

The Influence of Clothing Fashion and Race on the Perceived Socioeconomic Status and Person Perception of College Students¹

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College students ($N = 168$) viewed photographs of an African American or Caucasian female model wearing grey sweatshirts with Kmart, Abercrombie & Fitch (AF), or no logo. As predicted, participants rated the Caucasian model more favorably than the African American model overall. Participants rated models wearing the AF sweatshirt highest in socioeconomic status while participants rated models wearing the Kmart sweatshirt lowest in socioeconomic status. Other person perception results, including sociability rating interactions with model race and dress, were found. Results are discussed with implications for discrimination based on fashion clothing, socioeconomic status, and race.

Keywords: social perception, racism, classism, fashion, clothing, attribution

"It is impossible to wear clothes without transmitting social signals. Every costume tells a story, often a very subtle one, about its wearer."

-Desmond Morris (1977, p. 213)

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. How clothing style and race are used in forming impressions and making attributions about social class has great implications for understanding and challenging prejudice and discrimination. The current investigation examines the combination of clothing fashion, race, and socioeconomic status (SES) on person perception.

Research on clothing related to social perception, categorization, impression formation, and attribution theory can be interpreted from a social cognitive perspective (Lennon & Davis, 1989). 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 and appearance emphasis variables in revealing a person's

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personality. People purposely select different types of clothing to wear in different types of social contexts. For example, clothing is very important to job candidates going on interviews who wish to present a professional, neat appearance to communicate desirable employment qualities. In a simulated personal decision scenario, a potential job candidate wearing appropriate job interview clothing was more likely to be selected for the position compared to a candidate wearing inappropriate job interview clothing (Bardack & McAndrew, 1985). Similarly, a male posing as a marketing researcher dressed “smartly” was more successful in gaining compliance of randomly approached women to complete a survey on advertising in a railway station compared to when the same male dressed “untidily” (Judd, Bull, & Gahagan, 1975). While these past studies show how clothing style is related to personality, the current study focuses more on casual clothing style differences among college students.

Choice in clothing can communicate responsibility, status, power, and the ability to be successful (Turner-Bowker, 2001). When teachers dress more formally, such as when they wore suits and dress shoes, they are rated as more competent, but when instructors dressed more casually, wearing jeans and a t-shirt, they were rated higher on sociability, extraversion, and having an interesting presentation (Morris et al., 1996). Similarly, college teaching assistants wearing formal clothing were rated as more intellectual and credible than teaching assistants wearing semiformal or informal clothing (Workman, Johnson, & Hadelar, 1993). In another study, college women in Brazil rated men who were dressed in a socially formal, socially informal, or sportively fashion. The socially formal dressed individual was rated as less extraverted, sympathetic, charming, and attractive than the other models as well as having a more rightist political ideology (Satrapa et al., 1992). These past studies show how clothing style is related to person perceptions related to competence, status, and power, however, the race of the models and their perceived socioeconomic background were not included as integral parts of the research design as in the current research.

Designer/name brand clothing also carries social perceptions related to status derived from multiple sources of social influence (Beaudoin & Lachance, 2006). Owning store brand jeans led to more negative person perceptions than designer/name brand jeans in a study of college students (Workman, 1988). Name brand slacks were also found to be rated as higher in quality and estimated to cost more, but only among individuals who identified the name brands on the products (Behling & Wilch, 1988). These studies demonstrate how status and class may be associated with particular designers and name brands of clothing. Clothing itself 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 (Gray, Russell, & Blockley, 1991). Results such as these show how clothing styles can influence the behavior of others. However, past research has not specifically investigated the combination of clothing style, race, and SES in person perception, especially related to name brand clothing popular among college students.

Unfortunately, despite having an African American president in office, civil rights movements, social policy passage, and evolving tolerance, racism is still a challenge in the United States today (Stewart et al., 2010). Past research has widely investigated racism and

has found minorities are often discriminated against as members of the out-group (Whitley & Kite, 2010). In the current research, we predicted the Caucasian model would be rated more favorably than the African American model. Research has also shown that income inequality has increased in recent years, leading to a decrease in general happiness among Americans related to further differentiation in social class distinctions (Oishi, Kesebir, & Diener, 2011). Classism is often expressed through cognitive and behavioral distancing (Lott, 2002) and can have serious implications for education, housing, healthcare, and other important areas of discrimination in life (APA, 2000). Therefore, we also predicted that models wearing a low status sweatshirt logo would be rated as lower SES and models wearing a high status sweatshirt logo were predicted to be rated as high SES. In addition, 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 and 100 women) undergraduates from a small, private college in Pennsylvania participated in this study. Nine additional participants completed the study, but were removed from the record because they knew one of the models, failed to recognize the logo on the sweatshirt, or could not accurately identify the race of the model. 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:

To conduct the current study, sweatshirts, human female models, photos of the models wearing the sweatshirts, and questionnaires regarding perceptions of the models and general demographics were used.

Sweatshirts

A control, a low SES, and a high SES gray sweatshirt were used as clothing options in the current study. Kmart was selected as the low SES clothing option and Abercrombie & Fitch (AF) was selected as the high SES clothing option based on the typical store shopper's SES, store prices, and general reputation. Three plain gray hooded sweatshirts were purchased from Walmart and the logo sweatshirts were created using a Kmart and AF iron-on developed specifically for this study. The logos were centered on the front of the sweatshirts and were approximately the same size. The Kmart logo was in red and the AF logo was in navy blue (the regular colors associated with each respective company's

advertising logos). The sweatshirts were made, not purchased directly from Kmart and Abercrombie & Fitch, to eliminate variations in the style and color of the sweatshirts.

A pilot test of the Kmart and AF logo sweatshirts without the models reinforced the respective low and high SES designations for these sweatshirts. Participants reported the Kmart sweatshirt cost significantly less than the AF sweatshirt, $t(29) = 10.26, p < .001, d = 2.43, Ms = \17.26 and $\$45.96, SDs = \4.64 and $\$16.01$, respectively. The SES of the person who would wear the Kmart sweatshirt was rated significantly lower than the SES of the person who would wear the AF sweatshirt, $t(29) = 14.43, p < .001, d = 4.03, Ms = 3.77$ and 6.97 on a 9-point scale, $SDs = .86$ and $.72$, respectively.

Models & Model Photos

Two undergraduate females agreed to serve as models, having their pictures taken wearing the hooded sweatshirts. Male models were considered as well, but were not included for sake of simplicity in the current study design. The study was fully explained to both models before they gave consent to have their photos used in the study. One model was African American and the other was Caucasian. Both were seniors in college, in their early twenties, and determined to be middle-class and similar in physical attractiveness through pilot testing. Three digital photos were taken of each of the models in the 1) plain gray hooded sweatshirt with no logo, 2) gray hooded sweatshirt with a Kmart logo, and 3) gray hooded sweatshirt with an AF logo. The photos showed the models from the waist up with neutral facial expressions and a solid white background.

Questionnaires

Participants rated photos of the models wearing the sweatshirts on SES and several dimensions related to status, intelligence, attractiveness, and sociability. To determine perceived SES of the models, participants were asked to “rate the socio-economic status of the person in the photograph” on a 9-point Likert scale (1 = *Lower Class*, 5 = *Middle Class*, 9 = *Upper Class*). Other questions included: “I think this person has a lot of friends”, “I think this person is successful in life”, “I think this person is attractive”, “I think this person is important”, “I would be friends with this person”, and “I think this person is intelligent.” Questions were answered on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 2 = *Disagree*, 3 = *Neutral*, 4 = *Agree*, and 5 = *Strongly Agree*).

Participants also provided demographic information about their sex, age, race, SES, and where they typically shopped for their clothing. As a manipulation check, participants were asked to recall the logo on the model’s sweatshirt and the race of the model to be certain participants noticed these variables. Participants were also asked to disclose if they knew the model and how they knew her.

Procedure:

Upon signing up for a study on “First Impressions”, participants were randomly assigned to view one of the six clothing/model photo combinations. Participants completed an

informed consent form and were given a packet containing the questionnaires to complete in small group settings of less than 20 students while the experimenter stood at the front of the room. The photo was shown on an overhead projector for the first part of the packet and removed for the second part so participants would have to recall the race of the model and logo of the sweatshirt. Participants were thanked for their participation and debriefed about the purpose of the study after their responses were recorded.

RESULTS

A 3 (sweatshirt: plain, Kmart, or AF) x 2 (model: 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 ($M = 5.10, SD = 1.36$), the model wearing the Kmart sweatshirt the lowest ($M = 4.26, SD = 1.29$), and the model wearing the plain sweatshirt ($M = 4.82, SD = 1.03$) in between the AF and Kmart sweatshirts. Individual comparisons showed the Kmart sweatshirt condition was rated significantly lower than the AF ($p < .001$) and the plain sweatshirt ($p = .03$) conditions. A main effect for model, $F(1, 166) = 16.18, p < .001, \eta^2 = .09$, showed the Caucasian model ($M = 5.10, SD = 1.03$) was rated higher in SES than the African American model ($M = 4.33, SD = 1.37$). The interaction effect was not significant, $p = .98$. See the Figure 1 for a visual display of these results.

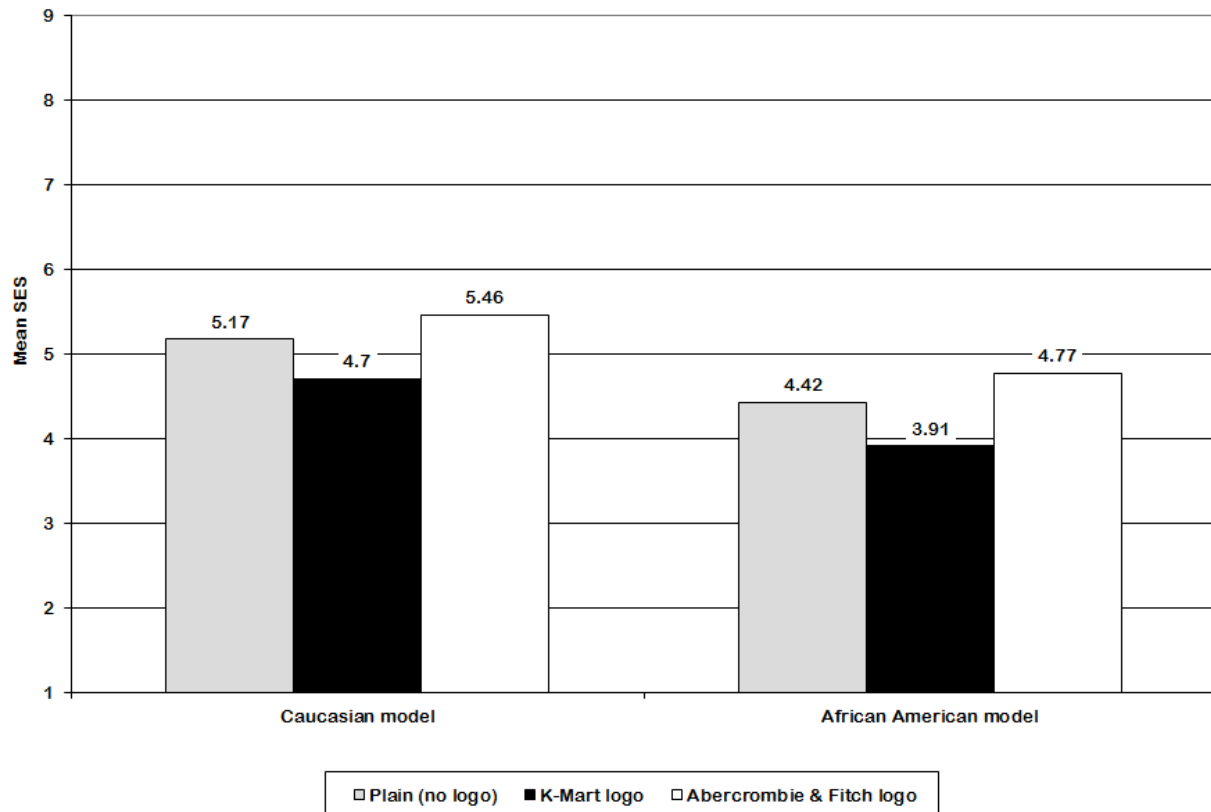


Figure 1. Mean SES ratings by sweatshirt condition and model. Higher scores indicate greater perceived socioeconomic status.

To analyze the six other perception areas, a 3 (sweatshirt: plain, Kmart, or AF) x 2 (model: Caucasian or African American) MANOVA was conducted. Results revealed a non-significant multivariate main effect for sweatshirt, Wilks' $\lambda = .91$, $F(12, 310) = 1.23$, $p = .26$, $\eta^2 = .05$, a significant effect for model, Wilks' $\lambda = .82$, $F(6, 155) = 5.83$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .18$, and a significant interaction effect, Wilks' $\lambda = .85$, $F(12, 310) = 2.14$, $p = .02$, $\eta^2 = .08$.

A series of similar 3 x 2 univariate ANOVAs for each of the six questions was conducted. A significant main effect for sweatshirt was found for the questions "I think this person is successful in life", $F(2, 165) = 3.62$, $p = .03$, $\eta^2 = .04$, and "I think this person is important", $F(2, 165) = 3.80$, $p = .02$, $\eta^2 = .05$. Participants rated the model wearing the plain sweatshirt the highest in success ($M = 3.16$, $SD = .68$) and importance ($M = 3.16$, $SD = 1.11$), the model wearing the Kmart sweatshirt the lowest in success ($M = 2.78$, $SD = .77$) and importance ($M = 2.66$, $SD = .88$), and the model wearing the AF sweatshirt ($M = 2.98$, $SD = .74$ and $M = 2.80$, $SD = 1.03$, respectively for success and importance) in between the plain and Kmart sweatshirts. Individual comparisons between sweatshirt conditions revealed the model was rated significantly lower when wearing the Kmart sweatshirt compared to the plain sweatshirt on success ($p = .01$) and importance ($p = .03$). No other significant main effects for sweatshirt were found.

A significant main effect for model was found for the questions "I think this person is successful in life", $F(1, 166) = 9.05$, $p = .003$, $\eta^2 = .05$, "I think this person is attractive", $F(1, 166) = 23.03$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .13$, and "I think this person is intelligent", $F(1, 166) = 4.09$, $p = .05$, $\eta^2 = .03$. The Caucasian model was rated higher than the African American model on the dimensions of success ($M_s = 3.15$ and 2.80 , $SD_s = .67$ and $.77$, respectively), attractiveness ($M_s = 3.06$ and 2.34 , $SD_s = .94$ and 1.02 , respectively), and intelligence ($M_s = 3.36$ and 3.09 , $SD_s = .73$ and $.84$, respectively). No other significant main effects for model condition were found.

A significant interaction effect was found for the question "I think this person has a lot of friends", $F(2, 165) = 3.31$, $p = .04$, $\eta^2 = .04$. The Caucasian model was believed to have less friends when wearing the Kmart sweatshirt ($M = 2.96$, $SD = .52$) compared to the plain sweatshirt condition ($M = 3.33$, $SD = .61$) or the AF sweatshirt condition ($M = 3.17$, $SD = .70$), but the African American model was believed to have slightly more friends when wearing the Kmart sweatshirt ($M = 3.19$, $SD = .69$) compared to the plain ($M = 2.93$, $SD = .73$, $p = .42$) or the AF ($M = 2.85$, $SD = .97$) sweatshirt condition. However, individual comparisons within model conditions between sweatshirt conditions revealed the only marginally significant difference was between the Caucasian model wearing the Kmart sweatshirt and the plain sweatshirt ($p = .06$). See Figure 2 for results.

A significant interaction effect was also found for the question "I would be friends with this person", $F(2, 165) = 3.43$, $p = .04$, $\eta^2 = .04$. Participants reported they would like to be friends with the Caucasian model most when she was wearing the plain sweatshirt ($M = 3.57$, $SD = .77$) and friends with the African American model most when she was wearing either the plain ($M = 3.33$, $SD = .92$) or the Kmart sweatshirt ($M = 3.34$, $SD = .87$).

Participants wanted to be friends with the African American model least when she was wearing the AF sweatshirt ($M = 2.81, SD = 1.02$) and friends least with the Caucasian model when she was wearing the Kmart sweatshirt ($M = 3.07, SD = 1.0$). Individual comparisons within model conditions between sweatshirt conditions revealed marginally significant differences between the Caucasian model wearing the Kmart sweatshirt and the plain sweatshirt ($p = .10$), and the African American model wearing the AF compared to the plain sweatshirt ($p = .11$) and the Kmart sweatshirt ($p = .08$). See Figure 2 for results.

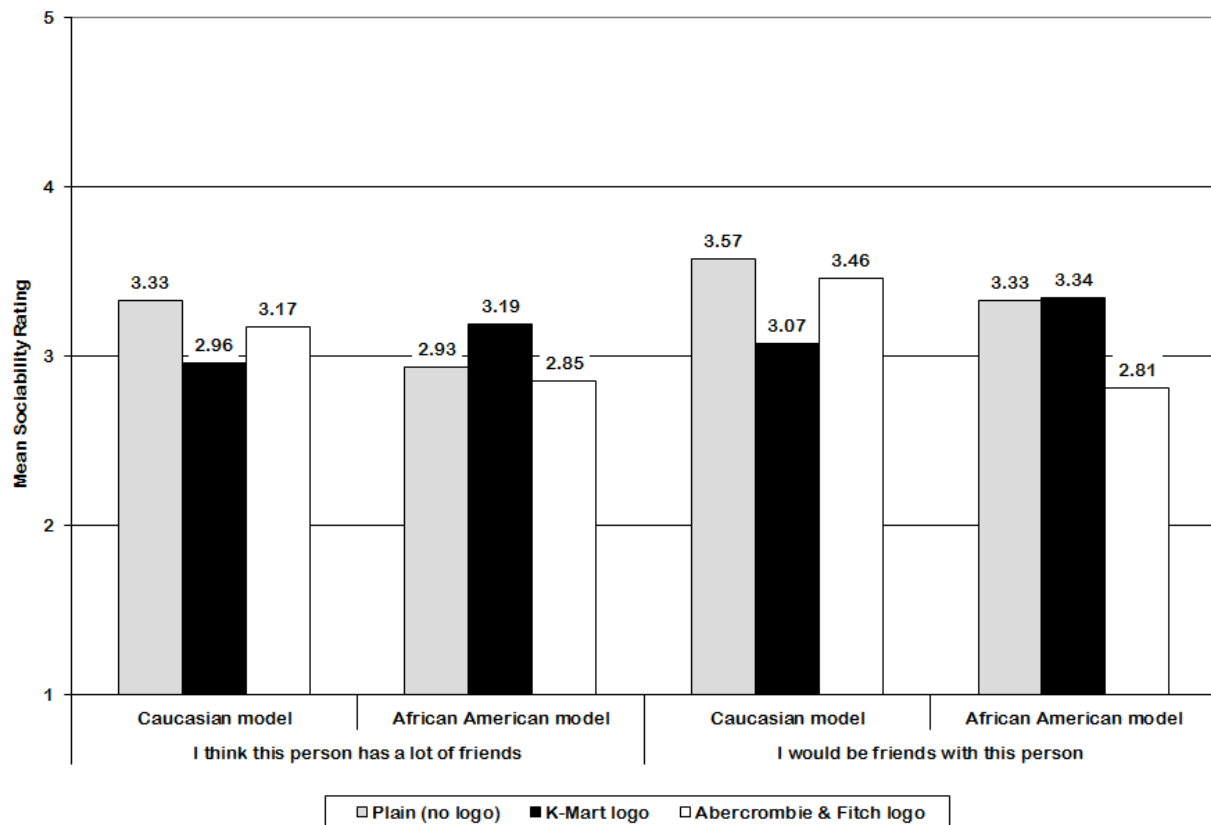


Figure 2. Mean sociability ratings by sweatshirt and model conditions. Higher scores indicate greater agreement with the sociability question posed.

The influence of participant sex on perception responses was also considered. Additional ANOVA analyses adding participant sex as an independent variable revealed no significant interactions involving participant sex. However, there were main effects for participant sex on the questions “I think this person is attractive”, $F(1, 166) = 19.73, p < .001, \eta^2 = .11$, and “I would be friends with this person”, $F(1, 166) = 8.44, p = .004, \eta^2 = .05$. Female participants rated the models as more attractive than the male participants ($M_s = 2.97$ and $2.28, SD_s = .94$ and 1.06 , respectively) and female participants were more likely to befriend the models than the male participants ($M_s = 3.44$ and $3.01, SD_s = .85$ and 1.0 , respectively).

Participants were also asked about where they typically shopped and purchased their clothing. As further description of the sample, 48.2% own clothes from Abercrombie &

Fitch, 19.3% own clothes from Kmart, 47.6% own clothes from Walmart, 64.5% own clothes from Kohl's, 54.2% own clothes from Hollister, 65.1% own clothes from the Gap, 80.7% own clothes from Old Navy, 33.7% own clothes from the Banana Republic, 72.3% own clothes from American Eagle. Furthermore, 50.6% reported enjoying shopping at Abercrombie & Fitch or similar clothing stores and 27.3% reported enjoying shopping at Kmart or similar clothing stores. Participant shopping preferences were equally distributed across experimental conditions. In addition, participants rated themselves as middle class overall ($M = 5.75, SD = 1.10$).

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. As predicted, the African American model was rated less favorably than the Caucasian model overall on dimensions of success, intelligence, and attractiveness. Models wearing the plain sweatshirt were judged to be most successful and important whereas models wearing the Kmart sweatshirt were judged to be least successful and important. Forms of prejudice and discrimination continue to influence our social cognitions and behaviors (Whitley & Kite, 2010), including perceptions of dress. Individuals make disparate judgments based on brand of clothing and class/race discrepancy.

Results between sweatshirt and model conditions did not follow our predictions exactly. Significant interaction effects between sweatshirt condition and model were isolated within sociability ratings. Interestingly, high SES dress (AF) reduced beliefs about the African American model having lots of friends and participant's desire to be friends with the model, whereas low SES dress (Kmart) did the same for the Caucasian model. The Caucasian model was believed to have less friends when wearing the Kmart sweatshirt, but the African American model was believed to have more friends when wearing the Kmart sweatshirt. Participants reported they would like to be friends with the Caucasian model most when she was wearing the plain sweatshirt and friends with the African American model most when she was wearing either the plain or the Kmart sweatshirt. Participants wanted to be friends with the African American model least when she was wearing the AF sweatshirt and friends with the Caucasian model least when she was wearing the Kmart sweatshirt.

Besides measures of sociability, other variables, such as attractiveness, intelligence, importance, and success, did not produce significant interaction effects between the variables of sweatshirt condition and model. When class and race mismatches occur (such as African-Americans wearing a high SES clothing item), there appears to be implications for friendship and social interactions, but not other impression areas. Stereotype mismatches between race SES and dress SES produce thought-provoking results which should be further studied in future investigations. Do certain clothing brands convey inconsistent information about the SES of an individual depending on the individual's race and how do people weigh race and dress SES information when making attributions? Experimentally isolating these variables and explaining their impacts on person perception may be quite informative in reducing social stigmas associated with race and class

differences. Initial impressions of class and race stereotype mismatches may be important in understanding approachability and social interaction between races.

One limitation of the current study was the selection of models used as experimental stimuli. While we did carefully select a Caucasian and African American college student matched on sex, age, hairstyle, attractiveness, and SES, we cannot rule out the possibility that other individual difference factors in our selection of models beyond race may have contributed to our findings as a potential confound. Future studies may incorporate images of the same model with graphically manipulated skin tone variations to remedy this individual difference possibility. Using multiple models of different races could also partially address this concern instead of relying on single models as in the current study. Despite this limitation, we believe model race and clothing style are extremely salient interpersonal features that were certainly utilized by participants when making their ratings.

Other limitations of the current research include a predominantly Caucasian sample from a private, Catholic college and reliance on self-report measures of exclusively female photographs as opposed to real social interactions with models. Replication of the current methodology using a more diverse sample from a more diverse educational background, including both male and female models, would strengthen the generalizability of the results. In addition, creating a more real-life scenario where participants interact with a model in a controlled lab setting, or in the field, and provide impression ratings would increase confidence in our findings as well. We recognize there are many ways to manipulate SES through clothing choice and using the association between specific store brand logos on sweatshirts is just one variation that may produce different results in different parts of the country or at different times based on store popularity. People wear shirts and other clothing items with many types of words and logos, including advertisements for alcohol, dining establishments, vacation destinations, sports teams, colleges, and charities. Each of these may provoke certain emotional reactions, impressions, and judgments of the person wearing the shirt. Further exploration of different types of logos and words on shirts or other articles of clothing related to impression formation and biases may be interesting.

Other future areas of research may include investigations of impressions of different races and SES models wearing particular colors of clothing or the effects of having participants themselves wear different types of clothing. The color red, for example, has been very popular in recent research on the effects of competitive sports outcomes and attractiveness (Elliot & Niesta, 2008; Elliot et al., 2010; Feltman & Elliot, 2011; Roberts, Owen, & Havlicek, 2010). Perhaps red, and other color clothing, has different implications when mixed with model race and SES? Another novel idea is to have participants wear particular items of clothing and measure how it changes their personal assessments of their personality and abilities. For example, Hannover and Kühnen (2002) had participants come to an experiment dressed in a formal or casual style dress and rate themselves on various trait adjectives. Those who wore formal clothing used more formal adjectives to rate themselves (cultivated, accurate) whereas those who wore more casual clothing used more casual adjectives (easygoing, tolerant). The clothes an individual wears impacts his/her self-

appraisal as well as the appraisals others have of him/her through a self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton, 1957; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). Word, Zanna, and Cooper (1974) demonstrate how this can happen with racial stereotypes in job interviews of white and black applicants.

In order to fix a social problem the source of that problem must be found. Racism and classism are prevalent in today's society. People continue to judge each other on first impressions of sex, race, and socioeconomic indicators like clothing. Once an initial judgment is made, the line between stereotypes and individual differences is blurred. The results of the current study demonstrate how initial judgments about other individuals can lead to more negative impressions. Discrimination may then occur after these negative impressions are formed. Given these results, individuals may be more careful in their clothing choices, especially when interacting with others who make important decisions about life outcomes, especially in areas related to education, finances, health, and policy. A simple logo on a sweatshirt has the power to significantly alter the impressions of others. In sum, the current findings suggest the combination of race and fashion is important in understanding social class and person impressions.

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