

## Effects of clothing congruity on consumers' perceptions of salespeople and consumers' age as a moderator of the effects of clothing congruity

Jessie H. Chen-Yu, Virginia Tech & Siwon Cho, Southern Illinois University, USA

*Introduction.* Clothing is often used as a communication tool to express oneself (Anand & Kaur, 2018). Clothing also plays an important role in a retail setting because the appearance of salespeople helps build relationships with customers, and customers use the appearance of salespeople to develop the perceptions of salespeople, stores, and brands (Kwok & Xie, 2018). The self-congruity theory (Sirgy, 1985) explains that the congruence between a product image and a consumer's self-image influences the consumer's behavior. This influence can be explained by the similarity-attraction effect (Byrne, 1961). Devendorf and Highhouse (2008) found that when a customer perceived a congruence between his/her self-image and the perceived image of a salesperson, this congruence incited the consumer to feel positive about both the salesperson and the store/organization. Therefore, congruence in clothing may play a critical role in consumer behavior as a mode of creating positive connections between the salesperson and the consumer during in-store interactions. The current study defines clothing congruity as the congruence between the clothing style that a salesperson wears and the clothing style that a consumer prefers to wear.

*Theoretical background and hypotheses development.* When a consumer perceives that a brand establishes brand user imagery that is congruent with the consumer, the consumer's brand attitude will be positive (Liu et al., 2012; Sop & Kozak, 2019). Applying these findings to clothing congruity, H1 was proposed that clothing congruity has a positive influence on attitudes toward the salesperson. Lee et al. (2017) studied the relationship between self-congruity and functional congruity. Functional congruity is defined as the comparison between a consumer's expectation of functional features in the brand/product and the actual performance of the features and is measured by the consumer's evaluation minus his/her expectation. Kang et al. (2015) and Lee et al. (2017) found consistent results showing that higher self-congruity induced greater functional congruity. If a consumer perceives that a brand/product image is consistent with his/her self-image, he/she is more likely to rate the brand/product performance as meeting or exceeding his/her expectation. According to these findings, H2 was proposed that clothing congruity has a positive influence on functional congruity. Ibrahim and Najjar (2007) found that the congruence between a customer's self-image and a store's image influenced the customer's satisfaction with the store. Tsai et al. (2015) also found that the congruence between a customer's self-concept and a brand experience increased satisfaction with the brand. Based on these studies, H3 was proposed that clothing congruity has a positive influence on satisfaction with the salesperson's performance. Shao et al. (2005) found that the formality of a salesperson's clothing more significantly affected older consumers than it did younger consumers. Self-congruity causes older consumers to have more positive attitudes toward a product (Huaman-Ramirez, 2020). According to these findings, H4 was proposed that consumers' age moderates

the effects of clothing congruity on attitudes toward the salesperson (H4a), functional congruity (H4b), and satisfaction with salesperson's performance (H4c). We expected that the moderating effect would be stronger among elderly consumers than among adolescent consumers.

*Method.* A 2 x 2 between-subjects factorial design was developed with a salesperson wearing two styles of clothing (formal vs. casual) and customers in two age groups (male high school adolescents aged 16 to 19 vs. male elderly 65 years and older). This design resulted in four experimental groups. To measure the research variables, we developed a questionnaire with two scenarios. In Part 1 of questionnaire, the participant was asked to put himself in a scenario in which he entered a store to buy sweatshirts for himself, and he was approached by a salesperson shown in a picture. Depending on the experimental groups, the picture showed an image of a salesperson wearing either formal clothing (a navy suit, tie, white dress shirt, black dress shoes) or casual clothing (a navy crewneck long-sleeve shirt, navy chino pants, tennis shoes). Then, attitudes toward the salesperson and expectation of the salesperson's performance were measured. In Part 2 of questionnaire, the basic assistance that a salesperson normally would offer was described, and the same picture shown in Part 1 was provided again. Then, evaluation of the salesperson's performance and satisfaction with the salesperson's performance were measured. In Part 3 of questionnaire, two pictures were shown (formal vs. casual clothing). Participants were asked to select the clothing style that they prefer to wear. All the questions were developed by adapting the definitions and questions from Jaeger and Ares (2022) and Chen-Yu (1995). Prior to data collection, the study was approved for exemption status by the Institutional Review Board. The surveys of the adolescent group (N=120) were conducted at two high schools. School board approval from the two schools was obtained, parental consent form was given prior to data collection, and the survey was administered by the teachers. The participants in the elderly group (N=120) were recruited from five retirement centers. Permission was obtained from the managers of the institutions and the participants themselves. Surveys were administered by the program managers of the centers.

*Results.* Three tests of two-way analysis of variance were conducted to analyze the data and test the hypothesis. The results show that clothing congruity has a positive influence on attitudes toward the salesperson (H1:  $F = 20.72, p < .001$ ), but no influence on functional congruity (H2). Clothing congruity also has a positive influence on satisfaction with the salesperson's performance (H3:  $F = 37.39, p < .001$ ). Consumers' age does not moderate the effect of clothing congruity on attitudes toward the salesperson (H4a). However, age moderates the effect of clothing congruity on functional congruity (H4b:  $F = 5.05, p = .026$ ). *T*-test results show that clothing congruity has a negative influence on functional congruity in the elderly group ( $t = 3.21, p = .002$ ), but no influence in the adolescent group. Furthermore, a Tukey's HSD test shows that elderly participants who preferred formal clothing had much higher performance expectations of a salesperson wearing formal clothing ( $M = 5.83$  on a 7-point scale) than a salesperson wearing casual clothing ( $M = 3.91; p < .001$ ). Age also moderates the effect of clothing congruity on satisfaction with the salesperson's performance (H4c:  $F = 4.51, p = 0.36$ ). The effect is stronger

among elderly consumers than among adolescent consumers (elderly:  $M_{congruent} = 83.03$ ,  $M_{incongruent} = 61.85$ ; adolescent:  $M_{congruent} = 73.97$ ,  $M_{incongruent} = 63.71$ ).

*Discussion & contributions.* Consistent with the literature (e.g., Ibrahim & Najjar, 2007; Sop & Kozak, 2019; Tsai et al., 2015), the current study determines that consumers like a salesperson more and tend to be more satisfied with his performance if he wears a style of clothing similar to what they prefer to wear. Consistent with the findings of previous studies in the moderating effects of consumers' age (Huaman-Ramirez, 2020; Shao et al., 2005), the effect of clothing congruity on satisfaction with salesperson's performance is stronger among elderly consumers than among adolescent consumers. Elderly consumers who prefer wearing formal clothing have high performance expectations of a salesperson who wears formal clothing. This result may explain why these elderly consumers are less likely to rate the salesperson's performance better than their expectations. This study gives insights into the effects of clothing congruity on consumers' perceptions of salespersons. It expands the understanding of male consumers, who have been under-represented in the realm of fashion studies. With the results of this study, fashion marketers could better understand how salespeople's clothing style influences consumer behavior and utilize salespeople's appearance to serve their customers more effectively.

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