FASHION CLOTHING CONSUMPTION: STUDYING THE EFFECTS OF MATERIALISTIC VALUES, SELF-IMAGE/ PRODUCT-IMAGE CONGRUENCY RELATIONSHIPS, GENDER AND AGE ON FASHION CLOTHING INVOLVEMENT

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Abstract

Over many years fashion clothing has been an area of interest to many consumer researchers. This study examines the effect of age, gender, materialism and self-image product-image congruency on consumers involvement in fashion clothing. Data were gathered via a mail survey of 450 respondents. The results indicate that fashion clothing involvement is significantly affected by a consumers age, gender, degree of materialism and degree perceived person-product image congruency.

Introduction

Many modern societies are characterised by a strongly held belief that *to have is to be* (Dittmar 1992) and life satisfaction is judged in terms of what possessions have or have not been acquired (Belk 1985 and Richins 1994). This is related to the benefit obtained by an individual's relationship with their possessions. Thus, individuals define themselves and others in terms of their possessions and possessions have come to serve as key symbols for personal qualities, attachments and interests. Summing up such views Dittmar said: *... 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* (1992 p.205).

Materialistic Values

Consumer researchers have shown considerable interest in values because they are argued to be an important influence on behaviour. In general marketers are keen to explore the values that characterise consumption. A value that is becoming more prevalent in many western counties, particularly Australia is materialism, and it appears to be a potentially important dimension of consumer behaviour. Australia's growing preoccupation with possessions is reflected in such consumption values as "shop till you drop" and "he who dies with the most toys, wins" and the rise in credit card usage and consumer debt. Such approaches to life are the basis of materialism. This does not imply that every consumer is materialistic, as there is significant variance between individuals prioritisation of and attachment to materialistic values (Richins 1987). Having more materialistic values has been associated with using possessions for portraying and managing impressions (Belk 1985). Greater levels of materialism seem to be associated with an understanding by individuals that possessions serve as part of a communication or signal to others informing them of who the individual is and what they are (Douglas & Isherwood 1979). Materialism may, therefore, represent a key variable in the development of a consumer's involvement with products that allow the fulfilment of such values and assist in portraying acceptable images.

Self-image and Product-image Congruency

Research on self-concept (or self-image) has often focused on brand/product preferences, purchase intention or usage at the level of congruency between the brand image and the individual's image (Sirgy, Grewal, Mangleburg, Park, Chon, Claiborne, Johar & Berkman 1997). The central element here is not the actual self-concept dimensions, but the perceived congruence between self-image and product-image. Here self-concept is defined as to "the totality of the individual's thoughts and feelings having reference to himself as an object" (Rosenberg 1979 p.7). Self-image congruence models are based on the notion of cognitive matching between a product and a consumer's self-concept. Researchers have operationalised the impact that self-concept has upon product (and brand) choice by developing measures of the consumers / product (brand) congruency. The fundamental proposition is that consumers will be more involved with products that are closer to their own self-image. Self-image congruence is defined as the match between consumer-image and product-image. An approach currently being investigated for tapping self-image product-image congruence is based on tapping the psychological experience of self-image congruence directly and globally by asking respondents to agree or disagree to a set of statements describing their subjective experience of self-image congruence in a global approach (Sirgy et al 1997). Essentially, this method captures self-congruity through images that are conjured up by the respondent at the moment of response and not through predetermined images that may be irrelevant to subjects. It is proposed that involvement inherently drives the perceived match or congruency between the self and the product.

Consumer Involvement

Materialistic tendencies and product person image congruency appear to be important determinants of consumers' involvement in products. In this study, involvement is viewed as a construct linked to the interaction between an individual and an object, i.e., the relative intensity of the consumer's thoughts about a focal object. In a given sphere of consumer activity, involvement refers to the extent to which the consumer views the focal activity as a central part of their life, a meaningful and engaging activity in their life and important to them. High involvement implies greater relevance to the self. Because products mean different things to different people, consumers form differing attachments to them. An individual's attachments may be quite different from their family or friends in intensity and nature. Understanding consumers varying attachments, how they form, are maintained and are influenced is of interest to consumer researchers (academics) and practitioners (managers) alike. In an attempt to more fully understand the behaviour of consumers related to possessions, consumers researchers have often invoked the construct of 'involvement' (Laurent & Kapferer, 1985; Mittal & Lee, 1989; Ohanian, 1990; and Zaichkowsky, 1986). The considerable empirical and theoretical effort devoted to this construct since the mid 1960s, has been driven by consumer behaviour researchers' desires to understand the ways in which consumers become involved with products. This research has also sought to understand the effect involvement has on various purchasing and consuming behaviours (Browne & Kaldenberg, 1997; Tigert, Ring & King, 1976 and Traylor & Joseph, 1984). To date this interest does not appear to be waning (Muehling, Laczniak & Andrews, 1993). Such interest may be partially because of the lack of consensus on involvement, and also because of the potential value that involvement has in contributing to a deeper understanding of consumer behaviour.

It has been argued that the philosophy and practice of relationship marketing and individuals ascribed meanings of products are clarified by the construct of involvement.

Involvement (centrality) has been identified as being at the heart of the person-object relationship and the relational variable most predictive of purchase behaviour (Martin, 1998 and Evrard & Aurier, 1996). Relevant to this study is the view that involvement may be understood via consumer-fashion clothing attachment or relationships. Involvement has been discussed and utilised to examine fashion clothing in a number of prior studies (eg. Browne & Kaldenberg, 1997; Fairhurst, Good & Gentry, 1989; Flynn & Goldsmith, 1993 and Tigert, Ring & King, 1976). The importance of involvement in the domain of fashion clothing can be seen via the defining role of fashion clothing in society. Further, fashion clothing's continual and cyclical nature implies people are often drawn into the 'style' or fashion of the moment, and there are those who place a great deal of emphasis on their clothing. Contemporary fashion research would indicate that consumers are often distributed across a wide range of fashion consciousness and behaviours. Of particular note is the point that, the high fashion involved consumer has historically been important to fashion researchers and marketers (practitioners), because they are seen as the drivers, influentials and legitimists of the fashion adoption process (Goldsmith, Moore & Beaudoin, 1999; Tigert, Ring & King, 1976).

Hypotheses

Given the discussion above it is hypothesised that:
Consumer involvement in fashion clothing will be significantly effected by;
A consumer's age with younger consumers' being more involved.
A consumer's gender, with females being more involved.
A consumer's degree of self-mage product-image congruency, with greater
Congruency being more involved.
A consumer's degree of materialism, with more materialistic consumers' being more involved.

Method

A self-administered survey was developed and administered via mail, resulting in 450 surveys being gathered. The questionnaire contained the materialistic values measure of Richins and Dawson (1992). A measure of product involvement developed specifically for this study. A modified version of the self-image/product-image congruency approach adopted by Sirgy, Grewal, Mangleburg, Park, Chon, Claiborne, Johar and Berkman (1997) was used to measure self-image/product-image congruency. The actual self-image/product-image congruency, ideal-self/product-image congruency and social-self/product-image congruency were measured using this approach. The survey was pilot tested on a sample of students (80) studying business. The pilot test results indicated that the instrument was sound.

Results

The data were initially examined for dispersion and central tendency via means, standard deviation and skew and kurtosis. This analysis indicated no anomolies in the data. Following this analysis the data were factor analysed using principle components with oblique rotation, followed by correlation and reliability estimates. The following provides a brief overview of the preliminary analysis, before discussing the results.

The following provides the results of the analysis of the materialistic values construct. Initial factor analysis of the materialistic values measure indicated that Materialism possessed 3 factors (possessions as defining success; acquisition centrality and acquisition as the pursuit of happiness) with factor loadings between .44 and .75. Richins and Dawson (1992) reported Cronbach alpha values ranging between .71 to .75 for centrality, .74 to .78 for success and .73 to 83 for happiness. The internal consistency achieved in this study is higher than those reported in studies by Richins and Dawson (1992).

Product Involvement

The factor analysis of product involvement scale indicated the items tapping product involvement ranging from .69 to .90 with 70% of the variance being explained and Cronbach Alpha was .97 indicating high internal reliability.

Self-image Product-image Congruency

Self-image product image congruency contained one factor explaining 64 percent of the variance, with a internal reliability of .88 and factor loading between .61 and .90.

The hypothesis proposed that consumer involvement in fashion clothing would be significantly effected by age, gender, degree of materialism and self-image product-image congruency (SPC). Table 1 below indicates that as hypothesised all variables were significant and in the proposed direction.

Table 1 Regression results for hypothesised effects on fashion involvement

		Beta	T-value	Sig
Age		-.271	-8.238	.001
Gender		.111	3.257	.001
Materialism		.250	6.733	.001
Self-image	Product-image	.473	12.926	.001
congruency				

The results indicated that 52 percent of the variance in fashion clothing involvement was explained by age, gender, materialism and self-image product-image congruency. The F-value was 121.4 significant at .001. As such the hypothesis is supported, in that age, gender, degree of materialism and self-image product-mage congruency all have a significant effect on consumer involvement in fashion clothing and in the predicted direction.

Although not hypothesised the data were further analysed to examine if ideal image, social image or actual image effects differed. Three variables were created by computing a composite mean for ideal self-image product-image congruency, social self-image product-image congruency and actual self-image product-image congruency out of the six items tapping self-image product-image congruency. Table 2 indicates that ideal self-image product-image congruency and social self-image product-image congruency do have a significant effect on consumers' involvement in fashion clothing, whilst actual self-image product-image congruency was not significant.

Table 2 Regression results for self-image types on fashion clothing involvement

	Beta	T-value	Sig
Age	-.273	-8.309	.001
Gender	.115	3.393	.001
Materialism	.251	6.595	.001
Actual Self-image Product-image congruency	.089	1.858	NS
Ideal Self-image Product-image congruency	.196	3.796	.001
Social Self-image Product-image congruency	.251	5.371	.001

The analysis indicated that 52 percent of the variance in fashion clothing involvement was explained by the predictor variables in table 2. The F-value was high at 82.0 and was significant at .001. This further analysis adds further understanding of the effects of the predictor variables on involvement.

Discussion

This research has identified age, gender, materialistic values and person-product image congruency as significant contributors to an individual's involvement in fashion clothing and its consumption. We have shown that significant insights into the determinants of involvement at an individual, market-segment or cultural level are achievable if involvement is modelled in the manner shown here. Thus, studying materialism at the individual level has permitted the study of the interaction between materialism and involvement. When we talk about consumers' involvement with a focal object, we view it as a continuum from total attachment (or absorption) with the product and related activities (high involvement) to complete detachment or automaticity (very low involvement). Involvement is always focused on a consumer's interaction with a product or stimulus in a marketing context. The more the focal object occupies a key position in the consumer's life, the greater the involvement.

This study also focused on the congruency between product-image and person-image and its relationship to consumers' involvement with fashion clothing. Consumer self-concept researchers have theorised that a product-user's image interacts with the consumer's self-concept generating a subjective experience referred to as self-image/product-image congruity or self-image congruence. The underlying notion of self-image and involvement is that consumers become involved in those products that have high symbolic elements that possess or portray images most similar to their own images or the images they wish to portray. This proposition, while logically sound, had not been tested. So while it was argued that consumers prefer products that match their self-concept, (because such products provided a vehicle for self-expression [Belk 1988]), little work supported this proposition in the context of self-congruity and involvement. Dolich (1969) and Engel and Light (1968) had alluded to proposed a relationship between self-concept and involvement, they did not however, empirically determine the extent of such a relationship nor its direction. This study has revealed the strength and direction of such a relationship. It was shown that self-image product-image congruency in fashion clothing and related stimuli drives the strength of ones involvement. Fundamentally, the respondent's level of involvement has been shown here to have self-image product-image congruency and materialism as its underlying trigger or driving mechanism. The findings indicate that, the more involved consumers are with fashion clothing (the product and its consumption/use), the more they perceive a high level of congruity between their self-image and the image of fashion clothing.

A major challenge facing involvement researchers lies not only in understanding involvement itself, but also understanding the role involvement plays together with other

variables in guiding the formation of purchase and consumption patterns and experiences of consumers. This challenge suggested the need to conduct research investigating not only involvement, but also involvement within a broader network, suggesting that involvement should be studied within a broader nomological network of consumer variables. This study has revealed important findings through modelling product involvement in a framework of related constructs.

Limitations & Future Research

There are some limitations given the nature of the sample, however, it should be noted that other involvement research and measurement (e.g., Mittal, 1989 and Zaichkowsky, 1985) have also been developed using student respondents (O'Cass, 2000). However, as identified earlier the sample is acceptable for theory testing (e.g., see, Calder, Philips and Tybout, 1981 and others). The study may also be limited by the use of a single product (fashion clothing), however other studies have also used single products (Arora, 1982; Fairhurst, Good and Gentry, 1989; Mittal and Lee, 1988; Slama and Tashchian, 1987 and Tigert, Ring and King, 1980). Further, a significant focus of the study was consumer involvement in fashion clothing and students are considered an appropriate sample for this product type (Browne & Kaldenberg, 1997; O'Cass, 2000). The driving force and long-term goal of future research is to test this conceptualisation and measures in different settings with different products and to discriminate between involvement with product categories such as fashion clothing and specific brands within such categories. This should be done using a broader nomological network than that used in this study. Research could focus on values, personality and situational variables to test these involvement propositions.

The theoretical propositions presented and tested here build on the prior work on involvement by Arora, (1982), Mittal and Lee (1989), Slama and Tashchian (1987) and Houston and Rothschild (1979). However, it has substantially modified key aspects also and the framework appears to be a valuable aid in bringing together the diverse extant approaches to construing and measuring involvement and its relationship with other important variables. Such improvement can only enhance the effective utilization of this construct at both a theoretical and practical level in understanding consumer behaviour.

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