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A portrait of intimate apparel female shoppers: A segmentation study

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ABSTRACT

This research expands dialogue on the dynamic consumer–product relationship within the under-researched, albeit sensitive, context of intimate wear. Drawing on involvement theory alongside specific product and service attributes, this study delineates and profiles segments within the highly engendered consumption of the bra. Data gathered from 221 Australian females unveiled three distinct segments of female bra shoppers: Enthusiasts who derive significant hedonic value in purchasing bras, Dilettantes who portray high interest in lingerie but exhibit the lowest levels of competency in bra-shopping, and Pragmatists who hold the lowest score in terms of hedonic value but perceive themselves as highly competent bra shoppers. Demographic and attribute profiling further captures differences between segments on factors including age, brand importance, lingerie servicescape ambience, and professional fitting advice. Findings provide relevant insights for lingerie retailers and suggestions for future research.

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CHINESE ABSTRACT

该项研究将消费者与产品之间动态关系的对话扩展到亟待研究的敏感领域——内衣消费。该项研究根据涉入理论并结合特定产品属性和服务属性,描述和介绍了高消耗文胸的细分市场。来自221名澳大利亚女士的数据揭示了女性文胸购买者的三个不同细分市场:热衷者通常能从购买文胸中满足其享乐主义价值观,而外行的购买者通常对内衣表现出高昂的兴趣,但是在购买文胸时却表现出极低的购买力,而实用主义者并不能从购买体验中获得享乐价值,但是她们认为自己是极具购买力的文胸购买者。人口统计学和产品属性与服务属性分析进一步反映了细分市场之间的区别,包括年龄、品牌重要性、内衣服务环境和专业试衣建议相关因素对细分市场的影响。这些发现为内衣零售商提供了相关的见解,并对未来研究的方向提出了建议。

1. Introduction

While literature on gendered consumption has been on the rise, extant research has rarely appreciated nor examined the variance existing within the same gender. More specifically in the context of lingerie consumption (Hart and Dewsnap, 2001; Hume and Mills, 2013), studies have yet to explore the differences among female shoppers in relation to purchasing intimate wear. This exploratory segmentation study therefore examines the gendered consumption of a product typically designed as a non-visible apparel item – the bra. Regarded by women as a wardrobe necessity, the bra serves as a foundation for clothing (Singer, 2014) and is a type of undergarment with which females develop an enduring and meaningful relationship (Amy-Chinn et al., 2006), albeit less explicit than that of conspicuous products. This discreet fashion product has undergone significant transformation in recent decades due to not only advances in production technology but also, perhaps more significantly, its position as a carrier of cultural meanings

dominating contemporary consumption ideology. Unsurprisingly, lingerie has blossomed from a commodity into a fashion market segment with reportedly higher margins than regular apparel (MarketResearch.com, 2015). Accounting for 55.5% of the world lingerie market, global bra sales in 2016 were estimated to be worth US\$16.42 billion, with brands distributing their products in well-known retailers or retailers offering their own brands and/or brands of trusted manufacturers (Just-Style.com, 2016).

While new and different lingerie silhouettes are continuously developed and offered, seasonal trends cannot belie the functional and hedonic needs that drive women to buy and consume the product. In light of the need to understand distinctive segments of intimate apparel shoppers, the primary aim of this paper is to explore whether the modalities and practices of lingerie consumption differ according to various types of consumers through the use of clustering techniques. The second aim of this research is to profile identified segments of consumers based on the importance of certain product and service attributes.

Building on the postulation that consumers differ in the amount of utility they derive from the same product (Coulter et al., 2003), we address the first aim of this study through the lens of involvement theory. Consumer involvement encapsulates complex

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“person-object” relationships from the perspective of product importance and its relevance to the consumer. While some individuals approach the task of apparel shopping as a chore that requires imposition on time and energy (Fischer and Arnold, 1990), others experience it as a pleasurable leisure activity (Green, 2001), deriving self-enhancing benefits contributing to one’s self image and personal identity (Babin et al., 1994; Hourigan and Bougoure, 2012). Existing literature on consumer behaviour in the fashion clothing market has drawn heavily on consumer involvement theory (e.g. Kapferer and Laurent, 1985; O’Cass, 2000). According to Rothchild (1984), “involvement is an unobservable state of motivation, arousal or interest. It is evoked by a particular stimulus or situation [and] its consequences are types of searching, information processing and decision making” (p. 217). As Martin (1998) further suggested, consumer involvement reflects a specific consumer’s response to the product or service.

Fashion-based consumption can be seen as an opportunity for consumers to express their unique personal identity, social status, and professional image (Thompson and Haytko, 1997). This projected identity presents a means of communicating with the external world and, as Gabriel and Lang (2006) stated, “[we] want to buy things not because of what things can do for us, but because of what things can mean to us and what they say about us” (p. 48). While prior research has explored the consumer decision-making process in the context of lingerie (Hart and Dewnap, 2001; Hume and Mills, 2013), there are no specific studies that marries the concept of consumer involvement and the purchase of intimate apparel. Adding to this apparent literature gap are the unique characteristics surrounding the intimate apparel product category, qualifying it an interesting subject of research. Briefly, these characteristics are associated with the fact that (1) intimate apparel, particularly bras, are products designed almost exclusively for females, (2) bras consists of multiple subcategories featuring various styles, material and purposes, and (3) the category is closely entwined with one’s self concept. In combination, these aspects relate to the degree of consumer involvement with the product, which in turn serves as a basis for segmentation.

Consumer segmentation is an important tool for retailers. Given the diversity of consumers and almost impossibility to satisfy all consumers with a single product, market segmentation serves to differentiate between distinct groups of consumers by identifying specific segments with similar requirements and buying characteristics (Dibb and Simkin, 1991). Careful market segmentation requires an understanding of the needs and expectations of consumers from which meaningful and profitable market segments can be identified based on appropriate geographic, demographic, behavioural and/or psychographic characteristics. In turn, clearly defined market segments help marketers develop strategies for effective targeting and positioning (Dibb and Simkin, 1991). Within the intimate apparel product category, a review of popular brands and retailers revealed the use of a combination of segmentation approaches, of which (a) age and life cycle (demographic variables) as well as (b) usage occasion, benefits sought and attitudes (behavioural variables) proved to be distinguishing characteristics between consumer segments. While researchers have previously noted that demographic characteristics may not always convey effective differentiation across fashion involvement profiles and are therefore less ideal for segmentation strategies (Haley, 1968; Moye and Kincade, 2003; O’Cass, 2004), brands have consistently recognized the undeniable role of age and life cycle in affecting bra purchase decisions due to the changing needs of the female body. Many brands including Berlei, Victoria’s Secret, Triumph and Bonds carry a wide range of bras that provide suitable comfort, support and fit according to the needs of growing teens, working women, nursing mothers and older women. Brands have also distinguished between different bra-wearing behaviour by differentiating the

product into usage patterns, such as occasions and benefits sought (e.g. T-shirt bra designed for seamless everyday wear, push-up bras for enhanced cleavage, convertible bras for strapless or halter-neck outfits and sports bra for physical activities). In addition to targeting consumers of various age and bra-usage behaviour, some brands further overlay differentiation strategies using females’ attitude towards their ideal self-concept. For instance, Victoria’s Secret line focuses on sensuality and body appeal while their youthful Pink line emphasizes more fun and cheekiness (Schlossberg, 2016; Singer, 2014). However, these approaches appear to be largely directed towards broadening their range of product offerings, rather than employing segmentation as a systematic marketing tool.

Taken together, it is imperative “not only to understand involvement itself but also to understand the role involvement plays together with other variables in guiding the formation of purchase and consumption patterns” (O’Cass, 2004, p. 878). This suggests that measurements of consumer involvement should be employed alongside relevant variables when identifying consumer segments of intimate apparel. In taking the first step towards empirically segmenting consumers of this product category, we focus on exploring the nuances of specific product and service attributes that would enable retailers to develop more targeted and tailored strategies towards enhancing consumer value during the shopping experience. Thus, the importance of such attributes to a particular consumer segment will be used to profile identified segments of female shoppers.

The following section provides an overview of existing literature regarding consumer involvement, the product concept of intimate apparel, product-related attributes, and service attributes. We then discuss the methodology and measures used in this study before presenting the results and discussion of managerial and theoretical implications.

2. Conceptual background

2.1. Consumer involvement

Consumers engage differently with various models of consumption. Douglas and Isherwood (1996) noted that consumption is not only directed to communicate to others but also to ourselves. This highlights the personal relevance that can be associated with a consumption behaviour or specific product category, conceptualized as consumer involvement. While involvement has been examined as a crucial factor in consumer behaviour (see, for example, Kapferer and Laurent, 1985), there is little agreement on the meaning of the involvement construct (Behe et al., 2015). In the pioneering work of Sherif and Cantril (1947), involvement was described as the state of the organism when presented with any stimulus which is consciously or subconsciously related to the ego (“ego central”). This finding was confirmed by Kassarian’s (1981) observation that the differences between individuals make some consumers more interested, concerned, or involved in the purchase decision process. Hence, consumer involvement can be broadly defined as “the degree of psychological identification, affective and emotional ties the consumer has with a stimulus or stimuli” (Martin, 1998, p. 8).

According to Laaksonen (1994, p. 28), both social psychologists and consumer behaviour researchers consider involvement as a property of product-related cognitive structure, determined either in terms of an attitude or knowledge structure in relation to the product. However, Kapferer and Laurent (1985) proposed that involvement may be approached more meaningfully as an arousal or motivational state that can be triggered by antecedents including interest, perceived pleasure value and perceived risk. In turn, such facets were postulated to provide a clearer picture of the involvement profile of consumers, challenging previous practices of measuring involvement with a single index or even item (Kapferer

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