Status Consciousness and Fashion Consumption

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Abstract

In seeking to expand our understanding of fashion brands this study examines the relationship between personal characteristics and fashion brands, focusing particularly on the effect of susceptibility to interpersonal influence on status consumption tendencies and attributing status, value and purchase intent to specific brands. Data were gathered via a self-administered survey of young people in a between subjects design for two fashion brands. The results indicate that individuals who are susceptible to interpersonal influence are likely also to be status conscious and those who were susceptible to interpersonal influence and status conscious ascribed greater status to the focal brands in the study and perceived them to have higher value and purchase intention than those who were less susceptible to influence and not as status conscious.

Introduction

How different people and groups are drawn into and attached to fashion is an important social, as well as marketing issue. There is growing recognition that strong brand names in fashion marketing are valuable assets, particularly, in a context of growing globalisation; heightened competition and increasing differentiation (Lim and O’Cass, 2001) in fashion, particularly so, when a brand is positioned on status. Mason (1981) argued that people express themselves through consumption in a myriad of ways and in this context, products and brands have the ability to communicate messages to others, in that product styles determine how consumers who own a particular product are perceived by others (Holman, 1981; Solomon, 1983). The role that interpersonal influence from reference groups and significant others plays is important in defining status and the products and brands that are ascribed status. Status conscious consumers appear to be more socially aware and more interested in social relationships (Kilsheimer, 1993). As such, a prominent feature of the status consumer focusing on social relationship formation revolves around their susceptibility to interpersonal influence.

Brands that have characteristics that provide status can provide entry into groups and allow consumers to fit in by portraying a particular image. At times reference group influence can have a powerful impact of relationship formation when the individual ascribes the brand as their own, to making it a part of their self-identity to forming a personal relationship with the brand. In effect reference group influence identifies a socially aware individual and it appears that those who are prone to interpersonal influence are also conscious of status. As such it is hypothesised that:

**H1: Susceptibility to interpersonal influence will influence status consumption.**

Examination of the fashion market shows that specific brands of fashion are overtly positioned to maintain exclusivity, to communicate prestige, status and users role position (Zinkhan and Prenshaw, 1994). However, the desire for status is not exclusive to the wealthy (Mason, 1992; Ram 1994; Underwood, 1994) and outward symbols of status are meaningful to both the wealthy and those of modest means (Basanko, 1995). The implication is that consumers at every class level have desires to consume for status purposes.
Tommy Hilfiger states that, “many of these people (kids from the ghettos and typical poverty areas) would rather have a Rolex than a home” (cited in Levine, 1997, p.144). In saying this, it must be recognised that status symbols vary depending on class, as different classes or groups will hold different ideals of status symbols and whom, they take their cues from. It has been argued that clothing styles and the fashions that influence them over time are in effect similar to a code. Further, that the difficulty of understanding fashion in all its vagaries is a lack of knowledge of the unconscious symbolisms that attach to forms, colours, textures and other elements (Davis, 1994). There is potential for consumers to prefer those status products that symbolically represent a prestigious position within their social group and as brands are seen as important in creating individual identity, a sense of achievement and status for consumers it is hypothesised that:

**H2a: Status consumption tendencies will influence the status ascribed to specific brands.**

**H2b: Susceptibility to interpersonal influence will effect the status ascribed to specific brands.**

The arguments above lead to the view that the status ascribed to brands influences preferences, value and ultimate purchase intention of specific brands. The focus on brand value and purchase intention is both managerially and theoretically valuable. Such a focus has been seen in prior studies using Asian contexts for example, by Leong (2000), who focused on the purchase intent of younger consumers. Also, it has been argued that marketers have for sometime now regarded intention as the most accurate predictor of purchase behaviour (Morwitz and Schmittlein, 1992; Pecotich, Pressley and Roth, 1996). Whereas value is more in tune with an overall rating of a brand compared to other brands in a consumer’s evoked set. Such that we would expect slight differences in perceived value and intent across consumers and between consumers for specific brands within a product class. As such it is hypothesised that:

**H3a: Status consumption tendencies will influence the perceived value of a brand.**

**H3b: The perceived status of a brand will influence its perceived value.**

Jacoby and Olson (1977) argued that price is an objective external characteristic that consumers perceive as a stimulus, and has both objective external properties and subjective internal representations that are derived from the perceptions of price, resulting in some meaning to consumers. It can be inferred that perceptions of the same price may be different across consumers. Cooper (1969) argued that because consumers generally have a price range that they will pay for any product, they will refrain from purchasing it at a price they perceive to be too high, or too low (that is outside their price range). The challenge for marketers then, is to identify the price bands for their brands that are held by consumers, as these price bands determine a consumer’s perception of value towards the product, which in turn directly influences consumers’ purchase intentions. As such it is hypothesised that:

**H4a: The perceived status of a brand will effect its purchase intention.**

**H4b: The perceived value of a brand will effect its purchase intention.**

**Research Design**

The study was based on the development and administration of a self-completed survey by people aged 18 to 25. The survey measured respondents’ status consumption tendencies via seven items adapted from Eastman, Goldsmith and Flynn (1999), reference group influence (normative) via seven items adapted from Bearden, Netemeyer and Teel (1989) and evaluation of the brand’s status via seven items adapted from Eastman et al (1999) and O’Cass and Frost (2002) focusing on the specific brand stimuli. Price perception focusing on
perceived value was measured via three items adapted from Dodds, et al (1991) and purchase intention was measured via three items tapping the respondent’s belief in their potential to buy the brand in the future, specifically developed for this study. All items were measured via 6-point Likert-type statements from strongly agree – strongly disagree. Clothing and sunglasses were chosen as the two product categories within the broader fashion category. Data were collected via a convenience sample of 18-25 year old students, and in total 153 surveys, were obtained for 2 status brands, Clavin Klein and Oakley.

The scales were tested via exploratory factor analysis using principle components and reliability estimates. The factor structures indicated all items loaded onto their respective constructs and reliabilities were all above accepted levels and those of the original scales. The analysis of status consumption indicated a two-factor structure, which explained 71.2% of the variance explained and good reliability at .86. Status consumption was also measured at the specific brand level, which in effect measures the status ascribed to the specific brands. The two factors in status ascribed to the specific brand explained 86.3% of the variance and had high levels of reliability at .92. Susceptibility to interpersonal influence revealed two-factors, the factor labeled normative accounted for 60.4% of the variance within the construct and had a high level of reliability at .89. Unlike Bearden et al’s study which focused on both components labeled ‘normative’ and ‘informative’, this research focuses on normative influence which was more relevant to status consumption and fashion as it taps impression creation, approval and achieving a sense of belonging.

Results for Hypotheses H1 to H4

Given the formulation of the proposed relationships in the hypotheses and sample size it was decided to use Partial Least Squares to analyse the data. A systematic examination of a number of fit indices for predictive relevance of the model is necessary (O'Cass, 2001) including, $R^2$, AVA and regression loadings. The average variance accounted (AVA) for, in the endogenous variables was .33 and the individual $R^2$s were greater than the recommended .10 (Falk and Miller, 1992) for all of the predicted variables as indicated in Table 1. As all of these $R^2$ estimates were larger than the recommended levels it is appropriate and informative to examine the significance of the paths associated with these variables. A reasonable criterion for evaluating the significance of the individual paths is the absolute value of the product of the path coefficient and the appropriate correlation coefficient (Falk & Miller, 1992). As paths are estimates of the standardized regression weights this produces an index of the variance in an endogenous variable explained by that particular path and 1.5% of the variance is recommended as the cut off point.

The results of the inner model results in Table 1 indicate all the paths exceed the variance criterion and the bootstrap critical ratios are of the appropriate size (greater than 1.96 < .05). Therefore, hypotheses H1, H2a, H2b, H3a, H3b, H4a and H4b are supported. The data, suggests that than individuals susceptibility to interpersonal influence does impact on their status consumption tendencies. Also that both interpersonal influence and status consumption tendencies impact on the status ascribed to a brand. Further, both status consumption and the status ascribed to a brand influences the brand value and the brands status and brand value influence purchase intention.
Table 1 Partial Least Squares Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predicted variables</th>
<th>Predictor variables</th>
<th>Hyp</th>
<th>Path</th>
<th>Path Variance</th>
<th>R²</th>
<th>Critical ratio</th>
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<td>Status consumption</td>
<td>Reference group influence</td>
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<td>.249</td>
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<td>Status of brand</td>
<td>Status consumption</td>
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<td>.122</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interpersonal influence</td>
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<td>.177</td>
<td>.30</td>
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<td>Status consumption</td>
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<td>.066</td>
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<td>2.80</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>H3b</td>
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<tr>
<td>Purchase intention</td>
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<td>H4a</td>
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<td>.192</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Brand value</td>
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<td>.33</td>
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Discussion

The effect of susceptibility to interpersonal influence (normative) on status consumption was an important focus of this study. The existence of a significant positive effect occurred between status consumption and susceptibility to interpersonal influence indicating that certain status products may be used for image portrayal to provide entry into certain groups or to fit into different situations. It would appear that if a person were status-conscious, then they would typically be individuals who are susceptible to the interpersonal influence of others. Further, in the context of specific brands Shermach’s (1997) notion that people use brands for social acceptance is consistent with this study, which shows how group affiliation can be enhanced or promoted and one can be identified through use of particular product via interpersonal influence. Similarly the view that consumers’ social networks, the influence of reference groups and popular taste determine the desire for status was supported. The findings also indicated that those brands marketed as status brands, were perceived by respondents to be of high status. Such brand associations allow improved social standing and image. Conceptually, consumers should show greater interest in deliberately displaying brands that signal status as opposed to those that are lower in price, prestige and perhaps quality. This implies that the level of perceived status influences the choice of brands chosen for status consumption. This is also consistent with Onkvisit and Shaw (1987) who suggested that socially desirable products such as status-laden brand names are seen as encouraging public consumption over those that have low social desirability and low status. What is also evident in the findings is that when a brand is ascribed status it is also perceived to hold significant value, increasing the strength of intention to purchase it. Therefore, if marketers are targeting segments via appeals of either inflating the ego, displaying status portrayal, then it is advised that the brand be articulated as being heavily status-laden, i.e. carrying the superior qualities and distinguishing characteristics that make it a status symbol. These attributes would include having: symbolic characteristics, standards of excellence in their field, positive brand image and identity, superior quality, ‘snob’ appeal, luxurious features, exclusivity, being associated with desired social groups or elite, high priced and success related.

A student sample is adequate for this study, as its objective was not to provide point and interval estimates of population parameters (Calder, Phillips and Tybout, 1981). Hence, generalisation of the specific results of this study is neither intended nor implied, beyond those fitting the sample’s profile. Although limitations exist with student samples they have been argued to be more fashion conscious and image orientated, as well as being up with the latest ‘fad’ in status brands (Beaudoin et al., 1998).
It is hoped that this study provides some imputes to research examining the role of status consumption in explaining fashion consumption behaviour. With increasing globalisation there is a pressing need for exploration of research across different countries, as the same brand can be perceived to have different meanings, symbols and value across different nationalities. Not only do countries differ by culture, history, geography and language but also in the way consumers perceive products and brands (Domzal and Ungal, 1987; Lim and O’Cass, 2001; Quelch, 1999). Many factors contribute to the differences between markets, regions and countries around the world and it would be valuable to discover the exact nature of these factors in combination with status consumption and conspicuous consumption. The impetus for future research in this area could stem from the initial work of Eastman et al. (1997) and Marcoux, Filiprault and Cheron (1997) who researched the Polish, American, Chinese and Mexican markets, and Lim and O’Cass (2001) who studied young Singaporeans, as well as this study which researched a predominantly Australian market. It is also widely recognised that Australia has a multi-cultural society, including those born in Australia, immigrants and naturalised citizens. Therefore, future research is recommended to examine the levels of status consumption and related brand associations across different countries and cultures. Future research could also examine different brand associations or variables associated with status consumption. For example, country-of-origin, media use, lifestyles, values, brand personalities and alternative consumption relevant concepts could all realistically be tested to yield further insight into status consumption and conspicuous consumption. Marketing practitioners and academics would benefit from understanding the plethora of brand associations that may be discovered to be the strongest predictors of status consumption and conspicuous consumption tendencies.

There is perhaps no single issue that consistently dominates the modern psyche as much as fashion, in that it not only forms an important part of everyday consumption decisions, but is also a central component of almost all daily events, particularly the clothes we wear, how we communicate through them and think about them. This study has gone some way to show that in reality, fashion may not be the creation of powerful persuaders, but a normal outcome of dynamic social interactions between individuals and groups within a culture, that creates shifts in the style and tastes of individuals and groups through ascribing status to products and brands. The suspicion that status-laden brands would be chosen for status consumption was confirmed and that the influence of others in this process is important was also shown. This insight broadens our understanding of what in effect are fashion conscious consumers driven by a strong need for status, lived through specific brands of status products. These consumers are a prime target for a plethora of products and brands so long as they are inherently laden with the ability to communicate status to others and/or are congruent with the user’s image. With this knowledge marketers are better equipped to improve marketing strategies and accurately identify key variables, which will induce desire, purchase. However, to conclude with the words expressed by a teenager in Davis (1994) “The poorer kids want to look rich, and the richer kids want to look poor (p 60). What this study shows is that the clothes individual’s wear, and indeed even how they wear their clothes tells us much about their status and group dynamics. It tells even more about the role of specific product types and brands that allow and aid this to happen.
References


