Information sources and clothing brands consumption in Mediterranean countries

A qualitative study of attitudes and behaviour of the Greek and Portuguese young consumers

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Abstract

The continuing transformation in a single market has created a need for exploring common consumer attitudes for clothing brands in Europe. This paper responds to this need to develop marketing strategies for a single European market. The purpose of this study is to analyze clothing brands consumption in Mediterranean countries. Specifically, the study aims to explore Greek and Portuguese young clothing consumers attitudes and their likelihood of purchasing these products. Based on two focus groups made in Greece and in Portugal, the results indicate that there are many similar factors that influence purchasing clothing choices between the two countries. Implications and areas for further researches are discussed.

Keywords: Consumer attitudes, clothing brands, young, Mediterranean.

1   Introduction

The intention of this article is to do an exploratory approach to consumer attitudes and clothing brands purchasing behavior of young Greeks and Portuguese's. The article makes a comparative study between Greece and Portugal. Both countries are European, Mediterranean, and entered at the European Union at the same time. The purpose of the study is to analyze the attitudes of Mediterranean young consumers towards the clothing brands from the viewpoint of information sources, shopping behaviour and purchasing choice criteria.

Academic researches in this field have mainly used quantitative methods. We decided to use a qualitative method - focus groups - because of the richness of information that we could obtain. In this study we used college-age consumers. This target group is very sensitive to fashion clothing and a good percentage

of them purchase their own clothing. The focus groups were audio taped and videotaped recorded, transcribed and thematic analysis conducted. A number of themes emerged from the focus groups that were organized and exposed. Some of these elements have close associations within issues raised in the literature.

In the first part of this article there is presented a discussion of the literature background about consumer purchasing behavior toward clothes. After that is presented the research questions and the description of the methodology used to examine these questions empirically. Finally is presented the major findings of this study and the discussion of the results. Implications for strategy development and areas for further research are presented at the end of the article.

2   Theoretical background

2.1   Self-concept and group influence

Fashion consciousness is related with individual's interest in the latest fashion trends. It defines those consumers who are sensitive to the images, and their physical attractiveness (Wan, Youn, and Fang 2001). Therefore, the phenomenon is related with fashion awareness, and innovativeness (Manrai *et al.* 2001).

Fashion consumption is often a manifestation of self-expression (Evans 1989). Clothing brands have identities and images, and consumers seek those brands that match their self-image or the image they would like to project to others (Goldsmith, Moore, and Beaudoin 1999). So, the idea of self-concept is related with the motivation of achieving the "ideal" self, whether in "private" or "social" context (Evans 1989).

Products that are congruent with individual self-images facilitate the formation and expression of personal identity. Clothing may be an especially effective product category in this regard (Nagasawa *et al.* 1991, Dodd *et al.* 2000; Goldsmith 2002; 2000; O'Cass 2000).

Clothing, as a form of nonverbal communication, reflects the wearer's identity. OnKivisit and Shaw (1987) found that consumers tend to select products and stores that correspond to their self-concept.

Self-monitoring reflects the degree to which a person observes and controls his expressive behavior and self-presentation in accordance to cues or patterns (O'Cass 2001a). Group influence is, in the case, very important. Dress conformity in line the consumer with their reference group and helps them gain acceptance by wearing the "right" clothes. This reflects a collectivist value system, where an individual's behavior is influenced such factors as group norms (Manrai *et al.* 2001). Therefore, clothing is a mean of communicating a social identity. Understanding the way people interpret clothing, and how different groups make different judgments about the same brand is particularly important to clothing manufacturers and their advertising agencies (Auty and Elliott 1998).

3   Fashion involvement and clothing choice criteria

Fashion involvement is associated with differences in sensitivity to social surroundings. Those who are highly motivated to fit into a particular group will need to be aware of the fashion cues not just of that group but also of others less desirable groups, so that the "wrong" cues may be avoided (Auty and Elliot 1998).

Clothing has frequently been recognized as a product category likely to induce high involvement. In general terms, involvement is a state of motivation, arousal, or interest. Personal relevance is a key concept in explaining, defining, and operationalizing involvement (Kim, Damhorst and Lee 2002). Seo, Hatchote and Sweaney (2001, p. 210) define clothing involvement as "the amount of time and effort a consumer spends in the selection of clothing". Some researchers have examined fashion involvement as a multidimensional construct that involves fashion innovativeness and

early adoption, interpersonal communication about fashion, fashion knowledge ability, and fashion awareness (Kim, Damhorst and Lee 2002).

Consumers vary greatly in their knowledge about a product and their degree of familiarity with it. Knowledge can come from product experiences, such as ad exposure, interactions with salespeople, information from friends or the media, previous consumption and usage experiences (O'Cass 2001b).

When consumers form an attitude toward the product they make evaluative associations between the product and its attributes. Some of that attributes may be utilitarian - such as durability or comfort - or hedonic - such as color, fashion ability, or styling (Kim, Damhorst and Lee 2002).

Beaudion, Moore, and Goldsmith (1998) analyzed the attitudes toward buying domestic and imported apparel products using a selection of attributes: good fit, durability, ease of care, good price, comfort, quality, choice of color, attractiveness, fashionableness, brand name, appropriateness for occasion, and choice of styles.

Brand image of the clothing store is particularly critical. Previous studies found that some attributes like fashion and style of clothing, store design and layout, price, quality of the clothes, refund and exchange policy, company reputation, selection of clothes, knowledge and friendliness of staff were particularly important to consumers (Birtwistle and Freathy 1998; Partolese and Dias 2003).

When we are talking about fashion clothing consumption we should take some dimensions in consideration: fashion consciousness, individual orientation, status orientation, style opinion leadership, price orientation and shopping habit (Seo, Hathcote and Sweaney 2001, p.210).

Therefore, shopping involves many dimensions, and it is an important function of the consumers' choice of clothes (Seo, Hathcote and Sweaney 2001). Informational sources, such as print media, commercial broadcast, world of mouth, and store displays,

are generally used to ascertain information about clothing. Mass media has been found to be the dominant information source for the younger age group (Lumpkin 1985; Shim and Kotsiopoulos 1992).

4   Methodology

Formation of a single market within the EU emphasizes standardization of marketing in the European environment. Research shows that there are some similarities among consumers in purchasing behavior and consumption (Kaynak and Ghauri 1994; Schmidt and Pioch 1996).

Past qualitative studies approached the purchasing behavior for clothing brands. Jensen and Ostergaard (1998) in their study created a distinction between two consumer types: the security oriented fashion consumer and the risk oriented fashion consumer. The two consumer types were described according to their consumer and purchasing behavior as well as their fashion media consumption. The data material was gathered in Denmark. The main data source was a collection of twelve personal interviews and two focus groups conducted with female consumers between the ages of 20-35.

Hogg, Horne, and Carmichael (1999) made an explorative study that investigated the adoption of communication in the fraternity and its influence on the purchase of sailing garments. A total of sixteen interviews were conducted, eight with male respondents and eight with female. Qualitative data collection techniques allowed the researcher to explore the participants understanding of their community and provided "access to reality". As the purpose of qualitative data is to gain insight and understanding, there was no requirement for statistical rigor in the sample selection.

In this study we focused on young consumers attitudes in Greece and Portugal since these nations represent many similarities like the Mediterranean way of life. The following research

questions were examined: What is the information sources that influence clothing purchasing? How do young consumers behave when they go shopping for clothes? What are the purchasing choice criteria for clothing brands?

In our study we intended to do an exploratory approach to the consumption of clothing brands and some factors that are related with this subject. We used qualitative approach using focus groups (Morgan 1997). Since we tried to analyze the relations between Portugal and Greece concerning the subject of the study, we made a focus group in each country. The questionnaire was originally drafted in English, translated to Greek and Portuguese.

We used a sample of college-age consumers, from 19 to 23 years old (figure 1). This target group is very sensitive to fashion clothing and a good percentage of them purchase their own clothing.

Figure 1 - Profile of the interviewees			
Name	**Country**	**Age**	**Occupation**
Leon	Greece	22	Accountant and economic studies company employee
Ioanna	Greece	20	Educational and Social Policy student
Smaragda	Greece	20	Civil Engineer student
Thetis	Greece	20	Optometrist student
Gianna	Greece	19	Management Company employee
Joana	Portugal	23	Management student
Paulo	Portugal	23	Communication Sciences student
Marta	Portugal	21	Communication Sciences student
Ana	Portugal	23	Architecture student
Luís	Portugal	22	Management student

The stages of the research were: the choice of the focus group (young students who participated voluntary), the general questionnaire, the in depth discussion, and the observation of each moderator. The focus groups were recorded and videotaped in order to be achieved the highest validity and reliability of the data analysis. A number of themes emerged from the focus groups that were organized and exposed. Some of these elements have associations with issues raised in the literature. The open-ended discussion questions asked by the moderators touched the three themes: Information sources - factors that influence clothing purchasing, shoping behaviour – and the influence of others, and purchasing choice criteria.

5   Findings and discussion

5.1   Information sources - factors that influence clothing purchasing

The results indicate that advertising and more specific print advertising is on of the the most important influential factor for young clothing consumers. The Greek interviewees said that clothing brand advertising influences consumers: "we will see something in an advertisement, in a magazine and proportionally we will act" (Thestis-GR). The Portuguese group defended the same opinion.

Other forms of brand diffusion were also mentioned, like the word of mouth: "there are a lot of brands that become known trough other persons and not trough advertising" (Paulo, PT), "I think that the group has a great influence in choosing and buying a brand . . . A person feels identified by other person and asks were did he/she bought that piece of clothing and goes to the same store" (Luis, PT).

Figure 2 - Information sources - Factors that influence clothing purchasing			
Advertising in magazines "we will see something in an advertisement, in a magazine and proportionally we will act" (Thestis-GR)	**Word of mouth** "there are a lot of brands that become known trough other persons" (Paulo, PT)	**The group** "A person feels identified by other person and asks were did he bought that clothe and goes to the same store" (Luis, PT)	**Store environment** "the stores and the shop-windows are a certain form of advertising... people pass and see the image the store or the brand wants to give" (Ana, PT)

The interviewees talked about advertisements of clothing brands that had impressed them. The most recalled advertisements by the Greek interviewees were the ones from Benetton: "This one with black and white races, that shows that all the races are equal" (Smaragda, GR), "The one which shows many faces, also. It shows Chinese, black, white, blond, brown" (Thetis, GR), "... the advertisement, which shows refugees who are about to die" (Ioanna, GR). An advertisement from GUESS was also mentioned, "... which have the Eiffel Tower as a background, with Letjcia Casta with little shoes and very beautiful clothes" (Thetis, GR).

The Portuguese interviewees recalled the advertisements from Levi's "... the one were the people twisted..." (Paulo, PT). A campaign from Lois was also mentioned "those press advertisements where some organizations of young people around the world showed photographs of various countries..." (Ana, PT). An advertisement from Camel "with images of a safari" was also mentioned (Joana, PT).

Some interviewees of both countries considered that the presence of famous persons in the advertisements is not important to the recall, "it is not essential" (Thetis, GR), and "does not work" (Luís, PT). Other interviewees considered that the presence of famous persons on the advertisements could be positive for the brand in some circumstances "in the case of a new and unknown brand, it helps to create confidence" (Paulo, PT). Another individual defended that the use of famous persons can result as a form of creating awareness for the brand (Marta, PT).

The results show, according to figure 2, that both groups had similar agreement levels for the different promotional strategies. Both strongly agreed that they liked interesting advertisements. They were neutral with the statements that advertisements affected their decisions about clothes. There were not significant differences between the two Mediterranean countries, in this topic.

6   Clothing stores

Among the factors that influence clothing purchasing is the store environment. The fashion stores were mentioned as important forms of brand communication: "the stores and the shop-windows are a certain form of advertising. . . people pass and see the image the store or the brand wants to give" (Ana, PT). Many brands that do not use traditional advertising use the stores and shop-windows to communicate the brand, for instance: "Zara does not use advertising on mass media, however has a strong identity and everybody knows the brand and the stores" (Marta, PT).

Some of the Greek interviewees prefer small stores: "because you can have better relation with the shopkeepers. I like to have contact with the storekeepers; I want them to tell me if the clothes suit me" (Thetis, GR). Another interviewees are expecting for just a "technical support from the staff" (Leon, GR), "you don't want to have a person always beside you asking if you want help" (Joana, PT). In general the interviewees like to chose the clothes without any help: "I want to have the comfort to look whatever I

want by myself and I try on many things" (Ioanna, GR), "It is difficult to try on clothes and have someone near you all the time" (Leon, GR). On the other hand, interviewees consider big stores "impersonal" (Gianna, GR).

7   Shopping behavior and the influence of others

The Greek interviewees prefer to shop alone, because it gives more freedom of movements: "I go to all the shops and I don't want to say all the time to the person I'm with: come here and let's go there" (Gianna, GR). Besides that, to shop alone gives more independence in choice: "I don't want anybody to influence me...I have the ability to choose the right clothes for myself" (Gianna, GR). In other cases the purchase is made in more than one phase: "I go alone to do a market research because I never buy anything just at the time I see it" (Thetis, GR). In a second phase the buyer may go with company "I do a research alone and when I go shopping I take someone with me, my mother or some friends" (Ioanna, GR).

Portuguese individuals also prefer to go alone, because the company "may not be useful in the end" (Marta, PT), or "because the opinion of others wont be taken in consideration after all" (Paulo, PT), or "because shopping clothes is very objective and pragmatic thing and should be made alone" (Luís, PT).

The research (figure 3) showed that young consumers in both countries prefer to shop alone, suggesting the shopping was for utility purposes.

Figure 3 - Shopping behavior and the influence of others		
Interviewees prefer to shop alone		
Because it gives more freedom of movements	**Because it gives more independence in choice**	**Because it is an individual decision**
"I go to all the shops and I don't want to say all the time to the person I have with me, come here and let's go there" (Gianna, GR)	"I don't want anybody to influence me...I have the ability to choose the right clothes for myself" (Gianna, GR)	"the opinion of others wont be taken in consideration after all" (Paulo, PT)

8 Purchasing choice criteria

The interviewees did not differ greatly on the level of agreement for the suitability of pricing strategies (figure 4). Good price and economic shopping seems to be an important factor: "Lower price clothes are usually my choice" (Leon GR).

The comfort was mentioned as important choice criteria. Young Greeks want to dress "something practical" (Thetis, GR). It is fundamental that the clothes please the young consumers: "above all, it should suit us" (Thestis-GR). The Portuguese's clothing consumers mentioned the same.

"Good design" (Marta, PT) is also an important factor. Interviewees appreciate clothes that are "very unusual, very different" (Thetis, GR). "Good quality" (Smaragda, GR) is considered another clothing choice criteria.

Responses indicate that brand name is not the most important factor: "it does not make much sense to get upset over a purchase decision since most brands are about the same" (Leon, GR). Very

few of the respondents, in Greece and Portugal, prefer to buy the latest cloth brands. Usually, they buy clothes with unknown brands very frequently.

Figure 4 - Purchasing choice criteria			
Low price "Lower price clothes are usually my choice" (Leon GR).	**Comfort** "something practical" (Thetis, GR)	**Good design** "clothes that are very unusual, very different" (Marta, PT)	**Good quality** (Smaragda, GR).
Brand name is not the most important factor "it does not make much sense to get upset over a purchase decision since most brands are about the same" (Leon, GR).			

Some interviewees mentioned that they are influenced only by their "personal taste" (Smaragda & Thestis, GR): "I believe that... if you know and what suits you, others will too (Gianna, GR). An interviewee said that "It depends on where you will go" (Gianna, GR), other said that it depends "on the work you do" (Leon, GR). Another interviewee mentioned that "we are always influenced, clothes are a social thing" (Paulo, PT). Other consumer said that she was "influenced by the magazines" (Ana, PT). Most of them buy according to personal needs more than influenced by social environment.

9 Conclusion and implications

The focus groups gave light to the three main questions of our study: What are the information sources that influence clothing purchasing? How does young consumers behave when they go shopping for clothes? What are the purchasing choice criteria for clothing brands?

The research shows that there are no significant differences between young Greek and Portuguese consumers in the factors

that influence clothing choices. The results show that advertising in magazines, word of mouth, the social group and store environment are the main factors that influence clothing purchasing.

The interviewees of both countries have also very similar views about shopping behavior and the influence of others. In general, they prefer to shop alone because it gives than more freedom of movement and more independence in choice.

Low price, confort, good design and good quality are the four most important factors in purchasing choice criteria. Nevertheless, brand name is not the most important factor when buying clothes. Something relevant with other recent researches about general attitudes towards buying clothes (Leung and Taylor 2002; Oh and Fiorito 2002).

Compatible with other researches is also the fact that many young consumers select clothes that fit their image they have of themselves. Clothes have images and young Mediterranean consumers prefer those clothes that match their self-image or the image they would like to project to others (Lurie 1981; Sirgy 1982; Onkvisit and Shaw 1987; Malhotra 1988).

The research revealed how Greek and Portuguese young consumers purchase brand clothes. The findings suggest an overall positive attitude: to buy the clothes does not necessary imply a higher likelihood of purchasing brands of these clothes.

The results showed that young Mediterranean consumers obtained fashion information by magazines. Therefore, advertisements placed in magazines would be the most suitable choice for marketers.

Another solution could be the attractiveness and good interior store environment. Marketers may need to provide a good store environment so as to make them to feel comfortable when they are choosing clothes. This can be done when there are more mirrors, plenty of space, clean environment, many choices, etc.

The results showed that young consumers were attracted by low prices, and they tented to be unwilling to pay higher prices for brand-named clothing. Marketers may reduce prices of fashiona-

ble clothes at the end of the season. On the other hand they can suggest that higher prices are related with better quality clothes.

Young's considered designs to be an important factor, therefore marketers need to give attention of the originality of design. Young buy clothes that show their personalities and not so much their status. The results show that brand name was the least important, and what they need more is to provide their personalities through unique designs. Marketers need to decide how their clothes can be adapted to the needs of young consumers.

Finally, it is important for marketers to recognize that young fashion change rapidly, therefore they must adapt quickly to these changes.

Despite the interest of the results discussed, an obvious problem involves generalization, because the sample is too small. Therefore quantitative questionnaire analysis of a broader sample would be enough to provide sufficient statistical power.

The study focuses to factors that have an impact on clothes buying behavior. Although under certain conditions in Mediterranean Europe the behavior of young consumers can be predicted by their attitudes towards clothes and brands, other factors may also have an effect in purchasing behavior. Therefore values and beliefs need to be examined in the future. Future research also can be done in other European countries.

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