

# **PROFILING THE STYLE-CONSCIOUS CONSUMER: EVIDENCE FROM EXPLORATORY CROSS-NATIONAL SURVEYS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Demographic and psychographic characteristics of style-conscious consumers are examined, based on data from exploratory surveys conducted in the US and Singapore. Tentative commonalities and differences between the two samples are identified, as a basis for future research.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Being in style is important to the self-image of many consumers [7]. This appears to be true at varying stages of economic development [9]. On the other hand, there are consumers who have little or no interest in style or fashion [1]. Uncovering factors associated with style-consciousness can therefore contribute to our understanding of the social-psychology of style and fashion, and can also be of benefit to marketers whose products are targeted toward style-conscious consumers. This paper reports some findings on demographic and psychographic characteristics of style-conscious consumers. These findings are based on analysis of exploratory consumer surveys conducted in the US and Singapore.

The larger context of this inquiry was a program of research into consumers' "cost-orientations" with respect to monetary and non-monetary costs of consumption [5]. Contemporary marketers and researchers are aware that "monetary price is not the only sacrifice consumers make to obtain products. Time costs, search costs, and psychic costs all enter either explicitly or implicitly..." [17]. In the present context, however, it was anticipated that, for style-conscious consumers, expenditures of both monetary and non-monetary resources in some aspects of consumption could be seen as benefits rather than costs, i.e. as aspects of a lifestyle choice that contributes to their self-image and personal satisfaction.

## **METHODOLOGY**

A questionnaire was administered to a convenience sample of 315 adults in a major U.S. metropolitan area. (After pre-testing, MBA students at two universities administered the questionnaire to adult friends and family members.) Subsequently, a slightly revised questionnaire was administered in a similar manner and completed by 338 comparable adult respondents in Singapore. Because of the exploratory nature of the study, no attempt was made to design samples that would be statistically representative of any definable populations of consumers. Nevertheless, the samples were sufficiently large, and exhibited sufficient diversity in terms of demographic and psychographic characteristics, to serve as a basis for identifying a range of responses to the items of interest, and ultimately generating hypotheses related to cost sensitivities and style-seeking behavior. However, the findings should be viewed as tentative pending future research.

One of the questionnaire items was the statement (to which responses were made on a five-point Likert-type scale) "It's important for me to be in style." For the purposes of the present paper, that item

was treated as a dependent variable. In addition, a number of "cost-orientation" scales, representing psychographic characteristics of interest, had been inductively derived from empirical analysis of responses to 60 Likert-scaled attitudinal items. They were interpreted as follows: *Shopping Pleasure* (SP): Shopping can be experienced as a form of recreation or a source of ego-gratification, rather than a procurement cost. *Price No Object* (PN): This scale indicates relative insensitivity to price as compared to other costs. *Credit Buying* (CB): A propensity to use credit and credit cards. Stronger scores suggest insensitivity to financing costs. *Save Time Not Money* (ST): Respondents strongly defined by this scale would be more sensitive to expenditures of time, to the extent that they would make sacrifices of money or even quality (e.g. use of convenience foods) in order to save it. *Positive on Housework* (PH): Like shopping, household duties can be perceived in negative terms, as costs, in positive terms as important responsibilities or forms of recreation, or in neutral terms as things that simply have to be done. *Buying Anxiety* (BA): Buying can involve social-psychological risks and costs. Consumers with strong scores on this scale might be willing to trade off other types of costs (e.g. money, effort) in order to reduce their worries. In the present context, it was expected that style-consciousness would be associated with higher scores on scales such as SP, PN, and CB, indicating a willingness to expend money, time and energy in consumption to achieve a desired level of style.

## RESULTS

Responses to many items were quite similar across the US and Singaporean samples. Indeed, the grand mean of all responses to the attitudinal items did not differ significantly. (The difference was approximately .01 on a five-point scale.) This also suggested no overall response bias, which meant that examining differences between the samples on selected items might yield suggestive results. In general, our Singaporean respondents were significantly *less* likely than the Americans ( $t=-2.71$ ,  $p=0.007$ ) to admit a concern for being in style. Nevertheless, the characteristics of those who scored highly on style-consciousness were similar across the two samples.

Style-consciousness was examined in relation to a number of *demographic* variables. (Certain items were not administered to both samples.) With respect to *gender* (see Table 1), in both countries *women* were more likely than men to report a concern for style, although the difference did not achieve statistical significance in Singapore. However, several qualifications should be made. First, in some male-dominated cultures, men have been reported to be more style- and fashion-conscious than women [9]. Second, some writers have observed the emergence of a "new man" in postmodern societies [16], a man with far more interest in matters of style than his traditional counterpart. Finally, even in our US sample, where the gender difference achieved statistical significance, the absolute difference was quite small (less than 0.3 on a 5-point scale). These observations suggest that marketers should not underestimate the extent of men's concerns in this area. With respect to *age* (see Table 2), in both samples there was a significant inverse relationship with style-consciousness. That is, being in style was much more important to *younger* consumers. This is generally explained by the fact that one's identity and self-image become more firmly established over time, and thereby less vulnerable to external societal shifts. Style-consciousness was also examined in relation to *employment status* (see Table 3), indicating significantly higher scores for *students*, as compared with both employed persons and homemakers, in both the US and Singapore. Meanwhile, no significant differences were found between employed persons and homemakers. These findings reflect both the effect of youth, as mentioned earlier, and the fact that students inhabit an environment where the "presentation of self" to one's peers is continually problematic. Our study found *no* significant relationships between style-consciousness and either *income* or level of *education*. This may be explained by the fact that, while a generic interest in style appears to cut across social status levels, the specific meanings and manifestations of style will vary greatly. For example, higher status

consumers often participate in a world of “high” fashion, while other consumers can only participate in what has been called “McFashion” [15], that is, less expensive products targeted to a mass market.

Other findings of this study contribute to our understanding of *psychographic* aspects of style-consciousness, and the results were essentially as expected. Moreover, the results for the US and Singapore samples were strikingly similar. Style-consciousness was significantly and positively related to our Shopping Pleasure, Price No Object, Credit Buying, and Save Time Not Money scales (see Table 4) in both samples, indicating that the style-conscious consumer is willing to put time and effort, as well as money, into consumption activities. Staying in style certainly requires investments of all these resources, which is perceived as worthwhile if the return on the investments includes purchases that contribute to one’s sense of style. These findings are also consistent with previous research showing that style-conscious consumers tend to be relatively price-insensitive [6] and more willing to incur credit debt [12]. Given a tradeoff between time and money, they appear to be more convenience-oriented and time-sensitive. The positive relationship between style-consciousness and Buying Anxiety may be worthy of note. For a consumer concerned with being in style, falling *out* of style is a constant threat. To be sure, there are some consumers for whom the search for style can be frustrating. For example, one study [11] showed that women seeking stylish clothing in larger sizes were often dissatisfied with the selection and fit available to them, which sometimes resulted in shopping avoidance.

Finally, the instrument administered to the US sample included a number of *personality* items. High scorers on style-consciousness (see Table 5) tended to have traits such as being outgoing, sociable, emotional, adventurous, impulsive, sensitive, romantic and experimental. (This would tend to support the view that advertising of style-oriented products should use affective rather than rational appeals.) To some extent, this again reflects the more youthful profile mentioned earlier. Traits such as impulsivity are also consistent with observations made earlier about price-insensitivity and credit-proneness.

## CONCLUSION

The *tentative* portrait of the style-conscious consumer that emerges from the results of these exploratory surveys includes several interesting characteristics. Although the Singaporeans in our sample are somewhat less likely than the Americans to admit a concern for style, the profiles of those who do are quite similar. Women are somewhat more likely to report that being in style is important to them, but the absolute difference between women and men is not large in this respect. The importance of being in style appears to be of more concern to younger people, and to decline with increasing age. With respect to employment status, full-time students (in this context largely MBA students) show more concern with being in style than either homemakers or employed people. Interest in style does not appear to vary by either education or income. With respect to psychographics, the style-conscious exhibit a greater enjoyment of shopping, less price-sensitivity, and greater willingness to incur credit debt. They are convenience oriented and will expend money to save time. With respect to personality, they are more outgoing, impulsive, and experimental, rather than reserved and conservative.

(Please note: Due to space constraints, this is an abbreviated version of the originally-submitted paper. For the complete paper, including tables and references, please contact the first author at the address given above.)