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To impress or not to impress: The power of first impressions

By Che Nooryohana Zulkifli

I recently tried a social experiment to see how people would treat and perceive me based on what I wear. The first attempt was all about glamming up with stylish clothes, a fancy handbag, dainty stilettos, and a radiant face full of makeup. I strutted into a well-known global beauty store that boasts nearly 340 brands. They have their own private label, known for being the most budget-friendly option in the store. If you're eyeing a lipstick from other brands, be ready to spend at least RM70. And for bigger goodies like eyeshadow palettes or compact powders? Well, let's just say your wallet might need a pep talk!

As I wandered from brand to brand, a sales assistant quickly approached me with a cute basket, ready for my potential haul. She greeted me warmly and offered her assistance, but I politely declined, saying I was just browsing. Despite my refusal, she stayed by my side, following me around while enthusiastically promoting newly launched products, hoping to pique my interest. After making a full round of the store, I returned the basket, thanked her, and left empty-handed, feeling like I had escaped a haunted house. She replied with a warm 'you're welcome'.

A week later, I decided to revisit the store, but this time I dressed down. I wore my favourite worn-out sneakers, mismatched and dull pants and shirt, and went makeup-free. Entering the store was a completely different experience – no sales assistants hovered around, allowing me to browse in peace. I had to go on a solo mission to grab a basket from the entrance since no one was around to help me shop for a few things.





Even though it felt like a true freedom, I couldn't help feeling ignored and unimportant. Eventually, a sales assistant followed me at a distance, but she didn't say a word. She tailed me for some time, but still nothing happened. Was she worried I might shoplift? After adding items to my basket, I headed to the checkout counter. There, she finally spoke monotonously, asking if I wanted to join the membership. Without hesitation, I reached for my membership card and handed it to her. As she scanned it, her expression shifted to surprise upon discovering that I am a Gold member, a status achieved by spending at least RM4500 within 12 months. Then only, she smiled at me (finally!), and I completed my purchase.

So, that is the reality.



There is also another incident that I just learned from a friend of mine. She's always been casual and relaxed with what she wears, deliberately avoiding the spotlight. One day, she went grocery shopping. She donned a baggy floral buttoned blouse with loose dark slacks and flat slip-on. Her scarf was also pinned unfashionably, which explains the less work she had to do before she arrived at the store. As she was wrapping up her shopping, she needed help reaching for something on the top shelf. She asked a young male shopkeeper nearby, likely in his 20s, for assistance. As they started conversing, she was taken aback when he addressed her 'makcik' (aunty) instead of 'kakak' (sister) since she was only in her early 40s. Without missing a beat, she corrected him, leaving him red-faced and quickly apologised. When she told me about it, I couldn't help thinking I could see where the shopkeeper was coming from!



When people see us for the first time, what we wear is often the initial impression they use to shape their perception of us. Until they get to know us better, our appearance is all they have to go on. I firmly believe that how we perceive and feel about these initial judgments plays a crucial role in how we respond to being misinterpreted or misunderstood. If you don't think first impressions of your self-image matter, then it shouldn't bother you when people judge you differently at first glance. After all, people can easily make assumptions about our age, marital status, and even

profession based on what we wear. For instance, my husband once mistook a teacher for a bus driver, and he was really upset about this blunder, so much so that he even talked about it to many people. It clearly had something to do with what he wore that day, but now you see how difficult it is for people to let go of such mistakes. This scenario shows that most of us want to be understood for who we truly are and generally seek others' validation and positive impressions (Hepper et al., 2011; Svetieva & Lopes, 2022).





Crafting an image without considering one's personality and behaviour is no easy task. Unlike personality, our choice of attire is within our control and can be planned in advance. We can convey professionalism, confidence, and approachability by thoughtfully selecting what we wear. This can significantly impact how others perceive our competence and reliability, especially in professional or social settings where first impressions matter. It could foster a positive environment where interactions are more productive and respectful. Choosing attire that reflects our values and enhances our self-assurance is not just about fashion but also a strategic tool for effective communication and relationship-building. So, the best advice I can offer is: don't feel pressured to dress to impress, much less to dress to kill. Instead, dress to delight, making it easier for people to appreciate and understand you without putting undue stress on your ego.



References

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