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A Cognitive and Social Psychological Perspective on the demand for fashion

Abstract

The fashion industry is an important global industry. In 2012, in Britain it generated more than £48 billion annually and employs more than 600,000 people. Whether or not we consider ourselves fashionable or interested in fashion, we all clothe ourselves in items we have bought or have chosen to wear. Individuals in developed countries tend to buy more fashion items than they need and many have bought items that remain unworn. The fashion industry depends on demand for new ideas and products which allow individuals to perceive themselves as socially or economically superior or simply different. From a psychological perspective, this is in conflict with the well understood desire to conform. The psychological underpinnings of the demand for fashion are complex and have been neglected in research. This paper considers the cognitive and social psychological roles of decision making in the demand for fashion.

Fashion has been described variously as the prevailing style at any given time (Nystrom, 1928); the pursuit of novelty for its own sake (Robinson, 1958); a manifestation of social contagion (King, 1964) and collective behaviour (Horn, 1968; Lang & Lang, 1961). It is a complex, diffuse, often perplexing, highly visible characteristic of societies which can be conceptualised both as an object and as a behavioural process of social influence and diffusion (Sproles, 1974). As such, fashion is a useful vehicle to enable economists to understand non-necessitous expenditure (Robinson, 1961). The demand for fashion is a multi-dimensional phenomenon of interest to researchers from many disciplines including cultural studies, fashion, psychology, sociology and anthropology as well as economics. However, due to the complexity and variability in understanding consumer decision making and buying behaviour, the demand for fashion is not well understood.

Consumer behaviour, particularly the act of purchasing, has been of interest to researchers for decades especially from an economic perspective (Loudon & Della Bitta, 1993). Utility Theory (Bentham, [1824], 1987), proposes that consumers are rational decision makers concerned only with self-interest who make rational choices based on the expected outcomes of their decisions. However, in order to behave rationally in the economic sense consumers would need to be aware of all the available consumption options, be capable of correctly rating each and available to select the optimum course of action (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2007). This is no longer considered realistic as consumers are unlikely to have all possible information, adequate motivation and time to make a perfectly rational decision (Bray, 2008). Moreover, social relationships and values strongly influence consumer decisions (Simon, 1997) which can result in individuals seeking satisfactory, rather than optimal, choices (e.g., Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). Consumers' attitudes about a product or service are formed through experience with the product or service, information from salespeople, friends, relatives and advertisements. Because attitudes are learned, they can change over time.

In 2012, the global clothing industry was valued at US\$1.7 trillion and employed 75 million people. At that time in the UK alone, the clothing industry employed 600,000 people and the total UK household consumption on clothing and footwear was £48 billion, approximately £732 per capita. Today, the UK high street fashion industry is worth an estimated £44.5 billion¹. Despite a general decrease in consumer spending on the high street, Mintel (April, 2014) reports that most shoppers in most department stores are shopping for fashion: 50% shop for clothing, 40% for footwear and over 30% purchase beauty products. Moreover, online shopping for fashion (clothing and footwear) continues to increase. Mintel report that online sales of fashion increased by 461% between 2001 and 2006 and by 152% between 2010 and 2011 when more than a third (35%) of shoppers bought their clothes online spending £4.3 billion. These figures continue to increase. In 2013, 36 million adults (73%) in Great Britain accessed the Internet every day and 72% of all adults bought goods or services online. Reasons for the boom in online fashion sales are cited as the increase in the number of households who have broadband (83% in 2013), more sophisticated websites, and increased numbers of fashion brands such as Zara, H&M, Gap and Topshop having transactional online presence. In addition to increased internet access from home, access to the Internet using a mobile phone more than doubled between 2010 and 2013, from 24% to 53%².

GfK's 2006 study for Wall Street Journal Europe³ surveyed 20,654 people aged over 15 years in 20 countries across Europe and USA to investigate consumers' reasoning about and attitudes towards clothing consumption and shopping habits. The study reported that 80% of the sample bought clothes because of necessity, low cost (75%), pleasure from buying clothing or an accessory (50%), own country of manufacture (52%), and spontaneity. Just over one third (38%) of those surveyed said they followed trends and a third were interested specific labels. The survey also investigated online shopping habits and found that only 25% of consumers in the UK and 13% of consumers in USA had made online purchases of clothing or accessories at least once in the previous twelve months. More recently, a study by GSI, owned by eBay, reported that of 2000 adult shoppers almost 45% preferred shopping for fashion online than offline. The study also found that 71% of women are likely to research online and buy offline, compared to 52% of men. Interestingly, although 64% consult a fashion retailer's website before making a purchase, consumers tend not to consult the retailers' social media profiles. In the GSI study, 90% of consumers reported that they had not interacted with any fashion retailer's Facebook, Twitter or mobile site.

Without doubt, fashion is an important global industry which relies on demand for new ideas and products that will allow individuals to perceive themselves as socially or economically superior or simply different. Whether or not we consider ourselves fashionable or even interested in fashion, we all clothe ourselves in items we have bought or have chosen to wear. Researchers in marketing, frequently suggest Maslow's (1943) model describing a hierarchy of needs is useful for understanding consumers' purchase decisions. This is reflected in the interpretation of GSI's survey findings which claims that 4 out of 5 purchases are bought as a result of need.

¹ <http://www.fashionunited.co.uk/facts-and-figures-in-the-uk-fashion-industry>

² http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171778_322713.pdf

³ <http://www.marketresearchworld.net/content/view/1333/48/>

Not only is the term 'need' problematic, the claim is unsupported by the literature. For example, many individuals buy more fashion items than they need as result of impulse and emotional buying. Consequently, many items remain unworn. A survey of more than 1,200 adults in 2011 by QVC, the online retailer, found that both men and women had unworn items of clothing they had bought as a result of impulse buying: women had an average of 22 unworn outfits valued at £285 and men had 19 unworn items worth an average of £248 (Poulton, 2011).

The fashion industry depends on demand for new ideas and products which allow individuals to perceive themselves as socially or economically superior or simply different. For more than a century, conspicuous consumption (Veblen, [1899], 1994) has been used to describe the acquisition of luxury goods and services to publicly display economic power. Veblen's Theory of the Leisure Class critiques the neoclassical theory of consumption and presents an evolutionary framework in which preferences are determined socially in relation to the positions of individuals in the social hierarchy. Having discretionary income allows individuals to consume goods and services for prestige rather than for the intrinsic, practical utility of the goods and the services. Almost 100 years ago, Nystrom (1931) argued that the industrial revolution had induced a 'philosophy of futility' that would increase the consumption of goods and services as an activity for its own sake. He discussed the concept of conspicuous consumption as behavioural addiction, narcissistic behaviour or both which was a means to satisfy consumers' desire for instant gratification of hedonic expectations. Previously considered a preserve of the rich, by the late twentieth century conspicuous consumption had become a socio-economic behaviour of poorer social classes and economic groups, and common to the societies of countries with emerging economies (Stanley & Danko, 1996; Charles, Hurst & Roussanov, 2009). Stanley and Danko (1996) described how Americans with a net worth of more than \$1 million were likely to avoid conspicuous consumption and practice frugality. In support, Charles et al. (2007) argued that the richer a society or peer group, the less important visible spending becomes. For individuals in lower economic status groups and developing economies, conspicuous consumption serves more to fight the negative perception of being poor rather than to establish an affluent status. Fashion satisfies simultaneously the demand for novelty and difference, and the demand for conformity and belonging (e.g., Asch, 1956; Sherif, 1935).

Novelty and difference in fashion is exemplified by modern celebrity culture and is often mimicked by fast fashion available to all at a low cost. What was previously novel becomes commonplace allowing individuals to be part of an 'ingroup' to which an individual identifies psychologically (Tajfel, 1974). Such systems are fundamental to the incessant demand for fashion. Research suggests that over the past 30 years, women have increased the volume of garments in their wardrobes by 400%. In 2011, research findings showed that women buy and dispose of 62lb of clothing in a year and that on average women have 22 unworn garments in their wardrobe. Siegle (2011) predicts that over a lifetime, women will spend £133,640 on 'looking good'. Siegle attributes this increase to the rise in 'fast fashion' where low-priced garments allow consumers to emulate celebrity looks and celebrity culture by wearing a different outfit every day. Fast fashion encourages consumers to spend less on individual items and buy more. This makes consumption attractive to individuals from a financial perspective.

The growth in online and mobile shopping encourages consumption at any time. The report highlights how the increasing demand for fashion is being met through a global production of 80 billion garments a year. Current thinking in sustainable consumption research suggests overconsumption (e.g., Diamond, 2008) is the fundamental barrier to a sustainable fashion industry, potentially as a result of the depletion of finite fossil fuels used for production and transportation (e.g., Allwood, Laursen, Rodríguez & Bocken, 2006). Persuading consumers to engage more with their clothing, value craftsmanship, buy fewer and spend more on individual items remains a serious challenge.

The demand for fashion is influenced by multiple factors including the internal and external influences on the individual, social relations, the media, advertising and marketing campaigns, festivities, socio-economic factors and the weather. The multitude of behavioural activities in fashion is known as 'fashion involvement', (O'Casey, 2004). Fashion involvement is impacted by psychological, social and economic factors. For example, Browne and Kaldengerg (1997) found that consumers spend more time buying fashion clothing due to strong feelings of pleasure related to possessions, while Park et al. (2006) found that materialism and positive emotion significantly affect fashion involvement and impulse buying behaviour. Yet, recent studies such as those by GSI report 80% of purchases were necessary. Indeed, many other suggestions have been put forth to account for consumer behaviour, but despite decades of research by social analysts, cultural historians and business entrepreneurs, an understanding of the demand for fashion remains elusive.

According to Dewey ([1910], 2009) the consumer buying decision process comprises a five-stage purchase decision process' framework: problem recognition, information search, and evaluation of alternatives, purchase, and post-purchase evaluation. However, because of multiple physical, social, temporal and psychological influences, the stages need not be followed in any particular order and some stages might not be completed at all. Physical influences include location, store atmosphere, aromas, sounds, lighting, weather, and so on. Social influences relate to the characteristics and interactions of others who are present during a purchase decision, product use and evaluation. Time impacts the buying decision process in several ways. Consumers consider the time required to acquire knowledge about, to search for, buy and use a product; the frequency of use and length of the overall product life. Other decision influencers are the time of day, day of the week or month at which the purchase decision is taken. In addition, the amount of time devoted to any stage of a purchase decision is mediated by the pressure on a consumer. Physical, social and temporal influences impact the consumer psychologically and these aspects are compounded by the individual's personality, mood and state. Together these serve to affect the ability and desire to search for and receive information, seek and evaluate alternatives (Pride & Ferrell, 2012).

Fashion is important for individual and social life and therefore has an obvious relationship with psychology. Yet as an area of research, fashion has been neglected in both cognitive and social psychology. Psychology involves the scientific study of mental functions and behaviours with the aim of understanding individuals and groups to the betterment of individuals, societies and communities. Cognitive psychology, a sub-discipline of psychology is concerned with the study mental

processes such as sensation and perception, memory and learning, attention, communication, problem solving, creativity and thinking. All of which impact the demand for fashion. Psychologists distinguish between sensation and perception: sensation relates to sensory input from the environment through sight, taste, hearing, smell, and touch; perception refers to the processes by which we make sense of these stimuli, and therefore the world. However, because cognitive capacity is limited, and impacted by physical, social, temporal and psychological influences, not all inputs are processed. Typically, inputs that have been processed are salient (loud or sudden) or easy to integrate with personal beliefs and attitudes. Thus they are inherently biased. Another sub-discipline of psychology is social psychology, the scientific study of how people's thoughts, feelings and behaviours and goals are constructed and how such psychological factors are influenced and are influenced by interactions with others (Allport, 1985). Recently, social cognition (e.g., Fiske & Taylor, 1991) has developed as an area of psychology in which cognitive processes are understood in a social domain. It is therefore an appropriate approach from which to better understand the demand for fashion.

Related to social psychology and social cognition is the study of personality. Personality is a set of internal traits and tendencies which result in consistent patterns of behaviour, and self-concept (e.g., Rogers, 1959) can also influence buying behaviour. Although studies of the link between buying behaviour and personality have been inconclusive, many marketers maintain a relationship exists. Buyers tend to purchase products that reflect and enhance self-concept, the view they hold of themselves. Lifestyles, innovators, thinkers, achievers, experiencers, believers, strivers, makers and survivors (Mitchell, 1983), are influenced by personality, self-concept and demographics. The interaction of these factors strongly impacts the consumer buying decision process.

In order to understand the demand for fashion, data needs to be collected, analysed and interpreted. However, the methods of achieving reliable outcomes are problematic. For example, self-report measures used in the majority of studies concerned with understanding attitudes, beliefs and behaviours in a broad range of domains have known limitations. Therefore, although descriptive and inferential statistics provide an insight into perceived attitudes, beliefs and behaviours, they do not inform us about the actual, limited cognitive processes that result in the reasoning behind these attitudes, beliefs and behaviours.

Questionnaires are a type of self-report method which can contain both open and closed questions. Although self-report methods allow personal data to be collected from large samples, there are potential validity problems. Items can be ambiguous, leading or incomprehensible, but in contrast with interviews, there is no way to discern if items have been interpreted as intended by the respondent. Respondents may seek to provide 'desirable' responses (Edwards, 1957), mistake or remember incorrectly the actual details of the responses they are providing due to the fallibility of memory, or because of. Furthermore, responses are constructed through recall which in itself is fallible (Bartlett, 1932). Information must be retrieved from episodic memory (e.g., Tulving & Thomson, 1973). Episodic retrieval involves interaction between a 'retrieval cue' (self-generated or provided by the environment) and a memory trace. The success of retrieval depends in part on the success of encoding at the time of the event. Self-report questionnaire items serve as retrieval

cues. Three quarters of the consumers in the GSI report above claimed they bought items because they were bargains. Thus, these purchases were likely to be spontaneous with little attention to aspects other than the seemingly low price. In such cases, when consumers are asked to recall why they made the purchase, their response relates to the most salient aspect of the transaction: the price. However, when asked for reasons based on subjective judgements such as emotional involvement, participants might respond that they needed the purchase because they may well have believed they did. More transient, but powerful emotional, psychological or social influences at the moment of purchase may not be retrieved as they might not have been successfully encoded at the time. Regardless of the fallacy of memory, people often do not know what influences their behaviour (e.g., Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). Even if it were possible to know this, recall is influenced by many factors including memory limitations and cognitive biases (Kahneman, 2011). The advantage of collecting personal, idiosyncratic data needs to be weighed against these disadvantages.

Attribution theory (Heider, 1958) is a bias which refers to a social psychological phenomenon in which people claim that their own behaviour is caused by situational factors and that other people's behaviour is caused by dispositional factors (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). It is concerned with all aspects of causal inferences: how people arrive at causal inferences, what sort of inferences they make and what the consequences of these inferences are (Folkes, 1988). Attribution theory assumes that people draw upon their past experiences when facing a new situation. It is therefore important for marketers as their role is to convince consumers of the need for a particular item to solve a problem or improve their lifestyle. Marketers may assume that as consumers use a product, they assess its quality and draw conclusions about its many characteristics. Then, when consumers see a similar product on the market, this past experience influences future purchase decisions. However, due to the inherent cognitive and social biases described above, asking purchasers to articulate the reasons for purchasing even at the time of buying may be problematic. Asking them to recall actual reasons is even more difficult as biases are impacted by problems with memory.

Despite the important role that consumption plays in economic theory, Ackerman (1997) argues that economics has been one of the least important contributors to this field of research and is one of the disciplines least affected by new approaches to consumption (Darnell, 1992). The reason for this is the "rigidity of the conventional economic theory of consumer behaviour" (Ackerman, 1997, p.65) which assumes that only prices, incomes and personal taste affect consumption. In this framework, consumers have well-defined, limitless desires for goods and services that are unaffected by social interactions, culture, economic institutions, or the consumption choices or well-being of others. However, from a psychological perspective, this framework is flawed in that consumers do not exist or make decisions in isolation.

In sum, the challenge of understanding the demand for fashion is a serious issue for researchers in many disciplines. Although many definitions of fashion exist (e.g., Nystrom, 1928; Robinson, 1958; King, 1964; Horn, 1968; Lang & Lang, 1961) no shared understanding exists. Because fashion can be interpreted as an object and a process (Sproles, 1974), it is a useful vehicle for economists to understand society's non-necessitous expenditure (Robinson, 1961). Consumer behaviour is of interest to

researchers from an economic perspective (Loudon & Della Bitta 1993), but the commonly cited Utility Theory (Bentham, [1824], 1987) is no longer seen as realistic (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2007; Bray, 2008). More recently, researchers have acknowledged that social relationships and values influence consumer decisions (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Allport, 1985) and can result in satisficing (Simon, 1997) rather than optimising (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). Marketing professionals cite Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943) as an appropriate model for understanding or predicting consumer behaviour, but evidence suggests consumers buy for many reasons other than necessity, including impulse, cheap cost, positive emotions (Browne & Kaldengerg, 1997; Park et al. (2006) often as a result of retail therapy (Schmich, 1986). However, on the negative side, impulse buying can result in conspicuous consumption (Siegle, 2011; Stanley & Danko, 1996; Charles, et al., 2009; Veblen, [1899] 1994), affluenza (de Graaf et al., 2001), overconsumption (Diamond, 2008), and a philosophy of futility' (Nystrom, 1931). Whilst supporting the fashion industry by maintaining a demand for fashion, such overconsumption can damage the environment (Allwood et al., 2006).

The paradoxical nature of fashion allows individuals to be different and conform (Tajfel, 1974; Asch, 1956; Sherif, 1935). Early models such as Dewey suggested ([1910], 2009) proposed a simple five-stage purchase decision process, but lifestyles (Mitchell, 1983), individual differences and personality (Rogers, 1959), can affect the value of such a model (Pride & Ferrell, 2012). As consequence of complex interactions, generating a valid and reliable understanding of the demand for fashion necessitates rigorous, valid and reliable data collection methods. However, questionnaires and other self-report measures are limited as respondents can be subject to social desirability (Edwards, 1957), fallible memory processes (Tulving & Thomson, 1973; Bartlett, 1932), ignorance of what influences behaviour (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977) and therefore misattribution (Folkes, 1988; Heider, 1958) as well as a range of cognitive biases resulting from the desire to respond quickly and intuitively (Kahneman, 2012).

Understanding the demand for fashion is complex and interpretation is likely to be influenced by the researcher's interest. For example, a marketer might be motivated to understand demand to increase sales, advertisers might seek understanding to increase perceptions of individual need, psychologists might be motivated to help consumers develop more healthy consumption behaviours. From a fashion perspective, affluenza, overconsumption, conspicuous consumption and retail therapy are considered serious threats to a sustainable fashion industry. However, while marketers promote the concept that 80% of what we buy is as a result of necessity, and consumers uncritically consider that their buying behaviour is necessary, asking consumers to develop more ethical buying behaviour remains futile. Consequently, it falls to psychologists to challenge consumers' perceptions to support them in reflecting more accurately on the reasons for their purchasing behaviour, and if possible to propose that marketers include caveats in their conclusions suggesting the results show *perceived* rather than *actual* reasons for consumers' purchasing behaviour.

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