

## Does formality matter? Effects of employee clothing formality on consumers' service quality expectations and store image perceptions

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Yan, Ruoh-Nan, Yurchisin, Jennifer, & Watchravesringkan, Kittichai (2011). Does formality matter? Effects of employee clothing formality on consumers' service quality expectations and store image perceptions. *International Journal of Retail and Distribution Management*, 39(5), 346-362.



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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/09590551111130775>

### Abstract:

**Purpose** The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, this study aims to understand whether and how sales employee clothing style would influence consumers' perceptions of store image through their expectations of service quality. Second, this study hopes to uncover how fashion orientation would influence the aforementioned relationship.

**Design/methodology/approach** A 3 (formality of employee clothing: formal vs moderate vs casual) × 2 (level of fashion orientation: low vs high) between-subject experiment design was conducted. Data were collected from 105 university students in a laboratory setting.

**Findings** Results indicated that formality of employee clothing (i.e. formal business, moderate, or casual attire) served 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, formality of employee clothing both directly and indirectly influenced consumers' perceptions of store image.

**Research limitations/implications** This study adds to existing literature by uncovering the moderating role of fashion orientation in consumers' service quality expectations and confirms the function of service quality as an antecedent to store image.

**Practical implications** Retailers should pay attention to the design of their salespeople's clothing because different clothing styles draw forth different evaluations from customers about the service quality provided in retail stores.

**Originality/value** This study investigates the role of clothing formality in influencing consumers' service quality expectations.

**Keywords:** employees | clothing | fashion | customer services quality | stores and supermarkets

### Article:

## Introduction

The use of salespeople as effective conduits of information concerning store image and positioning for retailers has been acknowledged (Chowdhury et al., 1998; Darden and Babin, 1994; Klassen et al., 1996; Lindquist, 1974; Mazursky and Jacoby, 1986). Previous studies have suggested that, along with location, convenience, price, promotion, store layout, quality of merchandise, and physical facilities, salespeople represent one dimension of the retail store that contributes to store image. Kunkel and Berry (1968) considered four specific aspects related to salespeople that affected store image, including knowledge, attitude, number of salespeople, and quality of service. Friendliness of salespersons has been considered another aspect as well (Bearden, 1977). In their study, Klassen et al. (1996) examined the effect of physical appearance of salespeople and found that consumers tend to perceive a store with obese salespeople to be less successful and possess a poorer store image.

As Klassen et al.'s (1996) study demonstrates, a relationship exists between a salesperson's physical appearance and consumers' store image perceptions. Additionally, researchers (Parasuraman et al., 1988) have also suggested that salesperson appearance, particularly with respect to the clothing items worn, is a critical element influencing consumers' service quality expectations. Despite its importance, the specific effect of employee clothing on store image perceptions and service quality expectations has not been widely investigated.

Researchers have found that a direct relationship exists between store image perceptions and service quality expectations (Baker et al., 1994). If, as has been previously suggested, salesperson dress does affect store image perceptions, then it seems likely that salesperson dress would impact store image perceptions both directly and indirectly through its influence on service quality expectations. Therefore, the purpose of the study is twofold. First, this study seeks to understand whether and how sales employee clothing style may influence consumers' perceptions of store image through their expectations of service quality. Second, because researchers (Lennon and Davis, 1989) have shown that sensitivity to dress cues varies across individuals, this study hopes to uncover how individual characteristics (i.e. fashion orientation) would influence the aforementioned relationship. Three specific research questions are developed in this study:

- RQ1: How does clothing style (i.e. formality of employee clothing) influence customers' expectations of service quality and store image perceptions?
- RQ2: Do individual traits (i.e. fashion orientation) interact with employee clothing formality in explaining customers' service quality expectations and store image perceptions?
- RQ3: How are customers' expectations of service quality related to their store image perceptions?

Clothing can be defined as “signs extending the basic meaning of bodies in a cultural context” (Danesi, 2004, p. 179) and dress is defined as “any intentional modification of appearance” (Damhorst et al., 2000, p. 2). Although dress and clothing are sometimes used interchangeably, dress includes more than clothing because it contains a wide array of supplements and attachments to the body (e.g. makeup, wigs, shoes). Dress, unlike clothing, also represents behaviour and refers to specific actions that people perform to maintain, manage, or alter appearance (Damhorst et al., 2000). Thus, the term of clothing is used in this study because we focus on the design (i.e. formality) of the three-dimensional objects (i.e. employee clothing) that enclose the salespeople's body in the work environment (Damhorst et al., 2000).

## Literature review and hypothesis development

Clothing, in general, provides protection, comfort, and modesty. Further, clothing may help individuals acquire status or authority (Morris et al., 1996). Previous studies have concluded that clothing and dress behaviours can reflect and create a variety of organizational dynamics through three dimensions, including attributes of dress, homogeneity of dress, and conspicuousness of dress (Rafaeli and Pratt, 1993). An employee's clothing and dress can help develop self identity in business environments because clothing and dress may “serve as a vehicle for representing [...] a web of multiple and contradictory identity related issues” (Pratt and Rafaeli, 1997, p. 887). The clothing and dress of employees can affect individual and organizational outcomes, including employee compliance and legitimation and organizational image and utilization of human resources (Rafaeli and Pratt, 1993).

Researchers have long recognized clothing and dress as cues that individuals use to express aspects of their personality at work (O'Neal, 1999; Peluchette et al., 2006; Reid et al., 1997; Ross and Barker, 2003; Temple and Loewen, 1993). Peluchette et al. (2006) found that people who valued workplace attire believed that it had a positive effect on the way they felt about themselves and their work performance. A recent study examined how business students at two universities perceived themselves when wearing formal vs casual workplace attire. The researchers found that business students associate their formal business attire with authoritativeness and competence, somewhat formal business attire with productivity and trustworthiness, and less formal business attire with creativity and friendliness (Cardon and Okoro, 2009). Further, Peluchette and Karl (2007) surveyed 190 MBA students who were also working professionals and found similar results. The participants felt most authoritative, trustworthy, and competent when wearing formal business attire, but friendliest when wearing casual or business casual attire. In general, the literature has suggested that employees' self-perceptions may be communicated via their clothing style.

In addition, researchers have found that people form impressions of another individual based on the clothing worn by that other individual. For instance, an early study by Thourlby (1978) suggested that people make inferences about each other solely on the basis of clothing choice. These inferences include economic background, trustworthiness, social position, level of sophistication, level of success and moral character of the wearer. Extending these findings into the context of a retail store, consumers are likely to make inferences about a salesperson based on his or her clothing style. Cho (2001) demonstrated that the clothing type of the salesperson (formal vs informal) in a department store influenced consumers' 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). Despite many employers' (Peluchette and Karl, 2007) and employees' (Cardon and Okoro, 2009) preference for business casual clothing in contemporary workplaces, retail consumers still perceive salespeople in formal clothing to be more qualified than salespeople in less formal clothing.

The consumers' perceptions of the salesperson based on his or her clothing style influence their beliefs about the characteristics likely to be possessed by the store. According to environmental psychology and marketing literature, consumers make inferences about a retail store based on environmental stimuli within the store, including the salespeople of the store (Baker

et al., 1994, 2002; Shao et al., 2004). For instance, Baker et al. (2002) concluded that employee cues in the retail setting (e.g. well-dressed employees) positively influenced a consumer's perception of interpersonal service quality (i.e. the quality of the interaction between employees and customers). Likewsie, Shao et al. (2004) also reported that appropriately (vs inappropriately) dressed personnel led to higher service quality expectations and resulted in a consumer's intention to patronize a service business. Because consumers view the salespeople as representatives of the store, the inferences they make about the individual salespeople based on their clothing most likely also carry over to influence their perceptions of the store. In this way, consumers use salespeople's clothing to make inferences about the level of service quality they would receive from the retailer and to form perceptions of the store's image.

Service quality is defined as the consumer's evaluation of the level of service provided in a retail store (Parasuraman et al., 1991). Service researchers have viewed service quality as the degree of discrepancy between customers' normative expectations for the service and their perceptions of the service performance. The well known and discussed scale for measuring service quality in service settings is SERVQUAL, which is designed to measure five dimensions of service quality, including tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy (Parasuraman et al., 1988). The construct of service quality expectation in this study refers to the overall expectation for the level of service quality consumers may receive in a retail environment.

Additionally, consumers may infer store image at the sight of employee clothing in the retail environment. According to the store image literature, store image refers to “consumers' objective and subjective perceptions (of stores) learned over time” (Hartman and Spiro, 2005, p. 1113) through the evaluation of functional and psychological attributes of retail stores. Those various retail attributes may include components such as store environment, merchandise quality, service quality, price, and location (Baker et al., 1994). In general, consumers' evaluations of various retail attributes contribute to store image. If consumers do not have complete information about merchandise quality or service quality, they can still base their perceptions about the store and purchase decisions on inferences they make from various information cues (Baker et al., 1994). Employee clothing may be one of those cues.

Assuming that employee clothing is one of the tangible cues considered by consumers in the formation of their service quality expectations (Zeithaml et al., 1993) and store image perceptions (Klassen et al., 1996), salespeople who dress in a formal business style would be expected to possess higher professionalism, credibility, and knowledge (Temple and Loewen, 1993). When employee clothing is considered appropriate, consumers would assume that, because the salespeople possessed these positive characteristics, the store would provide them with a higher 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 (Adomaitis and Johnson, 2005). 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 formality of employee clothing. In other words, 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 moderate and casual attire.

H2: Consumers' store image perceptions vary across formality of employee clothing. In other words, consumers perceive the store's image more positively when salespeople are dressed in formal business attire than when they are dressed in moderate and casual attire.

Fashion orientation, one way to identify fashion lifestyle segments (Gutman and Mills, 1982), involves the fashion-specific dimensions of fashion priority, time frame, and initiative. More specifically, the concept helps identify consumers' fashion leadership, fashion interest, perceptions of the importance of being well-dressed, and attitudes toward fashion (Gutman and Mills, 1982). Research suggests that fashion orientation may influence consumers' buying behaviours. For instance, Gutman and Mills (1982) found that consumers with high fashion orientation tend to shop at upscale department stores and upper-end specialty stores rather than mass merchandisers. Park and Burns (2005) found that consumers who were interested in fashion tended to engage in compulsive buying behaviour and in credit card spending. Clothing interest is found to impact individuals' sensitivity to dress cues as well (Lennon and Davis, 1989). It is likely that 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 employee clothing formality in explaining consumers' service quality expectations and store image perceptions. In other words, given the same employee clothing formality, consumers with a high level of fashion orientation expect the service quality to be lower and perceive less positive image of the store 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. In other words, 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: H4. Consumer expectations of service quality will predict store image perceptions positively. In other words, 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 (formality of employee clothing: 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 et al., 1997). Both formality of employee clothing and gender were manipulated, and fashion orientation was measured in the questionnaire given to the participants. The context chosen for the experiment was a department store due to its product offerings that may appeal to customers of both genders and all levels of fashion orientation.

## *Setup*

Six drawings were prepared by using various computer software programs (e.g. Adobe Photoshop) to represent three clothing formality styles across employee genders (Appendix of the drawings). 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 et al., 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 clothing formality (formal vs moderate vs casual) and two levels of employee gender (female vs male) were established via a series of pretests using a convenience sample of 40 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 levels. 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.

## *Procedures*

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 clothing formality 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. Each of the respondents was able to view and examine two drawings of both genders in two randomly assigned experimental conditions on the computer for five seconds before the next slide came up. In other words, each respondent saw only one employee gender in each condition. 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 et al., 1991). While five dimensions of service quality were identified in the SERVQUAL scale, only four were included and explored in this study. Items related to the four dimensions (i.e. reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy) focused on the interpersonal component of service quality and allowed respondents the ability to evaluate service quality provided at the department store based solely on the information provided in relation to employee clothing. Store image perception was measured with 13 items modified from Chowdhury et al. (1998). Fashion orientation was measured with 18 items according to Gutman and Mills' (1982) fashion orientation scale. All of these three constructs were measured using seven-point Likert-type scale anchored by (1) strongly disagree to (7) strongly agree.

## Results

A total of 105 university students majoring in social science-related programs participated in the experiment ( $M_{age}=21.2$  years with a standard deviation of=3.5; 8.6 percent male and 91.4 percent female; 84 percent Caucasian). Each student was exposed to two drawings with one male and one female each, resulting in 210 responses in the dataset. The one-item manipulation check for clothing formality was significant at the  $p<0.05$  level, indicating that the respondents perceived the treatments of clothing formality significantly different. Factor analysis with varimax rotation was conducted to identify the dimensions of multi-item scales, including service quality expectation and store image perception. Factors with eigenvalues  $>1.0$  and items with rotated factor loadings of 0.50 or greater were retained. Any item loading on more than one factor with a loading score equal to or  $>0.40$  on each factor was eliminated from the analysis. Results indicated that, among the 18 modified items regarding service quality expectation, 14 items were retained and two dimensions of service quality expectation emerged. One of these factors was concerned with the professional behaviour of employees (e.g. professional; competent; dependable) and was labelled as “employee service competency” ( $\alpha=0.96$ ), 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” ( $\alpha=0.91$ ). The same factor analysis procedure was conducted for the store image perception items. Results revealed, after deleting five items due to cross loading, two store image dimensions. One of these factors was related to store quality (e.g. elegant and upscale perception) and thus was named “store prestige image” ( $\alpha=0.93$ ), and the other factor was associated with product availability and was labelled as “product selection image” ( $\alpha=0.78$ ). For the fashion orientation scale, after reverse coding five items, the summed score of the 18 items was obtained for further analyses ( $\alpha=0.87$ ). To test the hypotheses, respondents were split into low vs high groups regarding their fashion orientation scores using a mean split method ( $M_{fashionorientation}=4.87$ ). The mean for the low fashion orientation group was 4.08 ( $SD=0.77$ ) and the mean for the high fashion orientation group was 5.46 ( $SD=0.42$ ). Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was then conducted for testing  $H1$  through  $H3$ , and multiple regression analyses were conducted for testing  $H4$ . Although gender of the salesperson was initially included as a covariate in the analyses to investigate potential gender effects, the gender effect was found to be non-significant. Thus, gender was removed as a covariate from further analyses.

$H1$  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 ( $F=17.13, p<0.0001$ ), but not employee service empathy ( $F=0.62, p>0.05$ ). Therefore,  $H1$  was partially supported ([Table I](#)). Univariate analysis showed that, although formality of employee clothing had a significant effect on employee service competency ( $F=40.59, p<0.001$ ), no significant effect was found on employee service empathy ( $F=1.03, p>0.05$ ). 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).

**Table I.** Effects of formality of employee clothing and fashion orientation on consumer service quality expectations

Variables	Means for service competency	Multivariate f	Means for service empathy	Multivariate f
		17.13***		0.62
<i>Formality of employee clothing</i>				
Formal	5.63		4.72	
Moderate	5.23		4.61	
Casual	4.13		4.44	
F-value	40.59***		1.03	
<i>Fashion orientation</i>				
Low	5.00		4.56	
High	5.05		4.62	
F-value	0.02		0.08	
<i>Formality of employee clothing × fashion orientation</i>				
Formal × low	5.95		4.87	
Formal × high	5.43		4.63	
Moderate × low	5.01		4.50	
Moderate × high	5.43		4.71	
Casual × low	4.11		4.35	
Casual × high	4.16		4.52	
F-value	3.83*		0.65	

*Note:* Significance at: \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$  and \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

**Table II.** Effects of formality of employee clothing on consumers' perceptions of store image

Variables	Means for service competency	Multivariate f	Means for service empathy	Multivariate f
		79.02***		1.36
<i>Formality of employee clothing</i>				
Formal	5.49		4.87	
Moderate	5.02		4.63	
Casual	3.64		4.58	

*Note:* Significance at: \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$  and \*\*\* $p < 0.001$



Next, *H2* tested the direct effect of formality of employee clothing on consumers' store image perceptions. MANOVA results showed that the overall model was significant for the first dimension of store prestige image ( $F=79.02, p<0.001$ ) but not for the second dimension of product selection image ( $F=1.36, p>0.05$ ). Thus, *H2* was partially supported (Table II). As for the dimension of store prestige image, univariate analysis indicated that respondents who viewed the employee in formal business attire have the most positive store image perceptions, followed by moderate and casual styles ( $M_{\text{formal}}=5.49; M_{\text{moderate}}=5.02; M_{\text{casual}}=3.64$ , 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 formality of clothing in explaining employee service competency ( $F=3.83, p<0.05$ ), but not employee service empathy ( $F=0.65, p>0.05$ ). As for the store image perceptions, however, no significant interactive effect was found for either store prestige image or product selection image ( $F=0.38, p>0.05; F=1.31, p>0.05$ , respectively). Thus, *H3* was partially supported (Table III). Further contrast comparison of 15 pairs of means in relation to employee service competency provided detailed information. Out of 11, 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 ( $M_{\text{formal-low}}=5.95$  vs  $M_{\text{formal-high}}=5.43, p<0.05; M_{\text{moderate-low}}=5.01$  vs  $M_{\text{moderate-high}}=5.43, p>0.05; M_{\text{casual-low}}=4.11$  vs  $M_{\text{casual-high}}=4.16, p>0.05$ ). 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 ( $M_{\text{formal-high}}=5.43$  vs  $M_{\text{casual-high}}=4.16, F=30.43, p<0.001$ ) and between those who viewed the employee in the moderate attire and those who viewed the employee in the casual style ( $M_{\text{moderate-high}}=5.43$  vs  $M_{\text{casual-high}}=4.16, F=28.92, p<0.001$ ).

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 ( $R^2=0.34, F=45.46, p<0.001$  for the store prestige image dimension;  $R^2=0.40, F=59.77, p<0.001$  for the product selection image dimension). Thus, *H4* was supported (Table IV). The product selection image dimension was better explained by service quality expectation than the store prestige image dimension according to the  $R^2$  figures. Specifically, results showed that the two dimensions of store image were predicted by different service quality dimensions. Employee service competency had a significant positive effect on store prestige image ( $\beta=0.63, t=9.02, p<0.001$ ), but employee service empathy did not ( $\beta=-0.13, t=-1.79, p>0.05$ ). In other words, respondents who expected the employees to be more knowledgeable, competent, dependable, and reliable (i.e. possess a high degree of employee service competency) were more likely to perceive the store to be upscale and prestigious. With respect to product selection image, on the other hand, although employee service empathy had a significant positive effect ( $\beta=0.60, t=8.95, p<0.001$ ), employee service competency did not ( $\beta=0.07, t=1.02, p>0.05$ ). Respondents who expected the employees to be approachable, sensitive, flexible, supportive, and benevolent to customer needs and wants (i.e. possess a high degree of employee service empathy) tended to perceive the store to have better product selections and availability. Further, the predictive utility of employee service competency on store prestige image was found to be larger, according to the beta coefficients, than that of employee service empathy on product selection image.

**Table III.** Means of service competency by clothing formality × fashion orientation—contrast test on the interaction effects

	Mean	F-value					
		FL	FH	ML	MH	CL	CH
FL	5.95						
FH	5.43	4.53*					
ML	5.01	13.01***	3.19				
MH	5.43	4.18*	0.00	3.10			
CL	4.11	46.95***	29.78***	12.53***	28.45***		
CH	4.16	48.08***	30.43***	12.23***	28.92***	0.04	

*Notes:* Significance at \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$  and \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ; FL = formal × low; FH = formal × high; ML = moderate × low; MH = moderate × high; CL = casual × low; CH = casual × high

**Table IV.** Regression analysis for predicting store image perception

Variables	Store prestige image ( $\beta$ )	$R^2$	Product selection image ( $\beta$ )	$R^2$
		0.34***		0.40***
Employee service competency	0.63*		0.07	
Employee service empathy	-0.13		0.60***	
		F = 45.46		F = 59.77

*Notes:* Significance at: \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.001$

## Discussion, conclusions, and implications

Incorporating three areas of literature, clothing, service quality, and store image, this study investigated how employee clothing formality impacts consumers' service quality expectations and store image perceptions. Even though past studies have recognized the importance of sales people in the formation of store image, little research has incorporated clothing style (i.e. formality) as a component of sales person appearance to understand how clothing might impact consumers' responses in the marketplace. This study attempted to fill the gap by investigating the role of clothing formality in consumers' service quality expectations and store image perceptions.

Situated in the context of a department store, findings of this study suggest that formality of employee clothing (i.e. formal business, moderate, or casual attire) 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, clothing formality both directly and indirectly influences consumers' perceptions of store image. More specifically, the findings suggest that clothing formality solely impacts consumers' expectations of employees' professional behaviour in the retail setting. That is to say, employees who are dressed in formal business attire are expected to be knowledgeable, competent, dependable, and reliable (i.e. possess a high degree of employee service competency). These findings are in line with the findings of 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. On the other hand, this study did not find significant influence of clothing formality on consumers' expectations of employees' empathetic expressions (i.e. be approachable, sensitive, flexible, supportive, and benevolent to customer needs and wants). Additional explanation for the insignificant result may be because our participants did not actually interact with the salesperson whom they saw on the computer during the experiment. Without interacting directly with the salesperson in an actual retail setting, it might be challenging for participants to evaluate whether the salesperson is kind, caring, or, sensitive. The overall mean score for this dimension of service quality was close to or just above average (from 4.44 to 4.72 for three different styles), which might suggest that participants did not have strong opinions, but might still expect salespeople to be supportive, considerate, and kind regardless of how they are dressed due to their job requirements. Further investigation may be helpful to verify this notion. In summary, our findings imply that employee clothing 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 et al., 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).

In addition to service quality expectations, formality of employee clothing was found to impact consumers' store image perceptions. Specifically, findings suggest that the more formal the employee's clothing, the more positive and upscale the store image. However, clothing formality did not have a significant effect on the perception of the product selection image dimension. This finding suggests that employee clothing, 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).

### ***Theoretical implications***

This study adds to existing literature (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. clothing formality) on service quality expectations. 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, the results of this study indicate that as the style becomes less formal, the impact of fashion orientation on the relationship between employee dress cues and service quality expectations becomes less pronounced.

In addition to better understanding the role of employee clothing formality, this study confirms the function of service quality as an antecedent to store image (Baker et al., 1994). Treating store image as a multidimensional construct (Chowdhury et al., 1998), this study found that specific service quality expectations influenced specific store image dimensions. Expectations regarding employees' professional behaviours may contribute to the formation of store prestige image, while expectations concerning employees' empathic dealing with and personal attention to customers may help enhance consumers' perceptions of product selection image. Considering "image as a combination of factual and emotional material" (p. 9), Oxenfeldt (1974-1975) posited that consumers' image perceptions arise from 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 (Gardner and Siomkos, 1985), others (Baker et al., 2002) did not confirm the relationship in their studies. 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.

### ***Practical implications***

Managerially, this study suggests that retailers should pay attention to the design of their salespeople's clothing because different clothing 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 higher 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 implying that better service quality will be provided. Alternatively, for retailers that would like to enhance customers' evaluations about the empathic role of employees, the formality of employee clothing may be less critical. Although retailers are able to manage customers' expectations based on employee clothing style, it is noted that retailers should establish good training programs to ensure that their sales associates have appropriate knowledge to help customers and ultimately meet customers' expectations.

Additionally, 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. Thus,

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.

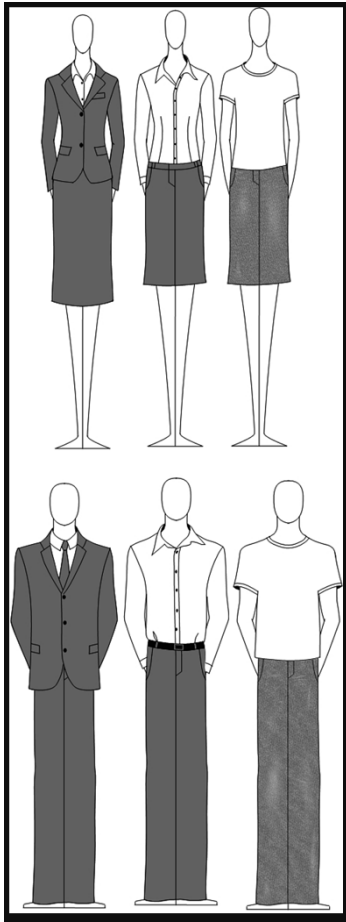
### ***Limitations and future research avenues***

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 be conducted in the field so that consumers' genuine reactions to dress cues in retail environments can be further understood. Also, other variations in the style of clothing (e.g. level of fashionability) and in the design and aesthetic appeal of clothing (e.g. colour) should be considered for future investigation. Additionally, appropriateness of employee clothing is not measured in the study. Shao et al. (2004) examined the effects of appropriateness of employee dress in the context of business casual dress. Researchers may want to investigate the relationship between formal business attire and service quality expectation and store image perceptions when formal business attire is considered inappropriate.

Second, this study is limited to the context of a department store, which may be a more product-oriented retailer in the minds of consumers. Effects of employee clothing may differ in a more service-oriented retail environment (e.g. dry cleaner, bank) due to the emphasis of tangible cues in evaluations of intangible services (Zeithaml et al., 2008). 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, it is noted that choice of employee clothing may need to be consistent with the type of product offerings in the store. For example, a salesperson dressed in formal attire at a retail store specializing in sport or camping equipment may be perceived to possess less expertise or knowledge because of the type of products offered at the store. Thus, the consistency between the style of employee clothing and product offerings can be further examined in future research.

Third, the use of a student sample and the small number of male respondents in this study eliminates the ability to generalize results to the entire population. With more female respondents, measurement of fashion orientation may be compromised because female consumers tend to be more fashion conscious (Browne and Kaldenberg, 1997). Fourth, although the hypotheses and corresponding results in the current study may have suggested the mediating role of the construct of service quality expectation in the relationship between clothing formality and store image perception, further analysis (e.g. structural equation modelling) is necessary to test the potential mediating effect. Finally, but not the least, two factors of service quality, instead of four factors as suggested by Parasuraman et al. (1991), emerged in this study. Different dimensional structures have been reported in previous studies (Paulins, 2005). Lam and Woo (1997) reported that certain service quality attributes are difficult to evaluate because they often depend on the interaction of the consumer and the salesperson and the intangible nature of the concept of service. The data collection method (i.e. experimental design), instead of a field study, could have made it more difficult for our respondents to evaluate service quality and thus offers an explanation as to why the data in this study do not support the basic five-dimensional structure of the construct found in previous literature.

## Appendix



**Figure A1.** Six drawings of formal, moderate, and casual clothing styles for both genders.

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