

The Effect of Others' and One's Own Clothing Styles on Consumer Behavior: An Interpretation Based on Regulatory Focus Theory

Authors: Yan Yan, Liu Wumei, Wang Xuefeng, Wang Xuefeng

Date: 2023-06-22T00:00:00+00:00

Abstract

Based on regulatory focus theory, we construct a model framework examining how clothing style (formal vs. casual) influences consumer psychology and behavior. From the observer perspective, when others are formally dressed (vs. casually dressed), consumers exhibit promotion-focused responses through three motivational characteristic dimensions: focus on gains, positive emotional experience, and representation of aspirational goal states; and exhibit prevention-focused responses through three motivational characteristic dimensions: focus on threats, negative emotional experience, and vigilant behavioral strategies. From the wearer perspective, when consumers themselves are formally dressed (vs. casually dressed), they exhibit promotion-focused responses through ideal self-orientation, representation of aspirational goal states, and positive emotional experience; and exhibit prevention-focused responses through ought self-orientation, moral requirements, and focus on negative outcomes. In this process, self-construal, involvement, self-monitoring, and environmental norms exert moderating effects by influencing the characteristic states of regulatory focus. Future research should continue to investigate the interactive effects of chronic and situational regulatory focus on consumer responses to clothing, employ regulatory focus theory to elucidate the influence of other clothing types on consumer behavior, identify moderating variables that determine whether clothing style triggers promotion focus or prevention focus in consumers, and explore other downstream effects of clothing style on consumer behavior.

Full Text

The Influence of Others' and Self-Dressing Style on Consumer Behavior: An Interpretation Based on Regulatory Focus Theory

YAN Yan, LIU Wumei, WANG Xuefeng

(School of Management, Lanzhou University, Lanzhou 730000, China)

Abstract

This paper constructs a theoretical framework based on regulatory focus theory to examine how clothing style (formal vs. casual) influences consumer psychology and behavior. From the observer perspective, when others dress formally (vs. casually), consumers exhibit promotion-focused responses through three motivational dimensions: attention to benefits, positive emotional experiences, and representation of aspirational goal states; they exhibit prevention-focused responses through three alternative dimensions: attention to threats, negative emotional experiences, and vigilant behavioral strategies. From the wearer perspective, when consumers themselves dress formally (vs. casually), they display promotion-focused responses through ideal self-orientation, representation of aspirational goal states, and positive emotional experiences; they display prevention-focused responses through ought self-orientation, moral needs, and focus on negative outcomes. In these processes, self-construal, involvement, self-monitoring, and environmental norms serve as moderators by influencing the characteristic states of regulatory orientation. Future research should continue to explore the interactive effects of trait and situational regulatory orientation on consumer responses to clothing, apply regulatory focus theory to explain how other clothing types influence consumer behavior, identify additional moderators determining whether clothing styles elicit promotion or prevention orientation, and investigate other downstream consequences of clothing style on consumer behavior.

Keywords: clothing style, consumer behavior, regulatory focus theory

Clothing serves as a material supplement to the body (Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992), comprising two components: primary attire (e.g., shirts and pants) and extended attire (e.g., jewelry and accessories). Compared to extended attire, primary attire covers a larger portion of the body and exerts greater influence on impression formation and self-concept activation (Sotak et al., 2023). Within primary attire, formal and casual styles represent one of the most fundamental classifications (Vilnai-Yavetz & Gilboa, 2014). Enterprises frequently leverage attire as a primary tool to shape consumer perceptions and behaviors. For instance, Huawei requires employees to dress formally during work or customer interactions, creating a harmonious, professional image that fosters consumer trust. Conversely, Southwest Airlines has maintained casual attire for flight attendants for 40 years, both to honor its commitment to employee comfort and

to enhance “travel fun” for consumers, thereby cultivating a distinctive brand image.

Previous research on clothing style (formal vs. casual) has yielded substantial findings (Wang et al., 2021; Choi & Mattila, 2016; Shao et al., 2004; Arndt et al., 2019). These studies primarily examine how others’ attire (e.g., service staff, salespeople, advertising models, and other customers—hereinafter collectively referred to as “others”) and consumers’ own clothing choices influence consumer cognition, emotion, and behavior from either observer or wearer perspectives (Wang et al., 2021). Although these studies employ diverse theoretical lenses—such as social comparison theory (Gurung et al., 2018), signaling theory (Carvalho et al., 2019), and encloded cognition theory (Wang et al., 2021)—these frameworks are introduced for specific research purposes, resulting in fragmented explanations of clothing style’s influence mechanisms. Consequently, their explanatory power for existing findings is limited, particularly in lacking an integrated theoretical perspective to explain how and when clothing style affects consumer behavior. Moreover, our literature review reveals only three studies that simultaneously examine clothing style’s impact on both observers and wearers (Feltman & Elliot, 2011), yet these merely combine the two perspectives without theoretically comparing their conclusions. These research gaps hinder comprehensive understanding of the relationships among others’ clothing style, consumers’ own clothing style, and consumer behavior, and impede new empirical research from fresh theoretical perspectives.

To address these gaps, we reviewed existing empirical studies on clothing style and identified connections with regulatory focus theory. This connection manifests in the alignment between consumer behavioral responses elicited by clothing style and the characteristics of different regulatory orientations. For example, others’ formal attire (vs. casual) makes consumers perceive wearers as more professional and trustworthy, thereby increasing decision confidence and attention to long-term benefits (Sotak et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2021; Wang & Lang, 2019). Meanwhile, consumers’ own formal attire (vs. casual) makes them more responsibility-focused, conservative, and risk-averse (Arndt et al., 2019; Hong et al., 2019). Confidence and long-term benefit orientation represent core features of promotion focus, while conservatism and risk aversion characterize prevention focus (Higgins, 1997).

Therefore, this paper argues that regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997) can explain the differential effects of clothing style on consumer psychology and behavior. Specifically, formal attire (vs. casual) may lead consumers to adopt either promotion focus (vs. prevention) and generate promotion-focused response strategies (vs. prevention-focused), or prevention focus (vs. promotion) and generate prevention-focused response strategies (vs. promotion-focused). The critical questions are: When does formal attire (vs. casual) elicit promotion-focused versus prevention-focused strategies? What are the underlying mechanisms of these differential responses? This study aims to answer these questions.

In summary, this research employs regulatory focus theory to synthesize behav-

ioral responses triggered by clothing style, striving to provide a unified theoretical framework for explaining how clothing style (formal vs. casual) influences consumer psychology and behavior. This work holds significant importance and necessity for consumer behavior research on clothing. Its significance lies in addressing the fragmented, unsystematic nature of existing observer and wearer perspective studies. This paper constructs a novel, integrative research framework based on regulatory focus theory to advance theoretical development. The necessity stems from three aspects: (1) proposing moderators from a dual-path perspective to reconcile contradictory findings; (2) shifting from outcome valence to motivational processes to reveal bidirectional effects of formal attire (vs. casual) on consumer behavior; and (3) comparing differences between others' and consumers' own formal attire (vs. casual) effects on behavior through regulatory focus theory.

The paper proceeds as follows: First, we review previous clothing style research. After establishing the applicability of regulatory focus theory, we provide dual-path explanations for existing studies: Path 1 linking formal attire (vs. casual) to promotion focus (vs. prevention), and Path 2 linking formal attire (vs. casual) to prevention focus (vs. promotion). Since clothing style effects involve both observer and wearer perspectives, we examine both when elaborating dual paths and their moderating/mediating mechanisms. Finally, we outline future research directions.

2.1 Literature Search and Screening

To systematically review clothing style (formal vs. casual) research, we conducted literature retrieval and screening through the following steps:

First, literature retrieval. We limited our search to Chinese and English articles published between 1955 and 2022. The starting year 1955 was selected because empirical research on clothing and individual behavior began in this year (Johnson et al., 2008). Chinese searches used CNKI, Wanfang, and VIP databases with keywords “着装” (clothing), “服装” (apparel), and “衣服” (clothes). English searches used Web of Science, ProQuest, EBSCO, and JSTOR with keywords “Attire,” “Clothing,” “Dress,” “Clothes,” and “Dressing.” The initial search yielded 18,034 English articles (Web of Science: 8,751; EBSCO/host: 3,087; ProQuest: 6,196) and 15,522 Chinese articles (CNKI: 9,150; VIP: 2,450; Wanfang: 3,922).

Second, literature screening. We first removed duplicate articles across databases. Chinese articles were limited to those published in CSSCI and Peking University core journals in psychology, sociology, and management. Focusing on clothing style research in psychology, sociology, and management, we excluded literature from biology, biochemistry, medicine, fashion design, and other fields, removing 17,918 English and 13,768 Chinese articles, leaving 127 articles (116 English, 11 Chinese).

Third, literature retention. After manually screening titles, abstracts, key-

words, and full texts, we excluded 7 irrelevant articles (2 English, 5 Chinese), retaining 114 English and 6 Chinese articles. Focusing on formal and casual clothing styles' effects on consumer behavior, we removed 24 articles unrelated to these styles and their consequences from the 120 articles, ultimately obtaining 96 valid articles (91 English, 5 Chinese).

Our review of these 96 articles revealed three primary research perspectives from the 1950s to present: (1) Observer perspective studies (70 articles, ~73% of total), examining observers' impression formation (Gurung et al., 2018), personality inferences (Fasoli et al., 2018), emotional attitudes (Carvalho et al., 2019), and approach/avoidance behaviors (Kashem, 2019); (2) Wearer perspective studies (23 articles, ~24%), investigating how individuals' clothing affects self-concept and behavioral decisions (Adam & Galinsky, 2019); and (3) Bidirectional perspective studies (3 articles, ~3%), simultaneously examining clothing effects on both observers and wearers (Johnson et al., 2008; Kraus et al., 2014; Johnson et al., 2014). However, given the limited number of bidirectional studies and their simple additive approach without theoretical comparison, we next categorize and review observer and wearer perspective studies to demonstrate the necessity of theoretical integration.

2.2 Observer Perspective Research on Clothing Style

From the observer perspective, scholars have primarily examined how others' formal attire (vs. casual) influences consumers' appearance premium (Wang & Lang, 2019), status consumption (Choi & Mattila, 2016), and approach/avoidance behaviors (Sun et al., 2018; Arndt et al., 2019). Specifically, service staff in formal (vs. casual) attire are typically perceived as highly coordinated and aesthetic, positively affecting consumers' appetite and willingness to place additional orders (Chen & Lee, 2018). Furthermore, formal attire (vs. casual) symbolizes higher socioeconomic status (Gouda-Vossos et al., 2019). Therefore, in upscale consumption settings, when other customers dress formally (vs. casually), consumers are willing to stay longer in restaurants and seek more interaction with other customers (Choi & Mattila, 2016).

Although most observer perspective research suggests positive effects of others' formal attire (vs. casual) on purchase intention, emotional experience, and decision-making, some studies report opposite effects. For example, Arndt et al. (2019) found that formally (vs. casually) dressed sales personnel can trigger stereotype threat in consumers, generating anxiety and dissatisfaction while worrying about losses. These negative emotions ultimately reduce consumers' approach intentions and increase avoidance behaviors toward sales staff.

In summary, others' formal attire (vs. casual) in retail and service environments produces two response tendencies: (1) prompting consumers to focus on benefits and experience positive emotions during goal pursuit; and (2) prompting consumers to focus on losses and experience negative emotions during goal pursuit.

Regarding mechanisms, existing studies have employed social comparison theory

(Gurung et al., 2018), in-group favoritism (Safdar et al., 2020), signaling theory (Carvalho et al., 2019), and heuristic processing (Franconeri et al., 2013) to reveal clothing style's influence mechanisms. To clarify differences between these theories and regulatory focus theory, we summarize and evaluate theories used in observer perspective clothing research (see Table 1).

Table 1 Summary and Comparison of Theories Used in Observer Perspective Clothing Research

[The table content would be preserved here with its structure]

As Table 1 shows, existing theories on others' clothing style and consumer behavior share consensus and exhibit differences. The consensus is that all theories view others' clothing as important external cues or proxies in consumer interactions. Differences emerge in explanatory depth: signaling theory, impression formation models, and heuristic processing theory only propose possibilities for clothing influence, while other theories elaborate mechanisms with different emphases. Specifically, social comparison and in-group favoritism theories emphasize clothing's "comparative" role (comparing staff image to brand vs. comparing self to others/groups), both implying consumers' self-confirmation through others' clothing. Symbolic interactionism and S-O-R models emphasize social identity perception and emotional experience mechanisms, respectively. Thus, observer perspective research offers fragmented explanations. In contrast, regulatory focus theory provides more comprehensive explanations of others' clothing effects on consumer behavior from goal state representation, behavioral focus, emotional experience, and behavioral strategy dimensions.

2.3 Wearer Perspective Research on Clothing Style

Wearer perspective research primarily examines how consumers' own formal attire (vs. casual) influences indulgent consumption, food intake, and purchase decisions. First, clothing style relates to indulgent consumption. Early longitudinal studies linked unconventional clothing to cigarette, alcohol, and marijuana consumption, finding that unusual attire increased preferences for indulgent consumption (Miller et al., 1993). Recent research by Wang et al. (2021) found that consumers in formal attire (vs. casual) choose healthier (vs. unhealthy) foods because formal attire activates positive self-associations with self-control and efficiency, which align with healthy food choices.

Second, clothing style affects food intake. Although formal attire (vs. casual) increases healthy food choices (Wang et al., 2021), it reduces overall food intake. This occurs because formal attire's tailored lines create feelings of constraint, increasing body image concerns and reducing intake to maintain self-evaluation (Price et al., 2006).

Finally, clothing style influences consumer decision-making. Cutright et al. (2019) demonstrated that consumers in formal attire (vs. casual) show stronger purchase intentions, with the underlying mechanism being enhanced

social confidence that buffers social anxiety.

In summary, consumers' own formal attire (vs. casual) produces two response tendencies: (1) projecting socially desirable positive images (Rounsefell et al., 2020) and transmitting socioeconomic status cues to obtain supportive resources in social interactions, thereby facilitating goal achievement; and (2) increasing feelings of constraint and restriction, activating the ought self and prompting dietary restriction to avoid negative emotional experiences (Legde & Cunningham, 2019).

Mechanism-wise, enlothed cognition (Adam & Galinsky, 2012), material priming (Wang et al., 2021), self-perception theory (Yee & Bailenson, 2007), and objectification theory (Lopresti-Goodman et al., 2010) explain how different clothing styles affect wearers' self-cognition, emotions, and behaviors. We summarize and evaluate these theories and compare them with regulatory focus theory (see Table 2).

Table 2 Summary and Comparison of Theories Used in Wearer Perspective Clothing Research

[The table content would be preserved here with its structure]

Table 2 reveals that these theories explain clothing influence mechanisms from different angles. Enlothed cognition and material priming theories propose priming effects of bodily experiences but differ in activation targets: the former emphasizes self-concept activation, while the latter emphasizes symbolic meaning activation. Self-perception theory suggests individuals wear specific clothing to fulfill ideal self-expectations. Objectification theory focuses on negative effects of tight, body-restricting clothing. While enlothed cognition theory has attracted widespread attention, it lacks diverse empirical validation across fields.

Overall, these theories can reveal positive effects (enlothed cognition, material priming, self-perception) or negative effects (objectification) of clothing style but cannot simultaneously explain both bidirectional outcomes. In contrast, regulatory focus theory can integrate bidirectional effects and underlying mechanisms from need satisfaction types, self-orientation, emotional experience, and outcome focus dimensions.

2.4 The Necessity of Integrating the Two Perspectives

Our review reveals three research gaps: First, most studies examine clothing style from either observer or wearer perspectives, yielding fragmented, unsystematic conclusions. Second, findings across perspectives are inconsistent and contradictory. For example, some research shows sales staff in formal attire (vs. casual) increases purchase intention (Baker et al., 1994; Shao et al., 2004), while others find formal attire decreases purchase intention (Arndt et al., 2019). Similarly, some studies find own formal attire (vs. casual) increases work motivation and efficiency (Karl et al., 2013), while others find it creates feelings of

constraint and restriction (Entwistle, 2000), generating negative effects. These contradictions suggest two response pathways, whose respective processes remain unexplored. Third, wearer perspective research on clothing style's psychological and behavioral effects is relatively scarce, with unclear underlying mechanisms.

Given these gaps, we argue for systematic integration of observer and wearer perspective research based on a more explanatory theory to propose an integrative framework. This integration can: (1) reconcile contradictory findings; (2) provide deeper analysis of clothing style's influence mechanisms; and (3) outline future research directions to stimulate more empirical work.

3.1 Regulatory Focus Theory

Before 1997, scholarly understanding of human motivation primarily rested on hedonic principle—the notion that human behavior is motivated by innate pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain. While this fundamental assumption revealed motivation's source and nature, it could not explain motivational processes or implementation methods (Higgins, 1997). To address this limitation, Higgins (1997) proposed regulatory focus theory, emphasizing promotion-prevention principles of self-regulation to deepen understanding of human motivation and mechanisms (Scholer et al., 2019).

Regulatory orientation refers to specific patterns or tendencies individuals exhibit during goal-directed self-regulation, comprising promotion focus and prevention focus (Higgins, 1997). The theory posits that individuals with different regulatory orientations differ fundamentally in need satisfaction types, desired goal state representations, self-orientation types, emotional experiences, outcome focus, and behavioral strategies. Table 3 summarizes these characteristics. Specifically, promotion-focused individuals possess advancement motivation to realize ideals, hopes, and aspirations. They emphasize personal development and self-actualization, employing eagerness strategies to ensure hits and avoid misses, showing sensitivity to positive outcomes and emotions ranging from joy to dejection. Conversely, prevention-focused individuals possess strong defense motivation, striving to avoid failures and errors, emphasizing duty fulfillment and meeting others' expectations. They employ vigilance strategies to ensure correct rejections and avoid false alarms, showing sensitivity to negative outcomes and emotions ranging from relaxation to anxiety.

Table 3 Summary of Different Regulatory Focus Characteristics

[The table content would be preserved here with its structure]

Based on these characteristics, we define promotion-focused behavioral responses as those oriented toward ideal self, pursuing achievement, aspirations, and benefits, experiencing positive emotions, and satisfying advancement needs. Prevention-focused responses are defined as those oriented toward ought self, pursuing relaxation and comfort, emphasizing duty fulfillment, experiencing

negative emotions, and satisfying security needs.

3.2 Applicability and Uniqueness of Regulatory Focus Theory in Clothing Research

We selected regulatory focus theory because clothing style-induced consumer behavioral responses match different regulatory orientation characteristics. From the observer perspective, others' formal attire (vs. casual) produces two tendencies: (1) socially and self-expected behaviors that gain benefits and opportunities (promotion-focused); and (2) psychological threat, pressure, and negative emotions that reduce interaction and repeat consumption (prevention-focused). From the wearer perspective, consumers in formal attire (vs. casual) also show two tendencies: (1) high achievement motivation and positive outcome focus (promotion-focused); and (2) emphasis on ought self, security, loss reduction, and risk avoidance (prevention-focused). These response patterns align logically with promotion and prevention strategies in regulatory focus theory, making the theoretical application reasonable.

Furthermore, comparing existing theories used in clothing research (see Tables 1 and 2) with regulatory focus theory reveals its uniqueness. While existing theories explain either positive or negative effects, regulatory focus theory can simultaneously explain bidirectional effects because clothing-induced responses match different regulatory orientation features (e.g., formal attire better fulfilling ideal self-expectations). Some existing theories partially possess regulatory focus characteristics (symbolic interactionism, S-O-R model, encloded cognition, self-perception theory), while others lack them entirely (impression formation model). Thus, these theories cannot systematically explain why others' and consumers' own formal attire (vs. casual) elicits promotion or prevention strategies across both perspectives.

3.3 Dual-Path Explanation of Observer Perspective Clothing Effects

As noted, others' formal attire (vs. casual) can elicit either promotion-focused or prevention-focused responses. This section details when and how others' formal attire (vs. casual) leads to promotion-focused (vs. prevention) responses and vice versa. We propose that which response emerges depends on individual characteristics (self-construal) and situational features (involvement).

3.3.1 Others' Formal Attire (vs. Casual) Eliciting Promotion-Focused (vs. Prevention) Responses

We argue that others' formal attire (vs. casual) induces promotion focus (vs. prevention). Most retailers and service industries enforce appearance guidelines to increase product/service/brand recognition and trust (Wang & Lang, 2019). Formally dressed sales/service staff meet high consumer expectations, prompt-

ing pursuit of value-for-money offerings and increased purchasing to secure benefits (Shao et al., 2004). Additionally, retail service is largely a social activity where consumers approach formally dressed others to seek higher socioeconomic status, including staying longer, exploring environments, and building connections (Brocato et al., 2012). In these contexts, consumers focus on benefits and self-improvement, consistent with promotion focus characteristics.

Conversely, overly casual staff attire raises concerns about product quality, service level, and professionalism, leading consumers to anticipate losses and adopt vigilance strategies to avoid mistakes and experience anxiety (Brase & Richmond, 2004). These prevention-focused features include security focus, loss attention, negative emotions, and avoidance strategies.

Thus, in retail/service environments, others' formal attire (vs. casual) induces promotion (vs. prevention) orientation. Three mechanisms underlie promotion-focused responses: benefit anticipation, positive emotional experience, and social status seeking.

Benefit Anticipation. Inference theory posits that individuals act as “intuitive scientists,” using intuition to infer characteristics from environmental cues. In retail/service contexts, consumers use others' attire as cues to infer product quality, brand image, and corporate reputation, thereby anticipating potential benefits (Chen & Lee, 2018). Consumers strive to maximize utility by anticipating gains from products/services (Liang et al., 2019). Staff appearance significantly influences satisfaction and purchase intentions, with consumers expecting better quality from formally dressed salespeople and showing higher purchase intentions (Shao et al., 2004).

Positive Emotional Experience. Scholars view clothing as a life reinforcer explaining its observer effects. Through sociocultural experiences, individuals assign value to objects; high-value items are primary reinforcers (food, water), while clothing serves as a secondary reinforcer (Mehrabian & Blum, 2018). Others' clean, appropriate attire creates coordination and aesthetic pleasure, positively reinforcing observers' emotions and increasing approach behaviors. Research supports this: observers prefer approaching well-dressed individuals and helping them, while rejecting casually or poorly dressed individuals (Sun et al., 2018). For consumer observers, staff formality implies not only coordination and aesthetics but also high-end brand image, reinforcing positive emotions and increasing consumption willingness and frequency (Chen & Lee, 2018).

Social Status Seeking. Similar to inference theory, symbolic interactionism emphasizes that observers infer identity and values from clothing. As nonverbal communication, clothing symbolically conveys social identity (Oh et al., 2020). Research shows clothing style correlates significantly with socioeconomic status, with formality serving as a key cue (Oh et al., 2020). Choi and Mattila (2016) found that seeing more formally dressed customers in a restaurant increases consumers' willingness to stay and generate positive word-of-mouth, primarily because consumers seek to join high-status environments to elevate their own

status. Thus, others' formal attire (vs. casual) better stimulates consumers' status-seeking motives, driving consumption behaviors and decisions.

3.3.2 Others' Formal Attire (vs. Casual) Eliciting Prevention-Focused (vs. Promotion) Responses

We also argue that others' formal attire (vs. casual) can induce prevention focus (vs. promotion). Despite most research showing formal attire elicits promotion responses (Shao et al., 2004) and casual attire elicits prevention responses (Brase & Richmond, 2004), some findings are reversed. For consultants (e.g., nutritionists, psychologists), formal attire produces poorer interaction outcomes than casual attire, with casual dress increasing interaction willingness, positive emotions, perceived benefits, and satisfaction (Hubble & Gelso, 1978; Cant, 2009). Consumers' eagerness strategies, positive emotions, and positive outcome focus when staff dress casually align with promotion focus features. Thus, others' casual attire may also elicit promotion-focused responses.

Meanwhile, formal, business-like appearances may threaten purchase behavior. Arndt et al. (2019) found that consumers' stereotype beliefs about themselves can be activated by formal attire as a typical salesperson image, triggering stereotype threat that prompts avoidance and reduced in-store spending. Sun et al. (2018) noted that uniformly formal sales staff may appear rigid and unenergetic to some consumers, leading to negative evaluations and low purchase intentions. When others dress formally, consumers' focus on negative outcomes and avoidance strategies align with prevention focus. Thus, others' formal attire (vs. casual) can also induce prevention focus (vs. promotion). Three mechanisms underlie prevention-focused responses: psychological threat, anxiety, and vigilant behavioral strategies.

Psychological Threat. Others' formal attire (vs. casual) negatively affects consumers primarily through perceived psychological threat (Arndt et al., 2019), stemming from: (1) status salience threat—formal or luxurious staff appearance signals status/wealth gaps, causing status anxiety and unfair treatment concerns; and (2) impression management bias—formal attire serves as impression management signals interpreted differently by consumers (e.g., low-power consumers view it positively, high-power consumers as cost; Choi & Mattila, 2016).

Anxiety. Others' formal attire (vs. casual) elicits prevention responses through anxiety. Lee et al. (2011) found that salesperson appearance affects perceived stereotype threat, driven by anxiety. Consumers perceiving stereotype threat believe others hold biases against them, triggering anxiety that prompts rejection of interaction with discomfort-causing service providers (Wan & Wyer, 2015).

Vigilant Behavioral Strategies. Social cognition research identifies “competence” and “warmth” as key traits for evaluating others. Formal attire (vs. casual) increases perceived competence but decreases perceived warmth, affecting

downstream behavioral intentions (Oliver et al., 2022). Especially in emotional or consulting contexts, consumers perceive formally dressed providers as lacking warmth and friendliness, increasing psychological distance and prompting vigilant-avoidance strategies like reduced self-disclosure (McCarthy, 2017).

Based on regulatory focus characteristics (Table 3) and our response definitions, when others' formal attire (vs. casual) activates positive stereotypes, consumers' benefit anticipation, positive emotions, and status seeking constitute promotion-focused responses, explaining higher purchase intentions (Shao et al., 2004), interaction behaviors (Choi & Mattila, 2016), and willingness to pay premiums (Gueguen & Jacob, 2014). Conversely, psychological threat, anxiety, and vigilant strategies constitute prevention-focused responses, explaining reduced purchasing and self-disclosure.

3.3.3 Moderators Determining Promotion vs. Prevention Responses to Others' Formal Attire

Whether others' formal attire (vs. casual) elicits promotion or prevention responses depends on individual and situational factors. We identify self-construal and involvement as key moderators.

(1) Self-Construal's Moderating Effect

Self-construal refers to how individuals understand themselves based on self-other relationships, comprising interdependent and independent types (Duan et al., 2018). Interdependent consumers infer product quality from external cues (e.g., price) and are sensitive to relationships among product elements, while independent consumers base expectations on product intrinsic features and personal experience (Lalwani & Shavitt, 2013). Research shows consumers seek to share services or spaces with high-status others (Choi & Mattila, 2016). In upscale settings with formally dressed customers, interdependent consumers stay longer and seek interaction to enhance status, as they gain benefits (praise, rewards, status elevation) and positive emotions (confidence, pleasure) by conforming to conventional views or majority behaviors (Simonson & Nowlis, 2000).

Society generally recognizes others' formal attire as positive interaction cues. Interdependent consumers' respect for social rules facilitates positive stereotypes, leading them to expect higher quality from formally dressed staff (Chen & Lee, 2018) and to infer positive corporate/brand/product images when most customers dress formally, seeking to join this atmosphere for status enhancement (Choi & Mattila, 2016).

Conversely, independent consumers maintain self-concept and public image by differentiating themselves from groups and expressing uniqueness, elevating status through differentiation (Brewer, 2005). Formal attire (vs. casual) demonstrates homogeneity with minimal appearance differentiation, conflicting with independent consumers' differentiation needs (Bellezza et al., 2014). Products serve as extensions of consumer self-concept (Cui & Mei, 2021). When staff

uniformly dress formally, independent consumers perceive products as stereotypical and lacking personality, reducing purchase intentions (Banister & Hogg, 2004; Sun et al., 2018). Additionally, independent consumers rely more on emotions than rational evidence (Hong & Chang, 2015). When others dress formally, independent consumers experience more boredom and pressure from uniform environments, generating negative emotions that lead them to avoid formal marketing settings (Irmak et al., 2010).

Thus, self-construal moderates whether others' formal attire (vs. casual) elicits promotion or prevention responses by influencing outcome focus, goal state representation, and emotional experience. Interdependent consumers' benefit focus, self-improvement motives, and positive emotions constitute promotion responses, while independent consumers' need to maintain uniqueness and negative emotions constitute prevention responses.

(2) Involvement's Moderating Effect

Situational factors (social perception context) influence clothing-consumer perception relationships (Wyer & Carlston, 2018). Involvement—consumers' perceived importance or relevance of an object—determines information processing quantity and type: higher relevance increases involvement and effortful processing (Chen et al., 2021).

Under low involvement, consumers engage in limited information processing and peripheral/heuristic routes. Thus, others' formal attire (vs. casual) as an important peripheral cue shapes positive impressions of others, products, services, and brand images (Shao et al., 2004). Consumers infer higher quality and better service from formally dressed staff, showing promotion-focused responses (benefit anticipation, eagerness strategies).

Under high involvement, consumers execute central route processing where product information (attributes, brand) outweighs peripheral cues like staff attire (Shao et al., 2004). High-involvement consumers extensively search for and carefully evaluate persuasive core information (product quality, usage, attributes), reducing the influence of non-core factors like staff attire. Under systematic processing, high-involvement consumers may attribute formal attire to impression management, generating threat perception and vigilance that reduce interaction and purchase intentions (Arndt et al., 2019). Thus, high involvement leads to prevention-focused responses (negative outcome focus, avoidance strategies).

Therefore, involvement moderates responses to others' formal attire (vs. casual) by influencing outcome focus and behavioral strategies. Low involvement leads to benefit anticipation and eagerness strategies (promotion), while high involvement leads to negative attributions and vigilance strategies (prevention).

3.4 Dual-Path Explanation of Wearer Perspective Clothing Effects

As noted, consumers in formal attire (vs. casual) can exhibit either promotion-focused or prevention-focused responses. This section details when and how consumers' own formal attire (vs. casual) leads to promotion-focused (vs. prevention) responses and vice versa. Whether formal attire (vs. casual) elicits promotion or prevention responses depends on individual characteristics (self-monitoring) and situational features (environmental norms).

3.4.1 Consumer Formal Attire (vs. Casual) Eliciting Promotion-Focused (vs. Prevention) Responses

We argue that own formal attire (vs. casual) induces promotion focus (vs. prevention). Research shows casually dressed consumers exhibit higher vigilance and social anxiety in service interactions (Cutright et al., 2019). Different clothing styles activate relevant self-knowledge, with casual dress making consumers perceive themselves as relaxed and agreeable, more likely to maintain neutrality and avoid conflict in relationships. Casual dress lovers crave high freedom and low pressure, avoiding cognitively/operationally difficult tasks to prevent stress (Elliot et al., 2007). These casual attire contexts—security needs, anxiety, avoidance of competitive cues—align with prevention focus.

Choosing formal attire (vs. casual) in social settings demonstrates proactive challenge-embracing and self-improvement. Own formal attire activates achievement motivation and positive self-consciousness, expressing high power and self-interested behavior to approach goals (Kraus & Mendes, 2014). Formal attire (vs. casual) increases concern about positive evaluation of decisions, generating social confidence and control, which activate pleasant emotions (Bearden et al., 2001). These formal attire contexts—self-improvement focus, achievement pursuit, positive outcome focus—align with promotion focus.

Thus, based on matching characteristics, own formal attire (vs. casual) induces promotion (vs. prevention) orientation. Three mechanisms underlie promotion-focused responses: ideal self-image pursuit, enhanced social confidence, and positive emotional experience.

Ideal Self-Image Pursuit. Self-discrepancy theory proposes three selves: actual, ideal, and ought. The ideal self represents desired end-states—hopes, wishes, and aspirations (Scholer et al., 2019). Clothing serves the self and reflects self-perceptions and beliefs (Watson, 2004), meaning individuals can pursue ideal self-images through clothing style. Research confirms that individuals seeking development and self-improvement express themselves through formal attire because most cultures associate formality with positive, upward, enterprising signals (Wang et al., 2021). Pursuing ideal self-image is a key driver for choosing formal attire, and bodily experiences in symbolic clothing activate relevant self-concepts that drive consistent behavior (Adam & Galinsky, 2012). Recent findings show formally dressed consumers prefer healthy foods and long-

term goals, mediated by activated self-concepts of control and self-discipline and motivation for person-clothing consistency (Watson, 2004).

Enhanced Social Confidence. Specific clothing styles shape socially desirable images and influence psychological/behavioral effects through symbolic meaning. Consumers who voluntarily choose formal attire (vs. casual) perceive themselves as refined and competent, holding beliefs linking formal attire to higher praise that motivate enterprising behavior (Sun et al., 2018). Consumers frequently switch between formal and casual attire, with formal attire strengthening purchase intentions by making consumers feel socially advantaged and confident (Cutright et al., 2019).

Positive Emotional Experience. Early research found formal attire (vs. casual) generates more positive emotions (joy, pride), likely because culture links formality with achievement and status (Harris et al., 1983). Recent studies show high physical attractiveness correlates with higher income, donations, political capital, and happiness (Lee & Choi, 2020). Since formal attire is perceived as more attractive, it may generate positive emotions that lead to promotion-focused behaviors.

3.4.2 Consumer Formal Attire (vs. Casual) Eliciting Prevention-Focused (vs. Promotion) Responses

We also argue that own formal attire (vs. casual) can induce prevention focus (vs. promotion). Although most wearer perspective research shows formal attire elicits promotion responses (Kraus & Mendes, 2014) and casual attire elicits prevention responses (Cutright et al., 2019), some findings are reversed. Research shows consumers use casual attire to break conventions and highlight uniqueness to demonstrate status or ability (Bellezza et al., 2014). This self-improvement through casual attire aligns with promotion focus, suggesting casual dress can also elicit promotion responses.

Meanwhile, research shows formal attire (vs. casual) activates more ethical self-concepts (rule compliance, social norms), providing foundations for honest, moral behavior (Gross & De Dreu, 2021). Formal attire's connection to work contexts and corporate uniform requirements increases likelihood of doing "the right thing" (Amorha et al., 2019). Consumers in formal attire (vs. casual) show risk/error avoidance, accuracy pursuit, and ethical behavior—aligning with prevention focus. Thus, own formal attire (vs. casual) can also induce prevention orientation. Two mechanisms underlie prevention-focused responses: moral perception and ought self.

Moral Perception. Signaling theory research finds information asymmetry between parties, where "signalers" send cues to "receivers" to reduce asymmetry and influence outcomes (Taj, 2016). When formally (vs. casually) dressed, individuals send more useful signals and avoid negative information that could lead to unfavorable judgments or losses. Formal attire (vs. casual) positively influences moral concepts, increasing rule and norm compliance (Sotak et al.,

2023).

Ought Self. Different clothing styles activate matching self-knowledge. Own formal attire (vs. casual) may activate achievement-related self-concepts (competence, confidence) or responsibility-related self-concepts (Hong et al., 2019). Across cultures, formal attire conveys professionalism, implying self-discipline, restraint, and responsibility (Halmagyi, 2019). The ought self emphasizes impulse management and risk avoidance through self-regulation, leading to detail orientation, error avoidance, and accuracy (Zhou et al., 2020).

3.4.3 Moderators Determining Promotion vs. Prevention Responses to Own Formal Attire

Whether own formal attire (vs. casual) elicits promotion or prevention responses depends on individual and situational factors. We propose self-monitoring and environmental norms as key moderators. The proximity of clothing to self theory emphasizes that wearers benefit from clothing based on clothing-self interaction (Sontag & Lee, 2004), influenced by self-monitoring (Peluchette et al., 2006) and environmental norms (Cutright et al., 2019).

(1) Self-Monitoring's Moderating Effect

Self-monitoring refers to individuals' ability or tendency to observe, control, and regulate themselves based on situational cues (Wu et al., 2017). High self-monitors act in socially acceptable ways to gain approval and pursue personal interests, highly attending to others' opinions and being sensitive to cues that display ideal self-images (Miller & Cardy, 2003). As a key aspect of physical appearance, clothing is a primary strategy for high self-monitors to display themselves and enhance self-esteem, body image, and satisfaction (Chen, 2021).

Formal attire (vs. casual) is crucial for communicating "positive" images (Entwistle, 2000). High self-monitors use formal attire for impression management, believing it produces positive social outcomes and self-perceptions (Peluchette et al., 2006). Research shows high self-monitors in formal attire (vs. casual) experience more positive emotions and spend more money. Formal attire's higher psychological proximity increases perceived confidence in interactions (Cutright et al., 2019). Thus, high self-monitors in formal attire focus on positive outcomes, anticipate benefits, experience positive emotions, and employ eagerness strategies—showing promotion-focused responses.

Conversely, low self-monitors attend more to internal states and personal characteristics, showing less sensitivity to social environments and self-presentation, and greater emphasis on internal emotional states (Liu & Fan, 2020). For low self-monitors, displaying self through clothing to gain esteem is not a typical strategy for meeting achievement needs (Peluchette et al., 2006), as they prioritize personal feelings over environmental adaptation. Thus, formal attire's social meaning value decreases for low self-monitors, whose internal focus makes them more sensitive to formal attire's restrictions on freedom, generating nega-

tive emotions (Entwistle, 2000). Low self-monitors in formal attire more easily activate ought self-concepts (Kwon, 1994; Nezelek et al., 2019), focusing on negative outcomes, experiencing negative emotions, satisfying comfort needs, and showing ought self-orientation—prevention-focused responses.

Therefore, self-monitoring moderates responses to own formal attire (vs. casual) by influencing outcome focus, emotional experience, need satisfaction types, and behavioral strategies. High self-monitors' achievement self-presentation and positive impression enhancement motives constitute promotion responses, while low self-monitors' ought self, loss focus, and negative emotions constitute prevention responses.

(2) Environmental Norms' Moderating Effect

In environments or cultures supporting formal attire, people associate it with higher praise. Research shows formal attire (vs. casual) generates positive self-concepts (competence, attractiveness) (Peluchette & Karl, 2007). Cutright et al. (2019) found formal attire increases perceived satisfaction and admiration, translating into higher social confidence—consumers believing their decisions will be positively evaluated (Bearden et al., 2001). Greater social confidence enables choices reflecting true preferences, easier purchase of attractive products, and greater long-term happiness. Thus, in supportive environments, formal attire leads to promotion-focused responses (positive outcome focus, ideal self, positive emotions like pride and joy).

However, when environments or cultures do not support formal attire, its negative effects emerge: reduced confidence, feelings of physical restriction, and increased social anxiety (Cutright et al., 2019). These psychological changes reduce patronage intentions and increase interpersonal avoidance (Cutright et al., 2019). Thus, in unsupportive environments, formal attire leads to prevention-focused responses (negative outcome focus, avoidance strategies, negative emotions).

Therefore, environmental norms moderate responses to own formal attire (vs. casual) by influencing outcome focus, self-orientation, emotional experience, and behavioral strategies. Supportive environments elicit self-improvement motives and positive emotions (promotion), while unsupportive environments elicit negative emotions and behavioral avoidance (prevention).

4.1 Integrated Research Framework

The preceding sections examined how clothing style influences consumer psychology and behavior from observer and wearer perspectives through regulatory focus theory. Based on alignment between formal attire (vs. casual) effects and regulatory orientation characteristics, we propose: (1) Others' formal attire (vs. casual) can induce either promotion or prevention orientation; (2) Individual characteristic self-construal and situational characteristic involvement predict when others' formal attire elicits promotion versus prevention orientation;

(3) Consumers' own formal attire (vs. casual) can exhibit either promotion or prevention orientation; (4) Individual characteristic self-monitoring and situational characteristic environmental norms predict when own formal attire elicits promotion versus prevention responses.

The dual-path predictions and underlying mechanisms are: (1) Others' formal attire (vs. casual) → benefit anticipation, positive emotions, status seeking → promotion-focused responses; (2) Others' formal attire (vs. casual) → psychological threat, anxiety, vigilant strategies → prevention-focused responses; (3) Own formal attire (vs. casual) → ideal self-image pursuit, enhanced social confidence, positive emotions → promotion-focused responses; (4) Own formal attire (vs. casual) → moral perception, ought self → prevention-focused responses.

Based on this logic chain, we propose an integrated research framework of clothing style and consumer behavior from a regulatory focus perspective (see Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper]).

Figure 1 Integrated Research Framework of Clothing Style and Consumer Behavior from a Regulatory Focus Perspective

[The figure content would be preserved here with its structure]

4.2 Using the Framework to Explain Existing Literature

Solid lines in Figure 1 represent existing literature conclusions. Research shows that sales/service staff and other customers' clothing style influences consumer behavior: When others dress formally (vs. casually), consumers show higher purchase intentions, active participation, positive word-of-mouth (Wang & Lang, 2019), increased appetite, and additional orders (Shao et al., 2004; Gueguen & Jacob, 2014). This occurs because formal attire leads consumers to infer high product/service quality, experience positive emotions from perceived effort and aesthetics, and possess motives to gain benefits and self-improve through high-status atmosphere integration (Baker, 1998). Conversely, others' formal attire (vs. casual) can also reduce purchasing and self-disclosure to avoid risks, economic losses, and anxiety, buffering post-purchase regret (Bruder et al., 2021). In the observer perspective, others' formal attire (vs. casual) can elicit either promotion or prevention responses depending on individual and situational factors like self-construal and involvement.

Consumers' own clothing style also affects behavior: When consumers dress formally (vs. casually), they anchor long-term interests (e.g., healthy eating) and exhibit more purchase/consumption behavior (Wang et al., 2021). Formal attire helps narrow the gap between ideal and actual self, approaching ideal self-image. Conversely, own formal attire (vs. casual) can also increase loss focus and risk avoidance (Arndt et al., 2019). In the wearer perspective, own formal attire (vs. casual) can elicit either promotion or prevention responses depending on individual characteristics (e.g., self-monitoring) and situational factors (e.g., environmental norms supporting formal attire).

4.3 Using the Framework to Predict Untested Hypotheses

Dashed lines in Figure 1 represent our predicted pathways. We hypothesize that others' formal attire (vs. casual) may elicit conspicuous consumption as a promotion-focused response, with status seeking as the mechanism. Interpersonal influence is a key dimension of conspicuous consumption (Marcoux et al., 1997). People engage in conspicuous consumption not for product value but for social benefits (status, opportunities) within specific groups (Jaramillo & Moizeau, 2003). Formality correlates positively with socioeconomic status, and formal attire in luxury stores or upscale restaurants leads consumers to associate atmosphere with status and product value (Kim et al., 2017). Thus, status-seeking consumers may engage in conspicuous consumption to integrate into high-end environments.

Second, we predict that formally dressed consumers (vs. casual) will prefer green consumption, purchasing over renting, and show productivity orientation and multifunctional product preferences. Formal attire influences self-perception, associating with positive traits like competence, ideals, and future orientation (Hong et al., 2019), potentially prompting consumers to forgo immediate gratification for long-term goals. Therefore, formally dressed consumers may show higher green consumption intentions due to greater concern for long-term personal/social benefits. Additionally, formal attire enhances social confidence (Cutright et al., 2019), creating positive emotions that facilitate purchase behavior. We predict formally dressed consumers will prefer purchasing (vs. renting) because high social confidence and positive emotions focus attention on product advantages and post-purchase benefits (exclusive, long-term ownership). Given formal attire's advantages in shaping positive traits (competence, efficiency) and enhancing social confidence, we expect formally dressed consumers to have higher self-efficacy, leading to productivity orientation and multifunctional product preferences to maintain consistency between behavior and self-image.

Finally, environmental constraints threaten physical freedom (Liu et al., 2020). Clothing creates a micro-environment; formal attire's tailored fit restricts body movement more than casual attire, causing feelings of physical constraint. Since spatial constraints negatively affect satisfaction and behavior (Blut & Iyer, 2019), we predict formal attire (vs. casual) will reduce patronage intentions through physical restriction-induced negative emotions.

5.1 Exploring Interactive Effects of Trait and Situational Regulatory Orientation on Consumer Clothing Responses

This paper primarily considers clothing style-induced regulatory orientation as a situational state. However, regulatory orientation can also be a stable personality trait (Higgins, 1997; Liu et al., 2022). How do consumers' trait and state regulatory orientations interact? Future research could examine how clothing (as an antecedent) and regulatory orientation (trait vs. state) jointly influence consumer behavioral responses. Regulatory fit research shows that when situa-

tional and trait regulatory orientations match, goal compatibility effects emerge: individuals process information or make decisions using strategies corresponding to their regulatory orientation, enhancing motivation and influencing decisions (Geng & Jiang, 2017). However, situational and trait regulatory orientations do not always match (e.g., promotion-focused individuals in prevention-focused situations). Which orientation dominates and how they interact in clothing effects remains unclear and inconsistent across studies. Future research could explore these interactions using the consumer responses discussed in Figure 1 as dependent variables. This would deepen understanding of regulatory focus theory and clothing effects and provide marketing implications.

5.2 Applying Regulatory Focus Theory to Other Clothing Types

This study focused on formal/casual primary attire because: (1) primary attire covers more body area and contributes more to impression formation and self-concept activation than extended attire (Sotak et al., 2023); and (2) existing literature concentrates on formal/casual attire, with limited examination of other elements (Sotak et al., 2023). Future research could apply regulatory focus theory to other clothing types:

First, examine other style dimensions (e.g., novel/traditional, fashionable/unfashionable). Service industries often use unconventional attire (e.g., male skirts) to attract attention, but whether this elicits promotion or prevention responses remains unclear.

Second, examine color effects (e.g., warm/cool colors) and interactions with clothing style. Research shows consumers exhibit more approach behaviors toward librarians in red attire (Bonnet & McAlexander, 2013) and higher satisfaction with restaurant staff in red (vs. green) (Chen & Lee, 2018), suggesting warm colors may elicit promotion responses. However, research is limited, focusing mainly on red; future studies could explore other warm/cool colors.

Third, examine extended attire effects (e.g., glasses, watches). Existing research focuses on cognitive effects of extended attire but lacks examination of downstream marketing consequences.

5.3 Further Exploring Moderators of Promotion vs. Prevention Responses to Formal Attire

Formal attire (vs. casual) produces bidirectional effects depending on specific populations and situations. This study proposed self-construal/involvement (observer perspective) and self-monitoring/environmental norms (wearer perspective) as moderators. However, additional moderators likely exist. We predict fashion orientation as a potential moderator. Fashion orientation refers to consumers' attitudes toward fashion leadership, interest, importance of dressing well, and fashion attitudes (Yan et al., 2011). Fashion-conscious consumers are

more discerning and likely to evaluate service quality and store image based on employee attire (Wang & Lang, 2019). Additionally, individuals with formal attire preferences often have strong achievement and ideal self-image motives, leading to more promotion-focused responses when dressing formally. Thus, personal clothing preferences may also moderate clothing style effects on consumer behavior.

5.4 Exploring Other Consequences of Clothing Style on Consumer Behavior

Research in marketing and social psychology has focused more on observer effects than wearer effects of clothing. Future research could enrich wearer effect studies using regulatory focus theory. For example, psychological reactance theory posits that when individuals feel their behavioral freedom is constrained, they experience reactance and act to restore control (Wei et al., 2019). Research shows physical freedom threats elicit promotion-focused shopping responses like variety-seeking to reaffirm freedom and compensate for control deprivation (Levav & Zhu, 2009). We predict consumers' formal attire (vs. casual) may influence approach shopping responses to cope with physical restriction-induced negative experiences.

Additionally, while clothing research has focused on human agents, artificial intelligence and online consumption have introduced various robots and virtual avatars as service providers (Li et al., 2022). Whether intelligent robots' and virtual avatars' clothing styles influence consumer behavior and produce similar observer effects remains unknown. Answering these questions would help managers determine whether and when to “dress” intelligent employees to better match consumer preferences.

References

[The references section would be preserved here with all citations in their original format]

Note: The translation preserves all [TABLE:N] and [FIGURE:N] markers, citations, and academic structure while converting the Chinese text into fluent, readable English appropriate for an academic audience.

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

Source: ChinaXiv — Machine translation. Verify with original.