

Toward holistic frontline employee management: An investigation of the interplay of positive emotion displays and dress color

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Abstract

Frontline employees' visual appearance is important in many service industries. Positive emotion displays are especially crucial, as are esthetic displays such as dress color. However, emotion and esthetic displays have commonly been examined independently of each other in marketing research. We contribute to research and practice by drawing attention to customers' holistic perception of frontline employees, indicating that emotion displays and esthetic displays, such as dress color, are jointly processed. Across four experiments, we demonstrate that the effects of positive emotion displays on customer tipping and employee warmth can be amplified by using warm (vs. cold) dress colors. Drawing on emotions as social information theory, we show that this interaction is explained by a cognitive inferential (i.e., the perception of fit) and not by an affective pathway through positive affect. Our findings guide managers on how to choose dress colors to increase the beneficial effects of positive emotion displays.

KEYWORDS

esthetic displays, emotions as social information, employee dress color, fit, frontline employee management, positive emotion displays, tipping, warmth

1 | INTRODUCTION

Managing frontline employees and their visual appearance is key to service success (Baker et al., 1994; Pounders et al., 2015). Consequently, many service firms systematically manage employees' emotion and esthetic displays (Paul et al., 2015). Service firms like Disney credit their success to frontline employees delivering service with a smile while maintaining a coherent and Disney-typical look (Walt Disney World, 2003). Regarding emotion displays, most industries such as aviation (United Airlines; Josephs, 2018), gastronomy (McDonald's; McDonald's, 2020), or retail (Apple; Gallo, 2012) consistently focus on the display of positive emotions and

implement respective guidelines in their employee manuals and recruiting practice. Concerning esthetic displays, which predominantly entail employees' dress (Paul et al., 2015), company policies are more heterogeneous and change over time. These changes are particularly evident in terms of dress color (Disney; Ziggy, 2019; United Airlines; The United Airlines Historical Foundation, 2020). For example, Apple has employed yellow, blue, and black dress colors in recent years (Appleseed, 2014) and McDonald's has switched from red over blue to gray (Hatic, 2017). Regarding the coherent appearance of frontline employees, the question remains: Do changes in dress color influence customers' perceptions of positive emotion displays?

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Research highlights the importance of both positive emotion (Barger & Grandey, 2006; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2006) and esthetic displays (Barney et al., 2020; Pounders et al., 2015) but examines these factors independently from each other. Extant research widely neglects possible interdependencies and, by extension, the possible effects that esthetic displays may have on the effectiveness of positive emotion displays. We question this separate consideration of both displays in research and practice as the perception of human beings is holistic (Aviezer et al., 2012; Berg, 2015) and emotion displays are not processed in isolation (for a review, see Matsumoto & Sung Hwang 2010). For example, Aviezer et al. (2012) show that faces and bodies are processed as one unit and that a congruent body facilitates the interpretation of facial expressions, and Freeman et al. (2011) show that perceived facial ethnicity is affected by signals from clothing. These findings indicate that customers perceive frontline employees holistically, suggesting that factors such as dress color can influence the effects of emotion displays. Emotion displays (van Kleef, 2014) and dress colors (Labrecque et al., 2013) have an inherent meaning (e.g., happiness and friendliness). Because the fit of emotion displays and dress colors may improve marketing outcomes due to customers' general preference for consistency (Oskamp & Schultz, 2005), we ask whether companies can foster the effects of positive emotion displays on marketing outcomes by using dress colors that convey meaning in line with employees' emotion displays.

To answer this question, we examine whether and how the effects of positive emotion displays on important marketing outcomes including a consequential one (i.e., customer tipping) are moderated by dress color and present three contributions for theory and practice. First, we combine research on emotion and esthetic displays by experimentally investigating the interplay of emotion display and dress color to predict important marketing outcomes. This joint investigation of both displays considers the notion of customers' holistic perception of frontline employees, which has been widely neglected in past research. Across four studies, we consistently show that the effects of positive emotion displays on marketing outcomes are amplified when employees wear a warm-colored (vs. cold-colored) dress. We validate our findings by showing that the effects hold for different settings (restaurant visit and grocery store shopping), for both male and female frontline employees, for different combinations of emotion displays with warm (red, orange, and yellow) and cold (green, blue, and white) colors, as well as for online and lab experiments in the United Kingdom and Germany.

Second, we shed light on the underlying mechanism of the focal interaction, thus expanding research on emotion displays and emotions as social information (EASI; van Kleef, 2014). According to EASI theory, emotion displays influence customers through inferential and/or affective processes (Keltner & Haidt, 1999). As research on positive emotion displays to date largely focuses on affective processes (e.g., Barger & Grandey, 2006; Otterbring, 2017; Pugh, 2001), we contribute by showing that the interaction of positive emotion displays and dress color on marketing outcomes is driven by the cognitive (i.e., inferential) perception of fit between positive emotion

displays and warm dress colors, thus extending existing findings and fostering theory development.

Third, our findings inform managers about the importance of holistically managing frontline employees by showing that different types of displays (i.e., emotion and esthetic displays) can have a cross-pollinating effect. We advise managers to choose warm dress colors if service firms seek to maximize the benefits of positive emotion displays in service delivery and show that positive emotion displays, in general, increase customers' perceptions of employee warmth. Beyond dress colors, our research indicates that other cues in the environment of frontline employees might impact the effects of positive emotion displays. Therefore, we recommend that managers consider relevant environmental cues in frontline employee management to ensure desired outcomes.

2 | CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

2.1 | Positive emotion displays

Positive emotion displays have been commonly conceptualized in terms of smiles (e.g., Hennig-Thurau et al., 2006; Tsai, 2001), defined as a "noticeable upward twist of the employee's lips" in the context of services encounters (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2006, p. 63). The effects of positive emotion displays can, according to EASI theory, be explained by cognitive inferences and affective reactions of customers, in which both mechanisms may either work together or one of them dominates (van Kleef, 2014). Extant research on the display of positive emotion has focused on affect as the process through which positive emotion displays impact customer attitudes and behavior (e.g., Barger & Grandey, 2006; Otterbring, 2017; Pugh, 2001). Furthermore, previous research presents boundary conditions of the positive effects of positive emotion displays. These include, for example, technical service quality (Söderlund & Rosengren, 2010) and customers' emotional expressivity (Luong, 2005). There is, however, a scarcity of boundary conditions relating to employees and their appearance (Keh et al., 2013), which is surprising as employees are at the heart of service delivery.

Positive emotion displays are crucial in service delivery as they are directly observable by customers and can, therefore, positively influence customer outcomes (Keh et al., 2013; Tsai, 2001). Positive emotion displays serve as important indicators of customers' global judgments of frontline employees, as they are some of the most formative nonverbal cues in interpersonal interactions (Bayes, 1972). They convey meanings such as happiness (Söderlund & Rosengren, 2008), friendliness (Gabriel et al., 2013), sociability (Mehu et al., 2007), positive intent (Abe et al., 2002) as well as positive emotionality in general (Harker & Keltner, 2001). These meanings of smiles lead to attraction in social interactions (Lau, 1982). Neutral emotion displays, on the other hand, convey considerably less meaning to customers (Mehu et al., 2007).

2.2 | Dress color

Employee dress can be defined as “any intentional modification of appearance” (Damhorst et al., 2000, p. 2) and is an important component of frontline employees’ esthetic displays (Pounders et al., 2015). Color, as a facet of dress (Rafaeli & Pratt, 1993), is formed by hue, saturation, and lightness. Hue refers to the proportion of red, yellow, and blue in the respective color (Mehta & Zhu, 2009; Thompson et al., 1992). Saturation (also known as chroma or colorfulness) refers to the intensity of hue, whereas lightness (also known as value) reflects the amount of black and white (Mehta & Zhu, 2009; Thompson et al., 1992). Colors influence observers by conveying meaning (Labrecque et al., 2013). One major theoretical foundation for differentiating colors regarding their inherent meaning is the dichotomy of warm (e.g., yellow, orange, and red) and cold (e.g., blue, green, and white) colors (Chebat & Morrin, 2007; Crone, 1999).

Colors are important for marketers in many areas, including advertising, branding, and store atmospherics, as they affect marketing outcomes such as perceptions of store environments and products (Bellizzi et al., 1983) as well as purchase intentions (Labrecque & Milne, 2012). Considering the meaning that dress colors convey, research shows that warm colors such as yellow, orange, and red are associated with social activity, happiness, love, intimacy, and positive emotional content (Fenko et al., 2010; McMenamin et al., 2013; Palmer et al., 2013). On the other hand, cold colors are perceived to be cool, calming, peaceful, relaxing, and gentle (Bellizzi & Hite, 1992; Bellizzi et al., 1983; Madden et al., 2000).

2.3 | Customer tipping and employee warmth as important marketing outcomes

We consider tipping as real spending behavior and perceived employee warmth as customers’ general impression of an employee as two key consequential and perceptual marketing outcome variables. Customer tipping is defined as “the customer’s performance appraisal in which they voluntarily reward the employee’s performance beyond the contracted service price” (Lechner et al., 2020, p. 5). It is a central indicator for the perceived service performance (Hülsheger et al., 2015) and plays an important role for companies and frontline employees as it may be a wage component (cf. U.S. Department of Labor, 2021).

Warmth reflects the degree to which individuals, groups, and brands are perceived as friendly, sincere, helpful, and trustworthy (Cuddy et al., 2008). It represents one component of the stereotype content model that is complemented by competence (Cuddy et al., 2011), referring to the degree to which others are judged to be efficient, intelligent, conscientious, and skilled (Cuddy et al., 2008). The model aims to explain how people make sense of each other and states that warmth and competence are two key dimensions underlying this process (Cuddy et al., 2008), which have been shown to represent important marketing outcomes as well (Wang et al., 2017).

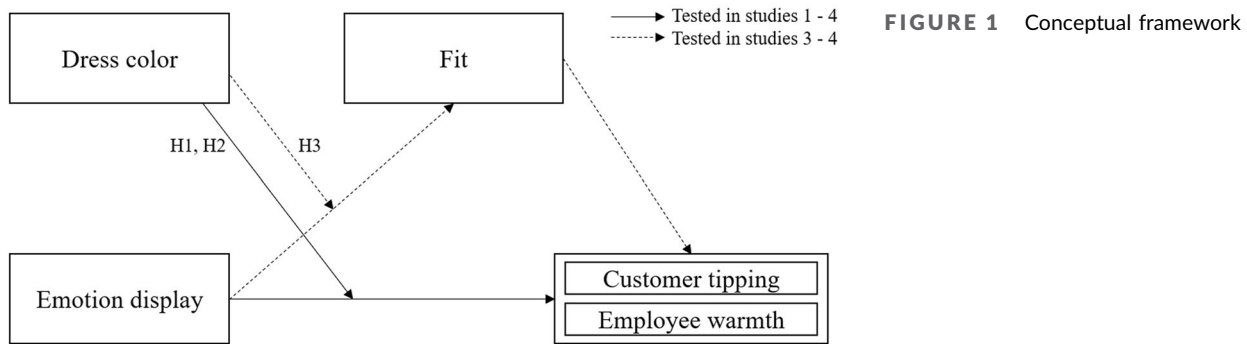
2.4 | The interplay of emotion displays and warm versus cold dress colors

We hypothesize an interaction effect of emotion displays and dress color on customer tipping and employee warmth as extant research suggests that customers perceive frontline employees holistically (Aviezer et al., 2012; Berg, 2015). We argue that dress color influences the effects of positive emotion displays on marketing outcomes and that this interaction effect can be explained by fit. Fit is conceptually defined as “the sense or logic of the entities belonging together at an abstract level” (Pounders et al., 2015, pp. 677–678). The perception of fit results from a cognitive process in which customers directly assess the degree to which two entities such as emotion displays and dress color are similar and relevant to each other (Spiggle et al., 2012). We argue that positive (vs. neutral) emotion displays increase the perception of fit, if they are accompanied by warm dress colors. This is due to the meanings described above, which are coherent in terms of positive valence and prosocial signaling for positive emotion displays and warm dress colors. On the other hand, fit perceptions are not expected to increase for positive (vs. neutral) emotion displays combined with cold dress colors because of the lacking similarity of their meanings. We further argue that the interaction of emotion displays and dress color on fit in turn has a positive impact on customer tipping and perceptions of employee warmth due to customers’ general preference for consistency (Oskamp & Schultz, 2005).

We do not expect that the interaction of emotion display and dress color affects perceptions of employee competence due to customers’ varying levels of sensitivity toward information related to warmth and competence. Humans use judgments of warmth to evaluate whether strangers in unfamiliar environments are well-intentioned or hostile (Cuddy et al., 2008). The urgency by which such judgments must be made explains why people are generally more sensitive to warmth-related cues as opposed to competence-related cues (Cuddy et al., 2011). Further, dress colors are less likely to influence the effects of positive emotion displays on perceived employee competence due to the more complex cognitive process required. A potential effect of positive emotion displays on employee competence would arise only indirectly from customers’ conclusion that positive emotion displays might reflect frontline employees’ ability to fulfill their work role (cf. Hochschild, 1983; Pugh, 2001). This increased complexity makes perceptions of fit with colors that might convey meanings related to competence less likely (cf. Henry, 1980). Based on our considerations, we formulate the following three hypotheses, which are summarized in Figure 1

Hypothesis 1: *Positive (vs. neutral) emotion displays lead to higher customer tipping when frontline employees wear warm-colored (vs. cold-colored) dress.*

Hypothesis 2: *Positive (vs. neutral) emotion displays lead to higher customer perceptions of employee warmth when frontline employees wear warm-colored (vs. cold-colored) dress.*



Hypothesis 3: *The interaction of emotion displays and dress color works through fit in that positive (vs. neutral) emotion displays of employees wearing warm-colored dress lead to a stronger positive indirect effect on customer perceptions of employee warmth as opposed to frontline employees wearing cold-colored dress.*

2.5 | Overview of studies and color pretest

Across four studies, we test whether dress color interacts with frontline employees' emotion displays in predicting important marketing outcomes. In Study 1, we establish this effect concerning real spending behavior (i.e., customer tipping in a restaurant context; H1) and conceptually replicate the effect using employee warmth (H2) as customers' general impression of an employee in Studies 2–4. In Studies 3 and 4, we shed light on the underlying psychological process by testing the predicted mediated moderation through fit (H3) and rule out positive affect as an alternative explanation. We do not hypothesize effects on customer perceptions of employee competence but we report respective effects for the sake of completeness of the stereotype content model in our studies and to demonstrate that the focal interaction does not affect employee competence.

Because dress color is a key manipulation in our studies, we conducted a pretest on all colors used to ensure that they were perceived positively by consumers. For each color used in our studies, participants in a sample of 69 German participants agreed (mean values above 5 on a scale from 1, strongly disagree, to 7, strongly agree) that the respective color is "suitable," "appropriate," "realistic," and "modern."

3 | STUDY 1

In Study 1, we sought to show that warm dress color can improve the beneficial effects of frontline employees' positive emotion displays on real customer spending behavior. To do so, we examine the interaction effect of emotion displays and dress color on customer tipping in a restaurant setting.

3.1 | Participants and procedure

We conducted a 2 (emotion display: positive vs. neutral) \times 2 (dress color: red vs. green) randomized between-subjects online experiment with a sample of 260 participants from a large customer panel in the UK. No cases were excluded from analysis. Participants averaged 37.30 years ($SD = 11.06$; 60.80% were women). None of the participants reported suffering from color vision deficiency. Cell sizes ranged from 61 to 67.

In the experiment, the participants had to imagine going out for dinner (Lechner & Mathmann, 2021). They then saw a randomly assigned series of three pictures depicting a female employee in a real restaurant. We used picture stimuli as they are frequently employed in service research (Keh et al., 2013; Lechner & Paul, 2019) and are ecologically valid (Bateson & Hui, 1992). Pictures included a speech balloon with short statements of the employee and were accompanied by brief text instructions leading participants through the scenario (e.g., "After you have ordered the food and drinks, you have a nice evening together and have a few short contacts with the employee."). Afterward, participants completed the survey and were then debriefed.

3.2 | Experimental manipulations

For the manipulation of emotion displays, we hired a female model with work experience in customer service to ensure natural movement and poses in front of the camera. A professional photographer took pictures in a local restaurant. The employee held menus in her hand and looked at the camera. In line with extant research, the employee showed a natural smile in the positive emotion display condition, whereas her facial expression was neutral in the neutral emotion display condition (Keh et al., 2013; Otterbring, 2017; Söderlund & Rosengren, 2008).

To manipulate dress color, the photographer changed the color of the employee's dress using Adobe Photoshop CC 2015.1. We chose red and green as warm and cold colors respectively as both are commonly used in color research (Niasta Kayser et al., 2010; Seo & Scammon, 2017). Following extant research (Elliot & Niasta, 2008; Labrecque & Milne, 2012), we kept

saturation (100%) and lightness (70%) constant to provide an unconfounded test for the effect of color hue. The HSL color codes for the red and green used in the study were 0,100,70 (RGB: 255,100,100) and 120,100,70 (RGB: 100,255,100; see Web Appendix A).

3.3 | Measures and manipulation checks

We measured customer tipping by allocating participants with an extra payment of 10 pence each, of which they could use any value from 0 to 10 pence to tip the employee (adapted from Simpson et al., 2018). Depending on what participants entered, we reduced the additional payout participants received and collected tips for the employee respectively. For the emotion display manipulation check, we used two items adapted from Diefendorff et al. (2006; split-half reliability = 0.85), which were measured on seven-point Likert scales with higher values indicating stronger agreement. The dress color manipulation check was categorical (see Web Appendix B for the list of all measures).

Participants in the positive emotion display condition reported significantly higher perceptions of positive emotion displays (positive: $M = 6.39$, $SD = 0.91$; neutral: $M = 3.61$, $SD = 1.43$; $T(258) = 18.68$, $p < 0.05$). Participants also correctly recalled dress color ($\eta^2(1) = 5.34$, $p < 0.05$). Both manipulations were unconfounded with each other (all $ps > 0.1$). Thus, our experimental manipulations were successful. Web Appendix C shows the color hue recall accuracy per experimental condition.

3.4 | Results

We tested our hypotheses using a two-way analysis of variance (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics of all our studies). The main effects of emotion display and dress color on customer tipping were not significant (positive: $M = 7.55$, $SD = 3.39$; neutral: $M = 6.86$, $SD = 3.40$; $F(1,256) = 2.47$, ns , $\eta_p^2 = 0.01$; red: $M = 7.47$, $SD = 3.46$; green: $M = 6.92$, $SD = 3.33$; $F(1,256) = 1.75$, ns , $\eta_p^2 = 0.01$). In support of H1, the two-way interaction effect of emotion display and dress color on customer tipping was significant ($F(1,256) = 5.14$, $p < 0.05$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$). Positive emotion displays had a significantly stronger positive effect on customer tipping when employees wore red- compared to green-colored dress. This is also reflected in the conditional effects of emotion displays on customer tipping, which are significant for warm dress colors (positive emotion display \times red dress color: $M = 8.27$, $SD = 3.31$; neutral emotion display \times red dress color: $M = 6.67$, $SD = 3.45$; $F(1,256) = 7.55$, $p < 0.05$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.03$) but not for cold dress colors (positive emotion display \times green dress color: $M = 6.77$, $SD = 3.32$; neutral emotion display \times green dress color: $M = 7.06$, $SD = 3.36$; $F(1,256) = .24$, ns , $\eta_p^2 = 0.00$). All results reported in this section remained unchanged in the direction of effects and significance when we controlled for customer gender. Web Appendix D shows a table with all cell means, standard deviations, and further simple effects assessment.

4 | STUDY 2

Study 2 was aimed at showing that the beneficial effects of positive emotion displays on marketing outcomes can be increased by warm dress colors not only considering real spending behavior but also concerning customers' general impression of frontline employees (i.e., employee warmth). To add to the generalizability of our results, we used a different combination of warm and cold dress colors by adapting the level of lightness to 25% instead of 70% in Study 1, a grocery store setting instead of a restaurant, and a German student sample instead of a customer panel in the UK.

4.1 | Participants and procedure

We conducted a 2 (emotion display: positive vs. neutral) \times 2 (dress color: red vs. green) randomized between-subjects laboratory experiment with a sample of 173 students from a large south German university. We excluded one case from analysis as one subject participated twice, yielding a final sample size of 172. Participants were on average 22.75 years old ($SD = 3.16$; 54.10% were women). None of the participants reported suffering from color vision deficiency. Cell sizes ranged from 40 to 45.

In the experiment, the participants had to imagine shopping at a local grocery store and spotting a tasting booth for spreads while walking through the aisles (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000). They then saw a randomly assigned picture of an employee at the tasting booth. The picture was complemented by a short text (i.e., "The employee greets you and offers you to taste different spreads"). Afterward, participants completed the survey and were then debriefed.

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics, reliabilities, and correlations

	M	SD	Cronbach's α	Correlations		
				1	2	3
<i>Study 1</i>						
Tipping	7.20	3.40	n.a.			
<i>Study 2</i>						
Warmth	4.82	1.51	0.96			
Competence	4.56	1.11	0.92	0.61		
<i>Study 3</i>						
Warmth	4.71	1.53	0.95			
Competence	4.51	1.13	0.90	0.60		
Fit	4.00	1.67	0.97	0.56	0.41	
<i>Study 4</i>						
Warmth	5.18	1.22	0.91			
Competence	5.21	1.04	0.92	0.64		
Fit	4.84	1.41	0.95	0.61	0.52	
Positive affect	4.17	1.28	0.89	0.55	0.60	0.54

4.2 | Experimental manipulations

For the manipulation of emotion display, we used the same female model from Study 1. A professional photographer took pictures in a grocery store setting, in which the model showed a natural smile in the positive emotion display condition, whereas her facial expression was neutral in the neutral emotion display condition (Keh et al., 2013; Otterbring, 2017; Söderlund & Rosengren, 2008).

As in Study 1, we used red and green for our manipulation of dress color but changed the lightness of the colors to add to the generalizability of our results. Saturation (100%) and lightness (25%) were kept constant across conditions. The HSL color codes for the red and green colors used in Study 2 were 0,100,25 (RGB: 128,0,0) and 120,100,25 (RGB: 0,128,0; see Web Appendix A).

4.3 | Measures and manipulation checks

All scales were measured on seven-point Likert scales. We measured employee warmth ($\alpha = 0.96$) and competence ($\alpha = 0.92$) with two four-item scales from Wang et al. (2017). We used the same manipulation checks for emotion displays (split-half reliability = 0.80) and dress color as in Study 1 (see Web Appendix B). All scales showed acceptable levels of reliability (see Table 1).

Participants in the positive emotion display condition reported significantly higher perceptions of positive emotion displays (positive: $M = 6.32$, $SD = .85$; neutral: $M = 4.08$, $SD = 1.67$; $T(170) = 11.03$, $p < 0.05$). Participants also correctly recalled dress color ($\bar{d}^2(3) = 164.84$, $p < 0.05$). Both manipulations were unconfounded with each other (all $ps > 0.1$). Thus, our experimental manipulations were successful.

4.4 | Results

We tested our hypotheses using two-way analyses of variance. Regarding employee warmth, we found a significant main effect of emotion display on employee warmth (positive: $M = 5.79$, $SD = .83$; neutral: $M = 3.82$, $SD = 1.38$; $F(1,168) = 128.10$, $p < 0.05$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.43$) but no main effect for dress color (red: $M = 4.76$, $SD = 1.58$; green: $M = 4.88$, $SD = 1.42$; $F(1,168) = 0.21$, ns , $\eta_p^2 = 0.00$). In support of H2, the two-way interaction effect of emotion display and dress color on employee warmth was significant ($F(1,168) = 4.20$, $p < 0.05$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.02$). Positive emotion displays had a significantly stronger positive effect on employee warmth when employees wore a red- compared to green-colored dress. This is also reflected in the conditional effects of emotion displays on employee warmth, which are greater for warm (positive emotion display \times red dress color: $M = 5.93$, $SD = 0.81$; neutral emotion display \times red dress color: $M = 3.62$, $SD = 1.30$; $F(1,168) = 92.64$, $p < 0.05$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.36$) than for cold dress colors (positive emotion display \times green dress color: $M = 5.65$, $SD = 0.85$; neutral emotion display \times green dress color: $M = 4.05$, $SD = 1.46$; $F(1,168) = 41.48$, $p < 0.05$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.20$). Concerning employee

competence, we obtained a significant main effect of emotion display (positive: $M = 4.89$, $SD = 1.00$; neutral: $M = 4.22$, $SD = 1.11$; $F(1,168) = 16.83$, $p < 0.05$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.09$). All other effects were insignificant. The results reported in this section remained unchanged in direction of effects and significance when we controlled for customer gender.

5 | STUDY 3

In Studies 1 and 2, we were able to show that the positive effects of positive emotion displays on customer tipping and employee warmth can be amplified with the use of warm (vs. cold) dress colors. To show that the effects hold independently of employee gender, we used a male model for Study 3 instead of a female model as in Studies 1 and 2. Study 3 was further aimed at showing that the mechanism explaining the focal interaction is customers' perception of fit (H3). Specifically, we expect that fit explains the increased positive effects of positive (vs. neutral) emotion displays on employee warmth due to the use of warm (vs. cold) dress colors. Also, the goal was to further extend the range of warm and cold colors to add generalizability to our results.

5.1 | Participants and procedure

We conducted a 2 (emotion display: positive vs. neutral) \times 2 (dress color: orange vs. blue) randomized between-subjects laboratory experiment with a sample of 198 students from a large south German university. No cases were excluded from analysis. Participants were on average 23.96 years old ($SD = 4.88$; 61.10% were women). None of the participants reported suffering from color vision deficiency. Cell sizes ranged from 46 to 54. The scenario and procedure were identical to Study 2.

5.2 | Experimental manipulations

For Study 3, we recruited a male model with work experience in customer service whose pictures were taken in the same shooting reported in Study 2. The model showed a natural smile in the positive emotion display condition, whereas his facial expression was neutral in the neutral emotion display condition. Further, we used orange and blue for warm and cold dress colors respectively (Babin et al., 2003). As before, saturation (100%) and lightness (50%) were kept constant across conditions. The HSL color codes for the orange and blue colors used in Study 3 were 39,100,50 (RGB: 255,165,0) and 240,100,50 (RGB: 0,0,255; see Web Appendix A).

5.3 | Measures and manipulation checks

All scales were measured on seven-point Likert scales. The measures for employee warmth ($\alpha = 0.95$) and employee competence ($\alpha = 0.90$)

were the same as in Study 2. We measured fit with four items adapted from Simmons and Becker-Olsen (2006; $\alpha = 0.97$). Our model variables showed acceptable levels of reliability, convergent validity (all AVEs > 0.5), and discriminant validity (all AVEs > all squared correlations; Fornell & Larcker, 1981). We measured the manipulation checks for emotion displays (split-half reliability = 0.86) and dress color as in Study 2.

Participants in the positive emotion display condition reported significantly higher perceptions of positive emotion displays (positive: $M = 6.29$, $SD = .84$; neutral: $M = 3.74$, $SD = 1.57$; $T(196) = 14.11$, $p < 0.05$). Participants also correctly recalled the displayed dress color ($\chi^2(2) = 194.04$, $p < 0.05$). Both manipulations were unconfounded with each other (all p s > 0.1). Thus, our experimental manipulations were successful.

5.4 | Results

Regarding employee warmth, we found a significant main effect of emotion display (positive: $M = 5.52$, $SD = 1.14$; neutral: $M = 3.95$, $SD = 1.46$; $F(1,194) = 72.50$, $p < 0.05$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.27$) but no main effect for dress color (orange: $M = 4.76$, $SD = 1.63$; blue: $M = 4.65$, $SD = 1.44$; $F(1,194) = 0.38$, ns , $\eta_p^2 = 0.00$). In support of H2, the two-way interaction effect of emotion display and dress color on employee warmth was significant ($F(1,194) = 4.44$, $p < 0.05$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.02$). Positive emotion displays had a significantly stronger positive effect on employee warmth when employees wore orange- compared to blue-colored dress. This is also reflected in the conditional effects of emotion displays on employee warmth, which are greater for warm (positive emotion display \times orange dress color: $M = 5.78$, $SD = 1.00$; neutral emotion display \times orange dress color: $M = 3.81$, $SD = 1.52$; $F(1,194) = 54.26$, $p < 0.05$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.22$) compared to cold dress colors (positive emotion display \times blue dress color: $M = 5.28$, $SD = 1.21$; neutral emotion display \times blue dress color: $M = 4.08$, $SD = 1.40$; $F(1,194) = 21.38$, $p < 0.05$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.10$).

To test the underlying mechanism of the interaction of emotion display and dress color regarding employee warmth through fit (H3), we used bootstrapping in the Process macro for SPSS (Model 8; 10,000 samples; Hayes, 2018). In line with H3, we found a significant interaction effect of emotion display and dress color on fit ($\beta = 0.57$, $SE = 0.10$, $p < 0.05$; $\Delta R^2 = 0.12$; see Table 2). Specifically, positive (vs. neutral) emotion displays resulted in higher fit for participants in the orange color dress condition ($\beta = 1.17$, $SE = 0.15$, $p < 0.05$), but no such difference occurred in the blue color dress condition ($\beta = 0.02$, $SE = 0.14$, ns). Fit exerted a positive significant effect on warmth ($\beta = 0.41$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < 0.05$). In line with H3, we found a significant difference between the conditional indirect effects of emotion displays on employee warmth through fit (index = 0.47, $SE = 0.11$, 95% CI [0.27, 0.70]). In the orange dress color condition, positive emotion displays had a positive indirect effect on employee warmth ($\beta = 0.47$, $SE = 0.09$, 95% CI [0.31, 0.66]), whereas the indirect effect in the blue dress color condition was insignificant ($\beta = 0.01$, $SE = 0.06$, 95% CI [-0.11, 0.13]). Concerning employee competence, only the main

TABLE 2 Regression results of Studies 3 and 4

	Study 3			Study 4						
	Fit (M) Coeff. (SE)	95% CI	Warmth (Y) Coeff. (SE)	95% CI	Fit (M) Coeff. (SE)	95% CI	Positive Affect (M) Coeff. (SE)	95% CI	Warmth (Y) Coeff. (SE)	95% CI
Intercept	4.03* (0.10)	3.82, 4.23	3.10* (0.25)	2.61, 3.59	5.98* (0.46)	5.08, 6.88	3.85* (0.44)	2.99, 4.72	2.13* (0.42)	1.31, 2.96
Emotion display	0.59* (0.10)	0.39, 0.80	0.55* (0.09)	0.37, 0.73	-1.39* (0.46)	-2.29, -0.49	-0.34 (0.44)	-1.21, 0.53	0.33 (0.31)	-0.28, 0.95
Dress color	0.23* (.10)	0.02, 0.43	-0.03 (0.08)	-0.20, 0.13	-0.46* (0.18)	-0.81, -0.11	0.09 (0.17)	-0.25, 0.43	0.17 (0.12)	-0.07, 0.41
Emotion display \times dress color	0.57* (0.10)	0.37, 0.78	-0.04 (0.09)	-0.21, 0.14	0.73* (0.18)	0.38, 1.08	0.28 (0.17)	-0.07, 0.61	0.01 (0.12)	-0.23, 0.26
Fit	-	-	0.41* (0.06)	0.29, 0.52	-	-	-	-	0.32* (0.06)	0.22, 0.43
Positive affect	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.26* (0.06)	0.15, 0.37
	$R^2 = 0.25$		$R^2 = 0.43$		$R^2 = 0.19$		$R^2 = 0.09$		$R^2 = 0.53$	
	$F(3,194) = 21.60$, $p < 0.05$		$F(4,193) = 36.27$, $p < 0.05$		$F(3,200) = 15.52$, $p < 0.05$		$F(3,200) = 6.33$, $p < 0.05$		$F(5,198) = 43.68$, $p < 0.05$	

* $p < 0.05$.

effect of emotion display was significant (positive: $M = 4.77$, $SD = 1.13$; neutral: $M = 4.28$, $SD = 1.08$; $F(1,194) = 10.00$, $p < 0.05$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.05$). All results reported in this section remained unchanged in direction of effects and significance when customer gender was included as a control.

6 | STUDY 4

Study 4 sought to further replicate the findings from our previous studies concerning H2 and H3. Also, in Study 4, we used another combination of warm and cold colors. Research on positive emotion displays posits affect as a main mechanism through which positive emotion displays elicit effects on marketing outcomes (Barger & Grandey, 2006; Otterbring, 2017; Pugh, 2001). Because we cannot definitely rule out affect as an alternative account to fit as a mediator, we tested affect as a competing mediator for the inferential pathway through fit according to EASI theory in Study 4.

6.1 | Participants and procedure

We conducted a 2 (emotion display: positive vs. neutral) \times 2 (dress color: yellow vs. white) randomized between-subjects online experiment with a sample of 204 participants from a large customer panel in the UK. No cases were excluded from analysis. Participants were on average 36.51 years old ($SD = 12.44$; 58.30% were women). None of the participants reported suffering from color vision deficiency. All cell sizes were 51. The scenario and procedure were identical to Study 2.

6.2 | Experimental manipulations

For the manipulation of emotion display, we used the same materials as in Study 2 (i.e., a female employee). To manipulate dress color, we used yellow and white for the manipulation of warm and cold dress colors (Madden et al., 2000). The HSL color codes for the yellow and white colors used in Study 4 were 60,100,50 (RGB: 255,255,0) and 0,0,100 (RGB: 255,255,255; see Web Appendix A).

6.3 | Measures and manipulation checks

All scales were measured on seven-point Likert scales. Employee warmth ($\alpha = 0.91$), employee competence (0.92), and fit (0.95) were measured as in Study 3. We measured positive affect with the established ten-item scale from Watson et al. (1988; $\alpha = 0.95$; see Web Appendix B). All four constructs showed acceptable levels of reliability, convergent validity (all AVEs > 0.5), and discriminant validity (all AVEs $>$ all squared correlations; Fornell & Larcker, 1981). We measured the manipulation checks for emotion display (split-half reliability = 0.76) and dress color as in Study 3.

Participants in the positive emotion display condition reported significantly higher perceptions of positive emotion displays as opposed to participants in the neutral emotion display condition (positive: $M = 6.03$, $SD = 1.04$; neutral: $M = 3.93$, $SD = 1.53$; $T(202) = 11.48$, $p < 0.05$). Participants also correctly recalled the displayed dress color ($\chi^2(3) = 171.75$, $p < 0.05$). Both manipulations were unconfounded with each other (all $ps > 0.1$). Thus, our experimental manipulations were successful.

6.4 | Results

We tested H2 using two-way analyses of variance. We found a significant main effect of emotion display on employee warmth (positive: $M = 5.77$, $SD = .92$; neutral: $M = 4.59$, $SD = 1.20$; $F(1,200) = 63.41$, $p < 0.05$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.24$) but no effect of dress color (yellow: $M = 5.20$, $SD = 1.31$; white: $M = 5.16$, $SD = 1.14$; $F(1,200) = 0.09$, ns , $\eta_p^2 = 0.00$). In support of H2, the two-way interaction effect of emotion display and dress color on employee warmth was significant ($F(1,200) = 4.58$, $p < 0.05$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.02$). Positive emotion displays had a significantly stronger positive effect on employee warmth when employees wore yellow- compared to white-colored dress. This is also reflected in the conditional effects of emotion displays, which are greater for warm (positive emotion display \times yellow dress color: $M = 5.96$, $SD = 0.80$; neutral emotion display \times yellow dress color: $M = 4.45$, $SD = 1.29$; $F(1,200) = 51.02$, $p < 0.05$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.20$) compared to cold colors (positive emotion display \times white dress color $M = 5.59$, $SD = 1.01$; neutral emotion display \times white dress color: $M = 4.73$, $SD = 1.10$; $F(1,200) = 16.96$, $p < 0.05$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.08$).

To test our mediated moderation hypothesis (H3), we again used the Process macro for SPSS (Model 8; 10,000 samples; Hayes, 2018). We included positive affect as an alternative mediator in our model. Supporting H3, we found a significant interaction effect of emotion display and dress color on fit ($\beta = 0.73$, $SE = 0.18$, $p < 0.05$; $\Delta R^2 = 0.07$; see Table 2). Specifically, positive emotion displays resulted in higher fit for participants in the yellow dress color condition ($\beta = 0.80$, $SE = 0.13$, $p < 0.05$), but no such difference occurred in the white color dress condition ($\beta = 0.07$, $SE = 0.13$, ns). Fit exerted a positive significant effect on warmth ($\beta = 0.32$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < 0.05$). In line with H3, we found a significant difference between the conditional indirect effects through fit (index = 0.24, $SE = 0.08$, 95% CI [0.10, 0.41]). In the yellow dress color condition, positive emotion displays had a positive indirect effect on employee warmth ($\beta = 0.26$, $SE = 0.08$, 95% CI [0.13, 0.42]), whereas the indirect effect in the white dress color condition was insignificant ($\beta = 0.02$, $SE = 0.04$, 95% CI [-0.05, 0.10]). We did not find a significant interaction of emotion display and dress color predicting positive affect ($\beta = 0.28$, $SE = 0.17$, ns ; see Table 2). There was also no significant difference in the conditional indirect effects of emotion displays on employee warmth through affect (index = 0.07, $SE = 0.05$, 95% CI [-0.02, 0.17]; yellow: $\beta = 0.13$, $SE = 0.04$, 95% CI [0.06, 0.21]; white: $\beta = 0.05$, $SE = 0.04$, 95% CI [-0.01, 0.13]), ruling out positive affect as an alternative account. Concerning employee competence, we found a main effect

of emotion display (positive: $M = 5.38$, $SD = 1.00$; neutral: $M = 5.05$, $SD = 1.06$; $F(1,200) = 5.25$, $p < 0.05$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.03$) but no other effects as expected. All results reported in this section remained unchanged in direction of effects and significance when customer gender was included as a control.¹

7 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

Across four studies, we provide evidence that customers perceive frontline employees holistically. Specifically, our findings reveal that the effects of positive emotion displays on important marketing outcomes can be facilitated by the use of warm dress colors. We focused on different individual marketing outcomes in our studies rather than mixing them within studies because their relationship (i.e., the positive effects of warmth on relevant outcomes) has been shown in prior research (Aiello et al., 2020; Gershon & Cryder, 2018). The focal interaction is explained by customers perceiving higher degrees of fit for positive emotion displays combined with warm dress colors and lower degrees of fit for different combinations with neutral emotion displays or cold dress colors. In our studies, we show that these effects on marketing outcomes can be observed for female and male frontline employees. Additionally, we demonstrate that affect, often shown to be the main mechanism of the effects of positive emotion display on marketing outcomes (Barger & Grandey, 2006; Otterbring, 2017; Pugh, 2001), does not hold for the interaction of emotion displays and dress color. We validate our findings for two different settings (restaurant visit and grocery store shopping), for female and male frontline employees, for different combinations of warm (red, orange, and yellow) and cold (green, blue, and white) colors, as well as for online and lab experiments in the UK and Germany.

7.1 | Theoretical implications

The present research makes three important theoretical contributions. First, we contribute to research on positive emotion displays and esthetic labor by combining both research streams. Considering positive emotion displays, previous research consistently reports positive effects on a diverse set of important marketing outcomes (Barger & Grandey, 2006; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2006; Söderlund & Rosengren, 2008). Initial moderators to these effects have been examined (Luong, 2005; Söderlund & Rosengren, 2010). However,

except Keh et al. (2013) examination of employees' physical attractiveness, research on moderators of emotion display effects referring to the visual appearance of frontline employees does, to the best of our knowledge, not exist. The notion of customers' holistic perception of frontline employees underpins the importance of jointly examining emotion displays and dress by indicating that both are jointly processed (Aviezer et al., 2012; Freeman et al., 2011). The present studies add to research on positive emotion displays by showing that employee-related moderators, such as employees' dress, can improve effects of positive emotion displays on marketing outcomes and are generally relevant to their effectiveness. Thus, we emphasize the importance of examining esthetic displays that have received little attention in marketing research (Pounders et al., 2015). The latter is remarkable as the importance of frontline employees and employees' dress is widely accepted in services marketing (Baker et al., 1994, 2002).

Second, we shed light on the process through which emotion displays and dress color jointly affect marketing outcomes and thereby extend research on EASI (van Kleef, 2014). Extant research on the display of positive emotion, to the best of our knowledge, has focused on affect as the process through which positive emotion displays impact attitudes and behavior (Barger & Grandey, 2006; Otterbring, 2017; Pugh, 2001) or has neglected to examine mediators altogether (Keh et al., 2013; Tan et al., 2004; Tsai, 2001). According to EASI, affect and cognitive inferences are two mechanisms through which emotion displays elicit effects on customers (van Kleef, 2014). In our studies, we show that the interaction effect of emotion displays and dress color works through fit, which results from a cognitive process in which two entities are compared on an abstract level (Pounders et al., 2015; Spiggle et al., 2012). We thus extend research on EASI by showing that the inferential pathway plays an important role in the conditional process of how positive emotion displays elicit effects on customers.

Third, we provide empirical evidence that the notion of customers' greater sensitivity toward warmth-related information (Cuddy et al., 2011) also applies to marketing contexts. We show that subtle cues such as dress color affect the influence of emotion displays on perceived employee warmth but not competence. These findings indicate that more concrete information may be needed to influence the perception of competence. We argue that this effect is especially evident in our studies due to our focus on service interactions, in which frontline employees often represent strangers for whom a basic judgment of warmth is vital ("friend or foe"; Cuddy et al., 2011, p. 76). This is important because relationships for which warmth is more important than competence (Güntürkün et al., 2020) are central in service encounters (Gremler & Gwinner, 2000).

7.2 | Managerial implications

Our research provides important managerial implications. First, we inform companies that dress color, in general, plays an important role to effectively convey positive emotion displays to customers.

¹To rule out that our fit measure created demand effects by explicitly referencing the color of the shirt and to show that an alternative measure of positive affect is no mediator of the effects of positive (vs. neutral) emotion displays moderated by warm (vs. cold) dress colors, we conducted an additional 2 (emotion display: positive vs. neutral) \times 2 (dress color: red vs. green) randomized between-subjects online experiment. In the experiment, we adapted the fit measure (fit between emotion display and outfit instead of fit between emotion display and shirt color) and used a three-item positive affect scale from Ekman et al. (1990). In a sample of 406 individuals, we used the same manipulations as in Study 1. We find a significant difference in the indirect effects of positive emotion displays on employee warmth between warm and cold dress colors through fit as intended (index = 0.33, SE = 0.17, 95% CI [0.01, 0.67]), but not through positive affect (index = 0.06, SE = 0.11, 95% CI [-0.16, 0.28]). These results confirm our findings from Study 4. We thank the two anonymous reviewers for these suggestions.

Specifically, we inform companies that warm dress colors foster effects of positive emotion displays on marketing outcomes. For companies that aim at consistently delivering positive emotion displays across all kinds of services and customers, we recommend implementing warm-colored dress to increase the effectiveness of positive emotion displays. For companies attempting to deliver different emotion displays for different services and customers, we recommend managing frontline employees' visual appearance by considering the respective goal of the service encounter. For example, it might be beneficial to differentiate dress colors between frontline employees who are mainly engaged in complaint handling and, therefore, interact with customers who may be in a bad mood and to whom positive emotion displays by frontline employees may be perceived as inappropriate. To ensure fit between the delivered emotion and dress color, we recommend that companies systematically test how customers perceive dress colors in combination with the intended emotion display.

Second, we provide evidence for the notion that customers perceive interactions with frontline employees holistically. Our findings indicate that components beyond dress colors may also affect perceptions of emotion displays. This might first and foremost refer to decisions about esthetic displays such as whether company policies foster formal dress like suits or informal dress like polos and jeans. Moreover, we suspect that potential factors affecting customers' perceptions of emotion displays may even be, for example, the color of the reception desk or the color of walls in the servicescape. As frontline employees and positive emotion displays are crucial in service encounters (Gremler & Gwinner, 2000; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2006), we encourage companies to scrutinize these cues to ensure fit with the emotion displays they strive to deliver.

Third, our research can guide managerial decision making as we provide support for the findings of Andrzejewski and Mooney (2016) by showing that companies can increase employee warmth and competence perceptions in delivering positive emotion displays. This further underpins the relevance of professionally managing frontline employees' positive emotion displays. In addition, we provide guidance on how companies may foster these effects. Companies must be clear about the fact that they may use subtle cues such as color, clothing, and ambient conditions to communicate warmth. Considering competence, on the other hand, our findings suggest that companies must create such impressions with more emphasis by executing service tasks successfully. Depending on the respective goal or focus (warmth or competence) of a service encounter, companies might therefore need a different focus in managing their impressions.

7.3 | Limitations and future research

Across four studies, we show that the effects of positive emotion displays on important marketing outcomes can be strengthened if frontline employees wear warm- (vs. cold-) colored dress, which is explained by the cognitive process of fit. In our studies, we validate

these findings for different experimental settings, for different combinations of warm and cold dress colors, for female and male frontline employees as well as for different countries (the United Kingdom and Germany). Nevertheless, further research may address the limitation that our studies only focus on dress color interacting with emotion displays. It might be interesting to test whether the notion of holistic frontline employee perception can be extended to the servicescape in that future research should test whether fitting or contrasting combinations of dress color and the color of the servicescape such as the background walls in a store increase effects of positive emotion displays on marketing outcomes and whether warm colors are more beneficial here too (Huang et al., 2020). Further, the effects shown in our studies can only be generalized to European cultures. We assume that there is also an interaction between positive emotion displays and dress color in other countries, but research shows that the meanings of color may differ across countries (Madden et al., 2000). Therefore, it might be interesting to test whether the effects hold, for example, for Asian countries. Further, we did not examine the effects in existing customer-company relationships. It seems possible that effects change in such relationships as frontline employees might already have been judged to be warm and/or competent (or not) in previous encounters. Finally, we only provide evidence regarding how companies may use dress colors to improve effects of positive emotion displays. In doing so, we focus on authentic positive emotions. Future research could investigate whether these effects also hold for inauthentic positive displays and negative emotion displays such as anger.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Open access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional Supporting Information may be found online in the supporting information tab for this article.

How to cite this article: Bruder, M., Lechner, A. T., & Paul, M. (2021). Toward holistic frontline employee management: An investigation of the interplay of positive emotion displays and dress color. *Psychol Mark*, 38, 2089–2101.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.21553>