New Clothing: Meanings and Practices

Gokcen Coskuner, Auburn University
Ozlem Sandikci, Bilkent University

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This paper explores feelings, experiences and practices related to new clothing. Specifically, we seek to answer two main questions: What does constitute newness of a clothing item? What is the motivation for a new clothing purchase? The study utilizes qualitative research methods and draws upon data collected from 24 informants of different age, gender and cultural capital. The paper argues that unlike technologically oriented new products, symbolic meanings, motives and practices predominantly characterize new clothing consumption.

In the era of mass production and consumption, we experience multiplication of objects (Baudrillard 1998). Furniture, books, cars, clothes etc. are all produced in vast numbers and in new variants. In such a context what the consumers perceive as “new” and what kind of experiences and feelings new products render emerge as important questions to explore. Within the field of marketing, the concept of newness has received substantial research interest especially since the early 1960s. Over the years, the concepts of newness and innovation have been explored, the constituents of newness as perceived by consumers and producers have been analyzed and models have been proposed for predicting consumers’ behaviors in relation to new products.

We aim to contribute to the existing literature by examining meanings and practices related to consumption of a highly symbolic product category, clothing. We first offer a brief review of the literature on new products and innovations and explain the motivation behind our research. Next, we present data collection methods and discuss our findings. We conclude with a discussion of contributions and future research areas.

BACKGROUND AND MOTIVATION
The literature on new products and innovations can be grouped under two major categories: product level and consumer level studies. At the product level, research is primarily concerned with examining product-related factors affecting the acceptance of an innovation—an idea perceived as new by the individual (Rogers and Shoemaker 1971)—without taking into consideration behavioral and perceptual characteristics of the individual consumer. These studies propose continuums that classify new products in terms of how continuous or discontinuous their effects are on established consumption patterns and discuss product related factors that effect the adoption of new products, such as price and advertising (e.g., Firth and Narayan 1996; Gobeli and Brown 1987; Kleinshmidt and Cooper 1991; Robertson 1971; Veryzer 1998).

At the individual level, studies focus on psychographic and demographic traits that make an individual more adept to adopt new products. Among psychographic traits innovativeness is the most discussed one in relation to new product adoption. Studies suggest that innovativeness is related to income and spending level (Baumgarten 1975; Goldsmith and Flynn 1992; Mason and Bellenger 1973–4) level of product involvement (Goldsmith et al. 1987; Mason and Bellenger 1973–4; Reynolds and Darden 1973, 1974; Schrank and Gilmore 1973) nature of the communicated product experience (Goldsmith and Flynn 1992; Mason and Bellenger 1973–4; Painter and Granzin 1976; Reynolds and Darden 1973, 1974), and perceptions of innovation attributes (Holak 1988; Holak and Lehmann 1990; Labay and Kinnear 1981). The literature demonstrates that early adopters have more education, more income, and higher occupation status than non-adopters (Adcock, Hirschman and Goldstucker 1977; Bell 1963; Feldman and Armstrong 1975; Kegeners and Engel 1969; Labay and Kinnear 1981; Plummer 1971; Robertson 1971; Rogers and Shoemaker 1971; Rogers and Stanfield 1968). Innovators are reported to be more inner directed (McDonald and Jacobs 1992) and driven by sensation-seeking and uniqueness-seeking motives (Burns and Krampf 1992). Consumers are also classified based on the rapidity of their adoption; namely as innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards (Rogers and Shoemaker 1971).

Despite the existence of a substantial amount of literature on new products and innovations, however, we believe that there remain two overlooked areas. First, most of the research focuses on technological innovations and tangible attributes of new products, leaving symbolic products and intangible attributes aside (for an exception see Hirschman 1982). As Hirschman (1982) argues, symbolism constitutes an important source of innovation, and by communicating new and different social meanings, a product can operate as a symbolic innovation. Second, while existing studies discuss demographic and psychographic traits that characterize innovativeness behavior in detail, they tend to neglect the actual experiences and practices of the consumers with new products.

Motivated by the gaps in the existing literature, this study offers an emic understanding of meanings and practices related to new product consumption in a symbolic product category, clothing. Two reasons underlie our selection of clothing category. First, clothing constitutes a signifying system through which meanings about class (Marx 1954; Veblen 1899); subcultural identity (Hebdige 1979), religion (Brown 2001; Crawley 1965b, Poll 1965; Sandikci and Ger 2001), sexual identity (Rolley 1992), gender roles (Crawley 1965a; Oakley 1981; Rouse 1989; Steele 1989), ethnic identity (Griebel 1995), and nationality (Ger and Ostergaard 1998) are communicated. Second, clothing, and in extension, fashion is characterized as ephemeral (Faurshou 1997; Fox-Genovese 1987). Clothes and fashion change continuously; the fashion industry always introduces new collections that aim to offer more allure and excitement to consumers.

METHODOLOGY
Given the exploratory nature of our study we adopted qualitative research methods, which are deemed more appropriate when the goal is to obtain in-depth understanding of the phenomena under investigation (Denzin and Lincoln 1994). The study was conducted in Ankara, Turkey in the summer of 2002 with 24 Turkish respondents selected through purposeful/purposive sampling (Berg 1998; Patton 1990). The informants were recruited on the basis of their gender, age and cultural capital levels. The sample consisted of equal numbers of females and males and low and high cultural capital informants who were either within the ages of 20 to 35 or 35 to 65. In order to assess the cultural capital level of the informants we used a modified version of Holt’s formulation1 (Holt 1998; also see Bourdieu 1984).

1Holt’s (1998) cultural capital level assessment method was modified in order to make it relevant to the Turkish context. Unfortunately, space limitation prevents us to give a more detailed explanation of the sample selection process.
Data collection procedure involved three steps. The first two consisted of projective techniques and the last one involved semi-structured interviews. Projective techniques, such as collage making and metaphoric portraits, are based on the premise that when people attempt to understand a relatively ambiguous stimulus, their interpretation and response reveal their personality, feelings and socio-cultural experiences (Lindzey and Thorpe 1968). Such unstructured techniques help generate data that would be harder to obtain through more structured approaches. At the first stage of data collection, the informants were instructed to prepare collages of new clothing. All the informants were given a four magazine set and briefed about the task. In the next stage, the respondents were asked to associate new and old clothes with a color, taste, sound, feeling and emotion. Metaphoric portraits helped us understand the feelings and associations that our informants had in relation to new and old clothes. In the third stage, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted. During the interviews, the informants were first asked to describe their collages and then additional probing questions were administered. The length of the interviews ranged from 40 minutes to 1 hour and all were tape-recorded. The first author was responsible for all the stages of the data collection process and translation of the interview transcripts into English.

Our analysis sought to identify conceptual categories and themes, following the discovery oriented aims and procedures of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Each interview was read many times to gain a perspective of consumers’ interpretations of and experiences with new clothes. Once themes and categories were identified and agreement among the authors was attained, we searched for similarities and differences between different groups of respondents. The patterns emerging from the data directed us toward theoretical constructs generated by previous research that may offer relevant insights into interpreting the patterns.

FINDINGS

In this section, we discuss two major groups of findings. First, we briefly analyze what constitutes “newness” in the clothing category. The data reveals that the meanings attached to new clothing derive from both tangible and intangible sources. Next, we discuss in detail the motivations behind new clothing consumption and consumers’ experiences with them.

So what is new?

The newness of clothes derives from both tangible and intangible features. Unlike the emphasis given to the tangible attributes in the case of technologically oriented new products, however, intangible sources seem to play a more important role in consumers’ assessment of newness of clothing items. Among the main tangible constituents of new clothing are the item’s physical condition, technology and design. Physical condition refers to the material form of the item. If the garment is not torn, worn out and/or stained than it is considered as new. The informants also refer clothes that offer new technical benefits as new. One of the respondents, for example, regards an Adidas’s t-shirt for bikers as a new product because it offers better protection from cold due to the cross-knitting technology used in its manufacturing. Apparels that are different in design are also perceived as new. Examples include Levi’s engineered jeans, athletic shoes, and asymmetrically shaped tops and skirts.

We identify two intangible constituents of newness: social visibility and fashion. Social visibility refers to the extent the garment is seen by others. Irrespective of the purchase timing, a garment can still be regarded as new if it is not seen by socially significant others. As soon as a garment is worn to a social gathering, its newness erodes. However, the same garment can be worn in the presence of another social group and still be viewed as new. Fashion trends also influence what is regarded as new clothing. The collages contain images of clothes and accessories that the informants think represent the fashion of 2002. As fashion trends change rapidly, items purchased recently may become “old” if the style turns out to be out-of-date quickly. Oppositely, previously purchased items that have become out of fashion can be perceived as new if the style becomes popular again.

Clothing as Celebration, Power and Play

In order to understand the dynamics of consumption of new clothes we also explored why people purchase new garments and how they experience them. Our analysis suggests that a new clothing purchase is motivated by a combination of utilitarian and symbolic reasons. As in the previous case, however, symbolic motives play a more important role than utilitarian motives. When existing garments are worn, torn and not wearable any longer, the consumer buys a new one. Yet, while such purely utilitarian purchase instances do happen, they constitute only a small set of the informants’ new clothing purchase episodes. More often, the symbolic motives trigger purchase of a new garment. The purchase and consumption of new clothing contribute to moments of celebration, prompt feelings of power and status, and render excitement through exploration and play.

Celebration

Ritual artifacts often take the shape of consumer products—food, drinks, jewelry, diplomas, candles, ceremonial garments, etc. (Douglas and Isherwood 1979; Rook 1985). When used in a ritual context, such artifacts often communicate specific symbolic messages that are integral to the meaning of the total experience. Our data suggests that clothing is one of the ritual artifacts of celebrations. Irrespective of their gender, age and cultural capital level, all informants mention that they wear or wish to wear new clothes on special occasions. For the high cultural capital group these special occasions typically involve weddings, work parties, formal events of the clubs they are members of, birthdays of themselves and their relatives or friends, and new year celebrations. Low cultural capital informants, on the other hand, cite weddings, anniversaries and religious holidays as celebration occasions. In such symbolically significant occasions, grooming becomes very important and informants want to feel special by wearing new clothes. The new cloth worn signals the degree of importance given to the occasion:

“If it is a special night for me, if I am going to go for a meal … I buy some nicer things. Instead of choosing among the existing ones, I prefer to wear something different and I buy. For example, my wedding anniversary is special to me. It has been 19 years and that day is always special. Birthdays are special and not forgotten, birthdays of the ones I love. … I think I have to be very special at very special days.”

(HCC, F, 42)

Religious holidays–bayram–constitute a major celebratory occasion for low cultural capital informants and, to a certain extent, for older high cultural capital respondents. Traditionally, it is customary to wear new clothes during religious holidays in Turkey. This custom continues among low cultural capital informants; they celebrate these days and, as much as they can afford, they prefer to wear new garments:

“I love to wear new clothes for bayram. New shoes, new handbag, all I just love it.”

(LCC, F, 56)
“Bayram is of course an important day. One sure wants to wear new clothes. We continue our traditions.”

(LCC, M, 36)

Among older high cultural capital informants this custom tends to continue. These people reflect upon their childhood memories and remember the days that religious holidays were important rituals not occasions for holidays as they increasingly turn into nowadays. They try to continue the custom of wearing new clothes and expect their children and grandchildren to do so:

“I try to get well dressed for bayram. Both new and clean. Because bayram is a very special day. We still continue to do that within Turkish traditions. I pay attention to be well dressed I also expect my children to be so.”

(HCC, M, 62)

“I used to wear but in the last years I don’t really. Isn’t it something traditional to buy and wear something new during bayram? But for the past few years I can say that I do not. Still I care for my clothing at bayram. I do not wear something that I wear everyday but rather prefer something that I wear seldom, that I have not appeared in it to people a lot, or I buy something. I mean it still exists as a tradition.”

(HCC, F, 54)

The social significance of bayram and the custom of wearing new clothes, however, are largely lost among young high cultural capital informants. These respondents find the practice of wearing new clothes during bayram absurd and ridiculous. While they distance themselves from such traditional rituals, they, nonetheless, create new celebratory occasions, such as new year’s eve, Valentine’s day and birthdays, during which they get the chance to show off their new clothes. These findings support the suggestion that like most marketplace products, rituals are subject to life cycle forces (Rook 1985) and that while some rituals decline in popularity, new rituals emerge (Erikson 1977). However, the decline of the importance of a ritual does not occur evenly through all groups of the society. Furthermore, rituals that replace bayram, such as Valentine’s Day, highlight the effects of globalization.

Power and Status:

Clothing has long been associated with power and status. According to Marx (1954), fashion and clothing reflect the class relations within the society. Marx regards fashion and clothing as the most significant means through which social distinctions and inequalities among people are constructed, experienced and legitimized. Historical accounts document that, as early as the fourteenth century, clothes were used for the status competition among the nobility and the emerging bourgeoisie (Batterberry 1977; Hollander 1980; Konig 1973). As Veblen (1899) explained succinctly, clothes helped upper classes to distinguish themselves from the lower classes. Through excessive and obsolete consumption of clothing, upper classes could symbolically establish their superiority over people of less means.

Our data suggests that not only the type of garment worn but also its newness signifies power and status. Independent of their age, gender and cultural capital our informants told us that they want to appear in new outfits in social occasions where they want to impress the group they will appear in. When attending to socially or professionally important meetings, it becomes almost embarrassing to show up with garments that were worn before. Not only people wear new clothes to impress other people, they also judge others by the clothes they wear in those occasions. It appears that the ability to wear a new outfit for each meeting evinces one’s wealth, or pecuniary strength as Veblen (1899) has put it:

“…if there is a group that I want to impress. For, example, I go to a wedding, then something new. For example, if it is a wedding in Istanbul, not at an ordinary place, of someone I don’t really care. As I have said the place and the people are important.”

(HCC, F, 29)

“For instance my daughter is taking classes, when I go there I always get specially dressed. Because I represent my daughter there I want to leave a good impression.”

(LCC, M, 38)

“And also at business related important meeting days I wore my newest tie, shirt and suit. I wear my newest outfits, at special days for business and for me.”

(HCC, M, 28)

While all the informants mention that they prefer to wear new clothes when participating in activities that are important to them, the nature of such occasions differ along cultural capital level. For informants with high cultural capital formal business meetings and cocktails appear as important occasions. For those with low cultural capital, on the other hand, home visits are important. In these gatherings, it is important to show that they are of no worse situation than any other member of their social group. Furthermore, while both female and male informants express their will to wear different outfits to important occasions, females seem to need to purchase new clothes more frequently than men do. It seems plausible that two reasons underlie this. First, women’s fashion changes more frequently than men’s fashion. Thus, it requires women who want to appear fashionable in these social gatherings to shop more frequently than men do. Second, men can create variety with minor differences in their outfit, such as complementing their existing suit with a new tie or shirt. Such accessory changes and additions give more flexibility and remove the burden of purchasing a whole line of new clothes:

“There is a club that I am a member of. I need to wear something different at special occasions of that club. I mean not wearing the same thing all the time. I mean my jacket and trousers remain the same but I make purchases in terms of variety in accessories, ties.”

(HCC, M, 62)

Many informants explain that wearing different and new outfits to every meeting they attend is almost a requirement. In order to eliminate social embarrassment by not complying with this requirement, some even borrow clothes from friends or relatives:

“This generally happens if I have not shopped recently, if I do not have something new, if my clothes are seen by everybody and if I want to wear something new. It happens when I go out at night. I wear the things I like very frequently. I avoid wearing those that I think I have worn too frequently and I go and borrow from his [roommate’s] wardrobe.”

(HCC, M, 28)

Play and Exploration:

Gabriel and Lang (1995) argue that purchasing of a new product signals the start of a new phase of exploration, the explo-
racion of the owned object. Similarly, Holt (1995) discusses consuming as play. He maintains that the consumption object provides an interaction between consumers that has no ulterior end. The consumption object is essential for playing because it provides the materials through which playful interaction is enjoined. Our data suggests that there is a playful mode associated with new clothes. The excitement of bringing a new acquisition back from the shop, trying it on with other garments, showing it to friends and family members are important dimensions of experiencing new clothes. The feelings related to new clothes in the metaphoric portraits include excitement, happiness, joy, and curiosity. When the informant purchases a new cloth, a period of exploration begins. She shows the newly purchased garments to friends and family to get their opinions. Some wear the garment right away and begin experiencing what it has to offer. Others extend the exploratory phase and deliberately wait for a while until the item is fully personalized and ready to be worn.

Especially the female consumers tend to share their experiences of new clothes with each other. Such an interaction transforms new clothing consumption into a socializing act among females where experiential practices inform each other:

“Let me tell you about Banu. She likes fashion a lot. Her new clothing is the most discussed topic between us. She goes and dies her hair into blonde, we decide on the color that goes best with her skin. It is fun actually. She has this habit. She buys lots of things and when I go to hers she shows them all. And we decide upon where to wear which items etc.”

(HCC, F, 30)

The fact that female informants enjoy both shopping for new clothes and talking to friends about them more than men supports the view that the interest in fashion and the pursuit of fashionability are perceived mainly as female characteristics (Sparke 1995; Thompson and Haytko 1997).

The purchase of new clothing also adds to the feelings of exploration and play through elimination of boredom and fatigue. Informants indicate that they give away their old clothes and buy new clothes when they get bored wearing the same item over and over again. The feelings associated with the old clothes in the metaphoric portraits include sorrow and unhappiness. In order to ease these negative feelings and evoke happiness, excitement, and joy again one has to purchase new clothes:

“When do I buy new clothes? When I got bored from the existing ones”

(HCC, M, 28)

“If it is worn out I give it to the cleaning lady or someone … I give away the old fashioned ones or the ones that I got tired of seeing.”

(HCC, F, 52)

The feelings of boredom can be triggered as a result of peer group or family pressure. Even if the person himself or herself does not experience boredom from his/her cloth socially significant others such as spouses may get tired of seeing the same outfit and encourage him or her to wear something new:

“I give away his [her husband’s] suits very easily, … I give away his shirts that I do not like on him anymore, that I got tired of seeing on him”

(HCC, F, 42)

“When I feel really lousy or when I want to make a change. Sometimes I stick to a cloth, my wife warns me about it, she says don’t wear it, wear something else. Then I change.”

(LCC, M, 39)

The frequency of purchase of new clothes, however, is related to economic capital. People feel freer to explore and purchase new garments when they can afford to do so. Informants who are economically well off present a rather blasé attitude (Simmel 1978) towards purchasing of new clothes. They believe that they work hard and earn the right to spoil themselves with new clothes. For informants with lesser financial means, an opposite case emerges. Among this group, frequent purchase of new garments is criticized and condemned. Since spending the limited budget of the family on clothing is not deemed appropriate, such excessive consumption behavior is typically disapproved. When confronted with such negative reactions, people may end up hiding the new outfits they purchase. One informant, for example, tells us that, she does not mention her new clothes to her husband; another states that she hides her new outfits from her mother-in-law with the fear that she will condemn her behavior and complain to her husband.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Scholars studying fashion point at the ephemeral nature of fashion (Faurshou 1997; Fox-Genovese 1987). Fashion in the capitalist era is characterized by novelty, rapid changes, proliferation of styles and mass consumption. Fashion changes continuously and new garments offer more allure and excitement (Wolf 1980). Furthermore, clothing and fashion operate as a major symbolic system through which meanings about identities and social relationships are constructed and communicated. The ephemeral and symbolic nature of clothing offers an interesting case to study meanings and experiences associated with new product consumption. The findings of this paper indicate that unlike technologically oriented new products, symbolic meanings, motives and practices predominantly characterize new clothing consumption.

Firat (1997) suggests that consumer’s motivation for consumption in the contemporary era stem from the symbolic meanings derived from the process rather than satisfaction of needs in the traditional sense. Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) similarly argue that experiences and feelings of consumers have become more dominant and important aspects of consumption process. The results indicate that, in the case of new clothing consumption, symbolic meanings and experiences surpass utilitarian meanings and experiences. While physical condition and technological features of garments contribute to the newness of a garment, it is more often factors such as social visibility and fashion that determine whether an outfit is perceived as new or not by the consumer. Similarly, new clothing purchase is often triggered by symbolic motives such as celebration, power and status, and exploration rather than merely utilitarian reasons.

The findings of this study point to several future research areas. First, more research is needed to better understand how symbolic new products are experienced and consumed. Research on new music, literature and films is likely offer interesting insights to the existing literature on new products. Second, follow up studies on consumption of new clothing is needed. Due to the limited sample size and its exploratory nature our study offers only an initial understanding of the phenomena. While some differences along gender, age and cultural capital emerge, future studies need to investigate such variations more in depth. It is also likely that cross-cultural investigations will offer exciting insights, as our results indicate rituals and practices specific to a particular cultures’
motivations for the consumption of new clothes. Finally, future studies need to pay attention to the production side and the media. Exploring the perceptions of producers as well as the discourses in the media that shape what is fashionable and new can provide a more comprehensive understanding of new clothing consumption.

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