Discovering consumer personality clusters in prestige sensitivity and fashion consciousness context

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Abstract

This paper aims to discover the differences between consumer personality clusters in regards to their extent of fashion consciousness and prestige sensitivity. Data was collected from 251 undergraduate students using self-administered questionnaires. Cluster Analysis and MANOVA were employed to assess whether significant differences exist between four personality clusters. The study used the Big Five scale items to measure consumer personality and found that respondents who score low on ‘openness to experience’ dimension tend to be less prestige sensitive and those who score high on ‘extraversion’, ‘agreeableness’ and ‘conscientiousness’ tend to be highly fashion conscious.

Introduction

Prestige brands are often regarded as a symbol of quality and status. Over the past few decades, marketing researchers have attempted to examine the psychological antecedents that drive prestige brand preferences. One of the most widely discussed concepts in the study of prestige brand shopping behaviour is ‘prestige sensitivity’, which is defined as “favorable perceptions of price, based on the feelings of prominence and status that higher prices signal to other people about the purchaser” (Lichtenstein et al., 1993, 236). Consumers who are
highly prestige-sensitive purchase an expensive brand not because of quality perceptions per se, but because of their perception that relevant others will perceive the purchase decision as reflective of their traits and socio-economic status (Bao and Mandrik, 2004).

Fashion consciousness refers to “a person’s degree of involvement with the styles or fashion of clothing…characterized by an interest in clothing and fashion, and in one’s appearance” (Nam et al., 2007, 103). Fashion consciousness has been identified as an important dimension of a person’s lifestyle that affects purchase decision and consumption behaviour (Wells and Tigert, 1971; Sproles and Kendall, 1986). People who are highly fashion conscious may pay more attention to the image portrayed by prestige brands and therefore may be more prestige-sensitive than those who are less fashion conscious.

The purpose of this study is to discover consumer personality clusters in the context of prestige sensitivity and fashion consciousness. More precisely, this study attempts to explore whether there are significant differences between consumer personality clusters in their extent of prestige sensitivity and fashion consciousness. Although this study was done in Australia, the findings of this study could have international implications due to the diversity of the respondents’ cultural background.

Consumer personality plays an important role in fashion marketing as it is argued that consumers, particularly young people, are highly influenced by their personality when it comes to fashion shopping behaviour (Piacentini and Mailer, 2004). While studies in the past have attempted to use personality traits as a predictor of fashion shopping behaviour (Goldsmith, 2002b; McIntyre and Miller, 1992; Summers et al., 2006), little empirical studies have been done to explore which personality traits place more importance on prestige brands.
and fashion. The study first covers the relevant literature on prestige sensitivity, fashion consciousness, and consumer personality traits (The Big Five). A number of findings is provided afterwards and supplemented with discussions of the study findings and limitations.

**Literature Review**

**The Big Five**

Personality research has attracted the interest of consumer researchers since the early 1960s as researchers were interested in exploring the relationship between consumer personality and purchase behaviour (Westfall, 1962; Birdwell, 1968). Studies by McIntyre and Miller (1992) suggested that personality traits moderate individual behaviour in fashion consumption. In addition, Goldsmith (2002a) found that frequent purchasers of clothing possess distinctive personality traits compared to consumers with lower frequency consumption patterns. Another study, however, found no significant relationship between personality and purchase intention within the context of controversial luxury fashion products (Summers et al., 2006).

The Big Five model is regarded as one of the primary benchmarks in the trait theory of personality. The model allows researchers to examine individual differences based on different trait factors that correlate each other within five distinct personality dimensions, which are as follows:

- **Neuroticism**: Assesses emotional instability (e.g. calm vs. worried) (Goldberg, 1990).

- **Extroversion**: Assesses the quantity and intensity of interpersonal interaction (e.g. reserved vs. sociable) (McCrae and Costa, 1990).

- **Openness to Experience**: Assesses the extent of proactive seeking and appreciation of experience, toleration and exploration of the unfamiliar (e.g. conventional vs. curious) (McCrae and Costa, 1990; Piedmont, 1998).
- **Agreeableness**: Assesses the quality of one’s interpersonal orientation along a continuum from compassion to antagonism (e.g. suspicious vs. trusting) (McCrae and Costa, 1990).

- **Conscientiousness**: Assesses an individual’s degree of organization, persistence, and motivation in goal-directed behaviour (e.g. aimless vs. organized) (McCrae and Costa, 1990)

The Big Five traits have been used in consumer research to predict brand preferences. Notable studies in this area include those by Mooradian (1996), Aaker (1997), Tsu Wee’s (2004), and Mulyanegara et al (2009). Mooradian (1996) related The Big Five to market mavenism whereas Aaker (1997) and Tsu Wee (2004) used The Big Five to develop brand personality constructs. Despite the plethora of studies in the application of The Big Five, no studies have been done to explore whether significant differences exist between The Big Five personality traits in the importance placed on prestige brands and fashion.

**Prestige Sensitivity**

Prestige sensitivity is originally conceptualized as part of the multi-dimensional price perception constructs which also consists of value consciousness, price consciousness, coupon proneness, sales proneness, price mavenism, and price-quality schema (Lichtenstein et al., 1993). Studies in the past have attempted to examine the relationship between personality traits and prestige sensitivity. Xu et.al (2004) found that consumers’ level of self-confidence had a significant influence on consumers’ purchase intention of prestige product apparels. Mandrik (2005) found that respondents with high ATSCI (Attention to Social Comparison Information) tend to be highly prestige-sensitive due to their tendencies to maintain favorable impressions among their peers (Mandrik et al., 2005).
Each personality trait of the Big Five construct possesses unique characteristics which can be reflected in consumers’ fashion behavior and preferences (Mulyanegara and Tsarenko, 2009). Baumeister and Bratslavsky (1999) asserted that personality has a strong influence on how passionate an individual is. Other studies have also related ‘extraversion’ to positive emotions and consumer passion (Matzler et al., 2005; Mooradian and Olver, 1997). It was argued that extraversion personality is positively related to consumer passion which then leads to the willingness to pay premium price for prestige brands (Bauer et al., 2007). Another study by Matzler, et.al (2005) found that Neuroticism is significantly associated with negative consumption-based emotions.

Self-completion theory suggests that the possession and use of symbols contributes heavily to the development and protection of a person’s self-image. A symbol can be defined as "any facet of the person that has the potential to signal to others (who understand the symbol as related to the identity) that one possess the identity in question" (Braun and Wicklund, 1989, p.164). The self-completion theory lends support to the notion that consumers use brands as a means to protect their self-identity. On the basis of self-completion theory, this study proposes that there are significant differences between consumer personality traits in regards to the importance they place on prestige brands as they use brands as a means to protect their self-identity. For instance, people who are highly extrovert value social interaction and thus might pay more attention to their social self-concept (how others see them) in regards to fashion brand selection. Those who are high in ‘neuroticism’ dimension and low in the ‘agreeableness’ dimension might favor prestige brands that are reputable as a protection against poor quality or image. Highly ‘conscientious’ individuals might also have high level of prestige sensitivity to reflect their ‘reliable’, ‘hardworking’, and ‘successful’ image which
is consistent with their self-concept.

**Proposition 1:** There are significant differences between personality clusters in their level of prestige sensitivity

**Fashion Consciousness**

Studies in the past have found that fashion-conscious consumers possess *personality traits* such as ‘self-assertive’, ‘competitive’, ‘venturesome’, ‘attention seeking’, ‘self-confident’ (Summers, 1970). Stranforth (1995) found that fashion innovators are related to traits such as ‘sensation seeking’, ‘adventure seeking’, ‘susceptibility’, and ‘clothing individuality’. They were also found to be better educated, possess higher income, and actively engage in travel, sports, and entertainment activities (Crask and Reynolds, 1978). Other characteristics such as self-esteem, clothing interests, innovativeness, vanity, gender, public or private self-consciousness were also found to be related to fashion consciousness (Wan et al., 2001). Kwon (1997) found positive associations between perceived facial attractiveness, social self-esteem, and interest in clothing. Gould and Stern (1989) found that fashion conscious females tend to focus more on their own external appearance (public self-consciousness) whereas fashion conscious males tend to focus more on their self-identity and internal manhood (private gender-consciousness).

In lights of the findings of previous studies that linked personality traits to fashion consciousness (Stranforth, 1995; Summers, 1970), this study postulates that certain personality traits may be significantly associated with high level of fashion consciousness. For instance, highly extrovert people value social interaction and thus may be more
concerned with how others perceive the way they dressed. People who are highly conscientious may want to reflect their ‘successful’ image through the way they dressed and thus may see fashion shopping as a high involvement purchase decision.

**Proposition 2:** There are significant differences between personality clusters in their level of fashion consciousness

**Segmentation via cluster analysis**

Cluster analysis has been widely used in consumer research as a means to segment the market, understand consumer behaviour, develop potential new product concepts, and test market selection (Kimiloglu et al., 2010). Within the marketing literature, clustering-based segmentation is often used to categorize consumers on the basis of the relative importance they place on various product attributes and benefits (Ness et al., 2002). The present study used cluster analysis to categorize respondents into personality clusters. The use of this technique will then allow for further analysis to examine whether significant differences exist between personality clusters in terms of their level of prestige sensitivity and fashion consciousness.

**The research context**

The respondents in the study were 251 undergraduate students (150 females, 101 males) enrolled within the business faculty of one of the leading universities in Australia. Most of the participants were aged between 18-20 (67%) and 21-23 (23%) years old. There were 168 local and 83 international students and more than 70% of them had been studying in Australia for at least 24 months. There was a large proportion of students from China (16%) and Indonesia (11%), whereas most of the other respondents came from other parts of Asia.
including Thailand, Japan, Singapore, Vietnam, Malaysia, and India. Thus, although this study was done in Australia, it can be argued that the findings of this study could have international implications due to the cultural diversity of the respondents.

Generation Y (number about 4.5 million) represents the largest demographic group in Australia and possess more than half of Australia’s discretionary spending power, mainly from part-time employment and curbed expenses as a result of living with parents (Daniels, 2007). They have grown up on brands, follow fashion trends, and spend a high proportion of their income on clothing (IBIS World, 2010). In Australia alone, Generation Y accounts for 24% ($3 billion) of the market segment for clothing retailers (IBIS World, 2010). Bakewell and Mitchell (2003) argued that Generation Y has a distinctive approach to shopping than any other generational cohorts. In the context of fashion industry, Dias (2003) pointed out that Generation Y has different personalities and attitudes which affect the fashion brands they purchase and the underlying motivations behind their purchase decisions.

Method

Measures of construct

The questionnaire comprised sections related to personality traits (The Big Five), prestige sensitivity, fashion consciousness, and demographic information.

Personality – The Big Five. The Big Five personality scale was adapted from the “Big Five Trait Factors and Illustrative Scales” (McCrae and Costa, 1990). Respondents were asked to rank themselves on a 7 point semantic-differential scale which contained the adjectives related to each of the Big Five dimensions.

Prestige Sensitivity. This study adopted the “brand” dimension of the PRECON scale (Deeter-Schmelz et al., 2000) to measure prestige sensitivity. The original five-factor scale
(brand, quality, status, involvement, store atmosphere) was developed to assess symbolic values that are likely to affect consumers’ prestige shopping preferences and behaviour (Dolich, 1969; Pessemier et al., 1971; Zaichkowsky, 1985; Dawson, 1988). The other scale which was considered was the prestige sensitivity scale of Lichtenstein et al (1993), but the author decided not to use this scale and use the PRECON scale instead because the latter is more relevant to the fashion context.

_Fashion Consciousness._ This study adopted items from the ‘Fashion Consciousness Scale’ (FCS) developed by Gould and Stern (1989) to measure respondents’ level of fashion consciousness. This scale is considered the most relevant as it captures the importance of other people’s perception of the respondents’ fashion behaviour, which is consistent with the focus of this study.

**Reliability and validity of measures**

The reliability of the constructs was measured using ‘composite reliability’ (C.R) (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). With the exception of ‘openness to experience’ (CR = 0.64), all constructs possess good level of reliability (.75 and above). The validity of the measures was assessed through the measurement model in AMOS. It was found that the AVE for each construct is greater than all related correlations, thus indicating discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). The final measurement model demonstrated acceptable fit with the data as reflected in the fit indices including χ² (116) = 268.32, Normed Chi-Square (NC) of 1.996, Goodness of Fit Index (GFI) of .902, Comparative Fit Index (CFI) of .913, and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) of .063.

**Findings of the study**
The findings of the study are presented in two sections. In the first part, cluster analysis is used to classify respondents based on their scores on the Big Five personality dimensions. The clustering resulted in the identification of four distinct personality groups. In the second part of the findings, the aim is to differentiate these four clusters according to their level of prestige sensitivity and fashion consciousness. Consequently, Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was employed to examine these differences.

**Part 1: Cluster analysis**

In the first stage, the author conducted a hierarchical cluster analysis using agglomerative method on 100 randomly selected samples of our data to decide the initial number of clusters. The author then used the initial results provided by the hierarchical cluster to conduct K-means cluster analysis to the entire samples. The results of hierarchical testing indicated two cluster solutions: 4 and 5. Next, the author conducted one way ANOVA to test the two cluster solutions. It was found that the 4 clusters solution has better distribution of cluster membership and dominant personality dimensions than the 5 cluster solution. Based on this, the four clusters solution was selected for further analysis.

[Table 1 around here]

It can be observed that the clusters overlap each other in terms of the Big Five scores, suggesting that most respondents belong to more than one dominant personality dimension, which is consistent with the theory (Goldberg, 1990). With 7-point semantic differential scale as the measures, the term ‘dominant’ in this study can be defined as any scores above 5.0. Based on the examination of Big Five scores in each cluster, the clusters can be described as follows:
• Cluster 1: *Traditionalists* – The lowest in openness dimension, indicating a conventional personality.

• Cluster 2: *Positivists* – The highest in openness to experience dimension, high in conscientiousness dimension, and low in neuroticism, indicating a positive personality.

• Cluster 3: *Anxious* – The highest in Neuroticism dimension and also high in Extraversion, indicating an emotional, worried, and active personality.

• Cluster 4: *Achievers* – The highest in Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, and Extraversion dimensions. This indicates an ambitious personality which is also active, sociable, trusting, and helpful at the same time.

**Part 2: MANOVA between four clusters on prestige sensitivity and fashion consciousness**

In this section of the findings, the four personality segments derived from the cluster analysis are investigated further with respect to their level of prestige sensitivity and fashion consciousness. To test the propositions, a multi-variate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed with prestige sensitivity and fashion consciousness items as the dependent variables, when personality cluster was entered as the independent variables.

The Wilks’ Lambda for personality clusters (F = 2.413, p = 0.00 < 0.001, η² = .109) demonstrated that there was a statistically significant difference between personality clusters on the level of prestige sensitivity and fashion consciousness. The Tests of Between-Subjects Effects indicates that personality clusters has a statistically significant effect on one item of Prestige Sensitivity scale and four items of Fashion Consciousness scale.

The Post-Hoc Multiple Comparisons Table below indicates that the *Traditionalist* scores
significantly lower than the Anxious and the Achievers in the Prestige Sensitivity scale item. The tests reveal that the Traditionalists score significantly lower than the Anxious in all four ‘fashion consciousness’ items. The Traditionalists also score significantly lower than the ‘Achievers’ in one ‘fashion consciousness’ item (‘I reflect about the fashion I wear a lot’).

[Table 2 around here]

**Discussion**

The major purpose of this study is to discover the differences between consumer personality clusters in regards to their level of prestige sensitivity and fashion consciousness. The tests have revealed several interesting findings. First, it was found that the Traditionalists score significantly lower than the Anxious and the Achievers in one prestige sensitivity item (‘I consider the brand name when purchasing clothing for others’). The traditionalists score the lowest in openness dimension, indicating a conventional personality. The findings suggest that those who are less open to new experience are less concerned about brand name when purchasing clothing for others.

The tests reveal that there are significant differences between the Traditionalists and the Anxious in terms of their level of fashion consciousness. The findings also reveal that the Traditionalists score the lowest in all items of fashion consciousness. It worth noting that the Traditionalists have the lowest score on ‘extraversion’ and ‘conscientiousness’ dimension
among other personality clusters. This might imply that the *Traditionalists* are less fashion conscious due to their low level of interpersonal interaction and low intention to reflect an image of success among their peers (conscientiousness). On the other hand, the *Anxious* score the highest in ‘neuroticism’ dimension and thus may pay more attention to the way they dressed because of the fear or anxiety associated with their image (e.g. fear of not dressing well). The findings also reveal that the *Achievers* score the highest in all fashion consciousness items. Since the *Achievers* have the highest score in ‘extraversion’, ‘agreeableness’, and ‘conscientiousness’, the findings suggest that those who are highly sociable and goal-oriented tend to be more fashion consciousness. Consistent with the self-congruity theory (Sirgy, 1985), this might be attributed to the fact that the *Achievers* tend to use fashion as a means to reflect their actual/ideal self-concept (e.g. reliable, successful). This explains the high importance they place on fashion as reflected in their high scores on fashion consciousness items.

This study provides several interesting findings for consumer researchers who are interested to examine the differences between personality clusters in their consumption behaviour. In terms of theoretical implications, this study is one of the few studies (Mandrik et al., 2005; Xu et al., 2004) that examine the concept of ‘prestige sensitivity’ through the lens of personality traits. The significant differences between personality traits found in this study have contributed to the body of knowledge in this area. In particular, this study has provided further empirical supports to self-congruity theory (O’Cass and Choy, 2008; O’Cass and Frost, 2002) and self-completion theory (Braun and Wicklund, 1989) in the context of fashion market.

Significant findings on the differences between personality clusters in regards to their level of prestige sensitivity and fashion consciousness could offer useful managerial insights. Personality-based segmentation can be implemented to help managers identify the most
effective segment for prestige brand appeals. The *Traditionalists* are the least fashion conscious and have the lowest level of prestige sensitivity among the personality clusters, and thus may not be an attractive segment for prestige brands. The *Achievers* and the *Anxious*, on the other hand, are very fashion conscious and consider the brand name when purchasing clothing for others. The two personality segments could be an attractive one for prestige brand managers. Consistent with the self-completion theory, brand appeals are most effective when they relate to the personality traits of the target segment. Therefore, brand managers could develop marketing message which centers on the role of the prestige brands in providing customers with a sense of security and achievement in life, which are consistent with the dominant personality traits of the *Achievers* and the *Anxious*.

There are a number of limitations worthy of improvement and future research. The study used a self-report instrument to measure respondents’ personality. Pervin and John (1997) argue that self-report instruments in personality measurement have weaknesses, since respondents tend to report positively about themselves. Although the survey was anonymous, respondents may have scored themselves high on certain dimensions conventionally perceived as ‘desirable characteristics’. Future research could employ triangulation by asking significant others to report on individuals in concert with self-report by respondents. The use of convenience sampling in this study is also a limitation which can be addressed in future studies.

The use of undergraduate students as the study sample is another limitation of this research. The group was relatively homogeneous and their incomes were low, which may raise concerns due to the nature of this research project which centres on prestige brands. Although the respondents of this study came from a diverse cultural background, the number of respondents was not enough to justify a valid comparison between the ethnic sub-cultures. Future research
could replicate this study using a larger heterogeneous sample with various cultural and income structures as it will be interesting to observe whether the findings of this study are consistent across various demographic groups.

In conclusion, the present study has provided useful insights into the role of consumer personality traits in the fashion context. The results presented in this study suggested that not all personality types are attracted to prestige brand and fashion products and therefore prestige brand managers should identify the most attractive personality cluster as their target segment. It is expected that the study will be a catalyst to draw further attention on research in this important topic.

References


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