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A conceptual model of the fashion process – part 2

An empirical investigation of the micro-subjective level

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Keywords Fashion, Theory, Society, Interviews, Questionnaires

Abstract This paper presents two separate empirical investigations of a new conceptual model of fashion – the “fashion transformation process model” presented in part 1 (this issue). One important strand of that model is the role played by individual wearers in the transformation of fashion. This level is defined as the micro-subjective level. There are two important forces that operate at this level – known as the “differentiating” and “socialising” forces. In the first study, 300 people were given questionnaires that considered a whole variety of fashion aspects, and also included a tool to distinguish between four types of consumers: fashion innovators, early fashion adopters, fashion followers and laggards. The results clearly confirmed these classifications and, importantly, confirmed the dominance of the differentiating force on fashion choices for “innovators”, and the socialising force for “followers” and “laggards”. The second study, involving interviewing 40 females, was concerned to investigate how new fashions might be adopted. The innovators were, again, shown to be motivated by quite different forces to fashion followers, in the choices they made. The study confirms an important aspect of the new conceptual model – the micro-subjective level forces. The dynamic role played by the individual also shows why fashion has to be continuously innovative and what forces operate to ensure primary markets respond to the majority of wearers.

Introduction

This is the second and empirical part of “A conceptual model of the fashion process – part 1: the fashion transformation process model” (Cholachatpinyo *et al.*, 2002). In the first part of the paper, the fashion process was divided into four levels: macro-subjective, macro-objective, micro-objective and micro-subjective, inspired by Hamilton (1997) and Ritzer (1991). This paper tests some predictions at the micro-subjective level. Kaiser *et al.* (1997) suggest that it is this level that “accommodates the interpretations of the resulting ‘looks’, including negotiations of meaning to make sense of symbolic ambiguity”. In other words, Hamilton (1997) defines this level as “negotiation with self”.

In our conceptual model we suggested that in the process of negotiation with self, there are two basic forces involved. These two psychological processes we labelled as the “differentiating force” and the “socialising force” (Cholachatpinyo *et al.*, 2002). Those two forces are seen as central in an individual’s self-negotiation between the need for exhibiting and the need to conform to the social norm. In the first part of the paper, we proposed that fashion innovators

are influenced much more by the differentiating force than the socialising force. This is why they are the first to adopt a new fashion. On the other hand, fashion followers, when compared to fashion innovators, behave in the opposite way in the fashion adoption process. Consequently, the two psychological forces also affect the fashion diffusion process in terms of the adopting hierarchy. The purpose of this paper is to test these predictions of the fashion transformation process model empirically. In addition, the paper attempts to provide the fashion retailers and suppliers with other relevant aspects with which to understand the process of fashion adoption.

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In the midst of rampant competition in fashion retailing, the success of each brand, and its adoption by purchasers, depends to a considerable extent on efficient management strategies. These strategies are not only to provide the right products to the right consumers at the right time but also to create the brand and to advertise it to the right target. There are many complicated dimensions to such fashion retailing. Different types of fashion consumers have to be matched with styles of commodities. Generally, from the marketer's point of view, marketing activities can be divided into stages correlated to the behaviours of consumers in terms of fashion adoption as shown in Figure 1(a) and (b)

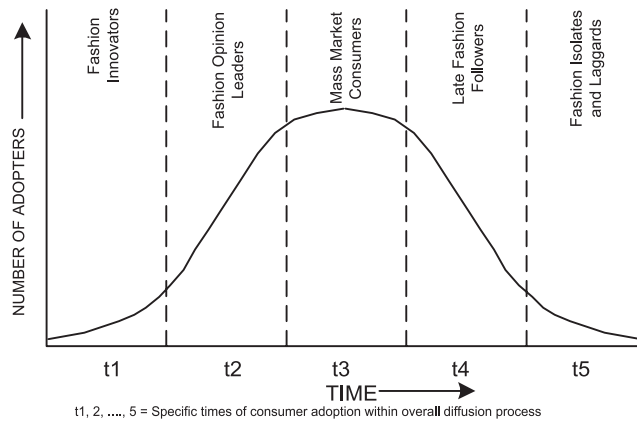
Figure 1(a) shows a general marketing life-cycle extended from its commercial design and introduction, through inventory accumulation and promotion, mass merchandising, and clearance and obsolescence (Sproles and Burns, 1994). The figure depicts the fashion life-cycle and how the marketer matches fashion adopters with marketing activities.

Fashion consumers have been classified into groups correlated to their behaviours by the acceptance of a specific style over a period of time. That classification can be graphically represented by the bell curve in Figure 1(a) (Rogers, 1983). Rogers divides fashion adopters into five categories: innovators, early fashion adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards. The curve indicates some variables, i.e. length of diffusion time, speed rate, and acceptance level of that fashion style.

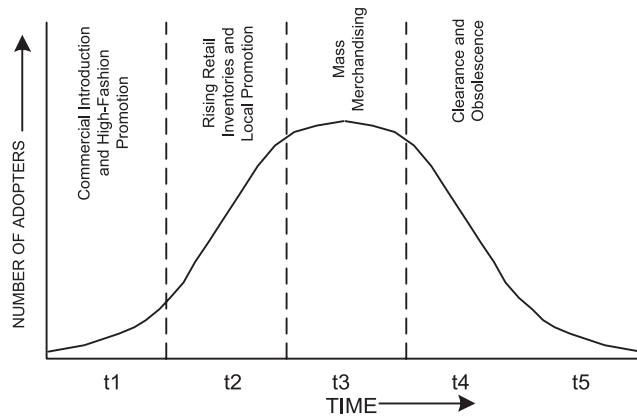
In general, a fashion diffuses from fashion innovators and opinion leaders to early fashion adopters. The diffusion, then, moves into the peak stage where a large number of consumers begin to adopt fashion. Eventually, the number of fashion adopters falls down when the fashion is already established. The adopters at this stage could be called fashion followers. Then, the diffusion process moves to the decline stage where the late adopters called "laggards" begin to adopt the fashion.

Not only one fashion emerges at a time. The collective selection theory of Blumer (1969) clearly stated that there are a variety of simultaneous fashion trends emerging and completing at the same time. Sproles and Burns (1994) also point out in the same way that:

If one examines any specific time, one might observe some trends beginning their diffusion, others peaking, and some declining. Each of these trends may have different levels, rates, and lengths of acceptance . . .



(a) Categories of Consumer Adopters



(b) Stages of Fashion Marketing

Source: After Sproles and Burns (1994)

Figure 1.
Consumer adopters
oppositional to stages of
fashion marketing

These have important implications for the conceptual modelling of the fashion process. First, we would expect to find many fashions competing for acceptance simultaneously. Second, we would expect each fashion to diffuse at different rates and different levels. Finally, we would expect heterogeneous styles rather than homogeneous styles. Fashion is complex and this will be revealed through a diversity of consumer practices and designer outputs.

Whilst we would expect there to be a popular fashion at any one time, we would not predict dominance. The more fashions there are the more trends. These different consumer groups have to be separated in order to fix the adopter group in a time scale in the diffusion process of a particular fashion style. In fact, each brand has to find only its targeted consumers. There have been many cases when fashion retailers have produced products and designs

that are a financial disaster – when the brands were no longer fitted with the targeted group. This relationship between adopters’ groups, marketing activities, and “fashionability level” of commodities needs to be investigated. The link between fashion adopters’ groups and market levels is investigated in two ways. We attempt to provide evidences relating to two questions of relevance to our conceptual model:

- (1) Why do those consumers adopt fashion in different time scales?
- (2) Do adopters follow the same pattern?

Aim of investigation

The investigation aims to provide some important information relating to adopter classification, psychologically purchasing impulses, and the diverse processes of purchasing behaviour. It is hoped the results may suggest guidelines for the fashion retailers and marketers in the planning of advertising, managing of brand, and providing the right commodities to targeted consumers. One aim of the study is to indicate fashion diffusion direction. There are two primary hypotheses detailed below:

H1. The first hypothesis relates to the “differentiating force” and “socialising force” in different types of purchasers.

H2. The second looks in more detail at the motivations of fashion innovators.

The empirical work uses questionnaire and interview techniques in a sample of 340 individuals.

H1 and theoretical framework

Fashion is explained by Flugel (1930) as a form of exhibitionism. It conceals the body and simultaneously exaggerates its differences. It creates a continual force between the competitive desires to display oneself and to retain a sense of modesty. Similarly, Simmel (1971) distinguishes between two social tendencies in the development of fashion: the need for union and the need for isolation. In other words, these impulses are always negotiated through fashion and clothing (Barnard, 1996).

Sproles and Burns (1994) point out that apart from intrinsic reasons for adopting fashions (protection, modesty and adornment), some other social-psychological needs are related to adoption. The needs are to be up to date, to adjust to a changing society, to escape boredom, for symbolic differentiation, and for social affiliation. However, those needs can be categorised into two groups: the need to conform to society and the need to be different. Sproles and Burns also point out three roles that fashion adoption plays for the changing society: it introduces order to social change, allows individuals the freedom to move in new directions, and to become accustomed to and prepare for the future. In this paper, the two forces are labelled the “socialising force” and the “differentiating force”. It can initially be anticipated that the underlying impulse that drives individuals to adopt fashion is the balance between those

two psychological forces. This hypothesis is based on the assumption that fashion innovators and followers have different proportions of the two psychological forces operating in their fashion choices. Innovators are assumed to carry more differentiating force than fashion followers do.

Research design

Methodology of investigation. The survey research method was used to collect data. A total of 300 questionnaires were distributed to female university students in London. The samples were divided into three groups relating to their main subject areas:

- (1) pure science and applied science;
- (2) business and management and social science; and
- (3) art and design.

The distribution into three major areas was based on two ideas. First, those samples in three major areas were assumed to represent a general sample of the student population. Second, it was to assist in getting a fair range of different groups of fashion wearers and, therefore, a spread of underlying motives.

Instrument. A questionnaire was developed from literature reviews aimed at:

- classifying fashion adopters into four main groups: fashion innovator, early fashion adopter, fashion follower, and laggard;
- measuring their “differentiating force” and “socialising force”.

The questionnaire consisted of four parts. The first and second parts were set to identify the samples in terms of adopter classification. In the first part, questions were asked relating to their perceptions of their:

- level of creativity and experience in creativity for self appearance;
- level of consumption of fashionable commodities;
- perception of themselves as a fashion leader;
- perception of their image of fashion leader as viewed by others.

The second part was a behavioural tool, to identify adopter classification. Based on the actual consumption, the questionnaire provided eight pictures of heterogeneous popular fashion styles. The person was asked to choose one of those styles and to indicate the time scale of first wearing it. The fashion styles used were based on fashions that became available at different time scales in terms of commercial launches. This was to match the whole range of marketing activities and adopters. There was also a free choice provided, in case the fashion styles depicted in the questionnaire were not used by the respondent.

The third part set eight questions to measure the level of socialising and differentiating forces through self-expression by providing various situations, i.e. fashion attitude, confidence, expression, and choices in fashion and in

colours. Those questions provided Likert-scale choices on a five-point scale. The final part of the questionnaire was for personal information.

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Results and analysis

Adopter classification. As mentioned previously, there were two parts of the questionnaire set to classify adopter's groups by conceptual and behavioural tools. In the first part, the samples were divided into four adopter groups based upon a scoring system as shown in Figure 2. Each answer in the first part of the questionnaire was given a score, for instance, 1, 3, 5, and 7 points for the least to the most level of creativity, respectively. In the second classification tool, the samples were classified by actual behaviour in wearing a fashion item related to the time scales. The results from both methods were mutually considered in order to get more precise classification of adopter groups.

The overall response rate was 57 per cent of the returned questionnaires. Of the respondents, 5.9 per cent were innovators, 35.3 per cent early fashion adopters, 50 per cent fashion followers and 8.8 per cent laggards.

Figure 3 shows all the results of *H1*. The collected data clearly showed a good range of respondents in terms of fashion and confirmed the concepts of the differentiating and socialising forces. For example, Figure 3.6 shows the results for the question relating to confidence when wearing a very cutting edge fashion item: there is a very strong link between fashion category and confidence, with laggards showing low confidence and innovators high confidence.

The same trend was revealed with all relevant questions. Fashion innovators from the survey are extremely confident in their standpoints, styles, and preferences. They are unlikely to be influenced by friends, social circle, commercial strategies and media. They feel uncomfortable in wearing similar style and colour with many others. As a result, the differential feeling drives them to search for a new fashion to replace the firmly established one.

On the other hand, fashion followers are likely to be radically influenced by others, marketing strategies and media. They are less confident and also likely to adopt a new fashion when that fashion has been held for a while or when many others are wearing it. They feel more confident when wearing similar style as others. They are unlikely to create their looks for themselves.

It can be concluded, therefore, that fashion innovators are more influenced by the differentiating force than the socialising force. On the other hand, fashion followers show the opposite pattern: they are most influenced in their fashion choices by the socialising force.

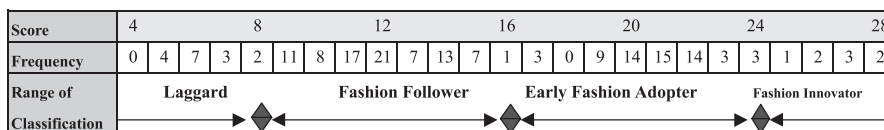


Figure 2.
Scoring system



Figure 3.
Results of H1

H2 and theoretical framework

According to Robertson (1971), the decision-making process model is divided into three main stages starting from an awareness of new fashion, then developing to the level of interest either by evaluation, comprehension or trial, and finally goes on to the adoption stage. In other words, the activities in the process are thinking, feeling and doing, respectively.

The adoption process model of Robertson (1971) has general application to all fashion adopters. However, the decision-making process of fashion innovators and that of followers may be very different. It may not only be different just in the timing of adoption process (relating to the time scale in the fashion life-cycle), but also in manner in terms of innovative fashion adoption. Whether or not a person wears a fashion may depend on the timing of the fashion emerging, social

forces, and fashion availability. The psychological situations of each fashion adopter may also differ from each other at the very beginning of the process. Therefore it is important to investigate the patterns of those different adopters' groups in the adoption process. This may help to understand what the fashion innovators' needs are related to fashion commodities.

Research design and methodology

These research data were collected by interviewing 40 females in London. In order to distinguish the results between two different groups of adopters, the research was focused on the comparison between two extreme types of consumers. They were fashion innovators, who adopted fashion when nobody else adopts it, and fashion followers, who adopted fashion when it was already firmly established. Therefore, the survey was set to interview individuals in those two groups.

The first part of the interview was set to confirm their classification based on the same principles employed in *H1*. At the beginning of the interview, interviewees could be classified by that tool before proceeding. The total sample of 40 contained 20 of each group. Sample groups from different social settings were selected, for example, from amongst the visitors to fashion week, from Art colleges and from fashionable areas, such as Soho, while the fashion followers were found at high street shopping areas.

The second part of the interview involved the decision-making process. Three major activities in the decision-making process were investigated: thinking, feeling and doing. The questions contained a variety of situations involving the adoption process. For instance, the interviewees were asked to indicate their first activity in adopting the present fashion, and to give their order of activities in the adoption process.

Results and analysis of H2

The results showed very clearly that the three groups did differ in terms of their fashion classifications. Figure 4 shows the results when interviewees were asked to identify the order of steps of activities they use in adopting a new fashion. For innovators, the dominant results of their first, second and last steps of activities in adopting a new fashion are:

- A – 73.7 per cent (I feel differently about myself);
- B – 63.2 per cent (I experiment with the way I look); and
- C – 89.4 per cent (I fulfil the need to be fashionable), respectively.

The pattern was very different for the fashion followers who showed two distinct patterns. The first pattern starts from C – 62 per cent, then B – 42.8 per cent, and A – 38.1 per cent. The other pattern starts from C – 62 per cent, then A – 38.1 per cent, and B – 42.8 per cent. The results from the rest of the questions were consistent with these findings.

The results show that the patterns in the decision-making process in changing to a new fashion of two major adopter groups are different, as shown

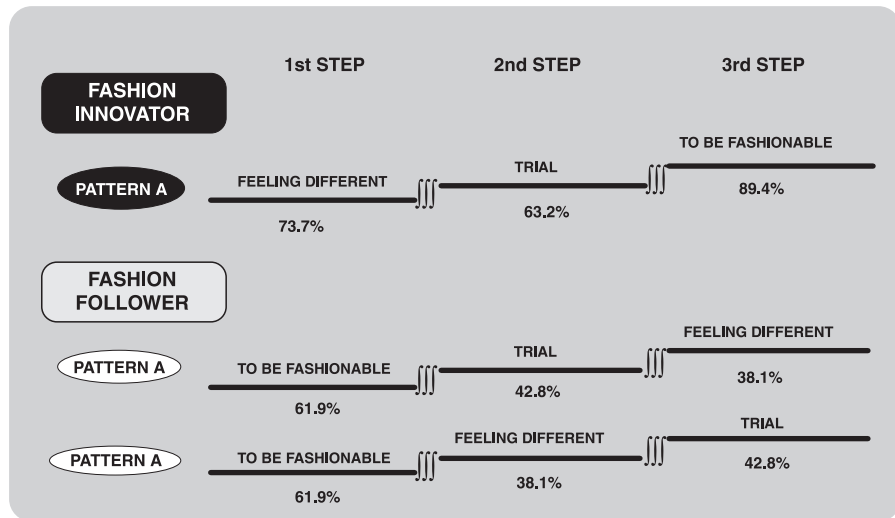


Figure 4.
Patterns of adoption
process

in Figure 4. Fashion innovators do not concern themselves with what is in fashion. When the present fashion is saturated and firmly established, fashion innovators are driven by their “feeling” or differentiating force to search for a new form of fashion. They search for a new symbolic difference or adopt a new fashion.

There are various possible situations in which innovators change styles. In the cases where a new fashion look is unavailable, fashion innovators tend to create new looks for themselves. The survey results also support this idea as most innovators generally create their own looks, either by cutting and sewing, decorating, re-styling old dresses, or mixing and matching dresses. Alternatively, a newly available fashion, perhaps one which has been recently launched can make innovators feel sufficiently different to adopt that fashion look.

On the other hand, the fashion followers’ pattern of decision-making process is clearly different. Both the decision-making patterns we observed start from the same point – the need to be up to date. It can be said that style-awareness is the major step, which followers always concern themselves with. Presumably, they feel safe when they wear the fashionable style.

Summary

Both hypotheses are supported by the results obtained empirically. First, the pattern of adopting a new fashion is different for innovators compared to followers. This explains “how” different groups of adopters behave differently when a new fashion emerges. *H1* confirms that psychological factors play a part in why fashion followers show less self-expression than fashion innovators. The proportion of the number in each fashion group is consistent with the general fashion-retailing marketplace. For instance, 50 per cent of our

samples were classified as followers, which is consistent with the fact that about half of all the brands in the marketplace are targeted at those followers.

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Conclusion

Based on the foregoing discussion, the crux of the issue in this paper was to investigate the complicated mechanisms when individuals negotiate with self. The study reveals both the “how” and the “why” of the underlying factors in the fashion adoption process. In the emerging of a new fashion, the results of negotiation with self of fashion innovators, which create symbolic ambiguities, are the most crucial. Fashion innovators create ambiguity that paves the way for a new fashion direction. As a result, fashion designers and suppliers always search for a new sense of fashion from innovators. This method is known as “cool hunting” (Armstrong, 1999; O’Brien, 1999). The results shown here suggest that:

- New fashion always has to be different (although it is evolving) from the firmly established fashion.
- New fashion makes innovative consumers feel differently, therefore, fashion can start.
- The direction of fashion is refined by the collective popularity suggested by Blumer’s collective selection theory (1969). Popularity is indeed driven by a socialising force.
- Fashion followers try to conform to the new conditions determining social appreciation by increasing their awareness of “how to be fashionable”.
- High street brands, therefore, are unlikely to provide cutting edge commodities.

It can be concluded that fashion innovators are at the centre of generating new social fashion, as well as the basis for fashion change options.

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