The Role of Employee Physical Dominance on Male Customers' Status-Signaling Consumption

Tobias Otterbring, CTF – Service Research Center Karlstad University, Sweden
Christine Ringler, University of Alabama, USA
Nancy Sirianni, University of Alabama, USA
Anders Gustafsson, CTF - Service Research Center Karlstad University, Sweden

Physically dominant male employees may attract female customers, but do they affect male customers? In a field experiment, male customers purchased more expensive products than female customers in the presence of a physically dominant male employee. Attractiveness is not driving our effect, as dominant and non-dominant employees were equally attractive.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Abercrombie & Fitch has become known for hiring physically fit male employees to pose at store entrances shirtless. However, it is not clear whether this strategy is effective in enticing male or female customers to make purchases.

Research has shown that youth, health, and attractiveness are important characteristics for men in a mate; whereas status, wealth, and dominance are priorities for women (Burd 1986). One way to understand gender differences in mate preferences is through Darwin’s (1871) principle of sexual selection. A heterosexual man will search for young, healthy and attractive female mates because they are generally more fertile, which increases the probability that the man’s genes can be passed on (Kenrick & Griskevicius 2013). Women place greater importance on a potential mate’s capacity for investment (Trivers 1972); in terms of time, effort, and ability to provide resources. It is therefore unsurprising that women value a mate’s status, as this has been linked to survival (Geary 2000).

Just as male peacocks with the most impressive feathers are more successful at attracting females, some men communicate fitness to potential mates and demonstrate competitiveness to rivals through flashy and noticeable displays (Buss 1988). Given that two of the most important cues in making inferences about people’s status are the cost and noticeable appearance of the products they buy (Belk, Bahn, & Mayer 1982), men are also more prone than women to use consumption as a way to signal status (Sundie et al. 2011). Men without large resources may attempt to signal status through the consumption of conspicuous brand logos, tipping more at dinner, or buying a more expensive brand than their peers.

The current research investigates whether physically dominant male employees can increase male customers’ status-signaling consumption. We expect that men whose status is threatened by a physically dominant male employee will show a greater willingness to spend money on products associated with status.

391 members of an online research panel completed Study 1 and were randomly assigned to a 2 (participant gender: male vs. female) × 2 (customer gender: male vs. female) between-subjects design. All participants read a scenario: “Retail companies have started to hire athletic, fit male employees to attract customers. These employees stand at the store entrances, where they greet arriving customers.” Participants then indicated their agreement on the following: “I think female [male] customers will spend more money in the store compared with male [female] customers” and “purchase more expensive products in the store than male [female] customers.” Respondents then answered demographic questions including gender (independent variable).

Conducting a two-way ANOVA with participant gender and customer gender as between-subjects factors, we found a main effect of customer gender (F(1,387) = 131.55, p < .001). Participants predicted that female customers would spend more money (Mfemale = 6.22) than male customers (Mmale = 3.84) in the presence of a dominant male employee. Similarly, we found a significant main effect of customer gender on purchasing more expensive products (F(1,387) = 65.54, p < .001), indicating that female customers would purchase more expensive products (Mfemale = 5.77) than male customers (Mmale = 3.92) in the presence of a dominant male employee.

Study 2 included 369 customers in a 2 (customer gender: female vs. male) × 2 (dominant employee: absent vs. present) between-subjects design. Customers in the dominant employee present condition entered the store where a dominant male employee greeted them. Customers in the dominant employee absent condition entered the store, but were not greeted by an employee. They then continued with their normal shopping. After checking-out, customers were asked if they would be willing to participate and their gender was recorded. A photograph was taken of their receipt to count the number of items purchased and the amount spent. To measure status-signaling consumption, we used the average price paid per item (Eastman, Goldsmith, & Flynn 1999).

Conducting a two-way ANOVA with customer gender and dominant employee as between-subjects factors on price paid per item, we found a main effect of the dominant employee condition (F(1,341) = 3.64, p = .05) and a main effect of gender (F(1,341) = 6.88, p = .009). These were qualified by an interaction (F(1,341) = 3.67, p = .05). The average price per item purchased by men (M = $18.33) was approximately 94% more expensive than the average price per item purchased by women (M = $9.43) in the presence of the dominant male employee (t(172) = 2.61, p = .010). When the employee was absent, we found no difference (t < 1).

Study 3, a 2 (participant gender: male versus female) × 2 (employee: dominant versus non-dominant) between-subjects design utilized 114 undergraduate students. They were given a photograph depicting the male employee, who was either dominant or non-dominant (but equally attractive). Participants were told the study would investigate participants’ ability to form impressions of employees. Participants answered questions consistent with the story and indicated their logo size preferences on clothing as research has demonstrated that a desire for larger logos indicates a willingness to engage in status-signaling consumption (Lee & Shrum 2012). Finally, participants indicated demographic information.

We conducted a two-way ANOVA on logo size preferences. We found a significant main effect of employee condition (F(1,110) = 5.84, p = .017) and of participant gender (F(1,110) = 6.67, p = .011). These effects were qualified by an interaction (F(1,110) = 8.28, p = .005). Male participants in the dominant employee condition (Mdominant = 5.20) preferred significantly larger logos compared with male participants in the non-dominant employee condition (Mnon-dominant = 3.52; t(54) = 3.57, p < .001); female participants did not differ between conditions (t < 1).

Collectively, we found that a dominant male employee motivates male customers to spend more money and buy more expensive products than female customers – while lay theory would suggest that female customers’ purchase behavior should be more positively influenced under such conditions. While previous research has focused on the effect that attractive women have on men’s status-signaling consumption, our main theoretical contribution is the finding that dominant male employees assert real-world consequences on men’s purchase behavior.
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