A Study of Emerging Consumer Markets through Fashion Selection and Consumption

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Introduction

Many prior research studies (Rahman et al., 2010) have reported that fashion consumers often search for product information, and use different product attributes to evaluate and select clothing to satisfy their personal needs and aspiration. However, little is known about the differences of consumers' perceived values and evaluative criteria of apparel products from a cross-national perspective. In this study, we argue that product-related attributes (intrinsic and extrinsic cues), information sources (personal and impersonal), and consumer characteristics (demographic variables) could greatly affect shoppers' choice and purchasing decisions. Previous literature (Narang 2010) suggests that demographic information cannot fully explain buyers' underlying motives. The present study seeks to advance our understanding about consumer choice of apparel products through different perspectives – consumer behaviour and buying motives. The research study was conducted in two emerging markets (China and India) because of their growth and the significant differences between these two countries in regard to social, cultural, and economic conditions (Hofstede 2001).

India and China accounted for 37% of the world's population or 2.6 billion people in 2013 (Yu et al., 2015). In 2014, the GDP per capita of China in nominal terms was US$7,589 (ranked 80 in the world), whereas India's GDP per capita was around US$1,627 (ranked 145 in the world) (International Monetary Fund, 2015). According to Price Waterhouse Cooper's (2017) prediction, China will become the largest economy in the world, followed by India and then the United States by 2050 (Mourdoukoutas, 2017). Another recent study (Yu et al., 2015) reported that consumer expenditure on apparel and footwear in Asia is expected to grow from US$625 billion in 2014 to US$920 billion by 2018. Due to the tremendous economic growth in Asia, it is imperative for the multinational companies to gain a better understanding of these fast-changing consumer markets. Thus, we believe that it is important to undertake the present research in India and China.

Literature Review

Product cues - intrinsic and extrinsic

Consumers evaluate and select apparel products based on a wide array of descriptive, inferential and informational cues (Newcomb, 2010; Rahman, 2011; Swinker & Hines, 2006). The apparel cues can be dichotomized into two types – intrinsic and extrinsic cues. Intrinsic cues are referred to those attributes directly related to the product, such

as colour, style, fabric and fit. The physical appearance of a product can be altered by changing or manipulating any of these product cues. On the other hand, extrinsic cues are referred to those intangible attributes indirectly related to the physical product, such as price, brand name and country of origin. Consumers often use both intrinsic and extrinsic cues concurrently to assess a product. However, the impact of product cues may *vary* among consumers depending on their cultural and demographic backgrounds, as well as their personal needs and aspirations. For example, Forsythe et al., (1999) found that Korean consumers tended to use intrinsic cues to a greater extent than Chinese consumers when making their buying decisions. In addition, Ahmed et al. (2004) found that consumers tend to rely more heavily on extrinsic cues when judging a low-involvement or privately consumed product such as socks and pyjamas. However, in another study, Rahman et al. (2009) found that female consumers relied more heavily on intrinsic cues to judge the quality of sleepwear in China. The results of previous research are therefore inconclusive. In order to further investigate the salient impact of both intrinsic cues and extrinsic cues from a cross-cultural perspective, twelve product cues were selected – including nine intrinsic cues (fit, comfort, style, colour, materials, ease of care, durability, wardrobe coordination and quality of workmanship), and three extrinsic cues (price, brand name and country of origin). The reason for selecting these product indicators was based on the frequency of their adoption in previous apparel research (Eckman et al., 1990; Rahman 2011; Rahman et al., 2009), as well as the popularity, relevancy and importance of these twelve product cues. For example, Eckman et al. (1990) reviewed 21 apparel literature articles from 1971 to 1988 and produced a comprehensive list of product cues, including 35 extrinsic and 52 intrinsic cues, hence this became an important source for developing our measuring instrument. In order to find out which product cues may play a relatively more significant role in clothing assessment in different socio-cultural contexts, the following research questions were posed to guide the current study.

RQ1: Do Chinese and Indian consumers rely more on intrinsic cues to evaluate apparel products than extrinsic cues?
RQ2: Do Chinese and Indian consumers rely on the same or different product cues to evaluate apparel products?

Income, product price and consumer behaviour

Consumer demographics such as income may greatly affect consumer shopping behaviour (Gao et al., 2008; Khare et al., 2012). According to Cleveland et al. (2011), income was considered as the most robust predictor for the quality of household products in Greece, Sweden, Chile, Canada and Korea, followed by age of the consumer. It is reasonable to assume that higher-income consumers are more likely to spend more time and money on clothing than the lower-income consumers. In a similar vein, it is logical to believe that people with more disposable income are more likely to shop for clothing more frequently because they have higher consuming power than the low-income counterparts. Other than shopping and spending behaviour, a previous study (Creusen, 2010) also indicated that higher-income consumers are more concerned about quality as well as the symbolic aspects of a product. As mentioned in the “Introduction” section, the GDP per capita of China was and is still higher than the Indian consumers. It is reasonable to suggest that Indian consumers may rely more on the price as an indicator of product choice. Additionally, some studies (Ackerman & Tellis, 2002; Khare & Rakesh, 2010; Tuli & Mookerjee, 2004)

reported that Indian consumers are highly sensitive in price regardless of their income level. As Puddick and Menon (2012, p. 51) put it, "Value-conscious shopping is ingrained into Indian culture. Indians know the price of items in different markets and they will absolutely shop around for the best deal." With the preceding discussion in mind, we posed the following research question.

RQ3: Do Indian consumers rely a lot more on price to evaluate an apparel product than Chinese consumers?

Fashion information sources

According to the findings of consumer-socialization theory (Bearden & Randall, 1990; Moore & Moschis, 1978), as children mature and enter adulthood, parental influence decreases while 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 preadolescents age, 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 of motivation for adolescents' apparel purchases. In addition, another study (Rahman et al., 2013) of pre-teen (9-12 years old) and teenage (13-18 years old) in China found that "peer" influence played a more influential role in apparel shopping and consumption than parents. However, consumers do not merely rely on personal or non-marketer dominated sources for product information. They also rely on impersonal or marketer dominated source encompassing traditional media (e.g., magazines, billboards/advertisements, television commercials, celebrities' endorsement, store/window displays) and digital media (e.g., e-retailer website and fashion blog). Some studies and reports (CBC, 2015; Cho & Kim, 2001) also found that today's consumers spending more time online than watching television. Consumers may use multiple sources to search for fashion information. With this changing habit and behaviour, it is important for fashion practitioners and marketers to find out which marketing strategies should be used to communicate and connect with their target customers more effectively in different socio-cultural contexts. With this perspective, we posed the following research questions to guide and direct this study.

RQ4: Do Chinese and Indian consumers rely more on digital media for fashion information than traditional media?

RQ5: Do Chinese and Indian consumers rely on the same or different sources for fashion information?

Research Methodology

In order to increase the survey response rate, both online and paper surveys were used for data collection; appropriate statistical analysis was employed to uncover the similarities and differences in related to apparel consumer shopping behaviour, clothing evaluative criteria, and the salient impact of information sources. Young female consumers aged between 18 years old or above were invited to participate in this study. The current study concentrated on female consumers because they are the principle-buying agents of apparel and household products, and relatively more interested in fashion and more sensitive to clothing cues than male consumers (Hansen and Jensen, 2009; Shephard et al., 2014). In total, 236 and 266 useable responses were collected from India and China, respectively. The self-administered questionnaire survey consisted of three sections. The first section of the survey include

Likert-scale measuring instruments of apparel product cues and fashion information sources (from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) to uncover the relative significance of different product evaluative cues and fashion sources. As mentioned earlier in this paper, 12 relevant product cues and 11 fashion information sources were selected for survey. In section two, participants were asked about their shopping behaviour, questions such as “How many time do you shop for clothing at the physical store each year?”, “How many time do you shop for clothing online each year?”, and “How much do you spend on clothing per year?” The final section included sociodemographic questions (age, education, and income). Statistical software (SPSS) was employed to analyze the collected data.

Results and Discussion

Participants’ profile and shopping behaviour

As shown in Table 1, the vast majority of Indian participants (86%, n = 203) belonged to the 18-21 age group, and 85.6% (n = 202) were students. Almost half of the participants did not generate their own income (n = 107, 45.3%), and many others (n = 81, 34.3%) earned less than Rs250,000 (about US$3,900) per year. In terms of the demographic profile of Chinese sample, over 50% of the participants were students (n = 144, 54.1%), and many of them fell into the age range 21 to 25 years old (n = 108, 40.6%). Almost 50% of the participants earned ¥20,000 (about US$3,000) or less per year. The Chinese participants in the survey were on average older and earned more than their Indian counterparts. As indicated in Table 1, many Indian participants (n = 107) reported that they had no income. The possible explanation is that many of them were students and many of them did not have a part-time job.

	India		China	
	N (236)	%	N (266)	%
Age				
18-21	203	86.0	50	18.8
22-25	27	11.5	108	40.6
Over 25	6	2.5	55	20.7
Missing response	0	0.0	53	19.9
Occupation				
Professional	12	5.1	19	7.1
Full-time employed	5	2.1	97	36.5
Part-time employed	8	3.4	4	1.5
Student	202	85.6	144	54.1
Missing response	9	3.8	2	0.8
Annual Income				
No income	107	45.3		
Rs250,000/US$3,903 or below	81	34.3		
Rs250,000/US$3,903 - Rs599,999/US$9,368	11	4.7		
Rs600,000/US$9,368 - Rs1,499,999/US$23,422	21	8.9		
Rs1,500,000/US$2,3422 - Rs1,999,999/US$31,229	7	3.0		
Rs2,000,000/US$31,229 or above	9	3.8		

Missing Response	0	0.0		
¥20,000/US$3,064 or below			132	49.6
¥20,000/US$3,064 - ¥59,999/US$9,193			50	18.8
¥60,000/US$9,193 - ¥149,999/US$22,982			54	20.3
¥150,000//US$22,982 - ¥199,999/US$30,643			4	1.5
¥200,000/US$30,643 or above			22	8.3
Missing response			4	1.5

Table 1. Demographic profile of the participants

According to the survey, both Indian and Chinese consumers relied more on intrinsic cues to evaluate apparel products than on extrinsic cues. As shown in Table 2, most of the Indian participants selected fit as the most important cue, followed by comfort, fabric, style and colour, while Chinese participants also chose fit as the most important cue, fit was most often followed by quality, comfort, colour and style in their case. Interestingly, both Indian and Chinese participants cited intrinsic cues as their top five apparel selection criteria. In regard to extrinsic cues (price, brand name and country of origin), participants rated them relatively low; particularly in the case of country of origin, participants from both countries considered this attribute the least important factor for clothing evaluation and purchases. Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest, in answering research question RQ1 that both Chinese and Indian consumers rely more on intrinsic cues to evaluate apparel products than on extrinsic cues.

	India			China		
Product Attribute	N	Mean	S.D.	N	Mean	S.D.
Fit	235	4.75	0.614	266	4.65	0.739
Comfort	230	4.48	0.860	266	4.53	0.717
Fabric	231	4.20	0.944	266	4.30	0.855
Style	232	4.14	0.971	266	4.40	0.814
Colour	232	4.13	0.963	266	4.43	0.818
Quality - Workmanship	229	3.87	1.043	266	4.56	0.666
Price	233	3.75	0.918	266	4.27	0.877
Durability	235	3.74	1.127	266	3.94	0.940
Ease of Care	234	3.57	1.059	266	3.96	0.943
Brand Name	230	3.50	1.081	266	3.28	1.045
Wardrobe Coordination	232	3.42	1.090	266	4.08	1.027
Country of Origin	229	2.58	1.210	266	2.48	1.156

Table 2: Impact of Product Evaluative Cues

In terms of answering RQ2, the results of the *t*-test revealed that there was a significant difference in terms of using price cue for apparel evaluation between Indian and Chinese consumers (t = 6.411, df = 497, p = 0.000), and there were significant variance on product cues including colour (t = 3.751, df = 496, p = 0.000), style (t = 3.257, df = 496, p = 0.001), quality/workmanship (t = 8.903, df = 493, p = 0.000), wardrobe coordination (t = 6.962, df = 496, p = 0.000), and ease of care (t = 4.354, df = 498, p = 0.000) between countries (RQ2). According to these findings, it is evident that price played a more important role on product evaluation to the Chinese consumers than Indian consumers, a finding which contradicts the assumption being

tested in RQ3, that Indian consumers are more concerned about or sensitive to product price than their Chinese counterparts.

	India			China		
Fashion Information Source	N	Mean	S.D.	N	Mean	S.D.
Friends	227	4.08	1.027	266	4.03	1.040
Parents	226	3.88	1.024	266	2.99	1.186
Siblings	222	3.81	1.093	266	3.09	1.369
Store / Window Display	224	3.72	1.017	266	4.02	0.909
Magazines	227	3.71	1.082	266	3.80	0.990
Internet: E-Retailer Web Site	225	3.68	1.006	266	3.81	1.041
Television	222	3.53	1.083	266	3.30	1.187
Internet: Fashion Blogs	226	3.51	1.144	266	3.76	1.080
Celebrities	226	3.46	1.193	266	3.50	1.153
Advertisement / Billboards	226	3.46	1.080	266	3.72	1.056
People on the Street	227	3.04	1.163	266	3.75	1.032

Table 3: Major fashion information source

In answer to RQ4 about fashion information sources, although it appears that Chinese consumers relied more on e-retailer website and fashion blogs for information than did Indian consumers, the *t*-test result does not show that there was any significant difference between the two countries. Consumers from both countries still rely on magazines for fashion information (RQ4). According to our *t*-test analysis, there was a significant difference in terms of seeking advice from parents for fashion information between Indian and Chinese consumers (t = -8.844, df = 490, p = 0.000), siblings (t = -6.367, df = 486, p = 0.000), store/window display (t = 3.395, df = 488, p = 0.001), and people on the street (t = 7.210, df = 491, p = 0.000). Indian consumers relied a lot more on parents and siblings for fashion information than Chinese consumers. Interestingly, Chinese consumers relied more on store/window display and people on the street for fashion information than the Indian consumers. Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest, in answering to RQ5, that Chinese consumers may rely more heavily on external information sources than their Indians counterparts. In other words, consumers from the two different cultures often use different information sources to help or reinforce their purchasing decisions.

Conclusion

The results of this study provides useful information to fashion designers, retailers and marketers relevant to three different aspects of their work: product design, symbolic meaning, and communication and marketing strategies.

Although garment fit was considered as the most important factor for clothing evaluation and selection by both Indian and Chinese participants, the design and physical characteristics may be perceived differently due to social, economic and cultural differences. Young Chinese consumers typically look for different design features to satisfy their personal needs and aspiration to a greater extent than the Indian counterparts. Several studies (e.g., Grossman & Wisenblit, 1999; Whitfield & Wiltshire, 1983) have pointed out that cultures may attribute similar or different associative and symbolic meanings to colours. In other words, a universal design strategy may not work for global consumer markets due to divergent cultural

characteristics and values. Indeed, the present study found that Chinese consumers relied more on style, colour and quality attributes to evaluate and select apparel products than the Indian counterparts. Thus, fashion designers and practitioners should pay attention to these intrinsic cues, as well as to further investigate the impact of these attributes and understand consumers' preferences through different lenses - aesthetic/visual, utilitarian/functional, and social/cultural.

According to the findings from the survey reported here, brand name and country of origin were not as important as many other product cues, findings which are in line with previous apparel studies conducted in China (Rahman et al., 2008; Rahman et al., 2009). One possible explanation is that today's consumers are more knowledgable, sophisticated, and assertive when it comes to fashion shopping and consumption. They do not purchase a product merely based on the brand name or the "made-in" label.

In terms of communication and marketing strategies, "word-of-mouth" marketing could become one of the more-effective methods to promote fashion products in both emerging countries. Our finding indicated that "friends" was the most important sources of fashion information, which suggests that for best effect, fashion marketers should identify and communicate with those consumers who are fashion opinion leaders, influencers or communicators; this could be accomplished through different social media such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, WeChat, WhatsApp, Hike, and Twitter. In addition to "friends", store environment and window display could play an important part in fashion communication as well, especially as, according to some other studies (Khare et al., 2012; Yin, 2005), cruising and browsing the stores are considered as important leisure activity for many young consumers in India and China.

Limitations of the Present Study and Prospects for Further Research

This study has several limitations as many other research studies have. First, the findings from the survey reported here cannot be generalized beyond the younger demographic segment in India and China (18-25 years old). However, if similar information was desired relating to other locations or older cohorts such as baby boomers and Generation X, the type of survey method and analysis used here should prove similarly fruitful. Secondly, qualitative research can be employed to capture consumers' cognitive and affective processes of clothing evaluation in order to uncover the underlying buying motives. For example, "laddering" interview method can be adopted to gain a deeper understanding of how consumers translate and interpret apparel cues into meaningful associations. Third, further research is needed to strengthen its external validity and reliability, as well as to avoid potential bias. Fourth, future studies on this topic can be expanded to other age groups and countries. For example, a comparative study between emerging countries and developed countries could provide meaningful insights and valuable information. Although this study has several limitations, we believe that the results can provide some contributions and up-to-date information to both academic scholars and fashion practitioners on product design and marketing strategies.

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