

# The Role of Gender Matching in Personal Selling of Embarrassing Products: An Empirical Study in Zimbabwean Fashion Boutiques

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## ABSTRACT

*Effective personal selling of embarrassing products, such as undergarments, seems to be a complex phenomenon in conservative societies, where sexuality is treated with higher levels of sacredness. This phenomenon is worsened by the gender mismatch between sales assistants and customers. Therefore, there is a need to determine whether gender matching between sales assistants and customers can improve customer-initiated sales interactions and sales conversion. To achieve this objective, an observation of personal selling encounters was conducted in fashion boutiques in Zimbabwe. A sample of 400 encounters was recorded, and a chi-square statistic was used to analyse the data. The results indicated that gender matching has a statistically significant effect on customer-initiated sales interactions and sales conversions. The findings of this study expanded the applicability of the role congruency theory to sales encounters for embarrassing products. The practical implications of this study suggested that gender matching should be considered when deploying sales assistants for embarrassing products so as to elicit customer-initiated sales interactions and sales conversions. Customer-initiated sales interactions play an important role in generating sales conversions. Gender matching tends to provide some comfort to the customers of embarrassing products, leading to pleasant shopping experiences.*

**KEYWORDS:** sales assistants, sales interactions, sales conversion, gender congruency.

**JEL CLASSIFICATION:** M30, M31, M37.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Personal selling is one of the most important aspects of the marketing practice that enhances possession utility for customers (Armstrong et al., 2014; Beeler et al., 2021). Traditionally, personal selling has been more pronounced in the business-to-business context due to its costly nature and suitability for high-value transactions (Anderson et al., 2020; Hutt & Speh, 2021; Paesbrugghe et al., 2018). However, to a certain extent, personal selling also thrives in retail contexts where sales assistants play a prominent role (Blessing & Natter, 2019; Eger & Mičák, 2017). A sales assistant is a person who is employed to serve customers in a retail shop (Spreer & Rauschnabel, 2016).

Sales assistants have several roles, such as attending to customer enquiries (Glucksmann, 2004), converting customer enquiries into sales (Jain et al., 2020), and managing point-of-sale transactions (Arkenback, 2019). Previous research has indicated that sales assistance rendered

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to customers during their shopping excursions leads to higher sales conversion rates (Jain et al., 2020). In performing their duties, sales assistants use a wide range of strategies to engage customers, such as emotional labour (Koenker, 2021; Makudza, 2023; Sixpence et al., 2023) manifested verbally through greeting and thanking customers (Yim et al., 2008), innovation (Muparangi & Makudza, 2020; Tasara et al., 2021), as well as being friendly (Hill & Alexander, 2017). They also use non-verbal engagement strategies (Pauser & Wagner, 2019) such as eye contact and smiling (Anglade et al., 2019; Morotti et al., 2022; Zhao et al., 2018). These strategies have the effect of making a positive impression on customers (Dangaiso & Mukucha, 2024; Jain et al., 2023; Pernice et al., 2023). They are also particularly common in the personal selling of clothing products in fashion boutiques.

In the fashion boutiques, sales assistants deal with a wide range of merchandise that includes embarrassing products such as male and female underwear (Mcintyre, 2016; Reddy-Best et al., 2022;). The embarrassing nature of underwear emanates from the fact that undergarments are socially sensitive (Keist & Marcketti, 2019), part of gender identity (Entwistle, 2023; Entwistle & Wissinger, 2023; Entwistle, 2017), and the embodied culture (Tsaousi, 2020, 2017, 2016). Moreover, in some cultures, it is a taboo for members of the opposite sex to know the kind of underwear that one wears or intends to wear (Barak-Brandes, 2011). As such, some customers feel embarrassed to be watched by employees buying sensitive products (Esmark et al., 2017). More specifically, there is a general belief that individuals cannot effectively sell undergarments designed for the customers of the opposite sex (Petersson McIntyre, 2016). However, gender matching between the sales assistant and the customer appears to be one of the personal selling strategies for embarrassing products, despite being neglected in previous research. Gender matching in the context of gendered sales interactions can be explained by the role congruency theory. The role congruency theory emphasises task effectiveness through aligning tasks to the relevant gender.

In contrast to the tenets of the role congruency theory, the deployment of employees in general has traditionally been based on sheer competence and qualifications (Barasa et al., 2023; Korder et al., 2019; Makudza, 2023; Troger, 2022;) while disregarding gender the sensitivity of some tasks (Mukucha et al., 2024; Wagner & Berger, 2018). This leads to the research question specified as follows: Does personal selling of embarrassing products through gender matching elicit customer-initiated sales interactions and sales conversion? This becomes an empirical question against the background of the conservative culture that characterises the Zimbabwean culture (Mukucha et al., 2023). Therefore, this study, leveraging the role congruency theory, seeks to determine whether the gender of sales assistants is effective in eliciting customer-initiated sales interactions and sales conversions for embarrassing products. The findings of this study will assist fashion boutiques, in particular, and retail outlets for embarrassing products, in general, to conduct proper deployments of sales assistants that will lead to customer-initiated sales transactions and sales conversions. In seeking to achieve these objectives, the rest of the study is structured as follows: a literature review followed by a methodology section, and then the results presentation and discussion. Finally, the study shall conclude with presenting both theoretical and practical implications of the research findings.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. Sales Assistants**

Personal selling is a practice within the broader marketing profession that is typically done by salespersons (Anderson et al., 2020; Olariu, 2016). There are two main types of salespersons:

order getters and order takers (Eger & Mičik, 2017). In a retail setup, order takers are usually known as sales assistants or shop assistants (Panda & Sahadev, 2019). Sales assistants do not necessarily have to go through the entire steps of the selling cycle (Kane & Zappulla, 2016; Makudza et al., 2021). Instead, they focus on handling customer-initiated sales transactions and closing a sale where it is permissible (Singh et al., 2018). However, the conditions that make order getters effective are not well documented in the existing literature, especially with regard to the gender matching of the order getters and walk-in customers. The existing research streams focus on issues such as artificial intelligence (AI) and robotic sales assistants, sales assistants' occupational risks, and workplace conditions that promote the effectiveness of sales assistants.

A recent research stream related to effective sales performances focused on the use of AI and retail robots as sales assistants. A study by Bongers et al. (2021) explored the challenges faced by salespersons in the wake of digital sales channels. In a study by Guido et al. (2024), robotic sales assistants were deemed less effective and have lower customer acceptance. In another study by Monod et al. (2023), the use of AI sales assistants was found to have unintended consequences. The use of AI and robotics was also explored in a study by Singh et al. (2019). A study by Raut et al. (2023) found virtual sales assistants to be more effective in routine duties such as booking and reservations.

The other stream of research focused on the challenges and occupational risks associated with the sales assistants' prolonged standing during the execution of their duties. In a study by Capodaglio (2017), it was revealed that sales assistants who conduct their duties in a standing posture for prolonged periods of time suffer from musculoskeletal disorders. The problem of musculoskeletal disorders was found to be prevalent among sales representatives in several industries, such as the pharmaceutical sector (Tander et al., 2007), department stores (Pensri et al., 2010), factory sales sections (Beyan & Turşucu, 2017), and apparel stores (Capodaglio, 2017).

A more prominent research stream also focused on strategies for increasing selling effectiveness. In that research stream, a study by Pauser and Wagner (2019) indicated that dynamic nonverbal cues increase the sales assistants' sales performance. Another study by Peesker et al. (2019) focused on the quality of leadership that improves the sales performances of the salespersons. Furthermore, a study by Dugan et al. (2019) dwelt on the efficacy of salespersons' grit in improving sales performance. Likewise, a study by Alavi et al. (2018) revealed how salespersons' inspirational appeal influences sales effectiveness. However, all these research streams have never sought to assess how gender matching can influence customer-initiated sales interactions and sales conversions. The lack of such studies is more pronounced in the sale of embarrassing products, such as undergarments.

## **2.2. Embarrassing Products**

Embarrassing products are described as items that cause shame, awkwardness, or discomfort when seen being consumed or purchased in the presence of others (Ndichu & Rittenburg, 2021; Sangwan & Maity, 2024; Yaseen et al., 2020). Previous research has profiled embarrassing products to include contraceptives, incontinence clothing, and underwear (e.g., Nichols et al., 2015); used clothes (Wu et al., 2023), junk food, sexual wellness products (Barney & Jones, 2023), counterfeit products (Davidson et al., 2019; Islam et al., 2022; Khan et al., 2023; Jiang et al., 2023;), personal care products (Dias et al., 2023), and lucky charms (Wang et al., 2017).

There are several research streams related to embarrassing products. The most common stream of research has sought to determine the psychological effects of purchasing embarrassing products. Previous research has revealed that purchasing embarrassing products is associated with feelings of shame (Davidson et al., 2019; Krishna et al., 2015), awkwardness (Sarkar & Sarkar, 2017), fear of being caught (Jiang et al., 2023), hate (Sarkar et al., 2020), and stigma (Ye et al., 2022). The other stream of research dwelt on strategies that enhance smooth purchasing of embarrassing products, such as providing anonymity (Jones et al., 2018; Kilian et al., 2018; Li et al., 2018), using online platforms (Dangaiso & Makudza, 2022; Jin et al., 2024;), reducing the order fulfilment process duration (Annamalai et al., 2019), increasing humour (Barney & Jones, 2023), and promoting consumer creativity (Ferguson & Herd, 2023).

However, as has already been indicated before, there has been very little recent research on the effective personal selling strategies for embarrassing products, save for studies conducted more than three decades ago (Bellizzi & Bitner, 1992; Levy & Jain, 1985). The absence of such research has left most fashion boutiques with untested sales assistants' deployment strategies. This brings to the fore the suggestion that gender matching between sales assistants and customers may enhance the effectiveness of embarrassing product sales transactions. The possibility of the effectiveness of gender matching between the sales assistants and customers in the personal selling of embarrassing products can be explained using the role congruency theory as presented in the next section.

### **2.3. Theoretical Perspective and Hypotheses Development**

The effectiveness of personal selling of embarrassing products in the retail context is likely to leverage the gender matching of sales assistants and customers. This can be explained by the role congruency theory conceptualised by Eagly and Karau (2002). Originally, the theory was coined to explain the discrimination faced by female leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Koburtay et al., 2019;). However, the theory has expanded its efficacy in explaining cross-gender issues that may attract some form of discrimination. The role congruency theory posits that an individual is positively evaluated if his/her role aligns with the societal expectations (Anglin et al., 2022). In contrast, individuals are likely to experience discrimination if their roles are stereotypically divergent from the societal expectations (Anderson, 2020; Ellemers, 2018).

The seeming incongruity between certain employee roles leads to a prejudice in appraising individuals for those positions (Koburtay et al., 2019; Muparangi & Makudza, 2023; Taparira & Lenka, 2022). In the context of underwear retailing, sales assistants of the opposite gender are not expected to handle gender-specific undergarments designed for the opposite sex. More specifically, it is a taboo in some cultures for individuals to handle underwear related to the members of the opposite sex (Abdel-Raheem, 2022; Chigidi, 2009; Gregersen, 2022; Mpofu & Salawu, 2021). Thus, the role congruency can be applied in various commercial transactions, such as customer-initiated sales transactions and sales conversion rates.

### **2.4. Customer-initiated sales interaction**

Customer-initiated sales interactions refer to occasions where a customer takes the leading step in engaging with a sales assistant for the purposes of seeking product information and making a purchase (Niemi & Hirvonen, 2019). More specifically, in an apparel retail set-up, customer-initiated sales interactions are common due to the customers' need for essential, personalised, and discreet services. Customers' approaches give sales assistants an opportunity to offer tailored solutions and preferably close a sale (Bhardwaj et al., 2008).

In light of the role congruency theory, it is likely that sales assistants will be approached by the same-gender customers rather than opposite-gender customers. This emanates from the fact that sales assistants tend to attract customers who identify with them in terms of characteristics. More specifically, sales assistants may attract customers who believe they share the same experiences and expectations, as well as possess perceived similarity. For instance, female sales assistants are more likely to understand the appropriate underclothing for women, while male sales assistants may do the same for male underclothing. Moreover, societal norms and expectations may have a strong bearing on sales interactions for certain types of products. Considering the sensitivity of underclothing, sales assistants are likely to be approached by members of the same gender for sales interactions. It is therefore posited that;  
*H1: Sales assistants are likely to be involved in customer-initiated sales interactions involving same-gender customers more than opposite-gender customers.*

## 2.5. Sales conservation

The interaction between sales assistants and customers is expected to result in sales conversion (Banerjee & Bhardwaj, 2019; Purnomo, 2023; Tintelnot, 2023). Sales conversion refers to the transformation of leads into actual sales (Saleem et al., 2019). Sales conversion as a metric is known as the sales conversion rate (Gopagoni et al., 2021; Sun et al., 2021). The sales conversion rate is an indispensable metric that measures the effectiveness of sales assistants in transforming potential leads into actual sales (Sun et al., 2021; Tong et al., 2022). The sales conversion rate is determined by dividing the number of actual sales by the total number of leads.

Sales assistants are likely to have higher sales conversion rates in sales interactions involving same-gender customers than opposite-gender customers. This arises from the fact that effective personal selling is a function of a relationship between a salesperson and a customer (Troccoli & Sauerbronn, 2021). A rapport as well as persuasiveness that is essential for effective sales conversion prevails when there are same-gender interactions for sensitive products such as underclothing. Sales assistants are likely to be more persuasive when dealing with customers of the same gender than those of the opposite gender. Gender congruency forms the basis for understanding the social norms and expectations that are crucial in convincing the customers to make a purchase. It is therefore suggested that;

*H2: Sales assistants have a higher conversion rate when having sales interactions with same-gender customers than opposite-gender customers.*

## 3. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1. Participants and research settings

The participants in this study were the sales assistants of fashion boutiques in Zimbabwe, as well as the customers of embarrassing products in the form of undergarments. A fashion boutique is a very small shop that specialises in trending clothes and accessories (Ahmed & Ahmed, 2013). Zimbabwe has several fashion boutiques of various ranges with a diverse merchandise of clothing that includes undergarments. The fashion boutiques that were chosen to be part of this study had a gender balance of sales assistants. Fashion boutiques were chosen on the basis of their small floor area sizes that enabled the researchers to observe the transactions easily without having to follow the sales assistants and the customers around the shop. Moreover, boutiques being naturally small and, in most cases, owner-run, have little bureaucratic structure that was likely to hinder the researchers from getting permission to observe the sales transactions.

### 3.2. Data collection procedures

The researchers collected data using a convenience sampling strategy from the boutiques that agreed to be part of this study. Most of the boutiques declined to allow the researchers to collect data using their shops. However, about 10 boutiques agreed to participate in the study. In each of the boutiques, the researchers were allocated a strategic corner that allowed them to record the data. Data was collected using unobtrusive observations. Unobtrusive observations allowed the researchers to collect accurate data due to the direct involvement associated with this data collection method (Benton & French, 2024; Kellehear, 2020). Observations also enabled the researchers to have the flexibility of collecting data from different boutiques in order to improve the ecological validity of the study (Fahmie et al., 2023). However, the use of observations was associated with some challenges of having to seek the informed consent of the participants. In that case, due to the desire to avoid confounding effects, the researchers had to seek the informed consent of the participants post-data collection. Those who did not consent had their observation data removed from the data set. Moreover, the personal identification details of the consenting respondents were not recorded in order to preserve their anonymity.

The data collection process was done over a period of 27 days. The researchers targeted unaccompanied participants in order to avoid confounding effects in line with a previous study by Barger & Grandey (2006).

### 3.3. Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis was conducted using Chi-square ( $X^2$ ). Chi-square ( $X^2$ ) is a useful statistic to assess associations between categorical variables (Vierra et al., 2023; Fernández-Cásseres & Russi-Pulgar, 2023). In this study, both the independent variable and the two dependent variables were categorical. Chi-square compares the survey data's observed frequencies with expected frequencies while assessing whether there is an association between the two variables (Field, 2024). This statistical tool decrypts the frequencies across different categories, resulting in robust conclusions regarding significant associations (Field, 2024).

## 4. RESULTS

The results presented in this section relate to the sample characteristics, descriptive statistics, and hypotheses testing.

**Table 1. Sample Characteristics**

Participants type	Variable	Category	N	%
Sales Assistants	Age	18-30	163	40.8
		30-39	121	30.3
		40-49	65	16.3
		50-59	41	10.2
		60 and above	10	02.4
	Gender	Male	185	46.2
		Female	215	53.8
Customers	Age	18-30	159	39.8
		30-39	140	35.0
		40-49	50	12.4
		50-59	51	12.8
	Gender	Male	173	43.2
		Female	227	56.8

*Source:* statistical output

The demographics of the sales assistants' sample were distributed as follows: 18-30 (40.8%), 30-39 (30.3%), 40-49 (16.3%), 50-59 (10.2%), and 60 years and above (02.4%), while the demographics of the customers were spread as follows: 18-30 (39.8%), 30-29 (35.0%), 40-49 (12.4%), 50-59 (12.8%). The sales assistants were mostly females (53.8%) and males (46.2%), while female customers (56.8%) were also more than male customers (43.2%).

#### 4.1. Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive statistics related to the shopping duration are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2. Group Statistics**

	<b>Gender congruency</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>	<b>Std. Error Mean</b>	<b>Max.</b>	<b>Min.</b>
Shopping duration	Matching	250	6.4840	2.85980	.18087	2	13
	Mismatching	150	5.0400	2.15157	.17568	2	9

Source: statistical output

There were 400 observations made, comprising 250 gender-matching cases and 150 mismatching cases. The average shopping duration for gender-matching cases was 6.48 minutes (sd = 2.86), ranging from 2m to 13m, and for mismatching cases it was 5.04 minutes (sd = 2.15), ranging from 2m to 9m. There were also statistically significant differences in the shopping durations between gender-matching and gender-mismatching cases,  $F(398) = 11.426$ ,  $t = 5.342$ ,  $p < .001$ .

#### 4.2. Hypotheses Testing

A Pearson Chi-Square test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between gender matching and customer-initiated sales interaction and sales conversion. The results for these tests are shown in Tables 4 and 5. Prior to interpreting the results, some chi-square assumptions were assessed. The assumption of having all cells having more than 5 counts was achieved, as shown in Table 3. The other requirement of chi-square, which was duly met in this study, was that the cells should be populated with counts rather than transformed data, such as percentages.

**Table 3. Cross-tabulation Counts**

			<b>Customer Sales Initiated Interaction</b>		<b>Sales conversion</b>		
			<b>Interaction</b>	<b>No Interaction</b>	<b>Sale</b>	<b>No sale</b>	
Gender congruency	Matching	Count	118	132	78	172	250
		Expected	144	106	89	161	250
	Mismatching	Count	113	37	64	86	150
		Expected	87	63	53	97	250
	Total		231	169	142	258	400

Source: statistical output

The cross-tabulation statistics shown in Table 3 indicated that in the gender-matching bracket, observed frequencies indicated that 118 (expected frequencies, 144) customers initiated the sales interaction with same-gender sales assistants while 132 did not (expected frequencies, 106). Similarly, in the mismatching category, observed frequencies indicated that 113 (expected frequencies, 87) customers approached different gender sales assistants while 37 did not (expected frequencies, 63).

The cross-tabulation statistics shown in Table 3 also indicated that in the matching bracket, the observed frequencies indicated that 78 (expected frequencies, 89) sales assistants made a sale, while 172 did not (expected frequencies, 161). Likewise in the mismatching category, observed frequencies indicated that 64 (expected frequencies, 53) sales assistants made a sale, while 86 did not (expected frequencies, 97).

The results shown in Table 4 from a Pearson Chi-Squared statistic indicated that the relationships between gender matching and customer-initiated sales interaction,  $X^2 (1, 400) = 30.411$ ,  $p < .001$ , and sales conversion,  $X^2 (1, 400) = 5.383$ ,  $p = .02$ , were all significant. Gender matching was more likely than gender mismatch to achieve customer-initiated sales interaction and sales conversion. Having achieved statistically significant results, the effect sizes were assessed using the Phi coefficient. The Phi coefficient is the most widely used effect size measure in 2x2 tables Chi-Square Tests that enables a comparison of results across different studies (Perdices, 2018; Sugathan & Jacob, 2021).

**Table 4. Chi-Square Tests**

Statistics	Customer	Initiated sales	Interaction			
	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig	Value	df	Asym. Sig
Pearson Chi-Square	30.411 <sup>a</sup>	1	.000	5.383 <sup>a</sup>	1	.020
Likelihood ratio	31.487	1	.000	5.338	1	.021
N of valid cases	400			400		
a. 0 cells (0.0%) have an expected count of less than 5. The minimum expected count is 63.38. 0 cells (0.0%) have an expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 53.25.						
b. Computed only for a 2x2 table						

Source: statistical output

**Table 5. Phi Coefficient Symmetric Measures**

Attribute	Value	Approximate Significance
Customer-initiated sales interactions	.276	.000
Sales conversion	.116	.020

Source: statistical output

Effect size for the influence of gender matching on customer-initiated sales interactions of .276 and sales conversion of .116 were moderate, suggesting the availability of practical significance of the findings.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The study sought to determine sales assistants' gender attributes that are more suitable for personal selling of embarrassment products in boutiques. More specifically, the sales assistants' attributes were limited to gender, and the embarrassing products that the study focused on were undergarments. The assessed sales interaction outcomes were customer-initiated sales interaction and sales conversion.

The results indicated that sales assistants whose gender matches that of customers are more likely to be approached by customers to provide assistance, such as product enquiries. The initial approach by the customers signals the commencement of the selling cycle (Weitz & Bradford, 1999). The sales assistants are likely to take the customer-initiated approach as an opportunity to provide crucial information about the product on offer, as well as address the customer queries (Baumann & Le Meunier-FitzHugh, 2015). Previous research has already indicated that customer-initiated approaches are likely to result in making a sale (Niemi & Hirvonen, 2019).



The fact that when it comes to embarrassing products, customers approach sales assistants of the same gender as theirs is likely to be a function of the role congruency theory. Usually, sensitive products of an intimate nature that are gender-specific are likely to be fully understood by the members of the same gender. Although members of the opposite gender may have professional knowledge about the nature of gender-specific products (Tak et al., 2019), they are likely to have no lived experiences about the performance of the products (Vora, 2020). This accounts for the limited customer-initiated sales approaches to the sales assistants of the opposite gender, which may have an impact on consumers' experience (Makudza et al., 2024).

Sales assistants were found to be very effective in sales conversion where there is matching of the sales assistant and customers' gender. This emanates from the fact that communication between the individuals of the same gender tends to be effective (Gaur, 2006; Leaper, 2019). Effective sales conversion requires effective product demonstration and handling of the customer enquiries (Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019). In most cases in the apparel industry, sales assistants are encouraged to have used some of the apparel they sell so as to have lived experiences. That way it becomes easier to handle customers' enquiries. However, sales assistants of the opposite gender may struggle to explain product performance for products they are likely to have never used, especially for gender-specific clothing. This provides some justification for the deployment of sales assistants who are of the same gender as the target customers, and, in the process, this provides some efficacy to the role congruency theory.

## 6. IMPLICATIONS

The study provided some empirical validation for the role congruency theory. This theory, as has already been explained, indicated that, in many endeavours, individuals succeed when they indulge in roles that match their societal expectations. This was confirmed in this study, where the personal selling of embarrassing products was shown to be successful when sales assistants attend to same-gender customers. This emanates from the fact that undergarments are usually gender-specific, and, therefore, it is valid to expect gender matching between the sales assistants and customers in order to make effective sales interactions and sales conversions. Therefore, through this study, further empirical weight has been provided to validate the role congruency theory's predictive power through its application to the personal selling of embarrassing products in fashion boutiques.

This study has some practical implications related to effective personal selling of embarrassing products that are deemed to be gender sensitive. More specifically, the personal selling of undergarments is effectively conducted by the sales assistants that are of the same gender as the customers. Thus, the deployment of sales assistants should be gender sensitive. However, this move is likely to create a dilemma considering the prevailing labour legislation, which largely outlaws gender discrimination in workplaces. The current labour laws emphasise deploying employees on the basis of qualifications and competence. This is why in other professions, such as midwifery and gynaecology, gender mismatching is prevalent as long as the deployed employees possess the requisite qualifications and competencies (Mukucha et al., 2024). Therefore, managers should consider training sales assistants to effectively handle sales interactions involving a gender mismatch with the customers.

## 7. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY AND FUTURE RESEARCH AGENDA

There are some limitations associated with this study. The reasons why most sales assistants were approached by same-gender customers may not necessarily be related to gender

mirroring issues. Rather, this could be due to a host of factors, such as the physical appearance of the sales assistant. Previous research has already shown that the physical appearance of the boundary-spanning employees elicits approach or avoidance behaviours (Mukucha et al., 2025; Quach et al., 2017; Su et al., 2021). Therefore, future studies must consider issues such as physical appearance as moderating variables in customer-initiated sales interactions.

Furthermore, there are possibilities that sales assistants may approach the customers within a boutique's premises instead of waiting for the customer-initiated sales interactions. However, in this study, such transactions were few, suggesting that for embarrassing products, sales assistants tend to wait for the customers to approach them. Perhaps this is a result of trying to avoid complicating the situation around embarrassing products.

Moreover, the reasons why gender matching is the preferred mode of interaction in sales transactions involving embarrassing products were not fully investigated in this study, considering that this study was quantitative in nature. Therefore, future research should take a qualitative approach so as to gain deeper insights through interviews and focus groups.

This study had another shortcoming in that it did not control for extraneous variables. This could be alleviated in future research by conducting experimental designs to test gender-matching effects in a controlled setting.

Lastly, future research should take into consideration the cultural context. Since the study was conducted in Zimbabwe, cultural factors could have influenced customer behaviour. The Zimbabwean society is highly conservative. There is therefore a possibility that the findings could differ with the scenarios in Western or Asian markets.

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