

THE INFLUENCE

THE
WAREHOUSE

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OF BRANDS IN THE FASHION PURCHASING PROCESS

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Understanding why consumers buy different products is a key challenge for marketers across all categories of products, from fast-selling consumer goods to High Street fashion.

Brands play a pivotal role in shaping people's perceptions of products as well as being a focal point for the meaning and value that products have for different individuals. For instance, why is it that one consumer may choose to wear Levis™ jeans, while another may choose to buy basic brand jeans from The Warehouse™?

The importance of store and product brands can depend on consumer characteristics, such as price consciousness and fashion sensibility, that will vary from segment to segment.

In this article, we identify through a series of focus groups six key factors of fashion brand choice: **rational, product, cognitive, environmental, peer and cultural.**

Understanding the interplay of the six factors in conjunction with the purchase occasion allows fashion retailers increased understanding of how consumers select fashion brands and how store brands can influence the location and likelihood of purchase.

Other retailers can also benefit from the findings of this research, particularly those who have a strongly defined product or store brand as well as those who rely on major manufacturers' brands for a large proportion of their bottom-line profits. ▶

We need to be in a position to understand the impact of branding in the fashion purchase decision

THE IMPORTANCE OF FASHION AND IDENTITY

Brands represent strong symbols of meaning for consumers. The brands we use reflect our nature and form a part of the image we present to the outside world (Ogilvy, 1983).

Obviously, some products are less conspicuous and may be used privately, so symbolic meaning will be derived from the individual person and the experience he or she has had with the products over time (“I’ll buy the same brand of baking powder that my mother did” – Childers and Rao, 1992).

Other products are more public, however, and can be easily seen (and evaluated) by others. These products demand more careful scrutiny in choice, especially for those trying to present a particular image to the outside world.

This is especially true in the case of fashion. No other product is a better example of consumer image conveyance.

The clothes we wear in our daily lives often signify our status, occupation, mood and even cultural affiliations (Levy, 1959). Clothing allows people to identify with others and identify themselves.

Clothing is also a product category where many factors influence the purchasing process and ultimate brand choice. Understanding brand selection in the fashion purchasing process not only allows valuable insight for fashion retailers, but for any business selling a product that is rich in meaning. The latter could include a long-time “family” brand of dishwashing liquid or a specialised electronic goods brand (McCracken, 1986).

We need to be in a position to understand the impact of branding in the fashion purchase decision. Brands are important for fashion and, indeed, all retailers, but how do they actually generate equity and operate in practice?

Here we examine brands as they relate to fashion purchasing. After reviewing the literature and the results of our qualitative study, we develop a conceptual model of brand influences and discuss this in relationship to purchase factors and different purchase contexts. The paper is set out as follows:

- A brief review of branding literature as it relates to product choice.
- A brief discussion of the study conducted to examine the topic.
- An examination of the results obtained from the focus groups.
- Development of a conceptual model of brand influences and the effect of purchase occasion.
- Conclusions and implications of the research.

BRANDS AND PRODUCT CHOICE: WHAT THE LITERATURE SAYS

WHAT IS A BRAND?

Brands are a well-recognised point of distinction in product and services marketing practice. In a fashion context, brands signal to consumers the quality of a product, the image that it is meant to convey, as well as representing particular current garment styles and trends (McCracken, 1986; Keller, 1993).

The brand can also act as a pivot between a number of competing considerations. For instance, a garment brand may be particularly expensive, but rich in symbolic meaning. A “basics” clothing retailer on the other hand, may stock good-quality, reasonably priced, durable clothing brands, but have little to offer a consumer in terms of brand image experience.

Brands can create value for customers and retailers in many diverse ways, depending on their nature (i.e. a category or store brand) and the way they are sold (i.e. alone or together with competing products).

WHY ARE BRANDS IMPORTANT?

Brands are important for both consumers and companies.

For consumers, brands can serve a number of purposes as demonstrated in the literature.

First and foremost, brands can serve as indicators of quality and authenticity (Aaker, 1994). As consumers become familiar with particular brands and what they can expect from branded products, trusting relationships can develop between consumers and manufacturers.

If a chef purchases and appreciates cooking with a particular brand of spaghetti sauce, for example, value can develop for the brand in the chef's mind, both in the sense of financial value (e.g. "I got more than I paid for") and intangible value (e.g. "This sauce makes my dishes taste more exotic and authentic").

If a brand can provide value through form and function, then consumers can feel comfortable repurchasing the brand and possibly other products made by the same firm (Keller, 1993).

Over time, consumers can and do develop relationships with particular brands they purchase (Fournier, 1998). Consider the man who will not drink a beer when at a bar unless it is his preferred brand (product loyalty) or the female shopper who steadfastly refuses to shop anywhere but at her preferred fashion retailer (store loyalty).

Understanding brands and consumer brand relationships is vital for any business seeking to improve its competitive advantage in the marketplace, be it a fashion retailer or a service provider operating under a clearly defined brand identity (Berry, 2000).

Over time, if a brand is maintained and supported by a firm, it can become a significant market-based asset, capable of increasing a

firm's resale value sometimes by a factor of 3.5 or more (Keller, 1993; Srivastava, Shervani and Fahey, 1998).

All retailers need to understand how their category and store brands can create value depending on customer type and purchase occasion.

The results of this study have potential applicability outside of fashion, especially where brands are rich in symbolic meaning, be it beverage brands or motor vehicle makers.

THE STUDY IN BRIEF

Because of the lack of information in this area, we used a series of focus groups for input into the initial development of our conceptual model. Each group contained between four and seven participants. We deliberately restricted the number of participants so as to make respondents feel more comfortable about discussing personal issues relating to brand choice.

Subjects were aged between 18 and 24 and the gender split was approximately equal. The sample consisted of university undergraduate students, who represent an important market segment for fashion retailers and other retailers of branded merchandise. The use of a student sample is a weakness of the research, but the findings are still useful as a starting point for understanding fashion brand choice.

Moderators used a semi-structured set of "primer" questions to guide participants. This question protocol was used to guide and control the research and to ensure a logical research process (Wolcraft, 1994). Results from the focus groups were then content-analysed using a computer program called QSR 

Understanding brands and consumer brand relationships is vital for any business seeking to improve its competitive advantage

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NUD*IST version IV for analysing text. Results were triangulated and cross-checked between researchers to ensure overall consistency and effectiveness (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

RESULTS FROM THE STUDY

To understand the importance of brands in the fashion purchase process, we focused our investigation on the key factors contributing to brand choice under different purchase occasions.

Although some results will be common sense to many retailers, the *interaction* of the factors in different situations represents the most useful insight to emerge from our findings.

RESEARCH ISSUE ONE: FACTORS IN FASHION PURCHASING

We noted six key factors that contribute to the fashion purchase decision and we discuss each in turn, paying particular attention to their impact on brand selection. We used the focus group results to develop a broad conceptual model of brand influence in the fashion purchase process detailed in **Diagram 1**.

Although the model assumes some thought is involved, it does not portray consumers as purely rational beings. Instead, it demonstrates the varied roles that different factors (such as style and store environment) can play during a fashion purchase and how different types of purchase situation affect the process and ultimate brand choice (Howard and Sheth, 1973).

We were interested to see how *internal* factors (such as price sensitivity) would be affected by more *external* influences (such as peer and cultural influences) in the selection of product brands and what stores consumers shopped at (i.e. store brand choice). We discuss each factor in turn and the contribution it makes to brand choice.

INTERNAL FACTORS

1. Rational factors

Rational factors can be thought of as the economic and price-related aspects of purchasing. All subjects appeared to have a set of rational beliefs that influenced what clothing and, more specifically, what brands they would purchase.

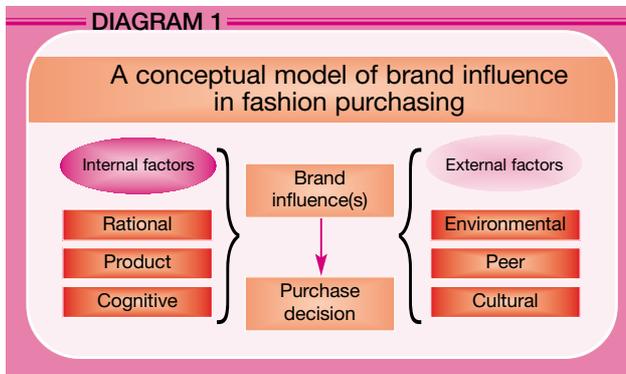
As expected, price was the key rational factor influencing brand choice. In fact, for some participants, price was even a precursor to basic product features. For most, however, there was a direct trade-off between price and quality: participants would pay a higher price if the brand was of sufficient quality. This was also reflected in the importance of durability: clothes needed to be long-lasting and made of good-quality fabrics to justify purchase.

The brands recalled by participants formed a definite continuum based largely on perceived quality (Aaker, 1994).

Specific fashion retailers' positions on the continuum seemed to be determined on the basis of price, perceived quality and the popular symbolic meanings ascribed to the brand by consumers (McCracken, 1986).

Two other interesting findings emerged when we examined rational influences. Firstly, participants rarely (if ever) mentioned more exclusive international brands (such as Gucci™, Chanel™ and Prada™). While this can be expected due to

DIAGRAM 1



the age and income of participants, it is important because if or when these brands do become financially accessible to participants, prior beliefs may prohibit participants from considering the brand in future purchases due to the memory associations of consumers.

The second interesting finding that emerged was the effect of familial influence on the rational side of the purchasing process. Familial influence was most visible in participants' rational beliefs. Parents were perceived as not understanding the importance of brands, but parental influence did extend to price-consciousness.

As one participant remarked: *"I think I learned about price from my family. I used to go out shopping with Mum and she'd be like 'don't buy that, it's too expensive'."*

Family influences typically appear to have a residual effect on necessity-clothes purchasing, especially brands that are not obviously visible (e.g. socks), but little or no effect on visible clothing or for more stylised or luxury brands (Childers and Rao, 1992).

While this effect may have been pronounced due to the sample, familial influence doubtlessly plays a role in shaping our early product preferences and purchase criteria. This will likely make some impact on brand choice at a later age for some consumers.

Rational factors were tempered by other considerations, however. Most important were participants' perceptions of the importance of fashion in their lives and the concept of their own style. Those who considered themselves more "fashion-conscious" were likely to reduce the importance of rational factors when selecting fashion brands. Similarly, those who placed more importance on their image recognised the need to pay more.

We examine fashion sensibility and the notion of a consumer's self-concept in the **cognitive factors** section.

2. Product factors

Consumers also base their evaluation on the physical make-up of branded apparel. These physical considerations can be labelled as product factors.

Consumers possess a set of criteria for evaluating the physical components of branded fashion apparel. These criteria are also rational in nature, but they are specifically concerned with the physical aspects of the brand rather than price or resource limits.

Fit was the most commonly mentioned product influence among males and females. Regardless of brand or price features, a garment still needs to "look right" if a person is going to buy it. A balance needs to be struck by retailers between clothes that will generally fit well and clothes that will fit specific people extremely well.

Style is another critical product influence. This concerns the look of a garment as opposed to the fit and includes references to garment cut and shape.

Importantly, branded apparel tended to have its own distinct style and even store brands carried distinct style associations.

Participants would often buy a specific brand purely on the basis of its style. In the absence of rational considerations, this was a key differentiator between branded and non-branded apparel (Birtwistle and Freathy, 1998).

One participant neatly expressed this when she said: *"It's not so much the brand name you're looking at. It's more like when you* ▶

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Consumers can become so closely affiliated to particular brands that they may refuse to wear anything else

know the style of clothing that goes with the brand, like it's the style you're looking at ..."

Developing a distinct style association is essential for all brands from private store brands to exclusive labels, as this association increases the likelihood of inclusion in a consumer's choice set.

Sibling influence can also play a role in product preferences. Males, particularly, noticed the influence of older brothers on style choices, but that other siblings could equally be influenced by their (i.e. the participants') own style preferences.

This finding holds interesting research opportunities for the advertising of certain brands of men's clothing. The father/son advertising link is often exploited, but older-to-younger-brother advertising links have been less deeply explored.

Fit has a dual role: physical comfort and mental comfort (i.e. the way you feel when wearing a garment). Many participants alluded to the fact that certain brands tended to fit a lot better than others, especially in the case of women's brands of clothing. This relates to a consumer's **self-concept**, which is examined in more depth in the **cognitive factors** section.

In the results, a significant interaction was noted between product influences and cognitive influences.

When a consumer tries on your brand of clothing, s/he needs to connect with its style and to feel physically **and** mentally comfortable in front of the mirror. A distinctively styled brand, worn over time, can greatly enhance purchase likelihood through the associations it embodies.

Following on logically, the second way in which product factors can influence brand choice is through encouraging heuristic (rule-of-thumb) associations with your brand. This means that when one thinks "I need a new shirt that looks stylish", a brand name is highly likely to be thought

of top-of-mind if it is sufficiently distinct in the consumer's mind (Birtwistle and Freathy, 1998).

Taking this to the extreme, consumers can become so closely affiliated to particular brands that they may refuse to wear anything else. This, of course, should be a key focus for all types of retailer (Fournier, 1998).

A retailer with private-label clothing needs to tie these associations to the store brand, whereas a manufacturer will need to compete for a distinct spot in a consumer's mind-space with any other brands present on the shop floor where the product is sold.

3. Cognitive factors

Cognitive factors refer to the mental processes a consumer undergoes during the decision-making process. These form the central core of consumers' purchasing patterns.

Purchase heuristics appeared to be quite common with particular brands. Based on rational and product factors, if a brand purchased in the past yields a positive experience then the brand may be purchased again in a similar situation. A familiar brand would dominate other brands in the evoked set, an evoked set being the small number of brands that are recalled by a consumer during the decision-making process.

Although this research sought to uncover the drivers of brand choice in the fashion purchasing process, it also seemed feasible that brands alone could actually drive purchases and that brands could be goals and serve more representative and heuristic purposes rather than just being a part of the final product choice in a purchase (Keller, 1993; Aaker, 1994).

Brands seemed to be the sole choice criteria for many participants in the research (Howard and Sheth, 1973). Several participants alluded to this, mentioning that actual brands were more important, particularly when you are younger and still at school. But after one's

formative years, brands serve more as quality indicators and purchase heuristics (e.g. “I need a new shirt – I’ll go to retailer X”).

Some participants’ heuristics were not brand-based, but focused more on rational and product influences. Others, however, made reference to specific brands and explained how they would repeat purchase because of their positive experiences relating to quality, durability and style.

These heuristics were especially prevalent for distinct store brands that represented a unique and stylised label clothing brand. Participants mentioned both high-class and more budget brands in heuristic terms. So being a brand “rule of thumb” is not a privilege reserved exclusively for upmarket retailer brands.

The meaning of brands and how this meaning can serve as an antecedent to choice is examined in the **cultural factors** section.

Some participants even described their brand choices in semi-ritualistic terms, emphasising that “going clothes shopping” often meant going to very similar locations and choosing familiar brands (Rook, 1985).

One participant commented: “*You might think of a particular style and you might think of (retailer name), (retailer name) and (retailer name) all together and just go after that particular style rather than the brand itself.*”

Consumer self-concept proved to be one of the study’s focal points. A consumer’s self-concept refers to the way we think about ourselves (Aaker, 1999). Participants appeared to have an internal point of self-reference (an ideal image of themselves) that they used to evaluate brands and the fit that brands had with their ideal image (Aaker, 1999).

The fashion brands that a person buys are highly representative of their self-concept and the type of person they consider themselves to be. To think of it another way, clothing not only makes the (wo)man, it is the (wo)man!

Participants stressed that because brands had inherent style and meaning, the style was more important to them than the underlying brand. Brands were purchased for their fit and style rather than just for the brand name *per se*.

Consistent with Aaker’s (1999) conceptualisation, participants varied in their degree of self-monitoring. Self-monitoring explains how our outward behaviour is guided by various social cues that dictate appropriate behaviour in particular situations (Snyder, 1974).

Low self-monitors are motivated more by their own personality traits, whereas high self-monitors, while also personality-driven, can alter their brand choices to adapt to certain situations where it is “socially appropriate” in their minds (Aaker, 1999).

Several participants stressed the importance of brand uniqueness and that the best brands were stylised brands that no other person was wearing at the time, indicating a low degree of self-monitoring.

Other participants identified brands as being part of clothing subcultures. Symbolic meaning from brands came from the desire to identify with a group and this influence is reflected in people’s self-concepts, indicating a greater degree of self-monitoring (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995).

Retailers need to be aware that these different types of consumers are buying their brands for different reasons. Low self-monitors use 

Being a brand “rule of thumb” is not a privilege reserved exclusively for upmarket retailer brands

OF BRANDS PURCHASING If in a positive mood, people could temporarily overcome inhibitions and perhaps try a brand that may not fit with their usual image

the brand for self-expression while high self-monitors use the brand to identify with others in a social group. Marketing communications can play on this distinction.

Self-concept (and brand uniqueness) interacted significantly with other variables in the purchasing process. Self-concept relates to fit, style and durability: the way you feel about wearing clothes is continually referenced to one's ideal self and positive experiences with clothes will influence your self-concept and evaluations of particular brands.

Self-concept was also strongly influenced by mood during purchase. For example, if in a positive mood, people could temporarily overcome inhibitions and perhaps try a brand that may not fit with their usual image. Likewise, a negative mood may heighten the negative aspects in a person's self-concept and perhaps eliminate potential brands from the evoked set.

In addition, the way you prefer to shop depends in part on your self-concept and will partially dictate your feelings toward aid from store assistants and the types of store atmosphere that you prefer to shop in. We discuss these applications of self-concept in the **environmental factors** section.

In summary, brand preferences are driven (in part) by a number of internal characteristics present in consumers, including rational,

product and cognitive influences. As the results have demonstrated, all three have a significant influence over store and product brand preferences and loyalty.

The cognitive aspects of brand preference do appear to manifest into some degree of "fashion sense", the influence of which will depend on the specific consumer and purchase occasion.

Current research highlighted four broad types of fashion consumer (significantly across males and females). The four classifications are presented in **Diagram 2** and, while not developed in detail here, they should play a significant role in future research.

EXTERNAL FACTORS

4. Environmental factors

Once participants had a brand (or brands) of clothing in mind, they would go to a given location to evaluate the brand. Three key environmental variables became apparent during the study: background music, rack density and store attendant behaviour.

• Background music

Music needed to reflect the ideals of the store and the brand. If one walked into a store and the music did not match with expectations, this could lead to the purchase being immediately abandoned. For example, one participant



TABLE 1

Retailer survey table

Retailer Type	Music Policy	Assistant Training	Rack Policy
Mass Retailer A (male)	Pre-mixed Top 40 hits	Set selling process	Set rack density ratio
Mass Retailer B (female)	Pre-mixed Top 40 hits and energy techno	Set selling process	Set rack density ratio
Low/mid-priced Retailer (unisex)	Pre-mixed Top 40 hits	Set selling process	Set rack density ratio
Mid-priced Retailer (male)	At manager's discretion – preferably eclectic music. No set policy	No specific policy – trained by manager and tailored to individual customer requirements	One or two of each garment size
High-priced Retailer (unisex)	At manager's discretion. No set policy	No specific policy – tailored to individual customer requirements	One or two of each garment

stated: “The shops that try to cater to our age groups with loud music and drum and bass ... I've never ever felt the compulsion to go in there and buy. I just don't feel cool enough to be perfectly honest.”

Music played needs to be congruent with shoppers' preferences: if your customers like the music you play, they will spend more time (and money) in your store than if they dislike your music selection (Herrington and Capella, 1996).

The results of an anonymous informal survey of five Auckland fashion retailers (refer Table 1) demonstrate that while mid- to high-level retailers are playing unique music, they will need to think closely about just how alternative and “in vogue” their selections are. Likewise, low- to mid-priced retailers will have to think carefully before they can justify playing premixed music to their customer base as this may equally have a negative impact on the brand.

Thinking back to the issue of brand value, a well-thought-out music selection will only enhance a retailer's brand value over time. The music played needs to reflect and associate itself with the image that the brand presents through advertising and marketing communications.

• Rack density

Participants stressed the importance of free browsing in stores. Overloaded racks make

browsing difficult and also cheapen brands in the eyes of the consumer. Having “bargain tables” is fine, but for normal clothing, only minimal numbers of clothes should be on the racks at any given time.

A small increase in labour to constantly restock lines is a small price to pay for enhanced brand value and perceived quality.

As can be seen in Table 1, low- to mid-level retailers can learn a lot from their higher-priced counterparts. By limiting stock on shelves, even mass retailers can enhance their brand image in consumers' eyes. Mass retailers should proceed with caution though: their customers may expect an abundance of shelf stock. Limiting it may, in fact, create negative perceptions if a large garment range represents a strong existing brand association.

Stores should always be designed to reflect brand symbolism, even for mass retailers. A store represents a brand's meaning, so the environment should reflect the image the brand is trying to present to consumers.

• Store attendant behaviour

If a brand is chosen from a rack or even just looked at, a salesperson's actions can “make or break” the purchase and brand evaluation.

Participants had mixed views about sales assistants. Many female participants felt sales

Some participants (particularly females) stressed the importance of having someone present to “keep them in check”

assistants should play a minimal role and help only when approached by a consumer. Others (mainly male participants) saw assistants as needing to exercise tact when deciding whether to aid in selection, and that help should be constructive and objective.

The strong negative reaction from females in this area highlights the particular importance of shop assistant training where female brand choice is concerned.

Retailers surveyed in **Table 1** had mixed policies regarding store assistants. The research holds advice for both specialised and mass retailers.

A set training policy is essential for consistency, but assistants need to be encouraged to tailor their policy to various clienteles intelligently. Thus more mass retailers need to encourage staff to show initiative in aiding brand selection, while more specialised retailers may need to consider implementing at least a basic standard training policy.

An example of the importance of these procedures is that participants often prefer to shop and evaluate brands with the aid of a friend rather than with the help of a paid (and possibly biased) shop assistant. So sales workers need to exercise tact when assisting different types of shopper.

• Peer influence

Consumers often do not feel confident enough to evaluate brands alone, so consulting a friend or partner by inviting them along to a potential purchase can enhance the process.

We found the influence of peers present at purchase to be critical in what specific brands were chosen, particularly with regard to product and rational influences (Asch, 1973; Venkatesen, 1973).

In childhood, a parent usually fulfilled this role. Participants found themselves using the

same methods in adulthood, however, but with a friend or partner instead of a family member. Having a peer present meant that shop assistants become largely irrelevant and that evaluation of a brand centred largely on initial peer reaction to fit, style and price-based decisions.

Some participants (particularly females) stressed the importance of having someone present to “keep them in check” and to validate their purchases.

Shop assistants need to understand how best to approach groups of consumers evaluating brands. Assistants need to use their own professional judgment to determine whether a group of consumers will benefit from assistance or whether the mere fact of there being a group should simply mean “leaving customers to it”.

6. Cultural factors

Another consideration of interest besides more rational factors is the more symbolic issues surrounding fashion brands. We attempted to uncover some of the sources of symbolic brand meaning that consumers use. McCracken (1986) proposed that symbolic brand meaning could be transferred from world to product through advertising and via the influence of the overall fashion system.

We questioned participants on their uses of advertising and celebrity endorsements in their evaluations of brands. Participants used magazines to understand the symbolism of current brand trends and also to establish reference prices. Others pointed to television and said that actually seeing someone wearing a brand was the best way to see “how good a brand was”.

Certainly, advertising is still perceived as an effective way for retailers to transfer brand meaning (McCracken, 1986).

Several participants also perceived celebrity endorsers as reference points for verifying particular brand meaning(s). It appeared that blatant celebrity endorsing was not well liked, but

that subtle and entertaining endorsements could be effective in transferring meaning to consumers (McCracken, 1989; Friestad and Wright, 1994).

Retailers can thus be assured that print and television advertising is still critical where fashion is concerned, but that endorsements need to be very carefully constructed.

An interesting finding to emerge at this stage was that many participants recognised strangers as having very strong influences on brand choice. Seeing a stranger wearing a brand could often be its best advertisement.

This was related to the fact that fashion show clothing was often perceived as unrealistic and that the top fashion models wore brands that were far too expensive “*for any ordinary person*”. If a normal person is seen wearing a brand, the clothing can be evaluated on a more neutral basis (cf. McCracken, 1989).

Retailers need to think about targeting “opinion leader” customers and offering them sample brands to wear and promote within their own circles, as this may be the best endorsement a brand can receive (cf. Friestad and Wright, 1994). These customers should be given preferential treatment and be kept informed of emerging designs and trends so that response can be gauged as and when brands alter their meaning over time.

Our findings concerning external factors are exploratory and, of course, limited by the sample we used. It is important to stress though, that brand choice is a balance of internal and external considerations. Consumers do not evaluate brands as solitary rational individuals. On the contrary, peer, culture and environmental influences do play a major role in brand choice.

The balance of internal and external factors will be moderated in part by the specific type of purchase that is taking place (i.e. is it planned

or unplanned?) and the type of product that is purchased (i.e. is the product a necessity or a luxury purchase?).

In the next section we outline an **influence matrix** that can help managers understand the drivers of different types of purchase in different situations.

RESEARCH ISSUE TWO: IMPACT OF PURCHASE SITUATION AND PURCHASE TYPE

A. Purchase situation

This can be planned or unplanned on the consumer’s part. Consider a consumer who realises that s/he needs to purchase a pair of socks because all existing pairs have worn through (**planned** purchase). Equally, a need to purchase may be activated by a situational impulse such as seeing a garment in a shop window or arriving at one’s favourite retailer to find a sale in progress (**unplanned** purchase).

Depending on whether a purchase is planned or unplanned, the **internal** factors isolated in this research will have varying degrees of impact on the purchase decision.

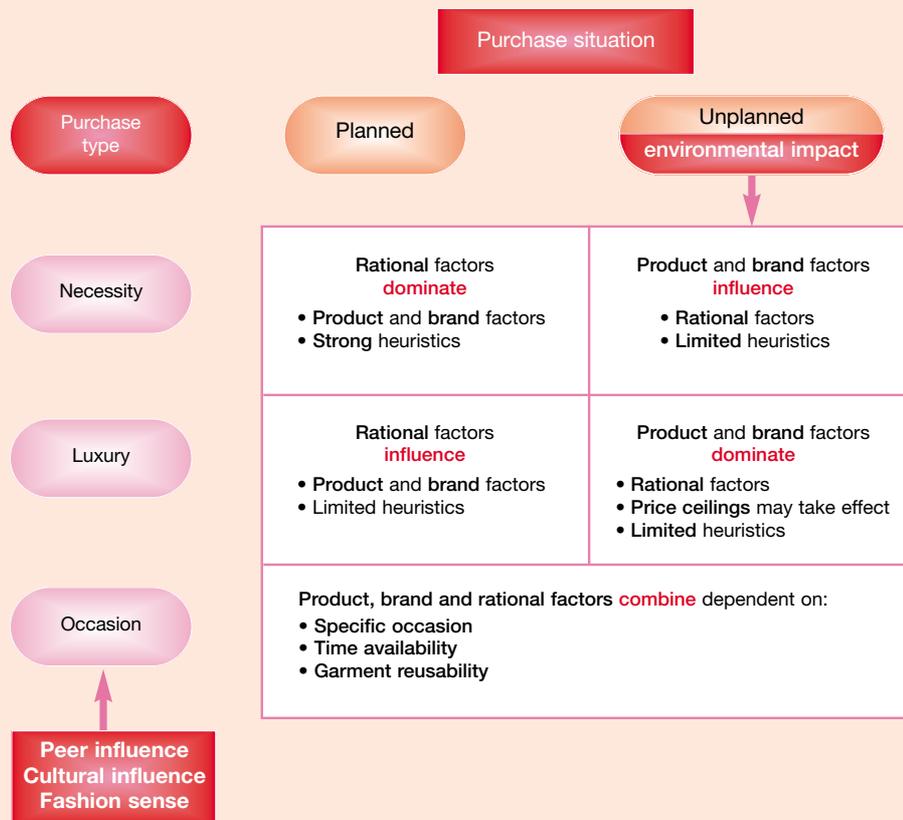
When purchases are planned, rational factors play a relatively greater role in brand choice than other product and brand factors. Note though that this does not amount to a purely rational choice for consumers. On the contrary, a consumer may refer to a brand “rule of thumb” and go straight to a budget retailer for her socks, but may be lured to a High Street store when she is looking for a new dress for a night out.

Planned purchases will often lead consumers to familiar stores. Store brands are particularly critical in the first instance, therefore, so that ▶

Retailers need to think about targeting “opinion leader” customers and offering them sample brands to wear and promote

DIAGRAM 3

The impact of purchase situation and purchase type on factor influences



when a consumer realises a need, s/he should ideally recall a store brand due to associations developed with the brand over time (Rook, 1985; Keller, 1993).

Product brands are still important, but for planned purchases, “getting customers through the door” will have a significant impact on purchase likelihood.

In contrast, unplanned purchases are more random and impulsive, so store brands and category-level brands can both potentially exert influence in the purchase process. Unplanned purchases are often less rational and so product features and existing consumer brand ideas and associations will be more important than rational influences.

That said, however, our research did reveal that even for unplanned purchases, rational impulses can still influence the ultimate brand choice and this finding is consistent

with studies in the extant literature (e.g. Rook and Fisher, 1995).

Environmental variables will also impact most heavily when a purchase is unplanned and surroundings may not be familiar to the consumer.

B. Purchase type

The purchase type as shown in the influence matrix will also moderate the relative impact of our factors. Peer and cultural considerations will also influence the type of purchase heavily, although these influences will be a lot stronger for luxury and special-occasion purposes than for everyday wear (Childers and Rao, 1992).

Necessity purchase

- Many purchases of fashion will be for basic garments such as socks and plain T-shirts. Sometimes a specific brand may be chosen to satisfy most if not all necessity purchases and this may become a purchase/brand heuristic.

Depending on whether a purchase is planned or unplanned, rational product and brand factors will combine to determine brand choice. Store and product brand heuristics are likely to be prevalent particularly for planned purchases.

Luxury purchase

- When consumers purchase luxuries, the impact of rational impulses will depend in part on whether the purchase is planned or unplanned. When a purchase is planned, rational factors will still have an influence over product and brand-specific factors. When a purchase is unplanned, however, the more symbolic aspects of brands can take hold and style as well as peer and cultural influences can often dominate rational considerations such as price and garment durability. Some consumers, particularly those faced with limited finances or those with a more rational nature, may still allow rational factors to influence purchase by imposing price ceilings and other limits on their brand selection(s) (Rook and Fisher, 1995).

Specific-occasion purchase

- Clothes are often purchased with a specific occasion in mind. This could be anything from a black-tie function through to a school ball. This purchase will often require a specialty brand stockist who can cater for specific events where a particular *type* of clothing is called for (e.g. a wedding or ball gown).

Some important decision-making criteria include:

- **Specific occasion** – how important is the occasion to the consumer?
- **Reusability** – can the garment be used again in another situation?
- **Time availability** – how much time does the consumer have to choose the garment?

Depending on the mindset of the consumer and the three factors above, price may increase or decrease in relevance when a garment (brand) for a specific occasion is bought. Price may *increase* in relevance if the garment is going to be worn only once. A consumer may question the need to spend more money on a brand (however appealing) that may be worn only once or twice in a person's lifetime.

Price may *decrease* in relevance, however, if the consumer wants to look good for the occasion. If this means spending more to look better, then this may have to be the case.

Consumers' fashion sense and the degree to which they monitor their own self-image (Aaker, 1999) will largely determine this relevance, regardless of whether a purchase is planned or not.

The influence matrix we have suggested demonstrates the interplay between competing factors in the purchase process and the varying roles brands can play in this process. It is important to realise that consumers can at one moment be purely rational and price-driven beings, yet in another instance be subject to the whim of a new fashion or style fad, irrespective of price or other rational considerations.

In future research we plan to empirically test the influence matrix and deepen our understanding of the interplay between factors in the process of brand choice, both in fashion and eventually other retailing sectors (Mullarkey and Stevenson, 2000).

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

Consumers have a set of rational beliefs and product preferences in terms of fit, style and durability, some of which develop through

When a purchase is unplanned, however, the more symbolic aspects of brands can take hold

Purchases will also be affected by product and store experiences as well as by responses from peers and colleagues

familial and peer influence, while some occur through consumers' unique cultural make-up.

They also have a number of cognitive processes that affect the brands they prefer: most importantly, their self-concept and degree of fashion sense. Depending on the type of purchase situation, an evoked set of potential brands is produced that inherently reflects these internal considerations. These brands will then be sought out and evaluated "in store" and may be influenced by the particular store environment. Purchases will also be affected by product and store experiences as well as by responses from peers and colleagues.

Brands themselves can also act as antecedents to fashion purchasing. In particular, they serve as quality and style indicators, they can be heuristic in nature, often they emphasise a particular style and fit (even sometimes at the expense of excluding particular consumers) and they can often guide initial purchase direction at the product category (store brand) level. Thus a good brand will need to associate itself with a particular style and market itself carefully to target the right group of consumers (McCracken, 1986; Keller, 1993).

Retailers can benefit from understanding the purchase processes that exist concerning their own store and product brands. We have examined the influence of brands as they relate to the fashion-purchasing process and isolated six key internal and external factors that influence and help to determine brand choice. We have also explained how these factors may differ in their influence across purchase situations and purchase types.

While the findings are specifically related to the fashion industry, we believe the underlying themes concerning brand symbolism, brand heuristics and the interactions between different factors have implications for all brand-based consumer businesses.

Our work is, of course, limited by the sample we used. We feel that future research should aim to incorporate other consumer segments in order to better conceptualise the role that brands play. But the purpose of this research was to develop a general conceptual model that could then be subject to further investigation in other research.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

By understanding customers and the roles that brands can play in purchasing, we believe retailers can better appreciate the sustainable drivers of brand value and brand equity in their businesses as well as isolating their competitive advantages over other retailers and manufacturers.

Brands are an essential part of consumer choices when purchasing products, but to understand why this is the case, we suggest retailers need to isolate and understand the factors that underlie a brand's importance and what factors lead their own brands to possess a competitive advantage in the marketplace.

To examine their own markets, retailers can use the six factors we discussed relating to fashion-brand choice as well as the influence matrix to understand the importance of brands



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in their own operations. Specific retailers can examine their customer base to see how they may use or react to these six factors when selecting brands at their own place of business.

Retailers could also examine how their own brands can affect departures from (or adherence to) rational choice in specific purchasing contexts (Simonson, 1993). By understanding the role of brands as market-based assets and the relationships that can develop between consumers and particular store and category brands, managers can not only enhance revenue generation, but also be in a better position to predict business outcomes, now and in the future.

FURTHER READING

For a general understanding of branding and brand equity, Aaker's (1994) book is a seminal work in the area. Srivastava et al (1998) offer managers insight into the conceptualisation of brands as market-based assets. McCracken (1986) outlines the importance of symbolic meaning transfer and how meaning is transferred to products and brands from the world at large through advertising and the fashion system. Keller (1993) is a good starting point for understanding the drivers of customer-based brand equity.

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