



“What does a woman want?” The moderating effect of age in female consumption



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ABSTRACT

This study aims to improve understanding of the factors that influence female purchase behaviour in the context of intimate apparel. This study examines mediating effects of hedonic consumption and interaction with store personnel on the relationship between (a) product attributes and the fitting process and (b) actual purchases. The chronological age of consumers included as a moderator of these indirect relationships. Our findings show that mediation effect of hedonic consumption is more pronounced in younger segment while interaction with store personnel is more apparent among older segment of consumers. These findings inform retailers how to successfully serve various age groups of female consumers.

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The great question that has never been answered, and which I have not yet been able to answer, despite my thirty years of research into the feminine soul, is “What does a woman want?” (Sigmund Freud, 1925)

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, empirical and theoretical research has led to a greater understanding of the demographic factors that affect consumption in general (Kalyanam and Putler, 1997; Min-Young et al., 2015). This information is useful in the development of marketing strategies aimed to increase greater consumption of goods and services by under-served demographics. Surprisingly, there appears to have been a lack of research regarding the impact of demographic factors on gendered consumption. Gendered consumption refers to strong gender differences in consumer acquisition of products and services and incorporates behaviours associated with such consumption (Costa, 1994). Although gendered consumption has been of interest to some marketers (Beetles and Crane, 2005; Gainer, 1993; Gould and Stern, 1989), this research will examine how the demographic characteristic of age

affects the gendered consumption of intimate apparel.

There are number of reasons why intimate apparel is a good product against which to test different factors that may affect gendered consumption. First, intimate apparel or, more specifically, women's lingerie including bras, are gendered products in that they are tailored to the female sex (Casey and Martens, 2007; Scanlon, 2000). Second, globally the lingerie market has estimated revenue of over \$30 billion (Mayne, 2014) which indicates that a considerable amount of effort and money goes into purchasing the “right” product for the “right” occasion. One interesting aspect of intimate apparel is that, conventionally, it is invisible to the public, in other words, it is considered “inconspicuous fashion” (Hume and Mills, 2013, p. 460). Although intimate apparel is usually hidden, bras and other undergarments can still modify body image in positive ways. Bras allow the wearer to express their personality as the undergarment contributes to the final breast shape and contour visible through outer clothing that constructs a social identity (Hart and Dewsnap, 2001). A further interesting aspect is the perceived risk associated with consumption of intimate apparel. For example, practical risk due to a lack of consistency in sizes between brands. Perhaps for these reasons, bras have been avoided in retail research.

Previous research indicates that age, ahead of social or economic characteristics, is the key demographic factor in determining female purchasing patterns of women's underwear (Amy-Chinn et al., 2006). Although many studies in consumer behaviour

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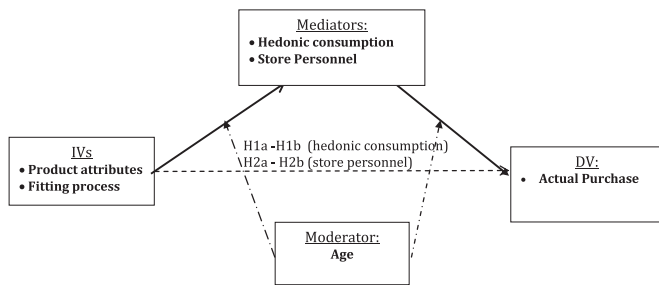


Fig. 1. Modelling consumption among younger and older females.

have recently directed their attention to the cognitive age of consumers because of its effects on purchasing behaviour (Greigore, 2003; Thomas and Peters, 2009), the question as to how chronological age impacts the purchase of ostensibly invisible, high-risk products remains unexplored.

The research aim of this study is two-fold. The first aim is to model female purchase behaviour in order to gain a better understanding of which factors influence and direct purchase behaviour of intimate apparel. The second aim is to assess the effect that the consumer's age has on this relationship. In doing so we gain a better understanding of gendered consumption and ultimately suggest approaches for managers and marketers who wish to tailor their strategies in serving various age segments.

To model female gendered consumption, we broadly relied on an approach offered by McDonald (1998) whereby the decision making process in a retail context is driven by two components—rational and emotive. Thus, our framework (Fig. 1) comprises a set of explanatory context-specific variables, such as product attributes and the fitting process. The relationship between these antecedents and the outcome (actual purchase) is mediated by (1) hedonic consumption and (2) interaction with store personnel. Furthermore, these mediation effects are moderated by consumer age.

In the first part of this article we isolate and discuss the existing literature regarding the mediators—hedonic consumption and interaction with store personnel. Further, we will discuss the role that age plays in moderating these relationships. In the third part of the article we will discuss the methodology and measures used in this study before presenting the results and discussing the theoretical and managerial implications.

2. Theoretical background

In order to understand gendered consumption, one should consider theories of decision-making process of consumers in the retail environment more generally. As Granot et al. (2010) noted this process is very complex, consumers are influenced by multiple forces and there is no one single theory that exclusively covers all aspects of consumer decision-making. Most pertinent to our research question is an approach offered by McDonald (1998), who observes that there are two components that inform a consumer's decision-making process flowing from the dialectic between two perspectives of human nature, the first viewing the individual as having an objective, rational nature and the second viewing the individual as having a sensual and emotional nature. In addition, a myriad of contextual factors, not all of which are conscious, influence the retail shopping process. McDonald (1998) notes that when consumers make purchases, they often report wanting functional or tangible attributes. In the context of lingerie retail, we consider that the tangible attributes are found in the product (product attributes) and the functional attributes in the process of fitting. McDonald (1998) says that in addition to these attributes,

the customer also wants a good experience and a good emotional response or “hedonic” benefit from product usage. We consider this second element of consumer decision-making to be enjoyment associated with a shopping experience and the subsequent use of a product. Both mediating factors will be discussed in turn below.

2.1. The mediating effect of hedonic consumption

In this article we argue that the relationships between product attributes and fitting process and actual purchase are mediated by hedonic consumption. Qualitative study conducted by Granot et al. (2010) found that lingerie shopping is a pleasurable experience. Conversely, prior literature established that hedonic consumption leads to greater purchase volume (Bloch et al., 1986; Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982).

The product category containing bras and lingerie is quite complex. Despite attempts to standardise size, every female's body shape is unique, which complicates the design process. This brings some uncertainty to the overall shopping process. For a consumer, being able to find a product that has desirable fit and design, will enhance a shopping experience, making it pleasurable, and in turn lead to increased consumption. Retailers, in their turn, are actively focusing on entertainment aspects of shopping experience for consumers or in other words “entertaining” as their competitive tool (Arnold and Reynolds, 2003).

Lingerie consumers are able to engage with the product during the fitting process, where they can trial the bra and have it fitted to their unique shape. The fitting process also enables the consumer to validate the aesthetic features and design of the product as well as functional aspects and comfort. Through this process, female shoppers can acquire “specialised knowledge” (Alba and Williams, 2012, p. 7) about various aspects of bras and lingerie that can be enjoyed, such as the significance of the particular brand, function, style, fabric and design. While a consumer will rely on their own expertise and the sensations of how something fits when trying on a bra, the consumer will also appreciate the mastery of the person administering the fitting, for example, the trained sales assistant (Alba and Williams, 2012).

2.2. The mediating effect of interaction with store personnel

In a similar way to enjoyment, the relationship and interaction between a consumer and store personnel may enhance the consumer's experience and elicit a good emotional response, in line with the more emotional or sensual aspects of human nature espoused by McDonald (1998). Successful retailing hinges upon effective interpersonal communications (Orth et al., 2013). According to Reynolds and Beatty (1999) if the relationship is built successfully, it is capable of generating particular positive emotions. In retail environments, researchers have already identified the fact that customers often desire personalised service (Kim and Kim, 2014; Reynolds and Arnold, 2000; Reynolds and Beatty, 1999). From the retailer or managers point of view, the following outcomes have been observed as a result of customer–store personnel relationships—store loyalty, increased chance of favourable word-of-mouth, increased satisfaction, ability to overcome a service failure and increased purchases (Kim and Kim, 2014).

Existing research suggests that these benefits are likely to be the greatest in high-contact, customised personal services, for example, upscale fashion operations (Reynolds and Arnold, 2000). There are some peculiarities with the sale of lingerie elevating it into this realm of ‘customised personal services’. There is a technical aspect of lingerie (fit) which means that store personnel can be more involved with the customer. Many retail stores offer in-store fitting services, and yet research conducted across western

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