shows that females have the highest percentage of respondents in the survey regarding inclusive dress codes, with an average rate of 57.70. This indicates that female students have higher support in reflecting the greater importance of social preferences in their dressing choices, uplifting community expectations (Santos & Marasigan, 2021). Female students are more engaged in social networks and subject to peer influences, which makes them more likely to participate in surveys on social issues. This includes those studies relating to dress codes and behaviors. Female students have higher scores regarding subjective norms, which suggests that social preferences and social pressures are more important to them, which is why they participated in this survey.

Table 3. Distribution of Participants According to Gender.

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	105	35.00%
Female	173	57.70%
LGBTQ+	22	7.30%
Total	**300**	**100%**

Perspectives of University Students on Inclusive Dress Codes

The sections below reveal the perspectives of university students regarding inclusive dress codes. Table 5 shows the summary of the data that has been gathered from respondents. The total mean is 3.86, with a standard deviation of 0.61 and a descriptive equivalent of agree. University students in the Davao Region generally support the concept of an inclusive dress code. The standard deviation suggested that responses were moderately consistent, with most student answers falling close to the average, reflecting a relatively shared perspective.

Table 5. Perspectives of University Students on Inclusive Dress Codes.

Category	Mean	SD	Descriptive Equivalent
I believe that an inclusive dress code improves the school environment.	4.27	0.82	Strongly Agree (5)
I believe that an inclusive dress code improves student learning.	3.80	0.97	Agree (4)
I believe that an inclusive dress code hinders my personal freedom.	3.32	1.21	Agree (4)
In my opinion, inclusive dress code eliminates distractions in the school.	3.62	0.99	Agree (4)
It seems to me that the traditional school dress code policy is unfair.	3.11	1.15	Neither (3)
In my opinion, wearing an inclusive dress code may help the students feel more accepted by the teachers.	3.94	0.93	Agree (4)
I believe that wearing an inclusive dress code may help students feel confident at school.	4.31	0.79	Strongly Agree (5)
I think wearing an inclusive dress code may help students improve their self-esteem.	4.26	0.77	Strongly Agree (5)
I believe wearing an inclusive dress code helps other students focus on school.	3.78	0.89	Agree (4)
I think an inclusive dress code policy would have a positive impact on schools.	4.15	0.87	Agree (4)
Overall Mean	**3.86**	**0.61**	**Agree**

Table 5 shows the results of the questions concerning the perspectives of university students regarding inclusive dress codes. The data reveals that the item *"I believe that wearing an inclusive dress code may help students feel confident at school"* has the highest mean score of 4.31 with a standard deviation of 0.79 and a descriptive equivalent of strongly agree. This indicates that the respondents believe that an inclusive dress code makes students feel more confident when they go to school, considering that the institution provides a safe and conducive environment to the students, despite

their gender identity. According to Cumming-Potvin (2023), dress codes and uniform policies have reinforced traditional gender roles, marginalizing students who do not conform to these expectations. The study highlights the need for gender-neutral dress codes to create an inclusive environment that supports diverse gender identities. Educational institutions with dress code policies play a crucial role in reinforcing societal norms and expectations around gender and sexuality. Existing policies often reinforce stereotypes about what boys and girls will look like and how they will behave. The item *"I think wearing an inclusive dress code may help students improve their self-esteem"* shows that the result is descriptively equivalent to strongly agree, although it has the lowest mean and standard deviation among all the received questions. This indicates that respondents think wearing inclusive dress codes may help them improve their self-esteem from a point where the students feel safe and far from a judgmental environment. Booneiam (2019) stated that the LGBTQ+ community is forced to follow rules that make them uncomfortable with their identity. According to Lee (2017), having gendered uniform restrictions must end, for it affects LGBTQ+ students in Philippine schools. These restrictions have damaged LGBTQ+ students' mental health and limit how they can express themselves. As asserted by Chaudhry (2022), having a gender-neutral uniform helped students have a productive work environment that enhances their performance in their academics.

On the other hand, the item *"It seems to me that the traditional school dress code policy is unfair"* got the lowest mean score of 3.11 with a standard deviation of 1.15 and a descriptive equivalent of neutral. This means that the university students neither agree nor disagree with the opinion that the traditional dress code is unfair. The institutions enforced sex-specific dress codes, none of which included protections for transgender and non-binary students to dress according to their gender identity. The LGBTQ+ community is subjected to disciplinary sanctions at school since they wear clothes that are considered inappropriate based on their sex assigned at birth. In addition, the item *"I believe that an inclusive dress code hinders my personal freedom"* has the lowest mean of 3.32, a standard deviation of 1.21, and a descriptive equivalent of agree. It means that they believe that an inclusive dress code would not hinder the personal freedom of some university students if the inclusive dress code were implemented in the institution. According to the study by Dimauro (2020), the inclusive dress code has a high potential for discrimination for three reasons: culture, gender, and socioeconomic status. In paying attention to what female learners must and must not be clothed on the school premises and assuming that a girl exposed their body, such as their collarbones and shoulders, as one of the factors of a disturbance to male learners, it conveyed a straightforward message that the education of male learners is prioritized and that girls get involved with that education purely by their choice of clothing.

With an overall mean of 3.86 and a standard deviation of 0.61, it is implied that respondents have a generally positive perception of inclusive dress codes. The respondents agreed that implementing inclusive dress codes would help students feel accepted in the institution. In connection with the Reason of Action Theory (1975), the positive attitudes of university students toward the inclusive dress code and strong supportive norms within the institutions will positively affect the institutions by forming policies and helping students feel more confident at school.

Levels of Support of University Students for Inclusive Dress Codes

The level of support of the respondents for inclusive dress codes is presented below. The total mean is 4.03 with a standard deviation of 0.68 and a descriptive equivalent of agree. Results show that university students in the Davao Region support the notion of implementing an inclusive dress code within their institutions.

Table 6. Levels of Support of University Students for Inclusive Dress Codes.

Category	Mean	SD	Descriptive Equivalent
I believe an inclusive dress code promotes a safe learning environment.	3.95	0.85	High
I support incorporating guidelines into inclusive dress code that allow student to express themselves.	4.18	0.76	High
I believe students could benefit from wearing inclusive dress code.	4.03	0.84	High
I believe that students should have the freedom to wear the uniform they want.	3.90	1.02	High
I am not distracted by other students if they wear inclusive dress code.	3.97	0.93	High
I think wearing an inclusive dress code may help students feel accepted.	4.13	0.85	High
I believe our school creates a positive learning environment if it implemented an inclusive dress code.	4.03	0.87	High
I believe inclusive dress code policy promotes a safe learning environment.	3.92	0.91	High
I would be happy if inclusive dress code policy were implemented within my school.	4.11	0.85	High
I support the implementation of inclusive dress code in my school.	4.12	0.89	High
Overall Mean	**4.03**	**0.68**	**High**

Table 6 shows the support levels of university students for inclusive dress codes. The data reveals that the item *"Support the implementation of inclusive dress code in my school"* has the highest mean of 4.12, with a standard deviation of 0.89 and a descriptive equivalent of high. This states that respondents would give their full support to the implementation of inclusive dress codes in their respective institutions. According to Wood (2023), schools in Australia have embraced and adopted gender-neutral school uniforms to promote gender equality in educational settings.

Meanwhile, the item *"I believe that students should have the freedom to wear the uniform they want"* got the lowest mean score of 3.90 with a standard deviation of 1.02 and a descriptive equivalent of high. This indicates that university students support the idea that they should be free to wear whatever uniform they prefer based on their gender identity and expression. According to Battye (2019), neutral uniforms allowed people to express themselves fully without pressure. It allows students the freedom to choose the attire that aligns with their gender identity and will enable them to have an equitable learning environment. Battye (2019) also discussed that gender-neutral uniforms could make an inclusive and tolerant environment for all. It allows everyone to feel comfortable knowing that the dress code is not associated with the sex assigned at birth, and not to feel pressure to look a certain way. A neutral dress code will enable people to express themselves; it allows them to feel comfortable and not be confined by gendered norms. As stated by Battye (2019), having gender-neutral uniforms has given students freedom of expression. It allowed them to feel accepted and included in the school, especially those who identify as non-binary or transgender. Through this, they can feel that they are being true to themselves and can increase their self-esteem. With an overall mean of 4.03 and a standard deviation of 0.68, the respondents have a high level of support for implementing the inclusive dress code. In line with the Theory of Reasoned Action (1975), the learners' attitude is to give thought to the importance of personal beliefs about the probable individual outcome of their perception towards the implementation of an inclusive dress code. This means that the positive feelings of the respondents regarding inclusive dress codes will be beneficial when implemented in their institutions. Inclusive dress codes give university students the freedom to express themselves, and they believe that implementing them will create a positive learning environment.

CONCLUSION

The respondents have a positive attitude regarding inclusive dress codes. Most university students strongly agree that an inclusive dress code improves the school environment. Implementing an inclusive dress code in the institutions could foster a more supportive student environment and an all-embracing educational setting. Institutions may adopt an inclusive dress code policy to promote an environment where all students feel accepted. Moreover, respondents support inclusive dress code policies as they believe this promotes a safe learning environment for all students and that students can express themselves. The strong agreement on implementing this policy would be well-received and beneficial to the student body and the institution. Consequently, the result of the study shows that the students agreed and supported the implementation of inclusiveness in the school premises that would make the learning environment multiculturally sensitive and create a positive learning environment for the students and the institution. The study results may be utilized as a reference for policy-making and revisiting dress code policies among state-funded universities and colleges, allowing all students to freely express themselves by wearing formal clothes based on their preferences.

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Conflict of Interest

The researchers declare no conflict of interest in the publication of this manuscript.

AI Disclosure

The researchers declare that AI tools, particularly Grammarly and ChatGPT, were used to enhance grammar, improve sentence clarity, and ensure overall language accuracy in our work.

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