

Consumer self-esteem while shopping: Maybe good-looking clerks shouldn't wear the store brands?

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People who don't feel positive about their appearance are less likely to buy an item they're trying on if they see a good-looking shopper or salesperson wearing the same thing, according to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

"Our work shows that consumers often focus on parallel consumption behaviors from others to inform their product decisions—i.e., people look to others in the store environment as an information source when shopping," write authors Darren W. Dahl (University of British Columbia), Jennifer J. Argo (University of Alberta), and Andrea C. Morales (Arizona State University).

When a consumer with low body esteem tries on an article of clothing and sees an attractive person wearing the same thing, he or she is less likely to want the item. But for this phenomenon to occur, both parties needed to be wearing the item. In the study, the negative evaluations did not occur if the other shopper was merely carrying the item or if consumers didn't try on the item but saw someone else wearing it.

The authors demonstrate that consumer reactions to social information will differ depending on whether or not [consumption](#) behaviors are aligned. "For example, when a low body esteem consumer sees a dress on another consumer in the store but is not trying it on herself, she might think to herself, 'That dress is really cute and stylish!' Similarly, if a low

body esteem consumer tries on a dress in a store but does not see any other consumers wearing the same dress, she might think to herself, "This dress is really cute and stylish on me!" However, if she sees a dress on an attractive consumer in the store and is trying on the same dress herself, as she looks in the mirror she now thinks to herself, "That dress is really cute and stylish on me, but compared to her, I look terrible!"

Consumers who have low body esteem are more likely to be influenced by other shoppers than by salespeople, the authors found, but the researchers still question whether it's a good idea to require clerks to wear a brand's clothing.

Retailers should also take note when designing store layouts.

"Specifically, stores would be advised to ensure that shoppers are not required to leave private dressing rooms to stand in front of a publicly shared mirror," the authors write.

More information: Darren W. Dahl, Jennifer J. Argo, and Andrea C. Morales. "Social Information in the Retail Environment: The Importance of Consumption Alignment, Referent Identity, and Self-Esteem." *Journal of Consumer Research*: February 2012 (published online June 14, 2011). ejcr.org

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