



FASHION AWARENESS AND INTEREST AMONG FEMALE STUDENTS AT A COLLEGE IN GWERU, ZIMBABWE

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ABSTRACT

The study examines the differences in orientation towards fashion styles among female students at a college and tries to determine how students develop awareness and interest in fashion. A descriptive survey was used and questionnaires were data collecting tools. Thirty female student teachers within the age range of 25-45 years were randomly selected from a college in Gweru, Zimbabwe. Quantitative and qualitative data collected were presented in tables and narrative forms. The findings indicate that levels of personal involvement with fashion were low among the female students. Differences in levels of fashion awareness and interest were noted by marital status and knowledge related to fashion. Findings are intended to benefit fashion marketers, designers, merchandisers and garment constructors. The study recommends that appropriate marketing tools be developed to meet the needs of the consumer at the different stages of the fashion adoption process and that different promotional strategies be designed to cater for the different consumer segments.

Key Words: Fashion, Fashion adoption, Fashion awareness, Fashion interest.

INTRODUCTION

Some studies on consumer personal involvement in fashion awareness have been done (Horridge, Khan, & Huffman, 1981; Kotler & Armstrong, 1991; Hye-Shin, 2005; Michaeldon & Dibb 2008). These studies established that indicators related to fashion awareness included readership of fashion media, age, marital status, education income and courses related to fashion. Sproles & King (1973), sought to measure fashion interest by analysing how well individuals keep their wardrobes up-to-date. Kaiser (1997) distinguished factors that might characterise people who value fashion and incorporate it in their everyday lives. Hye-Shin (2005) analysed consumer profiles of apparel product involvement and values. However none of these studies have been documented outside the confines of industrialised countries. Hence there is a need to study the differences in orientation towards fashion styles among female students.

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THE FASHION ADOPTION PROCESS

The area of fashion is rooted in such disciplines as sociology, psychology, home economics, anthropology, economics and marketing (Horn & Gurel 1990). Sociologists and marketing theorists have noted that styles are adopted through personal involvement with fashion occurring over a number of stages in the fashion adoption process. Sociologists further provide a basic framework for understanding the stages involved in the acceptance of a new fashion. This study was concerned with the series of stages a consumer goes through in deciding to buy and make regular use of a new fashion. It focuses on the first two stages of the adoption process according to the “new product adoption” model by McCarthy & Perrault (2005). Other models presented by Rogers (1962) and Robertson (1971) are explored to give an in-depth insight into the fashion adoption process. The “new product adoption” model consists of six stages whereas Rogers (1962) model distinguishes five stages in the process of adopting a new product. The first four stages in both models are basically similar. These include the awareness stage where the individual comes to know about a new product in the market via various means of communication such as television, newspapers, and magazines but lacks details on the product. The consumer may not even know how it works or what it will do. This is then followed by the interest stage which involves the consumer finding the product interesting enough to seek more information on it. The evaluation stage involves deciding whether the product is worth trying. The consumer begins to give the product a mental trial applying it to her personal situation. Trial involves the actual sampling of the product. The fifth stage in the “new product adoption” model is decision making where a consumer decides on either adoption or rejection while Rogers’s fifth stage is adoption where the consumer decides to use the product on a regular basis. The “new product adoption” goes beyond the purchase stage to the sixth stage, which is confirmation. The adopter continues to rethink the decision and to search or support for the decision (McCarthy & Perrault, 2005).

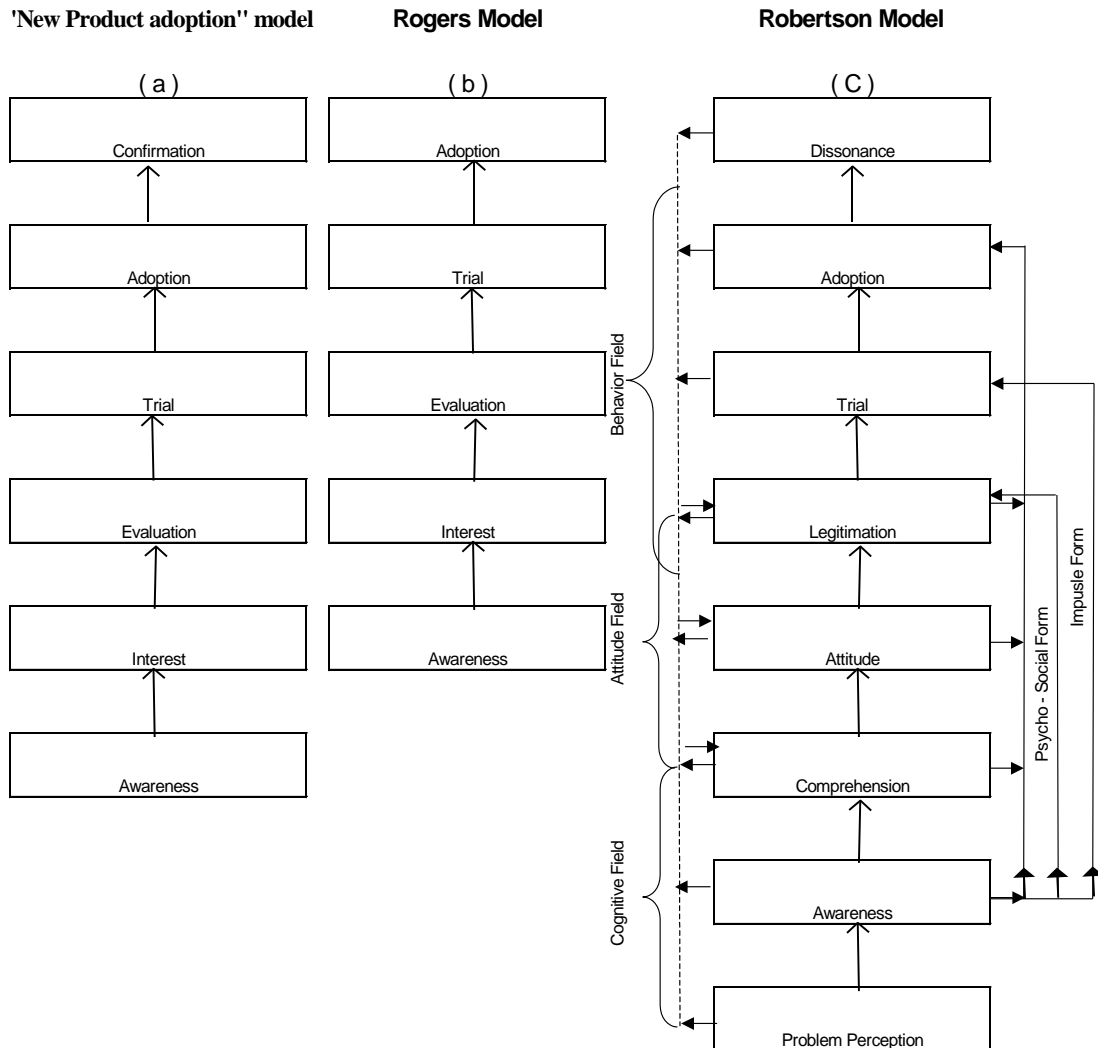
On the other hand, Robertson (1971) proposed an alternate model which has eight stages that are grouped into three major overlapping fields’ namely cognitive, attitude and behaviour. The cognitive field relates to obtaining of knowledge about style. This is similar to McCarthy & Perrault, and Rogers’s awareness and interest stages. Robertson’s (1971) cognitive field, however, has three stages namely problem perception, awareness and perception. Robertson’s problem perception stages refer to the individual’s perception that there is need for a new product but is exposed to it in the awareness stage. The third stage is comprehension where the product is better understood (Kaiser, 1997).

The attitude field encompasses the comprehension, attitude, and legitimation stages. During these stages, an attitude is formed towards the product and the consumer may seek further legitimation of the styles usually by obtaining more information. In the behavioural field, there are the legitimation, trial, and adoption stages. The trial and adoption stages are similar to Roger’s model.

Robertson's model includes the dissonance stage which is the last stage in this model. A consumer may experience dissonance after adopting a new style.

Though the classic models and the "new product adoption" models are action oriented staged models of individual consumer behaviour where some stages may be skipped and others returned to if need arises. Robertson's and the "new product adoption" models consider stages beyond the purchase occasion itself. That is dissonance in Robertson's model and confirmation in the "new product adoption" model. All the models present levels in stages where used terms are even similar.

Fig-1. Models of Fashion Adoption



PERSONAL INVOLVEMENT WITH FASHION

Involvement is the motivational state of arousal or interest evoked by a particular stimulus or situation and displayed through properties of drive (O’Cass 2008). Fashion clothing involvement is defined as the perceived personal relevance or interest from the consumer by fashion clothing and refers to the extent to which individuals are concerned and involved with fashion and is reflected in how much they regard it as important (Engel et al 2005; Michaelidou and Dibb 2008). Two related concepts can help us understand the manner in which fashion plays a role in individuals’ lives. These are social worlds and level of personal involvement with fashion. A social world is defined by symbolic interactionists as a diffuse and loosely bonded level of social organisation, characterised by a system of practices that have evolved into a perceived sphere of interest and involvement for participants Unruh in Kaiser (1997). They further distinguished four factors that might characterise “regulars” in social worlds which are especially applicable to people who value fashion and incorporate it into their everyday lives. These factors include habituation, integration, familiarity and attachment. Apart from interacting with social worlds, individuals also get personally involved in fashion through involvement in activities in reference groups or situational context (Kaiser 1997).

Prus in Kaiser (1997) has identified a different model with four groups or situational processes through which individuals may become initially involved in fashion. These are seekership, recruitment, closure and drift. On the other hand, Unruh in Kaiser (1997) identified four factors that might characterise regulars, which are especially applicable to people who value fashion and incorporate it in a meaningful manner into their everyday lives. Habituation occurs when participation in fashion related activities are regularised and routine to the extent that personal activities reveal a strong interest in fashion. Such activities might include reading fashion magazines on a regular basis, planning one’s wardrobe and discussing fashion changes with friends. Frequent shopping trips for clothes and engagement in social trips that require specific clothing styles are high indications of habituations. Other habituation patterns include a tendency to exhibit store loyalty and purchasing garments to match accessories already in the wardrobe. Therefore these elements may be used as indicators to measure an individual’s personal involvement with fashion. Integration is the ability of an individual to personalise fashion symbols to bring out the dynamics of the fashion process. Combining fashion symbols or making minor adaptations to the clothing symbols is one solution. Familiarity allows an individual to interpret other person’s mode of dress through symbolic interaction. Such familiarity enables individuals to understand others identities and intentions. Attachment promotes a sense of commitment at the individual level and forms the part that bonds a social world together (Kaiser 1997). Situational processes through which individuals may initially become involved in fashion include seekership, which involves a self recognised attraction or fascination with fashion. Recruitment generally occurs when others try to get a person interested in fashion. Closure involves a person’s sense of obligation to dress fashionably.

FASHION AWARENESS

This is the stage when an individual becomes alert to new fashion styles. It is basically a stage of exposure not information processing. At this stage the individual is not yet motivated to seek additional information about style. Such information might be about who is wearing what, where and when? Individuals will vary in the extent to which they are aware of new fashion styles. At the individual level perceptions of what is fashionable is subjective and the degree to which a person is committed to the idea of keeping up with fashion varies. The degree to which various fashion styles can be kept in fashion also varies (Clamp and Bohdahgwicz 1994). Fashion related products tend to have short life cycles (Stone 2010). The awareness stage in the adoption process therefore becomes difficult to assess after a style has been adopted.

FASHION INTEREST

During the interest stage of fashion adoption process, an individual becomes sufficiently interested in the new style but is not yet involved. The individual seeks more information on the style to learn more about it. During this stage, behaviour changes are noted as the individual becomes more purposive than in the awareness stage. The individual is eager to learn more about and becomes more emotionally involved and hence seeks out information sources. Individual characteristics such as personality, value systems affect where information is sought. Some studies done elsewhere indicate that when it came to actually comprehending the style or understanding its functions, fashion leaders were more likely to be influenced by marketer dominated sources like window displays, fashion magazines, radio programs, internet, T.v and newspaper advertisements. The fashion leaders include those individuals who are eager to try new fashion styles and willing to take risks (Stone 2010). In contrast fashion followers were influenced more by social interactions with others.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A mixture of qualitative and quantitative data were used in the collection and analysis of data. Information on interests, opinions and awareness of fashion is soft data. Cresswell (2010) describes qualitative data as soft that are rich in descriptions of human behaviour, conversations, and places which cannot be handled statistically. The specific design used was a descriptive survey. The target population for this study was two hundred and eighty four, first and third year female students at a college in Gweru. They were considered to be purveyors of fashion. A representative sample of thirty students was selected using stratified random sampling method. The sample was divided into two groups of first and third years, respectively. The second year students were out on teaching practice. The subjects were then randomly selected from class registers provided by the administration. The lottery method was used where cards with students names were placed in different hats and then the first fifteen cards were picked. Random sampling gave each member of

the target population a known and equal probability of selection. The main advantage of the stratified random sampling is that it is highly representative of all subjects under study. Data collection tools were questionnaires.

DATA PRESENTATION

Data to describe the personal attributes of the respondents was collected and is represented in table 1.

Table-1. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Age		
Below 25 years	17	56.7%
25-35 years	12	40%
36-46 years	1	3.3%
Above 46 years	Nil	Nil
Marital status		
Married	21	70%
Divorced	Nil	Nil
Single	9	30%
Academic Qualifications		
“O” Level	23	76.7%
“A” Level	6	20%
Other	1	3.3%
Technical Subjects Studied		
Art	2	6.7%
Fashion and Fabrics (F/F)	15	50%
Food and Nutrition (F/N)	6	20%
Technical Graphics	1	3.3%
Art and F/F	1	3.3%
Art and F/N	4	13.4%
Music and F/N	1	3.3%

Data in table 1 indicated that of the thirty female students 17 were below 25 years, 12 were between 25 and 35 years and only one was in the range between 36-45 years. Twenty-one of the respondents were married and nine were single. Twenty three indicated that their academic qualifications were O level while six had gone up to A level. One respondent indicated that she had other qualifications but did not specify. Two respondents had done art, fifteen had done fashion, six did food and nutrition, one did technical graphics, one had a combination of art and fashion fabrics. Four had a combination of fashion and fabrics and food and nutrition. One had done fashion and fabrics and music. All in all twenty one respondents had knowledge of fashion related subjects.

PERSONAL INVOLVEMENT WITH FASHION

Table-2. Commitment to fashion

variable	frequency	Percentage
Ability to adapt fashion styles	17	56.7
Inability to adapt fashion styles	13	43.3
Obligation to dressing fashionably	17	56.7
Not obligated to dressing fashionably	13	43.3

One question sought to establish respondent's commitment to fashion by determining whether they adapted fashion clothing to create their own distinct style. Findings revealed that seventeen showed commitment by adapting styles while thirteen did not. Of those who adapted four indicated they adapted fashion styles by use of accessories. One question intended to determine the respondents' involvement with fashion by establishing whether they dressed fashionably all the time. Findings showed that seventeen believed they dressed fashionably while thirteen did not. Various reasons for dressing fashionably were put forward ranging from being presentable or just fashionable.

Of the social activities attended by respondents, church was the most popular with a frequency of twenty-eight. Nine of these respondents did not have any specific clothing style for church, while the other nineteen wore uniforms. Ranking second was visiting friends where all respondents indicated that they wore smart casual clothes. Weddings ranked third with a frequency of twenty-four. Attire worn ranged from formal, elegant to African attire. Ranked fourth was watching soccer where the majority indicated that they wore casual or sportswear. Kitchen parties were ranked fifth position with fifteen frequencies. Baby showers ranked sixth position with fourteen frequencies. All respondents indicated that they wore smart casual clothes. At the bottom of the wrung was clubbing with six frequencies. Those who went clubbing were always in smart casual wear.

Time spent on wardrobe planning is an indication of personal involvement. When asked about time respondents spent planning wardrobes, seven indicated that they spent a lot of time, twenty a fair amount and three never spent time planning wardrobes. With regards to shopping for new clothing, twenty-three usually shop after three months; six did it on a monthly basis. Only one indicated they did it on a weekly basis. The most preferred shops included boutiques, discount houses, flea markets or a combination of these and the reasons for shopping from these shops included exclusiveness, good customer care, store ambience and availability of credit facilities.

Perceptions of Fashion Awareness

Questions in this section sought to establish how respondents became aware of fashion. One question intended to establish the respondent's evaluation of the most and least appealing factors in a pictorial advertisement. Findings revealed that most appealing was size of picture, followed by colours or design in apparel, style features, body form or model, prize of product and brand name being the least appealing. Another question sought to find out which advertising strategy the respondents found most to least informative. Findings revealed that the most popular informative strategy was TV and radio, followed by newspaper adverts, brochures, magazines then in-store

displays while clothing sales assistants and the internet were ranked the least informative. Reasons for considering strategy informative being that the strategy could be accessed, was available in their homes and that exposed them to general information on various subjects. The least informative was cited as being expensive to access.

Perceptions of Fashion Interest

Questions in this section sought to find out how individuals got interested in fashion. Respondents were asked what they understood by the term “fashion”. Responses varied from those who did not know nine, two thought it had something to do with changing styles, three thought it had to do with popular dressing, fourteen thought it had to do with garment construction, two thought it was a study of fibres and fabrics. On further probing on whether respondents found the subject of fashion interesting, twenty-nine indicated they found the subject interesting, while only one found it uninteresting. On what they found interesting, responses ranged from indications that the subject gave them an opportunity to be exposed to information on wardrobe planning, current fashion styles and knowledge on designing, keeping up with fashion trends.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Differences in Levels of Commitment

Individuals who value fashion and incorporate it in their personal lives can be identified by the commitment shown through regularised and routine fashion activities they get involved in. indicators used to measure how an individual gets personally involved in fashion include time spent planning a wardrobe, frequency of shopping trips, engagement in social activities for which specific clothing styles are require, adaptation of fashion to create uniqueness and the obligation to dress fashionably (Naderi; 2011). The findings indicate that most of the respondents did not involve themselves in wardrobe planning or shop for new styles frequently. As measures of commitment to fashion one might conclude that commitment is generally low. However, this variable may be difficult to give a conclusive assessment as some other factors come to play.

Adaptation of style to create uniqueness in dress was minimal. A possible cause could be limited knowledge on how fashionable items or accessories may be modified. Being able to adapt and incorporate fashionable symbols to create one’s own distinct style is an indication of high personal involvement with fashion (Kaiser 1997). One way which shows commitment to fashion is through the obligation which compels one to dress fashionably all the time. Kaiser (1997) refers to this concept as closure the majority of respondents felt obligated to dress fashionably had a background of Fashion & Fabrics. An indication that subjects of this nature enable an individual to make informed decisions on aspects related to fashion.

Regular display of fashionable styles through various social activities one regularly engages in is another variable that may be used to measure personal involvement with fashion. A sense of

commitment to a group through adoption of certain fashion symbols is a good indication of deep personal involvement with fashion. Findings indicated that social activities where fashion displays occurred include weddings, baby showers and kitchen parties. In these settings, groups showcase African attire, elegant formal styles and smart casual styles.

The place where fashion merchandise is sought is an indicator of personal involvement with fashion. Frequenting fashion boutiques, discount houses and flea markets would be good indicators of this variable. However no conclusive assessment could be established since respondents utilised a combination of sources.

DIFFERENCES IN LEVELS OF INTEREST AND AWARENESS

The study sought to establish differences in levels of fashion awareness and interest. Differences related to age were insignificant since the majority of the respondents were within the age range 25-35yrs. Horridge & Richards (1984) in their study established that teenagers were more aware of fashion than their mothers. In addition involvement in activities like fashion shows readership of fashion magazines and studies of in-store displays were common among single women than the married women an indication that single are more aware of fashion than married women.

Summary of Research Findings

Levels of personal involvement with fashion were generally low and differed among female students at the College. Factors which influenced the differences in levels of personal involvement included marital status and knowledge acquired from fashion related courses. Though some studies done elsewhere highlight age as one factor that might influence personal involvement with fashion (Horridge et al 1981), the participants used in this study had their age ranges close together such that no significant differences were noted on this variable. Low personal involvement with fashion was signified by the fact that fashion related activities they got involved in did not reflect high levels of personal involvement with fashion. According to Unruh in Kaiser (1985) people who value fashion and incorporate it in their everyday lives participate in fashion related activities. These include, spending time planning one's wardrobe, engaging in social activities for which specific clothing styles are required, frequently going shopping for clothes, being obligated to dress fashionably and being able to adapt styles. High levels of personal involvement are particularly associated with the frequency with which an individual goes out shopping for clothes as well as the time spent planning one's wardrobe. The majority of students did not go on shopping trips and only spent a fair amount of time planning their wardrobes. Though low levels of personal involvement with fashion were noted among the female students, single students displayed a slightly higher level than married students did.

The most common strategies to develop awareness included broadcast and print media. According to literature, these strategies can be used to develop awareness but other variables like the cost

factor and accessibility could explain why the students preferred reading local magazines and accessing information on fashion from broadcast media. However, due to the limited nature of content in local magazines and lack of fashion commercials on the local television station students might not be getting exposed to the current fashion styles by international standards.

CONCLUSIONS

Throughout recorded time and probably even before, clothing along with food and shelter has been recognized as one of the primary needs of mankind (Horn and Gurel 1990). However it is no longer the essential spend that it was. And hence personal involvement was low among female students did at the college. Exclusive clothing is getting expensive therefore the need to buy fashionable clothes is less pronounced. Personal involvement was also low because students did not spend as much time on fashion related activities which include time spent planning one's wardrobe, engaging in social activities for which specific clothing styles are required, frequently shopping for clothes, adapting styles and being obligated to dress fashionably.

For any new fashion style, the marketer must purposely address the communication needs of the consumers at every stage of the purchase process in order to successfully bring them from awareness of style right up to adoption. Broadcast media such as television and radio are typically considered best for creating awareness in consumers. Though most of the respondents had access to broadcast media the fact that few fashion shops nowadays use these strategies for advertising might serve to explain why some respondents were not aware of current fashion styles. Examination of the fashion industry reveals that current practice also matches specific marketing tools to those respective stages of the adoption model for which they are suited but this fall short due to the fact that they are currently not being used as they should to bring out awareness. Literature on use of advertisements states that for any advertisement to be effective repetition plays an important part. The fact that fashion advertisements are no longer being screened repeatedly may also explain low levels of awareness in current fashion styles.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study of fashion has to be incorporated into syllabi in secondary and tertiary colleges. Program planners should design content relevant for students who intend to pursue fashion related careers. Appropriate marketing tools have to be developed to meet the needs of the consumer at the different stages in the adoption process. Marketers should aggressively build product awareness campaigns for different consumer segments to make it easy for consumers to try out new styles. However further research needs to be performed to determine the applicability of promotional tools to each of the fashion adoption stages in this dynamically changing environment where new communication technologies are being introduced.

There is need for further research to establish how the variance in individuals acceptance to new fashion styles affect the applicability of the “new product adoption” level for marketing communications in planning communication tools.

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