

Perceptions toward Specific-Product Types and Product Cues – Fashion adopters and fashion followers

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Abstract

It is evident that consumers have higher level of fashion innovativeness (e.g., fashion adopters/leaders) are more likely to consume and display a new product at the early stage of its lifecycle (Kang and Park-Poaps, 2010). Thus, it is imperative for fashion practitioners to understand this consumer group in order to offer better products, develop effective marketing strategies and ultimately increase the sales. In this study, three product types (t-shirt, evening dress and socks) and ten product cues (four extrinsic cues and six intrinsic cues) were used to examine how fashion adopters and followers perceive and evaluate these products and what product cues may significantly affect their purchasing decision. Six items of the domain-specific innovativeness (DSI) scale (Goldsmith and Hofacker, 1991) were adopted to identify the fashion consumer groups (adopters and followers), and cue utilization theory was used to measure the salient effects of ten product cues among three apparel products. According to the results, both fashion adopters and followers perceived fit as the most salient cue for both t-shirt and evening dress followed by style and colour. In terms of socks, comfort was the most important evaluative cue followed by price and fabric. Clearly, the product type played a relatively more important role than the consumer type. Consumers used different evaluative criteria to judge the quality of different products. The visual appearance or aesthetic attributes such as fit, style and colour deemed to be more important for evaluating the publicly consumed products (dresses and t-shirt) than the privately consumed ones (socks).

Keywords: *product type, product cue, fashion adopter, fashion follower*

Introduction

It is evident that consumers who have a higher level of fashion innovativeness are more likely to consume and display a new product at the early stage of its lifecycle (Kang and Park-Poaps, 2010). According to many prior studies (Beaudoin et al., 2000; Eicher et al., 2000; Schrank et al., 1982), fashion leaders were found to be more positive toward change, more interested in fashion and to play an influential part for other consumers to adopt new styles. They often facilitate the diffusion process of product acceptance by either spreading the word among the people they know or to simply display the products without any verbal persuasion. Many consumer socialization studies (Anderson and Meyer, 2000; Bearden and Randall, 1990) have pointed out that one's peer influence play a significant role on product consumption, particularly among the young. With this perspective, it is imperative for fashion designers, manufacturers and marketers to identify and understand this consumer group in order to offer better products, develop effective marketing strategies, and ultimately increase the sales.

Fashion leadership is a combination of psychological and learned behaviors (Sproles, 1979). However, there is no universal definition of what a "fashion adopter" is or a clear distinction among all the fashion change agents – fashion leader, fashion innovator, fashion opinion leader, fashion adopter (early adopter and late adopter) and innovative communicator (Gorden et al., 1985). In some studies (Goldsmith *et al.*, 1999; Schrank and Guilmore, 1973), innovators and early adopters were used interchangeably or loosely termed innovators collectively. According to Workman and Kidd (2000), fashion innovators, fashion opinion leaders and innovative communicators are demographically and psychologically similar. In other words, the characteristics and behaviours of these fashion consumer groups could be overlapped and correlated.

Nevertheless, as recommended by a number of researchers (Beaudoin et al., 2000), the definition of fashion leader should include two other constructs: fashion innovator and fashion opinion leader. According to numerous studies (Beaudoin et al., 2000; Kim and Schrank, 1982), both fashion innovator and opinion leaders are the earliest adopters in the diffusion process of new fashion. As such, the term fashion adopter does reflect some characteristics of both innovator and opinion leader, and this definition was adopted for the present study.

Fashion Adopters and Fashion Follower

The focus of the present study was merely placed on two consumer groups - fashion adopters and fashion followers. Fashion adopters can be described as those consumers who are more inner-directed, confident with their own tastes and have a higher need to be unique. In general, they are more interested in fashion, stay current with fashion magazines, spend more money for clothing and are less sensitive towards price (Beaudoin et al., 2000; Goldsmith and Stith, 1993). According to some other studies (Kang and Park-Poaps, 2010; Workman and Caldwell, 2007), fashion leader was associated with hedonic shopping motivation (want-based approach) whereas fashion follower was associated with utilitarian shopping motivation (need-based approach). In other words, fashion followers have less motivation for mental stimulation from fashion products. They often imitate the style of fashion change agents or follow the acceptable norm/dress code in order to be accepted by their peers and societal groups (Workman and Johnson, 1993). As such, fashion followers generally scored lower on centrality of visual product aesthetics than fashion adopters/leaders (Workman and Caldwell, 2007). In addition, fashion followers are less willing to adopt fashion during its early cycle, and they have a tendency to adopt styles when

they have become main stream or widely accepted. Moreover, they score low on both the need for touch (NFT) and need for uniqueness (Workman, 2010).

Over the years, many diverse aspects of innovativeness has been widely studied and investigated. Topics have encompassed uniqueness (Workman and Caldwell, 2007), NFT (Workman, 2010), need for variety (Workman and Johnson, 1993), shopping motivations (Kang and Park-Poaps, 2010), magazine content (Bailey and Seock, 2010), brand sensitivity (Beaudoin et al., 2003), self-concept (Phau and Lo, 2004), and Internet consumers (Phau and Lo, 2004). However, little research has examined the relationships between consumer groups of innovativeness (fashion adopters and fashion followers) and various apparel types within the same product domain.

Fashion Clothing – Publicly Consumed/High Involvement versus Privately Consumed/ Low Involvement

Young consumers often use fashion clothing to construct and reconstruct identity, build self-image and express inner feeling (Rahman et al., 2011). Clothing also serves as a marker of individuality among peers as well as a marker of distinction between generations. As Horn and Gurel (1981) described clothing choice acts as “social glue” to affiliate with or differentiate from certain social groups. Indeed, clothing is one of the most expressed symbols of peer identification. As Dittmar (1992) points out that “an individual’s identity is influenced by the symbolic meanings of his or her own material possessions, and the way in which s/he relates to those possessions”. Without a doubt, Clothing plays an important role in the formation and exhibition of self (Davis, 1985; Evans, 1989; Lurie, 1981). However, clothing consumption is a complex interplay with many factors encompassing consumer’s degree of innovativeness (e.g., fashion adopters/leaders, fashion followers/non-fashion leaders), specific-product types (e.g., winter coats, summer dresses, bathing suits) and product attributes (e.g., fabric, style, colour, fit and comfort). People tended to use different apparel products to display themselves in different social situations and public settings. In other words, the nature of clothing type may play a critical role in the process of innovativeness and symbolism. For example, privately consumed/low-involvement products such as socks and pyjamas may play a relatively less significant role in the diffusion process of fashion innovativeness than publicly consumed/high involvement products such as evening dresses/suits. According to a study conducted by Rahman et al. (2008), Chinese consumers were more willing to spend their money on prestigious or publicly consumed products than privately consumed products such as pyjamas. They also found that the symbolic value of pyjamas was perceived to be relatively low as compared to other visible apparel products. With this perspective, it is reasonable to suggest that consumers may have different attitudes toward different types of apparel products. Thus, a number of research questions should be raised to further investigate and explore on this variance:

- Are fashion adopters more conscious and sensitive on both publicly consumed and privately consumed products than fashion followers?
- Are fashion adopters more concerned about visual aesthetic cues (e.g., style, colour and fit) than fashion followers when they evaluate publicly consumed products?
- Do fashion adopters and followers use the same criteria when they evaluate privately and publicly consumed products?
- Overall, what role do product cues play in the evaluation of various apparel product types?

In order to understand fashion adopters’ and followers’ perception toward different types of apparel products, three types of apparel products were chosen for this study – two publicly consumed products (eveningwear and t-shirt) and one privately consumed product (socks). If a bi-polar continuum scale is employed to illustrate the involvement intensity of these products, socks would be classified as low-

involvement, t-shirts as 'in-between' or mid-involvement, and evening dresses/suits would be considered to be high-involvement.

Product Cues

Other than the product type, product attributes may also play a significant part in consumer evaluation of apparel products. Due to the fact that fashion adopters are more interested in fashion (Eicher et al., 2000; Beaudoin et al., 2000; Workman and Johnson, 1993), they are more likely relying on aesthetic cues to evaluate a new clothing product than the fashion followers. In this respect, a question should be posed: Would it be the selection of evaluative cue more associated with the consumer types rather than the product types or vice versa? In order to gain a deeper understanding, ten product cues were selected for this study including three extrinsic cues (price, brand name and country-of-origin) and seven intrinsic cues (fit, style, colour, comfort, fabric, coordination and durability).

Based on the cue utilization theory, consumers' perceptions of product values are often associated with a wide array of attributes. They are generally dichotomized into two types – extrinsic and intrinsic cues and both are used concurrently when evaluating a product (Simonson, 1989). Extrinsic cues are related to the product but not directly attached to the physical product itself (e.g., brand name, country-of-origin and price) whereas intrinsic cues are directly attached to the product (e.g., fabric, colour and style). In general, intrinsic cues are perceived to be more important and reliable indicators of quality than extrinsic cues (Wall et al., 1991; Zeithaml, 1988). If consumers are familiar with the product, they often use intrinsic cues to assess the product quality. In addition, according to many prior studies (as shown in Table 1), consumers are not necessarily using the same set of criteria for apparel evaluation. Nevertheless, according to several prior studies, comfort deemed to be an important evaluative cue for privately consumed products including brassiere (Chan et al., 2001), pyjamas (Rahman et al., 2008) and sleepwear (Rahman et al., 2009). On the contrary, many consumers tended to use visual intrinsic cues (e.g., colour, style and fit) to assess publicly consumed product such as denim jeans. It is important to note that fit can be used to provide psychological comfort (visual appearance) as well as physiological comfort (ease of movement).

However, limited research has been examined on the relationships between consumer types (fashion leader and fashion follower) and the salient effect of product attributes among various product types. Over the years, there has been relatively little research (Bye and Reiley, 2003; Davis et al., 1990; Hatch and Roberts, 1985; Lee and Burns, 1993) which has dealt with multiple apparel products within a study. Although Bye and Reiley (2003) have examined on various products including jeans, T-shirt, lingerie and dresses, their focus was placed on the retail formats rather than the product cues. Therefore, it seems to be worthwhile and meaningful to explore and investigate on this particular topic.

<i>Top 3 Significant Evaluative Product Cues</i>				
Chan et al.	2001	Hong Kong	Brassiere	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Comfort 2. Fitting, functions: pushing, uplifting 3. Aesthetic
DeLong et al.	2002	South Korea & U.S.A.	Jeans	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Colour (S. Korea & USA) 2. Style/design (S. Korea); Fit (USA) 3. Brand name (S. Korea); Tactile quality (USA)
Herbst and Burger	2002	South Africa	Jeans	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Brand 2. Style

				3. Place of purchase
Chen et al.	2004	China	Children's clothing	1. Quality 2. Style 3. Personal preferences
Chae et al.	2006	U.S.A.	Tennis Wear	1. Comfort 2. Fit 3. Construction quality
Wu and DeLong	2006	China	Jeans	1. Comfort 2. Fit/shape 3. Design/cut
Rahman et al.	2008	China	Pyjamas	1. Comfort 2. Quality 3. Fabric
Rahman et al.	2009	China	Sleepwear	1. Comfort 2. Quality 3. Fabric
Rahman et al.	2010	Canada & China	Jeans	1. Fit (Canada); Comfort (China) 2. Style (Canada); Fit (China) 3. Quality (Canada and China)

Table 1
Prior Apparel Studies of Product Cues and Perceived Quality

Research Methodology

A self-administered questionnaire survey was designed and developed for this study. It consisted of three sections. In section one, six items of the domain-specific innovativeness (DSI) scale (Goldsmith and Hofacker, 1991) were adopted to identify the fashion adopters and fashion followers, and seven-point Likert scale to measure the innovativeness. In section two, questions were developed to investigate respondents' perceptions and evaluative criteria of three apparel products – evening wear (dress/suit), t-shirt and socks. Five-point Likert scale questions (anchored by strongly agree = 5,4,3,2 to strongly disagree =1) were employed to measure the relative significance of seven intrinsic cues and three extrinsic cues. In final section, questions were developed to collect demographic data (age, annual income, occupation).

Female subjects were solicited from a major university in Toronto. The selection criteria for participants were gender and age. According to Campbell et al. (1976), young female consumers are more involved in fashion than men (Auty and Elliott, 1998). Researchers such as Walters and Bergiel (1989) also found that female consumers are more responsible for the purchase of their own apparel items than their male counterparts. Therefore, female students, 18 years or older, were solicited and chosen for this study. In total, 132 useable questionnaires were collected. The participants ranged from 18 to 25 years of age, and the mean age was 19.86.

Results and Discussion

In terms of identification of fashion leaders and followers, the method proposed by Beaudoin et al. (2000) was adopted. The score of 23 on the Innovativeness Scale was used as a cut-off point to split the sample into adopters and followers. As a result, 100 respondents (or 75.8 percent) scoring between 6 and 23

were designated “fashion followers”, and the 32 respondents (24.2 percent) who scored between 24 and 30 were designated “fashion adopters”. The score of 23 separated approximately the top 24% of the sample was in lined with some prior studies – e.g., 24.3% (Morgan and Birtwistle, 2009).

According to the results (as shown in Table 2), both fashion adopters and followers perceived fit as the most salient evaluative cue for evening dresses and t-shirts followed by style and colour; and in terms of socks, comfort was the most important cue followed by price and fabric. There were no significant differences among the ten product cues except the durability of socks – fashion adopters ranked durability as the fifth significant product cue for socks purchase whereas fashion followers ranked it as the second most important cue. In this particular case, fashion adopters had less concern about the durability than followers. Nevertheless, it seems the product type played a relatively more important role than the consumer type. Clearly, consumers used different evaluative criteria to judge the quality of different products. The visual appearance or aesthetic attributes such as fit, style and colour deemed to be more important for evaluating the publicly consumed products (e.g., dresses and t-shirt) than the privately consumed ones (e.g., socks). This finding is similar to a study conducted in South Korea and the United States (DeLong et al., 2002), they found that colour, style/design deemed to be important for buying a pair of denim jeans (publicly consumed product). However, two other studies of denim jeans (Wu and DeLong, 2006; Rahman et al. 2010) conducted in China have different outcomes, they found that comfort was the most important evaluative criteria for most of the Chinese consumers. In other words, the socio-cultural or economic factors may also play an influential role in product evaluation other than product types. However, the cross-cultural aspect is beyond the scope of the current study. This will be an interesting and meaningful topic for future investigation.

Order of Significance	T-shirt	Evening Dress/Suit	Socks	T-shirt	Evening Dress/Suit	Socks
1: most significant cue	Fit	Fit	Comfort	Fit	Fit	Comfort
2	Style	Style	Price	Style	Style	Durability
3	Colour	Colour	Fabric	Colour	Colour	Fabric
4	Comfort	Fabric	Fit	Comfort	Fabric	Fit
5	Price	Price	Durability	Fabric	Price	Price
6	Fabric	Comfort	Style	Price	Comfort	Colour
7	Coordination	Brand	Colour	Coordination	Durability	Style
8	Durability	Durability	Coordination	Durability	Brand	Coordination
9	Brand	Coordination	COO	Brand	Coordination	COO
10: least significant cue	COO	COO	Brand	COO	COO	Brand

Table 2
The significance of product cues

The present study provides evidence that visual cues (style and colour) of socks played a less significant role as compared to functional cues (comfort and fabric). This finding suggests that many respondents might perceive socks as a homogenous or basic commodity rather than a symbolic item. Although style and colour did not consider as significant influential cue, it was ranked relatively high as compare to other product cues including coordination, brand name and country of origin. This finding clearly demonstrated that both fashion adopters and followers often used similar evaluative cues to assess apparel products. They relied more on visual aesthetic cues to evaluate publicly consumed products and focused more on functional cues to judge the privately consumed products. These findings are consistent with a study of pyjamas conducted by Rahman et al. (2008), Chinese consumers rarely used privately consumed product such as pyjamas to communicate and express their self-image. As they expressed, “One’s private self is not as important as the public self (pp.228).” It seems this analogy can also be applied to this study. It is evident that most of the respondents tended to use functional cues (comfort, durability and fabric) more than the visual aesthetic (colour and style) cues to evaluate the privately consumed products.

In addition, according to the result of the present study, the fit of clothing deemed to be more significant than other product cues, particularly for the publicly consumed products (see Table 2). It is reasonable to suggest that consumers (both fashion adopters and followers) are generally concerned about the fit of a garment. Without a doubt, it is evident that fit plays a significant role in the evaluation and selection process when it comes to making a clothing purchase. In a study conducted in the United Kingdom by Apeageyi (2008), 86 per cent of the respondents were concerned with their appearance when wearing certain types of clothing, and 85 per cent believed that identical garments could look different on distinct body shapes/types. If a specific desired social stereotype or ideal body image cannot be achieved with an item of clothing, an unpleasant psychological state (e.g., anxiety, dissatisfaction and depression) can arise in the wearer (Altabe and Thompson, 1996). Individuals often use clothing as a means to accentuate their ideal body features or to conceal undesirable body attributes (Markee et al., 1990). Indeed, clothing is a prevalent way of enhancing body image: it has been shown that a change in clothing style or outward appearance can result in a change of one’s moods and attitudes (Rahman, 2011).

Moreover, today’s consumers are more savvy and sophisticated when it comes to shopping. The vast majority of respondents include both fashion adopters and followers did not use brand name and country-of-origin as an indicator of product quality. They relied on the intrinsic cues such as the physical characteristics and attributes to judge the apparel products rather than extrinsic cues regardless of the product types, and this finding is consistent with many prior studies (Chae et al., 2006; Rahman et al., 2008, 2009, 2010; Wu and DeLong, 2006).

In terms of the consumer types, this study found that fashion adopters ranked price cue higher but the durability cue lower than the fashion followers. The possible explanation is that fashion adopters are unlikely to spend too much money and time on the basic commodities or low-involvement products. In other words, they rather spend their money on publicly consumed and/or high involvement products. Involvement has been defined as an individual’s perceived relevance of an object based on his/her needs, values and interests (Zaichkowsky, 1985).

This finding is in line with Mitchell and Greatorex (1989), consumers tended to use price as a cue to quality when judging the low-quality products.

	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree
I am uncomfortable when the colour of my clothes are different from others	31.3%	68.7%	22%	78%
I buy the same colour of clothing as what others are wearing	9.4%	90.6%	6%	93%
I would not buy certain colours if my good friends told me they did not like them		100%	14%	86%
I enjoy wearing unusual colour of clothing	87.5%	12.5%	75%	25%
I use colour to differentiate from others	65.6%	34.4%	60%	40%
I wear certain colour that make me feel distinctive	81.3%	18.7%	84%	16%
I buy certain colour to draw the other's attention	59.4%	40.6%	59%	41%
I wear certain colour to appeal to the other gender is important to me	25%	71.9%	42%	57%
I buy colour to keep up to date on fashion	53.2%	43.8%	56%	43%
The current fashion colour trend is important to me	62.5%	34.4%	53%	46%
I buy certain colour to express who I am	87.5%	9.4%	88%	11%
I tend to buy clothing in my favourite colour	65.6%	31.3%	80%	19%
I don't care whether people like the colour of my clothes or not	93.8%	3.1%	76%	23%
I buy certain colour to make me feel good	93.8%	3.1%	92%	7%
I choose colour to evoke thoughts of happiness	65.6%	31.3%	63%	36%
I buy certain colour because it makes me look more mature	50%	46.9%	63%	36%
I buy certain colour because it makes me look more younger	12.5%	84.4%	19%	80%
I spend time to find colour that look best on me	75%	21.9%	87%	12%
I spend time to find colour that coordinate well with my wardrobe	62.5%	31.3%	73%	26%

Table 3**The Role and Importance of Colour Cue**

Colour often plays an influential role in the acceptance or rejection of a product. According to a several studies (Bevlin 1997; Myers 1989; Rasband 2001), colour is considered to be the most visible and appealing design element. Colour cue provides immediate information and impression to a viewer about the products prior to physical interaction. In order to gain a deeper understanding of consumer's perceptions toward colour, a number of statements were employed to elucidate the salient impact of this visual cue. According to the results of this study, it is reasonable to suggest that fashion adopters are more knowledgeable and sensitive about the colour and fashion trend. For example, 62.5% of fashion adopters reported that the current fashion colour trend is important versus 53% of fashion followers. It seems fashion adopters knew exactly what colour they want more so than the followers – adopters generally spent less time to find the desirable colour to enhance or compliment their personal look and appearance.

Conclusion and Limitations

Within the fashion/clothing domain, there is a wide categorization of product types – privately consumed/publicly consumed, high-involvement/low involvement and symbolic/functional. Fashion adopters and followers do not necessarily use the same criteria to evaluate different apparel products. In other words, they do not perceive the same value among products within the same domain. In this study, it is evident that evening dresses and t-shirts were considered to be more symbolic whereas socks were seen as primarily functional. Additionally, fashion adopters were less sensitive to price when evaluating evening dresses and t-shirts, but not for socks.

According to the results of the present study, most of the participants did not perceive brand name as a salient purchasing criterion. The challenge for fashion designers and marketers will be building the brand image and adding symbolic value to both high- and low-involvement apparel products. As stated in the preceding section, many consumers rarely use privately consumed products (socks) as a communication tool to express their self-image and identity. As McEwen et al., (2006) suggested that self-satisfaction and self-expression have become the predominant motivators of young and affluent consumers. With this perspective, fashion firms must offer their customers added values in the realm of pleasure (Jordan, 2000) or meet “super-functional needs” (Weightman and McDonagh, 2004) to sustain their competitiveness.

To conclude, for a product’s success in today’s marketplace, fashion practitioners must fully understand their consumers, pay maximal attention to the needs and aspirations of fashion adopters in particular, identify the shifting paradigm of taste, focus on the relationships between product cues and product types, and discover what design elements could trigger particular cognitive and affective responses among young consumers, particularly the fashion adopters. I believe that the present study should provide valuable contributions, insights and information on various aspects of innovativeness for fashion practitioners in general and designers in particular.

Although this research provides important insights to fashion practitioners, further research using a larger sample, different products, and soliciting a more diverse population including both males and females would strengthen the external validity and reliability of future studies.

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