

Hitting Purchase: The Influence of Social and Demographic Variables on Fast Fashion Consumers

Alicia Zhou¹

¹The Bishop's School

ABSTRACT

With an average annual growth rate of around 11.68%, the fast fashion industry is expanding immensely. Increasing sales of affordable yet trendy clothes are driven by the rising youth population, boosting the fast fashion market. Previous research on influences of the life cycle of fashion and consumer behavior theories sparked this research study's goal: for fast fashion marketers to understand consumer behavior in terms of social and demographic variables. To assess the most prominent themes that influenced fast fashion consumer behavior in Southern California, two procedures were implemented: a survey on consumers' shopping behaviors and short interviews with a range of demographics and genders for both qualitative and quantitative analysis. In this study, five occurring themes of (1) Trendiness of Apparel, (2) Broad Range of Apparel, (3) Age and Gender, (4) Affordability, and (5) Follower-Leader Relationships were found to be the largest influences to draw consumers. Three core themes were found to influence consumer behavior the most: (1) Age and Gender, (2) Affordability, and (3) Follower-Leader Relationships. This study's findings may improve future marketing tactics to expand a fast fashion business's popularity and sales. It was concluded that while fast fashion companies should focus on expanding their trendiness and range of clothing, companies should target females in the 11-20 age group using social media influences to involve more potential consumers. It was further concluded that attraction of the business will proliferate through word of mouth recommendations by customers.

Introduction

Fashion, in its most inherent form, is a social phenomenon. Varying throughout each generation, fashion has evolved to adapt to the environment it is marketed in. Since the beginning of the 20th century, fashion has become one of the world's most prominent creative industries. With the rise of global capitalism, the proliferation of retail markets, and new technologies for production, the fashion industry is a major output with annual U.S. sales of more than \$200 billion (Hemphill and Suk 1148). Without understanding consumers' needs and predicting fashion trends, companies would not be able to satisfy consumer demand and operate at a profit. Thus, consumer behavior research is necessary for marketers to develop strategic marketing tactics to understand their companies' target consumer group and market.

For the fast fashion field, separate from the conventional fashion field, the need for consumer behavior research is similar. Leaders in the fashion apparel industry have increasingly embraced fast fashion retailing, resulting in mass production of recent catwalk replications surging the market only to go out of fashion days later (Cachon and Swinney 778). While the fast fashion market has only just emerged, it has grown in several markets led by various brands. This domination has led to a relatively high threshold for newer entrants and small brands. (Wang 4). A fast-fashion system, referring to the "inexpensive clothing produced rapidly by mass-market retailers in response to the latest trends," combines quick production and distribution times with highly fashionable or "trendy" product designs to effectively match supply with uncertain demand ("fast, adj."). The fast fashion industry has been attentively studied in specific ways; researchers and professionals alike have published several papers scrutinizing the impacts of fast fashion on the environment and human rights violations.

Gaps in Pre-Existing Research

The pre-existing research regarding fast fashion consumer behavior focuses mainly on price, quality, production, supply, sustainability, and distribution. Papers that do focus on consumer behavior often neglects equally important underlying factors such as social and demographic variables and their relationship to consumer behavior. This lack of knowledge allows major fast fashion brands to run a monopoly in the market. The purpose of this study is to investigate these variables of fast fashion consumer behavior and how conventional fashion consumer behavior can be applied to allow for easier entry into the market. The information presented is especially valuable to researchers in the fast fashion field, especially marketers, who can use this data to promote products more efficiently. To analyze the psychological factors as influencers of consumer behavior in large metropolitan cities, the guiding research question is: *To what extent do social and demographic factors influence fast fashion consumer behavior in Southern California, and how can these factors be applied to conventional consumer behavior theories?*

Literature Review

To understand how consumer buying behavior in fast fashion is influenced, it is important to look at existing studies on this subject. There are two primary branches of research that relate to this study: the literature on society's impact on the life cycle of fashion and the literature on pre-existing consumer behavior theories. These sources were located using different databases with various keywords. Keywords used to research were: fast fashion, psychological factors, consumer behavior, and economics.

The Life Cycle of Fashion and Its Influences

Currently, few studies look directly at fast fashion. However, studies that examine this relationship suggest that fast fashion and fashion greatly differ in their life cycle shape. Researchers like Solomon and Sarma used product life cycles to analyze marketing patterns and summarize consumers' processes in selecting items. Both studies look at fashion in stages that correspond to a distinct product life cycle. Solomon asserts in his research that at its most basic form, fashion cycles are composed of an introduction stage, an acceptance stage, a peak, and a regression stage (Solomon et al. 539). To illustrate, Solomon explains that this cycle is due to the trickle-down theory, which is driven by the desire to climb up or stay on top of the social ladder. Dominant classes respond to the impersonation attempts of lower classes by adopting newer fashions, resulting in an infinite fashion change cycle.

This study suggests that the cycle begins with the innovation and rise of the product, which applies to the introduction stage. When the product exponentially gains acceptance, acceleration will occur until the general acceptance of the product is at its culmination. Because society is characterized by several different lifestyles, different social groups have independent fashion cycles that hold little influence on other groups (Solomon et al. 549). This progression composes the acceptance stage. As time passes, the original adopters of the product will gradually decline until the fashion is obsolete, making up the regression stage. Likewise, Sarma concludes that a product's life cycle shape varies due to three broad categories of factors: innate utility, individual boredom, and social influence (Sarma et al. 1). Similar to Solomon, his research reveals the basic formation of fashion trends. Thus, both of these studies reinforce that consumer behavior in fashion is influenced by personal social and psychological factors, ensuing a self-propelling change cycle. The studies, however, are limited in that they combine different groups of fashion together. In essence, Solomon and Sarma group fashion to form a general conclusion to provide explanations for the social influences of fashion as a whole.

Consumer Consumption Behavior Theories

Research concerning fast fashion consumer behavior is virtually nonexistent, which leaves a gap that this study intends to fill. However, various studies generalize consumer consumption behavior theories, especially for hedonic consumption. Hedonic consumption, or consumption for happiness after basic needs of life are met, is defined by Hirschman et al. as a feature of consumer behavior that relates to the emotional (response generated that alters both the mind's and body's state), fantasy (imagery occurs when consumer produces an imaginary multi-sensory image), and multi-sensory (recipient of multiple sensory experiences that lead to positive sensations) of product use (Hirschman et al. 100). Returning to the previously mentioned fashion life cycle, the researchers found an emotional arousal pattern for products over a specific time frame. This suggests that emotional arousal is one of the primary components of various hedonic consumption (Zuckerman 257). However, differences in consumer emotional arousal response to specific products were concluded by Hirschman et al. to be tied to a variety of subcultural differences. Likewise, values and beliefs shared by members of a given social class or group will influence responses and desires to specific products. By examining the hedonic consumption consumer behavior theories, these studies show that consumer behavior patterns do exist and that the generalized theories could be applied to several different subgroups of fashion. While these articles do bring several perspectives on emotional behavior influences, central research is absent due to the combination of fast fashion and conventional fashion. As aforementioned, subgroups of fashion can be correlated, but a qualitative study of consumer behavior is useful to understand the relationships and impacts psychological factors bring to choose in fast fashion products.

Summary

While several studies acknowledge a driving factor of consumption and consumer behavior to be psychological, few studies solely test fashion subgroups such as fast fashion. Given the limitations of previous studies, it is clear that any research to justify a consumer's choice of products must focus on a specific fashion industry. Moreover, former studies do not address if conventional fashion consumer buying behavior could be applied to fast fashion behavior. Most studies used content analysis or meta-analysis to formulate their thinking; there were little to no researchers that provided detail about utilizing a different method of research or went into detail about it. As stated earlier, this study will therefore be unique in its examination of psychological variables of fast fashion and its influence or similarities with conventional fashion consumer behavior. With this knowledge, marketers will gain easier access into the fast fashion market and hinder the emerging monopoly of leading fast-fashion producers.

Method

Hypothesis

This study initially hypothesized that fast fashion's affordability would greatly influence fast fashion consumer behavior. Moreover, this study believed that while conventional consumer behavior theories could be applied to fast fashion consumer behaviors, the influx of fast fashion companies could alter consumer buying actions. Specifically, the experience of fewer resources spent on fast fashion would motivate consumers to use more resources, creating a trend of spending with higher amounts of items purchased. This hypothesis was developed based on the conclusion from the Literature Review section examining the generalized theories of conventional consumer behavior. This research will be focused on consumers in Southern California. With several large metropolitan cities, a growing sweatshop industry, and a majority of the United States' garment manufacturing industry centered in Los Angeles, it is important to focus on the potential capitals of fashion (Vemulakonda).

Study Design

As aforementioned, this study explores which specific psychological factors impact fast fashion consumer behavior, and whether or not conventional consumer behavior can be applied to the fast fashion industry. Because previous research was not centered around this industry, this study will aim to fill the gap using a two-part mixed-method study. This approach provided both a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the research question, allowing for more varied results and could capture specificity that would have been not revealed had only one component of the mixed-method study been utilized for data collection and analysis. Specifically, this study will gather quantitative data through a set of questions about respondents' shopping behaviors and underlying factors. This study will also gather qualitative data through a series of short interviews to test its hypothesis on major themes that were derived from the survey. As seen in the literature review, past researchers mostly conducted content analysis or meta-analysis to derive their information. Mixed-method study is important in this sense that it combines methods for more accurate results.

Sampling Method: Selection of Participants

The survey link was posted to the social media platforms Instagram and Facebook. All responses were collected. Respondents who were not fast fashion clothing consumers were not included in the results. Data was collected during a duration of three weeks for a longer period of access.

For the interview, three subjects were interviewed. This was selected by the availability of a respondent chosen from a random selection of different age and gender groups. In order to protect user anonymity, this study will not disclose the names of the subjects.

Results

It is important to define the themes that emerged from both the survey and the interviews. Out of 104 respondents, a total of five themes consistently emerged. These themes are (1) Trendiness of Apparel, (2) Broad Range of Apparel, (3) Age and Gender, (4) Affordability, and (5) Follower-Leader Relationship. The table below details the results of these themes. When necessary, respondents were given the option to select all that applied.

Table 1: Recurring Themes and Its Definitions

| Recurring Theme | Definition | % of Respondents aligning with this theme |
|------------------------------|--|---|
| Trendiness of Apparel | The attempt to attain clothing that is the latest fashion; has strong appeal for a short amount of time (Cachon, 2011) | 61.5% |
| Broad Range of Apparel | The ability to select unique items in contrast to a limited selection | 51% |
| Age and Gender | The impact of a person's age and gender on their interest in fast fashion | 73.6% |
| Affordability | The number of resources a person could afford/want to spend on fast fashion | 82.7% |
| Follower-Leader Relationship | The impact of an influencer online influencing a "follower" or a viewer to buy fast fashion | 87.7% |

The results from the interviews with available randomly selected survey participants were compiled into a table shown below. Participant 1 was randomly selected after narrowing the group down to ages 11-20 and Female. Participant 2 was randomly selected after narrowing the group down to ages 21-30 and Female. Finally, Participant 3 was randomly selected after narrowing the group down to ages 11-20 and Male. All three were asked for availability and permission to record before conducting the interview.

Table 2: Summary of Interview Results

| Participant # | Key Memories Regarding Fast Fashion | Corresponding Themes |
|---------------|--|--|
| 1 | <p>Decided to purchase from leading fast fashion brands after watching several videos on Youtube of influencers promoting products from various fast fashion companies</p> <p>Continued purchasing after realizing the affordability of the clothing available; bought several items for a lower price than other more conventional brands</p> <p>Spent around 50% of her allowance on fashion; 35% of her resources were spent on fast fashion apparel. Associated this to her age, because she conceded that she would not spend this amount of money if she had more adult responsibilities.</p> | <p>Follower-Leader Relationship</p> <p>Affordability</p> <p>Age</p> |
| 2 | <p>After being told by a friend about a leading fast-fashion brand, she was impressed by the broad range of items on the online store page and continued to buy from the company once a month.</p> <p>Watched several Youtubers who posted hauls of fast fashion items and followed influencers and the company itself on Instagram to see newer pieces.</p> <p>Realized the quick response fast fashion brands had with the newest trends; liked the accessible page of the latest trends to find items that suited her taste.</p> | <p>Broad Range of Apparel</p> <p>Follower-Leader Relationship</p> <p>Trendiness of Apparel</p> |
| 3 | <p>Enjoyed the affordability of the items; liked the easiness to stay on trend to be more fashionable because of the ability to purchase items monthly or even weekly</p> <p>Followed an Instagram account of a male model to see pieces he was wearing to replicate the outfits and purchase the items on a fast fashion website</p> <p>Because trends are constantly changing, it's hard to stay on trend. Fast fashion websites make it easy to find trendy clothing. Feels the need to stay on trend due to the people surrounding him; admitted was because of both the gender and age groups he belonged to.</p> | <p>Affordability</p> <p>Follower-Leader Relationship</p> <p>Age and Gender</p> |

In Table 2, the first column lists the number associated with the participant. As aforementioned, numbers were given for participants’ anonymity. The second column contains key events that the interviewee mentioned during the discussion. Lastly, the third column sorts the summarized event with a generalized theme that corresponded with the survey. If an interviewee (for instance, Participant 3) mentioned enjoying the affordability of fast fashion items, the matching theme was affordability.

This correspondence is significant because it justifies the five themes listed above in Table 1. Through Table 1 and Table 2, it was possible to identify the recurring themes from the mixed-method study. These themes will be analyzed to identify the underlying psychological factors of fast fashion consumer behavior.

Discussion

Limitations

Before delving into the findings of this study, it is important to address the limitations in this research process and therefore factors that will affect the effectiveness of the results. One substantial limitation was the sample size. While the survey was open to all residents of Southern California, it was difficult for those older than forty to participate, especially if they were male. This data can only accurately reflect Southern California fast fashion consumers with a large likelihood of variability. Lastly, it is difficult to determine how much the COVID-19 pandemic affected fast fashion consumer buying behavior, either negatively or positively.

Following the discussion on the themes derived from the data collection of the mixed-method study, this section will discuss the results as well as the leading conclusion derived from the data that addresses the goal of this entire study. While five themes were present in the study, three core themes underlying the respondents’ answers: (1) Age and Gender, (2) Affordability, and (3) Follower-Leader Relationships. Other themes were influenced by these three factors.

Age and Gender

Without taking age into consideration, the distribution of answers to the question “How often do you consume fast fashion?” given by female respondents is different from the answers given by male respondents with a P-value of 1.2×10^{-9} . The mode of female response is “Once a Week”, while the mode of male respondents is “Once a Month.” This indicates that females were more likely to turn towards fast fashion companies, especially if they bought fashion items once a week or twice a week.

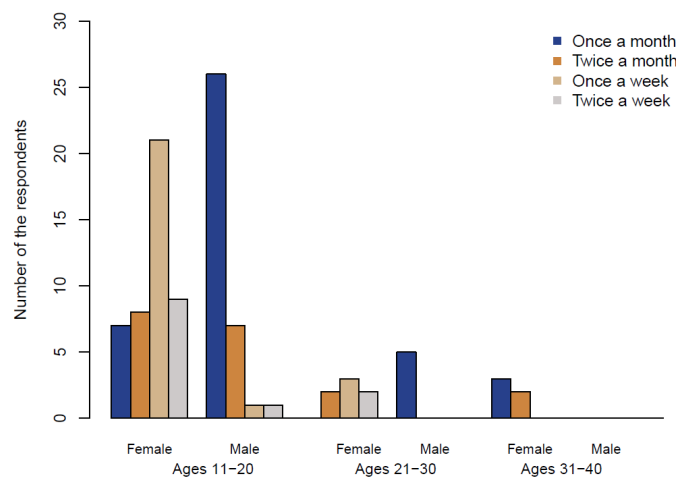


Figure 1. The relationship between age & gender and fast fashion purchases

Without taking gender into consideration, the data shows that the most frequent Southern Californian fast fashion consumers are in the age group between 11-20. It is logical that most fast fashion consumers fall into this age range because this age group is more concerned about fashion trends and fads than other age groups. Most respondents that checked the “Twice a week” option for the same question “How often do you consume fast fashion?” were part of this group. Participant 3 stated that he “felt the need to stay on trend” because of his surrounding friends who all dressed well. This correlates with prior findings. Researchers generally agree that, while older age groups are more predominantly focused on pressures of work and family obligations, younger age groups are more concerned over changing fashion trends and fads (Hervé and Mullet 304).

Compiling the two groups leads to an important discovery (Figure 1): women in the 11-20 age group are the most enthusiastic to buy from fast fashion brands. Due to social issues such as gender stereotypes, females can feel the need to spend more resources on fast fashion. This finding complies with the survey question, “Where do you find your information?” Respondents were given the option to select all that applied to their experience. Most respondents in the 11-20 age group answered that they were most influenced by “Friends/People Around You,” which 91.5% of respondents agreed with. This result is surprising; social media options such as Tiktok and Instagram fell short, coming only at 54.7% and 63.7% respectively. This source of information can be concluded to stem from peer pressure. During the interview with Participant 1, she remarked, “I get a lot of inspiration for what I buy at fast-fashion websites from my friends. While I could search up trends on Google or Instagram, it’s easier to figure out trendy or cool clothes by looking at people around me.” This response correlates to how many teenagers start to express themselves through clothes in a search for personal identity (O’Conner et al. 135). As a result, many teenagers become extremely fashion-conscious in contrast to several adults who regard the scrutiny of fashion as unimportant.

Affordability

The results of this study indicate that income or afforded resources for fashion is one of the most important demographic variables after fashion consciousness. This variable was hypothesized to play a major yet underlying role since the start of the study. Some respondents, especially those in the 11-20 age range, have a tight budget where affording high-end fashion such as Louis Vuitton or even middle-end fashion such as LuluLemon are deemed unattainable because of the high price range. Even with a laxer attitude towards money (Figure 2), 54.1% of respondents in ages 11-20 said that they use around 25% of their money on fashion. Participant 1 mentioned in her interview that “I spend about 50% of my allowance on fashion because I don’t need to worry about more adult responsibilities. I want to get more trendy clothes for less money so I spend about 1/3 of my allowance on fast fashion.” It becomes apparent that fast fashion’s popularity is largely due to being fashionable yet also affordable.

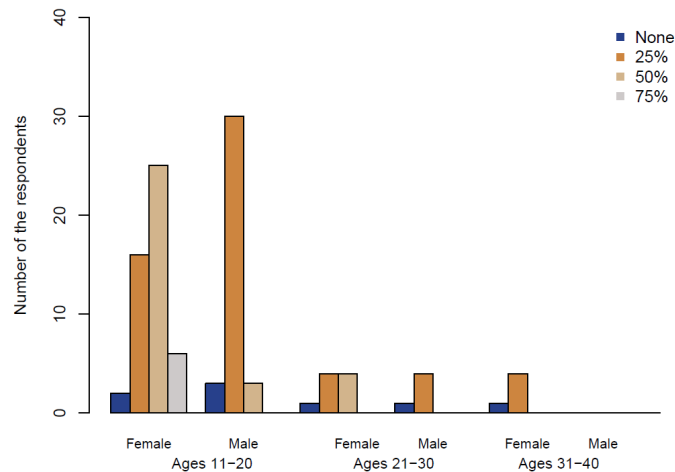


Figure 2. The relationship between age & gender and resources spent on fast fashion

Interview findings emphasize the importance of several methods for data collection. While all interviewees corroborated that affordability played a huge role in their reasons for choosing fast fashion, both Participant 1 and Participant 3 mentioned an underlying reason. Participant 3 stated in his interview that “I reach towards fast fashion brands to get more clothes. It’s not that I can only afford their clothing; it’s just easier to stay on trend by buying from fast fashion.” Participant 1 had a similar narrative. She also noted in her interview that “I don’t get as guilty when I don’t wear something that used to be trendy as often because I bought it for less money.” We can observe that a desire to stay in trend is prominent in reaching for fast fashion, which correlates with the lesser theme of trendiness of apparel.

This conclusion is corroborated by the survey question “When shopping, I will consider purchasing fast fashion items.” 55.7% of respondents stated that they agreed, while 19.8% stated that they strongly agreed. Only 4% of respondents stated that they either strongly disagreed or disagreed. While affordability is important, it is clear that consumers who choose fast fashion are propelled by cheaper access to the latest trendy items.

Follower-Leader Relationship

Out of the main five themes, the most prevalent in both the survey and the interview was the Follower-Leader Relationship. Defined in Table 1, this relationship was defined to be the impact of an online influencer enticing a “follower” to buy fast fashion. The survey results showed that friends or people around respondents influenced them the most. When asked the degree of agreement to the statement “I have bought a fashion product influenced by a content creator (e.g., YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Pinterest)”, 16.6% of answerers responded that they strongly agreed while 43.4% responded that they agreed. More than half of the respondents have been impacted by a creator’s persuasion to get a fast fashion item.

These findings imply that an opinion leader, an information source who easily and frequently influences others, holds substantial influence on potential fast fashion consumers. It is clear that content creators hold social power over their viewers. 64.2% of respondents said that they followed a fashion brand or fashion content creator on any social media platform. Furthermore, 55.7% of respondents agreed that they would buy an item that suits their taste if they saw their favorite influencer buy that specific product.

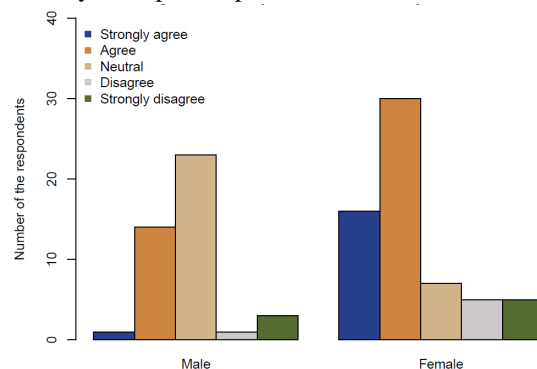


Figure 3. Gender differences responding to the question “I have bought a fashion product influenced by a content creator”

Respondents were asked to gauge their level of agreement with the statement “A favorite content creator influenced my style and my purchasing choices of fashion items” (Figure 3). 15.2% stated that they strongly agreed, 46.7% stated that they agreed, and 34.3% stated that they were neutral about this statement. All three interviewees confirmed this statement. Participant 2 admitted that “I watch a lot of Youtubers post hauls of what they got from fast fashion companies to see what items catch my interest. When I go on Instagram, the majority of posts on my feed are from companies that I follow like Yesstyle and Shein. They usually post the latest pieces, so I get a broader range of selection than I usually get with other brands.” Her last statement supported the lesser theme of a broader range of apparel, mentioned in Table 1.

Seeing as both the survey and interview validates this narrative, it can be concluded that outside influences (especially those on social media) greatly impact a person’s fast fashion consumer behavior. Therefore, fast fashion consumer behavior is strongly performative. With Southern Californian youth participating more on social media, the reliance on parasocial relationships and the relationship to self-create an image-based culture where new products easily gain and lose interest. The group size and unanimity of the influence may also affect the compliance of the follower; the desire to be part of a group can greatly override their own opinions (Hirschman and Holbrook 97). Therefore, the mixed-method study suggests that the greatest influence on a consumer is their attention to influencers, which makes them more likely to conform to meet group expectations.

Application to Conventional Fashion Consumer Behavior Theories

After interpreting the data results, it is evident that researchers can apply this information to conventional fashion consumer behavior theories.

As seen by Age and Gender, Affordability, and Follower-Leader Relationship, a consumer’s attitude and self-image greatly impacts their behavior. Psychological factors of fast fashion may be influenced by social and demographic issues. While group influences (as observed in the Follower-Leader Relationship section) can influence personal attitudes, a consumer’s emotion toward a certain product or brand makes a great impact on their decision to purchase. If a consumer believes a fast-fashion brand is affordable yet fashionable, this positive attitude will likely accumulate over time and influence sales greatly. The opposite will take place with a negative attitude. Attitude is affected by the consumer’s age and how many resources they can afford to use in fast fashion.

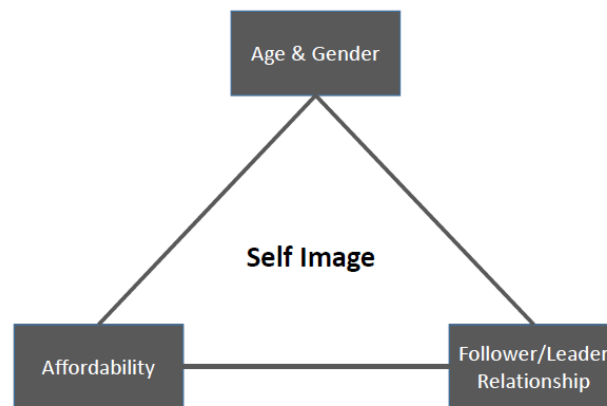


Figure 4. Foundation of the 3 Recurring Themes

The foundation of all three recurring themes was self-image (Figure 4), a factor that greatly impacted a consumer’s behavior. Self-image refers to a person’s evaluations of their own image and the image they perceive the public sees. The Age and Gender section reflected this greatly; due to peer pressure, consumers’ self-image was considered and influenced respondents to buy fast fashion items to stay on trend. This trend also occurred in the Affordability section. Because fast fashion brands offered trendier pieces for much less than their conventional fashion competitors, a consumer believed that fast fashion brands met their ideal clothing standards. Lastly, in the Follower-Leader Relationship section, “leaders” will influence a consumer to conform to the group’s taste and demands for clothing.

Fulfillment of Gaps in Pre-Existing Research

Prior concerns to pre-existing research were the lack of empirical data on psychological factors that could influence fast fashion consumer behavior. Previous studies focused mainly on the production and quality of fast fashion, leading to neglect of other equally important factors. Former studies mentioned in the literature review did not specify the

means they took to derive their information, or how prevalent psychological factors were. In this study, data was gathered using social media platforms for greater access to different age and gender groups. The most prominent gap, where no study questioned the application of psychological factors from fast fashion to conventional fashion brands, was filled when this study looked at psychological factors using a mixed-method study of both quantitative data collection using a survey and qualitative data collection using interviews.

Marketing Implications

There are strong marketing implications that can be derived from this research. The results of this study make it apparent that influencing a consumer's attitude to the brand is an effective way to increase sales and gain positive consumer and company relationships. Fast fashion companies looking to grow further should focus on expanding their range and trendiness of their apparel. They should target females in the 11-20 age group to expand their popularity and sales. Furthermore, a new company should get consumers involved in promoting their brand. Because opinion leaders are so influential, marketers should identify potential influencers to get more consumers involved, who will naturally involve other potential consumers by word-of-mouth recommendations. Further attraction of the company will be gained.

Conclusion

This mixed-method study summarized the psychological factors of fast fashion consumer behavior, and through the results concluded the application fashion marketers could implement. The study's results were separated into five themes: (1) Trendiness of Apparel, (2) Broad Range of Apparel, (3) Age, (4) Affordability, (5) Follower-Leader Relationship, Out of these five themes, the three most foundational themes (age, affordability, and Follower-Leader relationship) were pulled out and significant conclusions were generated from the results.

Therefore, the results suggest that the initial hypothesis was slightly off: while affordability was a strong influencer on consumer behavior, it was the ability to stay on trend to follow an opinion leader that made the affordability of fast fashion so valuable to consumers. Moreover, age was a primary factor that impacted consumers. Because younger consumers desired to appear more trendy, fast fashion was an appealing option to reach towards. Most importantly, fast fashion consumer behavior can not be reduced to one particular factor; several social and demographic variables play an influential role.

Further Research Recommendations

While this study attempted to effectively address its intended objectives, additional research is recommended to be conducted to verify if these generalizations are accurate across all markets. The limitations of this study offer several research incentives. Future research can be conducted to reach a larger sample size to have a more extensive analysis of the results. Furthermore, extending the geographical location from Southern California to the United States can include cultural considerations on fast fashion consumer behavior. One could also look into the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic to see how it affected fast fashion consumer buying behavior.

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