The Influence of Clothing Fashion and Race on the Perceived Socioeconomic Status and Person Perception of College Students

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Abstract

College students (N=168) viewed photographs of African-American or Caucasian female models wearing grey sweatshirts with Kmart, Abercrombie & Fitch (AF), or no logo. Participants rated the Caucasian model more favorably overall. The AF sweatshirt was rated highest and Kmart was rated lowest in SES. Other person perception results, including sociability rating interactions with model race and dress, are discussed.

Introduction

The field of social psychology has a vast literature related to person perception, attribution, categorization, and impression formation (Davis & Lennon, 1988; Gilovich, Keltner, & Nisbett, 2011). When meeting a stranger, skin color and clothing are two important characteristics used to formulate a first impression.

There have been many interesting studies considering the influence of clothing on the judgments of strangers. Johnson, Francis, and Burns (2007) explain the importance of clothing in revealing a person's personality. For example, clothing is very important to job candidates going on interviews.

Choice in clothing can communicate responsibility, status, power, and the ability to be successful (Turner-Bowker, 2001). When teachers dress more formally, they are rated as more competent (Morris et al., 1996). Designer/name brand clothing also carries social perceptions related to status. Owning store brand jeans led to more negative person perceptions than designer/name brand jeans in a study of college students (Workman, 1988). Clothing can also be used to stereotype and discriminate. Shoppers wearing pro-gay slogan shirts were less likely to receive help than shoppers wearing unmarked shirts (Cray, Russell, & Blockley, 1991).

Current Study Hypotheses

In the current research, models wearing a low status sweatshirt logo were predicted to be rated as low socioeconomic status (SES) and models wearing a high status sweatshirt logo were predicted to be rated as high SES. In addition, an interaction effect was predicted between model race and sweatshirt status. Caucasian models wearing the high status sweatshirt were predicted to be rated most positively and the African-American models wearing the low status sweatshirt were predicted to be rated least positively on potential success, attractiveness, and other interpersonal dimensions.

Method

Participants

One hundred and sixty eight (68 men, 100 women) undergraduates from a small, private college participated in this study. The average age of the participants was 20.29 (SD=4.06; range=18-50). The majority of participants were Caucasian (84.3%), but also included African-American (3.6%), Hispanic (6%), Asian American (4.3%) and "other" (1.8%) ethnicities. Participants were enrolled in psychology courses and completed the research for partial fulfillment of a research participation requirement.

Materials & Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to view one of six model/clothing photograph combinations and complete a series of ratings. Models included either a Caucasian or an African-American college student, matched for level of attractiveness, SES, and age. Clothing conditions included a grey hooded sweatshirt with a Kmart (low status), Abercrombie & Fitch (AF; high status), or no logo (see **Model Photographs**). The sweatshirts were created for the study with iron-on logos.

Participants rated the photo on SES using a 9-point Likert scale (1=*Lower Class*, 5=*Middle Class*, and 9=*Upper Class*). Several other dimensions related to status, intelligence, attractiveness, and sociability were also rated using a 5-point Likert scale (1=*Strongly Disagree* and 5=*Strongly Agree*).

Model Photographs

Results

A 3 (sweatshirt: plain, Kmart, or AF) x 2 (model race: Caucasian or African-American) univariate ANOVA was conducted for perceived model SES. A main effect for sweatshirt, $F_{(2, 165)}=6.53$, $p=.002$, $\eta^2=.08$, revealed participants rated the model wearing the AF sweatshirt the highest in SES and the model wearing the Kmart sweatshirt the lowest. A main effect for model race, $F_{(1, 166)}=16.18$, $p<.001$, $\eta^2=.09$, showed the Caucasian model was rated higher in SES than the African-American model. The interaction effect was not significant, $p=.98$. See **Figure 1** for results.

Univariate ANOVAs revealed the model wearing the plain sweatshirt was rated as the most successful and important and the model wearing the Kmart sweatshirt was rated as the least successful ($p=.03$) and important ($p=.02$). The Caucasian model was rated more successful ($p=.003$), attractive ($p<.001$), and intelligent ($p=.05$) than the African-American model overall.

Significant interaction effects were found for the sociability ratings. When wearing the Kmart sweatshirt, the Caucasian model was believed to have the least amount of friends, but the African-American model was believed to have the most friends. Participants reported they would like to be friends with the Caucasian model most when she was wearing the plain sweatshirt and least when she was wearing the Kmart sweatshirt. Participants indicated they wanted to be friends with the African-American model most when she was wearing the plain or Kmart sweatshirt and least when she was wearing the AF sweatshirt. This pattern of results can be seen in **Figure 2**.

When participant sex was considered in additional analyses, no significant interactions were found.

Figure 1. Mean SES Rating by Model Race and Sweatshirt Condition.
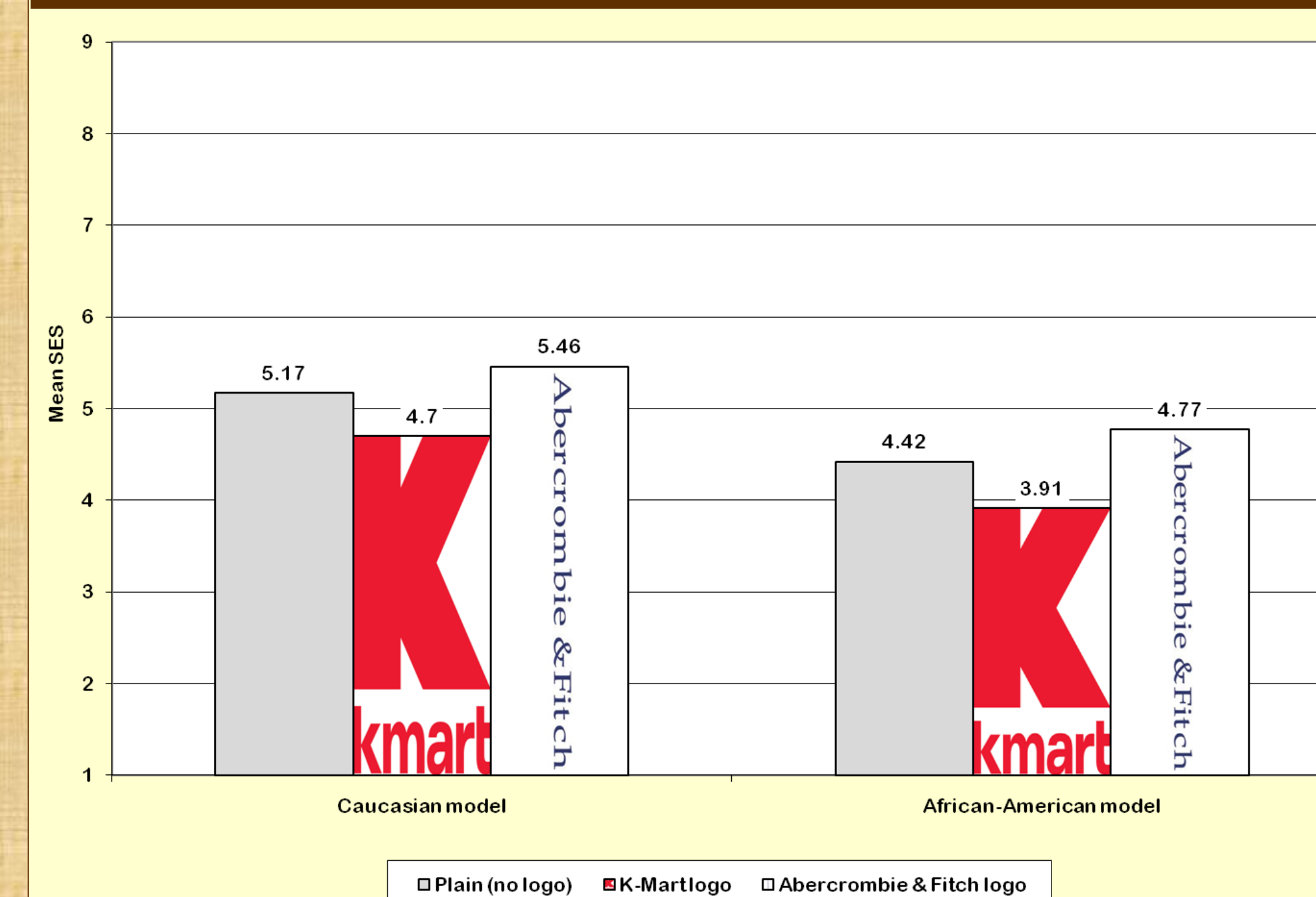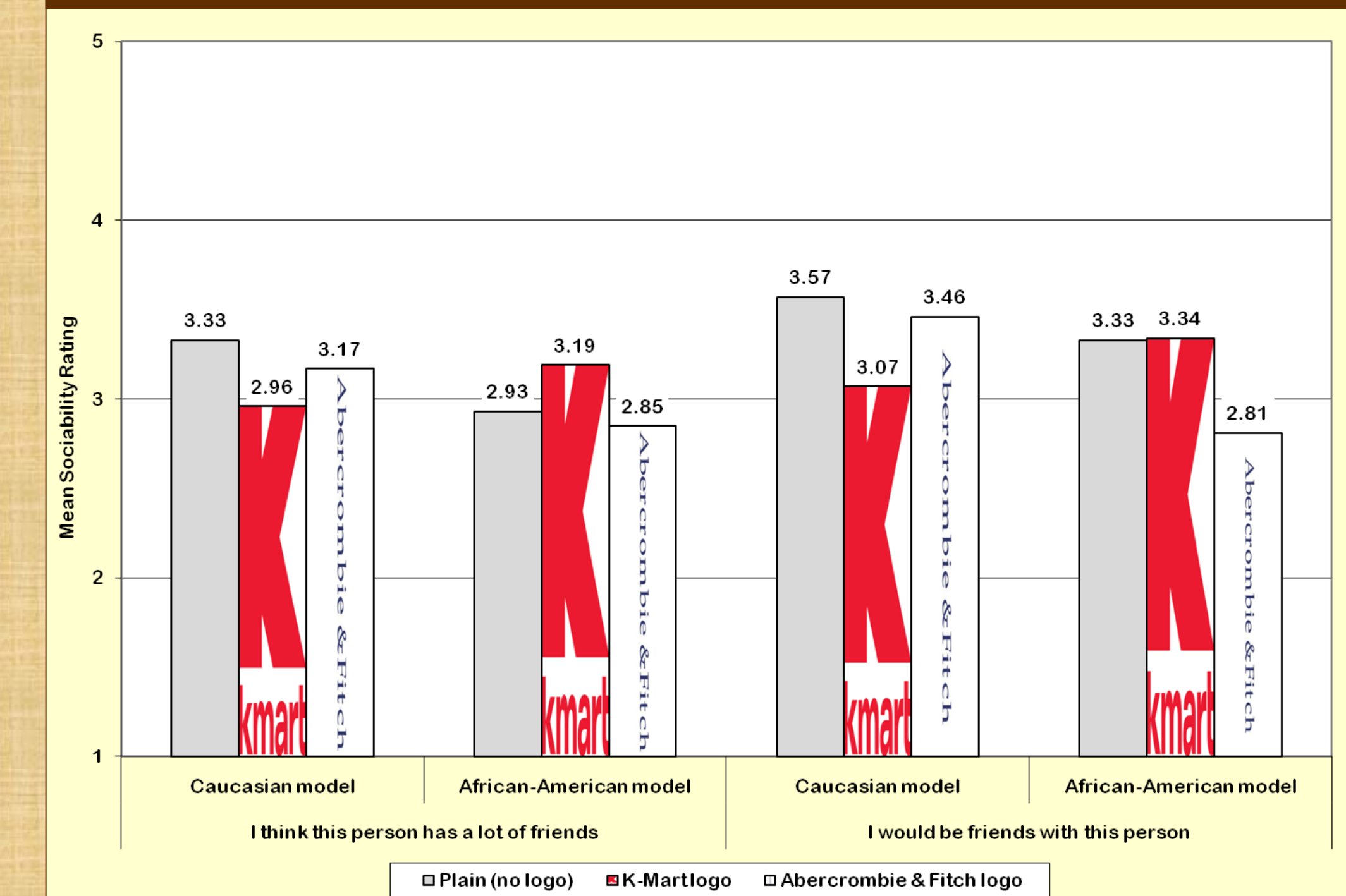

Figure 2. Mean Sociability Ratings by Model Race and Sweatshirt Condition.

Discussion

Results were consistent with SES predictions. The model wearing the AF sweatshirt was rated highest SES and the model wearing the Kmart sweatshirt was rated lowest SES overall. Main effects for success, importance, and attractiveness of models were also found, as predicted. However, interaction results between sweatshirt and model race were mixed. Interaction effects were isolated within sociability ratings. Interestingly, high SES dress (AF) reduced beliefs about African-Americans having lots of friends and participants desire to be friends with the model, whereas low SES dress (Kmart) did the same for Caucasian models. Stereotype mismatches between race SES and dress SES produce thought-provoking results which should be further studied.

Unfortunately, the African-American model was rated less favorably than the Caucasian model overall. Forms of prejudice and discrimination continue to influence our social cognitions and behaviors (Whitley & Kite, 2010), including perceptions of dress.

Limitations of the current research include a predominantly Caucasian sample and reliance on self-report measures of photographs as opposed to real social interactions with models.

The current findings suggest the combination of race and fashion is important in understanding social class and person impressions.

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