FACTORS PREDICTING CONSUMER BEHAVIOR TOWARDS INTERNATIONAL FAST FASHION

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Abstract

Fast fashion became widely popular as consumers demanded fashionable yet affordable clothes, and companies started to expand worldwide. This paper aims to investigate consumer behavior towards international fast fashion brands as shaped by brand image, country of origin (COO), social influence, and price premium. The author also determines whether demographic characteristics are related to the behavior. Using questionnaire distributed to 351 consumers in Malaysia with linear regression analysis, it was found that the four attributes are correlated to dependent variable. With t-statistics value of 4.959 (Brand Image), 6.296 (COO), 3.622 (Social Influence), and 4.918 (Price Premium), it is indicated that they drive consumer behavior towards international fast fashion. Demographic characteristics such as age, gender, employment, and income are relevant (with significance value of below .05), while marital status and education level are not. Discussions and managerial implications are also provided.

Keywords: marketing, consumer behavior, fast fashion

Topic Groups: international business, marketing and consumer behavior, social science and business.

INTRODUCTION

Looking back to the past, the fashion industry was remarked by *haute couture,* a French term that describes high quality fashion design, in which garments are made to measure (Hibbert and Hibbert, 2005). According to Charles Frederick Worth, the early *haute couture* business figure, this business model offers extremely expensive fashion products destined for elite patronage. In other words, models are described as unique creations that nonetheless subject to endless repetition and adaptation, the original and the reproduction at one at the same time (Troy, 2002). Fashion weeks held in cities like Paris, Milan, New York and London exhibit *couture* designer brands for exclusive clients and the international press (Skov, 2006).

Easey (2009) argued that fashion has three levels of quality, in which *haute couture* is in the first level. One level below *haute couture is* called Designer Wear or ready-to-wear. The designs for this market sector have high quality in terms of fabric, cut and finish. Unlike *haute couture,* ready-to-wear fashion is not custom-made. However, the collections are still premier,

often limited edition and therefore exclusive (Dillon, 2011). A designer or a fashion house can release *haute couture* and ready-to-wear collection on the same season; they can produce exclusive and highly priced custom-made and ready-made dresses at the same time, and gain profit maximization by selling in limited edition. The lowest level is called *mass-market fashion*, where the fashion products are sold in lower price and targeted to mass market.

Reinach (2005) also argued that there has been a change in fashion design from ready-to-wear to *fast fashion*, where the designer imitates the most attractive trends at the fashion shows and remodels them into products that can immediately be put on the market (Leslie et al., 2014). This is the reason major retailers like Zara have developed information systems that bring designers, manufacturing teams and retails staff much closer together, that enable customers to enjoy fashion at more affordable prices, so that the company could achieve good levels of profit (Easey, 2009). This business model is later called *fast fashion*.

Fast fashion is a term used by today's fashion retailers to describe the move of the design from catwalk quickly in order to capture current trends in fashion. Hines and Bruce (2001) define fast fashion as a business model that gives the perception of fashionable and stylish clothes sold in more affordable prices. During the past two decades, fashion retailers have dramatically transfigured the fashion industry by pursuing the strategy of fast fashion, where retailers give response to changes in the market within just a couple of weeks compared to an industry average of six months (Nagurney et al., 2013). The fast fashion retailers market their textile and clothing products globally in order to enjoy cost benefits and in time, and to serve demanding consumer needs that moves quickly (Hines and Bruce, 2007). Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, and Pakistan were reported to be the major clothing producing countries in 2005 (Audet, 2007). Barnes and Lea-Greenwood (2006) found that consumer demand is extremely important that it has driven the rise of fast fashion; and in order to accelerate the supply chain to fulfill the demand, product development and quality control are the two stages of supply chain that are eliminated.

The new borderline of fast fashion is one where companies have the flexibility and skills in design to offer fashion products that customer perceives to be recent and unique, yet at the same time inexpensive to a mass market (Taplin, 2014). Study on Zara, H&M, and Gap found that clothing specialties in the world are more likely to gain the right balance between style, quality and price at the same time (Wei and Zhou, 2013). On the other hand, consumers have become more knowledgeable and flexible to adapt to the latest trends in fashion, given that the goods are inexpensive and continuously evolving (Cachon and Swinney, 2011; Taplin, 2014).

Bloomberg Businessweek revealed another interesting fact. Zara was reported to have more than 2,200 flagship stores worldwide. H&M has 3,300 stores in 54 countries, and Mango has a total of 1,700 stores in 100 countries worldwide. From the financial context, a study on fast fashion companies found that the estimate profit increase ranges from 22 to 28 percent due to the efficiency in supply chain (Hausman and Thorbeck, 2010). Expanding market by opening flagship stores has proven to be effective for fast fashion companies, particularly in Malaysia. H&M Malaysia, for instance, only had two stores in the country by the end of November 2012, yet successfully collected net sales of SEK84 million (USD12.19 million). After opening five more stores in 2013, the net sales skyrocketed by 77.84 percent or SEK379 million (USD54.99 million).

Fast fashion companies have to deal with designers, suppliers, manufacturers, distributors, retailers, consumers, and many others. Consumer is also one of the major players in the industry and is able to determine the future of a fashion business. With the many brand choices offered to them today, inability to provide excellent and satisfactory goods and services to consumers may lead to business failure, as they can easily switch from one brand to another. With relatively affordable prices available in the market, consumers today hold strong power, allowing them to select any brand they want, evaluating based on price, quality, image, style, and other factors. This is the reason the complexity in fast fashion industry is not only on its supply chain management but also on its marketing and branding effort.

THEORY

The independent variables in this research are determined by reviewing past studies. Researchers have found that behavior towards fashion brands could be driven by brand image, COO and social influence.

Brand Image

The concept of '*image*' can be described as an overall impression that an entity establishes on the minds of others, and it is the overall feeling towards a brand, including thought and feeling related to product attributes, product functions, and advertisements (Dither, 1985). Hendon and Williams (1985) argued that brand image has also been defined as the personification of a brand that expresses a consumer's self-image. It may strongly relate to brand name, as brand names are considered as strong cues for quality (Gentry et al, 2006). Research in fashion industry by Forsythe (1991) has found that brand name influenced shoppers' perception of price.

Brand image is a critical concept for marketing managers as it has been explained by research findings, such as those affirming that considerations about image can guide the choice in product purchasing (Dolich, 1969; Dobni and Zinkhan, 1990). In its concept, it matters how intensively a brand is "*felt*" and whether they are relevant to the behavioral act in purchasing (Bird and Ehrenberg, 1970). Sirgy (1982) believed that an image of a product has to be reflected by its physical features, such as price, packaging, or label. In the context of fashion, consumers find brand as one of the most important attributes for products to be called *fashionable* (Iman, 2013). Study by Davis (1985) indicated that branded skirts were found to have higher quality than non-branded ones. This explains why the image of a certain fashion brand represents what a consumer is willing to pay more money to acquire the particular brand (Kort et al., 2006). In recent study by Tajuddin et al., (2014), it was found that Malaysian women perceived fashion goods as those with quality attributes and were highly motivated to purchase branded fashion products.

Galilee (2002) revealed that male consumers of international fast fashion brands associated the brands with high cost, quality and exclusivity. From a study by Hong and Koh (2002), it was suggested that there were three consumer segments in Korean fashion market; brand oriented consumers, budget-oriented consumers, and fashion-oriented consumers. In the UK and Switzerland, Ismail and Melewar (2014) recently found that brand image had shown to have positive significance with consumer-brand relationship in the case of fashion brands.
Based on these past studies, the author derived Hypothesis 1: *Brand image influences consumer behavior towards international fast fashion.*

Country of Origin (COO)

COO is explained as the country where corporate headquarters of the company is located or based in (Johansson et al., 1985; Ozsomer and Cavusgil, 1991; Al-Sulaiti and Baker, 1998). Research in the past showed that the knowledge of COO in fact influences buyers' perceptions of products (Ahmed and d'Astous, 1995). COO indicates country image perceptions, which result to two attributes called *perceived quality* and *purchase value* (Roth and Romeo, 1992). The information of COO and its impact to other information during consumer's purchase decision-making process are important in highly industrialized or developed countries (Wall et al., 1991). Past researchers found that geography-based labeling methods are successful at shaping market premiums, as the common reputation of the product is finer (Laureiro and Umberger, 2007). When it comes to high cost products, COO was found to have a major role for consumer behavior (Cordell, 1991).

Consumers in developing countries also tend to have more positive attitudes towards products from developed countries than those from local producers (Shen et al., 2002). In terms of fashion, most products available in Chinese market are made in European countries like Italy and France, and such products have been successfully sold there (Lin and Chen, 1998; Shen et al., 2002). This proves that COO is supposed to have a greater influence on buyers (e.g., the '*made in*' labels on fashion goods) (Wall et al., 1991).

Piron (2000) revealed that consumers' willingness to purchase fashion products was significantly determined by that product's COO. Khan et al. (2012) found that in purchasing fashion goods, elite Pakistani consumers paid attention to "*made in*" labels to quickly gain the COO information. Zhou et al. (2010) also studied Chinese consumers' behavior toward foreign brands and showed that foreign brands were generally considered as having higher brand value compared to local brands. Kashi (2013) has shown that the need to be unique among Iranian consumers influenced the likeliness to purchase foreign products or services. The effect of manufacturing country, country of parts and COO were also examined by Ha-Brookshire (2012) in the U.S., and revealed that COO impacted consumers' purchase preferences and perceived prices of clothing products.

Based on these past studies, the author derived Hypothesis 2: *COO influences consumer behavior towards international fast fashion.*

Social Influence

One of the most pervasive determinants of an individual's behavior is the influence of those around him (Bunrkrant and Cousineau, 1975). Brands used by member groups can become connected to the mental of consumers (Escalas and Bettman, 2003). Marketers have also accepted that reference group construct is important in at least some types of consumer decision-making (Bearden and Etzel, 1982). McGuire (1974) argued that acceptance, affection, and affiliation are basic human need. Hence, social comparison theory explains that individuals look to others in order to evaluate their own opinions, appearance, and ability (Festinger, 1954; Workman and Lee, 2010). Social group is closely associated with social image, or consumer's perception of the esteem in which the consumer's social group holds the brands (Lassar et al., 1995).

Dias-Meneses (2010) found that the process of consumer interest in fashion is related to the need for social acceptance and approval. Fashion is a form of collective behavior that is

socially accepted by a group of individuals (Kaiser, 1997; Kim and Hong, 2011), and for centuries, clothing has traditionally symbolized various social, cultural and economic signifiers about their owners/wearers (Finkelstein 1991; Edwards 1997; Galilee, 2002).

Today's fashion is mostly consumer-driven, and market trends originate in many types of social groups (Crane, 2000; Kawamura, 2006). Cao et al. (2014) found that in Germany, apparel purchases are characterized by uncertainty and are susceptible to social influences. Generally, people in a social group purchase fashion goods in order to imitate people who are similar to them and people whom they want to emulate (Tassier, 2004).

Yalkin and Rosenbaum-Elliott (2014) found that British female adolescents cultivated symbolic and other consumer skills and knowledge about fashion through practice and talk within their friendship groups. Jin and Kang (2010) conducted a study among Chinese college students and revealed that among social factors, face-saving had a direct effect on purchasing intention of foreign jeans among young Chinese consumers, as they believed they had to dress properly in public. Kestler and Paulins (2014) found that social relationships like mothers and daughters also influenced perception and behavior in fashion consumption.

Based on these past studies, the author derived Hypothesis 3: *Social influence influences consumer behavior towards international fast fashion.*

Literature gap: Price Premium

Miller and Mills (2011) argued that brand value directly affects the willingness of consumers to pay a premium price. O'Cass and Choy (2008) believed that prestige, the high levels of quality, price and a brand's ability to act as a status symbol are contributing factors that affect a consumers to pay a premium. Consumers perceive products with high quality as more expensive and products with lesser quality as cheaper; or higher-priced products have better quality and lower-priced products have lower quality (Ha-Brookshire, 2012).

According to many studies, consumers with high fashion involvement tend to be less price-sensitive than consumers with low fashion involvement (Naderi, 2013). Study by Biehl-Missal (2013) revealed that H&M's higher-priced brand *Collection of Style* features many of plastic garments that have no hemlines at all. Laforet and Chen (2012) showed that price-quality relationship is a part of the dimensions of brand trust. O'Cass and Choy (2008) did a study on Chinese generation Y and their fashion consumption behavior and found that consumers were actually willing to pay a premium price, not only for high-status fashion brands also for low-status fashion brands.

Based on these past studies, the author derived Hypothesis 4: *Price premium influences consumer behavior towards international fast fashion.*

Demographic characteristics

Men and women are related to shopping, even though their behaviors may differ. While women are more likely to be affected by brand name, men tend to seek for quality as reflected by product function (Sahay et al., 2012). In the context of fashion shopping, they shop in a different manner, where men prefer brands that can speak their personality and product function, while women prefer brands that make them look better in front of their peer groups

(Cox and Dittmar, 1995). Furthermore, study by Workman and Lee (2010) revealed that women put a greater concern for physical features and public self-consciousness than men.

Bagga and Bhatt (2013) explained that consumers aged 25 and above focus on convenience when shopping online, as working people like them tend to have less time to shop, while those below 25 are highly affected by promotions. Age also influences individuals to become fashion leaders. Goldsmith et al. (1991) found that younger females have greater tendency to behave in a way that reflects their role in fashion leadership, such as fashion shopping. American generation Y consumers prefer clothing brands that speak the *cool* idea such as Abercrombie and Fitch, while generation X consumers prefer business attires such as Banana Republic (Dias, 2003).

Marital status has also been found to be a driving factor, including that of online shopping (Chhikara, 2010). Wu et al. (2011) proved that when somebody gets married and becomes older, the probability to become an Internet user decreases; hence it is unmarried consumers who have higher probability to purchase things online. It was also found to be a key factor determining male fashion leadership, where unmarried men have greater eagerness to become fashion leaders (Koksal, 2014). Similar to this finding, Vigneron and Johnson in 1999 found that unmarried consumers aged approximately 35 years old with net income of €50,000 tend to purchase luxury fashion goods in order to express their economic and social status, and to enjoy high quality products (Amatulli and Guido, 2011). On the other hand, married consumers are more likely to find problems in clothing products they purchase (Liu and McClure, 2001).

Jensen (1991) believed that in order to effectively study consumer behavior, one must consider consumers' education. Even for purchasing apparel products in rural communities, consumer's education level plays an important role (Miller et al., 1998). In Sri Lanka, consumers with high education level tend to shop fashion products from western countries, as they perceive them with high quality (Rathnayake, 2011). Rosencraz (1962) also approves that consumers with high level of fashion awareness are usually those with higher education level (Goldsmith et al, 1991).

Employment or occupation is another demographic character proven to be a factor predicting consumer behavior. Shim and Bickle (1994) found that the occupation of a consumer could determine what and where he shops. Canadian consumers with higher occupational level prefer foreign fashion products than local products (Wall and Heslop, 1996). In the UK market, the higher the income, the greater purchase ability consumers have (Weale, 1990). In terms of fashion, occupation was one of the factors that shape an individual to become a fashion leader among older consumers (Polegato and Wall, 1980; Huddleston et al., 1993). Compared to students and non-employees, female employees are more likely to be aware of fashion brands, hence they are more likely to involve in fashion buying (Shim and Kotsiopulos, 1993). In India, Gupta (2012) found that the higher the income of Indian consumers, the higher the tendency to purchase products of international brands.
Based on these past studies, the author derived:
Hypothesis 5: *Gender is relevant to consumer behavior towards international fast fashion.*
Hypothesis 6: *Age is relevant to consumer behavior towards international fast fashion.*
Hypothesis 7: *Marital status is relevant to consumer behavior towards international fast fashion.*

Hypothesis 8: *Education level is relevant to consumer behavior towards international fast fashion.*
Hypothesis 9: *Employment is relevant to consumer behavior towards international fast fashion.*
Hypothesis 10: *Income is relevant to consumer behavior towards international fast fashion.*

METHODS

To answer the hypotheses, the author conducted a survey by distributing online and paper questionnaires to a total of 360 fast fashion consumers in Klang Valley, Malaysia, and received 351 valid responses. To ensure the validity of the survey, the author did a short screening by asking whether correspondents have experience with fast fashion shopping lately. There are 20 Likert-scale questions asked in the questionnaire, with Cronbach's Alpha of .890. The data were all analyzed using SPSS Statistics.

FINDINGS

From a total of 351 correspondents, the author classified correspondents as follows:

Table 1: Classification of Correspondence

	Frequency	**%**
Gender		
Male	112	31.9
Female	239	68.1
Age		
20 and below	89	25.4
21 – 25	151	43.0
26 – 30	70	19.9
31 – 35	22	6.3
36 and above	19	5.4
Marital Status		
Not Married	311	88.6
Married	40	11.4
Education Background		
Graduate or equivalent	236	67.2

Postgraduate or equivalent	115	32.8
Employment		
Employee	201	57.3
Student	150	42.7
Income		
RM1,000 – RM1,500	148	42.2
RM1,501 – RM2,000	67	19.1
RM2,001 and above	136	38.7

Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation of the Response

Statement	Mean	Std. Deviation
Brand Image		
I believe international fast fashion brands have good quality.	3.64	.815
I have at least one favorite fast fashion brand that I buy over and over.	3.75	1.008
I believe that branded fast fashion products last long.	3.50	.910
I only buy fast fashion products if I recognize the brand.	3.35	1.090
COO		
The country where a fast fashion brand comes from is important for my purchase decision.	2.74	1.205
The made-in aspect is important for me when purchasing fast fashion products.	2.82	1.233
I prefer to buy international than local fast fashion brands.	2.73	1.116
I prefer to buy fast fashion products from developed countries than developing countries.	2.81	1.093
Social Influence		
My colleagues and friends say that international fast fashion brands are unique and special.	3.14	1.048

It is important that my colleagues and friends like the clothes I purchase.	3.01	1.193
I often ask my colleagues' or friends' opinion when purchasing fast fashion products.	3.05	1.115
I pay attention to fashion brands my colleagues and friends purchase and wear.	3.19	1.128
Price Premium		
I believe that the higher the price of a fast fashion products, the better its quality.	2.99	1.150
The price I pay for fast fashion products is worth its quality.	3.52	.985
I do not mind paying more if the clothes have reputable brand and quality.	3.57	1.077
Consumer Behavior		
I avoid purchasing fast fashion brands with poor image.	3.57	1.045
I will buy fast fashion products from a country that I think has favorable image.	3.07	1.084
I like to purchase fast fashion products that make me look good in front of my colleagues and friends.	3.71	.933
I purchase fast fashion products not only when they are on sale.	3.31	1.058
I am willing to pay higher price for recognized fast fashion brands.	3.20	1.066

The correlation between independent variables and dependent variable was tested and all the four independent variables are significant to the dependent variable. From Pearson Correlation analysis, data had it that the R-value indicating the positive or negative relationship between variables is above the rule of thumb of .05 for all independent variables. The R-value for Brand Image, COO, Social Influence, and Price Premium is .592, .517, .492, and .587 respectively. Also, with a β value of .297, Brand Image came up as the most influential factor of consumer behavior towards international fast fashion brands, followed by Price Premium (.243), COO (.216) and Social Influence (.162).

Using Linear Regression analysis to determine how much the changes in independent variable influence dependent variable, the author generated the value of R Square of .510. The analysis also showed F-value of 90.399 at two degree of freedom, with p-value of 0.000, which justified the author to proceed to the hypothesis testing. Referring to t-statistics obtained from the same test, Hypothesis 1, 2, 3 and 4 were tested. The t-statistics for Brand Image, COO,

Social Influence and Price Premium was 4.959, 6.296, 3.622 and 4.918 respectively, indicating that the four hypotheses are accepted.

One-way ANOVA results have it that there are four segments related to consumer behavior (Gender, Age, Employment, and Monthly Income), reflected by their significance values of below .05. Gender, Age, Employment, and Income score significance value of .000, .008, .001, and .009 respectively. The other two segments (Marital Status and Education Level) are found to be irrelevant, with significance value of .772 and .233 respectively. Thus, Hypothesis 5, 6, 9, 10 are accepted while Hypothesis 7 and 8 are rejected.

DISCUSSIONS

Results of this study, where brand image, COO, social influence and price premium influence consumer behavior towards international fast fashion brands reflect the findings of past studies. This means Malaysian fast fashion consumers behave just like consumers in any other country. The findings of this research tell what Malaysian consumers search for in fashion goods they purchase. Despite the many studies done on fashion, there aren't many that specifically explore the shopping behavior of Malaysian fast fashion consumers.

By revealing how consumers behave towards certain brands or products, it explains that this study is closely related to psychology. Many behavioral economists and psychologists have tested factors predicting consumer behavior, and when it comes to fashion, they usually relate one's fashion behavior with self-actualization, emotions, or social influence. The findings of this study are therefore expected to give a new insight among future researchers who study the behavior of Malaysian fashion consumers.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

It is worth noting that there might be rationales for gender, age, employment, and income to have significant relationship with consumer behavior towards international fast fashion. How interest in fast fashion consumption affects both male and female consumers could be explained by the reality that people, in spite of their gender, need fashion on a daily basis. People purchase fashion to be worn at home or outsides, with different styles for different occasions. Moreover, studies on psychology have found that fashion clothing involvement does not have gender, meaning that men and women are both involved in fashion.

Fast fashion business today offers products for both men and women. Before this, there were many that only concentrated on certain gender, until they saw the opportunities to expand their market to a wider segmentation. One of the opportunities is the increased awareness of fashion among men, thus increasing their fashion involvement. As a result, fast fashion companies whose target market was only female now have diversified their brands and opened flagship stores or new product line, selling only men's fashion goods. For example, Zara came up with Zara Man, Mango with H.E. from Mango, and Topshop with Topman.

The presence of fast fashion brands specially dedicated to men is what makes male consumers have wider selection of fashion goods. What's more, fast fashion brands today offer even more choices for consumers of all ages. Following high-end fashion houses that introduced exclusive product line for kids (Armani, Dolce & Gabbana, and Versace to name a few), fast fashion companies like Uniqlo, Mango and H&M have also taken further opportunity by

opening product line for kids. In March 2015, *Forbes* reported that Zara opened a new division, Zara Kids, which has a total of 162 stores in four countries.

Employment status or occupation also affects consumer behavior towards fast fashion brands. Companies offer exclusive collection for office attire. Uniqlo, for instance, has special sections of work attire that display formal and semi-formal business wears for adult, both men and women. Consumers looking for fashionable ways to dress at work or any business occasion can now simply walk into fast fashion stores and pick any attire they wish, at relatively lower price than designer attire. This is what makes fast fashion stores regularly visited by not only millennial shoppers who are often students, but also adults who are mainly employees. Also, with desirable prices offered during the sale season, companies enable consumers to get exclusive clothes they want in a better price. Hence, consumers can get an exclusive Zara dress by just waiting for a few months until the price goes down.

The abovementioned description implies that consumers with different income level are still able to enjoy fast fashion shopping. It is also quite unpredictable to see that more than 42 percent of the consumers asked in this study have monthly income of less than RM1,500, yet they are willing to shop fast fashion products. However, as further finding tells, it is those with income of RM2,000 and above who have stronger relationship with fast fashion behavior. This is perhaps because consumers with higher income are more likely to think less about price, as long as they can enjoy the good quality of the product. Fast fashion consumers seek for quality and style with minimum cost. Although they believe that price equals quality, being able to offer even lower price can bring a competitive advantage to the companies. They can maintain their cost leadership strategy while at the same time offer exclusive image.

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