Understanding Consumers' Perceptions of Fashion

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Despite the prevalence of fashion in the consumer market, previous research on fashion has primarily focused on the characteristics, motivations and behaviors of fashion innovators/leaders and little is known about the meanings of fashion to the broader range of consumers and their perceptions of fashion. The aim of this research is to provide a conceptual foundation for understanding consumers’ perceptions of fashion and their various orientations toward fashion consumption. Furthermore, through a series of five studies, we develop and validate a scale that measures consumers’ different orientations toward fashion. This research offers important theoretical and practical implications.

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When A Good Impression Goes Bad: The Effect of Goal Changes on Repeated Attitudes

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Extended Abstract

Past consumer research has shown consumption goals impact product information processing, weighting and retrieving, which results in variances in the reported attitudes (Huffman and Houston 1993; Markman and Brendle 2000). However, the extant research has only examined how goals impact an initial attitude (Garbarino and Johnson 2001; Huffman and Houston 1993). In reality, a consumer’s goal can change from time to time. It remains unclear whether attitudes formed under different consumption goals impact each other. For instance, when consumptions goals change, will the prior goal-driven evaluation influence the later evaluation? If yes, why and in which direction (i.e., assimilating or contrasting)?

We answered the above two questions by relying on Selective Accessibility Model (SAM, Mussweiler 2003) proposed in social judgment literature. The model suggests that whether the evaluation target is judged as similar or dissimilar to the comparison standard will decide whether the contrast or assimilation effect will be resulted. If the target is judged as similar, the assimilation effect will be observed, but if the target is judged as dissimilar to the comparison standard, the contrasting effect will happen. Based on SAM, we argue that an initial positive (bad) attitude formed under a certain consumption goal can be used as a comparison standard, makes the later evaluation of the same object under a conflicting goal worse (better) off.

The current paper suggests that consumers use the relationship between consumption goals as a way to judge similarity or dissimilarity between the current and prior evaluations, (not only judging the applicability of the stored attitudes as suggested in extant attitude literature). Such judgment can be made quite quickly and colors the new evaluating process. In particular, we predict when two conflicting consumption goals activated at different times, attitudes reported under the later consumption goal would be judged as dissimilar to the initial attitudes formed under the earlier consumption goal, resulting in contrast effect. Our prediction was supported with two lab experiments.

In Experiment 1, we demonstrated that the contrast effect was more robust when the cognitive resource was limited. In this one factor (cognitive load: high-rehearsal 7 digits vs. low-rehearsal 2 digits) design experiment, all participants first reported their initial attitudes under performance goal (the same car information as in Experiment 1 was used), and after a 10-min filler task, they were asked to read information again, and reported their attitude under a different consumption goal (i.e., later attitude). We found that when evaluation was made under economy goal, the later attitude was poorer than the initial attitude; but when evaluation was made under performance goal, the later attitude was better than the initial attitude. A clear pattern of contrast effect between evaluations under conflicting consumption goals were demonstrated in Experiment 1.

In Experiment 2, we demonstrated that the contrast effect was more robust when the cognitive resource was limited. In this one factor (cognitive load: high-rehearsal 7 digits vs. low-rehearsal 2 digits) design experiment, all participants first reported their initial attitudes under performance goal (the same car information as in Experiment 1 was used), and after a 10-min filler task were asked to reported their attitudes under economy goal (i.e., later attitude). Cognitive load was manipulated before the second time evaluation. Results revealed that though the initial attitudes reported under performance goal remained same, compared to participants under low cognitive load, those under high cognitive load evaluated the car less positively under economy goal. Our results in experiment 2 suggested that the comparison to the initial attitudes happened as a default, which was consistent with SAM.

Taken together, the current research suggests that when contextual cues (in this research, consumption goals) are salient, consumers can depend on the relationship between those cues to come up with an initial judgment and adjust from there. More specifically, when contextual cues are in conflict, the prior evaluation can serve a comparison standard rather than an anchoring point, resulting in a contrast effect that impacts attitudes reported later.

References


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Extended Abstract

Despite the prevalence of fashion in the consumer market, previous research on fashion has primarily focused on the characteristics, motivations and behaviors of fashion innovators/leaders (e.g., Cassill and Drake, 1987; Goldsmith Flynn and More, 1996; Goldsmith, Moore and Beaudoin, 1999). Therefore little is known about the meanings of fashion to the broader range of consumers and their perceptions of fashion. This research attempts to fill this void.
The major objectives of this article are twofold. First, we aim to provide a conceptual foundation for understanding consumers’ perceptions of fashion. Second, as one of the first attempts in the literature, we develop and assess the validity of the consumer fashion orientation (CFO) scale that measures the different orientations toward fashion across consumers.

Based on a review of the literature as well as qualitative research inquiries (20 interviews), we identified three fashion orientations/focuses adopted by consumers toward fashion.

**Brand focus**: More than any other consumer brands, the fashion brand sustains itself on the image of the brand rather than aspects inherent to the product (Auty and Elliott 1998). It appears that many consumers use fashion as a way to communicate their status. In this regard, fashion serves as a symbol or sign. Moore (1995) stressed the positive association with brand, quality and status if the fashion brand is perceived to have a distinctive image. Auty and Elliott (1998) found that consumers perceive branded fashion items to be of higher quality therefore a better conveyer of their self-image.

**Trend focus**: Trend aspect is inherent in the definition of fashion. One of the very early definitions of fashion states that “Fashion is the prevailing style at any given time” (Nystrom, 1928). Adopting the current trend is a way for consumers to communicate their desire to be “a part of the community”. According to Simmel (1904), social tendencies are essential for the establishment of fashion, namely the need of becoming a part of the group on the one hand and the need for uniqueness on the other. Miller et al. (1993) emphasized the desire of consumers to be current by adopting styles that will identify themselves as up-to-date with the people whom they admire in a given situation.

**Design focus**: It appears that for many individuals, the actual design is another important aspect of fashion and that is what they focus on when it comes to fashion consumption. Many consumers wish to communicate their uniqueness via what they wear (Tian, Bearden and Hunter, 2002). A unique design is usually the answer for individuals who have such concerns when approaching fashion.

A total of 5 studies were conducted in developing and validating the CFO scale.

**Study 1: Item development.** Besides gleaning on published research related to fashion consumption, we conducted 20 in-depth interviews with undergraduate students in a southeastern university to generate a pool of items for CFO. A total of 33 items were generated (11 items for each dimension).

**Study 2: Initial item refinement.** The content validity of these items was assessed according to Bearden et al. (1989). After eliminating items that did not receive the appropriate categorization by at least two of the three judges used in this study, 23 items remained (9 items for brand focus, 7 items each for trend and style focuses).

**Study 3: Item refinement.** Each item was formatted into a seven-point Likert-type response scale in the questionnaires. A sample 98 undergraduate business students (45 females) was used in this study. Based on the data, items that did not have corrected item-to-total subscale correlations above .40 were deleted. Items that did not have statistically higher correlations with the dimension of which they were hypothesized to belong in comparison with item correlations with remaining dimensions’ total scores were also deleted (Bearden et al. 1989). These analyses resulted in a reduced scale of 15 items (5 items each dimension).

**Study 4: Scale validation-latent structure, reliability and discriminant validity.** A non-student sample of 133 consumers (64 females, average age 36) was used to validate the CFO scale. Respondents were recruited by students as an extra credit assignment. Using this data, first, the latent structure and reliability of the scale were assessed. Results show that the three-factor oblique model provided a better fit relative to five more restricted competing models. The hypothesized model was the only model to exhibit acceptable fit. Within the CFA setting, reliability of each dimension was calculated using the procedures outlined by Fornell and Larcker (1981) based on the work of Werts, Lin, and Jöreskog (1974). The reliabilities for the three dimensions ranged from .894 to .954 and the variances extracted ranged from 64 to 80.4 percent, which are highly satisfactory. In an effort to establish scale construct validity, we also conducted discriminant validity tests of the measure by analyzing CFO along with need for uniqueness and fashion innovativeness as pairs of constructs in a series of two-factor CFA models (Bagozzi and Phillips, 1982). The results provided evidence for discriminant validity.

**Study 5: Further scale validation-nomological validity.** A sample of 243 non-student respondents was used to further validate the scale by focusing on the nomological validity of the scale. We developed our tests based on the established models of fashion clothing consumption (e.g. O’Cass 2004). Age and gender of consumers were included as control variables in our tests. Our test of antecedents revealed that materialism and involvement were positively related to CFO. Moreover, our tests of the consequences found that individuals who are high on CFO scale also had higher self-confidence, tended to spend more and made more impulse purchases. Our results also showed interesting differential effects of the CFO dimensions. While all three dimensions of CFO were positively correlated with impulse buying tendency, only brand focus was significantly correlated with level of spending, and only design focus was significantly correlated with self-confidence.

This research offers both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, this study provides an important contribution to current fashion research by first attempting to focus on consumers’ in general, rather than the limited number of fashion innovators/leaders’ perceptions of fashion. CFO may fit into a broader theory of fashion and fashion consumption (Miller et al. 1993). As such, CFO should be useful in empirical studies of consumers’ purchasing and consumption patterns of fashion products. This study also offers many important implications to fashion retailers to better understand and segment their market.

**References**


Information Search due to Extended Separation
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Extended Abstract
Information search allows consumers to learn about relevant product dimensions, compare alternative options, and ultimately select the product they prefer. Many factors contribute to consumers’ information search processes, including: uncertainty (Urbaney et al., 1989), domain knowledge (Brucks, 1985; Ozanne et al., 1992), breadth of alternatives (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000), and the magnitude of perceived difference between choice options (Russo & Carlson, 2002). Oddly, little is known about how expectations influence search in situations where consumers know very little about the choice options.
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Expected separation is the non-directional anticipated difference between the overall values of choice alternatives. As a belief that relates to the choice set, expected separation can exist even when consumers have too little information about the specific choice options available to warrant a clear directional prior belief. For example, sometimes consumers confront: really new products, as in the constantly changing realm of consumer electronics; product categories that are new to them; new choice options in existing categories, like major redesigns of auto models, or restaurants in a new city. Broadly speaking, any situation where the choice options are novel to the consumer is one where clear directional priors may not exist, but where expected separation may operate.

The effects of beliefs on product evaluation and choice have been demonstrated in numerous domains within consumer research (Allison & Uhl, 1964; Moorthy et al., 1997; Carlson & Russo, 2001). However, we know of no work that has focused on how expected differences among options influences information search. There are two possibilities in this regard, leading to opposite predictions.

It is well-known that the closer options are in value, the longer and deeper consumers will search, at least when they have sufficient expertise to evaluate the acquired information (Bockenholt et al. 1991; Huber and Klein 1991). Thus, if expected separation operates in the same manner as actual separation between choice options, then greater expected separation may lead to less overall search.

The prediction of less information search as expected separation increases is intuitively appealing. After all, if two options are expected to be very different from one another, one would expect to be able to easily tell the options apart, and thus, require less extensive information search to pick one.

However, when expected separation is high the anticipated costs of selecting the wrong option should be high. Thus, consumers may be more likely to fear making a mistake than under conditions of low expected separation. Consequently, search depth may increase as expected separation increases.

Two studies were conducted to test these competing predictions. To begin, we pre-tested expected separation manipulations in a variety of product domains. The manipulation effectively altered expectations of differences between options, as measured by perceived differences among options.

Study 1 employed a mixed 3×3 full-factorial design. The first factor included three levels of expected separation, manipulated by telling participants that the options given in the domain are either “very different,,” “slightly different,” or “almost the same”. The second factor consisted of three product domains chosen following pre-testing.

Participants saw descriptions of three simulated scenarios, one in each product domain (hotels in a foreign city, vacation destinations, and imaginary products called gimpers). Each domain was coupled with an expected separation condition. Following each scenario participants answered a series of questions regarding their projected information search behavior.

Results showed that across product domains participants anticipated they would engage in more information gathering the greater the expected separation among alternatives. Participants expected to spend more time gathering information, examine a greater number of options, and use more choice criteria in higher expected separation. Our hypothesis regarding perceptions of cost of picking the wrong option was borne out by higher ratings of risk perception under higher expected separation.

Study 2 was designed to examine actual, rather than anticipated, information search behavior. In addition, the study was designed to allow us to examine potential interaction effects between expected separation and actual (objective) differences between options. Participants were given a simulated scenario where they were asked to choose between two potential date candidates for a friend. The study employed a between subjects 2×3 (expected separation*actual separation) design. Expected separation was manipulated by referring to the two candidates as either very similar or very different. Actual separation was manipulated by varying the average difference in candidates’ ratings across a variety of traits.

Participants read a description of the task and examined information about the two candidates. A trait “menu” listed different trait categories where evaluation information was available. Participants were asked to look through traits until they’ve gathered enough information to make a choice. The main DV was number of traits participants chose to examine.

As predicted by participants in study 1, participants in this study examined significantly more trait categories under high rather than low expected separation. While expected separation yielded a main effect on information search, no similar effect was found for actual separation, even though power analysis revealed sufficient power to detect an effect. Additionally, there was no interaction between expected and actual separation on information search.

Participants were more certain of their choice in high rather than low expected separation. This might demonstrate compensatory conviction in response to greater uncertainty during the search process (e.g., McGregor et al., 2001).

To sum, our studies thus far show non-directional expectations of difference between options lead consumers to search for more information. This is borne out in both expected and actual information search. Effects were demonstrated across a variety of consumer domains, adding to the generalizability of the findings.

Further steps in this research include an examination of the effect in real choice, to establish ecological validity, and an investigation of possible mechanisms underlying consumers’ extended search for information when expecting greater differences between options. We also wish to clarify the causal role of uncertainty in prompting greater information search following expected separation. This, and other factors, may play in as boundary conditions on the effects of expected separation.

References