

FACTORS AFFECTING CONSUMERS' PREFERENCE OF FASHIONABLE CLOTHES: A MACROSCOPIC MODEL

INTRODUCTION

Blumer (1969) notes that fashion is a very adept mechanism for enabling people to adjust in an orderly and unified way to a moving and changing world which is potentially full of anarchic possibilities and Kimmel (1985) notes that fashion is a language, with its own grammar and syntax; to decipher its changing code, to "read" its fluctuating styles, is to uncover a crucial form of interpersonal communication and cultural statement. According to Schrank and Gilmore (1973), the role fashion plays in the diffusion of ideas, practices, or products reflects changing relationships between human beings and between man and his material culture. Fashion and clothing are so intimately linked that we must consider them as twins joined at the hip (Coates 2005). Therefore, clothing is the most suitable ground on which fashions can be examined.

Many research studies have focused on several related cognitive traits that may influence the decision-making processes among fashion consumer groups of emerging adults, specifically, the need for uniqueness, need for variety, optimum stimulation level, sensation seeking, expressing individuality, and susceptibility to boredom (Workman and Studak, 2006). Yet, much of the research efforts have been expended on scrutinizing fashion in a sociological perspective. Veblen (1991) explains that fashion is not about protection, but rather about displaying socio-economic status. In addition, the "Trickle-down theory", proposed in 1904 by Georg Simmel states that fashions of the upper social classes are diffused to lower classes through imitation. Further, Blumer (1969) explains fashion as the outcome of a process of collective selection among fashion alternatives that are presented by an elite of fashion creators.

Conversely, in the modern consumer culture it is noticeable that fashion preference is not solely limited to one factor, and the beliefs formed by many symbolic forces push consumers towards fashion. The media, particularly films and TV, have continually shaped clothing fashions (Coates 2005). Further, Workman and Studak (2006) explain that being exposed to advertisements of the latest fashions can trigger recognition of a problem because of a change in a consumer's desired state, that is, what a consumer wishes a situation to be like. As a result, the factors affecting the fashion are less apparent and rather difficult to determine.

Recently, the phenomenon of fashion has received growing attention by scholars and management practitioners alike. Much of the existing management

fashion literature however operates without providing a clear conceptual and theoretical foundation (Ruling, 2005). Undoubtedly, the first step in righting this situation is to provide a holistic view on fashion from the consumer behavior point of view. Therefore, this study is aimed at explaining the factors affecting consumers' preference of fashionable clothes. Basically, this "theoretical" study draws on relevant disciplines such as marketing, consumer behavior, and sociology. The study's significance is in its holistic depiction of the drives which affect fashion preference and, which in turn constructs an arena for academics in the field of consumer behavior to scrutinize fashion(s).

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Fashion consumption is an important practice around which much debate is centered. While disciplines ranging from sociology, through psychology to marketing have provided explanations for this phenomenon, much of the literature available on management fashion does not provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors affecting fashion consumption. On the other hand, management is closely related to other fields such as sociology, social psychology, and economics. Therefore, a full study of fashion consumption needs to take into account the conclusions arrived at by these other disciplines as well.

The study is expected to address the following problem:

What are the factors which influence consumers' preference for fashionable clothes?

The main objective of the study is to bring together the theoretical explanations on fashion consumption and form a macroscopic model for the factors affecting the fashion preference of consumers. The study depends on the premise that fashion consumption is affected by economic, social and behavioral factors and even type of consumer. It is assumed that all these influences occur simultaneously and that fashion consumption is the result of a combination of such influences. The study aims at proposing a new hypothetical framework to examine fashion consumption.

METHOD

The study is a desk research project which mainly depends on literature from various sources such as academic journals, textbooks, and magazines. Reviewing the existing literature, I propose two hypotheses to examine fashion consumption.

DISCUSSION

One of the fundamental premises of the study of modern consumer behavior is that people often buy products not for what they do but for what they mean (Solomon, 2002). For instance, imagine the ever-popular T-shirt and how it can furnish cultural meaning and identity for wearers. T-shirts can function as trophies (as proof of participation in sports or travel) or as self-proclaimed labels of belonging to a cultural category. T-Shirts can also be used as a means of self expression, which may provide wearers additional benefit of serving as a “topic” initiating social dialogue with others (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2002). Hence, apparel is a consumer product from which the consumer expects, or wishes to express a particular meaning. Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) note that because of the multi-sensory imagery involved in fashion apparel, it is a consumer product that is capable of stimulating and requiring considerable mental activity. Further, dress can be thought of as a consumer product which decides the consumer’s place in the society. Because what others see includes a person’s clothing, jewelry, furniture, car and so on, it stands to reason that these products also help to determine the perceived self. The self concept refers to the beliefs a person holds about his or her own attributes, and how he or she evaluates these qualities. Thus, dress provides the consumer an answer to the question, “Who am I now?” (Solomon, 2002)

The Clothed Consumer and Fashions

Fashion is the process of social diffusion by which a new style is adopted by some group(s) of consumers. In contrast, *a fashion* (or style) refers to a particular combination of attributes. And *being in fashion* means that this combination is currently positively evaluated by some reference group (Solomon, 2002). Schrank and Gilmore (1973) define fashion as a socially derived valuation of an idea, practice or product, or as a form of collective behavior. Fashion, therefore, has implications for many facets of human group living. Unlike a language, however, fashion is context-dependent. The same item can be interpreted differently by different wearers and viewers in different situations. In semiotic terms, the meaning of fashion products is often undercoded. There is no one precise meaning, but rather plenty of room for interpretation among perceivers (Solomon, 2002). According to Coates (2005) cultural universals in time and space will continue to dominate fashions in clothing to illustrate status, wealth, group memberships, affiliations, age, fertility, health, well-being, profession, occupation, and power.

A Macroscopic Model for the Factors Affecting Fashion Preference

The proposed conceptual model (figure 01) seeks to clarify the factors affecting consumers’ preferences for fashionable clothes from a holistic point of view. The

model accumulates the existing theoretical findings on fashion, and is structured as follows: first, it concentrates on fashion as a display of socioeconomic status. Second, fashion is considered as a mode of erotic exposure. Third, fashion is identified as a modern consumer practice. Further, the model suggests that the type of consumer is a key factor in fashion preference. Finally, it is emphasized that fashion is paradoxical in nature and it reflects a conflict in the consumer's mind. The explanation, however, is confined to the socio-economic and psychological factors that contribute to fashion.

Fashion: A Display of Socioeconomic Status

Fashion and economic strength are so related that one might argue that fashion is for the wealthy. According to Ruling (2005) the occurrence of fashion is related to change. Fashion acts as an indicator for changes in the economic structure, in norms and values. Veblen's notion of conspicuous consumption proposed that the wealthy consume to display their prosperity, for example by wearing expensive clothing (Solomon, 2002). In his book "A Theory of the Leisure Class" Veblen explains that clothing is a public display of "pecuniary strength" —and a telling one at that. "Clothing is a social necessity and a universal need; yet clothing is not about protection, but rather about showing socioeconomic status" (Veblen 1991).

In addition Veblen (1992) notes that the difference in male and female clothing is therefore a reflection of economic difference. Women become representative of a husband's socioeconomic status. Their clothing reveals that they are able to purchase garments and accessories at will, to change wardrobes with the season and at the caprices of magazine editors, and to refrain from physical activity. The dress of women goes even farther than that of men in demonstrating the wearer's abstinence from productive employment. According to Veblen, in woman's dress there is obviously greater insistence on such features that testify to the wearer's exemption from or incapacity for all vulgarly productive employment.

Moreover, according to Solomon (2002) "Trickle Down theory", first proposed in 1904 by Georg Simmel, has been one of the most influential approaches to understanding fashion. Fashion emerges as higher classes choose distinctive signs in order to differentiate themselves. As lower classes tend to imitate higher ones, members of the higher classes need to recreate class segmentation through a new differentiation (Simmel 1957). Further, he adds that fashion is the imitation of a given pattern and thus satisfies the need for social adaptation; it leads the individual onto the path that everyone travels, it furnishes a general condition that resolves the conduct of every individual into a mere example. At the same time, and to no less a degree, it satisfies the need for distinction, the tendency towards differentiation, change and individual contrast.

Herbert Blumer (1969) enriches the above views and sees fashion as the outcome of a process of "collective selection" among fashion alternatives that are presented by an elite of fashion creators. According to him, this type of collective selection among a variety of alternatives typically emerges in situations in which traditional criteria for evaluation have become obsolescent. Fashion then becomes a "process in which collective judgment of what is proper and correct serves to set new, albeit temporary, guidelines" and (fashion) is a "continuing pattern of change in which certain social forms enjoy temporary acceptance and respectability only to be replaced by others more abreast of the times" (Blumer, 1968).

Blumer's (1981) theory of 'collective selection' equally asserts that innovative individuals (fashion leaders) within social groups look to a plurality of sources for inspiration. They select only styles that display some continuity with previous fashions, and which are relevant to the existing social climate to create their own rather distinctive fashions of a localized nature (Davis 1992). The desire to belong to a certain higher (elite), possibly imaginary group and the simultaneous desire to distinguish oneself from other, lower groups is manifest in fashion (Thompson & Haytko, 1995). Further, Blumer (1969) explains that fashion trends are a highly important yet much neglected object of study and signifies a convergence and marshalling of "collective taste" in a given direction and thus pertain to one of the most significant yet obscure features in group life. The fashion process involves both a formation and an expression of collective taste in the given area of fashion. Collective taste is an active force in the ensuing process of selection, setting limits and providing guidance; yet, at the same time it undergoes refinement and organization through its attachment to, and embodiment in, specific social forms. The origin, formation, and careers of collective taste constitute the huge problematic area in fashion (Blumer, 1969). However, fashion does not operate on a base of rationality, i.e. it can, but it does not need to, recur to utility or superior merit for receiving social approbation.

However, those explanations were much more valid for a society with a stable class structure, which permitted the easy identification of lower-versus upper-class consumers. Thus, the "trickle-across theory" and the "trickle-up theory" were proposed. Trickle across theory held that a perspective based on the class structure cannot account for the wide range of styles that are simultaneously made available in society. Instead, consumers tend to be more influenced by opinion leaders who are similar to them. As a result, each social group has its own fashion innovators who determine fashion trends (Solomon, 2004). Further, as per the "trickle-up" theory, current fashions often originate with sub-cultural groups or the lower classes and *trickle up* to higher classes (Solomon, 2004).

Fashion: A Way for Erotic Exposure

Sexual identity is a very important component of a consumer's self concept. However, a person's biological gender (i.e. male or female) does not totally determine whether he or she will exhibit sex typed traits. A consumer's subjective feelings about his or her sexuality are crucial (Solomon, 2002). Indeed, the many connections between fashion and sexual attraction have been the subject of considerable debate. Kimmel (1985) explains that clothing (beginning from the fig-leaf perhaps) has been designed to conceal the naked body from full view. But even the most casual observer knows that garments also reveal one's sexuality, arousing and sustaining interest in what is concealed. Clothing must give voice, as one 19th-century observer put it, to "the desire to reveal and the necessity to conceal". Further, according to Steele (1985) the social function of clothing is both to preserve modesty and to accentuate the wearer's sexual beauty. She claims that fashion allows women to express their sexual availability. Therefore, clothing fashions can be thought of as a means for stimulating the sexual feelings of others.

Each gender has explicit and implicit standards of dress which are subject to cultural and historical interpretations (Workman and Studak, 2006). Davis (1992) notes that clothing and appearance do not just indicate femininity, for instance, but they also illustrate and constitute our sexual identities. Thus, fashion can be thought of as a means of reflecting gender differences and attracting the opposite sex by highlighting the sexual identity of the consumers. One of the earliest theories of fashion proposed that "shifting erogenous zones" (sexually arousing areas of the body) accounted for fashion changes, and that different zones become the object of interest because they reflect societal trends. J.C. Flugel, a disciple of Freud, proposed in the 1920s that sexually charged areas wax and wane in order to maintain interest, and that clothing styles change to highlight or hide these parts (Solomon, 2002). Flugel notes that while all cultures have clothing that connote sexual differences to varying degrees, in cultures where the motive for clothing is display, such as those found in Africa, men are the more ornately dressed. In Western cultures, where much of the motivation for clothing is modesty, women are the more ornately dressed (Clemente, 2005). Flugel believes that women use modesty and body concealment for sexual allure, as a form of what he terms "erotic exposure." As women have diffused sexual centers—that is, the whole body is sexualized—women's clothing becomes more highly charged than that of men. According to Clemente (2005) under these conditions, it is not surprising that women should be at once the more modest and the more exhibitionistic sex, since both their shame and their attractiveness relate to the whole body.

Fashion: A Modern Consumer Practice

Socio-cultural values in contemporary society that demand that one should be autonomous, successful, or different from others can be thought of as setting in motion the dynamics of consumption. These socio-cultural values need to be expressed in ways that makes them understandable to others (Cosgel, 1997). The feature of “modernity” in fashion is especially significant. Fashion is always modern; it always seeks to keep abreast of the times. It is sensitive to the movement of current developments as they take place in its own field, in adjacent fields, and in the larger social world (Blumer, 1969). Elizabeth Wilson in her book “Adorned in Dreams – Fashion and Modernity” (1985) has put it thus: “Changes in fashion styles not only represent reaction against what went before; they may be self-contradictory too” (Dolfsma, 2004). Further, it is notable that the paradoxes of modernist consumption—manifest in fashion as well as in pop music—is due to the hankering after socio-cultural values such as authenticity, freedom, novelty, speed, success, autonomy, independence, pleasure, success, youth, and the like, that need to be communicated in a way that is understandable to others (Thompson & Haytko, 1995; Cosgel 1997). An emphasis on functionality, freedom, progress and simplicity in one style of clothing is followed by one on speed, uniqueness, frivolousness and authenticity (Lewenhaupt & Lewenhaupt, 1989). In addition, Coates (2005) notes that to a great extent style changes in fashion are not for economic reasons. It is the constant striving to be up-to-the-minute, to be different, but not too different.

On account of its associations with emotions, irrationality and non-productivity, fashion is seldom analyzed in the social sciences. Some consider fashion - clothes and other means of decorating the body – as the quintessential post-modern practice because it is so fickle (Firat & Venkatesh, 1993). Society expects individuals to present themselves in a specific manner. Appearance is therefore a crucial element (Finkelstein 1991; Baudrillard, 1981). Within an “interpretative community” a “socially negotiated set of rules of interpretation and aesthetic standards” is needed (Thompson & Haytko 1995; Dolfsma 2004). The rules for interpreting are shared by a community that constructs what might be called a generalized *other*, who is consistently characterized as a conformist who is highly sensitive to the opinions of peers (Thompson & Haytko, 1999).

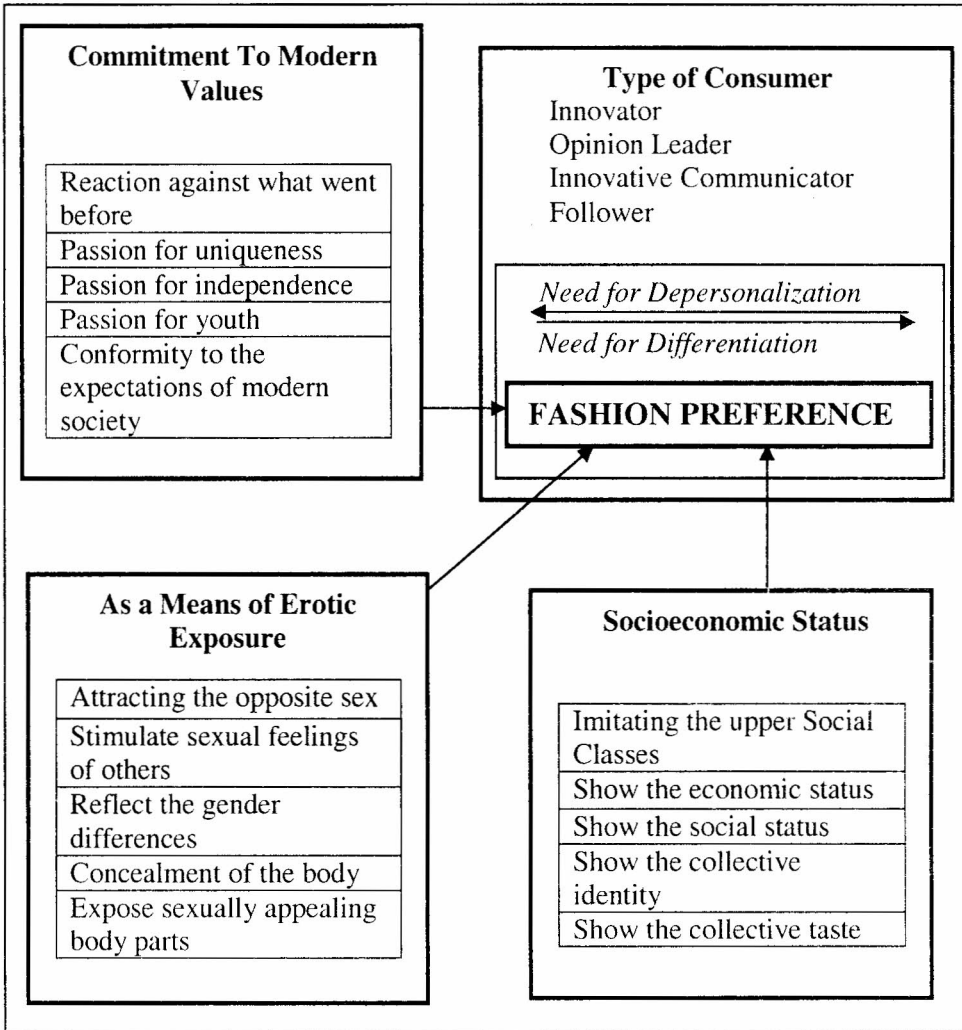
A real or assumed generalized other is the release valve for pent up tensions due to institutional factors, or inherently conflicting modernist values (Dolfsma, 2004). Or, as Wilson (1985) observes “[d]espite its apparent irrationality, fashion cements social solidarity and imposes group norms, while deviations in dress are usually experienced as ‘shocking and disturbing’.” Thus vulnerability and anxiety are significant factors for consumers (Robins, 1994). Thus, fashion can be identified as one of the central concerns in the postmodern condition. However, in the modern

consumer culture, fashion consumption is determined by economic, social and modern motives simultaneously. Therefore, it is notable that, in order to understand the fashion consumption of a group of consumers, researchers need to examine the intensity of each of the factors given above. Those factors are context-dependent and therefore, it can be argued that fashion consumption has been different among different communities as the intensity of economic, social and modern motives are different among communities.

All the above explanations taken together posit that consumers prefer fashions due to two motives. First, they use fashions to be a member in a preferred social group. Second they need to differentiate themselves from the other members of the society (the group) (figure 01). These two motives are paradoxical in nature. The observation Simmel (1957) made with regard to fashion is that there is a simultaneous "need of union on the one hand and the need of isolation on the other". Fashion is paradoxical in nature as it provides at the same time individual dissociation and group cohesion. These two functions are fundamental to fashion. For Simmel, there is no fashion if one of these two conditions is not satisfied. On the imitation side, fashion provides depersonalization. An individual acting in a fashionable way does not only act as an individual but his or her acts function as representations of a social class and its distinctive features. On the other hand, differentiation is provided through changing. As a result, fashion creates a state which Simmel calls "relative individualization", and in which the individual differentiates itself through adoption of the standards of a distinctive group (Simmel, 1957). Hence, it is evident that fashion is a direct manifestation of the consumer's mental conflict where he tries to differentiate and depersonalize simultaneously.

The proposed model for the factors affecting the consumers' preference for fashionable clothes (figure 01) depends on the premise that fashion consumption is affected by economic, social and behavioral factors and even type of the consumer. The model proposes that the consumer decisions are affected by all these factors. It is suggested that all these influences occur simultaneously and fashion consumption is the result of the strong influences. However, the nature and extent of the influence of each factor is context dependent. Therefore, a careful quantification of the factors affecting fashion consumption needs to be done on the basis of culture, gender, income, country and social class of the consumers.

Figure 01: Macroscopic Model for the Factors Affecting Fashion Preference



A New Hypothetical Arena for Scrutinizing Fashion Consumption

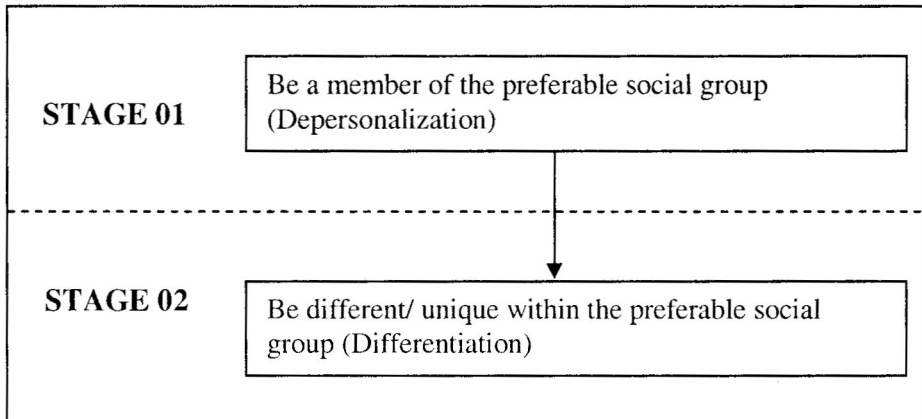
It is evident that, in the modern consumer culture, various external influences exert a significant impact on fashion consumers. Thus, a new conceptual foundation needs

to be set up to create a solid theoretical basis to examine fashion consumption. Therefore, the study presents two hypotheses to investigate fashion consumption.

Hypothesis 01

The present study does not solely depend on previous theoretical explanations. Instead, the study suggests that first; the fashion consumer basically attempts to be a member of a preferable social group. This group might be in or out of his/her social class and social life to which the consumer wishes to belong. Second, the study suggests that the fashion consumer attempts to be different within the social group in which he/she lives. The study maintains that in both these behavioral dimensions the behavior of the modern consumer is controlled by a set of external influences created by the consumer culture more than his/her inner intentions to be fashionable. Specially, these influences determine the place/ membership and/or role of the consumer in society and then direct his/her behavior to be a member of the society/ consumer group. Thus, the study proposes that the fashion consumer passes two stages in fashion consumption. First he/she is directed more towards "depersonalization" in a preferable social group using fashion preferences, and then, motivated more towards "differentiation" in the social group (figure 02).

Figure 02: Stages of Fashion Consumption



The study proposes that this argument should be tested across diverse consumer groups, social classes and cultures. Thus, rather than considering this "stages of fashion consumption" as conclusive, it is advisable to develop hypotheses based on the relationship between these two stages and test their validity empirically.

Hypothesis 02

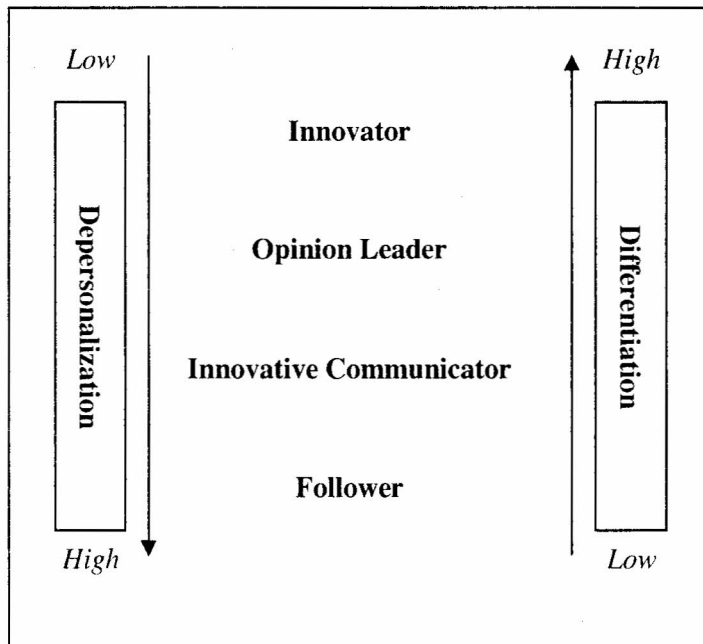
Consumers differ in their attitudes to and enthusiasm for fashioning. Some may introduce fashions to the group and others may follow the first movers and communicators. The nature of the consumer is a basic factor in fashion preference. Hirschman and Adcock (1987) categorized fashion consumers into one of four groups: fashion innovators, fashion opinion leaders, innovative communicators (the fashion change agent groups) and fashion followers. Although fashion innovators are among the first consumers to purchase and wear new clothing fashions, fashion opinion leaders give the new clothing fashions their approval and influence other consumers to purchase and wear the new fashions. Further, innovative communicators combine the characteristics of fashion innovators and opinion leaders by being among the first to purchase and wear new fashions while at the same time exerting influence on others to follow suit. Fashion followers are the largest group of fashion consumers and are regarded as imitators of the fashion change agents (Workman and Studak 2006).

The study suggests that the innovators tend more towards differentiation while, opinion leaders, innovative communicators, and followers tend towards depersonalization in ascending degrees (figure 03). Thus, the study emphasizes that the consumer group in which a consumer lives is a ground factor in his/ her fashion preference. This argument further provides a conceptual arena to investigate fashion consumption and claims another conceptual dimension of the stages of fashion consumption specified above (figure 02). It is argued that when a consumer moves from the stage 01 (depersonalization) to the stage 02 (differentiation) of fashion consumption his./her role changes from follower to innovative communicator, opinion leader, and finally, to innovator. Here, the study depends on the argument that the consumer does not play just one role in fashion consumption. Instead, it is argued that the consumer's role as a fashion follower/ innovative communicator/ opinion leader and/or innovator depends on his social surroundings and the role he/she plays in the society.

This conceptual construct can be used to justify most aspects of fashion consumption. For instance, a normal consumer in stage 01 of fashion consumption cannot introduce (or innovate) fashions as his/her membership in the social group is low. Thus, he/she has to follow the fashions introduced by the consumers who are firmly established in society. Conversely, celebrities can introduce (or innovate) fashions as they are iconic figures in society. As a result, celebrities (music stars, actors, models, and even politicians) have become fashion innovators and opinion leaders. Therefore, the study suggests that fashion followers and innovative communicators are in stage 01 and opinion leaders and innovators in stage 02 of fashion consumption. Further, it is necessary that this argument should be tested on

empirical grounds before establishing it as a theoretical construct. The research paper emphasizes that various consumer characteristics such as demographics, attitudes, personality, cognition, perception, and several other factors, like social class, marketing and advertising efforts, will affect the nature and extent of the application of the above construct. Specifically, the degree of the consumer's movement from fashion follower to innovator depends on the above factors. Therefore, based on this theoretical foundation, fashion consumption can be explained across diverse consumer groups from different cultures, social groups, income groups and even countries.

Figure 03: Fashion Consumers' Tendency towards Differentiation and Depersonalization



CONCLUSIONS

Consumers are engaged in a continuous effort to conform to a way of life which is commonly accepted by others as good. They may display a vast array of symbols which reflect such a positively valued life. At the same time, consumers need to present themselves as unique individuals who are superior to other members of society. Fashion is a strong symbolic device which functions as a mode for displaying certain meanings. Thus, consumers use fashion(s) to convey some

meanings to the society around them. As shown in this essay, the study of fashion has been approached by theorists in a variety of ways. The contribution of this article is two-fold. It collates the explanations of the leading theorists of fashion and constructs a foundation on which all these theories are interconnected to form a macroscopic model (figure 02) to account for fashion preference of consumers and then provides a new conceptualization of fashion consumption which other researchers and practitioners can use as a guideline for further exploration.

The study describes "meanings" which consumers intend to express through fashions. The model demonstrates that consumers prefer fashions which once adopted, place them in a preferable social class (indeed in an upper social class). In other words, they imitate the fashions of such a class with the intention of being a member of it. They also prefer fashions to reflect the collective taste and the identity of their class. Then again, consumers use fashion to display their socioeconomic strength. Second, people use fashions to turn themselves into sexual beings; in particular, they distinguish themselves from the opposite sex and try to attract the members of the other sex by expressing their sexual beauty by way of fashion. In this process, consumers are seen as both covering and uncovering sexually appealing parts of the body for the purpose of sexual allure. That is, the simultaneous concealment and disclosure of the body through fashion constitute means of providing "erotic exposure". The article merges the above theoretical notions with modern and postmodern explanations of fashion and thereby fulfils a pre-existing need for academic literature pertaining to fashion. The study explains that fashion is a modern consumer practice which is a reaction to that which went before. It reflects a passion for uniqueness, independence and youth. Further, the study explains that fashion is a practice where the consumer adapts to the rules of the "generalized other" which is a construction of the community. However, the model depicts that through the conveyance of all the meanings above, consumers attempt to accomplish two objectives simultaneously. On the one hand, they try to "depersonalize" themselves, and on the other hand, to "differentiate" them in a preferable social group. These two objectives are paradoxical in nature and at first glance mutually exclusive. Fashion or fashioning, thus, reflects a conflict in the consumer's mind. Finally, the study extends previous research by offering two conceptual constructs to investigate fashion consumption, where the consumer passes two stages in fashion consumption. First he/she is directed more towards "depersonalization" in a preferable social group, and then, motivated more towards "differentiation" in the social group. Second, when a consumer moves from stage 01 (depersonalization) to stage 02 (differentiation) of fashion consumption his/her role changes from follower to innovative communicator, opinion leader, and finally, to innovator.

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