

Effects of clothing congruity on male consumers' perceptions of salesperson's performance and consumers' age as a moderation

Abstract

The purposes of this study are to determine a) the effects of clothing congruity on male consumers' expectation, evaluation, and functional congruity of and satisfaction with salesperson's performance and b) whether consumers' age moderates these effects. Clothing congruity in the study is defined as the congruence between the clothing style that a salesperson wears and the clothing style that a consumer prefers to wear. Functional congruity is defined as the difference between a consumer's expectation and evaluation of a salesperson's performance. A positive functional congruity indicates that a consumer's evaluation exceeds expectation of a salesperson's performance. Five hypotheses were generated based on the self-congruity theory and previous studies. A 2 x 2 between-subjects factorial design was developed with a male salesperson wearing two styles of clothing (formal vs. casual) and participants in two age groups (adolescent vs. elderly). Data were collected from a survey of 120 male adolescents aged 16-18 and 120 elderly men aged 65-85.

The results show that clothing congruity has a positive influence on expectation and evaluation of and satisfaction with salesperson's performance. Male consumers tend to have higher expectations and evaluations of salesperson's performance and be more satisfied with salesperson's performance if the salesperson wears a style of clothing similar to what they prefer to wear. Consumers' age moderates the effects of clothing congruity on expectation and functional congruity of and satisfaction with salesperson's performance. The effects of clothing congruity are stronger among male elderly consumers than among male adolescent consumers. Academic contributions and contributions to the field are discussed.

Keywords: clothing congruity, male consumers, expectation, evaluation, satisfaction, salesperson's performance, age as a moderation

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Jessie Chen-Yu,¹ Siwon Cho²

¹Department of Apparel, Housing, and Resource Management, Virginia Tech, USA

²Fashion Studies Program, School of Architecture, Southern Illinois University, USA

Correspondence: Jessie Chen-Yu, Department of Apparel, Housing, and Resource Management, Virginia Tech, 240 Wallace Hall (0410), Blacksburg, VA 24061, USA, Email cheny@vt.edu

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Introduction

Building good relationships with customers is one of the key factors for long-term business success.¹ In retail environments, salespeople, as a medium between retailer and customers, interact with customers to develop customer relationships. Customers use the appearances of salespeople as cues to develop the perceptions of salespeople, stores, and brands.² Clothing is an essential part of salespeople's appearance and plays a significant role in customers' perceptions of salespeople's performance.³ Yan et al.³ found that consumers evaluate salespeople in formal business clothing to be more competent than those in moderate and casual clothing. The results showed that the clothing style of salespeople wear is an influential nonverbal communication cue in a retail setting and is an important factor influencing consumers' perceptions of salespeople's performance.

The self-congruity theory^{4,5} stipulates that consumers compare their perceptions of self-image with a product, brand or store image, and when they find congruity, it influences their attitudes, brand preference, and shopping behaviors. This influence can be explained by the similarity-attraction effect⁶: people are attracted to those they perceive to be similar to themselves. Devendorf and Highhouse⁷ applied the self-congruity theory to consumers' perceptions of salespeople and found that when consumers perceive a congruity between their self-image and the image of salespeople, this congruence makes the consumers feel positive about both the salespeople and the store. Clothing is an important aspect of salespeople's image.

Customers may perceive that their self-image is consistent with salespeople's image if the salespeople wear the clothing style that the customers prefer to wear. This congruence is expected to develop positive connections between the salespeople and the customers during in-store interactions. Studies have found significant effects of self-congruity in various retail settings;⁸⁻¹⁰ however, no study of the congruity effects between salespeople's clothing and consumers' preferences in clothing has been found. The current study attempts to fill the gaps in the literature of the self-congruity theory and consumer behavior during apparel shopping.

Studies showed that both adolescent and elderly consumers find interactions with salespeople a pleasurable in-store shopping experience.¹¹ Adolescents prefer to shop in store for the pleasure of instant obtention and experience shopping, although much of the information search was conducted online. The experience of in-store shopping also offers a social setting for adolescents to explore products with their peers and talk to salespeople. The in-store experience is also pleasurable for elderly consumers, as they prefer assistance and information from salespeople. However, consumers in different age groups have their own unique perceptions and preferences in clothing¹² and have different attitudes, values, and behaviors.¹³ Hence, adolescent and elderly consumers, according to their own preferences in clothing, may have different responses to salespeople. By comparing adolescent and elderly consumers, the current study provides insights into the influences of salesperson's clothing on consumers' perceptions of salesperson's performance.

Consumer behaviors, such as information search, purchase behavior, and mall loyalty, are different between male and female consumers.¹⁴⁻¹⁶ The menswear market worldwide has continuous rapid growth and is projected to have an annual growth rate of 2.83% between 2024 and 2027,¹⁷ which is higher than the growth rate of 2.76% in the women's apparel market.¹⁸ Although studies showed that male and female consumers behave differently and menswear sales worldwide have grown continuously, male consumer behaviors have been underexplored in the realm of fashion studies. Therefore, the current study focuses on male consumers to expand the understanding of clothing congruity on male consumers' perceptions of salesperson's performance.

The first purpose of this study is to determine the effects of clothing congruity on consumers' expectation, evaluation, and functional congruity of and satisfaction with salesperson's performance. The current study defines clothing congruity as the congruence between the clothing style (formal vs. casual) that a salesperson wears and the clothing style that a consumer prefers to wear. Functional congruity is the difference between a consumer's expectation of functional features in the brand/product and his/her perceived performance of the features and is measured by the consumer's evaluation score of the features minus his/her expectation score of the features.¹⁹ Functional congruity in our study is defined as the difference between a consumer's expectation and evaluation of a salesperson's performance. A positive functional congruity indicates that a consumer's evaluation exceeds expectation of a salesperson's performance. The second purpose of the study is to determine whether consumers' age (adolescent vs. elderly) moderates the effects of clothing congruity on consumers' expectation, evaluation, and functional congruity of and satisfaction with salesperson's performance. This study explores the application of the self-congruity theory to male consumers' perceptions of salesperson's performance. Results may give insights into the effect of clothing congruity for fashion marketers to understand how salespeople's clothing influences their customers' in-store shopping behavior. Retailers may utilize salespeople's appearance to communicate more effectively with male customers in different age groups and build a long-term relationship in this extremely competitive industry.

Literature review and development of hypotheses

Clothing congruity

Sirgy⁴ proposed the self-congruity theory, which indicates that consumers align themselves with the brand, store, or product that has an image consistent with their self-image. This theory has been applied to study the congruity effects in various marketing settings. If a brand's image is perceived to be congruent with consumers' self-image, they not only feel positive about, but also trust, that brand.¹⁰ Consumers are attracted to a store and are more likely to patronize the store when the store's image is perceived to be congruent with their self-image.⁸ The self-congruity theory may also be applied to investigate the effect of salesperson's clothing on consumers' perceptions of salesperson's performance. Consumers may feel drawn to a salesperson who resonates with them, especially in physical appearance, such as clothing, which is more easily detectable than internal traits. The congruence between consumers' preferred clothing style (e.g., formal vs. casual) and salesperson's clothing style may influence consumers' perceptions of salesperson's performance.

Effect of clothing congruity on consumers' expectation of salesperson's performance: Consumers' expectations influence their decisions before purchase and help determine their satisfaction after purchase.²⁰ Although the effect of congruity on behaviors such

as purchase intention has been reported extensively in the marketing literature, few studies were found that investigated the direct effect of congruity on consumers' expectation. One study in tourism showed that self-congruity has a positive impact on place expectation.²¹ The congruence between people's self-image and destination image generates a positive expectation of the destination. Other studies showed that self-congruity can make consumers feel positive about a brand and a store.^{22,23} These studies also support the possibility that clothing congruity plays a significant role in consumers' expectation of salesperson's performance because clothing is an important aspect of one's self-image. If the clothing style of a salesperson and the preferred style of consumers are congruent, this clothing congruity may generate a positive expectation of salesperson's performance. Therefore, the first hypothesis was proposed as below:

Hypothesis 1: Clothing congruity positively influences consumers' expectation of salesperson's performance.

Effect of clothing congruity on consumers' evaluation of salesperson's performance: According to the self-congruity theory, an individual's self-concept is related to his/her evaluation of services. Consumers evaluate products and services by using the same dimensions by which they describe themselves; thus, self-congruity influences the evaluation of product and service quality.²⁴ Massicotte et al.²⁵ found that self-congruity positively affects mall evaluation. The more a mall is perceived as having customers that shoppers can identify with, the more favorably that the shoppers would evaluate the mall. Koo et al.²⁶ found that the closer the image of an online store is to a consumer's self-image, the more favorably the store is evaluated by the consumer. Ekinci and Riley²⁴ also found that self-congruity positively influences the evaluation of service quality. These studies support that the clothing congruity between a salesperson and a consumer may also make it more likely for the consumer to evaluate the salesperson's performance favorably. Therefore, the second hypothesis was developed as below:

Hypothesis 2: Clothing congruity positively influences consumers' evaluation of salesperson's performance.

Effect of clothing congruity on functional congruity: Lee et al.¹⁹ and Kang et al.²⁷ found that if consumers perceive a brand/product image to be consistent with their self-image, they are more likely to evaluate the brand/product performance as meeting or exceeding their expectations (i.e., higher functional congruity). Personality congruity between a brand and consumers was also found to have a positive relationship with functional congruity.²³ When consumers share characteristics with a brand's personality, their evaluations of the brand will likely meet or exceed their expectations. Similar to the brand-consumer congruity, the clothing congruity between a salesperson and consumers may help the consumers' evaluations of the salesperson's performance meet or exceed their expectations. Therefore, the third hypothesis was developed as below:

Hypothesis 3: Clothing congruity positively influences functional congruity.

Effect of clothing congruity on consumers' satisfaction of salesperson's performance: The effects of self-congruity on consumer satisfaction have been examined in various marketing settings. Ekinci and Riley²⁴ found that the congruence between consumers' self-image and a product's image leads to higher levels of satisfaction with the product. A study by Tsai et al.²⁸ showed that customers whose self-concept is consistent with a brand experience have high customer satisfaction. Ibrahim and Najjar⁹ also found that the congruence between customers' self-image and a store's image

increases the customers' satisfaction with the store. Applying the findings of these studies to clothing congruity, we proposed that clothing congruity may increase consumers' satisfaction with a salesperson's performance. If a salesperson wears a clothing style that customers prefer to wear, this clothing congruity may lead to consumers' satisfaction with the salesperson's service. Based on the proposition, the fourth hypothesis was developed as below:

Hypothesis 4: Clothing congruity positively influences consumers' satisfaction with salesperson's performance.

Consumers' age as a moderation of the effects of clothing congruity

People in different age groups behave differently because the forces that shape the lives of each group are different.²⁹ Because people's cognitive performance deteriorates as they age, elderly consumers rely less on detailed and effortful processing but more on experiential-based and schema-based processing than younger consumers do during information search and purchase decision making.³⁰ The perception of clothing congruity is schema-based, and clothing congruity reflects a person's self-image. While adolescents are still developing their self-image,³¹ elderly people have already fully developed their self-image, would like to maintain their self-image, and tend to associate their self-image with their life satisfaction.³² According to Yoon's theoretical notion³⁰ and Bai et al.³²'s research results, clothing congruity will play a more important role among elderly consumers than among younger consumers in decision making. In other words, the self-congruity effect will be stronger in elderly consumers' decision making.

Huaman-Ramirez³³ found that self-congruity causes older consumers to have more positive attitudes toward a tourist destination. Gilal et al.³⁴ found that brand-user image congruity is more important for forming brand passion among older consumers than among younger consumers. These studies showed that consumers' age moderates the effects of self-congruity on consumers' attitudes and emotional states, and the self-congruity effect is stronger among older consumers than among younger consumers. No studies were found that investigate the moderating role of consumers' age in the effects of clothing congruity on consumers' perceptions of a salesperson. However, the findings of Shao et al.¹² may shed some light on this topic. These researchers found that consumers of different ages have different reactions to and senses of importance of salespeople's clothing. The formality of salespeople's clothing impacts older consumers significantly more than it does younger consumers. Older consumers discredit inappropriately dressed salespeople more than younger consumers do. These findings suggested that clothing congruity may also influence older and younger consumers differently in consumers' perceptions of salesperson's performance. Thus, we expected that clothing congruity evokes more positive behaviors among older consumers than among younger consumers. Therefore, the fifth hypothesis with four sub-hypotheses was proposed as below:

Hypothesis 5: Consumers' age (adolescent vs. elderly) moderates the effects of clothing congruity on consumers' expectation (H5a), evaluation (H5b), and functional congruity (H5c) of and satisfaction (H5d) with salesperson's performance. The clothing congruity effect is stronger among elderly consumers than among adolescent consumers.

Methodology

Research design

A 2 x 2 between-subjects factorial design was developed with a salesperson wearing two styles of clothing (formal vs. casual)

and participants in two age groups (adolescent vs. elderly). This design resulted in four experimental groups. In Group 1, adolescent participants were shown a picture of a salesperson wearing a formal style (i.e., a navy-blue suit, navy-blue tie, white dress shirt, and black dress shoes). In Group 2, adolescent participants were shown a picture of a salesperson wearing a casual style (i.e., a navy-blue crewneck long-sleeve sweatshirt, navy-blue chino pants, and white sneakers). Navy-blue was selected as the color of salesperson's clothing because it is found commonly in both formal and casual menswear. In Group 3, elderly participants were shown a picture of a salesperson dressed in a formal style. In Group 4, elderly participants were shown a picture of a salesperson dressed in a casual style. Adolescent and elderly participants were randomly assigned to the formal and casual clothing experimental groups, 60 participants in each group, for a total of 240 participants.

Selection of participants

Only males were selected as participants for the current study because male and female consumers may have different perceptions of a salesperson. Selecting only male subjects can reduce the effect of gender on the results. For the same reason, a male salesperson was selected in this study. Furthermore, adolescent and elderly consumers were selected as participants because both prefer in-store shopping, during which they are bound to interact frequently with salespeople. The understanding of the shopping behavior of adolescents is critical because they will soon join the main workforce and have high purchasing power. Forward-thinking companies actively market brands to adolescents because adolescents are the future spenders.³⁵ The ages of adolescent participants were further narrowed down to 16 to 19 because adolescents in this age group can drive a car, have more opportunities to work part time, and have more experience in purchasing apparel products independently than consumers who are 15 years old and under. Participants aged 65 and older were selected as the elderly group because consumers in this age group numbered about 58 million in 2022 (17.3% of the total population)³⁶ and are predicted to reach 77 million by 2034 in the United States.³⁷ In 2022, consumers in this age group accounted for 22% of spending in the United States.³⁸ The number of seniors is growing by 3.2% every year in the world compared with a growth of 0.8% of the whole population.³⁹ However, marketers have typically underestimated the value of consumers aged 65 and older, who are often neglected.⁴⁰ Similarly, apparel consumer behavior studies on older consumers are far fewer than those on other age groups.

Instrument development and data collection

For measurements of research variables, a questionnaire with descriptions of scenarios was developed with an effort to make it more accessible and easier for elderly and adolescent participants to follow. The elderly participants may have various degrees of disability and medical conditions, and these conditions may influence the duration of participants' concentration.⁴¹ Borgers et al.⁴² emphasized that obtaining high-quality survey responses from adolescents requires keeping them motivated and guarding against their boredom and flippancy. In addition, Hair et al.⁴³ noted that single-item measures are especially useful for easily understood concepts. Cheung and Lucas⁴⁴ found positive correlations between the findings measured by single-item scales and those measured by well-established multiple-items of the Satisfaction with Life Scale. The single-item measures demonstrate a substantial degree of criterion validity consistent across three samples. In view of these considerations, short, single-item measures for all research variables were generated.

In Part 1 of the questionnaire, the participant was asked to put himself in a scenario in which he entered a store to buy sweatshirts for himself and was approached by a salesperson shown in a picture. Depending on the experimental group, the picture showed an image of a salesperson wearing either formal or casual style. Adapting the questions from Chen-Yu,⁴⁵ we measured expectation of salesperson's performance by the statement "I predict the level of performance (e.g., product knowledge, attentiveness, friendliness) of this salesperson is ____." The response scale ranged from "terrible" (1), to "neutral" (4), to "excellent" (7).

In Part 2 of the questionnaire, the basic assistance that a salesperson normally would offer was described, and the same picture shown in Part 1 was provided again. In the scenario, the participant was greeted by the salesperson and shown the location of the sweatshirts that the participant would consider. Then, evaluation of and satisfaction with the salesperson's performance were measured by adapting the questions from Chen-Yu.⁴⁵ The evaluation was measured by the statement "Based on the service in the above scenario, the performance of the salesperson is ____.", and the response scale ranged from "terrible" (1), to "neutral" (4), to "excellent" (7). A graphic format of scale was used to measure satisfaction because according to Hausknecht,⁴⁶ a graphic format could better communicate and quantify consumer satisfaction and remove the ambiguity of verbal measures. A scale with 10 equal intervals was used, and each interval represented a 10% increment in satisfaction. The percentage of satisfaction increased from the left end of the scale (0%) to the right end of the scale (100%). The participant was asked to mark (↓) on the scale to indicate the percent of satisfaction he had with the performance of the salesperson in the described scenario.

In Part 3 of the questionnaire, two pictures were used for the measurements of the participants' preference of clothing style. One picture showed an image of formal style clothing (i.e., a navy-blue suit, navy-blue tie, and white dress shirt) and was marked as Picture A, and the other picture showed an image of casual style clothing (i.e., a navy-blue crewneck long-sleeve sweatshirt and navy-blue chino pants) and was marked as Picture B. The participants were asked to select either "A" or "B" to respond to the statement "I prefer to wear the clothes shown in picture ____." Then, questions on participants' age and race were asked. These questions were developed by the present authors.

To establish the content validity of the questionnaire, three faculty members with Ph.D. degrees in the field of apparel evaluated the questionnaire against the research objectives. The questionnaire was pilot tested with eight adolescents 14 to 18 years old and seven elderly people 65 to 85 years old. The participants were asked to evaluate the wording, ease of understanding, clarity of the picture, and time requirement to complete the questionnaire. The pilot test results showed that the pictures clearly showed the details of the clothing, and the scenario and questions were easy to understand. The participants in the pilot study were not included in the main data collection.

Prior to data collection, the study was approved for exemption status by the Institutional Review Board because there was no risk involved to the participants in this study. The survey of the adolescent group (N=120) was conducted at two high schools in the United States. School board approval for the two high schools was obtained, parental consent forms were handed out before the data collection, and the survey was administered by the teachers. The range of ages was 16 to 18, and most of the adolescent participants were 16 years old (67.5%). The participants in the elderly group (N=120) were recruited from five retirement centers in the United States. Before data

collection, permission was obtained from the manager of each center and the participants themselves. The surveys were administered by the program managers/directors of the centers. The range of ages was 65 to 85, and most of the elderly participants were 65-70 (38.3%) and 71-75 (34.2%).

Data analysis and results

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences was used to analyze the collected data. The independent variable of clothing congruity was generated by creating two groups: the congruity and incongruity groups. The congruity group consists of participants who prefer wearing formal clothing and saw a picture of a salesperson wearing a formal style, and participants who prefer wearing casual clothing and saw a picture of a salesperson wearing a casual style. The incongruity group consists of participants who prefer wearing formal clothing and saw a picture of a salesperson wearing a casual style, and participants who prefer wearing casual clothing and saw a picture of a salesperson wearing a formal style. The dependent variable of functional congruity was calculated by the score of the participant's evaluation of the salesperson's performance minus the score of the participant's expectation of the salesperson's performance. The calculations indicate that the higher the functional congruity score, the higher the evaluation exceeding the expectation. Three tests of two-way analysis of variance were conducted to test the hypothesis.

The results show that clothing congruity positively influences consumers' expectations of salesperson's performance (H1: $F(1, 239) = 26.55, p < .001$; see Table 1) and evaluation of salesperson's performance (H2: $F(1, 239) = 13.06, p < .001$), but has no influence on functional congruity (H3: $F(1, 239) = 1.92, p = .167$). Clothing congruity also positively influences consumers' satisfaction with salesperson's performance (H4: $F(1, 239) = 37.39, p < .001$). The values of Partial Eta Squared (η_p^2) are compared, and the results show that clothing congruity has the strongest effect on satisfaction ($\eta_p^2 = .137$). Although clothing congruity influences both expectation and evaluation, the effect is stronger on expectation ($\eta_p^2 = 0.101$) than on evaluation ($\eta_p^2 = .052$). Except the result for functional congruity, these results confirm the proposed effects of clothing congruity on consumers' perceptions (i.e., expectation, evaluation, and satisfaction) of salesperson's performance and extend the literature on the self-congruity theory.

The results of interactions between clothing congruity and consumers' age indicate whether consumers' age is a moderation of effects of clothing congruity. The results show that consumers' age moderates the effect of clothing congruity on expectation of salesperson's performance (H5a: $F(1, 239) = 11.51, p < .001$). Consumers' expectations are significantly higher among elderly consumers than among adolescent consumers when the salesperson's clothing style is consistent with consumers' preferred clothing style ($M_{elderly} = 5.56, M_{adolescent} = 4.57, t(122) = 4.66, p < .001$). A Tukey's HSD (honestly significant difference) test further shows that elderly participants who prefer wearing formal style have much higher performance expectations of a salesperson in a formal style ($M = 5.83$) than of a salesperson in a casual style ($M = 3.91; p < .001$). However, consumers' age does not moderate the effect of clothing congruity on evaluation of salesperson's performance (H5b: $F(1, 239) = 1.51, p = .285$). Consumers' age moderates the effect of clothing congruity on functional congruity (H5c: $F(1, 239) = 5.05, p = .026$). Clothing congruity has a negative influence on functional congruity in the elderly group ($t(118) = -3.21, p = .002$), but no influence in the adolescent group ($t(118) = .52, p = .603$). Consumers' age also moderates the effect of clothing congruity on

satisfaction with salesperson's performance (H5d: $F(1, 239) = 4.51, p = .035$). Consumers' satisfaction is significantly higher among elderly consumers than among adolescent consumers if the salesperson's clothing style is consistent with consumers' preferred clothing style ($M_{elderly} = 83.03, M_{adolescent} = 73.97, t(122) = 2.97, p = .004$). The values of Partial Eta Squared are compared, and the results show that consumers' age moderates the most the effect of clothing congruity on expectation of salesperson's performance ($\eta_p^2 = .046$). Except

the result for functional congruity, the results show that consumers' age is a moderation of the proposed effects of clothing congruity on consumers' perceptions (i.e., expectation, evaluation, and satisfaction) of salesperson's performance. These clothing congruity effects are stronger among elderly consumers than among adolescent consumers. These findings provide insights into the differences between adolescent and elderly consumers in utilizing their clothing preferences in response to salespeople's service.

Table 1 Hypotheses testing results

Hypothesis	Results	Proposed hypothesis supported or not supported
H1 Clothing congruity positively influences consumers' expectations of salesperson's performance.	$F(1, 239) = 26.55, p < .001$ $\eta_p^2 = .101$	Supported
H2 Clothing congruity positively influences consumers' evaluations of salesperson's performance.	$F(1, 239) = 13.06, p < .001$ $\eta_p^2 = .052$	Supported
H3 Clothing congruity positively influences functional congruity.	$F(1, 239) = 1.92, p = .167$ $\eta_p^2 = .008$	Not supported
H4 Clothing congruity positively influences satisfaction with salesperson's performance.	$F(1, 239) = 37.39, p < .001$ $\eta_p^2 = .137$	Supported
H5 Consumers' age (adolescent vs. elderly) moderates the effects of clothing congruity. The clothing congruity effect is stronger among elderly consumers than among adolescent consumers.		Partially supported
H _{5a} Consumers' age moderates the effects of clothing congruity on consumers' expectations of salesperson's performance.	$F(1, 239) = 11.51, p < .001$ $\eta_p^2 = .046$	Supported
H _{5b} Consumers' age moderates the effects of clothing congruity on consumers' evaluations of salesperson's performance.	$F(1, 239) = 1.51, p = .285$ $\eta_p^2 = .005$	Not supported
H _{5c} Consumers' age moderates the effects of clothing congruity on functional congruity.	$F(1, 239) = 5.05, p = .002$ $\eta_p^2 = .021$	Supported but in a negative direction
H _{5d} Consumers' age moderates the effects of clothing congruity on consumers' satisfaction with salesperson's performance.	$F(1, 239) = 4.51, p < .035$ $\eta_p^2 = .019$	Supported

Discussion

Academic contributions

The current study contributes to the knowledge of apparel consumers' shopping behavior and fills gaps in the literature. First, this study focuses on male consumers and provides insights into their responses to a salesperson. The results of the study expand the knowledge of male consumer behavior and affirm the impacts of salesperson's clothing as a nonverbal communication cue on male customers during in-store shopping.

No study was found that investigated the congruity effects between salespeople's clothing style and consumers' preferences of clothing style on consumers' perceptions of salesperson's performance. Our results extend the application of the self-congruity theory⁴ to male consumers' perceptions of salesperson's performance and give insights into this topic. Consistent with the literature on self-image congruity,^{21,26,28} the current study determines that consumers tend to have higher positive expectations and more favorable evaluations of salesperson's performance and are more satisfied with the performance if the salesperson wears a style of clothing similar to what the consumers prefer to wear. This finding supports the proposition of the similarity-attraction effect,⁶ which indicates that individuals who share similar appearance symbols or the same understanding of such symbols are more likely to attract each other. The similarity between the salesperson's clothing style and the consumers' preferences of clothing style creates positive connections; therefore, the consumers feel satisfied with the salesperson's performance.

Inconsistent with the previous studies on the effect of self-congruity on functional congruity,^{19,27} our results show that clothing congruity does not influence functional congruity. Consumers do not evaluate a salesperson's performance exceeding their expectations, even if the salesperson is in a clothing style that they prefer to wear. A possible explanation is that the salesperson's performance in this study is a basic assistance that a salesperson normally would offer, as described in the survey scenario. Although clothing congruity positively influences consumers' evaluation of salesperson's performance, the values of Partial Eta Squared show that the effect of clothing congruity on the evaluation is lower than that on the expectation. Therefore, male consumers would not evaluate salesperson's performance higher than their expectations; thus, there is no effect on functional congruity.

This study examined the moderating role of consumers' age (adolescent vs. elderly) in the effects of clothing congruity on consumers' perceptions of salesperson's performance. We found that the effects of clothing congruity are different between adolescent and elderly consumers, providing insights into male consumers' apparel shopping behavior in these two specific age groups. Consistent with the findings of previous studies on the moderating effects of consumers' age,^{12,34} the effect of clothing congruity on consumers' expectation of and satisfaction with salesperson's performance are stronger among elderly consumers than among adolescent consumers. Male elderly consumers have higher expectations of salesperson's performance and are more satisfied with the performance than male adolescent consumers if the salesperson wears a style of clothing similar to what the consumers prefer to wear.

However, consumers' age does not moderate the effect of clothing congruity on evaluation of salesperson's performance. The result may be explained by the fact that elderly consumers have more experiences with salespeople than adolescent consumers do, and these broad experiences are likely to play a role in elderly consumers' evaluations of salesperson's performance. Elderly consumers may use the performance level that they experienced with other salespeople as the standard of comparison. As a result, the effect of clothing congruity on evaluation of salesperson's performance is not stronger among male elderly consumers than among male adolescent consumers.

The effect of clothing congruity on functional congruity are stronger among male elderly consumers than among male adolescent consumers. Clothing congruity influences functional congruity among elderly consumers but has no significant influence among adolescent consumers. However, clothing congruity negatively influences functional congruity among elderly consumers. Elderly consumers who prefer formal clothing are less likely to evaluate a salesperson's performance exceeding their expectations if they see the salesperson wearing a formal style. Further examinations show that elderly consumers who prefer formal clothing have a high-performance expectation of a salesperson in a formal style. The high expectation created by the clothing congruity would cause a low functional congruity because functional congruity is calculated by the score of evaluation minus the score of expectation.

Contributions to the field

In addition to the academic contributions, the findings of the current study may help marketers better understand how salespeople's clothing influences male consumer behavior and how salespeople's clothing is utilized to serve customers more effectively and build a stronger relationship with customers. We found that a salesperson who wears a clothing style that customers prefer to wear can prompt the customers to have positive expectations and evaluations of and high satisfaction with the salesperson's performance. Therefore, requesting salespeople to wear the style that the target customers prefer to wear can be an effective strategy to better serve customers. The study scenario of the current study was buying sweatshirts. The results suggest that even for companies that sell casual clothing, if their target customers usually prefer formal clothing, they should still request their salespeople to wear a formal style to create positive communications with their customers.

This study also found that male elderly consumers who prefer formal clothing tend to evaluate their expectation of salesperson's performance higher than their evaluation if they see a salesperson in a formal style. These findings suggest that retailers that target elderly consumers need to ensure that their salesperson's performance meets or exceeds their customers' expectations. Retailers need to understand how much product knowledge and interaction that their customers expect to receive from their salespeople. It is also important for their salespersons to understand that consumers' expectations for a salesperson may vary from customer to customer. Salespeople need to observe each customer carefully to understand his shopping behavior in order to provide services that can meet or exceed his expectation.

In summary, this study contributes to the knowledge of apparel consumers' shopping behavior by extending the application of the self-congruity theory to examine the clothing congruity effects on male consumers' perceptions of salespeople's performance in apparel shopping. Findings of the study fill gaps in the literature of male consumer behavior. This study also expands the understanding of the

differences between adolescent and elderly consumers' behaviors, showing that clothing congruity effects are stronger among elderly consumers than among adolescent consumers. The study confirms the impacts of salesperson's clothing as a nonverbal communication cue on male customers during in-store shopping. The results help retailers understand how salesperson's clothing can be utilized to serve customers more effectively and develop unique approaches to target customers in different age groups to build a good relationship with customers.

Conclusion and recommendations for future studies

This study explores the application of the self-congruity theory to male consumers' perceptions of salesperson's performance. According to the results, clothing congruity has a positive influence on expectation and evaluation of and satisfaction with salesperson's performance. Male consumers tend to have more positive expectations and evaluations of salesperson's performance and be more satisfied with salesperson's performance if the salesperson wears a style of clothing similar to what they prefer to wear. Consumers' age moderates the effects of clothing congruity on expectation and functional congruity of and satisfaction with salesperson's performance. The effects of clothing congruity are stronger among male elderly consumers than among male adolescent consumers.

Because a nonrandom sample selection process was used in the study, the results cannot be generalized to all adolescent or elderly consumers. Additional research is required to verify the findings of the current study. Because only male adolescent and elderly consumers were examined in the current study, future studies should involve other customer segments, such as different genders, age groups, cultures, or countries. In addition, single-item measures were used in the current study. Replication is needed to examine the reliability of the measurements. Furthermore, customers' perceptions of a salesperson may vary with the type of products (e.g., jewelry vs. software), price of products (e.g., luxury vs. budget), and type of stores (e.g., specialty vs. department). In the scenario described in the current study, the salesperson's performance was a basic assistance that a salesperson normally would offer. Studies are needed to further understand if salespersons' performance level (e.g., basic service vs. all-encompassing service) moderates the effects of clothing congruity on consumers' perceptions of salesperson's performance. Only two styles of salesperson's clothing, formal and casual, were examined. Other styles of clothing (e.g., trendy, classic, and uniform) may be used in future studies. In addition to clothing, many other items influence a salesperson's appearance, such as makeup, hair style, tattoos, body weight, and facial expressions. Studies are needed to help retailers understand what other aspects of a salesperson's appearance than clothing may also play a role in the effects of salesperson-customer congruity on consumers' perceptions of salesperson's performance.

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Conflicts of interest

Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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