



Cognitive impact on fashion preference: an empirical investigation of the clothing preferences of university students

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Abstract

This paper examined the nature and extent of cognitive impact on fashion preferences of young Sri Lankans. The paper focused on fashion consumer behavior from two perspectives: fashion as a display of Socioeconomic Status, and a way for Erotic Exposure. The sample of the study consisted of 60 Sri Lankan students in the age between 17 and 25. The data for the survey were collected through the interviews based on a formal questionnaire. Likert Scale anchored with seven scales (1= strongly disagree to 7= strongly agree) were used to record respondents' fashion preferences and cognition. Mann-Whitney test statistics were used to examine the cognition of fashions and fashion preference between male and female respondents. Study results showed that cognition of fashions as a means to show the socio-economic status is not different between males and females. However, it was evident that females highly believe that fashions reflect the collective choice of a social group. Further, young fashion consumers equally believe that fashion is a means to show the commitment towards the modern values of the society. However, females highly prefer free and independent fashions, and the fashions expected by the modern society. Findings also indicated that youngsters attempt to express their gender through the fashions. According to the test results, the cognition of males is tended towards the view that fashionable clothes create sexual attraction. The results showed that young males tend more towards having sexual attraction through fashions than women.

Keywords: Fashion; Modern Practice; Erotic Exposure; Socio-economic Status

Introduction

Blumer (1969) notes that fashion is a very adept mechanism for enabling people to adjust in an orderly and unified way to a moving and changing world which is potentially full of anarchic possibilities. According to Schrank and Gilmore (1973) role fashion plays in diffusion of ideas, practices, or products reflects changing relationships between human beings and between man and his material culture. Many research studies have focused on several related cognitive traits that may influence the decision-making process among fashion consumer groups of emerging adults, specifically, need for uniqueness, need for variety, optimum stimulation level, sensation seeking, expressing individuality, and susceptibility to boredom (Workman and Studak, 2006). Yet, much of the research efforts have been expended on scrutinizing fashion in a sociological perspective. In the modern consumer culture it is noticeable that fashion preference is not solely limited to one factor, and the beliefs formed by many symbolic forces push

consumers towards fashion. The media, particularly films and TV, have continually shaped clothing fashions (Coates 2005). Further, Workman and Studak (2006) explains that being exposed to advertisements of the latest fashions can trigger recognition of a problem because of a change in a consumer's desired state, that is, what a consumer wishes a situation to be like. As a result, the cognitive factors affecting the fashion are less apparent and rather difficult to determine.

This paper examines the nature and extent of cognitive impact on fashion preferences of young Sri Lankans. The endeavor is to identify the cognitive impact on fashion from a holistic perspective. There, the study aims to incorporate the socio-economic and modern justifications on fashion preference on a common platform, to be exact, "cognition". In some cultures, especially in Asian cultures, the use of fashions to display socioeconomic status is believed to be unethical. The sexual attraction through fashions is generally believed to be bad even. Thus, the study

explains an inherent set of cognitive dimensions of fashion consumption in Sri Lanka. The study is momentous since it provides the understanding that would allow decision makers particularly in marketing and consumer behavior to recognize a set of shared meanings for clothing fashions in Sri Lanka and the cultures alike.

Litreature Review

According to Ruling (2005) the occurrence of fashion is related to change. Fashion acts as an indicator for changes in the economic structure, in norms and values, and in the static of existing social stratification. Veblen's notion of conspicuous consumption proposed that the wealthy consume to display their prosperity, for example by wearing expensive clothing (Solomon, 2002). In addition Veblen (1992) notes that the difference in male and female clothing is therefore a reflection of the economic difference. Women become representative of a husband's socioeconomic status. Their clothing comes to reflect that they are able to purchase garments and accessories at will, to change wardrobes with the season and at the caprices of magazine editors, and to refrain from physical activity. Moreover, according to Solomon (2002) "Trickle Down theory", first proposed in 1904 by Georg Simmel, has been one of the most influential approaches to understanding the fashion. Accordingly, fashion emerges as higher classes choose distinctive signs in order to differentiate themselves. As lower classes tend to imitate higher ones, the members of the higher classes need to recreate class segmentation through a new differentiation (Simmel, 1957). Herbert Blumer (1969) enriches the above views and sees fashion as the outcome of a process of "collective selection" among fashion alternatives that are presented by elite of fashion creators. Blumer's (1981) theory of 'collective selection' equally asserts that innovative individuals (fashion leaders) within social groups look to a plurality of sources for inspiration. They select only styles that display some continuity with previous fashions, and which are relevant to the existing social climate to create their own rather distinctive fashions' of a localized nature (Davis 1992).

In his review of "Fashion and Eroticism: Ideals of Feminine Beauty from the Victorian to the Jazz Age" by Valerie Steele, Kimmel (1985) highlights the prominence of the notion that clothing from the fig-leaf onward has been designed to conceal the naked body from full view. But even the most casual observer knows that garments also reveal one's sexuality,

arousing and sustaining interest in what is concealed. Clothing must give voice, as one 19th-century observer put it, to "the desire to reveal and the necessity to conceal". Further, according to Steele (1985) the social function of clothing is both to preserve modesty and to accentuate the wearer's sexual beauty. She claims that fashion allow women to express their sexual availability. Therefore, clothing fashions can be thought of as a means for stimulating the sexual feelings of others. Each gender role has explicit and implied standards of dress subject to cultural and historical interpretations (Workman and Studak, 2006) and Davis (1992) notes that clothing and appearance do not just indicate our femininity they also illustrate and constitute our sexual identities. One of the earliest theories of fashion proposed that "shifting erogenous zones" (sexually arousing areas of the body) accounted for fashion changes, and that different zones become the object of interest because they reflect societal trends. Flugel a disciple of Freud, proposed in the 1920s that sexually charged areas wax and wane in order to maintain interest, and that clothing styles change to highlight or hide these parts (Solomon, 2002). Flugel believes that women use modesty and body concealment for sexual allure, as a form of what he terms "erotic exposure." As women have diffused sexual centers—that is, the whole body is sexualized—women's clothing becomes more highly charged than that of men.

Methodology

Study Variables

The study focused on understanding the consumers' fashion preferences, and then compares such preferences with their cognition of fashions. Cognition refers to the beliefs a consumer has about an attitude object (Solomon, 2002). Thus, the measures and attribute measures of the research characterize the consumers' "cognition" of clothing fashions. Fashion and clothing are so intimately linked that we must consider them as twins joined at the hip (Coates, 2005). Therefore, it was assumed that clothing is most suitable attitude object through which fashion consumer behavior can be examined. Accordingly, as discussed above two basic measures (study constructs) were used in order to examine how fashion consumer behavior is. Table 01 depicts the fashion preference and two measures (study constructs) and the related attribute measures used for each.

Sample, Questionnaire Design and Data Collection

The adopted research method was survey and the sample was selected randomly. The sample of the study comprised of 60 Sri Lankan students in the age between 17 and 25. The data for the survey were collected through the interviews based on a formal questionnaire. Initially the questionnaire was developed in English and then translated it into Sinhala. Another bilingual researcher back translated the questionnaire as to ensure the translation equivalence. The questionnaire was divided into two sections. The first section dealt with generic demographic variables of the respondents. The second section focused on the aspects of fashion preference and cognition of fashions: socioeconomic status, erotic exposure and modern values. Likert Scale anchored with seven scales (1= strongly disagree to 7= strongly agree) were used to examine respondents fashion preferences and cognition.

Analysis and Discussion

First, the cognition of fashions was examined among the male and female respondents from three

perspectives: socioeconomic status, erotic exposure and modern values. Thereafter, it was necessary to examine the fashion preference of the respondents. Thus, a fashion preference inventory was tabulated to portray the clothing preference of the respondents. Thus, the internal consistency of the four study constructs (i.e. Fashion Preference, Socioeconomic Status, Erotic Exposure and Modern Values) were measured based on the Cronbach's Alpha.

Mann-Whitney test statistics given in Table 01 shows how mean ranks for socioeconomic attribute measures for males and females. Accordingly, it was found that almost similar mean ranks of SS₁, SS₂, SS₃ and SS₄ for males and females and this reflect males and females have similar fashion cognition from socioeconomic perspective. Moreover according to the U test statistics, it was found that there were no significant differences of these mean ranks ($p > 0.05$). But mean ranks of SS₅ were different between males and females and the relevant U test statistics showed that it was significant ($p < 0.05$).

Table 01. Measures & Indicators

Measure	Attribute Measure
Show the Socioeconomic Status (SS)	Imitating the upper Social Classes –SS ₁ , Show the economic status of the family - SS ₂ , Show the social status of the family - SS ₃ , Show the collective identity - SS ₄ , Show the collective taste- SS ₅
As a means of Erotic Exposure (EE)	Attracting the opposite sex –EE ₁ , Stimulate sexual feelings of others- EE ₂ , Reflect the gender differences- EE ₃ , Concealment of sexually stimulating body parts for sexual allure- EE ₄ , Expose sexually stimulating body parts- EE ₅
Fashion Preference (FP)	Expensive Fashions Worn by Rich People - FP ₅ , Fashions Which Display High Social Status- FP ₆ , Fashions Popular among Friends- FP ₇ , Fashions Common to Friends- FP ₈ , Sexy Fashions which Attract Opposite Sex - FP ₉ , Fashions which Differentiate the Gender- FP ₁₀ , Fashions which cause Sexual Stimulation - FP ₁₁ , Highly Sexy Clothes which Expose Body Parts – FP ₁₂

Table 02. Mean Ranks and Mann-Whitney Test Statistics for Socioeconomic Status ^(a)

Attribute Measure	Gender	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Mann-Whitney U	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
Fashions of Rich People are Imitated by Poor People- SS ₁	Female	30.17	905.00	440.000	.879
	Male	30.83	925.00		
Reflects a Person's Economic Strength - SS ₂	Female	30.02	900.50	435.500	.823
	Male	30.98	929.50		
Reflects a Person's Social status-SS ₃	Female	29.10	873.00	408.000	.519
	Male	31.90	957.00		
Shows the Collective Identity of a Social Group- SS ₄	Female	30.22	906.50	441.500	.896
	Male	30.78	923.50		
Reflects the Collective Choice of a Social Group-SS ₅	Female	34.72	1041.50	323.500	.046
	Male	26.28	788.50		

^aGrouping Variable: Gender

Mann-Whitney test statistics for the cognition of fashions as a means of erotic exposure is given in Table 03. Accordingly, similar mean ranks were found for EE₁, EE₂, and EE₃. It shows that for these three measures the cognition of fashion were almost similar among

males and females. Conversely, there were differences between the mean ranks of male and female for EE₃ and EE₄. The U statistics depicted by table 03 reflected that the differences are significant for EE₃ and EE₄ (p<0.5).

Table 03. Mean Ranks and Mann-Whitney Test Statistics for Erotic Exposure^(a)

	Gender	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Mann-Whitney U	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
A Means to Attract Members of the Opposite Sex- EE ₁	Female	28.62	858.50	393.500	.392
	Male	32.38	971.50		
Stimulates Sexual Feelings of Others- EE ₂	Female	28.95	868.50	403.500	.483
	Male	32.05	961.50		
Highlights the Gender and Differentiates from the Opposite Sex- EE ₃	Female	27.30	819.00	354.000	.145
	Male	33.70	1011.00		
Creates Sexual Attraction by Hiding Sexually Stimulating Body Parts - EE ₄	Female	26.13	784.00	319.000	.048
	Male	34.87	1046.00		
Creates Sexual Attraction by Exposing Sexually Stimulating Body Parts- EE ₅	Female	25.57	767.00	302.000	.024
	Male	35.43	1063.00		

^a. Grouping Variable: Gender

Table 04. Mean Ranks and Mann-Whitney Test Statistics for Fashion Preference^(a)

Attribute Measure	Gender	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Mann-Whitney U	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
Expensive Fashions Worn by Rich People- FP ₅	Female	30.42	912.50	447.500	.970
	Male	30.58	917.50		
Fashions Which Display High Social Status- FP ₆	Female	34.47	1034.00	331.000	.074
	Male	26.53	796.00		
Fashions Popular among Friends- FP ₇	Female	33.43	1003.00	362.000	.164
	Male	27.57	827.00		
Fashions Common to Friends- FP ₈	Female	32.40	972.00	393.000	.365
	Male	28.60	858.00		
Sexy Fashions which Attract Opposite Sex- FP ₉	Female	21.97	659.00	194.000	.000
	Male	39.03	1171.00		
Fashions which Differentiate the Gender- FP ₁₀	Female	31.97	959.00	406.000	.500
	Male	29.03	871.00		
Fashions which cause Sexual Stimulation- FP ₁₁	Female	21.73	652.00	187.000	.000
	Male	39.27	1178.00		
Highly Sexy Clothes which Expose Body Parts- FP ₁₂	Female	21.92	657.50	192.500	.000
	Male	39.08	1172.50		

^a. Grouping Variable: Gender

Fashion Preference

The actual fashion preference of the males and females are shown in Table 7. Accordingly it was found that the mean ranks for the preference of modern and non-traditional fashions, unique fashions of the young

generation, expensive fashions worn by rich people, fashions which display high social status, fashions popular among friends, fashions common to friends, and the fashions which differentiate the gender were almost similar. Thus, it shows that the fashion preference of males and females are almost similar for

these measures ($p > 0.5$). However, it was revealed that the preference of free and independent fashions, fashions expected by the modern society, sexy fashions which attract opposite sex, fashions which cause sexual stimulation, highly sexy clothes which expose body parts are significantly different between males and females ($p < 0.5$).

Conclusion

Having being conducted with a group of young fashion consumers from Sri Lanka, this study examines the cognitive impact on the fashion preference. The results of the analysis provide several important insights when understanding the fashion preference of youngsters in Sri Lankan context. As per the test statistics, there is no significant difference in the cognition of fashions as an imitation of the rich people, a display of a person's socio-economic strength, and a display of the collective identity of a social group among the young males and females. However, compared with males, it is evident that females highly believe that fashions reflect the collective choice of a social group. Further, the study reveals that the cognition of fashions/fashioning as a means to attract members of the opposite sex, as a stimulation of sexual feelings of others, as a practice to stress the gender and differentiate from the opposite sex, is similar among young males and females. Conversely, the study highlights an important dimension of the cognition of fashions. There, it is noteworthy that males highly believe that fashionable clothes create sexual attraction by hiding sexually stimulating body parts, and on the other hand, fashions create sexual attraction by exposing sexually stimulating body parts.

Further, it was found that there is no significant difference between males and females in the preference of expensive fashions worn by rich people, fashions which display high social status, fashions popular among friends, and fashions common to friends. This shows that even though females' cognition of fashion as a means of reflecting the collective choice is higher than males, this cognitive difference is not visible in their preference of fashions. In addition, the study results reveal that both young males and females equally prefer fashions, which differentiate their Gender. In the same way, the cognition of fashion as a means to highlight the gender and differentiate from the opposite sex is not different among males and females. This shows another unique dimension of the fashion consumption in Sri Lanka. In Sri Lanka, there are different masculine and feminine

roles assigned to the members of its culture. These roles exist in a large array of situations ranging from the activities of the family, religious activities, social activities, rituals, and even to the different aspects of employments. Therefore, individuals attempt to regularize their behavior to these masculine and feminine roles. There, they select the attitude objects, which express their masculinity or femininity. Thus, the study reveals that, as the dress is an attitude object, which signifies a particular meaning, the youngsters attempt to express their gender through the fashions.

Further, it was found that males prefer more sexy fashions, which attract opposite sex, fashions, which cause sexual stimulation, and highly sexy clothes, which expose body parts than females. Thus, it is evident that the fashion preference of males is influenced by their cognition of fashions as a means of having an erotic exposure. In Sri Lanka, it is commonly believed that the sexual attraction through fashions is bad. However, in Sri Lankan culture this belief is much more focused on women's fashion and the sexual attraction of men is not emphasized adequately. There, the study reveals that young males are more tended towards having sexual attraction through fashions than women.

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