EFFECTS OF EMPLOYEE DRESS ON CONSUMERS' SERVICE QUALITY EXPECTATIONS AND STORE IMAGE PERCEPTIONS

Ruoh-Nan Yan, Colorado State University
Kittichai Watchravesringkan, University of North Carolina at Greensboro
Tracy Zarubin, Colorado State University
Jennifer Yurchisin, Texas State University at San Marcos

ABSTRACT

This research investigated the impact of employee dress on consumers' expectations of service quality and store image perceptions in the retail environment while incorporating an individual trait (i.e., fashion orientation) as the moderator. Data were collected from university students in a laboratory setting. Results provide useful information for marketing practitioners.

INTRODUCTION

The use of salespeople as effective conduits of information concerning store image and positioning for retailers has been acknowledged (Chowdhury, Reardon, and Srivastava 1998; Klassen, Clayson, and Jasper 1996; Lindquist 1974; Mazursky and Jacoby 1986). While the impact of salespeople's attitudes, knowledge, and customer service behaviors on consumers' perceptions of store image have been recognized, the specific effect of employee dress on store image perceptions has not been widely investigated. Salesperson appearance, particularly with respect to the clothing items worn, has been considered to be a critical element in service quality literature (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1988). Because salesperson dress seems to influence consumers' expectations of both service quality and store image perceptions and researchers have found that a direct relationship exists between service quality expectations and store image perceptions (Baker, Grewal, and Parasuraman 1994), it seems likely that salesperson dress affects store image perceptions both directly and indirectly through its influence on service quality expectations. Given the proposed importance of employee appearance in store image and service quality literature, there is a paucity of empirical research investigating how salesperson dress styles influence consumers' expectations of service quality and store image perceptions. This study attempts to answer several research questions. First, how does salesperson dress style influence customers' expectations of service quality and store image? Second, because researchers (e.g., Lennon and Davis 1989) have shown that sensitivity to dress cues varies across individuals, do individual traits (i.e., fashion orientation) interact with salesperson dress style in explaining customers' service quality expectations and store image perceptions?

HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

According to environmental psychology and marketing literature, consumers make inferences about an object or a person based on environmental stimuli (Baker et al. 1994; Shao, Baker, and Wagner 2004). One such environmental stimulus or attribute in a retail store is the dress style of salespeople. Researchers have long recognized clothing as a cue that individuals use to establish impressions of other people (Reid, Lancuba, and Morrow 1997) and that may convey greater power (O'Neal 1999; Temple and Loewen 1993). While Temple and Loewen (1993) did not examine the effect of styles per se, the conclusion sheds light on how formal vs. informal wear may influence consumers' perceptions of the level of power possessed by the sales employee. Through an experimental design, Cho (2001) demonstrated that the clothing type of the salesperson (formal vs. informal) in a department store influenced the consumer's attitude toward the salesperson such that consumers were found to have more positive attitudes toward the salesperson in formal clothing compared with informal clothing. Hence, consumers do seem to see a salesperson dressed in a certain style (e.g., formal business attire) and infer that this salesperson possesses the characteristics associated with this type of style (e.g., professional, credible, knowledgeable). Because consumers likely view the salespeople as representatives of the store, the inferences they make about the individual salespeople based on their dress most likely also carry over to influence their perceptions of the store. In this way, consumers use salespeople's dress styles to make inferences about the level of service quality and to form perceptions of the store's image. Assuming that employee dress is one of the tangible cues considered by consumers in the formation of their service quality expectations (Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman 1993) and store image perceptions, salespeople who dress in a formal business style would be assumed to possess higher professionalism, credibility, and knowledge. Consumers would assume that, because the salespeople possessed these

positive characteristics, the store would provide them with a high level of service quality and would possess a more positive store image. On the contrary, employees dressed in a casual style would be regarded as less credible, less professional, and/or less knowledgeable. Hence, the store where these employees worked would be expected to provide consumers with a lower level of service quality and to possess a less positive store image. Therefore, the first and second hypotheses are stated as follows:

> **H1: Consumers' service quality expectations vary across style of employee dress. That is, consumers evaluate service quality (e.g., professional, credible, and knowledgeable) higher when salespeople are dressed in formal business attire than when they are dressed in casual attire.**

> **H2: Consumers' store image perceptions vary across style of employee dress. That is, consumers perceive the store's image more positively when salespeople are dressed in formal business attire than when they are dressed in casual attire.**

Fashion orientation is one way to identify fashion lifestyle segments (e.g., Gutman and Mills 1982). Research suggests that fashion orientation may influence consumers' shopping behaviors (e.g., Darley and Johnson 1993). Clothing interest is also found to impact individuals' sensitivity to dress cues (Lennon and Davis 1989). Thus, consumers who are more fashion oriented may be more critical in evaluating service quality and store image based on employee dress cues than those who are less fashion oriented. Therefore,

> **H3: Consumer fashion orientation interacts with salesperson dress style in explaining consumers' service quality expectations and store image perceptions. That is, given the same employee dress style, consumers with a high level of fashion orientation expect the service quality to be lower than those with a low level of fashion orientation.**

Instead of viewing service quality as one of the components of store image, Baker et al. (1994) found that elements of store environment influence consumers' service quality perceptions which in turn, impact their impressions of store image. That is, service quality may serve as an antecedent of store image. This research follows their findings and hypothesizes that the service quality expectations of consumers that are based on salesperson dress style

will have an effect on consumers' perceptions of store image. Thus,

> **H4: Consumer expectations of service quality have a positive effect on store image perceptions. That is, the higher the consumers' expectations of service quality (e.g., professional, credible, and knowledgeable), the higher the consumers' perceptions of the store's image.**

METHODOLOGY

A 3 (style of business attire: formal vs. moderate vs. casual) x 2 (level of fashion orientation: low vs. high) between subject experiment design was conducted. This study included employee gender as a within subject measure for control purposes (Fischer, Gainer, and Bristor 1997). Both salesperson dress style and gender were manipulated, and fashion orientation was measured. The context chosen for the experiment was a department store due to its product offerings that may appeal to customers of both genders.

Six drawings were prepared by using computer software programs to represent different styles across employee genders. Each drawing portrayed an individual in a neutral and consistent pose with an oval-shaped head. Background and facial characteristics were not included in the drawings in order to avoid confounding effects (Lukavsky, Butler, and Harden 1995; Temple and Loewen 1993). The male drawing featured a more masculine body (i.e., wider shoulders) wearing pants, while the female drawing portrayed a more feminine figure (i.e., obvious waist line) wearing a skirt. Three levels of styles (formal business attire vs. moderate vs. casual) and two levels of gender (female vs. male) were established via a series of pretests using a convenience sample of forty college students majoring in a business-related program. A two-item manipulation check scale was used to assess the success of the manipulations for the three styles. The drawings were then imported into Power Point slides to be presented on a computer screen with a faded store background to help respondents imagine the store environment.

Respondents were randomly assigned to a computer in a laboratory and were given a questionnaire in which a scenario was written. The scenario depicted a situation in which the respondent entered the apparel section in a department store and saw a sales associate on the sales floor. The respondents were instructed to use the computer as

they finished reading the scenario. Two (both genders) of the six drawings that coincided with the manipulations of styles were sequentially shown on the computer with a faded retail background showing products hung on racks and folded on shelves to help respondents imagine their surroundings. To avoid order effects, the order of gender was randomly assigned on different computers. Respondents were able to view and examine the pictures on the computer for five seconds before the next slide came up. After the first drawing was shown, the respondents were asked to complete the first part of the questionnaire to evaluate service quality and store image. As they finished the first part, they were instructed to repeat the same procedure with the second drawing on the computer. Then, again, they were instructed to finish the rest of the questionnaire, including questions concerning the evaluation of service quality and store image based on the second drawing, their fashion orientation, and their demographic information. The measure of service quality expectations consisted of 18 items selected and modified from the SERVQUAL scale (Parasuraman, Berry, and Zeithaml 1991) to allow respondents the ability to evaluate based solely on the information provided in relation to employee dress. Store image was measured with 13 items modified from Chowdhury et al. (1998) on a 7-point Likert scale anchored by (1) strongly disagree to (7) strongly agree. Fashion orientation was measured with 18 items according to Gutman and Mills' (1982) fashion orientation scale.

RESULTS

A total of 105 university students majoring in social science related programs participated in the experiment. Each student was exposed to two drawings with both genders, resulting in 210 responses in the dataset. Manipulation checks for style of employee dress were significant at the $p < .05$ level, indicating that the respondents perceived the treatments of style significantly different. Results of a factor analysis indicated two dimensions of service quality after deleting four items due to cross loading. One of these factors was concerned with the professional behavior of employees (e.g., professional; competent) and was labeled as "employee service competency" ($\alpha = .96$), and the other factor dealt with employees' consideration and concerns for customers (e.g., make me feel special; sympathetic and reassuring if something is wrong) and was named "employee service empathy" ($\alpha = .91$). For the store image scale, after deleting five items due to cross loading, factor analysis revealed two dimensions of this variable. One of these factors

was related to store quality (e.g., elegant and upscale perception) and thus was named "store prestige image" ($\alpha = .93$), and the other factor was associated with product availability and was labeled as "product selection image" ($\alpha = .78$). For the fashion orientation scale, after reverse coding five items, the summed score of the 18 items was obtained for further analyses ($\alpha = .87$). To test the hypotheses, respondents were split into low vs. high groups regarding their fashion orientation scores using a mean split method ($M_{fashion\ orientation} = 4.87$). MANOVA was conducted for testing hypotheses 1 through 3 and multiple regression analyses were conducted for testing hypothesis 4.

H1 predicted that style of employee dress impacts consumers' service quality expectations. MANOVA results indicated that the overall model was significant in explaining employee service competency ($F = 17.13$, $p < .0001$) but not employee service empathy ($F = 0.62$, $p > .05$). Therefore, H1 was partially supported. Univariate analysis showed that, while style of employee dress had a significant effect on employee service competency ($F = 40.59$, $p < .001$), no significant effect was found on employee service empathy ($F = 1.03$, $p > .05$). Mean descriptives further showed that respondents who viewed the employee in formal business attire perceived the employee to have the highest level of service competency, followed by the moderate and casual styles ($M_{formal} = 5.63$; $M_{moderate} = 5.23$; $M_{casual} = 4.13$, respectively). Next, H2 tested the direct effect of style of employee dress on consumers' store image perceptions. MANOVA results showed that the overall model for the first dimension of store prestige image was significant ($F = 79.02$, $p < .0001$), but the second dimension of product selection image was not ($F = 1.36$, $p > .05$). Thus, H2 was partially supported. As for the dimension of store prestige image, univariate analysis indicated that respondents who viewed the employee in formal business attire have the highest store image perceptions, followed by moderate and casual styles ($M_{formal} = 5.49$; $M_{moderate} = 5.02$; $M_{casual} = 3.64$, respectively). H3 examined the moderating effect of fashion orientation on consumers' service quality expectations and store image perceptions. Regarding service quality expectations, univariate analysis results according to the first MANOVA revealed a significant interactive effect of fashion orientation with style of dress in explaining employee service competency ($F = 3.83$ $p < .05$) but not employee service empathy ($F = 0.65$, $p > .05$). As for the store image perceptions, however, no significant interactive effect was found for either store prestige image or product selection image ($F = 0.38$, $p > .05$; $F = 1.31$, $p > .05$, respectively). Thus,

H3 was partially supported. Further contrast comparison of 15 pairs of means in relation to employee service competency provided detailed information. Eleven out of the 15 pairs of comparison showed significant results. Respondents who were less fashion-oriented perceived a higher level of employee service competency than those who were more fashion-oriented only in the condition of formal business attire ($M_{formal-low}$ = 5.95 vs. $M_{formal-high}$ = 5.43, p < .05; $M_{moderate-low}$ = 5.01 vs. $M_{moderate-high}$ = 5.43, p > .05; $M_{casual-low}$ = 4.11 vs. $M_{casual-high}$ = 4.16, p > .05). For those who were more fashion-oriented, significant differences were found between those who viewed the employee in formal business attire and those who viewed the employee in a casual style ($M_{formal-high}$ = 5.43 vs. $M_{casual-high}$ = 4.16, p < .001) and between those who viewed the employee in the moderate and casual styles ($M_{moderate-high}$ = 5.43 vs. $M_{casual-high}$ = 4.16, p < .001). Finally, H4 examined the relationship between service quality expectations and store image perceptions. A set of multiple regression analyses revealed that service quality expectations, in general, predicted two dimensions of store image perceptions (R^2 = .34, F = 45.46, p < .001 for the store prestige image dimension; R^2 = .40, F = 59.77, p < .001 for the product selection image dimension). Thus, H4 was supported. Specifically, results showed that the two dimensions of store image were predicted by different service quality dimensions. For store prestige image, employee service competency was found to have a significant effect (t = 9.02, p < .001, β = .63) but not employee service empathy (t = -1.79, p < .05, β = -.13). With respect to product selection image, on the other hand, while employee service empathy had a significant effect (t = 8.95, p < .001, β = .60), employee service competency did not (t = 1.02, p > .05, β = .07).

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

Incorporating three areas of literature; clothing, service quality, and store image, the study investigated how employee dress style impacts consumers' service quality expectations and store image perceptions. Situated in the context of a department store, findings of this study suggest that style of employee dress (i.e., formal business attire, moderate, and casual) does serve as a cue in the retail environment for consumers to make inferences about the service quality expected to be provided by the sales employee. Furthermore, salesperson dress style both directly and indirectly influences consumers' perceptions of store image. More specifically, the findings suggest that style of employee dress solely impacts consumers' perceptions of employees'

professional behavior in the retail setting, such as being knowledgeable, competent, dependable, and reliable (i.e., employee service competency), but not their perceptions of employees' empathy while dealing with customers, such as being approachable, sensitive, flexible, supportive, and benevolent to customer needs and wants (i.e., employee service empathy). These findings are somewhat in line with the findings by Temple and Loewen (1993) who reported that the use of a jacket, which may be viewed as a formal style, can increase perceptions of expertise. Our findings imply that employee dress style may help convey an impression of professionalism and competency among service providers at work but does not communicate employees' considerations for having customers' best interests at heart. Business dress is often associated with masculine roles instead of feminine roles (Rucker, Anderson and Kangas 1999), which might aid in explaining why the respondents thought that the employee in the formal business attire would be competent (a masculine trait) but not emotional and personal (feminine traits) (Macionis 1991). Also, employee dress style is found to impact consumers' store image perceptions. The more formal the sales employee dress, the more positive and upscale the store image. However, dress style does not have a significant effect on the dimension of product selection image. This finding suggests that employee dress, regarded as a tangible cue, may help promote intangible aspects of the store's image (i.e., store prestige) rather than tangible aspects related to the store's image (i.e., products).

This study adds to existing literature (e.g., Shao et al. 2004) by uncovering the moderating role of fashion orientation in consumers' service quality expectations. Results indicate that the individual trait of fashion orientation helps determine the strength of the influence of employee dress cues (i.e., style) on service quality expectations even though the impact may be limited only in the style of formal business attire according to our findings. Those who highly regard the pursuit of fashion trends tend to be more sensitive to dress cues in the retail environment and thus may be more critical in evaluating services based on dress styles; however, as the style becomes less formal, the difference does not seem as obvious. This study further confirms the role of service quality as an antecedent to store image (Baker et al. 1994). Treating store image as a multidimensional construct (e.g., Chowdhury et al. 1998), this study found mixed effects of service quality expectations on store image dimensions and further revealed the importance of various dimensions of service quality. Expectations regarding employees' professional behaviors may

only contribute to the formation of a store prestige image, while conjecture in relation to employees' empathic dealing with and personal attention to customers may help enhance consumers' perceptions of product selection image instead. Considering "image as a combination of factual and emotional material" (p. 9), Oxenfeldt (1974-1975) posited that image is an interaction among store characteristics and emotional content, which results in a broad range of consumer reactions from pure judgment to emotional attachments. Findings regarding the relationships between service quality expectations and store image perceptions seem to reflect that proposition. While some studies found that employee cues have a positive influence on consumers' perceptions of merchandise quality (e.g., Gardner and Siomkos 1985), others (e.g., Baker, Parasuraman, Grewal, and Voss 2002) did not confirm the relationship in their study. Our findings extend the extant literature and pose questions for future research regarding how employee cues may impact customers' perceptions of merchandise in terms of variety and selection.

Managerially, this study suggests that retailers should pay attention to their salespeople's dress because different dress styles draw forth different evaluations from customers about the service quality provided in retail stores. In general, compared with moderate and casual styles, the style of formal business attire generates better service quality expectations with respect to employee competency than the other styles (i.e., moderate and casual). For retailers, especially those who sell complex products and require sales associates to provide their expertise and knowledge to customers (e.g., high technology products; electronics), formal business attire seems to be a better option for achieving better service quality perceptions. On the other hand, for retailers that would like to enhance customers' evaluations about the empathic role of employees, the formality of employee dress may seem less critical. In addition, dimensions of service quality expectations may have different effects on various dimensions of store image perceptions. Retailers that would like to enhance customers' prestige impressions of their stores should emphasize more employee service competency, meaning that training employees to be professional, reliable, dependable, and competent would assist in the formation of customers' perceptions of an upscale and elegant store image; on the contrary, companies that strive to focus on customers' perceptions of product availability and wide selections in the stores may be more likely to achieve their goals if they prepare their employees to be more personable, understanding, flexible, benevolent, and sensitive to customers' needs and wants.

Several limitations of this study are worth discussion. First, this study utilizes a laboratory setting without showing respondents the various style designs on live models in a realistic setting. Caution should be exercised when trying to interpret the results of this study due to the reduction of external validity. Future research may apply the design concept in a field research environment so that consumers' genuine reactions to dress cues in retail environments can be further understood. Also, other styles such as fashionability and additional design and aesthetic aspects such as color should be considered for future investigation. Second, this study is limited to the context of a department store which may be more product-oriented in nature even though service may be one of the critical aspects in customer evaluations. Effects of employee dress may differ in a more service-oriented retail environment due to the emphasis of tangible cues in evaluations of intangible services (Zeithaml and Bitner 2003). In the future, the retail context (e.g., department store vs. bank) may be included as a moderator to further understand the importance of employee dress in different retail settings. Furthermore, choice of employee dress may need to be consistent with the type of product offerings in the store. Thus, the consistency between design of employee dress and product offerings can also be examined. Third, this study limits the time exposure of the drawings to respondents to mimic reality. Given the time available, respondents' concentration on and attention to the details of the drawings were not controlled. Finally, the use of a student sample was a limitation. With more female respondents in the data, measurement of fashion orientation may be compromised.

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