



Apparel design typicality and aesthetic response: Moderating role of apparel categories

Dawn Michaelson, Neha Arya, and Veena Chattaraman, Auburn University, AL

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*Significance.* Aesthetics plays a crucial role in apparel products. Consumers make apparel selections and purchases based on the apparel product's aesthetic appeal, as well as their individual aesthetic preferences (Minshall, 1994). Prior studies on aesthetic preferences have examined specific categories of apparel such as jackets and uniforms (Eckman, 1997; Feather, Ford, & Herr, 1996; Yoo, 2003); however, little or no studies have examined how consumers' aesthetic preferences differ between apparel categories. This study examines how consumers preferences for design typicality differs between the apparel categories of a) tops and jackets (upper body apparel), b) skirts and pants (lower body apparel), and c) dresses (whole body apparel).

*Theory and Literature.* Design typicality is defined as the extent to which an item conforms to a category (Loken & Ward, 1990). In context to apparel, typicality refers to classic or current styles (Minshall, 1994). According to Reber, Schwarz, & Winkielman's (2004) theory of processing fluency, typical stimuli are preferred over atypical since they are closer to the 'average' of any category and are hence easier to process, resulting in greater pleasure. However, this is not always the case since atypical stimuli may be perceived as novel and unexpected, and thereby result in greater pleasure (Loken & Ward, 1990; Minshall, 1994; Reber, et al, 2004). Since atypicality and novelty may be a valued in context to apparel, the purpose of this study was to investigate: 1) whether consumers have greater aesthetic preference and purchase intentions towards typical or atypical apparel, and 2) how preferences for typicality or atypicality differ by apparel categories.

*Method.* This study utilized a 2 (typicality: typical vs. atypical) x 3 (apparel category: lower body apparel, upper body apparel, and dresses) mixed-factorial experimental design with typicality as the between-subjects factor and apparel category as the within-subjects factor. Stimuli consisted of CAD line drawings created by the researchers. Two drawings were used for each apparel category (top, skirt, pant, dress, and jacket) to represent a typical and atypical garment for each category. Typical stimuli were developed to have a traditional or classic appearance and atypical apparel had unique draping, pleats, or unusual seam placement. An online experiment using the Qualtrics software was employed. Participants were randomly assigned to a typicality (typical vs. atypical) group with one stimulus for each of the five apparel categories. Hence, each participant rated five stimuli on existing and reliable, 7-point scales for the following dependent measures: aesthetic judgement scale, 4 items; purchase intention scale, 3 items; and manipulation check items (typicality scale, 2 items). A total of 103 participants were recruited from a lower-division human sciences course and 91 completed the survey (44 in the typical group and 47 in atypical group), yielding an 88% response rate. Study sample consisted of 93.4% females, a mean age 20; 94.5% Caucasian; and 62.6% had a sophomore standing.

*Results.* Prototypicality manipulation checks were conducted prior to hypotheses testing and found to be effective for lower body apparel [ $t(89) = 5.047, p < .001$ ], upper body apparel [ $t(89) = 5.5563, p < .001$ ] and dresses [ $t(89) = 7.646, p < .001$ ]. Scales revealed good reliability with Cronbach's alpha coefficient above 0.70 for all measures. With respect to answering the research questions, repeated measures analysis of variance results revealed a between-subjects effect for typicality on aesthetic judgement [ $F(1,89) = 20.096, p < .001$ ] and purchase intent [ $F(1,89) = 5.129, p = .026$ ]. Participants rated typical apparel significantly higher than atypical for both aesthetic preference ( $M_{\text{typical apparel}} = 4.526$  vs.  $M_{\text{atypical apparel}} = 3.745$ ) and purchase intention ( $M_{\text{typical apparel}} = 3.824$  vs.  $M_{\text{atypical apparel}} = 3.351$ ). In addition to this main effect, a significant interaction effect for typicality and apparel categories also emerged for aesthetic judgments [Wilks's  $\Lambda = 0.594, F(2,88) = 30.039, p < .001$ ] and purchase intention [Wilks's  $\Lambda = 0.729, F(2,88) = 16.329, p < .001$ ]. Specifically, participants have greater aesthetic preference and purchase intentions for typical over atypical lower body apparel [aesthetic judgments,  $t(89) = -7.269, p < .001$ ; purchase intentions,  $t(89) = -4.054, p < .001$ ] and typical over atypical dresses [aesthetic judgments,  $t(89) = -3.759, p < .001$ ; purchase intentions,  $t(89) = -2.896, p < .005$ ]. However, atypical upper body apparel was preferred over typical for aesthetic judgment [ $t(89) = 1.876, p = .064$ ] and purchase intentions [ $t(89) = 2.367, p = .020$ ]. The aesthetic preference for atypical over typical upper body apparel was marginally significant.

*Implications.* These results reveal that consumers have greater aesthetic preference and purchase intentions for typical pants, skirts, and dresses but prefer atypical tops and jackets. Implications from this study can be used when designing apparel, making line production decisions, along with merchandise assortment plans. It also contributes to processing fluency theory by examining the moderating role of apparel categories in preferences for typicality in apparel products.

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