The Product Choices of Young Adult Consumers – Does Gender Matter?

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ABSTRACT
Through content analysis of 266 product photos from 28 participants, this paper aims to ascertain the influence of gender on the product choices that young adult consumers make, and whether females and males employ products to communicate aspects of the self in similar or different ways.

INTRODUCTION
The use of products and/or brands to communicate aspects of the self is well recognised in the consumer behaviour literature (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Belk, 1988; McCracken, 1986). Consumers use products and/or brands to communicate a range of aspects such as class, status and lifestyle; ethnicity and culture; membership of reference groups or belongingness to communities; uniqueness; age; and cosmopolitanism or global affiliation (see, for e.g., Auty & Elliott, 1998; Crane, Hamilton, & Wilson, 2004; Elliott, 1994; Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Franke & Schreier, 2008; Fung, 2002; Hogg & Michell, 1996; Lamont & Molnar, 2004; Leigh & Gabel, 1992; Lindridge, Hogg, & Shah, 2004; O’Cass & Frost, 2002, O’Cass & McEwen, 2004; Tian, Bearden, & Hunter, 2001; Thompson & Tamyah, 1999; Wang & Wallendorf, 2006; Wattanasawan, 2007; White & Dahl, 2006, 2007). Typically, studies tend to focus on researcher driven pre-selections of product categories or brands to examine how participants use the same to communicate specific aspects of the self. However, the empirical examination of consumers’ self-selection of products, and their self-identification of self-related aspects these products communicate remains relatively unaddressed. This paper attempts to address this gap and specifically focuses on self-selected product choices of young adult consumers between the ages of 18 and 21. The aim of this paper is twofold - First, to specifically examine the nature and type of product choices young adult consumers make, and whether such choices are a function of gender. The question of the diverse product category or brand choices that consumers make, when given the opportunity to do so, in an undirected manner, has so far not been addressed in the literature, nor the role of gender in young adult consumers’ product/brand choices, when given free rein to select products/brands that communicate aspects of their selves. Second, to identify aspects of the self these choices represent or emphasize and examine whether female and male participants employ products and/brands to communicate aspects of their selves in similar or different ways. So far, to the best of the authors’ knowledge, no research has addressed these diverse self-related aspects in product selection together, within a single study. In doing so, the study endeavours to add new knowledge to the understanding of the role of gender in self-selected product or brand choices, and also contributes to the understanding of salient self-related aspects in young adult consumers’ product or brand choices when communicating the self.

THE ROLE OF GENDER IN PRODUCT AND/OR BRAND CHOICE
Empirical literature suggests that gender can have an impact on the product and/or brand choices consumers make. Gender in the marketing and consumer behaviour literature tends to signify the biological sex, gender roles, or the degree to which an individual identifies with masculine or feminine personality traits (Caldwell, Kлепpe, & Henry, 2007; Kolyesnikova, Dodd & Wilcox, 2009; Palan, 2011). Typically, studies investigate differences between males and females on processes underlying judgment (Dube & Morgan, 1996; Myers-Levy & Sternthal, 1991); information search and processing (Barber, Dodd, & Kolyesnikova, 2009); product perception and self image (Gentry, Doering, & O’Brien, 1978) or gift giving (Garbarino & Strahilevitz, 2004; Laroche, Saad, Cleveland, & Browne, 2000; Thompson, 1996). A stream of literature examines female role portrayals and stereotypes in advertising (e.g., Lysonski, 1985; Plakoyiannaki & Zotos, 2009; Wiles, Charles, & Tjernlund, 1995). A more recent study by Tuncay, Sredl, Parmentier, and Coleeman (2009) examines discourses of gender and consumption in the media, specifically in two television shows, ‘Entourage’ and ‘Sex and the City’.

Only a few empirical studies outside the realm of advertising and media studies examine gender related aspects in consumers’ product choices (e.g., Allison, Golden, Mullet, & Coogan, 1980; Dittmar, Beattie, & Friese, 1995; Fugate & Philips, 2010; Goulding & Saren, 2009; Morris & Cundiff, 1971; Patterson & Hogg, 2004; Vitz & Johnson, 1965), and the majority involve researcher selected products. A cluster of studies specifically examine gender related stereotypes in the symbolic value of products; such stereotypes are appropriated by consumers to communicate specific gender related aspects of the self. Vitz and Johnson (1965), for example, demonstrate the symbolic value of products to communicate masculinity or femininity. They found that males were likely to smoke cigarettes with masculine images; and females were likely to smoke cigarettes with feminine images. Similarly, Allison et al. (1980) observe that masculinity and femininity are separate constructs, that product images tend to be gendered, and these in turn have a bearing on consumer behaviour. Morris and Cundiff’s (1971) study shows males are inhibited in buying hair spray because of the perceived feminine appeal of the product. In other words, they are reluctant to buy the product as it does not communicate desired gender related aspects of the self. Dittmar et al. (1995) suggest that men tend to buy items that are instrumental or leisure related to express independence and activity, whereas women tend to buy products that express appearance and emotional aspects of the self. Along similar lines, Fugate and Philips’s (2010) study focuses on gender related aspects in product consumption. The researchers asked participants to indicate the masculinity or femininity of 41 pre-selected products. Items such as beer, cars, SUVs, coffee, athletic shoes, lawnmowers, and potato chips were considered masculine in nature, whereas other researcher selected products such as shampoo, bath soap, wine, digital cameras, facial tissue, food processors, frozen vegetables and hair spray were considered feminine. These studies suggest that consumers consider the gender images of their product choices to express gender related aspects of the self.

Along similar lines, Patterson and Hogg (2004), in a study with two males and females aged between 18 and 24, report that one male participant did not buy books by female authors because he perceived them as ‘girly’ books aimed at girls. Similarly, a female participant was particularly conscious of what her clothes symbolized in terms of her femininity. Gould and Stern (1989) used pre-selected items such as dresses, shoes, blouses, hats, hairstyle, jewellery in a fashion consciousness scale and note that women were more conscious of fashion related products in relation to gender than men. Goulding and Saren’s (2009) study shows how participants, in the context of the Whithby Goth festival, express various gender related aspects. Straight men, for example, express their feminine side by wearing lace, ruffles, and velvet associated with the Gothic dandy. These studies, together,
suggest that gender has an impact on product or brand choice, that is, both males and females are conscious of the gender related stereotypes they communicate via the product choices they make. However, in the majority of previous work, researchers have selected or driven the product or brand selections, which may not necessarily be ideal representations of consumers’ product choices to communicate their selves. Thus, by virtue of allowing participants the autonomy to self-select the products that communicate aspects of their selves, this study allows a more authentic and realistic view of young adult consumers’ product or brand choices to communicate the self. Therefore, the intent of this study is twofold. First - when given free rein, are young adult consumers’ product or brand choices indeed a function of gender? That is, whether there are noticeable differences in young adult consumers’ product or brand choices, based on gender. Second, do the aspects of the self that young adult consumers choose to communicate, validate or confirm those identified in the literature (as discussed in the following section)?

### Representation of aspects of the self in product choice: Proposition formulations

That consumers use products to communicate aspects of the self is well recognized in the consumer behavior literature. Based on a review of the literature on the use of products and/or brands to communicate aspects of the self, this paper formulates seven propositions (P1 to P7 - See Table 1) to examine whether and the extent to which these aspects are identified when consumers self-select products and brands to communicate aspects of the self. It is hoped that such examination of propositions would add to the current understanding of the relationship between product/brand choice and specific aspects of the self, and would also provide a commentary on the relative significance of specific self-related aspects in young adult consumers’ product or brand choices. The study formulates propositions as follows:

- **P1:** Young adult discourses are characterised by evidence of the use of products to express affiliation, association, or belongingness with reference groups or community.

  The literature provides evidence for individuals’ use of products to denote status (e.g., Lamont & Molnar, 2001; O’Cass & Frost, 2002; O’Cass & McEwen, 2004; Vigneron & Johnson, 1999). It also provides evidence that consumers use products to indicate ethnicity (e.g., Chattaraman & Lennon, 2008; Lindridge et al., 2004; Oswald, 1999; Penaloz, 1994). It is expected that respondents in this study would reflect this behaviour:

- **P2:** Young adult discourses are characterised by evidence of the use of products to indicate status.

- **P3:** Young adult discourses are characterised by evidence of the use of products to indicate ethnicity.

There is some empirical evidence for the notion that individuals use products to establish differentiation from others in terms of uniqueness (e.g., Chan et al., 2009; Franke & Schreier, 2008). Accordingly, the following proposition is set out:

- **P4:** Young adult discourses are characterised by evidence of the use of products to communicate uniqueness.

Existing studies suggest consumers’ product choices indicate cosmopolitanism-related characteristics of the self (e.g., Caldwell et al., 2006; Wattanasuwan, 2007). The following proposition follows.

- **P5:** Young adult discourses are characterised by evidence of the use of products to communicate cosmopolitanism related characteristics of the self.

Consumers’ product choices reflect and support age and life stage related characteristics (e.g., Auty & Elliott, 1998; Elliott, 1994). It is expected that the same characteristics will be reflected in young adult consumer discourses.

- **P6:** Young adult discourses are characterised by evidence of the use of products to communicate age and life stage related characteristics.

Empirical studies suggest the use of products to communicate gender related aspects of the self (e.g., Fugate & Philips, 2010; Goulding & Saren, 2009; Patterson & Hogg, 2004; Vitz and Johnson, 1965). Accordingly, this study sets out the following proposition:

- **P7:** Young adult discourses are characterised by evidence of the use of products to communicate gender related characteristics.

### METHOD

This paper comprises two parts. The first examines the types of products and/or brands young adults self-select to communicate aspects of their selves and whether and to what extent gender (male versus female) plays a role in such choices. The second, the aspects of the self these choices represent relative to aspects identified in the literature, and whether both female and male participants employ products and/or brands to communicate aspects of their selves in similar or different ways. Such understanding is relevant to scholars and practitioners with a specific interest in young adult consumers, their choices and behaviors, especially so to develop appropriate gender segmentation, targeting and promotional strategies.

### SAMPLE

Twenty-eight young adults (18-21 years of age) participated in the study, 13 male and 15 female. All participants were university students at Auckland, New Zealand. Participants were instructed to take photographs of products and/or brands they owned and which said something about them to their peers.

### PROCEDURE

The first part of the study involves identification of products selected by participants. Identification of the self-selected products and brands was undertaken by examining the contents of the photographs supplied. This was done in conjunction with the participants as an aspect of the interviews was the clarification of any ambiguity associated with the items selected for inclusion. Once each interview was transcribed, the researcher identified and listed all product categories (and brands) through two sample transcripts, and confirmed the findings with two independent judges who undertook the same task for the two sample transcripts. There was complete agreement on identified product categories (and brands), following which the researcher repeated the process for all 28 transcripts. This paper analyses 266 photographs taken by 28 participants and categorized into seven broad product groupings (see Table 2).
The second part of the study involved the use of content analysis techniques. In qualitative research, the term content analysis is used in two ways; as an umbrella term for both quantitative and qualitative approaches to text (words and or pictures) analysis, or to only describe the process of quantifying data (Kassarjian, 1977; Krippendorff, 2004; Neuendorf, 2002; Smith, 1992). Where the term content analysis is used to denote qualitative content only, terms such as words, phrases, thematic or discourse analysis are used to denote the qualitative condition. In the case of quantified output, the researcher systematically assigns measurable codes to specific elements (e.g. words, phrases, objects) in the text; where applicable, descriptive statistics can be used to identify patterns in the data (Kassarjian, 1977; Krippendorff, 2004; Neuendorf, 2002; Smith, 1992). In this study, the data is subjected to both quantitative and qualitative content analysis. Inferences about the set of propositions are based on a quantitative content analysis of the themes and word frequencies linked to each photograph within each of the 28 transcribed interviews. This approach allows an indication of the scope and substance of the associations and provides indicative evidence.

The first step in the quantification process is the creation of key terms and operationalisations pertaining to specific propositions as described in Table 1. The essence of each proposition, key term and operationalisation was established by agreement and discussion between three judges.

As noted in Table 1, each proposition related to key terms, for example, P1 to affiliation, P2 to status, P3 to ethnicity, and so on. While specific procedures for analysing quantitative data are well-established and accepted, methods for analysis of qualitative data are diverse and often subject to variability (Holsti, 1969, Kassarjian, 1977; Krippendorff, 2004; Neuendorf, 2002; Smith, 1992). Analyses of qualitative data can also be ad-hoc and emergent, however, the use of measurement and formal tables can assist in pattern-identification. Analysis tables, summarizing and synthesizing information from diverse sources in a standardized format can also serve as reporting tools (Krippendorff, 2004; Neuendorf, 2002). Quantification in this study is based on unit counts and provides a basis for inference.

A unit was defined as “the specific segment of content that is characterised by placing it into a given category” (Holsti, 1969, p. 116). In this study, Holst’s use of the word category is also applicable to propositions. Categorisations of content could comprise of a single sentence or multiple sentences referring to a specific proposition in relation to one photograph. If a participant spoke of one or more propositions in relation to a photograph, then a count was recorded for all identified propositions. In other words, each of the

### Table 1: Propositions and operationalisation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Propositions</th>
<th>Key term</th>
<th>Operational definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1: Young adult discourses are characterised by evidence of the use of products to express affiliation, association, or belongingness with reference groups or community (e.g., Berger and Heath 2007, 2008; Escalas and Bettman 2005; Hogg and Michell 1996; White and Dahl 2006, 2007).</td>
<td>Affiliation</td>
<td>Reference to an actual or imaginary group conceived of having significant direct or inverted relevance upon an individual’s evaluations, aspirations, or behaviour (Park &amp; Lessig, 1977).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2: Young adult discourses are characterised by evidence of the use of products to indicate status (e.g., Lamont and Molnar 2001; O’Cass and Frost 2002; O’Cass and McEwen 2004; Vigneron and Johnson 1999)</td>
<td>Status</td>
<td>Reference to prestige, honour or deference accorded to an individual by others (Burn, 2004); reference to class, wealth or the lack of it (Coleman, 1983; Vigneron &amp; Johnson, 1999).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3: Young adult discourses are characterised by evidence of the use of products to indicate ethnicity (e.g., Chattaraman and Lennon 2008; Lindridge et al. 2004; Oswald 1999; Penaloza 1994).</td>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>Reference to a sense of common ancestry based on shared individual characteristics and/or shared socio-cultural experiences (Driedger, 1978).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4: Young adult discourses are characterised by evidence of the use of products to communicate uniqueness (e.g., Chan et al. 2009; Franke and Schreier 2008).</td>
<td>Uniqueness</td>
<td>Seeking to express difference through the purchase, use or display of original, novel or unique consumer goods; avoidance of similarity (Tian et al., 2001); references to product or brand choices in terms of not being particularly socially acceptable (Simonson &amp; Nowlis, 2000; Snyder &amp; Fromkin, 1977).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5: Young adult discourses are characterised by evidence of the use of products to communicate cosmopolitanism related characteristics of the self (e.g., Caldwell et al. 2006; Wattanasuwon 2007)</td>
<td>Cosmopolitanism</td>
<td>Reference to notions of world citizenship (Cannon &amp; Yaprak, 2002).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P6: Young adult discourses are characterised by evidence of the use of products to communicate age and life stage related characteristics (e.g., Auty and Elliott 1998; Elliott 1994)</td>
<td>Age &amp; life stage</td>
<td>Reference to age, e.g., in terms of young, old or middle aged; life stage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P7: Young adult discourses are characterised by evidence of the use of products to communicate gender related characteristics (e.g., Fugate and Philips 2010; Goulding and Saren 2009; Patterson and Hogg 2004; Vitz and Johnson 1965)</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Reference to gender - male or female; masculine or feminine.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
seven propositions could be counted only once for a given photograph, fulfilling the criteria of “existence (existent) or nonexistence (nonexistent)” (Kassarjian, 1977, p. 11), applicability or non-applicability of propositions. Further, if a participant referred collectively to a set of photographs in terms of one or more key terms, then the same proposition/s would apply to each photograph. For example, in this study, Participant 28 refers to two dresses, a Latin shirt, a pair of ballroom Latin shoes, and a sports jacket in terms of uniqueness (P4) and age and life stage (P6) - so both propositions (P4 and P6) were applied to each of the five photographs he referred to - a total of five counts for P4 and five counts for P6. All three judges (the researcher, J1 and J2) were requested to highlight and extract proposition related statement(s) in relation to each photograph for both sample transcripts (Participant 1 and Participant 28). They were to record if one or more propositions (coded as P1 to P7) were applicable to a photograph. They were to enter all data in columns - the first, noting the product or brand in photograph (or photographs if spoken of as a cluster); the second, noting the applicable proposition; the third, comprising of proposition related statements.

Following this task, comparisons were made on the bases of evidence identified in support of each proposition for each photograph. Comparisons amongst the three judges were made on the applicability or non-applicability of each of the seven propositions to each photograph. There was more than 90% agreement amongst the three judges. Where disagreements occurred, differences were resolved through discussion. A total count of 34 and 25 propositions applied, respectively, to sample transcript 1 and sample transcript 2. On the basis of the high figure of inter-coder reliability, the researcher proceeded to analyze the remaining 26 transcripts.

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

This paper analyses 266 photographs taken by 28 participants (see Table 2). The photographs were categorised into seven broad product groupings:

- **Clothing and accessories** (clothing, bags & wallets, hats & belts, shoes, jewellery, sunglasses and reading glasses, watches);
- **Cosmetics**: (make up, perfumes and deodorants, and personal cleaning and grooming products);
- **Electronics**: (cell phones, computers, iPods, domestic appliances, LCD TVs, hair straighteners, cameras, play station/X-box, music systems, CDs/DVDs, miscellaneous electronic/electrical (GPS, CD rewritable);
- **Food and Drinks** (non-alcoholic);
- **Drinks** (alcoholic);
- **Cars**;
- **Miscellaneous** (barbeque table, soft toy, painting, sporting equipment (chees & cards, gym equipment, scuba tank, diving watch, fishing rod, map of huts in Fiordland, hockey stick bag, cricket bat and soccer ball), trombone, books, magazines, books, stationery, wall planner, flyer for dance party (Get Shaky), flyer (Young Labour Party), flyer for entertainment show (Rhythm & Vines), movie posters, photograph wall, photograph frame, flat (door), computer tablet (to draw on), bus card, car keys, Kleenex tissues, items of cultural significance, Flag of NZ)

Table 2 shows the total number of photographs per product category. Both female and male participants most commonly link aspects of their self to clothing/accessories (36% of photographs) and electronics (25% of photographs).

The dominance of the product categories of clothing and accessories and electronics may be explained in a number of reasons. It could be young adult consumers find these product categories most relevant to their selves and that these product categories most readily assist them to communicate self-related characteristics. Interestingly, in this study young adult male consumers (43% of all male photos) use clothing and accessories to express themselves approximately 1.4 times more than young adult female consumers (30% of all female photos). It could be that young adult male consumers tend to place greater emphasis on clothing and accessory items such as bags and wallets, hats and belts, and watches as markers of the self compared to young adult female consumers.

The interest in clothing and accessories and electronics could also reflect a concern with aspects relating to self-image and status. As Wilksa (2003) notes, information and communication technologies are a very important part of the everyday life of young people. Svoen’s (2007) study suggests that young adults use technologies to construct self-directed identities.

Several reasons may explain the interest in the product categories of magazines and books and sporting equipment within the miscellaneous product category. It could be that such products help manage and communicate aspects of the self to others, for example, by communicating belongingness to a certain social set, supporting or contesting stereotypes of masculinity or femininity, and providing information on self-related aspects, such as the relative roles and attitudes of men and women (Kim & Ward, 2004; Moore, Earless, & Parsons, 1992; Shannon, 2004). Photographs of food and drinks suggest that these categories are of significance to young adult consumers as communicators of the self. However, the difference in percentage of photographs taken by young female (12% of all female photos) and male (7% of all male photos) adult consumers for the food and drinks category suggests that females emphasise food and drinks, as communicators of the self, 1.7 times more than males.

There is nearly double the percentage (1.86) of photographs taken by female participants (13% of all female photos) than by male participants (7% of all male photos) in the cosmetics product category. The same holds true for the miscellaneous product category which suggests that miscellaneous items are of much greater interest (1.67) to females (15% of all female photos) than males (9% of all male photos). It could be that cosmetics and miscellaneous products such as the barbecue table, soft toys, planners and flyers, photographs and items of cultural significance are of greater value as communicators of the self for young adult female consumers than they are for young adult male consumers. The sample for this study does not provide evidence of choices involving high investments such as real estate, luxury vehicles or top of the line luxury goods. This could be due to the life stage and financial constraints of the participant sample.

The next part of the study examines the use young adult consumers put the products and/or brands to, and whether both female and male participants employ products and/or brands to communicate aspects of their selves in similar ways. Table 3 presents the number of instances in support of the study propositions, with data presented separately for males and females by product category.

As seen in Table 3, group affiliation (P1), status (P2) and age (P6) are the dominant aspects of self that participants seek to communicate. It can be concluded that

**Proposition 1** - Young adult discourses are characterised by evidence of the use of products to express affiliation, association, or belongingness with reference groups or community, and

**Proposition 2** - Young adult discourses are characterised by evidence of the use of products to indicate status can be accepted.

Similarly, though not as substantial, there is some evidence across product categories that participants are interested in communicating that they are young. So
Proposition 6 - Young adult discourses are characterised by evidence of the use of products to communicate age related characteristics, can also be accepted.

Though some participants seek to communicate ethnicity (Proposition 3), uniqueness (Proposition 4) or gender (Proposition 7), the number of instances is fewer. Yet, even though weaker, each of the three propositions -

Table 2: Number of Photographs per Category per Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product Category</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>% Difference</th>
<th>No. Photographs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clothing &amp; Accessories: clothing, bags &amp; wallets, hats &amp; belts, shoes, jewellery, sunglasses and reading glasses, watches</td>
<td>43(30%)</td>
<td>53(43%)</td>
<td>43/30=1.43</td>
<td>96 = 36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electronics: cell phones, computers, iPods, domestic appliances, LCD TVs, hair straighteners, cameras, play station/X-box, music systems, CDs/DVDs, miscellaneous electronic/electrical, GPS, CD rewritable</td>
<td>36(25%)</td>
<td>31(25%)</td>
<td>25/25=1</td>
<td>67 = 25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous: barbeque table, soft toy, painting, sporting equipment (chess &amp; cards, gym equipment, scuba tank, diving watch, fishing rod, map of huts in Fiordland, hockey stick bag, cricket bat and soccer ball), trombone, books, magazines, books, stationery, wall planner, flyer for dance party (Get Shaky), flyer (Young Labour Party), flyer for entertainment show (Rhythm &amp; Vines), movie posters, photograph wall, photograph frame, flat (door), computer tablet (to draw on), bus card, car keys, Kleenex tissues, items of cultural significance, Flag of NZ.</td>
<td>22(15%)</td>
<td>11(9%)</td>
<td>15/9=1.67</td>
<td>33 = 12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cosmetics: make up, perfumes and deodorants, and personal cleaning and grooming products</td>
<td>18(13%)</td>
<td>9(7%)</td>
<td>13/7=1.86</td>
<td>27 = 10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food/Drink</td>
<td>17(12%)</td>
<td>9(7%)</td>
<td>12/7=1.71</td>
<td>26 = 9.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cars</td>
<td>5(3%)</td>
<td>5(4%)</td>
<td>4/3=1.33</td>
<td>10 = 4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol</td>
<td>3(2%)</td>
<td>4(3%)</td>
<td>3/2=1.5</td>
<td>7= 2.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>144 (100%)</td>
<td>122 (100%)</td>
<td>266 (100%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Evidence in Support of Propositions from each Product Category - Females (F) and Males (M)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product category</th>
<th>P1 Affiliation</th>
<th>P2 Status</th>
<th>P3 Ethnicity</th>
<th>P4 Uniqueness</th>
<th>P5 Cosmopolitanism</th>
<th>P6 Age</th>
<th>P7 Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clothing / accessories</td>
<td>17 F</td>
<td>20 M</td>
<td>29 F</td>
<td>29 M</td>
<td>4 F</td>
<td>6 M</td>
<td>16 F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cosmetics</td>
<td>9 F</td>
<td>6 M</td>
<td>10 F</td>
<td>2 M</td>
<td>0 F</td>
<td>0 M</td>
<td>2 F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electronics</td>
<td>21 F</td>
<td>15 M</td>
<td>12 F</td>
<td>11 M</td>
<td>0 F</td>
<td>0 M</td>
<td>2 F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food / non alcohol drinks</td>
<td>10 F</td>
<td>6 M</td>
<td>3 F</td>
<td>2 M</td>
<td>2 F</td>
<td>0 M</td>
<td>0 F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcoholic drinks</td>
<td>2 F</td>
<td>2 M</td>
<td>1 F</td>
<td>4 M</td>
<td>0 F</td>
<td>0 M</td>
<td>0 F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cars</td>
<td>2 F</td>
<td>0 M</td>
<td>5 F</td>
<td>5 M</td>
<td>0 F</td>
<td>1 M</td>
<td>0 F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous</td>
<td>14 F</td>
<td>8 M</td>
<td>3 F</td>
<td>0 M</td>
<td>2 F</td>
<td>2 M</td>
<td>2 F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>75 F</td>
<td>57 M</td>
<td>63 F</td>
<td>53 M</td>
<td>8 F</td>
<td>9 M</td>
<td>22 F</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Proposition 3: Young adult discourses are characterised by evidence of the use of products to indicate ethnicity.

Proposition 4: Young adult discourses are characterised by evidence of the use of products to communicate uniqueness.

Proposition 7: Young adult discourses are characterised by evidence of the use of products to communicate gender related characteristics is accepted.

There is no evidence for Proposition Five, that
Young adult discourses are characterised by evidence of the use of products to communicate cosmopolitanism related characteristics of the self.

This could be due to a number of reasons - for example, physical location, specific socio-cultural context, or insufficient global experience. The bulk of the cosmopolitan literature includes a sample population of adults (e.g., Caldwell et al., 2006; Thompson & Tambyah, 1999), although a few studies that involve young adults specifically examine the link between geographical location and cosmopolitanism (e.g., Kjeldgaard, 2003; Wattanasuwan, 2007).

Table 3 shows that (with the exception of cosmopolitanism) both male and female participants use products and brands to express affiliation, association, or belongingness with reference groups or community, status, age, ethnicity, uniqueness and gender.

The final part of this study compares female and male participants’ use of products to communicate specific aspects of their selves. This paper restricts discussion to only those instances where one gender was seen to emphasise some aspect of the self at double (or more) the frequency of the other gender. We also refrain from drawing conclusions where incidences were coded less than two times for both females and males.

As Table 3 displays, for Affiliation (P1) there are no substantial overall differences between genders, nor are there any noteworthy product level differences. For Status (P2), while there are no overall differences, females are three times more likely to use cosmetics and miscellaneous items to denote status, whereas males (in this study) prefer to use alcoholic drinks to express status. There are no marked gender differences at the overall or product level for Ethnicity (P3). Uniqueness (P4) seems to provide the most contrast. Here, females are three times more likely to use products to communicate uniqueness, with most of this difference stemming from the use of clothing and accessories. Females are also more likely to use cosmetics and miscellaneous items to communicate aspects of Age (P6). Last, although much literature espouses the influence of gender on product choice, we find no marked differences between male and female young adult consumers’ use of products to convey Gender (P7).

The findings suggest that aspects of the selves that young female and male consumers intend to communicate seem to be associated with the nature of the products selected. The selection of common product categories by both female and male consumers and the emphasis on specific aspects could also be attributed to the influence of social media. Over the past decade or so, social media has become increasingly popular in influencing consumers, especially from the standpoint of communicating the self (Kietzmann et al., 2012; Pan & Thomas, 2012; Utz, 2010). As consumers construct profiles, view and traverse connections in online environments, they share information about their interests and choices. Such sharing influences product selections as a basis for impression formation and identity construction. This paper suggests that social media may well stimulate the construction of the self in off-line environments too, and that it may be worthwhile to explore this aspect further in future research.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, this paper set out to examine the role of gender in the nature and types of product choices young adult consumers make, and whether females and males employ products and/or brands to communicate aspects of the self in similar or different ways. The paper extends current knowledge by focusing attention on specific product categories relevant to female and male young adult consumers, and aspects most salient in the use of products to communicate the self. Cosmetics, followed by food/drink, and then the miscellaneous category accounted for the main differences in product use based on gender. Females appear to use a variety of products to express themselves, more so than males. However, more interesting, is the diversity in terms of how female and male participants use products to communicate aspects of their selves. Females are more conscious of communicating age, uniqueness and status compared to males. In view of the sample size for this study, while it may be inappropriate to generalise, some plausible implications for practitioners lie in focusing on aforementioned aspects of self representation when promoting specific products to women. For example, when directing advertising and promotional material to women, emphasizing more than chronology, age as a state of mind and heart, uniqueness as being special in some ways, status and affiliation in terms of roles or ways of thinking and perceiving the world.

REFERENCES


Utz, Sonja (2010), “Show me your friends and I will tell you what type of person you are: How one’s profile, number of friends, and type of friends influence impression formation on social networking sites”, Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 15 (2), 314-315.


