Chapter 10

What Do Chinese Fashion Consumers Talk about when They Talk about Fashion?
Exploring Diffusion of Innovation in a Networked Information Economy

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the interaction between fashion innovation and a networked information economy. One of the distinctive features of the latter is the prominence of a consumer who is able to play a more active and prominent role in the reception and even design of new products. Against this background the purpose of this study was to explore the role and contributions of Chinese consumers in the diffusion of fashion innovation. A content analysis of the contributions of Chinese consumers to a popular fashion forum called Branded Clothing is presented. The findings suggest a preference for later rather than earlier adoption of fashion goods; with forty-one per cent of respondents acting as a fashion follower, and fifty-nine per cent adopting more active roles in the exchange of fashion information. Tips and advice are the main category of content identified. The reliability and validity of the findings of the study are discussed. In conclusion it is suggested that the social system into which fashion goods are introduced in China may be different from that in a Western context. While innovative communicators exist, there are also opportunities for displays of increased innovativeness and opinion leadership in a Chinese online fashion consumption context.

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of a participative and interactive consumer has become one of the distinctive features of a networked information economy. This is a consumer who not only plays an influential role in ushering in the reception of goods into the marketplace, but also contributes to the design of new products and services. This chapter presents findings from an analysis of the content of a popular Chinese consumer forum called Branded Clothing hosted by bbs.trends.com.cn. The chapter
LITERATURE REVIEW

This section is organized as follows. The first section addresses the interaction between fashion and the networked information economy; the second section characterizes fashion consumption as a stage within the diffusion of an innovation; and a third section addresses the roles that different types of fashion consumer adopt when influencing the fashion diffusion process.

Fashion and the Networked Information Economy

Fashion is as much concerned with the creative aspects of designing new fashion goods as it is with determining what is in style for a given season. It is in the latter sense that the fashion industry can be said to have entered a new phase in the era of online technology and the Internet.

What distinguishes this new wave of fashion innovation is the prevalence of the information economy - the convergence of fashion and style with on-line technology. Communities of consumers have wielded new ways to express taste in what is colloquially referred to as fashion trends. Conversely, producers have new methods to qualitatively and quantitatively evaluate demand. The information economy has produced a new consumer with an increased sense of efficacy and a true stake in determining what is and what is not in style. In effect, the fashion industry must innovate itself as a whole to confront the new frontiers of possibilities presented by its consumer business partners” (Lim & Bayrak, 2010, pp. 1-2).

As this quotation suggests it is new Internet-enabled ‘communities of consumers’ who are currently responsible for a new wave of fashion innovation. Through the routine exchange of information and communications online, consumers are now able to influence fashion tastes, and to an extent influence the direction of fashion trends. This influence can be observed directly as consumers increasingly use the Internet, electronic forums, and social media to give their opinions about new fashion goods, and attempt to influence how other consumers will perceive the same goods. The influence can also be more indirect as companies capture and mine electronic purchasing data or otherwise analyze what consumers are saying about their fashion brands and products on social media sites.

This shift towards greater consumer influence has had an undoubted effect on how businesses design and implement their marketing communications. In a pre-Internet era companies would market to buyers via industry fashion events, e.g. shows, fashion weeks etc.; and would market to consumers via store displays and celebrity events. In addition a range of media including television, film, and magazines would be used to communicate word-of-mouth. In this marketing communications context consumers were predominantly viewed as the passive recipients of one-way communications and standardized fashion content. In a networked era these marketing communications methods continue; at the same time however the consumer also plays a much more active role in influencing the reception of fashion goods in the marketplace e.g. through opinions ratings and reviews. In summary, in a networked information...

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