

A CROSS-NATIONAL STUDY OF APPAREL CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR AND CONSUMPTION BETWEEN CANADA AND CHINA

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ABSTRACT

To understand the shopping behaviour of both fashion leaders and fashion followers, the current study was undertaken to investigate the following areas in a cross-national perspective: fashion information sources, buying motives and patterns, and product evaluative criteria. A Domain Specific Innovativeness (DSI) Scale was adopted and data was collected through questionnaire surveys carried out in Canada and China. According to the results of this study, Canadian fashion leaders were found to be relatively more concerned about the aesthetic aspects of clothing, while fashion followers were more focused on practical attributes. However, there were no significant differences between leaders and followers in terms of using product cues as evaluative determinants for apparel products in China. In addition, the internet could play an important role for fashion leaders during their shopping process, and fashion followers were found to rely more on their friends and siblings for fashion information.

Keywords: consumer behaviour, apparel attributes, product choice, fashion innovativeness, cross-national study

INTRODUCTION

In today's competitive retail markets, it is important to understand consumer choice and preferences in order to develop appropriate products/strategies to meet their needs and aspirations. Although demographic information can provide meaningful data for market segmentation, some prior studies (Goldsmith and Flynn 2004; Narang 2010) indicated that demographic alone cannot fully explain how consumers behave. Given these considerations, we proposed that consumer preferences, fashion innovativeness and product-related attributes could play a significant and interactive role in apparel purchases. For example, previous studies (Gatignon and Robertson, 1991; Jordaan and Simpson, 2006) reported that fashion leaders are more likely to purchase new fashionable clothing when it is first introduced to the marketplace. In other words, fashion leaders play an important part in the process of fashion diffusion such as displaying new clothing styles in the public and/or persuading other consumers to adopt the new fashionable styles. The overarching objective of this study is to understand how consumers (include fashion leaders and followers) behave in relation to apparel shopping and buying in two different cultural perspectives – Canada and China. In order to guide and direct this study, the following research questions were posed:

- Do Canadian and Chinese consumers use different sources for fashion information?
- Do fashion leaders and fashion followers use different sources for fashion information?
- Do Canadian and Chinese consumers use different product cues to evaluate clothing?

- Do fashion leaders and fashion followers use different product cues to evaluate clothing?

LITERATURE REVIEW

PRODUCT EVALUATIVE CUES

On the basis of the preceding discussion, it is reasonable to propose that fashion leaders are more concerned about the aesthetic aspects (e.g., style, design and colour) and symbolic meaning (e.g., brand name) to build their self-image and identity, whereas fashion followers are more interested in the functional aspects (e.g., durability, comfort factor) and economic value of a product. In order to gain a deeper understanding, it is essential to uncover the salient impact of various product cues as well as the consumer preferences.

According to many apparel studies (e.g., Rahman, 2011), product cues can be categorized into two types – intrinsic and extrinsic cues. Intrinsic cues are referred to those attributes directly attached to the physical product such as colour, style, fabric and fit, and the extrinsic cues are referred to those intangible attributes which are indirectly attached to the product such as price, brand name and country of origin. However, the salient impact of product cues may vary among consumers depending on their personal needs, cultural values and beliefs. In order to understand both fashion leaders' and followers' choices and preferences from a cross-national perspective, eleven product cues were selected for the present study. The selection criteria for these product cues were based on the guidelines of numerous apparel studies (e.g., Rahman 2011; Rahman et al., 2009) such as the relevancy, importance and frequency.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN FASHION LEADERS AND FOLLOWERS

Many scholars (Beaudoin *et al.*, 2000) found that fashion leaders are more interested in clothing purchases than are followers. Fashion leaders often look for excitement, aesthetic and symbolic values in a product (Goldsmith *et al.*, 1991). It is logical to suggest that fashion leaders are more likely to shop more frequently and spend more money on symbolic or publicly-consumed products such as clothing than the fashion followers. In terms of the self-concept of fashion leaders, they are considered to be more indulgent, contemporary, formal and colourful than fashion followers (Goldsmith *et al.*, 1996). Another study (Workman and Kidd, 2000) found that fashion leaders were more concerned about the product's uniqueness than fashion followers. In addition, Beaudoin *et al.* (2000) found that six out of twelve product evaluative cues include colour, attractiveness, fashionableness, brand name, and appropriateness for occasion, and the choice of styles play a more significant role to fashion leaders than fashion followers. Thus, it is reasonable to suggest that colour, style and fashionability could play a more-significant role for fashion leaders than followers. Other than product choice and evaluative criteria, fashion leaders tended to read more magazines (Goldsmith *et al.*, 1991) than fashion followers (Goldsmith and Stith, 1993). In a similar vein, some studies of fashion information source also revealed that fashion leaders were more reliant on marketer-dominated sources (e.g., fashion magazines) than consumer-dominated sources (e.g., classmates) when they searched for a new fashion product (Verette, 2004). Although a considerable number of studies (e.g. Goldsmith *et al.*, 1991; Workman and Studak, 2006) have reported on differences between fashion leaders and followers, several areas have not been fully addressed or investigated from a cross-national perspective, including traditional information sources versus digital information sources (e-retailer website and fashion blog); and product choice and evaluative criteria.

METHOD

A questionnaire survey consisted of three sections was designed and developed for the present study. The first section of questions covered three areas: (1) fashion innovativeness; (2) importance of product evaluative cues; and (3) fashion information sources. To measure fashion innovativeness, Goldsmith and Hofacker's (1991) Domain Specific Innovativeness (DSI) Scale was adopted. This scale is a balanced scale consists of six statements, three of which are positively worded and three negatively worded. The DSI scale is a psychometrically-sound instrument (Goldsmith, 1996), which has been applied in different product and service domains. In addition to the DSI scale, twelve apparel product attributes and eleven fashion information sources were also selected to measure and identify the most-frequently used product-evaluative cues and fashion information source(s). A five-point Likert-type response scale (5 = strongly agree or very important, 1 = strongly disagree or unimportant) was used for this section. The second section of the survey was focused on consumers' shopping behaviour such as apparel spending, shopping channels and shopping frequencies. The third section was designed to collect demographic data including age, gender and marital status. In total, 172 usable questionnaires were collected from Canada and 221 from China. SPSS was used for data analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As suggested by (Goldsmith *et al.*, 1999), the distribution of DSI scores was used to split the sample into two groups, and a score of 23 was used as the cutting point for differentiating between fashion leaders and followers. According to the results, 135 Canadian participants (or 78.4%) scored between 6 and 23 and were designated "fashion followers," whilst 36 Canadian participants (or 20.9%) scored between 24 and 30 and were designated as "fashion leaders." For the Chinese sample, using the same criteria, 191 Chinese participants (or 86.4%) were designated as "fashion followers," and 30 (or 13.6%) were designated as "fashion followers."

Overall, the participants were predominately female, although there was a relatively higher proportion of men in the Chinese sample than the Canadian sample. The Canadian sample was composed of more females (n=133; 77.3%) than males (n=38; 22.1%), and the Chinese sample was composed of 133 females (60.2%) and 70 males (31.7%). The difference in gender distribution was significant in both samples. This may be attributed to the nature of the online survey and the topic of study: a previous study by Quigley and Notarantonio (2009: 239) revealed that women are more engaged and interested in fashion than are their male counterparts. The subjects from these two countries were relatively young, with most of the participants falling between 18 and 27 years of age (as shown in Table 1).

SOURCES OF FASHION INFORMATION

In terms of fashion-information sources, "store/window display", "friends," and "people on the street" were ranked as the top three by both Canadian and Chinese participants. Other than "friends," personal sources such as "parents" and "siblings" play a relatively less important or less influential role for both Canadian and Chinese consumers than do public sources such as "magazines," "Internet - fashion blogs," "Internet – e-retailer websites," and "advertisements/billboards" (as shown in Table 2). According to the findings of consumer-socialization studies (Bearden and Randall, 1990), as children mature and enter adulthood, parental influence decreases whilst peer-group influence increases. A study of apparel shopping behaviour conducted by Koester and May (1985) also found that parental influence on clothing selection decreased as pre-adolescents grow older, but peer, sibling, and media

influences increased. In a similar vein, Chen-Yu and Seock (2002) revealed that “friends” were the most important fashion information source motivating adolescents’ apparel purchases. Thus, the findings of current research are in line with past studies.

Characteristics	Canada		China	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
<i>Gender</i>				
Male	38	22.1	70	31.7
Female	133	77.3	133	60.2
Missing	1	0.6	18	8.1
Total	172	100	198	100
<i>Age</i>				
18-27	83	48.3	121	54.7
28-37	41	23.8	36	16.3
38 or above	40	23.2	7	3.2
Mean age	n=164 mean age=33.7	95.3	n=164 mean age=26.2	74.2
Missing	8	4.7	57	25.8
Total	172	100	221	100
<i>Marital status</i>				
Single, never married	106	61.6	166	75.1
Married	57	33.1	40	18.1
Widowed, divorced	7	4.1	3	1.4
Missing	2	1.2	12	5.4
Total	172	100	198	100

Table 1: Demographic profile of respondents

INFORMATION SOURCE – FASHION LEADERS & FOLLOWERS

Canada

The results of the *t*-test on the Canadian data showed significant differences in regard to the number of sources used by fashion leaders and fashion followers to obtain fashion trends and information. These included magazines ($t=-4.946$, $df=170$, $p=0.060$), Internet e-retailer websites ($t=-3.198$, $df=170$, $p=0.006$), and Internet fashion blogs ($t=-5.647$, $df=170$, $p=0.016$). Clearly, public sources including magazines and the Internet (e-retailer websites and fashion blogs) played a more-significant role for fashion leaders than fashion followers in their search for apparel information (as shown in Table 3 and Figure 1).

China

The mean differences between fashion leaders and fashion followers in China regarding the significance of fashion information sources were examined using the *t*-test. The results showed significant differences between leaders and followers in terms of using friends ($t=4.015$, $df=185$, $p=0.000$) to acquire fashion trends and information. Relatively, Chinese fashion followers relied more heavily on friends for fashion information than fashion leaders (as shown in Table 3 and Figure 1).

	Canada (N=172)		China (N=221)	
Fashion Information Source	Mean [Ranking]	S.D.	Mean [Ranking]	S.D.
Store/window displays	3.82 [1]	1.013	3.84 [2]	1.005
Friends	3.60 [2]	1.147	3.97 [1]	0.984
People on the street	3.58 [3]	1.228	3.71 [3]	1.008
Internet – e-retailer websites	3.52 [4]	1.197	3.69 [4]	1.013
Magazines	3.28 [5]	1.235	3.61 [6]	1.080
Internet – fashion blogs	3.25 [6]	1.394	3.48 [7]	1.164
Advertisements/billboards	3.01 [7]	1.284	3.64 [5]	0.999
Television	3.01 [8]	1.200	3.22 [9]	1.162
Celebrities	2.92 [9]	1.307	3.31 [8]	1.195
Siblings	2.75 [10]	1.314	3.14 [10]	1.272
Parents	2.64 [11]	1.226	3.02 [11]	1.167

Table 2: Major fashion information source

*[#]: Ranking of attributes are based on the mean scores (5=most important and 1=least important)

Fashion Information Source	Canada						China					
	Fashion Leader			Fashion Follower			Fashion Leader			Fashion Follower		
	N	Mean	S.D.	N	Mean	S.D.	N	Mean	S.D.	N	Mean	S.D.
Internet – fashion blogs	36	[1] 4.19	1.091	135	[9] 2.79	1.299	30	[5] 3.63	1.129	191	[7] 3.48	1.164
Internet – e-retailer websites	37	[2] 4.08	0.862	135	[4] 3.27	1.211	30	[6] 3.60	1.133	191	[4] 3.69	1.013
Magazines	36	[3] 3.94	1.145	134	[8] 2.98	1.193	30	[2] 3.77	1.106	191	[6] 3.61	1.080
Store/window displays	36	[4] 3.94	0.924	135	[1] 3.71	1.036	30	[1] 4.10	0.885	191	[2] 3.84	1.005
Friends	37	[5] 3.73	1.194	134	[2] 3.58	1.129	30	[4] 3.70	1.393	191	[1] 3.97	0.984
Celebrities	37	[6] 3.73	1.194	134	[11] 2.72	1.256	30	[7] 3.53	1.196	191	[8] 3.31	1.195
People on the street	37	[7] 3.73	1.146	135	[3] 3.44	1.211	30	[8] 3.57	1.165	191	[3] 3.71	1.008
Advertisements/billboards	37	[8] 3.32	1.180	135	[6] 3.04	1.219	30	[3] 3.77	1.006	191	[5] 3.64	1.013
Television	37	[9] 3.24	1.321	135	[7] 2.99	1.146	30	[9] 3.53	1.106	191	[9] 3.22	1.162
Parents	36	[10] 2.44	1.229	135	[10] 2.73	1.186	30	[11] 2.70	1.236	191	[11] 3.02	1.167
Siblings	36	[11] 2.42	1.273	135	[5] 3.04	1.306	30	[10] 3.13	1.236	191	[10] 3.14	1.272

Table 3: Fashion Leaders and Followers: Significance of Fashion Information Sources

THE IMPORTANCE OF PRODUCT EVALUATIVE CUES

As shown in Table 4, it is evident that “fit” was perceived as the most important product attribute for clothing evaluation by participants in both countries. “Comfort” was ranked as the second most important factor by Chinese, and ranked third by Canadian participants. Interestingly, both “brand name” and “country of origin” were perceived as relatively insignificant factors for clothing evaluation in both samples. Our results showed that functional variables (e.g. fit, comfort, durability) and symbolic/aesthetic variables (e.g. style, colour and brand name) were assigned a similar role in clothing evaluation in both countries

regardless of the cultural differences that arise from participants living in an individualistic society (Canada) versus a collectivistic society (China).

Product Cue	Canada		China	
	Mean [Ranking]	S.D.	Mean [Ranking]	S.D.
Fit	4.88 [1]	0.356	4.56 [1]	0.805
Price	4.47 [2]	0.696	4.22 [6]	0.890
Comfort	4.34 [3]	0.839	4.51 [2]	0.736
Style	4.34 [4]	0.801	4.28 [5]	0.896
Quality - Workmanship	4.30 [5]	0.778	4.49 [3]	0.692
Colour	4.28 [6]	0.738	4.34 [4]	0.824
Material - Fabric	4.26 [7]	0.832	4.20 [7]	0.884
Durability	3.94 [8]	0.992	3.99 [8]	0.965
Ease of Care	3.74 [9]	1.122	3.96 [10]	0.943
Wardrobe Coordination	3.60 [10]	1.158	3.97 [9]	1.116
Brand Name	2.77 [11]	1.151	3.41 [11]	1.073
Country of Origin	2.47 [12]	1.222	2.61 [12]	1.230

Table 4: Salient Product Evaluative Cue

*[#]: Ranking of attributes are based on the mean scores (5=most important and 1=least important)

Product Cue	Canada						China					
	Fashion Leader			Fashion Follower			Fashion Leader			Fashion Follower		
	N	Mean	S.D.	N	Mean	S.D.	N	Mean	S.D.	N	Mean	S.D.
Fit	37	[1] 4.92	0.277	135	[1] 4.87	0.798	30	[1] 4.50	0.861	191	[1] 4.57	0.798
Style	36	[2] 4.72	0.513	135	[7] 4.23	0.834	30	[3] 4.47	0.973	191	[6] 4.25	0.882
Quality workmanship	37	[3] 4.30	0.812	135	[5] 4.30	0.771	30	[2] 4.50	0.861	191	[3] 4.49	0.664
Colour	37	[4] 4.24	0.925	133	[6] 4.30	0.681	30	[4] 4.30	1.022	191	[4] 4.35	0.792
Price	37	[5] 4.19	0.739	132	[2] 4.54	0.667	30	[7] 4.03	0.890	191	[5] 4.25	0.888
Wardrobe coordination	37	[6] 4.16	0.970	135	[10] 3.44	1.163	30	[8] 3.90	1.213	191	[9] 3.98	1.103
Material - fabric	37	[7] 4.05	1.137	133	[4] 4.32	0.784	30	[6] 4.13	1.137	191	[7] 4.21	0.840
Comfort	37	[8] 3.92	0.862	133	[3] 4.45	0.798	30	[5] 4.30	0.952	191	[2] 4.54	0.694
Durability	37	[9] 3.59	1.066	135	[8] 4.03	0.954	30	[11] 3.83	1.053	191	[8] 4.01	0.951
Ease of Care	37	[10] 3.11	1.100	135	[9] 3.91	1.068	30	[10] 3.90	1.029	191	[10] 3.97	0.932
Brand Name	37	[11] 3.08	1.064	135	[11] 2.68	1.163	30	[9] 3.90	1.213	191	[11] 3.33	1.042
Country of Origin	37	[12] 2.49	1.304	133	[12] 2.47	1.203	30	[12] 2.90	1.398	191	[12] 2.56	1.199

Table 5: Fashion Leader and Followers: Significance of product evaluative cues

PRODUCT EVALUATIVE CUES – FASHION LEADERS AND FOLLOWERS

Canada

The mean differences between fashion leaders and fashion followers in Canada regarding the significance of product evaluative cue were examined using the *t*-test. The results showed no significant differences between leaders and followers in terms of using various

product cues as evaluative determinants for apparel, except “style” ($t=3.348$, $df=167$, $p=0.002$). Based on this finding, it is evident that Canadian fashion leaders were more concerned about fashion style than were the fashion followers.

China

The mean differences between fashion leaders and fashion followers in China regarding the significance of product evaluative cue were examined using the t -test. The results showed no significant differences between leaders and followers in terms of using product cues as evaluative determinants for apparel products.

CONCLUSIONS

According to the results of this study, Canadian fashion leaders were more concerned about the ‘style’ of clothing than the fashion followers. This finding is in line with Workman and Studak’s study (2006); fashion leaders often look for hedonic values to satisfy their wants, whereas fashion followers often seek utilitarian benefits to satisfy their needs when they shop for clothing. Given such findings, Canadian fashion practitioners need to pay attention to the visual/aesthetic features of their apparel products such as fashionable style and fit to satisfy the fashion leaders’ desires and psychological needs, especially at the beginning of the product life cycle. Apart from style, “fit,” “quality” and “comfort” also play a very important role for both fashion leaders and fashion followers in Canada and China. However, brand name and country of origin were considered relatively insignificant to both categories of consumer in both countries. In other words, most of the respondents did not purchase clothing based on the brand name, but on functional values and benefits such as physical comfort (e.g. ease of movement) and psychological comfort (e.g. aesthetic fit/appearance). The results also show that the number of fashion followers in the Chinese sample was much higher than in the Canadian sample.

In terms of fashion information source, many respondents cited fashion blogs and e-retailer websites as important sources, particularly the Canadian fashion leaders. In other words, the Internet plays an important role for fashion leaders during their shopping process and experience. However, many fashion followers were more reliant on their “friends” for fashion information than on the Internet. These findings underscore at least two important implications for fashion practitioners. First, it is evident that many fashion leaders liked to use various media such as magazines, fashion blogs and e-retailer websites to search for fashion information and did not rely on their peers’ opinions or need their endorsement/approval when it came to apparel purchases. As such, it is reasonable to suggest that many fashion leaders prefer to use clothing as a signifier to express themselves rather than to conform to the current socially-acceptable norm. With this perspective, fashion marketers should use both traditional printed media (magazines) as well as digital media (website, digital media and fashion blogs) not only to promote their latest products but also to create a congruence between the brand image and user imagery. Second, given that fashion followers were more reliant on people (friends, and siblings cited by Chinese respondents) for fashion information, it is reasonable to believe that fashion leaders could play an influential role with ‘follower’ friends through their personal connections. Given such a perspective, it should prove useful for fashion practitioners to identify and communicate with fashion leaders because their word-of-mouth is an effective tool to promote new products to the late-adopters or followers.

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