



Towards a better understanding of fashion clothing involvement

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ABSTRACT

This study is concerned with consumer involvement in fashion clothing. Amidst the consumer objects that facilitate everyday life, fashion clothing is an important and meaningful object for many consumers. In the extant consumer literature few studies have attempted to examine fashion clothing involvement, particularly in terms of its causes and outcomes. This study then focuses on building a reliable nomological network to bring a greater understanding to this facet of consumer behaviour. To achieve this, materialism and gender are examined as drivers of fashion clothing involvement. Recreational shopper identity, ongoing information search, market mavenism, and purchase decision involvement are explored as outcomes of fashion clothing involvement. Data were gathered using an Australian Generation Y sample resulting in 200 completed questionnaires. The results support the study's model and its hypotheses and show that materialism and gender are significant drivers of fashion clothing involvement. While also, recreational shopper identity, ongoing information search, market mavenism and purchase decision involvement are significant outcomes of fashion clothing involvement.

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1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, studies of involvement have grown in number and importance as a consequence of increasing focus on consumer studies. Along with Western developments in industrial production and the proliferation of material goods, fashion clothing is now recognised as an important part of our human, corporeal existence. For example, fashion clothing is unique in its material proclivities and its relation to our body; we experience life through clothing items (Woodward, 2007). This paper is concerned with involvement consumers have with fashion clothing as a product category. In doing this, we seek to highlight the effect that fashion clothing involvement has on various consumer behaviour variables.

The term 'fashion' is accounted for through the attributes of change, ambivalence, novelty and added value when associated with an object (Kawamura, 2005, pp. 4–5). It follows then that a continued focus on this ever-changing consumer object would be of great benefit to consumption studies. Using the arguments of Eicher and Roach-Higgins (1992, p. 13), the inclusion of the term fashion clothing in this research refers to *all items that adorn any part of the body*. Defining fashion clothing in this manner allows for a more thorough account of fashion clothing yet avoids

potential bias to certain items within the category, like jewellery for example.

In conceptualising a nomological network, this study proposes that materialism and gender are important drivers of fashion clothing involvement (FCI). Furthermore, it is posited that recreational shopper identity (RSI), market mavenism, ongoing information search (OIS) and purchase decision involvement (PDI) are outcomes of FCI. The present research extends the scope of the existing nomological FCI network developed by O'Cass (2004). For instance, whilst he found that decision confidence and subjective knowledge are FCI outcomes, this study is the first to conceptualise RSI as an FCI outcome. This paper is also one of the only studies to conceptualise market mavenism as an outcome of FCI. The proposed theoretical model is examined in the context of Australian Generation Y (Gen Y) consumers.

Australian Gen Y consumers are an important and appropriate context for the study of FCI. Here, Daniels' (2007, p. 6) definition of Gen Y is adopted and accounts for those persons born between 1977 and 1994 inclusively. Many consumer studies focus on Gen Y consumers from America (e.g. Bakewell and Mitchell, 2003; O'Donnell, 2006; Sullivan and Heitmeyer, 2008; Wolburg and Pokrywczynski, 2001) or Asia (e.g. Arora, 2005; O'Cass and Choy, 2008; O'Cass and Lim, 2002). However, as noted by Solomon (2004), the distinguishing characteristics of individuals that comprise an age cohort differ across cultures. Thus, the findings of these studies may not necessarily be generalisable to an Australian context. For fashion marketers, in an industry that is worth billions

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worldwide (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009), understanding young consumers is important as they are predicted to become the most significant retail spending group in Australia by the year 2015 (Daniels, 2007; Huntley, 2006).

This paper begins with a review of the extant FCI literature and develops the proposed conceptual model, 'Fashion Clothing Involvement Drivers and Outcomes' with six hypotheses. This is followed by an outline of the research design used in the study including data collection methods. The paper then presents the analysis and results of the study and concludes with a discussion of the study's findings, its limitations and recommended areas for future research.

1.1. Fashion clothing involvement

Since being introduced by Krugman (1965) and McLuhan (1964) nearly 50 years ago, consumer involvement has developed into an important area of consumer research explaining many aspects of decision making and consumption (e.g. Evrard and Aurier, 1996; Flynn and Goldsmith, 1993; Kim, 2005; Michaelidou and Dibb, 2006; Mittal and Lee, 1989). As a more specific thread in the involvement literature, FCI is a growing research stream associated with how important, meaningful and relevant fashion clothing is to the lives of consumers. It is a research stream dedicated to explaining fashion clothing related consumption behaviours (e.g. Auty and Elliott, 1998; Bloch et al., 2009; O'Cass, 2000, 2004).

While some consumers find the fashion clothing items they buy and wear to be involving, this is not the case for all. As such, FCI represents an individual difference variable which, according to O'Cass (2004, p. 878), follows "a continuum from total attachment (or absorption) in fashion clothing and related activities (very high involvement) to complete detachment or automaticity (very low involvement)". In this respect, the more fashion clothing occupies a key position in a consumer's life, the greater the FCI experienced. Given this, FCI is defined in this study as "the extent to which a consumer views the related fashion [clothing] activities as a central part of their life" (O'Cass, 2004, p. 870). Petty and Cacioppo's (1984) elaboration likelihood model (ELM) of persuasion, which was developed to understand how attitudes are formed and change, highlights how consumer decision making changes under differing levels of involvement. The ELM suggests there are clear differences in decision making between those who are high in involvement and those who are low in involvement. This implies in terms of fashion clothing, that highly involved consumers use a central route to their fashion clothing decision making, as they are motivated by and find fashion clothing personally relevant. Alternatively, less involved consumers tend to follow a more peripheral, surface route to their fashion clothing decision making (Josiassen, 2010; Petty and Cacioppo, 1980).

While recent work has expanded our understanding of FCI (e.g. O'Cass, 2004), the literature fails to provide a comprehensive picture of the conditions that foster involvement in this lucrative product category, and of its outcomes. Given the current poor retail climate within Australia, there are perhaps fewer areas of greater importance to both retailers and marketing academics. As such, findings from O'Cass (2004) are used to frame this study. By examining FCI in the context of an extended nomological network as advocated by O'Cass (2004), we can better understand how consumer involvement in fashion clothing is formed and where this leads consumers in their decision-making processes.

1.2. Drivers of fashion clothing involvement

1.2.1. Materialism

In seeking to better understand the relationship between consumers and fashion clothing, it is important to understand how

consumer values influence this relationship. Materialistic values influence the need for goods in terms of identity search, self-presentation, aesthetic consumption and for the marking of special occasions (O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy, 2007). Defined by Belk (1984, p. 291) as "the importance a consumer attaches to worldly possessions", materialism explains differences across consumers in well being related to possession ownership (Burroughs and Rindfleisch, 2002), impressions of others through publicly consumed goods (Belk, 1995), attachment to material possessions (Richins, 1987), material possessions as communication devices (Douglas and Isherwood, 1996) and self-concept/image management (Wang and Wallendorf, 2006).

Materialism is rooted in Belk's (1988) theory of the Extended Self, which explains how possessions can become a part of our notion of self and personal identity. At its highest levels, materialists value possessions so greatly that they are thought to assume a central place in life, providing life's greatest source of satisfaction and dissatisfaction (Browne and Kaldenberg, 1997; Fournier and Richins, 1991; Richins and Dawson, 1990). Materialists rely heavily on possessions to symbolise individual qualities, reference and membership group affiliations and social standing within the wider community (Dittmar, 1992; Richins, 1994). Overall, collective findings imply that materialism plays an important role in the development of consumers' relationships with particular objects (O'Cass, 2004).

Importantly, materialism is often portrayed in the literature as a negative personality trait (i.e. Burroughs and Rindfleisch, 2002; Fournier and Richins, 1991; Kasser, 2002; O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy, 2007; Richins, 1994; Richins and Dawson, 1992) and is connected to notions of possessiveness and envy. Materialism has even been referred to by Kasser (2002, p. xii) as "the tragic tale of modernity – we are the snakes eating our own tails". Despite this view, O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy (2007, p. 14) argue that materialism is not solely a narcissistic trait resultant of modern times, but instead "covers a spectrum of human behaviour [where] materialism simply becomes part of our humanity". Furthermore, O'Cass (2001) argues materialism may be a necessary underlying value for consumers to possess in order to become highly involved in goods like fashion clothing. In his study, O'Cass (2004) found empirical evidence for this proposition. Certainly, when considering the ELM, it would be expected that fashion clothing messages sent through the central route would be well received by materialists, who are argued here to find the information personally important and relevant. Thus, it is hypothesised:

H1. Materialism will be significantly and positively related to FCI.

1.2.2. Gender

Another variable that can potentially explain differences in consumer attachments to possessions and marketplace behaviours is gender (Auty and Elliott, 1998; Browne and Kaldenberg, 1997; Dittmar, 1992; O'Cass, 2000, 2004). Gender is a social construct defined by Gentry et al. (2003, p. 3) as "... the symbolic role definition attributed to members of a sex on the basis of historically constructed interpretations of the nature, disposition and role of members of that sex" and has been found to influence FCI (Auty and Elliott, 1998; O'Cass, 2000, 2004; Tigert et al., 1980).

Gender role socialisation helps to account for variances in behaviours between males and females. Socialisation is "the process by which an individual learns the norms and values of the group and society" (Assael et al., 2007, p. 336). Underpinned by social learning theories, in gender role socialisation, an individual learns their gender identity from others of the same sex by early adulthood. It is this gendered identity that forms the basis of an individual's personality and belief system (Chodorow, 1978; Gilligan,

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