

# MEASURING THE IMPACT OF BRAND-NAME CLOTHING ON PERCEPTIONS OF THE WEARER

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In my early years as a junior high and high school student, brand name clothing, clothing with the company name emblemized on the clothes in a noticeable way, became a focus of my attention. At first I wanted to be like the popular (and often times wealthy) students and wear brand name clothes just as they did. I looked at those wearing brand names as “better” than those who chose not to wear brand names. Shortly thereafter, I rejected the “popular” brand names in favor of “indie” brand names feeling as though this were a slap in the face to the “popular” names, thinking the popular brand names were just stupid. By my later high school years, I felt that by wearing any brand name I was wasting my money and began to view others who wore shirts with large brand name logos as stupid for wasting their money, and often times viewed them as stuck-up as well. All through the end of high school and into college, I have noticed a proliferation of brand names. I began to wonder if other people judged others as I do based on their clothing. This sparked the idea for my senior thesis; Do brand name clothes impact how a person is perceived by others?

Previous research has shown that individuals are perceived differently depending on the types of clothing that they wear (Damhorst & Reed, 1986; Kerr & Dell, 1976). Both clothing style and color affect how others perceive a person. For example, James, Man, and Stout (2006) found that individuals dressed in athletic clothing were at a greater perceived social distance than those in a control group. Several studies have found that the color of clothing affects the perceived level of aggression; specifically dark clothing evokes the perception of aggressive acts (Frank & Gillovich, 1988; Vrij, 1997). A recent study by Fennis (2008)

has demonstrated that surrounding oneself in high-status brands causes submissive behavior in a partner during social interactions and affects the person’s likeability. Fennis established this by having participants wait in a room with an individual who they were told was another participant; that second individual was in fact a confederate. The confederate was surrounded with branded items, including a sunglass case with a printed brand and a magazine in one’s vicinity. The participants were assigned to either a high-status brand condition or a low-status brand condition. The study examined the relationship between various characteristics of brands (competence, prestige, success, wealth, achievement, luxury, and power, as rated on a 5 point Likert-type scale by judges prior to the study) and perceptions of submissive and dominant behavior in the confederate, as well as perceived likeability. Fennis gave the participant and confederate 8 mins to engage in conversation. Then a research assistant took the participant to another room where he was asked to answer on a 5-point Likert-type scale: “To what extent did you like your conversation partner?” Two judges who watched the participant-confederate interactions using a hidden camera rated submissive behavior. The study found that both males and females were more likely to rate a confederate as likable if the confederate was surrounded with high-status brand name products even without attention directed to the product. The judges rated participants as significantly more likely to act in a submissive manner when the confederate was surrounded with items rated as high-status. This suggests that high-status brands of clothing may affect the perception of the wearer.

No study has specifically addressed the perception of a person wearing brand name clothing. One study addressed the competency of the wearer of brand name clothes, but their study was confounded by the location in which the target was photographed (Fennis & Pruyan, 2006). Another study addressed perception of brand name clothing (as well as other items); it did not address the how the wearer of the brand name clothing was perceived, but chose to focus on the clothes themselves (Workman, 1988).

People looking to shape their image could utilize results from the following study if results show that those wearing high-status clothing are perceived differently than those in low-status or no-status clothing. If results were to show that clothing status does not affect how a person is perceived, this information could be used to inform buyers so that they know they can save money on clothing without changing how they are perceived. If results show that such clothing does affect how an individual is perceived, individuals could use this information to shape how they are perceived. The purpose of this study is to evaluate whether brand names on clothes affect how a person is perceived, without attention being called to the brand name in particular.

The participants were 64 California State University Stanislaus enrolled in introductory psychological methods courses. Three different classes were used for each group. Volunteers were treated in accordance with the "Ethical Principles of Psychology and the Code of Conduct" (American Psychology Association, 1992).

A model was photographed wearing three different tee shirts associated with different levels of social status. The photographer used a tripod. In one photo, the model wore an Abercrombie and Fitch™ tee shirt. He then was photographed in a similarly colored and styled Old Navy™ tee shirt. Adobe Photoshop 7.0 was then used to remove the

Abercrombie and Fitch™ logo on a separate picture to create a control photo. The Abercrombie and Fitch™ photo and the Old Navy™ photo were taken in the same location with the same stance and facial expression to control for extraneous variables. The three photos of a male model were shown to participants on an overhead projector. The participants were told they were participating in a survey regarding person perception, so that they would not intentionally look at the brand. They were given a survey that included 50 questions regarding different aspects of personality as well as six demographic questions. Only the questions asking about likeability, attractiveness, competency, trustworthiness, and intelligence were examined in this study.

The collected data were analyzed using a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). The simplest statistical analysis would be the t-test. To use a t-test, the standard test in statistical analysis, there must be only two levels (Christiansen). The current study contained three levels. Therefore, the next step was to use what is the simplest expansion of the t-test, the one-way ANOVA. The one-way ANOVA was chosen as the appropriate statistical test because the data to be analyzed had three levels (conditions) but only one independent variable (Christensen). The levels of the present study were the control, the Abercrombie and Fitch™ photo, and the Old Navy™ photo. The independent variable was the ratings of the target in the photo (388).

Testing occurred in three introductory psychological methods classes. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: the Abercrombie & Fitch™ shirt condition (high status condition), the Old Navy™ shirt condition (low status condition), or the control (no status) condition. In all conditions, participants were given an informed consent form to read and sign. Participants were told to keep a copy of the informed consent form for their records. A

questionnaire was then given to participants asking them to evaluate the model on a Likert-type scale involving questions regarding likeability, intelligence, attractiveness, personality, competence, and trustworthiness. The participants were allowed to view the picture while they completed the questionnaire, and were allowed as much time as necessary to complete the questionnaire. After completing the questionnaire, participants received a debriefing form to read.

Results of the present experiment do not support the hypothesis that brand name clothing affects how the wearer is perceived. The mean rating for likeability wearing a higher status brand name shirt (Abercrombie & Fitch<sup>TM</sup>), a lower-status brand (Old Navy<sup>TM</sup>), and the control are 6.04 (SD=0.95), 5.50 (SD=1.65), 6.17 (SD=1.34), respectively. A one-way ANOVA revealed no significant difference between mean group scores,  $F(2,62) = 1.45$ ,  $p = 0.24$ ). The mean rating for attractiveness when wearing a higher-status brand name shirt, a lesser brand, and the control are 3.87 (SD=1.63), 4.44 (SD=1.65), 4.52 (SD=1.88), respectively. A one-way ANOVA revealed no significant difference between mean group scores,  $F(2,61) = 0.95$ ,  $p = 0.39$ ). The mean rating for competency when wearing a higher-status brand name shirt, a lesser brand, and the control are 6.25 (SD=1.57), 6.06 (SD=1.34), 6.35 (SD=1.56), respectively. A one-way ANOVA revealed no significant difference between mean group scores,  $F(2,60) = 0.17$ ,  $p = 0.84$ ). The mean rating for trustworthiness when wearing a higher-status brand name shirt, a lower-status brand, and the control are 5.92 (SD=1.38), 5.33 (SD=1.75), 6.04 (SD=1.36), respectively. A one-way ANOVA revealed no significant difference between mean group scores,  $F(2,62) = 1.27$ ,  $p = 0.29$ ). The mean rating for intelligence when wearing a higher-status brand name shirt, a lower-status brand, and the control are 6.75 (SD=0.99), 6.94 (SD=1.47), 7.00 (SD=1.73), respectively. A one-way ANOVA revealed no

significant difference between mean group scores,  $F(2,62) = 0.20$ ,  $p = 0.82$ ).

The results of this study did not support the hypothesis that brand name clothing affects how the wearer is perceived among college undergraduates. Specifically, no significant differences were found for the effect of brand names on perceptions of attractiveness, competence, intelligence, likeability, and trustworthiness. The major implication of this finding is that despite the major consumption of brand names, it may not be important to wear brand name clothing to promote one's image to others. These findings do not contradict results from previous studies; but rather, they elaborate that unlike other factors of clothing, such as style and color (Damhorst & Reed, 1986; Frank & Gilovich, 1988; James, Man, & Stout, 2006), the brand name of clothing is not a factor in determining person perceptions.

There were several limitations to this study. It is possible that the manner in which the model was photographed caused participants to focus on the model's face rather than the model as a whole. Perhaps if the assessment were conducted with a photo of a model from head to toe it would have better simulated meeting the model in real life. Another issue was the survey questions themselves, specifically, only one question was used to sample person perceptions in each area (e.g., competence). In my research I am going to consider studying what is a high status brand before conducting the study, as was done in the study by Fennis (2008). My future research regarding brand names and how they affect how a person is perceived should involve more than one question evaluating each area. Future studies could also analyze the difference between how males and females perceive brand name wearers. An alternative investigation could be conducted to discover whether the gender of the wearer interacts with the brand name clothing to produce different ratings among

respondents, since Fennis (2008) showed that brand names affect females more than males in relation to brand status.

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