



Appearance and Social Psychological Meanings of a Favorite Clothing Item

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Significance. Clothes are consumed not only for their utilitarian benefits but also for their social psychological meanings as clothes are symbolic signifiers of taste, lifestyle, and identity (Solomon & Douglas, 1989). It has been documented that women attempt to alter themselves to meet current societal demands concerning appearance (Fallon, 1990). Women's awareness (i.e., recognition) of societal influences as well as their internalization (i.e., endorsement) of views regarding the importance of attractiveness in society could affect the social psychological aspects of their clothing consumption. Depending on women's perceived beliefs relative to their appearance and their sociocultural attitudes toward appearance, the perceived social psychological meanings that clothes have for them may differ. The purpose of this study was to examine whether fear of appearance evaluation was related to sociocultural attitudes toward appearance (i.e., awareness, internalization) and (2) whether sociocultural attitudes toward appearance were related to the social psychological meanings and functions (i.e., self-expression, personal history, mood/ self-confidence, and social interrelatedness/ intrinsic object) of women's favorite clothing items.

Theoretical Framework. Sociocultural Theory (Levine & Smolak, 1996) posits that the societal norms embedded within any culture create powerful and influential ideals of what is acceptable behavior for a range of behaviors including appearance management. We examined the effect of fear of appearance evaluation (e.g., "I am concerned about what other people think of my appearance.") and sociocultural attitudes on social psychological aspects of clothing consumption (i.e., social psychological meanings and functions). Sociocultural attitudes toward appearance examined included awareness (e.g., "In today's society, it's important to always look attractive.") and internalization (e.g., "I tend to compare my body to people in magazines and on TV."). The social psychological meanings and functions of a favorite clothing item were operationalized as four constructs: (a) self-expression (e.g., "My favorite clothing item allows me to express myself."), (b) personal history (e.g., "My favorite clothing item links me to a much liked place or event."), (c) mood and self-confidence (e.g., "My favorite clothing item makes me feel good and enhances my self-confidence."), and (d) social interrelatedness and intrinsic object (e.g., "My favorite clothing item symbolizes and communicates my social identity and my favorite clothing item has a specific utility.") (see Figure 1 for hypothesized relationships).

Method. Data were collected from U.S. female apparel shoppers ($n = 904$) using a consumer panel via an online survey. Structural Equation Modeling was used for data analysis.

Participant Characteristics. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 72 ($m = 43$, $SD = 14.94$). With respect to ethnicity, 86.0% were Caucasian. Median income was \$50,000-\$59,999 and 70.5% had a four-year college degree.

Results. Confirmatory factor analysis was used to test the convergent and discriminant validity and composite reliability of the set of measures. A structural analysis was conducted using the maximum likelihood estimation method. The structural model exhibited a good fit with

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the data ($\chi^2 = 1236.04$ with 420 *df*, $\chi^2/df = 2.94$, CFI = .96, NNFI = .95, IFI = .96, RMSEA = .046, and SRMR = .058). Regarding H1, awareness was positively related to both self-expression ($\beta = .20$, $t = 4.54$, $p < .001$) and mood/ self-confidence ($\beta = .17$, $t = 3.52$, $p < .001$). For H2, internalization was positively related to personal history ($\beta = .30$, $t = 6.54$, $p < .001$), mood/ self-confidence ($\beta = .23$, $t = 5.05$, $p < .001$), and social interrelatedness/ intrinsic object ($\beta = .28$, $t = 5.99$, $p < .001$). For H3, fear of appearance evaluation was positively related to awareness ($\beta = .52$, $t = 13.43$, $p < .001$) and internalization ($\beta = .68$, $t = 17.25$, $p < .001$).

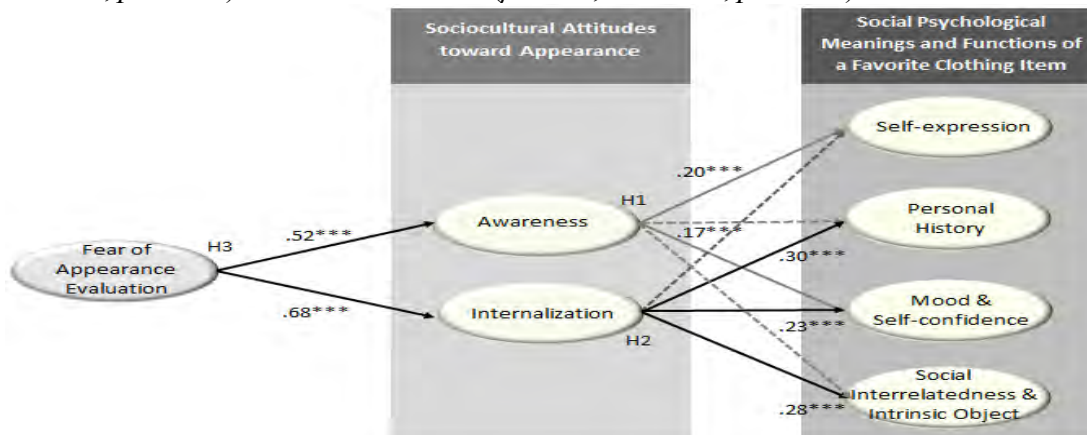


Figure 1. Final model

Conclusions. The results indicated that female apparel shoppers who feared appearance evaluation were aware of societal pressures as well as exhibited internalization of social standards of appearance. Female apparel shoppers who recognized societal influences valued clothes as a means of self-expression and for mood-related reassurance and self-confidence. In addition, female apparel shoppers who had internalized views regarding the importance of attractiveness within society were likely to value clothes as means to signify their personal history, for mood-related reassurance and a sense of self-confidence, and as a symbol of their relatedness to others, their social group memberships, and for its functional attributes (i.e., social interrelatedness and intrinsic object). Both awareness and internalization were positively related to mood and self-confidence. To enhance female apparel shoppers' mood and provide a means for them to feel good about themselves (i.e., mood-related reassurance), apparel retailers could reinforce the aesthetic appeal of their apparel by highlighting design details/ colors and coordinating items with accessories that can affect shoppers' innate reactions. Results also contribute to theory development concerning social psychological aspects of apparel and its connection to clothing consumption in the context of appearance evaluation and sociocultural attitudes toward appearance.

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