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ARTICLE

The model effect: How the facial attractiveness of a model shapes clothing evaluation

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Abstract

Clothing plays an integral role in the formation of first impressions and has been studied within social perception. However, little attention has been paid to the reverse process: whether evaluations of clothing are influenced by the attractiveness of the person wearing it. Across four studies, results consistently revealed a "model effect," whereby attractive faces increased positive ratings of the clothing. This effect was found to be robust, emerging whether participants were explicitly instructed to assess the clothing (Studies 2, 3 and 4) or the whole image (Study 1), and across experimental (Studies 1, 2 and 4) and naturalistic (Study 3) settings. The "model effect" emerged when considering dresses worn by female models (Studies 1, 2 and 3), as well as models varying in ethnicity, age, and gender wearing everyday clothing other than dresses (Study 4). This effect was not moderated by one's experience and attitudes towards the target garment (Study 2) nor general interest and engagement towards fashion (Study 4), suggesting that the effect is a general bias. These findings extend prior work on the "attractiveness halo effect," where the appeal of a model can be transferred to fashion items, highlighting how attractiveness-based biases operate in everyday aesthetic judgements.

KEYWORDS

attractiveness halo effect, clothing preference, empirical aesthetics, everyday aesthetics, facial attractiveness, fashion psychology

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Fashion is one of the world's major industries and encompasses a wide range of everyday functions, from protection (both physical and psychological) to self-expression. This prevalence and breadth of fashion invite a systematic examination of the factors behind one's fashion choices and preferences, as recent empirical studies have explored the individual and cultural factors underlying everyday clothing choices (Hur et al., 2023; Hur et al., 2025; Stolovy, 2021).

At the same time, because fashion is commonplace and is rarely presented in real life as an isolated phenomenon or object, a study of fashion preference requires careful weighing of related variables. Notably, research has frequently highlighted the dynamic relationship between a garment and its wearer. It has been argued, for instance, that the human body and clothing form an integrated impression that viewers visually perceive holistically, suggesting that clothing plays a crucial role in how its wearer is perceived (Hester & Hehman, 2023). Reflecting this view, much has been written and studied about the impact of clothing on impressions of the wearer (e.g., Elliot et al., 2013; Fasoli et al., 2018; Naumann et al., 2009).

If a garment and its wearer are indeed perceived holistically, the wearer should likewise, at least in part, influence the visual evaluation of the garment. In the context of advertising, for example, it may be that the attractiveness of the wearer of a garment may influence the general pleasantness of the garment itself. While this phenomenon has rarely been empirically tested in fashion, two lines of research support its plausibility.

Attentional bias to attractive faces

Firstly, research on social attention has consistently demonstrated that the visual attention system is biased towards facial stimuli, such that people automatically attend to human faces even when it is not required to do so. This finding has been replicated across various settings, including isolated or schematic faces (Bindemann et al., 2005; Theeuwes & Van der Stigchel, 2006), naturalistic photographs and videos (Stoesz & Jakobson, 2014), and human artefacts such as paintings (Massaro et al., 2012). It has been argued that the human brain has evolved a highly specialized mechanism for attending to faces (Tsao et al., 2006), rendering faces natural attentional targets. It is, therefore, reasonable to expect that a similar attentional mechanism operates in the context of clothing evaluation, such that when a garment is worn by a visible wearer, viewers' visual attention is automatically directed towards the wearer's face.

Importantly, the attentional capture of faces is unlikely to be equal across all faces. A number of studies have demonstrated that aesthetically pleasing and attractive faces hold an especially privileged attentional status. Attractive faces capture attention more readily compared to unattractive faces, which seems to happen unconsciously, rapidly, effortlessly, and even against ongoing tasks (Leder et al., 2016; Lindell & Lindell, 2014; Sui & Liu, 2009).

Attractiveness halo effect

What are the psychological consequences of this attentional bias towards attractive faces during garment perception? Experimental works on advertisement effectiveness have previously reported on the role of presenter attractiveness, which can lead viewers to evaluate products more positively (Park et al., 2021; Tang et al., 2024; Trampe et al., 2010). A study by Filieri et al. (2023) recently reported its potential mechanisms. That is, while source attractiveness (in this case, attractiveness of the influencer advertising the product) predicted consumer purchase decisions, the attractiveness effect was explained by source expertise and source trustworthiness (see also Amos et al., 2008). In other words, when viewers encounter an attractive model in an advertisement context, they seem to automatically infer positive qualities from the model, which are then transferred to the advertised product.

Such benefits of attractive faces can be construed as an instance of the "attractiveness halo effect" (Batres & Shiramizu, 2022; see also "what is beautiful is good" stereotype by Dion et al., 1972), a cognitive

bias whereby socially desirable traits, states, behaviours, and general life outcomes are attributed to physically attractive individuals. Where the attractiveness of an individual has been shown to bias judgements of academic performance (Talamas et al., 2016), trustworthiness (Gulati et al., 2024), job-related outcomes (Hosoda et al., 2003), and intelligence (Zebrowitz et al., 2002), it seems reasonable to assume that this bias can also extend to the evaluation of objects and products associated with an attractive individual.

Individual differences and the attenuation of the attractiveness halo effect

At the same time, there are reasons to believe that the "attractiveness halo effect" can be attenuated by viewer characteristics. Some works examining mating preferences, for instance, have reported that an individual's attentional bias towards attractive faces was dependent on the participants' personal attitudes towards their current relationship (Maner et al., 2007). On the surface, these findings imply that not everyone responds to visual tasks in the same way. However, they can also represent more systematic variations.

Specifically, theories in visual attention claim that there are at least three components to the attention system: current goals (i.e., top-down goal-driven attention based on a given task or voluntary selection), physical salience (i.e., attention selection based on properties of the stimulus as opposed to the mental state of the observer), and past selection history (i.e., selection bias deriving from past experience of a viewer, regardless of the viewer's explicit awareness; Awh et al., 2012). The last component is particularly relevant; a person's tendency to attend to attractive faces can systematically vary according to their past experiences.

In the present context of fashion preference, variations in personal past history can arise from, for example, the amount of experience one has with particular garments e.g., how often one wears dresses, how many dresses one owns, etc. and, relatedly, one's general engagement with fashion. For example, someone who deals with dresses on a daily basis and is attuned to handling them, compared to those who are not, could be less affected by the model's face when asked to judge a dress. Likewise, someone who is generally more interested in and engaged with fashion may be less influenced by a model when making daily fashion judgements during shopping. Thus, these prior experiences and attitudes can be important personal factors that affect the attentional competition between physical salience (attractiveness of the model's face) and current goals (clothing evaluation).

Overview of studies and methodological considerations

Taken together, the reviewed literature demonstrates the possibility that the attractiveness of a clothing wearer or a model, at least in part, influences a viewer's opinion and preference towards the clothing itself. This influence could then be moderated by one's existing attitudes and experience. This idea was examined across four studies.

Study 1 explored the influence of the model face and the garment itself on the overall evaluation of a dress with a model, via an experimental design. To experimentally control for confounds whilst maximizing external validity, a set of real-life dresses and human faces was selected before creating a naturalistic composite image. Following the analytical framework of Hur et al. (2024), the relative influence of model and dress was statistically tested via a study design in which each participant rated three sets of images (i.e., dress-only, face-only, & dress-with-face composite images) on their pleasantness. Importantly, while evaluations of faces are known to be relatively constant across participants, at least compared to other image categories, it is known that individual taste still accounts for about half the variance in ratings (Brielmann & Pelli, 2018; Vessel et al., 2018). To account for this, the pleasantness of faces and dresses was not based on pre-selected ratings, but on each participant's own ratings. Study 2 was a methodological refinement of Study 1, with a larger sample size and with explicit instructions to participants to focus on the dress when rating the dress-with-face images. Study 2 also examined the moderating role of individual differences, looking at whether

one's attitude towards and experience with dresses could alter the extent to which one is influenced by the model's face.

To provide a more naturalistic account of this process, Study 3 involved a content analysis of interview transcripts. Here, in a naturalistic 1:1 interview setting, participants viewed images of models with dresses and provided a verbal moment-to-moment narrative regarding their visual experience. Afterwards, participants were involved in a discussion explicitly discussing whether they believed a model's face played a role during dress evaluation. In each scenario, statistical analyses were conducted to see if participants thought model faces were considered important during dress evaluation. Lastly, Study 4 sought to further generalize the "model effect" while enhancing the ecological validity of the stimuli. Using an experimental paradigm similar to the first two studies, the "model effect" was tested using a wider range of participants, using real-life fashion photographs involving models that varied in ethnicity, gender, and age, and who wore a wide range of everyday clothing. Study 4 also incorporated the individual differences in general fashion engagement to examine whether the effect generalizes across people with differing levels of fashion involvement.

Research hypotheses

From the preceding discussions, three hypotheses are derived. Firstly, it was hypothesized that model faces would play a partial role in the evaluation of garments with models, which would be experimentally verifiable (Studies 1, 2 and 4). Secondly, it was hypothesized that this effect would be modulated by one's attitude and experience with the target garment and fashion generally (Studies 2 and 4). Thirdly, it was expected that a study executed in a more naturalistic setting would replicate the experimental results (Study 3). That said, the last hypothesis was also considered exploratory, considering the occasional discrepancy observed between actual experience and explicit reporting in the context of aesthetic judgement (e.g., Hur et al., 2020).

STUDY 1

The study investigated the extent to which a model's face influences aesthetic evaluations of a dress (the "model effect"). Participants evaluated individual faces, individual dresses, and composite images combining both. This design allowed for a direct statistical comparison of the relative contributions of facial and dress cues to aesthetic judgements, following the analytical framework of Hur et al. (2024).

Methodology

Participants

54 female participants[1] (aged 19–75 years; $M = 36.31$; $SD = 10.36$; two preferred not to say their age) were recruited via social media platforms and personal networks. No monetary incentives were provided, and anonymity was ensured.

[1]As a reviewer pointed out, the terminology "female participants" may conflate sex assigned at birth (e.g., Assigned Female at Birth; AFAB) with gender identity, which the present work did not distinguish at the time of measurement. In the present work, demographic information was collected via self-report items (e.g., "What is your gender?", with the options of "Female", "Male", "Other", and "Prefer not to say"), and participants who selected "female" are described as "female participants." Accordingly, the gender-related variables in the present work should be understood as reflecting self-reported gender, rather than separate measures of sex assigned at birth or gender identity. For a recent discussions on these topics and recommendations for future research, readers may refer to Beischel et al. (2023) and Darwin (2020).

The sample size was determined through past studies of the "attractiveness halo effect", which demonstrated a fairly large effect size of facial attractiveness on product evaluation (Park et al., 2021; Tang et al., 2024; Trampe et al., 2010). The expected sample size was calculated via G*Power (Faul et al., 2007), for a two-tailed test in a linear multiple regression, with the following parameters as the input: $f^2 = .35$, $\alpha = .05$, $1\text{-}\beta = .80$, and number of predictors = 2. While the recommended sample size was 25, a slightly larger sample was used in the final study to err on the side of caution, given the study's novelty.

Design and procedure

The study had three experimental blocks. The face-only block consisted of participants rating the pleasantness of five different female faces ("How pleasant do you find this face?") Unless mentioned otherwise, all ratings were based on a continuous scale of 1 (indifferent) to 7 (very pleasant). The dress-only block consisted of participants rating the pleasantness of eight different dresses ("How pleasant do you find this dress?"). The dress-with-face block consisted of participants rating the pleasantness of images that had dresses with female models ("How pleasant do you find this look?").

The dress-with-face block consisted of composite images taken from the images of the other two blocks. While the combination of all five faces with all eight dresses creates 40 stimuli in total, it was decided against the idea that each participant would rate all 40 images, as this would render a study session too long and repetitive. Therefore, the 40 composite images were divided into four subgroups of 16 images. For this experimental block, participants were randomly allocated to one of the four subgroups in approximately equal numbers (*N*s = 13, 15, 13, and 13). Statistically, the spread of participants did not deviate from equal allocation, χ^2 (3) = 0.22, $p = .974$, $V = .04$.

Specifically, in each subgroup, the facial stimulus with the neutral level of attractiveness (see below in the Materials section for further details) appeared in all eight dresses, whereas the remaining four faces each appeared twice, each time with a different dress. Within each subgroup, each dress appeared twice, each with a different face. In this way, the four subgroups had equal appearances of each facial and dress stimulus. In addition, the subgroups were balanced in a way that each composite image appeared once (save for the composite image with the neutral face, which was common to all) across all four subgroups.

For all participants, the dress-with-face block appeared first. The appearance order of the ensuing face-only and dress-only blocks was counterbalanced, such that half of the participants rated the faces before the dresses, whereas the other half of the participants rated the dresses before the faces. For each study session, the order in which the stimuli appeared within each block was randomized.

The experimental blocks were preceded by a participant information sheet, a consent form, self-reported demographics of age ("What is your age?") and gender ("What is your gender?"), and were followed by a debrief. The study was administered via Qualtrics, and each study session took approximately 10–15 min.

Materials

Faces

Five standardized neutral-expression Caucasian/White faces were selected from the Chicago Face Database (CFD; Ma et al., 2015). Given the study context of dress evaluation, female faces were selected. The specific selection of the faces was based on the mean attractiveness ratings as provided in the CFD's Norming Data and Codebook. As such, the following facial stimuli were selected: WF-219 (neutral attractiveness), WF-229 (lowest attractiveness), WF-233 (highest attractiveness), WF-242 (high attractiveness), and WF-247 (low attractiveness).

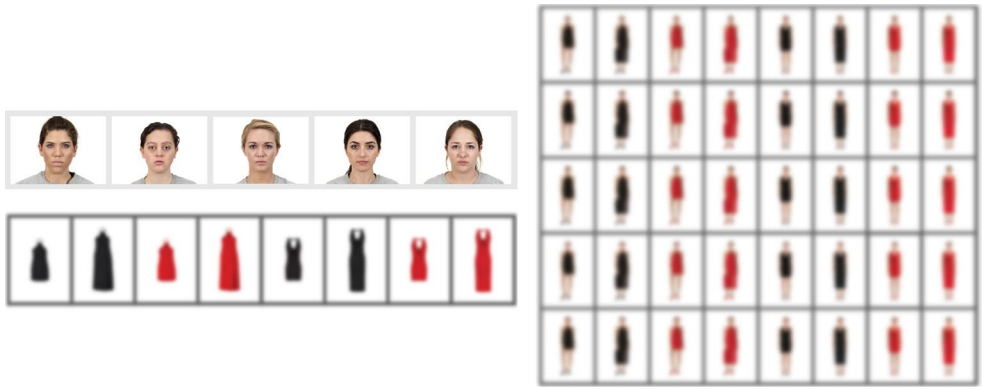

FIGURE 1 Visual stimuli used for Studies 1 and 2. The set of 40 composite images (right) was created from the combination of the five faces (Chicago Face Database; Ma et al., 2015) and eight dresses (all left). Some images are blurred for copyright reasons.

Dresses

The eight dress stimuli were based on variations of two base dress designs (one body-contouring black dress from Armani Exchange, and one more structured, floral-appliqué halter neck dress from Valentino). Each design was digitally manipulated using Adobe Illustrator and Photoshop to create variations in colour (red [RGB 181, 1, 1] vs. black [RGB 0, 0, 0]) and length (short vs. long). The dresses were varied in their colour and length, given the prevalence of studies on these two design attributes, such as the "red dress effect" and the "little black dress" (e.g., Elliot et al., 2013). The colour manipulation drew on two historically and psychologically meaningful dress archetypes. In Western fashion culture, the "little black dress", often associated with Coco Chanel's designs in the 1920s, has long been framed as an elegant and desirable garment that is associated with sophistication and versatility. In contrast, research on the "red dress effect" has suggested that wearing red dresses is associated with passion and romantic attraction. Varying dress colour between red and black introduced variability in the stimuli while holding constant the general desirability of both colours and other design features. To match the facial stimuli, all images had a white background.

Dress-face composite images

The composite images of the facial and dress stimuli were generated using Adobe Illustrator and Photoshop. From the five faces and eight dresses, a total of 40 images were created. In all images, the models were depicted standing still and facing forward against a white background. To test and validate the naturalness of the generated images, five female volunteers who are regular online shoppers were asked to comment on the images. No participants raised questions regarding the quality and naturalness of the images. Figure 1 presents a visualization of the created stimuli.

Analytical approach

The comparison of the five facial stimuli in the face-only block (one stimulus per condition) adopted a one-way repeated-measures ANOVA. Greenhouse–Geisser adjustment to the degrees of freedom was applied in the event of a violation of sphericity. All post hoc pairwise comparisons were Bonferroni-corrected.

The analysis of the dress-only and dress-with-face blocks adopted linear mixed models (LMM), where there were nested data. The LMMs were set up similarly to previous works that explored aesthetic or general evaluations using LMM (e.g., Hur et al., 2024; Vartanian et al., 2019), using R's

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics (Mean [SD]) for Study 1's dress-only block ratings.

	Short	Long
Black	4.43 (1.40)	4.92 (1.37)
Red	4.12 (1.40)	4.68 (1.39)

lme4 (Bates et al., 2015). Estimates of t-statistics were computed using the Satterthwaite approximation of degrees of freedom via the *lmerTest* package (Kuznetsova et al., 2017). Equality of regression coefficient testing was assessed using the Wald test of linear hypothesis implemented in the *car* package (Fox & Weisberg, 2019). In line with Barr et al. (2013), the random effects structure was initially specified to be maximal, including both random intercepts for stimuli and participants and random slopes (allowing fixed effects to vary across both stimuli and participants). The structures were simplified in the event of convergence errors. Please note that, as linear mixed-effect model outputs do not yield a single default standardized effect size metric, unstandardized coefficients were reported.

The analysis of the dress-with-face block was modelled after Hur et al. (2024), which predicted the independent influence of auditory and visual stimuli on audiovisual multimodal stimuli. Unless mentioned otherwise, all analyses were run via R or SPSS.

Results

Evaluation of facial stimuli

When participants rated the pleasantness of all five faces in the face-only block, the five faces were not rated equally (F [2.64, 137.46] = 108.69, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.68$). Post hoc pairwise comparisons of the five faces revealed that the ratings reflected the Chicago Face Database's attractiveness levels ($M_{WF\text{-}219} = 3.76$, $SD_{WF\text{-}219} = 1.30$; $M_{WF\text{-}229} = 2.07$, $SD_{WF\text{-}229} = 1.10$; $M_{WF\text{-}233} = 5.21$, $SD_{WF\text{-}233} = 1.50$; $M_{WF\text{-}242} = 4.63$, $SD_{WF\text{-}242} = 1.01$; $M_{WF\text{-}247} = 2.48$, $SD_{WF\text{-}247} = 1.24$). Mean ratings of all five faces were significantly different from each other at $p < .05$.

Roles of colour and length on dress evaluation

Predicting the pleasantness rating of dresses when the dresses were presented without models (dress-only block), there was no statistically significant effect deriving from colour (red vs. black; $b = 0.14$, F [1, 4.02] = 1.29, $p = .320$), length (short vs. long; $b = 0.26$, F [1, 4.48] = 4.46, $p = .095$), nor their interaction ($b = -0.02$, F [1, 4.00] = 0.02, $p = .899$). Descriptive statistics can be found in Table 1.

Impact of model face and dress on the evaluation of composite image

The pleasantness ratings of the dress-face composite images (dress-with-face block) for each participant were predicted by the pleasantness ratings given to the individual faces (face-only block) and dresses (dress-only block). Both the pleasantness of individual dresses ($b = 0.50$, t [41.36] = 8.31, $p < .001$) and faces ($b = 0.56$, t [30.63] = 9.73, $p < .001$) positively predicted the pleasantness of their composite images, indicating that the perceived pleasantness of both dresses and faces contributed to the evaluation of the composite image. The coefficients were not found to be significantly different from each other ($\Delta b = 0.06$, χ^2 [1] = 0.39, $p = .532$), meaning that the relative impact of the face and dress on the composite image was similar. Visualization can be found in Figure 2.

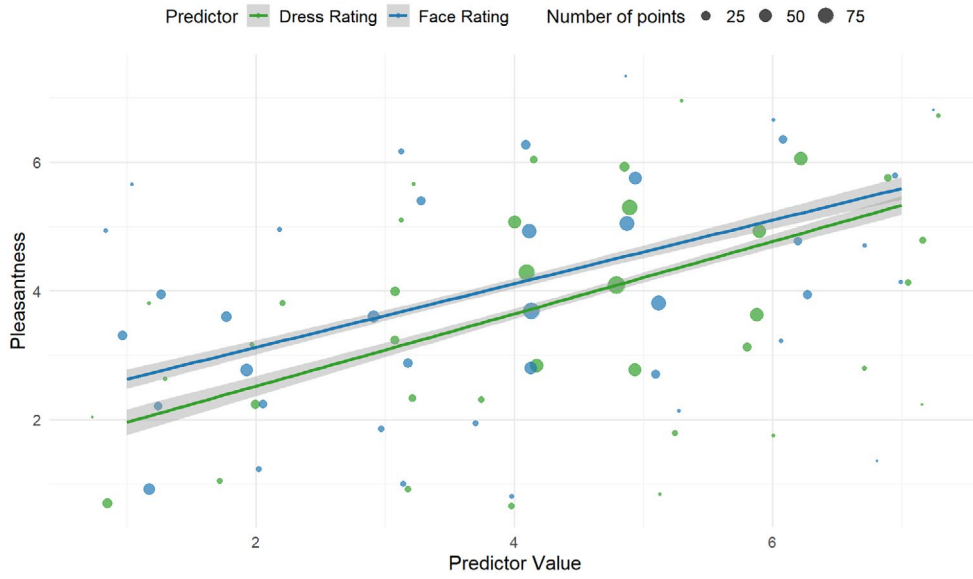

FIGURE 2 Impact of model face and dress on the evaluation of composite image (Study 1). Based on raw data. The grey shaded area around the lines represents 95% CI.

Discussion

In answering the question of whether a model's face impacts the evaluation of a dress presented with a model (the "model effect"), the results demonstrate that the model's face has a positive impact. Furthermore, this effect was comparable to the pleasantness deriving from the dress itself. Concerning the judgement of the dress itself, neither its colour nor its length had any overall impact on pleasantness. These results support the view that even in the absence of preference towards certain design elements of a dress, the evaluation of it may depend on contextual factors, such as one's evaluation of the model's face.

STUDY 2

To derive a more generalizable and methodologically improved result of Study 1, the sample size was increased in Study 2, participant instructions were refined (e.g., participants were explicitly asked to rate the dress during the composite image rating task), and individual differences measures regarding attitude towards and experience with dresses were included. The study of individual differences would enable a better understanding of whether the "model effect" is modulated by one's familiarity or positive views towards dresses, or whether it exists regardless of these measured individual variations.

Methodology

Participants

180 female participants (aged 18–55 years; $M = 25.65$; SD = 6.84; 36 preferred not to say their age) were recruited via social media platforms and personal networks. No monetary incentives were provided,

and anonymity was ensured. The sample size is comparable to the sample used in previous works on the "attractiveness halo effect" that have explored interactions in their analyses (Trampe et al., 2010).

Design and procedure

The design and procedure were identical to Study 1, apart from three changes. Firstly, in the dress-with-face block, to study the impact of the model on dress evaluation more explicitly, participants were asked to rate the pleasantness of the dress specifically ("How pleasant do you find this dress?") instead of being asked to rate the pleasantness of the general "look." Secondly, for all rating trials, all the scales were also renamed so that participants now rated on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much).

Thirdly, three individual differences questions were added to the end of the study, measuring one's experience and attitude towards dresses, namely how much one enjoys wearing dresses ("Do you enjoy wearing dresses?", measured on a scale of 1 [not at all] to 7 [very much]), the number of dresses one owns ("How many dresses do you own?", measured on a scale of 1 [none], 2 [1–3], 3 [4–6], 4 [7–9], and 5 [10 or more]) and how often one wears dresses ("How often do you wear dresses?", measured on a scale of 1 [a few times a week], 2 [once a week], 3 [a few times a month], 4 [once a month or less], 5 [a few times a year], and 6 [never]). As before, primarily for the dress-with-face block, participants were randomly allocated to one of the four subgroups in approximately equal numbers (*N*s = 41, 49, 45, and 45). Statistically, the spread of participants did not deviate from equal allocation, χ^2 (3) = 0.71, p = .868, V = .04.

Materials

The materials were identical to those of Study 1, apart from the aforementioned three measures added at the end of the study.

Analytical approach

The general analytical approach was identical to that of Study 1.

Results

Evaluation of facial stimuli

In the face-only block, there was evidence to suggest that the five faces were not rated equally in terms of pleasantness across all participants (F [3.42, 611.52] = 96.29, p < .001, η_p^2 = 0.35). Interestingly, the pleasantness ratings did not reflect the Chicago Face Database's ratings, with WF-242 being rated highest (M = 5.04, SD = 1.57), followed by the order of WF-233 (M = 4.57, SD = 1.57), WF-247 (M = 3.82, SD = 1.65), WF-229 (M = 3.40, SD = 1.71), and then WF-219 (M = 3.21, SD = 1.63). When post hoc pairwise comparisons were run, apart from the last two faces (p = .698), all other faces were rated significantly differently from each other at p < .001.

Roles of colour and length on dress evaluation

Predicting the pleasantness rating of dresses when the dresses were presented without models (dress-only block), there was no statistically significant effect deriving from colour (red vs. black; b = 0.04, F

TABLE 2 Descriptive statistics (Mean [SD]) for Study 2's dress-only block ratings.

	Short	Long
Black	4.04 (1.58)	4.44 (1.60)
Red	3.96 (1.58)	4.37 (1.73)

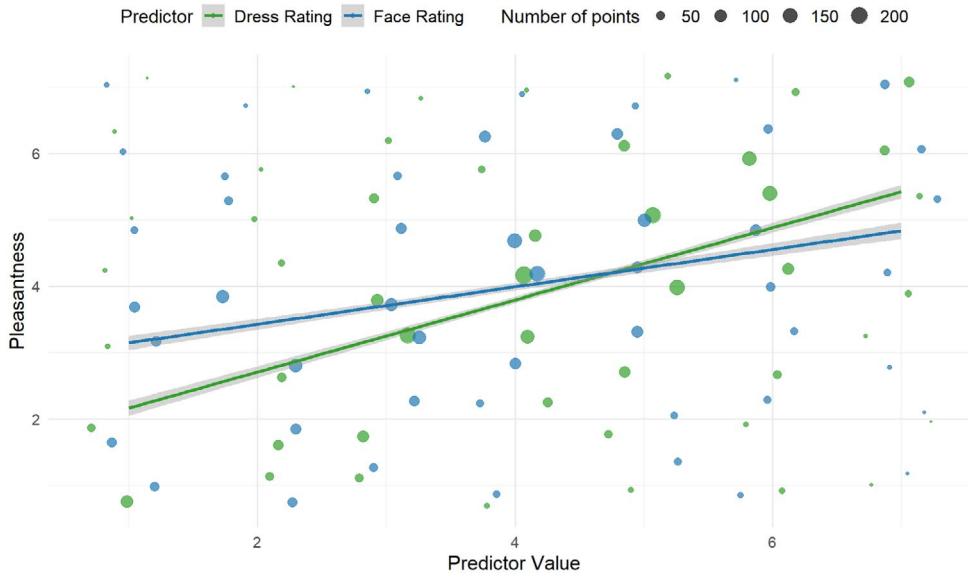

FIGURE 3 Impact of model face and dress on the evaluation of composite image (Study 2). Based on raw data. The grey shaded area around the lines represents 95% CI.

[1, 4.50] = 0.21, p = .669), length (short vs. long; b = 0.20, F [1, 4.22] = 5.52, p = .075), nor their interaction (b = 0.00, F [1, 4.00] = 0.00, p = .976). Descriptive statistics can be found in Table 2.

Impact of model face and dress on the evaluation of composite image

A set of analyses was conducted to explore the relative influence of the face and dress on the evaluation of the dress in the composite image in the dress-with-face block.[2] Both the pleasantness of individual dresses (b = 0.62, t [163.39] = 12.98, p < .001) and faces (b = 0.17, t [117.60] = 4.61, p < .001) positively predicted the pleasantness rating of the dress when presented as composite images, indicating that the perceived pleasantness of both dresses and faces contributed to the evaluation of the dress in the composite image. The coefficients were found to be significantly different from each other (Δb = 0.45, χ^2 [1] = 44.97, p < .001), with the coefficient of the dress being around 3.5 times that of the face. Visualization can be found in Figure 3.

Comparing the coefficients between Studies 1 and 2 using the formula from Clogg et al. (1995) and Paternoster et al. (1998), the influence of dress did not differ across the studies (Δb = 0.12, z = 1.56, p = .119). However, the influence of face was stronger for Study 1 compared to that of Study 2 (Δb = 0.39, z = 5.70, p < .001).

[2]Three participants were removed from all analyses for the dress-with-face block data, as they did not vary in their ratings for the block.

Moderating role of individual differences

Can this "model effect" be modulated by the viewer's personal attitude towards and experience with dress, the target garment? To answer this question, the above analyses were re-run three separate occasions, with each of the three individual differences measures capturing attitudes towards and experience with dresses (i.e., enjoyment of wearing dresses, number of dresses owned, and frequency of wearing dresses) entered as a moderator in turn. Given the multiple testing of three additional analyses and to account for inflated Type 1 error, the reported *p*-values for the interactions have been Bonferroni-corrected.

No moderation analyses were statistically significant, indicating that the observed "model effect" on dress evaluation held regardless of one's attitude towards and experience with dresses. Specifically, the enjoyment variable did not interact with dresses ($b=0.00$, t [157.41] $=0.10$, $p=1.000$) and faces ($b=-0.03$, t [125.11] $=0.76$, $p=1.000$) as predictors. Similarly, the number of dresses owned did not interact with dresses ($b=-0.03$, t [160.78] $=0.57$, $p=1.000$) and faces ($b=0.01$, t [118.01] $=0.15$, $p=1.000$) as predictors. Lastly, the frequency of wearing dresses did not interact with dresses ($b=0.10$, t [152.55] $=2.17$, $p=1.000$) and faces ($b=0.02$, t [113.41] $=0.68$, $p=1.000$) as predictors.

Discussion

Using a larger sample size and refined participant instructions (e.g., explicit direction to focus on the dress), the positive effect of the model's face during dress evaluation (the "model effect") was replicated, albeit weaker than in Study 1. This effect was not modulated by participants' experience with or attitude towards dresses, indicating that the effect was there regardless of one's perceptions towards dresses. The present study thus increases the validity and generalizability of the "model effect." Also replicating Study 1, there was a lack of influence of design elements (colour and length) on dress evaluation.

STUDY 3

In Study 3, the "model effect" was studied beyond experimental designs, via a naturalistic approach. In a 1:1 interview setting, participants were given a set of images and asked to narrate their moment-to-moment experience with each image. Participants were afterwards directly asked whether they believe the model's face plays an important role when evaluating a dress. The results were analysed via a content analysis of interview transcripts.

Methodology

Participants

30 female participants (aged 18–40 years; $M=25.13$; SD $=4.80$) were recruited via social media platforms and personal networks. No monetary incentives were provided, and anonymity was ensured.

Design and procedure

A set of online semi-structured interviews took place, as part of a larger project on fashion psychology. For each interview, the relevant questions for the present work were presented at the start of the interview; thus, the answers to these questions are not influenced by previous questions. There were three questions in the following order: (1) a moment-to-moment verbal description of viewing a picture of a model wearing a red dress ("As you view this dress, please describe your experience. Where are you

looking, and what are you thinking as you look? Feel free to view the image for as long as you like. We're interested in your moment-by-moment experience of looking at the dress"), (2) the same task, but this time a different model wearing a black dress, and (3) a discussion (without visual stimuli) regarding the importance of the model's face during everyday evaluations of dresses ("Do you think a model wearing a dress influences your opinion of the dress? Is there a particular attribute of the model you look at? How important is the model's face?").

Each interview was preceded by a participant information sheet and consent form, and was followed by a debrief. Each interview took approximately 30 min.

Materials

Two images of models wearing dresses were taken from shopping websites. To emphasize the ecological validity of the interviews (and to avoid the impression of a controlled experiment), the two dresses were not identical in design but shared key parameters (e.g., mid-length and exposed arms). In both images, the models had a minimal pose, looked straight at the camera, and were set against a neutral white/grey background without any environmental objects.

Analytical approach

The data were analysed using content analysis of the interview transcripts. Specifically, for each image, whether each participant spontaneously mentioned the model's face during their moment-to-moment viewing description was binomially coded (yes/no). Similarly, a separate binary code (yes/no) was adopted to determine if each participant verbally reported that the model's face played an important role in the evaluation of dresses.

To examine whether people cite face as a contextual cue during dress evaluation, assuming it is not an important cue, a series of binomial tests was run to determine if the proportion of people who mentioned the model's face during the answering of the three questions was significantly different from .00.[3] To determine if the proportion of people who highlighted the model's face differed from those who did not, a series of χ^2 goodness-of-fit tests (testing equal proportion) were conducted.

Results

The binomial tests revealed that faces were mentioned significantly more (13% of participants for each image; ps $<.001$, hs $=.67$) than the null probability (probability of 0) for both images. Similarly, when participants were directly asked about the relevance of faces, a higher proportion responded positively (23% of participants; $p<.001$, $h=.94$) than would be expected under the null proportion.

Furthermore, the χ^2 goodness-of-fit tests revealed that more participants did not highlight the model's face during the viewing of the first image (χ^2 [1] $=16.13$, $p<.001$, $V=.73$), the second image (χ^2 [1] $=16.13$, $p<.001$, $V=.73$), and the discussion (χ^2 [1] $=8.53$, $p=.003$, $V=.53$).

Discussion

Adopting a naturalistic approach, this study tested the "model effect" outside of an experimental paradigm. The results replicate the findings of the two previous studies, confirming that the model's face plays a role in the evaluation of dresses.

[3]As the null probability cannot technically be 0, .001 was used as the null proportion.

STUDY 4

Study 4 returned to the experimental approaches of Studies 1 and 2 while incorporating insights from Study 3. This study had two main aims. First, it sought to extend the generalizability of the observed "model effect" by expanding the stimulus set beyond dresses worn by Caucasian/White women to include a broader range of everyday garments and models systematically varying in ethnicity, age, and gender. The participant sample was also balanced by male and female participants. In addition, general interest and engagement with fashion were measured as moderating individual differences variables, allowing the examination of whether the "model effect" varied across individuals with differing levels of fashion involvement. Second, consistent with Study 3's aim of increasing the naturalism of the stimuli, Study 4 employed real-life images rather than the composed images used in Studies 1 and 2, thereby enhancing the ecological validity of the findings.

Methodology

Participants

161 participants (aged 19–65 years; $M = 37.09$; SD = 11.54) were recruited via Prolific, where participants were paid the amount in line with Prolific's official guidelines. Participant anonymity was ensured throughout the study.

Design and procedure

As in Study 2, all participants first rated the whole image (garment-with-face) block ("How pleasant do you find this outfit?"), followed by a face-only rating block ("How pleasant do you find this face?"), and a garment-only rating block ("How pleasant do you find this outfit?"). The order of the face-only and garment-only blocks was counterbalanced across participants.

Differing from Studies 1 and 2, the "composite", garment-with-face, images were no longer artificial composite images, but rather real-life images that could be found on the internet. 72 such images were selected and were balanced with respect to gender (two levels: male vs. female), ethnicity (three levels: East Asian vs. White vs. Black), and age (two levels: approximately 18–25 years vs. 25 years old and older). Care was taken to ensure that a wide range of everyday clothing, as outlined in Hur et al. (2025), was represented across the images.

The 72 images were then pseudo-randomly assigned to six subgroups of 12 images, with each subgroup containing all combinations of the model characteristics outlined above. During data collection, participants were randomly allocated to one of the six subgroups in approximately equal numbers (Ns = 25, 29, 26, 28, 24, and 29). Statistically, the distribution of participants did not deviate from equal allocation, χ^2 (5) = 0.85, $p = .972$, $V = .03$.

The ratings blocks were preceded by a measure of demographics (age and gender), and were followed by a block measuring one's attitude towards and experience with fashion. Fashion attitudes were measured via Gutman and Mills' (1982) fashion orientation scale, which produced four independent measures, namely fashion leadership ($\alpha = .86$), fashion interest ($\alpha = .83$), the importance of being well-dressed ($\alpha = .79$), and anti-fashion attitude ($\alpha = .31$). Anti-fashion attitude was dropped from subsequent analyses, considering its low internal reliability. Due to low variability, measures regarding one's work experience in the fashion industry and fashion education (measured in years), while measured, were not used in the analysis.

Materials

The 72 images (of 72 unique faces and clothing) were taken from publicly available marketing materials produced by existing brands, as well as from publicly accessible online platforms (e.g., Pinterest). To maximize the naturalness of the face-only and garment-only images deriving from these sources, ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2026) was used to crop out and standardize the images. Specifically, the face-only images were cropped to resemble passport-style photographs, with a neutral background and all models wearing a white t-shirt. The garment-only images were edited such that the model was removed, leaving only the garment on a neutral background. Two independent judges verified that this method produced superior stimuli compared to more traditional, manual cropping methods, specifically that the resulting cropped images appeared natural, as if they had been originally photographed in this format.

Analytical approach

The general analytical approach was similar to that of Study 2. Given a key aim of the study to further generalize the "model effect", the analysis reported the impact of model face and garment evaluations on the evaluations of the whole, garment-with-face images. In the individual differences moderation analysis, the dress-related individual differences questions from Study 2 were replaced with the fashion orientation measures as the moderators.

Results

Impact of model face and garment on the evaluation of the whole image

Both the pleasantness of individual garments (b=0.71, t [174.91]=36.84, p<.001) and faces (b=0.13, t [1413.72]=7.00, p<.001) positively predicted the pleasantness rating of the whole images. The coefficients were significantly different from each other (Δb=0.58, χ^2 [1]=407.70, p<.001), with the coefficient of the garment being around 5.5 times that of the face.

How do these coefficients compare to those of Study 2? The influence of garment/dress did not significantly differ across the studies (Δb=0.09, z=1.75, p=.080). Similarly, the influence of face did not significantly differ across the studies (Δb=0.04, z=0.97, p=.333). Taken together, these results indicate that they are comparable to Study 2's results.

Moderating role of individual differences

Fashion interest interacted with garment evaluation (b=0.03, t [1882.20]=2.92, p=.021) in predicting whole image ratings, indicating that those with a high interest in fashion relied more on garment information when evaluating a whole, garment-with-face image. No other interactions were significant. Specifically, fashion interest did not interact with face evaluation (b=−0.03, t [1762.93]=2.29, p=.132). Fashion leader did not interact with garment evaluation (b=0.02, t [1880.55]=2.23, p=.155) and face evaluation (b=−0.02, t [1727.49]=1.72, p=.512). The importance of being well dressed did not interact with garment evaluation (b=0.02, t [1881.43]=1.49, p=.813) and face evaluation (b=−0.01, t [1715.92]=0.81, p=1.000). These results illustrate that, although personal interest in fashion increases the weight given to garments when evaluating whole images, the influence of the model's face remains consistent regardless of fashion engagement.

Discussion

Study 4 further strengthened evidence for the "model effect" by demonstrating its robustness across a more diverse and generalizable set of stimuli and participants. Moreover, the absence of moderation by fashion attitudes suggests that the effect generalizes across individuals with varying levels of engagement with fashion. Finally, the use of real-world images likely to be encountered online provides an additional layer of ecological validity.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Fashion, being a commonplace and essential product in day-to-day life, is rarely examined as an isolated object and phenomenon. Previous research has notably discussed how clothing and its wearer are holistically perceived (Hester & Hehman, 2023), and how garments affect the evaluation of their wearer (e.g., Elliot et al., 2013). Conversely, whether and how the wearer influences the evaluation of a garment has rarely been tested. This is even though faces, especially attractive ones, have a privileged position for visual attention (e.g., Lindell & Lindell, 2014), and facial attractiveness can positively bias the evaluation of associated objects and features (e.g., Park et al., 2021).

The present work addressed the question of whether the attractiveness of a model's face influences the visual evaluation of clothing, aka the "model effect." Across four studies, there was converging evidence that this was the case. This effect was observed in both experimental (Studies 1, 2, and 4) and naturalistic, non-experimental (Study 3) settings. When participants were explicitly instructed to focus on the garment (Studies 2, 3 and 4), the influence of the face was weaker compared to when they were not (Study 1), but it remained statistically significant. This pattern suggests that while explicit task goals can attenuate the effect, they do not remove it altogether. It should also be noted that individual differences regarding clothing experience and attitude, whether it was for the particular target garment, that is, dress (Study 2) or general interest and engagement with fashion (Study 4) did not moderate this effect, implying that the "model effect" operates independently of one's personal engagement and familiarity. As such, two out of the three hypotheses were supported, and these studies make a convincing case for the generalizability of the effect.

The present work's findings are consistent with prior literature on the "attractiveness halo effect" (Batres & Shiramizu, 2022), which has been studied frequently in advertising and marketing (e.g., Amos et al., 2008). According to these studies, physical attractiveness biases extend to evaluations of associated attributes or objects. The present research advances this literature in three key ways. First, the present work presents one of the first known empirical cases to test this idea in the context of fashion, manipulating the attractiveness of the model of a dress. Second, it demonstrates that the halo effect can operate even when the source of attraction (the model's face) is independent from the object of evaluation (the garment). Third, it extends the phenomenon into an aesthetic rather than commercial context, showing that mere visual co-presence suffices for positive spill-over effects. These views suggest that attractiveness-based biases are not limited to social, consumer, or target object-based judgements, but also shape broader aesthetic experiences of everyday objects.

From a cognitive perspective, the findings highlight a potential interplay between attention capture and evaluation judgements. Attractive faces may draw early visual attention (Lindell & Lindell, 2014), increasing their visual saliency, which, in turn, facilitates spill-over effects to nearby objects such as garments. This process is likely to occur automatically and involuntarily, which is consistent with Sui and Liu (2009), who reported that attention towards facial beauty automatically competed against ongoing tasks. For this reason, the "model effect" was persistently observed in the present work, even when participants were explicitly asked to focus on the clothing.

The model effect in practice

For marketing, advertising, and fashion design, the "model effect" suggests that the choice of model can systematically guide or bias consumers' evaluations of a product. Accordingly, companies or individuals who advertise products should remain attentive to which models potential consumers may find attractive.

However, this is by no means a straightforward process. While the present work consistently demonstrated that what a viewer perceives as attractive in a model's face influences subsequent product evaluations, it was not the aim of the study to specify what those faces look like. Although the Chicago Face Database (Ma et al., 2015) was used as a guiding reference to approximate the broad distribution of attractiveness ratings in faces, the normative, standardized measures provided by the original authors were not used in any part of the analysis. Indeed, Study 2 found that the original ratings did not replicate the source ratings from Ma et al. (2015). This aligns with the view that, while ratings of facial attractiveness tend to be consistent across observers, this consistency is only relative to other image types, and that individual taste still accounts for about half the variance in facial attractiveness ratings (Brielmann & Pelli, 2018; Vessel et al., 2018). The more appropriate baseline assumption, therefore, is to expect individual variation rather than uniformity (see Albohn et al. (2025) for a recent examination of individual differences in facial attractiveness).

There is also an ethical dimension. Even if the results had identified an "ideal" face, one must recognize that public-facing advertisements may also shape, rather than merely mirror or reflect, societal pressures surrounding idealized beauty (Campbell et al., 2025). In the most detrimental cases, such portrayals may impose psychological burdens on those who do not conform to these idealized views (Sarwer et al., 2022). In other words, while the present findings in themselves paint a robust phenomenon, they invite a number of nuanced considerations when it comes to real-world applications.

Strengths and limitations

A particular strength of the present work lies in its triangulated design across four studies. The combination of controlled experimental manipulations (Studies 1, 2, and 4) with qualitative, ecologically valid data (Study 3) enhances both internal and external validity. The use of participants' individual ratings as predictors of facial attractiveness in the experiments provides additional validity. As discussed above, participants' face ratings diverged from those reported in the Chicago Face Database (Ma et al., 2015). Thus, by utilizing individual ratings and not relying on aggregated group-level data of facial attractiveness, the latter of which is a common practice in research, the results accounted for these individual differences and present a more realistic picture of the reported effects. Overall, the replication of the "model effect" across distinct methodological contexts demonstrates its robustness as a perceptual and evaluative bias in the context of fashion.

Nevertheless, several limitations are worth considering. Firstly, the stimuli consisted of static, front-facing images under neutral emotional conditions. In everyday fashion contexts, bodily movement and posture may further amplify or diminish the "model effect." Indeed, previous works have explored that the smiling of models may have detrimental effects on advertisement effectiveness (Essiz et al., 2025), and works have also reported on the affective perception of particular body movements (Christensen et al., 2016). Systematic control of these dynamic and contextual stimuli could reveal additional nuances of the "model effect." Secondly, while the present work reported a general impact of facial attractiveness, previous research has suggested that perceptions of facial attractiveness are influenced by the viewer's sexual orientation, sex assigned at birth, and gender identity (e.g., Ciocca et al., 2014). Such a nuanced analysis was not conducted in the present work, but it, including the differentiation between the said variables, may further elucidate the mechanisms through which the "model effect" operates.

Thirdly, while the present work estimated the importance of visual attention as an important mechanism of the "model effect", the study's reliance on self-reported ratings may, in turn, under- or

over-estimate the automatic components of visual attention. While Study 3 used moment-to-moment verbal reports to track a viewer's gaze, eye-tracking (as was done in Tang et al., 2024) could provide a more direct measure that is not mediated by language, in which researchers can examine how, when, and for how long the fixation on the model face occurs, and how this may impact subsequent experiences and evaluations. This could further clarify the dynamics of gaze and visual attention in the context of how the facial attractiveness of a model influences garment evaluation.

CONCLUSION

The present research provides convergent evidence that the facial attractiveness of a model systematically shapes the visual evaluation of the clothing they are wearing. This "model effect" underscores the role of the social context of aesthetic experience, such that even in object-focused tasks and judgements, human features exert a powerful influence on the viewer. These findings highlight the importance of contextual factors in shaping aesthetic preference and challenge object-centred accounts of aesthetic experience by demonstrating that evaluations are not determined solely by features or evaluations of the target object.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Young-Jin Hur: Conceptualization; formal analysis; methodology; project administration; writing – original draft; visualization. **Bunyaporn Burechittinanta:** Conceptualization; methodology; investigation; visualization; writing – review and editing.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Raw data from the present work are available in a trusted repository at https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.32877431.

ETHICS STATEMENT

All studies were considered minimal risk research and were ethically approved by the London College of Fashion, University of the Arts London.

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