Latency to Serve in Stores: Effects of Gender, Race, and Clothing

by

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Abstract

The present study was designed to evaluate the effects of ethnicity and appearance on customer service in randomly selected stores in large shopping malls. African-American, Hispanic-American, and Caucasian confederates dressed in either business or casual attire recorded the latency to serve in a variety of single-entrance stores. The results indicated that race, sex, and type of attire were significant factors in determining how long the potential customer had to wait for service. Suggestions for more effective customer service are presented.

Physical attractiveness can be important in the formation of first impressions by salesclerks. For example, clothing or attire worn by a person influences one's perceptions about the wearer's socioeconomic status (Heitmeyer & Goldsmith, 1990). Additionally, there is evidence sales personnel initially categorize customers on the basis of easily observable characteristics such as clothing, ethnicity, and/or gender (Taylor, Fiske, Etcoff, & Reuderman, 1978).

Because potential customers are categorized on the basis of such characteristics, the process of stereotyping (Kaplan, Wanshula, & Zanna, 1992) clearly is at work in such instances. Unfortunately, stereotyping frequently leads to prejudice when individuals are judged on the basis of their group membership(s). Prejudice, in turn, frequently manifests itself in behaviors that adversely affect members of the targeted group; such behaviors are classified as discrimination. Discrimination may occur in a variety of forms ranging from subtle to blatant. For example, tokenism (hiring individuals only to satisfy guidelines); (Summers, 1991) reflects subtle discrimination, whereas, the

finding that many physicians and nurses spend less time with AIDS patients than individuals suffering from other diseases (Hunter & Ross, 1991) is more blatant discrimination.

Once salesclerks classify shoppers on the basis of gender, ethnicity, and attire, it seems likely discrimination, in terms of quality of service, will follow. For example, negative attitudes toward and stereotypes of ethnic minorities may result in lack of attention and inferior service. Likewise, the quality of one's attire also may be positively related to quality of service. The present study sought to investigate these predictions.

Method

Participants

The accessible population consisted of the salesclerks in 84 one-entrance, service-oriented retail stores located in two large shopping malls in the midwest. The stores were assigned to one of three categories: "male" - stores selling primarily male-oriented goods, such as electronics or sporting goods; "female" - stores selling primarily female-oriented goods, such as clothing or beauty aids; and "gender neutral" - stores selling primarily gender-neutral goods, such as jewelry or home furnishings. The stores sampled in the present study were randomly selected from a larger number of stores from which permission and informed consent previously had been obtained from the manager. The number of each type of store evaluated in the two malls is shown in Table 1.

Procedure

Three men (one African-American, one Caucasian, one Hispanic) and three women (one African-American, one Caucasian, one Hispanic) in their 20s served as confederates in the conduct of the experiment. The two styles of attire, business and casual, were adopted by each confederate. A description of each style of attire for the two sexes appears in Table 2. None of the confederates had shopped in the malls used in the experiment.

Table 1.
Number of each type of one-entrance store evaluated in each shopping mall.

	Type of Store		
	Female	Male	Gender Neutral
Mall 1	15	11	18
Mall 2	13	11	16

The assignment of confederates and attire to type of store and shopping mall was random with the restrictions that: (a) each confederate was to participate at each mall in only one style of clothing (i.e., if the African-American man wore casual clothing in Mall 1, he wore business attire in Mall 2), and (b) casual and business clothing be worn an equal number of times in each mall.

Table 2.
Style of attire, business versus casual, worn by the male and female confederates.

Male - Casual Attire:	Non-namebrand, faded blue jeans, a worn sweatshirt, carried a used bluejean jacket, soiled tennis shoes with holes in toes, no socks.
Male - Business Attire:	Two-piece suit with a white button down collar shirt and conservative tie, dress socks and leather shoes.
Female - Casual Attire:	Same as male casual.
Female - Business Attire:	Skirted business suit and white blouse, hose and matching leather pumps, gold jewelry.

Each confederate carried a silent, digital stopwatch in the palm of his or her hand. As the confederate crossed the threshold of each store and made eye contact with an available
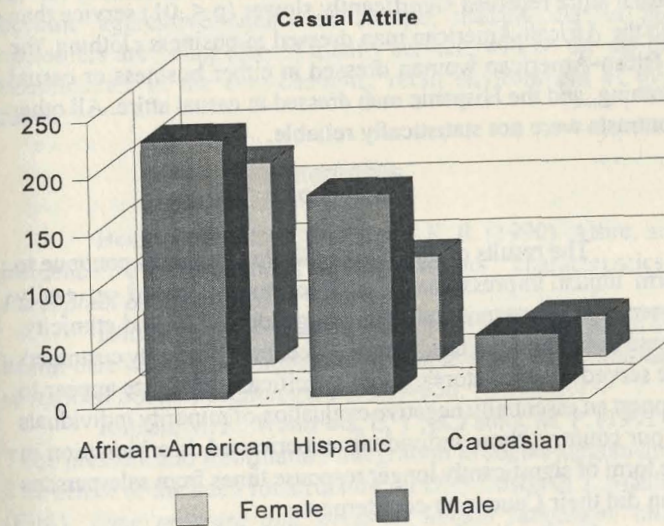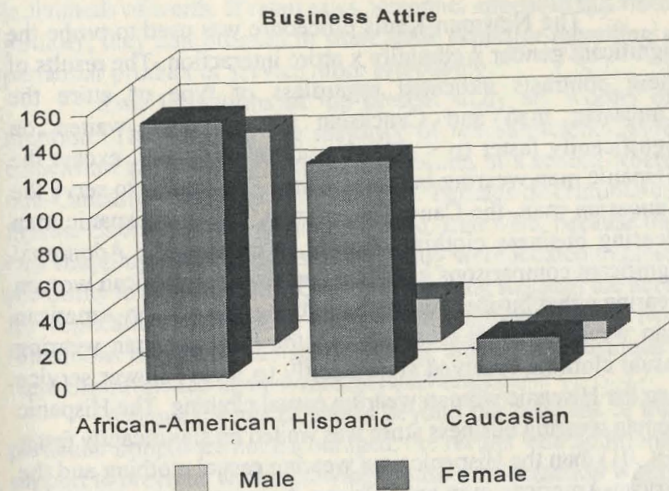
salesclerk, the stopwatch was activated. If an unoccupied salesclerk was not available upon entering the store, timing did not begin until a clerk was available and eye contact had been made. When a salesclerk approached the confederate and offered help, timing was stopped. An offer of assistance was defined as consisting of comments such as "May I help you?" "Is there something in particular you are looking for?," or "If I can be of assistance, or show you something, please let me know." If the salesclerk responded, "I will be right with you," the confederate did not stop timing. The latency to serve data was reported to a data recorder positioned in the mall walkways outside the stores.

Results

A preliminary analysis compared the latency to serve data (sec) between the two shopping malls. As the results of this analysis failed to yield a significant difference, $t(334) = 1.31$, $p > .05$, the malls were considered equivalent and this factor was not evaluated in subsequent analyses.

A four-factor analysis of variance (ANOVA) incorporating gender (male-female), ethnicity (African American-Hispanic-Caucasian), type of attire (business-casual), and type of store (masculine-feminine-gender neutral) was used to analyze the latency to serve data. This analysis yielded significance for ethnicity, $F(2, 468) = 85.44$, $p < .001$, type of attire, $F(1, 468) = 33.18$, $p < .001$, gender x attire, $F (1, 468) = 24.05$, $p < .001$, and gemder x ethnicity x attire, $F(2, 468) = 5.95$, $p = .003$, effects. The mean latencies to serve for the conditions represented in the significant triple interaction are shown in Figure 1.

Figures 1 & 2. Mean latency to service (seconds) as a function of gender (M = male confederate, F = female confederate), and ethnicity – business attire (top panel), casual attire (bottom panel).

Business Attire

African-American   Hispanic   Caucasian

■ Male   ■ Female

Casual Attire

African-American   Hispanic   Caucasian

■ Female   ■ Male

The Newman-Keuls procedure was used to probe the significant gender x ethnicity x attire interaction. The results of these contrasts indicated regardless of type of attire the Caucasian man and Caucasian woman were waited on significantly faster ($p < .01$) than all other groups, except the Hispanic man wearing business attire. The latency to serve the Caucasian man, the Caucasian woman, and the Hispanic man wearing business clothing did not differ reliably. Additional significant comparisons indicated the African-American woman wearing either business or casual clothing, the African-American man wearing casual clothing, and the Hispanic man wearing casual clothing received significantly ($p < .01$) slower service than the Hispanic woman wearing casual clothing. The Hispanic woman wearing business attire was waited on significantly faster ($p < .01$) than the Hispanic man wearing casual clothing and the African-American man and African-American woman wearing casual clothing. Finally, the African-American man dressed in casual attire received significantly slower ($p < .01$) service than did the African-American man dressed in business clothing, the African-American woman dressed in either business or casual clothing, and the Hispanic man dressed in casual attire. All other contrasts were not statistically reliable.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate salesclerks continue to form unjust impressions of their customers based on easily observable characteristics including gender, attire, and ethnicity. These initial impressions, in turn, affect how promptly customers are served in retail stores. More specifically, the data appear to support an essentially negative evaluation of minority individuals in our country: these individuals experienced discrimination in the form of significantly longer response times from salespersons than did their Caucasian counterparts.

On the other hand, the logic of salesmanship suggests it is important for all customers to be accepted and appreciated as individuals of worth. If retail sales personnel appeal to this need initially, they can proceed to share their expertise regarding a particular product or service more effectively.

Two limitations of the present study are worthy of mention. The fact that the majority of the salesclerks were Caucasian suggests the need for replication in a setting where non-Caucasian salesclerks predominate. Perhaps discrimination against Caucasians would be evidenced. Likewise, because the two shopping malls samples in this study were located in close proximity to predominately Caucasian housing suggests the need for replication in different geographic locations. These two limitations notwithstanding, the finding that certain customers were discriminated against remains unchanged.

Although generalizations beyond the confines of this particular sample are not encouraged, the results lend additional support to previous works showing a positive interaction within the buyer-seller dyad is necessary to facilitate quality customer service (Schurr & Ozanne, 1985). It is clear those retailers who become aggressive agents of change, making certain all customers are being offered quality service, will be the major beneficiaries in the ever-changing retail environment of the future.

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