THE MODERATING INFLUENCE OF CULTURE VALUES ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DRESS AND CUSTOMER AFFECT

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how service-contact-personnel dress influences customer feelings of being dominated. A lab experiment with a full factorial design is utilized with the independent variables of dress and involvement, and the dependent variables, customer feelings of being dominated and purchase intent. Results show that appropriate dressed service-contact-personnel resulted in higher customer feelings of being dominated and greater intent to purchase than do inappropriately dressed service-contact-personnel. In addition, results supported a mediating effect of customer feelings of being dominated on the relationship between dress and purchase intent. Finally, implications of the findings are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The influence and importance of the appropriateness of service-contact-personnel dress (hereafter refer to as dress) have been examined and discussed from different perspectives and within various contexts. For example, while Shao, Baker, and Wagner (2004) examined the influence of dress from a cognitive perspective (i.e., cognition in the form of customer expectations of service quality in general), Shao and Ramser (2004) studied the effects of dress from an overall attitude perspective (i.e., attitude in the form of affect, behavior, and cognition). More recently and following the cognitive perspective, Shao, Ramser, and Wilson (2006) looked into the effects of dress on dimensions (i.e., reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy) of customer expectations of service quality. In terms of the context, dress has been studied in the areas of accounting (e.g., Khan, Chawla, & Devine 1996-1997), advertising (e.g., O’Neal & Lapitsky 1991), education (e.g., Behling 1994), hospitals (e.g., Marino et al. 1991), personal selling (e.g., Baker, Grewal, & Parasuraman 1994), and retailing (e.g., Michael Baker, Levy, Grewal 1992).

However, there is little research (e.g., Petrovich, Bennett, & Jackson 1968; Hubble & Gelso 1978; Gjerdingen, Simpson, & Titus 1987; Marino et al. 1991) that adopts the affective perspective to the examination of dress (Soloman 1998). While the previously cited studies indicate general support for the effects of dress, they did not examine the effects of dress in a commercial context. Furthermore, there is no research investigating dress effects from the view point of cultural values. Thus, the study reported here empirically examines the influence of dress from an affective perspective and within the context of differences in cultural values.
CONCEPTUAL MODEL AND HYPOTHESES

This study is grounded in the Mehrabian and Russell model (1974), which postulates that physical and/or social stimuli in an environment directly influence an individual’s affective states. All affective states can be represented by three dimensions. The pleasure-displeasure dimension concerns the degree to which one feels happy, contented, pleased, or satisfied in the situation. The dimension of arousal-nonarousal relates to the degree to which one feels stimulated, excited, frenzied, or active in the situation. The dominance-submissiveness dimension involves the degree to which one feels influential in, in control of, unrestricted from, or free to act in, the situation. Even though there have been a number of empirical studies applying the Mehrabian and Russell model in investing the environmental elements, these studies either utilized the dimensions of pleasure and arousal only (e.g., Baker, Levy, & Grewal 1992) or failed to support the significance of the dominance dimension (e.g., Bellizzi & Hite 1992), except (Yalch & Spangenberg 1988). This study, therefore, employed only the dimension of dominance-submissiveness. It is proposed that a customer’s feelings of being dominated (hereafter refer to as being dominated) will be influenced by dress. In addition, cultural value (i.e., power distance) is proposed to moderate the relationships between dress and being dominated.

![Figure 1. The Conceptual Model](image)

Dress, as one of the social stimuli in an environment, is defined as the total arrangement of material supplements to the body and detectable modifications of the body (Roach-Higgins & Eicher 1992). Appropriate dress denotes “displaying particular modes of dress within the professional context” (Fiore & Delong 1990, p. 219). In other words, whether employee dress is appropriate or inappropriate depends entirely upon the type of work to be performed. Customer affect can be defined as “the emotional states an individual experiences within the environment” (Donovan & Rossiter 1982, p. 34). The relationship between environmental elements and customer affective states has been established by marketing scholars. Conceptually, for example, Gardner (1985) proposed that interactions with service providers influence consumers’ affective states. Likewise, Bitner’s servicescape (1992) model, which is similar to the Mehrabian-Russell model, suggested that customers’ emotional responses (e.g., mood) can be elicited by “the place.”
Effect of Dress

Intense, ordered, and powerful stimuli are associated with a submissive feeling within the person encountering them (Mehrabian & Russell 1974). Furthermore, Rafaeli (1993) suggested that style of dress can elicit attributions of dominance, power, and status. Shao and Ramser (2004) found support for the hypothesis that appropriately dressed service-contact-personnel positively influenced customer affect in general. People dressed appropriately have repeatedly been noted as more powerful and of higher status than people who are inappropriately dressed (e.g., Bickman 1974). Doctors, nurses, and medical students utilize the dress of their profession to reinforce their power and authority (Burgoon & Saine 1978). Though highly dominant, however, the traditional medical profession attire has been deemed appropriate for physicians by patients (e.g., Gjerdingen, Simpson & Titus 1987). All in all, dress functions to establish the wearer’s right to a given status and authority without his or her need to prove himself or herself. It is likely that, when dressed appropriately for a service, service-contact-personnel can create a feeling of dominance over customers. Thus, it is hypothesized that:

H1: Appropriate dress for service-contact-personnel will result in greater customer feelings-of-being-dominated than will inappropriate dress.

Moderating Effect of Power Distance

Social perception theory, which examines the process through which an individual “seeks to know and understand other persons” (Baron & Byrne 1994, p. 80), suggests that perceiver characteristics may moderate the effects of dress on being dominated. Perceiver characteristics refer to the aspects of the perceiver which are likely to affect how the social world is perceived, such as physical traits or personal traits. A perceiver characteristic that is likely to influence the effect of dress is the difference of cultural value.

One of the most relevant studies of cultural values has been conducted by Hofstede (1983). Hofstede suggested that differences in cultural values can be explained by four dimensions: individualism vs. collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity, and power distance. Individualism describes the degree to which human beings in a society prefer to act as individuals rather than as members of a social group. In highly individualistic societies, people are concerned about their personal interests and the well-being of the members of their immediate family and friends, and want to be perceived as independent and unique persons separate from others. Personal goals and achievement, freedom of choice and decision-making are, therefore, important characteristics of individualistic societies. Contrarily, collectivistic societies emphasize the needs and interests of the group rather than the individual. All human beings are perceived as equal and have to conform to the norms of the group. In collectivistic societies, people see themselves as a part of a group and it is, thus, very important for them to build relationships.

Uncertainty avoidance is the extent to which people feel uncomfortable in the presence of vagueness and ambiguity. Low uncertainty avoidance cultures accept the fact that the future is uncertain and take every day as it comes. They are more willing to take risks and try new things. High uncertainty avoidance cultures try to cover themselves against unwanted changes in the
future and would rather rely on established behaviors, rules, and procedures than experiment with new ideas. Masculinity refers to the importance a culture places on perceived masculine traits such as recognition, achievement, assertiveness, challenge, and the acquisition of wealth in contrast to perceived feminine traits such as nurturance, care-giving and co-operation. Power distance is the “extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally” (Hofstede 2001, p.98). In low power distance cultures, equality is desired and status symbols are avoided. Contrarily, in high power distance cultures, the powerful are entitled to privileges and try to emphasize their status through visible signs.

Hofstede assigned the indices of cultural dimensions to countries and assumed that nationality is a proxy of culture. This assumption is supported by Dawar and Parker (1994), who argue that nationality reflects culture, because all members of a nation tend to share similar language, history, and religion. Therefore, it is common to study countries instead of cultural regions beyond national borders when conducting cultural studies (Pothukuchi et al. 2002; Hofstede et al. 2002; Thomas & Au 2002; Grinblatt & Keloharju 2001; Li et al. 2001; Gibson & Zellmer-Bruhn 2001). Though Hofstede emphasized that the indices are valid on a group basis only, Brockner et al. (2001) indicated that power distance is significant on the group level as well as on the individual level.

Though power distance has been examined in various marketing areas, such as advertising (e.g., Albers-Miller & Gelb 1996; Jung & Kellaris 2006; Tai & Chan 2001), brand management (e.g., Roth 1995), internal marketing (e.g., Blodgett et al. 2001), new product development (e.g., Singh 2006; Yeniyurt & Townsend 2003; Dwyer, Mesak, & Hsu 2005), and relationship marketing (e.g., Hewett, Money, & Sharma 2006; Ndubisi 2004), no direct empirical evidence regarding the effect of dress on being dominated has been found. Therefore, only basic exploratory hypotheses are offered.

People who grew up in a high power distance culture are highly aware of the difference between people of high status and people of low status. Appropriately dressed people will be perceived as of high status, whereas inappropriately dressed people will be perceived as of low status. Depending on the perceived status of the service-contact-personnel, the customer will find himself/herself in a more or less powerful position. Professional services are characterized by a provider-client asymmetry and naturally put the customer in a dependent position (Shaffer & O’Hara 1995). Customers with a high power distance background will experience this situation as more intense because of high awareness of status differences. Therefore, these customers are assumed to feel more dominated than customers with low power distance backgrounds. The study of Swanson, Frankel, and Sagan (2005) indicates that people experience different feelings in the same situation; or people may experience the same feelings, but they experience them with different intensities depending on their nationality and cultural background. Thus, it is hypothesized that:

**H2A:** Customers from high power distance cultures will experience greater feelings-of-being-dominated than those from low power distance cultures, if the dress of service-contact-personnel is appropriate.
**H2B:** Customers from high power distance cultures will experience less feelings-of-being-dominated than those from low power distance cultures, if the dress of service-contact-personnel is inappropriate.

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research utilizes the cognitive psychological perspective to studying cross-cultural differences. According to Malhotra, Agarwal, and Peterson (1996), the perspective is appropriate because this study is dealing with the issue of “understanding basic processes of” how dress influences customer emotion (i.e. feelings-of-being-dominated) (p. 12). In addition, this study investigates the research questions from an etic perspective which examines the influences of dress as a “phenomenon from a position outside the system” (Malhotra, Agarwal, & Peterson 1996, p. 12).

The study was a 2 (appropriate/inappropriate dress) x 2 (high/low power distance) between-subjects, full factorial design. Dress was manipulated by presenting colored photographs showing models (service-contact-personnel) in either appropriate (i.e., in the form of business professional dress) or inappropriate dress (in the form of very casual sports attire). It was manipulated at two extreme values, with the intention being to create a strong enough stimulus (Kerlinger 1986). No manipulation was needed for power distance. Nevertheless, about half of the subjects in the experiment were from a high power distance culture (i.e. Mexico), and the other half were from a low power distance culture (i.e. the U.S.). The context for this study was banking, because it allowed for the appropriate manipulation of dress and was not considered extreme with regard to dimensions used in service classification schemes (e.g., Chase 1978).

Customer feelings-of-being-dominated were measured by the dominance section of the Mehrabian and Russel (1974) Measures of Emotional State scale (PAD Scales). The scales have been used frequently in research investigating affective reactions to environmental elements (e.g., Baker, Levy, & Grewal 1992; Donovan & Rossiter 1982). The mean of responses was used as the participant’s affective state of being dominated.

Furthermore, back-translation procedures (Malhotra, Agarwal, & Peterson 1996) were utilized for all materials in the experimental booklet to ensure the equivalence of translation. The experimental booklet was first translated from English to Spanish by a bilingual speaker whose native language is Spanish. The translated experimental booklet, then, was re-translated back to English from Spanish by another bilingual speaker whose native language is English.

### ANALYSIS AND RESULT

**The Sample**

A total of 189 students participated in the study. Almost half of them (92 students or 48.7%) were from a university located in Mexico and 97 (51.3%) students were from a university located in the United States. Both genders were distributed almost equally with 96 (50.8%) male and 93 (49.2%) female participants. The age ranged from 18 to 44 years with an
average of 22.87. Thirty-six (19.0%) students were not employed, 118 (62.4%) were employed half-time, and 35 (18.5%) worked full-time. Of the 189 students, 96 were randomly assigned to the appropriate dress condition and the remaining 93 to the inappropriate dress condition. Based on the research design, four individual treatment options resulted by combining the following conditions: appropriate versus inappropriate dress and high versus low power distance. Each of the four individual treatment options had individual samples that ranged from 44 to 49.

**Manipulation Check**

The independent variable service-contact-personnel dress has been manipulated by showing participants two photographs of the same situation with the only difference being whether the investment banker is dressed appropriately or inappropriately. Participants were asked to answer two questions about the investment banker’s dress. The first question was the 7-item professional dress assessment instrument (Roach 1997). The second question was, “In your opinion, the investment banker dresses ________ for her job,” and was answered on a 7-point scale between the given responses “Very unsuitably” or “Very suitably”. The number 1 was assigned to subject’s response “Very unsuitably” and the number 7 was assigned to “Very suitably”. One-way ANOVA supports that the dress manipulation was successful. Subjects in the inappropriate-dress condition show a mean of 2.39, while subjects in the appropriate-dress condition show a mean of 6.24. The two means are significantly different ($F_{1, \, 188} = 837.27$, $p < .0001$) (Table 1). Cronbach’s Alpha reliability coefficient indicated a very high reliability ($\alpha = .968$).

The difference between cultures in terms of power distance was checked using Hofstede’s Value Survey Module Questionnaire (Hofstede et. al 2002). Participants were asked to express their agreement or disagreement with the following statements: (1) I have a good working relationship with my direct superior, (2) I am often consulted by my direct superior in his/her decisions, (3) Subordinates are often afraid to express disagreement with their superiors, (4) One can be a good manager without having precise answers to most questions that subordinates may raise about their work, and (5) A company’s or organization’s rules should not be broken, not even when the employee thinks it’s in the organization’s best interest.

**Table 1. Manipulation Checks**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>$F$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inappropriate Dress</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>2.39</td>
<td>837.27</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate Dress</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>6.24</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Power Distance</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>4.36</td>
<td>66.99</td>
<td>.000</td>
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<tr>
<td>High Power Distance</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>5.50</td>
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</table>

Cronbach’s Alpha reliability coefficient indicated that the reliability of these scales were high ($\alpha = 0.844$). A one-way ANOVA showed that Mexican subjects had a mean response of 4.36 indicating high power distance, whereas U.S. subjects had a mean response of 5.50 indicating low power distance. The two means differed significantly ($F_{1, \, 188} = 66.99$, $p < .0001$) (Table 1).
Table 2. Means

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Low Power Distance</th>
<th>High Power Distance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inappropriate dress</td>
<td>$\bar{X} = 3.63$</td>
<td>$\bar{X} = 3.93$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$n = 49$</td>
<td>$n = 48$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate Dress</td>
<td>$\bar{X} = 3.42$</td>
<td>$\bar{X} = 4.16$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$n = 44$</td>
<td>$n = 48$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results

An ANOVA was run to test Hypotheses 1 and 2. The results (Table 3) indicated a main effect of dress on feelings-of-being-dominated ($F_{1, 185} = 22.42, p < .001$). In the inappropriate-dress condition the mean response was 3.53; in the appropriate-dress condition the mean response was 4.04. Thus, a significant difference in feelings-of-being-dominated due to dress could be found and Hypothesis 1 was confirmed. Customer feelings-of-being-dominated are stronger in the appropriate-dress condition than in the inappropriate-dress condition.

The significant interaction effect of Dress x Power Distance support the predicted moderating influences of power distance on the relationships between dress and customer feelings-of-being-dominated (H2A and H2B). As predicted by H2A, the influence of the service-contact-personnel dress on customers feelings-of-being-dominated was significantly stronger ($F_{1,185} = 4.155, p < .05$) within high power distance culture ($\bar{X}_{\text{Appropriate}} = 4.16$, $\bar{X}_{\text{Inappropriate}} = 3.42$) than within low power distance culture ($\bar{X}_{\text{Appropriate}} = 3.93$, $\bar{X}_{\text{Inappropriate}} = 3.63$).

Table 3. ANOVA for Customer Feelings of Being Dominated

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Customer Feelings of Being Dominated</th>
<th>d.f.</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4801.514</td>
<td>.000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dress</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>22.418</td>
<td>.000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Power Distance</td>
<td></td>
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<td>.004</td>
<td>.952</td>
</tr>
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<td>Dress*Power Distance</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4,155</td>
<td>.043</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrected Model</td>
<td></td>
<td>188</td>
<td>8.705</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

DISCUSSION

Service-contact-personnel dress has been proposed conceptually and tested empirically to be a critical component in consumers’ affective responses in general to different businesses (e.g., Shao & Ramser 2004). This study, however, provides the first empirical evidence supporting the importance of appropriateness of service employee dress on customer feelings of being
dominated only. It was found that appropriately dressed service-contact-personnel lead to higher customer feelings of being dominated than do inappropriately dressed service-contact-personnel. Further, this research identified an important moderator to the dress/being dominated relationship, demonstrating that the influence of dress differed depending on the perceiver characteristics. The effect of service-contact-personnel dress was stronger for people with high power distance than for people with low power distance.

The results of this study emphasize the importance of creating an image of authority, expertise, and power for service contact employees by providing them with appropriate dress. With the image of authority, expertise, and power, service contact employees can manage their customers effectively and efficiently. In addition, it is critical that service managers recognize the level of power distance in the country in which their business is operating, because the influence of dress varied with the level of power distance.

REFERENCES


Pothukuchi, Vijay, Fariborz Damanpour, Jaepil Choi, Chao C. Chen, & Seung Ho Park (2002), “National and Organizational Culture Differences and International Joint Venture


