



Halo Effect among Customers and Salespersons: Insights from Delhi, India

Gaurrika Bhandarri
Student
Vasant Valley School

Abstract

The Halo effect was introduced by Edward Thorndike in 1920. Since then, this effect has been extensively researched on especially in workplace setting. Physical attractiveness, general appearance, colour of clothing etc have been reported to influence how individuals are perceived by others. These consequently also influence hiring, promotion and other decisions at a typical workplace. This study attempts to understand the influence of customers' appearance on the attitude and actions of the salespersons in the retail sector in Delhi, India. Observations, interviews and a survey were used to test the hypothesis. The results showed that customers who were 'well-dressed' were treated better than customers who were not. The findings can help improve the functioning and operations of salespersons in the retail sector.

Keywords: *Halo effect, salespersons, bias, customer satisfaction*

Introduction

The halo effect is a cognitive bias that influences the perception of an individual based on one specific trait or characteristic, leading to a generalized judgment about that person. The psychologist Edward Thorndike first noted this phenomenon in 1920. He conducted a study in which he asked military officers to rate the performance of their subordinates on a variety of factors, including intelligence, leadership, and character. Thorndike found that the officers' ratings were often correlated with the subordinates' physical attractiveness. In other words, the more attractive officers were also rated as being more intelligent, more capable leaders, and having better character.

This was generalized to the general public and it was found that people tended to judge others primarily based on their first impression. This shows up in a variety of settings, including personal connections, job interviews, and performance reviews. For instance, even though there is no clear relationship between physical attractiveness and aptitude, those who possess physical attractiveness may be seen as bright or competent. This bias has the potential to seriously affect decision-making procedures and result in erroneous personal evaluations; It can lead us to make inaccurate assessments of people's abilities and personalities. In some cases, it can even lead us to discriminate against people who do not fit our preconceived notions of what is attractive or desirable.

One key factor is physical attractiveness, as studies have shown that individuals who are deemed attractive are often attributed with positive traits such as intelligence, kindness, and competence (Dion et al., 1972). Additionally, familiarity with a person can also enhance the halo effect, as individuals tend to rely on previous experiences and knowledge when forming judgments. Furthermore, the context in which an individual is observed plays a crucial role in perpetuating this bias. For instance, if someone excels in one area, such as sports or academics, they may be automatically assumed to excel in other unrelated areas due to the halo effect.

Halo effect and its Influence on Appearances

Clothes can be very powerful. They can communicate certain messages about us, whether intentionally or not. The way we dress can tell a story about our personality, our values, and our work ethic. Actors use clothes to get into character and transform their performances. Business professionals can also use clothes to communicate specific messages about themselves. For example, to look clean, sharp, and to the point, you should dress in clean lines and sharp creases. Even the way you wear your glasses can communicate something about you. For instance, when President Obama addressed a crowd of working-class Americans, he spoke with no jacket and his sleeves rolled up. This gesture may seem unnoticeable but it indirectly communicated to the public, that he too was a hard worker (Goman, 2011)

Two studies have shown that our clothes can have a significant impact on how others perceive us, even in very subtle ways. In one study, people were more likely to judge a man as being more confident, successful, flexible, and a higher earner if he was wearing a “bespoke suit” than if he was wearing an “off-the-peg” suit. This is even though the only difference between the two suits was minor (Howlett et al., 2013)

In the other study, people's perception of women's clothing and their occupational roles was assessed. Women in senior roles were perceived less favorably if they wore "provocative" clothing. While women in junior roles like receptionists were judged less harshly on their clothing style. However, the authors note that the difference between "provocative" and "conservative" clothing in the study was minor (Howlett et al., 2015).

It's not just the clothes, but also colors that influence perceptions. A study as early as 1988 concluded that black-coloured clothing was often associated with aggressiveness and maliciousness. The authors studied football players and noticed that those wearing black uniforms were more likely to get penalties (Frank & Gilovich, 1988). In another study, Gueguen (2012) gave male participants images of women in different colored t-shirts. Women wearing red T-shirts were considered more attractive and sexual intent.

Furthermore, body piercings and tattoos are also primarily frowned upon by the general public. Tattoos especially are associated with risky sexual behaviors, shoplifting, drinking, smoking etc (Koch et al., 2007)

These studies suggest that people make snap judgments about others based on appearances, and these judgments can have a real impact on how they interact with those people. For example, a man wearing a bespoke suit may be more likely to be taken seriously in a job interview than a man wearing an off-the-peg suit.

It's important to remember that these studies are just correlational, meaning they can't prove that wearing certain clothes or colors causes us to be perceived in a certain way. However, they do suggest that there is a link between our dressing and how others perceive us.

An independent study also found that around 80% of people dress similarly to their friends, indicating a tendency to align in style. Additionally, about 50% of participants reported mood changes based on their clothing, potentially influencing their interactions and how others treat them. This suggests that personal presentation can impact social treatment. In summary, the way we dress or present ourselves appears to influence how we are treated by others, as evidenced by the correlation between shared style among friends and the effect of clothing on mood and subsequent behavior (Howlett et al., 2013)

The context in which you are dressing is also important. A tie might make a person look reliable and rooted in tradition at an investment firm, but it might come off as stuffy and resistant to change at a tech startup. It is essential to consider the context of dressing and to make sure that clothing choices are appropriate for the occasion. When dressed appropriately, people are more likely to be taken seriously.

Another interesting theory that can be applied here is the Schema Theory; it explains how the same stimulus can be perceived differently by each person. This is because each person has their own subjective schema or ‘anchor for judgments’ or template (Yu & Ahn, 2017). Hence the perception of the same stimulus is not based on objective evaluation of the object (Axelrod, 1973)

So, in this research article, I seek to essentially recreate the Halo experiment by exploring the impact an individual's appearance has on a salesperson's mentality and whether they are treated any differently based on dressing.

Methodology

Research question: How does the appearance of a customer (Regular vs Flashy clothing) impact the mentality of a salesperson?

Hypothesis: Employees will be more friendly and attentive towards a person dressed in flashier clothing.

Sample size: 20 salespeople from a particular shopping store in the Indian city of Delhi were identified for this study.

Procedure: The 20 salespeople were selected based on convenience and consent to participation. The researcher observed their interactions with customers throughout the day and interviewed customers and the salespersons at the end of the day. Questions such as- *Did you feel you were treated the same as the other customers? Were you given ample attention to fulfill your requests? Were you offered any promotions or offers on products etc* were directed to the customers. Relevant questions were asked to the salespersons as well.

The salespersons were also provided a Google form survey to record their experiences. This survey was shared to numerous salespersons across the city to test the hypothesis. Statements such as *I internally judge customers based on their appearance, The way I interact with customers who are well-dressed and those who are not, are different, I don't treat customers differently based on appearance, I give more attention to customers who are well-dressed etc.* The responses were provided based on a 5-point Likert scale- Strongly Agree, Agree, uncertain, Disagree and Strongly Disagree.

Results and Discussion

At the end of the experiment, it was observed that the employees spent more time and resources on the customer who was dressed in neater and sharper clothing. In this context, the clothing was either very fashionable or simple but elegant. Furthermore, these customers wore make-up and were generally groomed. Salespersons provided more time and dedicated more resources to the customers dressed more aptly. For instance, they were more likely to personally look into the customer's requests like a change of dress size etc. This set of customers did not feel like they would be treated differently had their attire been swapped. They did not feel like they were being judged or ignored in any way.

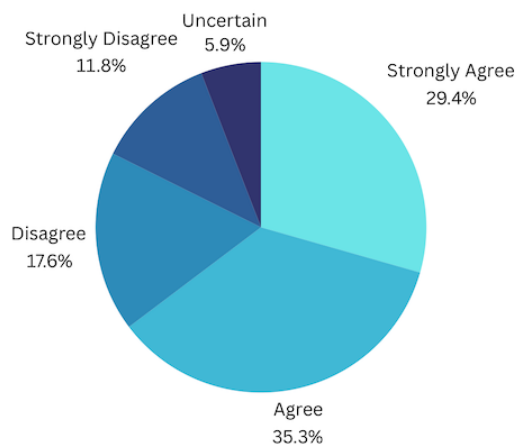
On the other hand, customers who were dressed or groomed poorly were treated differently by the salespersons. Salespersons spent little time with them or sometimes even ignored them. These customers' requests were not often personally looked into by the salespersons. This set of customers did report that they would have been treated differently if they were dressed in flashier clothing. They did notice that they were often ignored or sometimes spoken to rudely by the staff. They also felt that were being mocked by the salespersons.

Interestingly, both groups were given the same number of promotions or discounts. This is probably because no matter the person, salespersons have to adhere to a script provided by the company that promotes the latest discounts and sales.

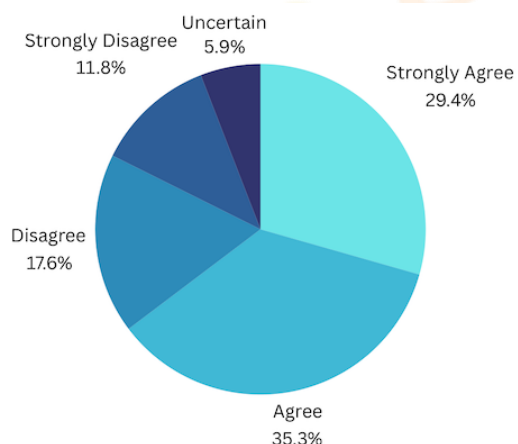
The interviews with the salespersons corroborate these findings. They reported that they treat customers differently based on appearance. Customers who appear well-dressed and well-groomed and given more attention and time. As some salespeople noted, they believe these customers are more likely to eventually buy items or even give them tips. But those who are less groomed or appear unkempt are unlikely to buy any item and hence they are often ignored or given very little attention.

However, the survey responses differed. The survey was shared with salespersons across stores in Delhi to get insight into their attitudes and behavior to the customers. A total of 53 employees from a variety of stores in the city responded to the survey. Four responses were removed due to incomplete inputs. Below is an overview of the responses from the remaining 49 respondents

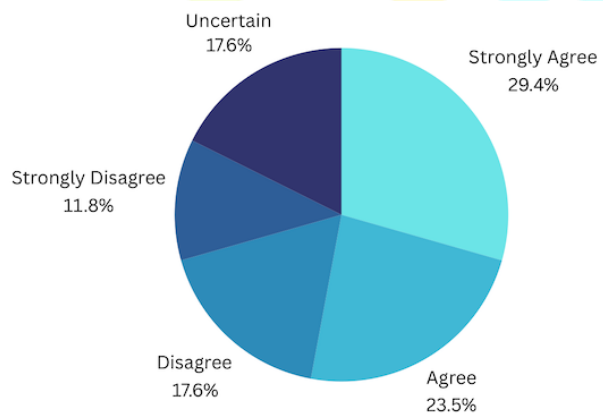
Qns: I internally judge customers based on their appearance,



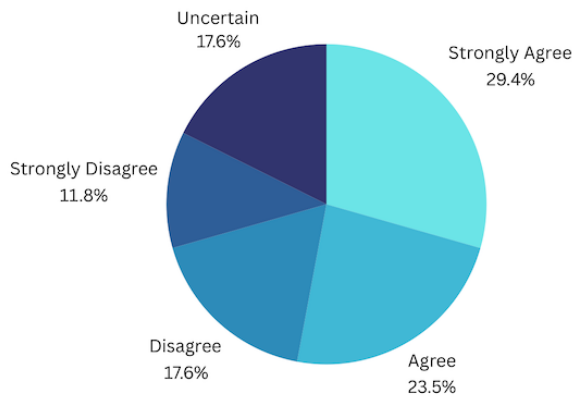
Qns: The way I interact with customers who are well-dressed and those who are not, are different,



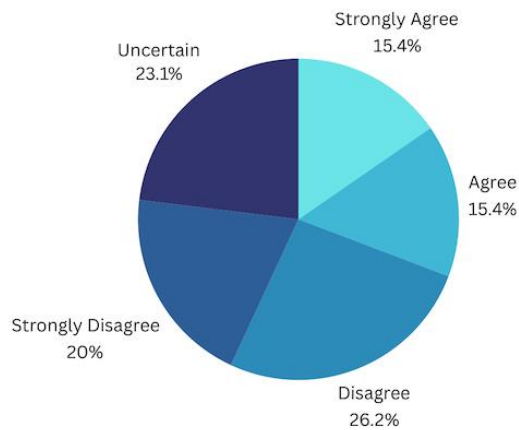
Qns: I don't treat customers differently based on appearance



Qns: I give more attention to customers who are well-dressed



Qns: I give some customers promotion and sale related information based on their dressing style



The graphs above indicate that salespersons are less likely to treat customers differently based on appearance or dressing style. However, they may internally judge the customers but it does not translate into behaviors or actions. These results are different from the interviews and observations. These differences in findings with the interviews can be attributed to social desirability. It is possible that in the survey, the salespersons did not want to come across as judgmental or rude to their customers. And hence, responded positively or in a safe middle ground ('uncertain'). Potentially, the researcher's presence and one on one conversations with the participants could have added to the level of insight for the salespersons who were interviewed. However, regarding promotions and sales information, all three sets of data indicate that it did not differ based on appearance.

Despite these differences, we must also consider factors like race, ethnicity, skin color etc also constitute appearance. These and other similar factors like language being spoken may play a role in people's perceptions. Social media has made us more aware of biases and discrimination, leading employers and individuals to be more cautious of their behavior.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the way individuals dress can have a significant impact on how others perceive them. Clothing choices can communicate a variety of messages about our personality, status, and values. Body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice also play a role. But clothing choices can be a powerful tool for communicating our desired image to the world.

Although the survey indicated otherwise, we found that those dressed in flashier or fashionable clothing were treated better than those who were poorly dressed and groomed. They were not shown the same level of respect and hospitality as the other, proving the hypothesis of this study. A similar study found that when we meet someone new, our brains are constantly processing visual details in milliseconds before we even say hello. They described this process as thin-slicing, allowing us to make rapid judgments about a person's trustworthiness, competence, and likability (Stecher & Counts, 2008).

Alternatively, this effect is also influential for companies and salespeople. For instance, consumers apparently form their attitude towards the private brand based on the halo effect of the retailer's image regarding their products (Park et al., 2011). Another study found that when a product has a 'Natural' label, consumers are more likely to purchase it due to the Halo effect (Kapoor et al., 2022). Hence there is scope to study this bias in detail in different settings and levels.

Limitations

Since this was a quasi-experimental design, there were several confounding variables. For instance, attitudes and dispositions of the employees may vary and are subjective which could have influenced their interactions with customers. Additionally, customers' attitudes and behaviors may have also influenced their interactions. Factors other than clothing such as age, language, time of the day, fatigue etc could have also influenced this study. The researcher's

presence could also have greatly altered the research context. Lastly, this study was based on one shopping store and hence the results cannot be generalized to all stores in India. Hence, future studies can use a controlled experimental design to factor in all these elements.

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