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We Are Veterans: The Therapeutic Effects of Clothing Related to Self-Concept

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Keywords: *Veterans, self-concept, clothing selection, life satisfaction*

Introduction: Veterans' war involvements influence their life experiences after coming back from the wars, and furthermore related to their self-concept and emotions (Ferrajão, & Oliveira, 2015). For example, they often suffer from posttraumatic symptoms related to stressful life events and personality schemas after the wars. Due to the emotional and mental transition, veterans may have a unique self-concept and may behave differently from the people who do not experience any severe life incidents. However, there is a lack of understanding about veterans' self-concept and various needs related to their self-concept. Thus, this study examines the self-concept (i.e., self-efficacy, public self-consciousness, and self-esteem) of veterans as they are the underserved but important group to understand and help. Also, clothing is one of the most immediate needs of individuals and is a therapeutic tool to understand and improve individual's self-concept and behavior (Damhorst et al., 2005). Therefore, this study investigates how clothing choices are related to veteran's self-concept and life satisfaction.

Literature Review and Hypotheses Development: The concurrent return of veterans from war increased and the presence of them has become more prevalent in social and occupational life, attention to the various needs of veterans has increased (Grossman, 2009). Especially, there is little research about veterans and their dress behavior. Thus, this study is designed to understand veterans' dress behavior, specifically clothing choices based on their self-concept. Furthermore, clothing can play an important role as a meaningful expression of the identity (Damhorst et al., 2005). However, apparel consumers' perspectives, especially veterans, of clothing have been largely ignored, as existing research on veteran consumers is both recent and severely limited. Furthermore, life satisfaction is used as a consequence of self-esteem, as psychological perceptions and evaluations about their lives (Diener et al., 1985).

This study applied self-concept and symbolic interaction theory to develop the conceptual framework. Based on the self-concept theory, the multi-dimensional aspects of self-concept is applied in this study (e.g., self-efficacy, public self-consciousness, and self-esteem). According to symbolic interaction theory, clothing can be a meaningful tool to symbolize person's characteristics and to communicate with others (Kaiser, Nagasawa, & Hutton, 1991). The conceptual framework for this study was adopted and revised from the previous literature (XXX, XXXX) based on self-concept and symbolic interaction theory. Three hypotheses were developed based on literature review and theoretical framework and these are:

H1: Veterans' a) self-efficacy and b) public self-consciousness will influence their self-esteem.

H2: Veterans' self-esteem will influence their clothing selection preferences: a) fashionability; b) individuality; c) assurance; d) camouflage.

H3: Veterans' self-esteem will influence their life satisfaction.

Methodology and Results: A quantitative survey method was used for this study. Participants were recruited from the National Panel of Qualtrics Incorporation. The study is designed to collect the U.S. national representative data for providing more empirical evidence on the U.S. veterans' responses of retailers' behavioral tracking practices. The targeted respondents are the U.S. consumers aged above 18 who are veterans. The total of 325 usable data was collected. The questionnaire was developed based on the scales adopted from previous literature (e.g., Kwon & Parham, 1994). The mean age of the respondents was 53.43. Male comprised 54.3% of respondents and 45.7% were female. The average household income for respondents was around \$57,500. With regard to ethnicity, the majority of them were Caucasian (76.9%).

Based on the validation of scales from the measurement of specific constructs by confirmatory factor analysis, structural equation modeling was used to test the hypotheses. Results for the main effects of the conceptual model revealed a χ^2 of 2541.66 (df = 811; $p < .000$), CFI of .95, RMSEA of .08, NFI of .93, TLI of .94, and $\chi^2/df = 3.13$. The model was deemed to be a good fit for the data. Results indicated that for veterans, self-esteem is related to self-efficacy and public self-consciousness, and that self-esteem positively influences life satisfaction. Additionally, a significant relationship was found between self-esteem and clothing selection motivations. Self-efficacy positively influenced self-esteem ($\gamma_{11}=6.20$, $p<0.001$), while public self-consciousness negatively influenced self-esteem ($\gamma_{12}=-11.11$, $p<0.001$). Self-esteem negatively influenced veterans' four clothing selection motivations ($\beta_{21}=-5.22$, $p<0.001$; $\beta_{31}=-7.35$, $p<0.001$; $\beta_{41}=-3.84$, $p<0.001$; $\beta_{51}=-3.99$, $p<0.001$) and positively influenced life satisfaction ($\beta_{61}=2.19$, $p<0.01$). Therefore, H1, H2, H3, and H4 were fully supported.

Conclusion and Implications: This research helps to contribute to apparel consumer behavior theory and to provide a better understanding of veterans' clothing selection experiences. Veterans who are confident about their capabilities of dealing with difficult situations are more likely to have high self-esteem, while veterans who are concerned about what other people think about them have low self-esteem. Veterans with low self-esteem tend to select clothing to assure themselves and fashionable. At the same time, veterans with low self-esteem select clothing to hide their appearances or figures. Thus, therapeutic effects of clothing selection (e.g., improving self-esteem) was found for veterans, as the clothing needs of veterans can be different from those of non-veterans. Therefore, specific therapeutic functions of clothing for veterans can be further studied, such as make-over or selecting right styles to improve self-esteem.

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