A Homophily/Heterophily Model of Communication in the Apparel and Textiles Industry

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Significance/innovation of the concept: The purpose of this concept paper is to examine the social sciences concept of homophily/heterophily (Hom/Het) as it relates to the apparel and textiles (AT) field. Homophily is the degree of similarity while heterophily is the degree of difference between a communicator and receiver of a message. Due to its visual nature, apparel is an integral part of the communication process and it is also very reflective of fashion change. While there has been some related research in the AT field, a model of Hom/Het has not been made. Such a model has the potential to guide research, teaching, and practice for successful communication within the AT field.

Analysis and synthesis of relevant facts, data and literature: Research in the social sciences and AT fields were examined and summarized as follows: 1) Individual's Hom/Het traits, 2) impact of Hom/Het on a relationship, 3) the relationship context, and 4) a model of Hom/Het for the AT field.

Individual's traits that can be Hom/Het to another have been arranged by tangible traits including age (e.g., Weisfeld-Spolter, & Thakkar, 2011), status, economic situation, looks, and size, and intangible traits such as attitudes, thoughts, morals, and beliefs (e.g., Saiki, 2006). In the AT literature visual traits, such as size and behavior have been noted as critical variables. In addition, AT literature has mainly focused on Hom/Het traits as *perceived* by a receiver of a message (e.g., Saiki). In the social sciences, studies have examined *actual* Hom/Het traits, such as age, gender, ethnicity, religion, education, and marital status (e.g., Furnham, & Swami, 2008). In the AT literature, Hom/Het of actual traits have been informally discussed. For example, Weisfeld-Spolter and Thakkar (2011) found teen age girls adopted from Jennifer Lopez, a celebrity of a different age and social class. Hom/Het of these traits have been measured using varying approaches, such as, a survey with Hom/Het on a Likert type scale, and by separating participants into Het/Hom groups (e.g., Saiki, 2006; Streukens & Andreassen, 2013).

The *impacts of Hom/Het on a relationship* include generating trust (Roger, 1995). In the AT field, some authors maintain that fashion heterophily in knowledge generates trust between the communicator and the receiver of a message by enhancing credibility (e.g, Weisfeld-Spolter & Thakkar, 2011). While others suggest homophily in other variables, such as background, attitude, and values generates trust through sharing of traits (e.g. Saiki, & DeLong, 2006). Hom/Het effects have mainly been found to influence adoption of fashion messages and buying fashion products (e.g., Saiki, 2006; Churchill, G. A. et al., 1975). The amount of social distance in the relationship has also been found to impact the effect of Hom/Het and depends on whether the message is impersonal, such as a billboard, or interpersonal, such as a face-to-face interaction between a retail salesperson and a customer (e.g., Weisfeld-Spolter, 2001). Research has also demonstrated duration of an interaction is an important consideration with visual traits particularly influential in shorter interactions (e.g. Saiki, 2006).

The *context of the interaction* includes theory. Leonard, et al. (2004) noted related theories- social identity theory, similarity-attraction theory, and social-categorization theory. Becker's theory of customer discrimination suggests similarity between an employee's and a customer's demographics improve communication. Another is social comparison theory where individuals compare themselves to others in varying attributes (Streukens & Andreassen, 2013). In some views, the heterophily effect follows a complementarity principle or when an individual's traits provide a missing part to a social environment satisfying needs (e.g., Dijkstra & Barelds, 2008). Related theories include the diffusion of innovations or the flow and of spread ideas through varying communication mediums (Rogers, 1995). Finally, Hom/Het

affects numerous communicating dyads in the *context* of the AT supply chain, such as the retailer/ customer, retail manager/employees, and apparel designer/ customer (Saiki & DeLong, 2006).

Given the above analysis a *Homophily/Heterophily Model of Communication in the Apparel and Textiles Industry* was developed as follows:
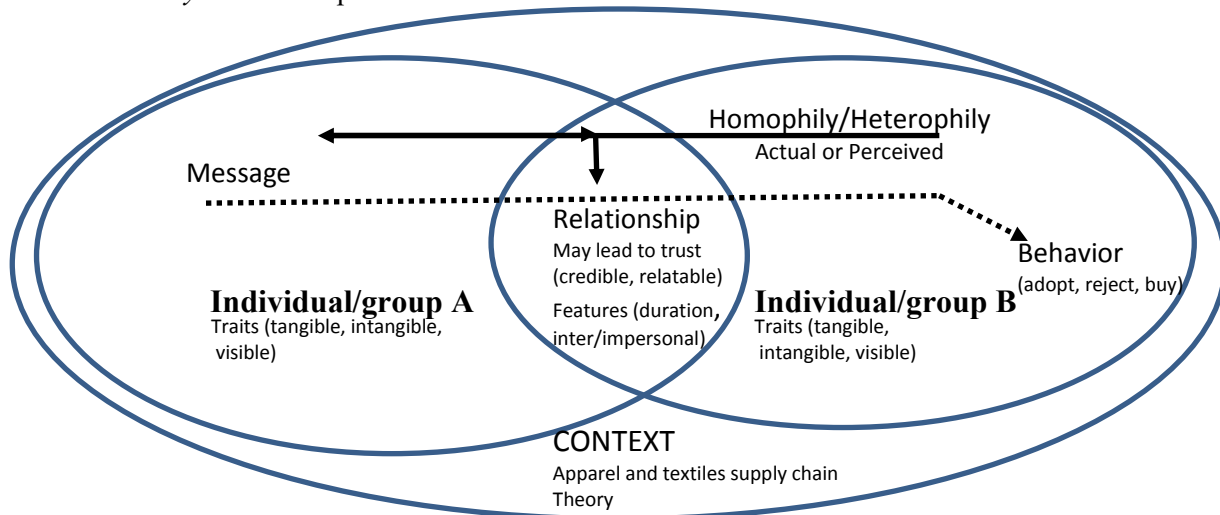
Future action: The above Hom/Het Model of Communication in the AT Industry can be used to guide research, practice, and teaching. The potential research studies are endless given the variety in potential measures, perceived and actual traits of individuals, the many relationships in the industry, the varying degree of social distances of messages, and the numerous outcomes of these interactions (adoption, rejection, buying, and creating trust). Within teaching, the concept of Hom/Het can be integrated in lessons to students, such as having them consider Hom/Het in assessing the ultimate customer or as a consideration in a professional development class (e.g. Het/Hom between a student and employee). The model has practical application, such as guiding Hom/Het in hiring and training retail salespersons.

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