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ARE CONSUMER PERCEPTIONS OF A BRAND EFFECTED BY MATERIALISM, GENDER AND NATIONALITY?

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Abstract

This study attempts to establish a linkage between materialism, gender and nationality with the consumer perception of a high priced brand of apparel. The work focuses on the differences in perception of a high priced brand. It indicates that young undergraduates hold different perceptions of a brand depending on their sex and nationality. The study also examines materialistic tendencies and whether, materialism was influenced by gender and nationality. The results indicated that there is a difference in perception between customers of different nationality and sexes and that materialism does effect the perception of high priced fashion clothing.

Introduction

Increasingly, in fashion marketing, brands are seen as important in creating an identity, a sense of achievement and identification for consumers who are fashion conscious and materialistic. The economic value of luxury, fashion and status products is argued to be substantial (Dubois & Duquesne, 1993). Mason (1981) argued that people express themselves through consumption in a myriad of ways, and in this context, products and brands have the ability to communicate messages to others, in that product styles determine how consumers who own a particular product are perceived by others (Holman, 1981; Solomon, 1983). One view of fashion is that it is not the creation of powerful persuaders, but a normal outcome of a dynamic culture and common shifts in taste and preferences. Increasingly the relationship between characteristics of consumers and of brands are becoming important marketing problems, particularly, so for the characteristics such as materialism as a strong driver of acquiring and consuming specific types of brands. As such, this study focuses on examining the relationships between consumer characteristics, including gender, nationality and level of materialism with brand perception.

Theoretical Framework

Possessions and their acquisition occupy a central role in the lives of many individuals (Richins and Dawson 1992), who are often termed materialists. Activities focusing on possessing and acquiring are central to materialists because they indicate success and provide happiness. It is not uncommon to be involved to some extent in the pursuit of happiness, however it is the pursuit of happiness through acquisition

rather than through other means, like personal relationships and achievements that distinguishes materialists. More often than not materialists tend to judge their own and others success by the number and quality of possessions they accumulate. The value of possessions stems not only from their ability to confer status but also from their ability to project a desired self-image and identify one as a participant in an imagined perfect life (Campbell 1987). Success for a materialist depends to a large extent on the possession of products that depict certain desired images.

As Richins (1987), Belk (1988), Mowen (1995) and Solomon (1999) suggest, some consumers emphasise the material significance of image. Having more materialistic values is associated with using possessions to convey an impression and also retaining possessions instead of disposing of them (Belk 1985). By the same token, materialism places a very high importance to possessions and accords them a central role in life (Fournier & Richins 1991). Materialistic individuals are believed to value items that are consumed publicly and possess public meaning, rather than private, personal or subjective meanings (O’Cass & Muller 1999). Also, it has been argued that Australia’s growing preoccupation with possessions is reflected in such consumption values as *shop till you drop* and *he who dies with the most toys, wins* and the rise in credit card usage and consumer debt (O’Cass 2001). This does not imply that every consumer is materialistic, as there are significant differences between individuals’ prioritisation of and attachment to possessions.

One product category that essentially fulfils these criteria in every respect is fashion clothing. Fashion clothing (apparel) is a product that is consumed publicly and possesses public meaning. Purchasing apparel satisfies various needs such as the expression of identity (Kaiser 1990; O’Shaughnessy 1987) and self-image (Kaiser 1990; Morganosky & Vreeman 1986), as well as giving individuals a way to impress others (Gould & Barak 1988). So consumers who tend to pick up high priced apparel aim to satisfy some of the above needs. The crucial dimensions of possessions for any materialist are utility, appearance, financial worth and the ability to convey status, success and prestige. All these dimensions are satisfied through the purchase of high profile branded (& high priced) apparel. Individuals have an understanding that a particular possession will convey a strong message or signal to the world about what and who they are (Douglas & Isherwood 1979). Customers under the age of 30 tend to be very conscious of their image and the products they possess or acquire (Beaudoin, Moore & Goldsmith 1998). High priced apparel is a product that has a high potential for symbolic meaning. The relationship between materialism, gender, nationality and possession of high priced apparel has not been explored and this exploratory study attempts to fill that gap.

Therefore, focusing on materialism, gender and nationality the following research questions are posed to examine brand perceptions:

1. *Do materialistic tendencies differ between males and females?*
2. *Do materialistic tendencies differ between Australians and Non-Australians?*
3. *Do brand perceptions of high priced fashion clothing differ between males and females?*
4. *Does perception of high priced fashion clothing differ between Australians and Non-Australians?*
5. *Is there an association between consumers’ materialism and his/her perception of brand image and personal satisfaction?*

Method

The methodology was based on the development and administration of a self-administered questionnaire using a convenience sample of students at an Australian university. Materialism was measured using the Richins and Dawson (1992) 18-item measure focusing on happiness, centrality and success. The survey also contained a number of statements on brand perceptions related to apparel. Brand perception was measured using a 6-item measure focusing on symbol of success, happiness, image, satisfaction, prestige and high-priced exclusivity.

In total 104 completed surveys were received and all the respondents were undergraduate marketing students under the age of 30. The sample had 59 males and 45 females. Of the 104, 34 were Australians and 70 were non-Australian students. The data was factor analyzed using principal components analysis with varimax rotation (Grimm and Yarnold 1998), and Pearson correlation (Hair, Anderson, Tatham & Black 1998). The research questions were analyzed with t-tests to compare any two groups (males, females and Australians, non-Australians).

Results

The preliminary factor analysis indicated that materialism contained three factors (success, happiness and centrality as identified by Richins and Dawson (1992). Factor loadings ranged between .40 and .81 and reliabilities ranged between .69 for success, .64 for centrality and .69 for happiness. 58% of the overall variance was accounted for by these three factors. The Cronbach alpha values reported by Richins and Dawson (1992) were .71 for centrality, .74 for success and .73 for happiness. The preliminary factor analysis for brand perception indicated 2 factors (brand image and personal satisfaction) with factor loadings ranging between .35 and .89. 54% of the overall variance was accounted for by these two factors.

Do materialistic tendencies differ between males and females?

The results indicate that there is a difference of .18 between the means of males and females (see table 1). The t test is quite significant and the results in this case are $t(88.5) = -2.095$ $p = .039$. The positive value means that the males had a higher average score. This means that there is a difference between the materialistic tendencies of males and females and that males tend to be more materialistic.

Do materialistic tendencies differ between Australians and Non-Australians?

A T-test was undertaken to explore if differences between Australian and Non-Australian respondents perception towards materialism (see table 1). The results indicate that there is no significant difference between the average materialism score for Australians and Non-Australians.

Table 1: Comparison of Materialism Scores

Mean	p<	t	N	
Australian	3.16	NS	1.109	34
Non-Australian	3.06			70
(Defined as respondents who are not citizens/residents of Australia)				
Male	2.99	0.05	-2.095	59
Female	3.17			45

Do brand perceptions of high priced fashion clothing differ between males and females?

A T-test was undertaken to examine if any differences between males and females exist in perception of the brand Armani (see table 2). There was no statistically significant difference between the males and the females in their perception of Armani fashion clothing.

Does perception of high priced fashion clothing differ between Australians and Non-Australians?

T-test were undertaken to determine if there is any difference between Australians and non-Australians towards the brand Armani (see table 2). Non-Australians are defined as respondents who are not citizens/residents of Australia. A statistically significant difference was found for only one item on the Armani scale, *this brand is purchased primarily for its image*. In this case the results were $t(96) = -2.57$, $p = .011$. The difference is $-.5$; the negative sign indicates that the Non-Australians had the higher average score. This means that the Non-Australians consider Armani to be an image brand more than the Australians do. This shows that both Australians and Non-Australians they differ only on the aspect of image but agree on all the other aspects like high priced exclusivity and prestige.

5. Is there an association between consumers' materialism and his/her perception of brand image and personal satisfaction?

To examine the relationship between materialism and brand perception a correlation analysis was undertaken. The results indicate that a significant correlation exists between Armani 1 (Owning this brand is a symbol of success in the society) and Materialism. The correlation is $.265$ i.e. $r(102) = .27$, $p < .05$. As the correlation is positive, respondents who viewed acquiring Armani as a symbol of success in the society possessed a higher degree of materialism. This can also imply that highly materialistic respondents rate owning Armani as a symbol of success in the society highly. The correlation between Materialism and the other items of brand perception was not significant, therefore it can be inferred that there is no systematic association between a respondent's materialism and his/her perception of the brand image but there is a systematic association with his/her perception of personal satisfaction.

Table 2: Comparison of Perceptions of the Armani Brand

	Mean	p<	t
Armani 1 .941 (Symbol of success in the society)	Male	3.28	NS
Armani 2 .904 (Makes Owners Very Happy)	Female	3.09	
Armani 3 .322 (Urge to own something new satisfied)	Male	3.20	NS
Armani 4 .320 (Purchased primarily for its image)	Female	3.02	
Armani 5 .591 (Prestigious)	Male	3.03	NS
Armani 6 .346 (High Priced Exclusivity)	Female	3.09	
Armani 1 .475 (Symbol of success in the society)	Male	4.10	NS
Armani 2 .137 (Makes Owners Very Happy)	Female	4.15	
Armani 3 .978 (Urge to own something new satisfied)	Male	3.72	NS
Armani 4 2.578 (Purchased primarily for its image)	Female	3.84	
Armani 5 .355 (Prestigious)	Male	3.91	NS
Armani 6 .1.941 (High Priced Exclusivity)	Female	3.97	
Armani 1 .475 (Symbol of success in the society)	Australian	3.30	NS
Armani 2 .137 (Makes Owners Very Happy)	Non-Australian	3.19	
Armani 3 .978 (Urge to own something new satisfied)	Australian	3.13	NS
Armani 4 2.578 (Purchased primarily for its image)	Non-Australian	3.10	
Armani 5 .355 (Prestigious)	Australian	3.20	NS
Armani 6 .1.941 (High Priced Exclusivity)	Non-Australian	3.01	
	Australian	3.76	0.05
	Non-Australian	4.26	
	Australian	3.73	NS
	Non-Australian	3.80	
	Australian	3.66	0.055
	Non-Australian	4.04	

Discussion

From this study, it has been observed that there is a difference in the materialistic tendencies of males and females where as there is no difference between Australians and Non-Australians in this aspect. It is interesting to note that there is no difference in the brand perception of high priced fashion clothing between males and females; however, Non-Australians differed significantly in their perception of high priced fashion clothing compared to Australians. Most importantly, it has been found that materialism does effect perception of high priced fashion clothing in terms of personal satisfaction but not in terms of the brand image.

The findings of this study can help in investigating the relationship between material values and marketing stimuli such as advertising, store displays and product characteristics. If the study is taken a step further and done in a comprehensive cross-cultural mode, then it will help in changing the product positioning across countries. Though the global boundaries are disappearing to some extent, new form of disintegration is being observed in the modern world. Whether viewed as good or bad, this is a trait, which will stay on for quite sometime into the future. Once the linkage between brand image and materialistic perception is obtained, then the brand image can be changed or re-positioned based on these perceptions. It would have been interesting to analyse the consumer perception of credit cards in this study. We did not put this category into the study because in countries like India and Malaysia, credit card usage is very low and especially in under-graduate students it is almost insignificant. So the responses that would have come would not have been authentic, that is the reason why it was not included.

Though the study answered all the research questions in an effective manner, the small size of the sample presents a high risk for external validity. There seem to be differences but given the number of interactions that could potentially have been significant, the number of differences found is rather low. The scale employed in the study and the way it is measured needs refinement. For example, measures that will assess the extent to which individuals use material possessions or goods to define himself or herself or their group behaviour will aid the researchers to examine and analyse in a broader sense, the relationships consumers have with material objects or certain brands. In conclusion, it can be stated that the consumer perceptions are effected by materialism, gender and nationality.

Conclusion

By continuing to explore issues related to possessions and their position in consumers' lives we can better understand the effective utilization of consumer attachment to possessions at both a theoretical and practical level in understanding consumer behaviour related to fashion. This is important because fashion clothing has both important economic and social significance in many societies, particularly Western. However, some would argue a fundamental paradox of fashion and consumers' strong attachment to it exists. Going so far as Dittmar (1992) did in the context of personal identity, with its unique and autonomous nature. She commented that personal identity should perhaps be independent of material context, and we are in reality, who we are, no matter what our possessions. However, what appears to be the case, as partially reflected in this study, in the context of fashion clothing, we are what we wear. In reality, we are who our clothes allow us to be.

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