

Understanding the Fashion Followers Propensity to Observe as a Purchase Decision Heuristic

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ABSTRACT

This paper is aimed to investigate the tendency of consumers in observing the purchase behavior of others as a purchase decision heuristic in order to simplify the process of decision making. The study is conducted in the area of fashion clothing by measuring the consumers' propensity to observe and testing the likely effects of individual consumer factors which are consisted of: brand choice overload, consumer self-confidence, and consumer propensity to conform on propensity to observe. The demographic factor of gender is expected to mediate the relationships between consumer self-confidence, propensity to conform, and consumer propensity to observe. A random of shopping mall visitors are asked to volunteer to participate in the survey by filling the paper-based questionnaires. The relationships of the variables which are formed for this study are tested using IBM SPSS Statistics 19. The findings show that there is a significant positive relationship between brand choice overload/consumer conformity and propensity to observe. Surprisingly, the negative relationship between consumer self-confidence and propensity to observe is not supported as it was expected. Having higher rates of propensity to conform among male consumers and higher levels of self-confidence among female consumers are the findings which was not expected. The major contribution of this research is to highlight the role of consumers' tendency to observe the purchase behavior of other consumers to resolve their own product choice dilemmas through measuring the effects of influencing factors on propensity to observe.

KEY WORDS: Consumer behavior, Consumer risk, Buying behavior

1. INTRODUCTION

Many studies have been done in the area of fashion clothing in order to better understand the behavior and motives of fashion consumers. Fashion is defined when members of a social group are adopted to temporarily practice a behavior because at that time and situation, the behavior is perceived to be appropriate (Sproles, 1979b). In clothes and bodily adornments, the style which is the most accepted is defined as "fashion" by Venkatesh et al. (2010). Consider the times in which consumers have had too many brands or products to choose among: which brand to buy or which product features they should consider in their purchasing environment. Having a computational decision making in a world with numerous product choice and voluminous information has got impractical (Ashley et al. 2005). The increasing amounts of decision-relevant information and the number of products can lead to consumer confusion and the results would be stress, frustration and sub-optimal decisions (Vincent-Wayne & Vassilios, 1999). The three main sources of confusion based on the studies of Vincent-Wayne and Vassilios (1999) consist of:

- (1) There are too many choices for products and stores
- (2) There are high product similarities
- (3) There are unclear information distributed through marketing channels

The exceeded levels of confusion would bring cognition and unclarity to the consumers and confused consumer would respond in a way to reduce the confusion through some strategies such as share/delegate the purchase and seek additional information (Vincent-Wayne & Vassilios, 1999).

One way of seeking additional information is observing the way other consumers do purchase (Park & Lessig, 1977). The consumer decision making process can be simplified through observing the behavior of other consumers and this would provide information that can be considered as a source of consumers' "evaluations, aspirations, and behavior" (Park & Lessig, 1977, p. 102).

Based on the studies of Park and Lessing (1977), consumers may be affected by others or reference groups and the reasons for their motives to be affected by others are consisted of:

- 1) The information that can be obtained through a valuable source.
- 2) The rewards that can be gained through the referents.
- 3) The connection that can be formed between self-image and the social world.

So based on Park and Lessing (1977), any of these three reasons may motivate the individuals to make inferences by observing the behavior of others who are significant. The consumers' tendency to observe the

purchase behavior of other consumers with the purpose of simplifying their own process of decision making is called consumer propensity to observe (Simpson et al., 2008). Consumer propensity to observe is consisted of observing the known consumers, the unknown consumers or both. Known consumers refer to observing the purchase behavior of family members, friends and the individuals such as a group member, classmates, co-workers and etc. Unknown consumers refer to observing the purchase behavior of consumers which are in the same peer groups but do not have any prior interactions. In the purchasing environment, all consumers, more or less, consider the purchase activities of others in their own buying and the level of this behavioural trait is affected by some factors such as consumer traits and situations like lack of knowledge. However, consumer propensity to observe has not been studied widely in previous researches, especially when considering it in the context of fashion clothing consumers. The most related research at this area have been done by Simpson et al., (2008) in that they considered the consumer propensity to observe related to all categories of products and not limited to fashion clothing.

In order to have a better understanding of fashion clothing consumers' propensity to observe, individual-specific traits should also be considered as the factors that may affect their propensity to observe tendency. The propensity of fashion clothing consumers to observe others' purchase behavior in order to simplify their own purchasing decisions (after this, propensity to observe) is affected by the consumers' feeling of choice overload in confronting with too many choices, self-confidence related with making satisfying consumer decision, conformity, and the effects of gender (male/female) on conformity and feeling of self-confidence in consumer tendency to observe. Exploring the fashion clothing consumer behavior related with the trait of tendency to observe may provide data that enable retailers active in the area of fashion to have a better understanding of consumers and also take advantages of marketing opportunities afforded through this study.

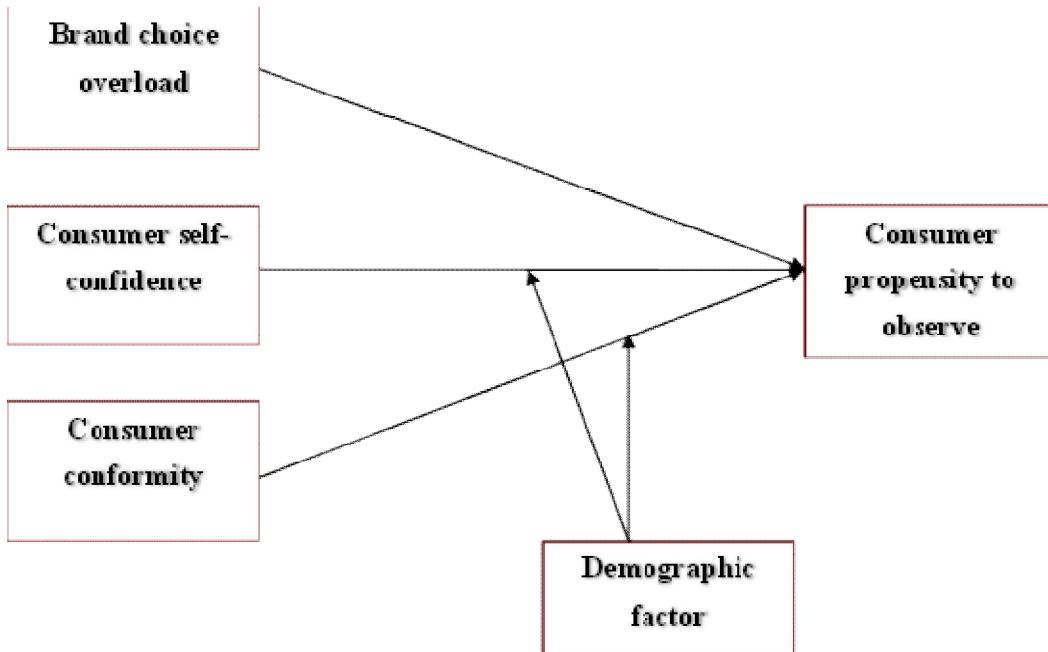
2. METHODOLOGY

The consumers' tendency in observing the purchase behavior of others can be described by cognitive learning theory. The theory refers to the process of gathering and synthesizing the new information with the existing information in memory and then processing the information in order to find an answer for the related issue (Edell & Staelin, 1983). Based on this theory, fashion clothing consumer may look at the others' purchase behavior as a source of information in the process of collecting new information. On the other hand, the findings of prior researches show that consumers are less motivated in processing additional information when they can have access to the opinion of others, so they will follow group opinions (Maheswaran & Chaiken, 1991). Based on this situation, fashion clothing consumers may look at the purchase behavior of others as facilitating heuristics and do not feel a need to engage in a complex task of acquiring and processing the information that help them with their purchase decision making. The consumer's observational tendencies may have a root in consumers' effort in finding a way to simplify mental processes.

In some social theories such as social comparison theory, reference group theory, and attribution theory, the consumers' tendency in observing the ways others do purchase is defined based on the consumer's motivation in decreasing the social risks in order to have a better product choice. Fashion clothing belongs to the category of highly visible social goods, so consumers take greater social risk in purchasing this category of products (Quigley, Jr. & Notarantonio, 2009). In social comparison theory, individuals try to match themselves with others in order to have improvement (Festinger, 1954). Based on the theory of reference group, consumers would adopt the behavior of others, both known others or strangers if they identify with them. According to the identification process of social influence, the tendency of an individual in adopting the attitude and behavior of others would increase if he or she identifies with them (Kelman, 1961).

In attribution theory, consumers make sense of their surroundings by observing the purchases of strangers. In this way, the purchase behavior of strangers may create positive characteristics for the product or brand that is purchased by the stranger (Kelley & Michela 1980, p. 458). The consumers' tendency in observing the purchase behavior of others as a way to facilitate their own purchasing decisions can be justified through the mentioned social theories. Simpson et al., (2008) examined the consumers' tendency to observe others in a general concept by investigating the consumer behavior under all categories of products. The degree in which a consumer has access to relevant information as an external factor, alongside with the level of self-confidence and conformity as internal factors may impact his tendency to observe. Observing the purchase behavior of unknown and known consumers can be considered as a source of information. The information gained through this channel can help consumers in the process of decision making. Figure 1 shows the theoretical framework for the paper.

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2.1 MODEL CONCEPTUALIZATION:

Brand choice overload: Keller and Staelin (1987) mentioned that consumers increased numbers of alternatives and attributions to choose among would lead to a decrease in the quality of their choice. Based on the studies of Schwartz (2004), choice overload has negative effects on consumers' decision making and the effects would be as anxiety, stress and depression. Andrews & Manrai (1998) believed that facilitating heuristics would be applied by those individuals who are under brand choice overload stress. Looking at the ways others do purchase may be considered as such a decision heuristic. In this case, an individual may purchase the same brand that others have purchased because he or she believes that what is chosen by others would be a good thing.

H1: There is a positive relationship between consumers perceived brand choice overload and consumer propensity to observe.

Consumer self-confidence: Consumers' self-confidence, have a direct effect on their external search for information (Wells & Prensky, 1996). Low self-confidence consumers seek more for information than self-confident consumers (Locander & Hermann, 1979). Observing other consumers' purchasing behavior can be considered as a source of information.

H2: The higher level of self-confidence in consumers is negatively related to consumer propensity to observe. The different behavior of men and women can become evident in the framework of consumption (Kolyesnikova et al., 2009, p.200). In consumer research the concept of gender differences have been investigated in the early years of 1960 by (Costa, 1994). Based on the study of Cooke-simpson and Voyer (2007), it has been found that in performing Mental Rotations Test, men have more confidence in the accuracy of their response in comparison with women when the test is administered without time constraint. In other studies, it has been found that the masculinity trait is related with assertion, independency, and rationality and femininity trait is related with relational and interdependent aspects (Cross & Markus, 1993; Palan, 2001).

H3: The negative relationship between consumer self-confidence and consumer propensity to observe becomes stronger under femininity population.

Propensity to conform: With regards to conformity, two types of influence processes have been distinguished which includes: informational and normative (Venkatesan, 1966). Consumers' tendency in looking at the way others do purchase and consider the way others evaluate a product as a source of information may be inferred through normative effects (Cohen & Golden, 1972; Burnkrant & Cousineau, 1975). People's tendency to conform is not limited and it contains a broad range of circumstances. The sources that people use for their conformity

consists of: observing others (Newcomb, 1943), unknown peers (Latane& Darley, 1968), reference groups (Cohen, 2003), and social norms in which they reject it privately (Prentice & Miller, 1996).

H4: The higher level of consumers' propensity to conform is positively related to consumer propensity to observe.

Eagly (1978) stated that females' tendency to conformity is more than males. Based on the studies of Santee and Jackson (1982), the rate of conformity is higher with females than males and in the context of normative and attributional judgments, conformity is judged as a more positive, self-defining act by females.

H5: The positive relationship between consumer propensity to conform and consumer propensity to observe becomes weaker under masculinity population.

2. SURVEY INSTRUMENTS AND SAMPLING:

The following scales were used to measure the variables of this study. For measuring brand choice overload, the researcher used 5 items from 11 items which was listed in brand choice overload scale by Simpson et al., (2008). Since there were no known measures that specifically assessed brand choice overload, they originally generated the relevant items for this scales. In order to measure consumer self-confidence, the researcher used 6 items which was taken from 31 items that was listed in the scale of measuring self-confidence by Bearden et al., (2001). In order to measure consumer propensity to conform, the researcher used 7 items which was taken from 13 items unidimensional measure of "attention to social comparison information" which was created by Lennox and Wolfe (1984). In order to measure consumer propensity to observe, the researcher used 7 items which was taken from 15-items to assess consumer propensity to observe scale that was created by Simpson et al., (2008).

All the scales which were used for this study are one-directional. Although applying reverse-worded items have been referred to as a challenging issue by many academics (Churchill & Peter, 1984), but there is no theory that clearly supports one side or rejects the other one. So the scale that was only positive or negative was used by many studies.

The researcher has changed the initial words of each item to adjust it to the fashion clothing context. For example the main item of propensity to observe scale "I like to observe what other unknown consumers are buying before I make a purchase" has been changed to "I like to observe what other consumers are buying before I make clothing purchase even though I do not know them" in order to adjust it to the fashion clothing purchase situation. For gathering data, random shopping mall visitors were asked to volunteer to participate in a short survey by filling up the questionnaire.

The whole number of questionnaires that was collected by the researcher is 324, where 32 of them were rejected because the respondents did not complete and answer all the items. A total of 294 questionnaires were used for the analysing section.

The descriptive statistic technique will be used for computing the percentages and frequencies of demographic variables which consists of: age, gender, race, and education. In order to do the statistical analysis for the gathered data, the researcher will use the statistical software which is called IBM SPSS 19. Pearson correlation technique and other related analysis will be used to test the relationships between dependent and independent variables of this study.

The analysis shows that two third of the respondents were female. The highest percentage of respondents belongs to the category of 20-24 years old individuals with 67.3 percent. In terms of educational levels, most of the respondents with the percentage of about 68.4 have obtained degree level. The majority of respondents are of Chinese origin with 56.1 percent.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 RELIABILITY TEST:

Since no items of the questionnaire have been negatively worded, there would be no need to change and reverse some of the items before running the reliability test. The results for the reliability test for factors such as: Products overload, consumer self-confidence, consumer conformity, observation, and purchase intention are summarized as below:

Table 1: Reliability Test

Scale	Alpha	No. of items
Product overload	0.738	5
Consumer self-confidence	0.871	6
Consumer conformity	0.814	7
Observation	0.741	7

The alpha value calculated for 32 items includes products overload, consumer self-confidence, consumer conformity, observation, and purchase intention are more than 0.7 and show that all items are reliable. Items contributing to consumer self-confidence, consumer conformity, and purchase intention have the reliability value of 0.871, 0.814, and 0.865 respectively, which indicates that these items have internal consistency.

3.2 KAISER MEYER OLKIN (KMO) TEST:

In order to measure the adequacy of the gathered samples, we should use the Kaiser Meyer Olkin (KMO) test. In order to proceed with satisfactory factor analysis, the result of KMO test should be greater than 0.5.

Table 2: KMO Test

KMO Measure of Sampling Adequacy	Sampling Adequacy
Brand choice overload	0.762
Consumer self-confidence	0.866
Consumer conformity	0.779
Propensity to observe	0.849

3.3 NORMALITY TEST:

In order to check whether a set of data is modelled appropriately by a normal distribution or not, we should use the normality test.

Table 3: Normality Test

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov		Shapiro-Wilk
	Sig.		Sig.
Brand choice overload	0.205		0.100
Consumer self-confidence	0.343		0.208
Consumer conformity	0.231		0.105
Propensity to observe	0.200		0.346
Consumer purchase intention	0.203		0.108

As the results show, the significance of all variables is above 0.05, so there is no significant departure from normality for all variables.

3.4 CORRELATION ANALYSIS:

Using the correlation analysis helped the researcher to find out whether there is a negative or positive relationship between the variables. The researcher used the Pearson correlation analysis in order to realize the strength and direction of the association between the variables.

Hypothesis one: There is a positive relationship between consumers perceived brand choice overload and consumer propensity to observe.

Table 4: Correlation Analysis between Overload and Observation

	Observation		Overload
	Pearson correlation		
Observation		1.000	0.196
Overload		0.196	1.000
Sig. (1 tailed)	Observation		P-value= 0.000
Overload	Overload	0.000	

The results show that the P-value is equal to zero and the correlation is $0.196 > 0.01$, then there is a positive relationship between brand choice overload and consumer propensity to observe. As it is expected, H1 is supported and shows that the higher levels of consumer's perception of brand choice overload would lead to a greater propensity to observe.

Hypothesis two: The higher level of self-confidence in consumers is negatively related to consumer propensity to observe.

Table 5: Correlation Analysis between Self-confidence and Observation

	Observation		Self-confidence
	Pearson correlation		
Observation		1.000	0.147
Self-confidence		0.147	1.000
Sig. (1 tailed)	Observation		P-value= 0.006
Self-confidence	Self-confidence	0.006	

The results show that P-value is equal to 0.006 and the correlation is $0.147 > 0.01$, then a positive relationship exists between consumer self-confidence and consumer propensity to observe. Hypothesis two which states that the higher level of self-confidence in consumers is negatively related to consumer propensity to observe is not supported. This means that greater consumer self-confidence would lead to a greater propensity to observe which is not what we expected. Based on the previous researches, self-confident consumers trust more on their own information for purchasing. Observing the purchase behavior of other consumers may not be considered as a source of information in the context of this study and that is why the rate of observation is still high among self-confident consumers.

Hypothesis three: The negative relationship between consumer self-confidence and consumer propensity to observe becomes weaker under femininity population.

Based on the results of correlation analysis in hypothesis two, consumer self-confidence does not have a negative relationship with consumer propensity to observe, so hypothesis three is also not supported.

Hypothesis four: The higher level of consumers' propensity to conform is positively related to consumer propensity to observe.

Table 6: Correlation Analysis between Conformity and Observation

		Observation	Conformity
Pearson correlation	Observation	1.000	0.494
	Conformity	0.494	1.000
Sig. (1 tailed)	Observation		P-value= 0.000
	Conformity	0.000	

The results show that the P-value is equal to zero and the correlation is $0.494 > 0.01$, then a positive relationship exist between consumer conformity and consumer propensity to observe. Hypothesis four which states that the higher level of consumers' propensity to conform is positively related to consumer propensity to observe is supported.

Hypothesis five: The positive relationship between consumer propensity to conform and consumer propensity to observe becomes weaker under masculinity population.

Table 7: Correlation Analysis between Observations under Masculinity Population (M)

For Men		Observation	Conformity
Pearson correlation	Observation	1.000	0.612
	Conformity	0.612	1.000
Sig. (1 tailed)	Observation		P-value= 0.000
	Conformity	0.000	

Table 8: Correlation Analysis between Observations under Masculinity Population (F)

For Women		Observation	Conformity
Pearson correlation	Observation	1.000	0.439
	Conformity	0.439	1.000
Sig. (1 tailed)	Observation		P-value= 0.000
	Conformity	0.000	

The results show that correlation in male population is $0.612 > 0.01$ and in female population it is $0.439 > 0.01$ so, comparing the results of correlation analysis in male and female population show that the rate of conformity is higher in males than females which is not as what we expected, So hypothesis five is not supported. Cultural differences may be a reason in which determine the rate of conformity in males and females.

4. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study put emphasis on the importance of propensity to observe heuristic in conditions where consumers are under brand choice overload which is a common experience as the numbers of offered brands expand every day. With regard to this, the individuals who are active in the area of marketing such as advertisers and retailers would be able to use the consumer's propensity to observe in designing their advertising messages and training the sellers. This study is limited in a number of aspects. In gathering data for this study, convenience sampling was used through mall intercept method and this limits the generalization of the results. The gathered samples tended to be younger than the overall population, so the attitude and behavior of older consumers is not reflected by the findings of this study. With regards to the ethnicity of respondents, more than half of them are of Chinese origin with 56.1 percent and the results may show a change in different ethnic groups. The shortcoming in this study with regard to the age factor of respondents, provide a direction by

advancing this research stream in order to cover the attitude and behavior of older consumers. There are three main ethnic groups that form the population of Malaysia and it is consisted of Malays, Chinese, and Indians. Malays and other native groups are known as Bumiputras and form more than half of the overall population. With regards to this, more than half of the respondents in this study are Chinese and this limitation creates an opportunity to do more research in future. With regards to the self-confidence trait in consumers, future researches should make it clearer whether the positive relationship between consumer self-confidence and propensity to observe of this study is a fixed relation or will it be changed under various cultures and contexts.

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