Suit or Skirt? Contextual Effects of Clothing Gender Stereotypes

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Abstract

This study investigated the situational effects of clothing gender stereotypes from both actor and observer perspectives through three series of studies. The findings indicate: (1) Evaluations of warmth and competence for men wearing counter-stereotypical clothing were significantly lower than for those wearing stereotypical clothing; whereas for women wearing counter-stereotypical clothing, warmth evaluations showed no significant difference, while competence evaluations were higher. (2) From the observer perspective: Regardless of whether the situation demanded warmth or competence, individuals evaluated male targets conforming to clothing gender stereotypes more highly on both dimensions; however, in competence-demand situations, female targets conforming to clothing gender stereotypes received higher warmth evaluations, while counter-stereotypical female targets received higher competence evaluations. (3) From the actor perspective: In both warmth-demand and competence-demand situations, men demonstrated a preference for gender-stereotypical clothing; in competence-demand situations, women exhibited a greater tendency to choose counter-stereotypical clothing; furthermore, women who chose counter-stereotypical clothing in competence-demand situations rated their own competence significantly higher than warmth; men who chose counter-stereotypical clothing in friendship-demand situations rated their own warmth significantly higher than competence. These results extend traditional gender stereotype research focused on "people" as the object of study to the clothing domain associated with individuals, thereby enriching the functional model of resistance behaviors for maintaining gender stereotypes, while also holding significant practical value for impression management through clothing in different interpersonal contexts.

Full Text

Suit or Skirt? The Contextual Effects of Clothing Gender Stereotypes

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Abstract

This study investigated the contextual effects of clothing gender stereotypes through three experiments from both perceiver and actor perspectives. The results revealed: (1) Men wearing counter-stereotypical clothing were rated significantly lower on both warmth and competence compared to those wearing gender-stereotypical clothing; however, women wearing counter-stereotypical clothing did not differ in warmth ratings but were rated higher in competence. (2) From the perceiver perspective: Regardless of whether the context demanded warmth or competence, participants evaluated male targets in gender-stereotypical clothing more positively on both dimensions; in competence-demanding contexts, female targets in gender-stereotypical clothing received higher warmth ratings, while those in counter-stereotypical clothing received higher competence ratings. (3) From the actor perspective: Men consistently preferred gender-stereotypical clothing across both contextual demands; women, however, were more likely to choose counter-stereotypical clothing in competence-demanding contexts. Furthermore, women who chose counter-stereotypical clothing in competence contexts rated their own competence significantly higher than their warmth; conversely, men who chose counter-stereotypical clothing in friendship contexts rated their own warmth significantly higher than their competence. These findings extend traditional gender stereotype research from "people" to clothing-associated domains, enriching the gender-counterstereotypical behavior functional model of stereotype maintenance while offering practical insights for impression management through clothing in interpersonal contexts.

Keywords: clothing gender stereotype; contextual effect; gender-counterstereotypical behavior functional model; perceiver; actor

1. Introduction

Since Lippmann (1922) first introduced the concept nearly a century ago, stereotype research has flourished as a relatively stable and important domain examining social biases in social psychology (Zuo, Zhang, Zhao, & Wang, 2006). Stereotypes represent relatively fixed beliefs or ideas about the characteristics of group members and their causes, encompassing categories such as gender, region, nationality, occupation, and age (Fiske, 2004; Myers, 2005). As an innate

and essential individual characteristic, gender serves as a critical cue for group categorization and impression formation, providing perceivers with efficient information for processing complex social environments (Zarate & Smith, 1990). Gender stereotypes—widely studied by researchers—refer to fixed perceptions or beliefs about behaviors and personality traits associated with different genders within particular groups or social systems (Liu & Zuo, 2006). According to the Stereotype Content Model and social gender role theory, men are generally perceived as more agentic and competent, focusing on work and task performance while neglecting interpersonal connection needs, whereas women are viewed as more communal and warm, concerned with others and family while neglecting professional achievement needs (Fiske, 2018; Ellemers, 2018).

Clothing represents one of the most important external visual cues for gender classification (Leone & Robertson, 1989; Ben-Zeev & Dennehy, 2014) and serves as a crucial information source for self and other perception (Gurney, Howlett, Pine, Tracey, & Moggridge, 2016; Liu & Zhao, 1998). Recently, clothing gender stereotypes have become a focal point for social psychologists. For instance, contemporary society holds the stereotype that "pink is for girls, blue is for boys" (Dwyer, 2012; Beillard-Robert, 2018; Paoletti, 2012). Girls' clothing receives more praise than boys' , and girls wearing skirts receive more praise than those wearing pants (Joffe, 1971). Researchers have further demonstrated that preschool children are expected to manage their gendered behavior and clothing according to social gender role norms (Cahill, 1989; Johnson & Workman, 1993).

How do clothing gender stereotypes influence social cognition? From the perceiver perspective, Leone and Robertson (1989) found that people perceive infants in feminine clothing as female and those in masculine clothing as male, attributing less power (e.g., weak, light, soft, small) to infants in feminine clothing compared to masculine or ambiguous clothing. Similarly, Forsythe (1990) discovered that women wearing more masculine clothing (navy suits) were perceived as more powerful in interviews and received higher recommendation rates than those wearing typical feminine clothing (soft beige dresses). Likewise, Morris, Gorham, Cohen, and Huffman (1996) found that students perceived teaching assistants in formal attire as more intelligent and competent but less sociable; notably, they did not attribute higher competence to formally dressed female instructors compared to semi-formal attire, whereas competence perceptions for male instructors differed significantly based on formality. From the actor perspective, the theory of enclothed cognition posits that clothing carries different meanings, and activating these concepts influences the wearer' s social cognition (Adam & Galinsky, 2012; Ishii, Numazaki, & Tado' oka, 2019). For example, participants wearing white clothing perceived themselves as more moral than those wearing black clothing on both explicit and implicit measures (Uebayashi, Tado' oka, Ishii, & Murata, 2016). Given that clothing-related concepts affect social cognition, clothing-associated gender stereotypes should similarly impact social cognition.

Clothing gender stereotypes are intimately connected to sociocultural norms and expectations, as clothing represents one of the most important expressions of identity, with sociocultural forces constructing gendered clothing representations (Lloyd & Duveen, 1993; Abnett, 2016). As society changes, cultural norms evolve, and fashion transforms accordingly. The contemporary fashion revolution aims to blur boundaries between masculinity and femininity, eliminate gender labels, and deconstruct gender stereotypes, enabling gender fluidity in fashion (Akdemir, 2018). For instance, individuals can freely express themselves through clothing, and pink—traditionally a feminine color—has gradually become fashionable for men (Idei, 2011). How do attitudes change toward individuals who violate clothing gender stereotypes?

Previous research indicates that counter-stereotypical information and behaviors conflict with existing gender stereotypes, prompting people to spontaneously adopt strategies to maintain these stereotypes (Plaks et al., 2001). For example, Sherman, Allen, and Sacchi (2012) demonstrated that counter-stereotypic exemplars typically create cognitive incompatibility, which people often assimilate into existing stereotypes. In other words, to maintain stereotypes, people socially and economically obstruct and sabotage counter-stereotypic individuals, producing backlash effects (Rudman, 1998). Extensive research shows that both men and women suffer backlash for violating gender role norms (Auster & Prasad, 2016; Amanatullah & Tinsley, 2013; Heilman, 2012; Livingston, Rosette, & Washington, 2012; Rudman et al., 2012; Rudman & Mescher, 2013; Silberzahn & Menges, 2016; Sullivan, Moss-Racusin, Lopez, & Williams, 2018). For instance, boys wearing pink are perceived as non-normative, socially deviant, feminine, and vulnerable (Rudman & Mescher, 2013). People tend to choose risk-averse treatments for boys in blue clothing but risk-seeking treatments for boys in pink clothing (Ben-Zeev & Dennehy, 2014), implicitly expressing bias and discrimination against counter-stereotypical males. Thus, most previous research has demonstrated backlash against counter-stereotypical individuals from the perceiver perspective.

Furthermore, researchers have proposed a dual-perspective (perceiver and actor) model of stereotype maintenance (Rudman & Fairchild, 2004; Phelan & Rudman, 2010). When expectancy violations occur, both perceivers and actors adopt different psychological responses and backlash mechanisms for self-esteem protection. For perceivers, expectancy violations (e.g., men or women displaying non-normative masculine or feminine behaviors) affect justification processes, leading to social or economic backlash. For actors (self-presenters or impression managers), expectancy violations trigger fear of backlash (e.g., fear of social rejection), prompting recovery strategies such as hiding counter-stereotypical behaviors, deception, and increasing normative conformity to protect self-esteem (Liu & Zuo, 2006).

Context also influences clothing gender stereotypes. In workplace settings, Glick et al. (2005) found that for low-status occupations (e.g., secretaries), attractive or sexy clothing did not reduce perceived competence, but for high-power po-

sitions (e.g., managers), attractive clothing decreased competence perceptions. Similarly, women in higher-status positions received more positive evaluations when dressed conservatively, while provocative attire triggered negative evaluations (Howlett et al., 2015; Gurung et al., 2018). Additionally, Fleischmann, Sieverding, Hespenheide, Weiß, and Koch (2016) found that in a masculine IT student job application context, women in feminine clothing were perceived as less intelligent with lower computer skills compared to those in neutral clothing. According to the "Big Two" model of social cognition, contexts can be categorized as demanding either competence or warmth (Zuo, Dai, Wen, & Suo, 2015; Dai, Zuo, & Wen, 2019). How do contextual demands for warmth versus competence influence evaluations of individuals wearing gender-stereotypical versus counter-stereotypical clothing from both perceiver and actor perspectives? This question presents an intriguing avenue for investigation.

Therefore, this study focuses on clothing gender stereotypes, examining evaluations of (counter-)stereotypical clothing wearers in warmth- and competence-demanding contexts from both perceiver and actor perspectives. First, a preliminary study screened clothing images for stereotypical and counter-stereotypical gender representations. Study 1 then tested the existence of clothing gender stereotypes. Subsequently, Studies 2 and 3 examined how warmth- and competence-demanding contexts influence clothing gender stereotypes from perceiver and actor perspectives, respectively. This research both enriches the dual-perspective functional model of gender-counterstereotypical behavior and offers important practical implications for behavioral decision-making and impression management in real-life contexts.

2. Preliminary Study: Selection of Clothing Materials for Gender Stereotypical and Counter-Stereotypical Attire

This preliminary study aimed to provide research materials for subsequent studies by identifying stereotypical and counter-stereotypical clothing for men and women (masculine/feminine clothing for both genders). It consisted of two parts: Preliminary Study a collected open-ended nominations of masculine/feminine clothing for men and women; Preliminary Study b assessed the representativeness of these clothing items.

2.1.1 Participants

Sixty-three university students in Wuhan participated, including 21 men and 42 women, with a mean age of 18.61 years (SD = 2.98).

2.1.2 Materials

A questionnaire survey included four open-ended questions: "What do you consider typical masculine clothing for men?" ; "What do you consider typical masculine clothing for women?" ; "What do you consider common masculine-style women' s clothing?" ; and "What do you consider common feminine-style

men' s clothing?" Participants were asked to list clothing types based on their experience and understanding, with specific details when possible.

2.1.3 Results

Responses were compiled, categorized, and combined. Frequency counts were calculated for the top five nominations in each category: feminine women' s clothing, masculine men' s clothing, feminine men' s clothing, and masculine women' s clothing .

Table 1 Frequency of Nominations for Masculine/Feminine Clothing by Gender

Category	Top Nominations	Frequency
Feminine Women' s Clothing	Dresses, skirts	N=63
Masculine Men' s Clothing	Suits, shirts	N=53
Feminine Men' s Clothing	Pink clothing, mesh/lace	N=32
Masculine Women' s Clothing	Loose T-shirts, deep V-necks	N=28

2.2.1 Participants

Fifty-three university students were randomly selected, including 21 men and 32 women, with a mean age of 21.63 years (SD = 2.15).

2.2.2 Materials and Procedure

Based on nominations from Preliminary Study a, corresponding clothing images were searched via Google Images and edited with Photoshop to ensure consistent size, resolution, and saturation. Participants rated the typicality of each clothing image on a 7-point scale (1 = very uncharacteristic, 7 = very characteristic).

2.2.3 Results

All clothing types received ratings above 4 except for loose T-shirts in the masculine women' s clothing category. Therefore, excluding loose T-shirts, the top four rated images from each category were selected as experimental materials .

Table 2 Representativeness Ratings for Masculine/Feminine Clothing Images

Clothing Type	Representative Items	Mean Rating
Masculine Men' s Clothing	Suits, jackets	5.8
Masculine Women' s Clothing	BF-style coats	5.2
Feminine Men' s Clothing	Pink shirts, mesh	4.9
Feminine Women' s Clothing	Dresses, lace	6.1

Note: N=53

2.3 Discussion

The preliminary study provided materials for subsequent research on gender-stereotypical and counter-stereotypical clothing. Results demonstrated widespread clothing gender stereotypes: feminine women' s clothing was consistently identified as dresses and skirts, while masculine men' s clothing included suits, shirts, sportswear, and jackets. Perceptions of counter-stereotypical clothing were more varied but generally included clothing with cross-gender elements—such as suits and loose BF-style clothing for women, and pink clothing, mesh/lace garments, tight pants, and deep V-necks for men.

3. Study 1: The Content of Clothing Gender Stereotypes

3.1 Purpose

Study 1 examined the content of clothing gender stereotypes based on the Stereotype Content Model (SCM), investigating warmth and competence impressions of individuals wearing masculine/feminine clothing.

3.2 Method

3.2.1 Participants Using G*Power with effect size = 0.8 and = 0.05, a two-way ANOVA required 73 participants. One hundred thirteen university students were randomly selected (44 men, 69 women; mean age = 20.56 years, SD = 1.51).

3.2.2 Design A 2 (clothing gendering: masculine/feminine) × 2 (clothing type: men' s/women' s) within-subjects design was employed, creating four image conditions: masculine men' s clothing, feminine men' s clothing, feminine women' s clothing, and masculine women' s clothing. Dependent variables were warmth and competence evaluations using trait adjectives on 7-point scales. Warmth included "friendly" and "sincere"; competence included "intelligent" and "competent," selected from Fiske' s (1999) warmth and competence dimensions.

3.2.3 Materials Experimental materials were the clothing images selected in the preliminary study [Figure 1: see original paper].

Figure 1 Example Images of Masculine/Feminine Men's and Women's Clothing Used in Study 1

3.2.4 Procedure Participants first completed demographic information (gender, age). They then viewed each clothing image and rated it on warmth and competence dimensions using 7-point scales (1 = very uncharacteristic, 7 = very characteristic).

3.3 Results

ANOVA revealed a significant interaction between clothing gendering and clothing type, $F(1, 112) = 95.65$, $p < 0.001$, $^2 = 0.46$. Since the three-way interaction with evaluation dimension was not significant, simple effects analyses were conducted separately for warmth and competence.

Warmth Dimension: Clothing gendering showed no significant difference for women' s clothing but a significant difference for men' s clothing, $F(1, 112) = 69.91$, $p < 0.001$. Post-hoc analyses indicated that masculine men' s clothing ($M = 4.27$, $SD = 0.75$) was rated significantly higher in warmth than feminine men' s clothing ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 0.75$).

Competence Dimension: Clothing gendering showed significant effects for both women' s clothing, $F(1, 112) = 20.19$, $p < 0.001$, and men' s clothing, $F(1, 112) = 246.46$, $p < 0.001$. Post-hoc analyses revealed that masculine women' s clothing ($M = 4.71$, $SD = 0.77$) received higher competence ratings than feminine women' s clothing ($M = 4.41$, $SD = 0.83$). Similarly, masculine men' s clothing ($M = 4.74$, $SD = 0.76$) received higher competence ratings than feminine men' s clothing ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 0.77$) [Figure 2: see original paper].

Figure 2 Warmth and Competence Evaluation Differences for Men' s and Women' s Clothing

3.4 Discussion

Study 1 examined warmth and competence evaluations of individuals wearing masculine/feminine clothing. Results showed that men wearing feminine clothing were rated significantly lower on both warmth and competence than those wearing masculine clothing, revealing rejection of counter-stereotypical clothing in men. For women, wearing masculine clothing did not significantly affect warmth ratings but increased competence ratings, potentially offering women an effective impression management strategy for enhancing perceived competence.

4. Study 2: Contextual Effects on Clothing Gender Stereotypes from the Perceiver Perspective

4.1 Purpose

Building on Study 1, Study 2 investigated how different contexts—specifically warmth-demanding versus competence-demanding situations—influence evaluations of individuals wearing masculine/feminine clothing from the perceiver perspective.

4.2 Method

4.2.1 Participants Using G*Power with = 0.8 and = 0.05, a three-factor design required 97 participants. One hundred twenty-three university students were recruited (40 men, 83 women; mean age = 19.54 years, SD = 3.28).

4.2.2 Design A 2 (clothing type: women' s/men' s) × 2 (clothing gendering: feminine/masculine) × 2 (context: warmth-demanding friendship situation/competence-demanding competition situation) within-subjects design was employed. Dependent variables included warmth and competence evaluations of target individuals on 7-point scales (1 = very uncharacteristic, 7 = very characteristic).

4.2.3 Materials The same clothing images from the preliminary study were used. Target individuals were represented by common names (eight male and eight female single-character names with similar attractiveness ratings based on expert evaluation). Contextual scenarios were adapted from Dai, Zuo, and Wen (2019), with friendship representing warmth demand and competition representing competence demand.

4.2.4 Procedure After completing demographic information, participants viewed clothing images with contextual prompts (e.g., "Li Gang wears this outfit to a friendship meeting/brain competition") and evaluated each scenario on warmth and competence using 7-point scales.

4.3 Results

4.3.1 Warmth Evaluations A significant three-way interaction emerged between clothing type, clothing gendering, and context, $F(1, 122) = 5.36$, $p < 0.05$, $^2 = 0.04$. In the friendship context, the interaction between clothing type and gendering was not significant; in the competition context, it was significant, $F(1, 122) = 21.47$, $p < 0.001$.

Friendship Context: Simple simple effects showed a significant difference between masculine and feminine men' s clothing, $F(1, 122) = 5.45$, $p < 0.05$, but not for women' s clothing. Masculine men' s clothing ($M = 5.27$, $SD = 1.04$) received higher warmth ratings than feminine men' s clothing ($M = 4.98$, $SD = 0.95$) [FIGURE:3-1-1].

Competition Context: Simple simple effects revealed significant differences for both men' s clothing, $F(1, 122) = 16.87$, $p < 0.001$, and women' s clothing, $F(1, 122) = 6.06$, $p < 0.05$. Masculine men' s clothing ($M = 5.07$, $SD = 0.95$) received higher warmth ratings than feminine men' s clothing ($M = 4.57$, $SD = 1.23$), while feminine women' s clothing ($M = 5.18$, $SD = 1.00$) received higher warmth ratings than masculine women' s clothing ($M = 4.91$, $SD = 1.02$) [FIGURE:3-1-2].

4.3.2 Competence Evaluations The three-way interaction was significant, $F(1, 122) = 32.69$, $p < 0.001$, $^2 = 0.21$. In the friendship context, the clothing type × gendering interaction was not significant; in the competition context, it was significant, $F(1, 122) = 50.53$, $p < 0.001$.

Competition Context: Simple simple effects showed significant differences for men' s clothing, $F(1, 122) = 153.84$, $p < 0.001$, and women' s clothing, $F(1, 122) = 21.53$, $p < 0.001$. Masculine men' s clothing ($M = 5.50$, $SD = 0.97$) received higher competence ratings than feminine men' s clothing ($M = 3.94$, $SD = 1.19$). Masculine women' s clothing ($M = 5.30$, $SD = 0.97$) received higher competence ratings than feminine women' s clothing ($M = 4.85$, $SD = 0.98$) [FIGURE:3-2].

4.4 Discussion

Study 2 examined contextual effects on clothing gender stereotypes from the perceiver perspective. Results showed that in warmth-demanding friendship contexts, masculine men' s clothing received higher warmth ratings than feminine men' s clothing. In competence-demanding competition contexts, masculine men' s clothing received higher ratings on both warmth and competence than feminine men' s clothing, while feminine women' s clothing received higher warmth ratings than masculine women' s clothing, but masculine women' s clothing received higher competence ratings. These findings indicate stronger stereotype maintenance mechanisms for male targets across both contextual demands, whereas female targets showed more pronounced contextual effects —particularly in competence contexts where counter-stereotypical clothing enhanced competence perceptions.

5. Study 3: The Actor Perspective on Clothing Gender Stereotypes

5.1 Purpose

Study 3 investigated how self-involvement influences clothing gender stereotypes, examining individuals' clothing choices and self-evaluations in high self-involvement situations.

5.2 Method

5.2.1 Participants Using G*Power with = 0.8 and = 0.05, a three-factor design required 50 participants. One hundred five university students participated (36 men, 69 women; mean age = 20.1 years, SD = 1.85).

5.2.2 Design A between-subjects design by participant gender examined clothing choice frequencies and self-ratings of warmth and competence in warmth-demanding (friendship) and competence-demanding (competition) contexts.

5.2.3 Materials The same clothing images from the preliminary study were used. Self-involvement scenarios included friendship (warmth demand) and competition (competence demand) contexts.

5.2.4 Procedure Participants were asked: "If you were attending a friendship meeting/competition, which outfit would you choose?" After imagining wearing their chosen outfit, they rated their own warmth and competence.

5.3 Results

5.3.1 Clothing Choice Frequencies **Women**: Chi-square analysis revealed a significant difference between contexts, ^{2} = 19.22, df = 1, p < 0.001. In friendship contexts, women showed no preference difference between feminine (n = 34) and masculine (n = 35) women' s clothing. In competition contexts, women chose masculine women' s clothing (n = 59) significantly more often than feminine women' s clothing (n = 10).

Men: Chi-square analysis showed no significant difference between contexts, ^{2} = 0.21, df = 1, p > 0.05. In friendship contexts, men chose masculine men' s clothing (n = 25) significantly more than feminine men' s clothing (n = 11). Similarly, in competition contexts, men chose masculine men' s clothing (n = 26) significantly more than feminine men' s clothing (n = 9).

5.3.2 Warmth and Competence Self-Evaluations In competition contexts, women who chose masculine women' s clothing rated their competence (M = 5.59, SD = 1.04) significantly higher than their warmth (M = 4.81, SD = 1.37), t(58) = -3.83, p < 0.001 [FIGURE:4-1]. In friendship contexts, men who chose feminine men' s clothing rated their warmth (M = 5.64, SD = 0.67) significantly higher than their competence (M = 4.64, SD = 0.67), t(10) = 3.32, p < 0.001 [FIGURE:4-2].

5.4 Discussion

Study 3 extended Study 2 by examining clothing preferences and self-evaluations from the actor perspective. Women showed context-dependent clothing choices: no preference in warmth contexts but preferring masculine clothing in competence contexts. Men consistently preferred masculine clothing across both contexts, reflecting stereotype maintenance mechanisms. Moreover, actors who chose counter-stereotypical clothing exhibited context-matching self-evaluations, rating themselves higher on the dimension demanded by the situation. This aligns with the actor perspective of the stereotype maintenance model (Rudman & Fairchild, 2004; Phelan & Rudman, 2010; Liu & Zuo, 2006) and suggests self-protective recovery strategies.

6. General Discussion

This study extends traditional gender stereotype research from "people" to clothing-associated domains, examining how warmth- and competence-demanding contexts influence clothing gender stereotypes from perceiver and actor perspectives. The findings enrich the gender-counterstereotypical

behavior functional model and offer practical implications for behavioral decision-making and impression management.

6.1 Existence and Gender Asymmetry of Clothing Gender Stereotypes

The preliminary study revealed widespread clothing gender stereotypes: feminine women' s clothing was consistently identified as dresses and skirts, while masculine men' s clothing included suits, shirts, sportswear, and jackets. Counter-stereotypical clothing was perceived as incorporating cross-gender elements—suits and BF-style clothing for women, pink and mesh/lace clothing for men. Study 1, based on the Stereotype Content Model, demonstrated gender asymmetry in stereotype maintenance: male targets wearing counter-stereotypical clothing faced stronger backlash with lower warmth and competence ratings, consistent with research showing more rigid stereotypes and lower tolerance for counter-stereotypical behavior in men (Rudman & Mescher, 2013). This may reflect "precarious manhood" in patriarchal cultures, where male identity is socially constructed, tenuous, and requires continuous validation (Vandello et al., 2008; Bosson et al., 2009; Bosson & Vandello, 2011), leading to stronger endorsement of male gender stereotypes. Conversely, women wearing counter-stereotypical clothing received higher competence ratings, aligning with research showing that women can use counter-stereotypical strategies for career advancement (Brosi, Spörrle, Welpe, & Heilman, 2016; Bauer, 2017). Thus, counter-stereotypical clothing may serve as an effective impression management tool for women to enhance competence perceptions.

6.2 Perceiver-Actor Differences in Contextual Effects

Studies 2 and 3 examined contextual effects from perceiver and actor perspectives. From the perceiver perspective, male targets elicited stronger backlash effects across both contextual demands, consistent with the perceiver component of the stereotype maintenance model (Rudman & Fairchild, 2004; Liu & Zuo, 2006). However, in competence contexts, female counter-stereotypical targets received higher competence ratings, demonstrating context-matching effects that offer practical guidance for women' s impression management in professional settings.

From the actor perspective, men consistently preferred gender-stereotypical clothing, reflecting stereotype maintenance mechanisms. Women showed more flexible, context-dependent choices: no preference in warmth contexts but preferring masculine clothing in competence contexts. Actors choosing counter-stereotypical clothing exhibited context-congruent self-evaluations, rating themselves higher on the demanded dimension. This aligns with the actor perspective of the stereotype maintenance model (Rudman & Fairchild, 2004; Phelan & Rudman, 2010; Liu & Zuo, 2006) and parallels findings that men wearing pink express stronger egalitarian gender attitudes (Ishii, Numazaki, & Tado' oka, 2019), suggesting self-protective recovery strategies.

6.3 Limitations and Future Directions

First, the study used university student participants and clothing familiar to young people. Future research should expand to diverse age groups and occupations to test the generalizability of clothing gender stereotypes and their contextual effects. Second, the reliance on self-report measures limits the findings. Future studies should employ more implicit paradigms (e.g., implicit social cognition methods) and ecological approaches (e.g., field studies). Finally, while this study explored perceiver and actor perspectives, future research should further investigate the psychological mechanisms underlying backlash effects across different contexts.

7. Conclusions

1. Clothing gender stereotypes are widespread. Men wearing counter-stereotypical clothing receive lower warmth and competence ratings, while women wearing counter-stereotypical clothing receive higher competence ratings.
2. From the perceiver perspective, male targets elicit stronger backlash effects, while female counter-stereotypical targets show context-matching competence advantages in competence-demanding contexts.
3. From the actor perspective, men consistently prefer gender-stereotypical clothing, while women prefer counter-stereotypical clothing in competence contexts. Both genders employ context-matching self-evaluation strategies as recovery mechanisms for counter-stereotypical choices.

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Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.