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Customer Service in Retail Stores:

The Effects of Confederate Appearance and Store Type

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### Abstract

Customer service in 3 tiers of retail stores located near a college campus was examined by entering low-end, middle-end, and high-end shops on 2 separate occasions. For the initial round of research the confederates were dressed in formal apparel, while on the 2nd round of research the confederates were dressed in casual apparel. During both instances the amount of time it took for the confederates to be approached by sales personnel with an acknowledgement other than a greeting was observed. The results revealed that while the effect of attire did not approach significance, an effect for the type of store was found for high-end and middle-end stores. These results indicate that significantly better customer service was achieved by high-end stores vs. middle-end stores.

## Customer Service in Retail Stores:

### The Effects of Confederate Appearance and Store Type

The effect of physical appearance on human behavior has been a familiar topic in social psychological research since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. With recent technological advances, and gradual value shifts placing more emphasis on physical appearance, it is only practical to reason that the liaison between first impressions based on appearance and customer service is a subject of substantial interest.

Previous studies regarding the link between physical attractiveness and helping have given us some insight into the powerful influence appearance can have, but it has also been somewhat limited by the expansiveness of the subject matter. Wilson (1978) examined 3 prevalent research studies regarding the influence of physical attractiveness on helping behavior and suggested that further research is needed in the subject area. He outlined a specific study he found to be one of the more considerable examples of research on the topic, which examined the differences between an attractive versus an unattractive female's success on asking specific tasks of males. One task involved obtaining directions, while the second task involved asking a specific favor (mailing an envelope).

Helping behavior in both experiments did not constitute a great deal of effort or time, yet the unattractive female received assistance significantly fewer times than the attractive female. Wilson concluded, "Physical attractiveness apparently was an important enough component in Ss' cognitive processing that it was weighted heavily even given the short, spontaneous nature of the encounter with C [the female confederate]" (Wilson, 1978, p. 314). This illustrates the concept that female's of high attractiveness instigate much more positive reactions in helping situations than those of low attractiveness.

Further research in this area involves looking at the consumer realm of helping behavior. In a related study women were shown photographs of a young female model and were asked to specify the quality of four consumer products that they believed the model was most likely to choose. The female model shown to the women was manipulated to be either physically attractive or physically unattractive, and elegantly dressed or not elegantly dressed. (Parekh & Kanekar, 1994)

The researchers found that product quality for beauty products was rated lower for the unattractive model and higher for the attractive model. They also found higher product quality ratings for the elegantly dressed model *overall*, indicating that dress seemed to have the more substantial effect. However, this is likely attributable to the association between elegant dressers ability to afford more expensive clothing. “Apparently, and justifiably, elegance of clothing was perceived as being a better indicator of financial solvency than facial attractiveness was” (Parekh & Kanekar, 1994, p. 299). The authors also noted, however, that previous research has indicated that physical attractiveness ratings frequently depend on clothing.

More specific research on the concept of attractiveness involves further linking clothing with attractiveness, and, hence, with helping behavior. With the advent of new clothing technologies and advanced manufacturing capabilities in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it became easier to generalize the attire of a person with other factors, such as wealth and attractiveness. Clothing has been found to directly influence our impression formation and management process, playing a key role in first impressions. As one of the cues people utilize in initial interactions, clothing has been categorized as a prominent factor in the friend and acquaintance selection process (Ryan, 1991).

One study found consistent stereotypical judgments regarding the level of attractiveness of a photograph of a stranger made by 20 independent judges when the stranger's appearance only varied in the form of attire worn. This illustrates the idea that the manner of dress alone can have a direct influence on one's perceptions of a favorable or unfavorable appearance.

Nonetheless, numerous factors beyond physical appearance alone are often responsible for customer service behavior, namely store price. In a recent study on store image, researchers analyzed an interesting facet of customer service behavior involving self-perceived store image and competitive position. The study involved researchers developing a task concerning retailers ranking store dimensions to indicate those which they feel offer them the most competitive advantages. The findings denote that most retailers consider service to be the feature that they tend to use to discern themselves from competitors; price and promotion being least differentiated. The study also points to six prominent dimensions (price, location, store interior, selection, service and product quality) that underlie retailer self-perceived store.

In order to expand on these research studies by offering further credibility through replication of results, we conducted an observational study regarding the link between customer service, physical attractiveness, and store type. The purpose of the study was to expand upon previous research on the subject to include more specific realms of customer service and to determine the significance of variables other than physical attractiveness. It was expected that there would be a significant difference in approach time determined by dress style. In addition, it was hypothesized that the store type would also have a significant effect on approach time.

## Method

### *Participants*

The confederates were a trio of Caucasian female researchers between the ages of 21 and 22. The subjects were the sales associates of each of the stores entered, primarily female (all but two), between the ages of 18 and 30.

### *Materials*

The materials used in the study encompassed the clothes the confederates wore during each store visit. The first round of the experiment involved the researchers wearing formal attire, which was defined as business casual. Slacks were preferred, along with a conservative top. The second round of the experiment involved the researchers wearing casual attire, defined as gym-wear or grunge. Figure 1 depicts the outfits each confederate wore under the two circumstances.

### *Design and Procedure*

The experimental design was a 2 x 3 ANOVA, with store type and dress style as the independent variables, and time (in seconds) as the dependent variable. Stores were chosen based on a three-tier system. The top tier, or the high-end tier, had an average cost of \$100.00+. Stores in the top-tier included Lacoste, Palm Avenue, and Finicky Filly. The middle-end tier, had an average cost of \$60.00+. Stores in the middle tier included Banana Republic, Ann Taylor and J. Crew. The bottom tier, or the low-end tier, had an average cost of \$35.00+. Stores in the bottom tier included The Gap, Express and Quiksilver.

The confederates entered each store at two approximately equal days of the week. The first day the confederates wore formal attire, representing a high-class appearance; while the second day they wore casual attire, representing a low-class appearance. The second researcher entered at the same time as the confederate and used a stopwatch to observe the amount of time it

took for the original participant to be acknowledged. Timing began upon setting foot in door and ended immediately after the acknowledgement.

The confederate was instructed to begin by looking at clothes closest to the front, then work her way through store. After 3 minutes the confederate was instructed to pick up an article of clothing as if she may want to try on. If the subjects continued to be unresponsive, a five minute limit was placed on the procedure. An acknowledgment was defined as when an employee asks or inquires as to whether the subject needs help or guides them in a direction should they need assistance. Acknowledgements excluded any form of a greeting.

### Results

Table 3 presents the results, in seconds, found for each store type with respect to dress. Although there appears to be some minor differences, none of these results reached significance. Table 1 depicts the results of the two-way analysis of variance for customer service. There was no significant main effect found for dress style, and, similarly, no significant interaction found between store type and dress style. However, there was a clear main effect for store type, alone, found. Post-hoc tests, using the Turkey HSD testing method, revealed a significant main effect for middle-end and high-end stores ( $p = .010$ ). Table 2 examines the overall averages for customer service times with respect to store type. These numbers illustrate the difference between the middle-end and high-end stores customer service times. The effects of these variables indicate that customer service was largely an effect of store type.

### Discussion

The central issue of this study concerned variables affecting customer service. While the main effect for store type exemplifies the significance of the type of store on customer service, and thus supports the initial hypothesis regarding store type, the hypothesis regarding the effects

of style of dress on customer service was not supported by the results, as can be seen in Table 1. Even tests for an interaction between the type of store and dress style failed to reach significance, indicating that type of dress was not a significant factor in this research.

This conclusion strays from previous research on physical appearance and its effects on helping behavior, as most prior research findings demonstrate a strong correlation between the two. In one study, evidence is even given regarding the biological and cultural explanations for such a response bias. However, several other factors seemed to have played a more major role in this research than was expected.

First off, the stores that were chosen for the experiment were all located in the same city on the same street in South Carolina. It is even possible that the notion of Southern Hospitality may be grounded in truth in some circumstances. Future research ought to be far more expansive in regards to location and culture. Stores ought to be a more eclectic draw of rural/urban, large/small, and culturally varied. In addition to the potential confounds of location, all three confederates were of the same gender, race and age range, which can present other confounds, as well. Future research ought to include a more diverse selection of confederates with varied ages, genders and cultural backgrounds. In addition, uniformly distributing confederates to stores would also help eliminate confounds.

Other variables that may have played a role in the results are store size, as stores in each tier were matched to be approximately equal in size. In addition, the methods and rate of pay tend to vary between high-end, middle-end, and low-end stores, which could account for some of the variability in times. This is especially likely in the high-end tier of stores, as wages tend to include incentives, or are commission-based at this level. In the future it would be smart to separate stores based on earnings and incentives, so as to account for any potential compounds.

These store-related difficulties could be controlled by retrieving store policy information to ensure similar customer service policies.

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Table 1

## Analysis of Variance for Customer Service

Source	df	F	p
Between subjects			
Store (S)	2	6.439*	.013
Dress (D)	1	.900	.361
S x D	2	.358	.706
S within-group error	15	(8151.146)	

Note. Values enclosed in parentheses represent mean square errors. S = subjects. \*p < .05

Table 2

## Mean Times for Store Types (in seconds)

Store Type	Mean	Standard Deviation (SD)
Low-End	192.683	111.5979
Middle-End	271.067	36.0610
High-End	84.783	91.8913

Table 3

Mean Times for Dress Style (in seconds)

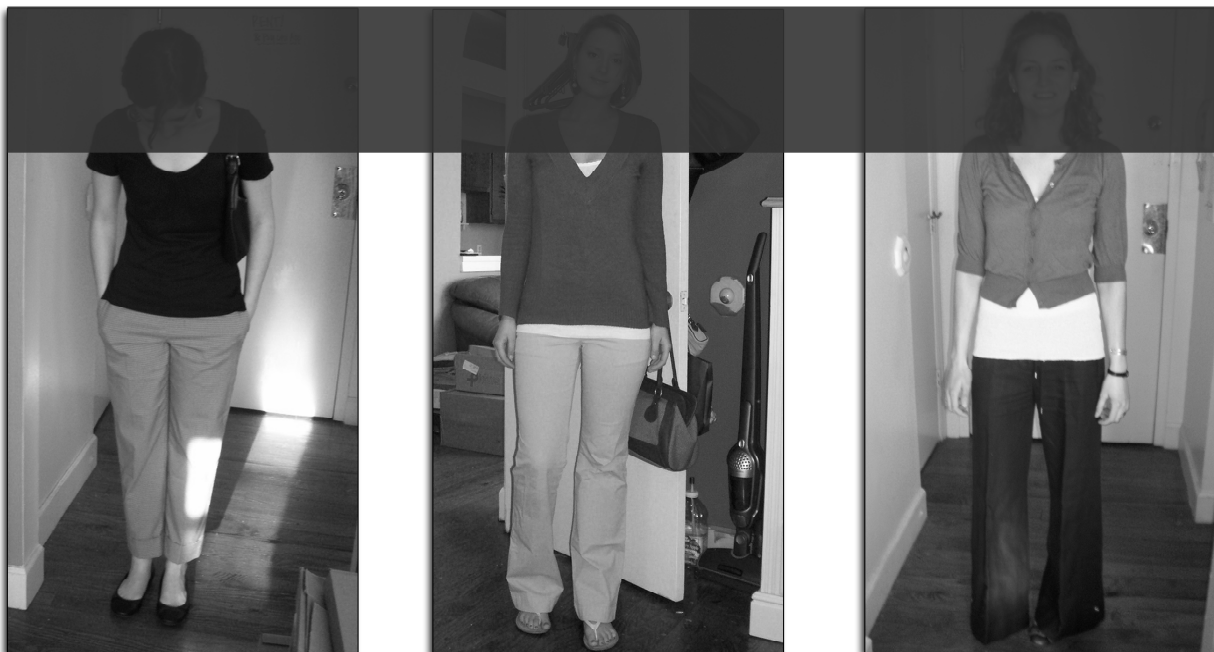
Store Type	Casual	Formal
Low-End	216.867	168.5
Middle-End	267.467	274.667
High-End	124.767	44.8

**Figure 1**

**CASUAL ATTIRE OUTFITS**



**FORMAL ATTIRE OUTFITS**



*Figure 1:* Examples of the casual attire outfits (top) and formal attire outfits (bottom) worn by the researchers when entering retail stores. Confederates faces are covered by a rectangle to minimize identifying features.