

Are Consumer Perceptions of Brand affected by Materialism?

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History of Textile Industry in India

The history of textiles in India dates back to the use of mordant dyes and printing blocks around 3000 BC. The diversity of fibres found in India, intricate weaving on its state-of-art manual looms and its organic dyes attracted buyers from all over the world for centuries. The British colonization of India and its industrial policies destroyed the innovative eco-system and left it technologically impoverished. Independent India saw the building up of textile capabilities, diversification of its product base, and its emergence, once again, as an important global player. Today, the textile and apparel sector employs 35.0 mn people (and is the 2nd largest employer), generates 1/5th of the total export earnings and contributes 4 per cent to the GDP thereby making it the largest industrial sector of the country. This textile economy is worth US \$37 bn and its share of the global market is about 5.90 per cent. The sector aspires to grow its revenue to US \$85bn, its export value to US \$50bn and employment to 12 million by the year 2010 (Texmin 2005).

Introduction

In social and cultural terms there is perhaps no single issue that dominates the modern psyche as much as fashion. It not only forms an important part of everyday consumption decisions, but is also a central component of almost all daily events, influencing what and where we eat, the clothing we wear, how we communicate and inherently the very nature of our thinking. 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. In reality fashion may not be the creation of powerful persuaders, but a normal outcome of a dynamic culture and common shifts in the style and tastes of individuals and groups.

In relation to fashion, consumer researchers have studied the links between consumer's personality traits and their buying behaviours for over 40 years (Browne & Kaldenberg, 1997). We can understand that People express themselves through consumption in an innumerable ways, and in our context, products and brands have an ability to communicate messages to others. The product style determines how consumers who own a particular product are perceived by others. There have been in the past a wide array of personality theories and measures developed to test the theoretical proposition that purchasing and consumption behaviour are related to aspects of consumers personality traits. 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.

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 references. 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 on summing 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, 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

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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. Success for a materialist depends to a large extent on the possession of products that depict certain desired images.

Having more materialistic values is associated with using possessions to convey an impression and also retaining possessions instead of disposing of them. By the same token, materialism places a very high importance to possessions and accords them a central role in life. Materialistic individuals are believed to value items that are consumed publicly and possess public meaning, rather than private, personal or subjective meanings.

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 and self-image, as well as giving individuals a way to impress others. 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. Customers under the age of 30 tend to be very conscious of their image and the products they possess or acquire. 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, a test was conducted focusing on various gender, nationality and materialism to understand brand value in the eyes of a consumer:

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

The methodology was based on the development and administration of a self-administered questionnaire using a convenience sample of students at various B-Schools in Mumbai. Materialism was measured using the Richins and Dawson (1992) 18-item measure focusing on happiness, centrality and success. In total 211 completed surveys were received and all the respondents were graduate marketing students under the age of 26. The sample had 176 males and 35 females. Of the 211, 202 were Indian and 9 were Non-Indian students.

Results

Do materialistic tendencies differ between males and females?

The research indicated that there is a slight difference between the males and females tendencies for difference in preferences on apparel purchase. The males had a higher average score. This means that there is a difference between the materialistic tendencies of males and females and males tend to be more materialistic.

Do materialistic tendencies differ between Indians and Non-Indians?

A survey was undertaken to explore if differences between Indian and Non- Indian respondents perception towards materialism. The results indicate that there is no significant difference between the average materialism score for Indians and Non-Indians.

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

The survey was taken to examine if any differences between males and females exist in perception of the Rohit Bal designer clothing. There was no statistically significant difference between the males and the females in their perception of Rohit Bal fashion clothing.

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

Non-Indians are defined as respondents who are not citizens/residents of India. Significant difference was found for only one item on the Designer Rohit Bal scale, this brand is purchased primarily for its image. The difference indicates that the Non-Indians had the higher average score. This means that the Non-Indians consider Rohit Bal to be an image brand more than the Indians do. This shows that both Indians and Non-Indians they differ only on the aspect of image but agree on all the other aspects like high priced exclusivity and prestige, etc.

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

A noteworthy relation exists between Designer Rohit Bal (Owning this brand is a symbol of success in the society) and Materialism. The respondents who viewed acquiring Rohit Bal collection as a symbol of success in the society possessed a higher degree of materialism. This can also imply that highly materialistic respondent rate owning Rohit Bal collection as a symbol of success in the society highly.

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 Indians and Non-Indians 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-Indians differed significantly in their perception of high priced fashion clothing compared to Indians. 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.

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, when 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, credit card usage is very low and especially in 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 him or his 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 it can better be understood that 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 and designer clothing both have major significance in today's many societies. However, some argue a fundamental contradiction of fashion and consumers' strong attachment to it exists. It is recommended that personal identity should perhaps be independent of material context, and we are in reality, which 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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Questionnaire

(I) Possession-defined success:

I admire people who own Designer Rohit Bal collection?

Some of the most important achievements in life include acquiring designer Rohit Bal clothing collection?

I don't place much emphasis on the amount Rohit Bal clothing collection people own as a sign of success?

The cloths I own say a lot about how well I'm doing in life?

I like to own cloths that impress people?

I don't pay much attention to the kinds of branded clothing other people possess?

(II) Acquisition centrality:

I usually buy only the sets of clothing I need?

I try to keep my life simple, as far as possession are concerned?

The branded clothing I own aren't all that important to me?

I enjoy spending money on Rohit Bal (or any other) designer cloths that aren't practical?

Do buying branded cloths give me a lot of pleasure?

I like a lot of luxury in my life?

I put less emphasis on branded clothing than most people I know?

(III) Acquisition as the pursuit of happiness:

I have all the things I really need to enjoy life?

My life would be better if I owned certain designer brands I don't have?

I wouldn't be any happier if I owned better designer clothing?

I'd be happier if I could afford to buy designer wear?

It sometimes bothers me quite a bit that I can't afford to buy all the brands I'd like.