



The impact of media exposure on fashion consciousness: A qualitative study

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Abstract

This study explored the impact of media exposure on fashion consciousness among youth, using a qualitative approach. Nine Malaysian Chinese male and female interviewees aged 21–25 were recruited with purposive and snowball sampling for data collection. How fashion consciousness is propelled by media exposure was sought via in-depth open-ended questions drawing upon the theories of self-discrepancy and social cognition. Six themes were identified after the coding and recoding processes. It was found that media exposure acted as a crucial hub in information acquisition on latest trends. The participants obtained their ideal images of self via media and either adapted it to their own styles, or retained their own styles.

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Introduction

Media plays a key role in facilitating global culture (Tomlinson, 2012). Information on lifestyle, culture, fashion, food and customs is brought into a country through media. While cultural imperialism detaches people from the cultural origins and traditions (Teltumbde, 2010) and can be labelled as the precedent of media imperialism, thus linking it to cultural genocide, a fake connection and non-existent link is established between the persuasive contents in the media and the audience. Hence, the item advertised is then purchased.

Rahman, Saleem, Akhtar, Ali, and Khan (2014) mentioned that fashionable clothing aids an individual to fulfil his or her basic need of dressing. Linking clothes as a fundamental need in human lives and fashion as an attribute, Rahman et al. (2014) justified the significance of how important clothes are in the daily lives of individuals: people are seeking for innovativeness and uniqueness in apparels. Influence of media was higher in developing countries. Moreover, TV viewers and magazine readers' desire to purchase is triggered by the exposure towards social models, thus leading to change in attitude and behaviour (Wok & Mohd, 2008).

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Although quantitative investigation into the influence of media exposure on fashion consciousness has received remarkable attentions (Gul, Shahzad, & Khan, 2014; Sun & Guo, 2014), the impact of both traditional and new media from a more insightful lens has been left unexplored. However, the results of quantitative studies are generalised, and these results provide only an overview on their samples. To date, no in-depth explanations have been obtained about the impacts of media exposure on fashion consciousness. Therefore, this study aimed to address the gap of knowledge in the body of literature by asking in-depth questions about the respondents' views on the impact of media exposure on fashion consciousness. In addition, in the previous studies on teenagers or adolescents fashion consciousness (Grant & Stephen, 2005), youths were not addressed. Finally, little is known about fashion consciousness in Malaysia. Malaysia is a multicultural country made up of different races, each being rich in its own culture and heritage. Over the years, with globalisation in place some individuals may have assimilated cultures from other parts of the world, thus developing their own identity and fashion preference. Therefore, the present study was an attempt to explore the impact of media exposure on fashion consciousness among youth in Malaysia.

Literature Review

Fashion Consciousness

Fashion consciousness is a person's degree of involvement with the styles or fashion of clothing (Shephard, Pookulangara, Kinley, & Josiam, 2016). Individuals with high fashion consciousness are characterized by high interest in fashion, desire to wear fashionable clothes, and spending time in fashionable places (Gul et al., 2014). Fashion conscious individuals believe in the value of being fashionable (Cassidy, 2012), thus wanting to dress well and be fashion leaders (Qureshi, Hashmi, & Faisal, 2015).

Fashion lifestyle relates to fashion purchases made by people based on their attitudes, viewpoints and interests (Ko, Kim, Taylor, Hoon Kim, & Jeong Kang, 2006). According to Rahman et al. (2014), the development and evolution of the fashion industry is triggered by fashion innovativeness, knowledge, involvement and opinion leadership. Individuals may have certain preferences of fashion pieces and are, therefore, concerned or aware of what they are wearing as clothes formulate outward appearances. Individuals then become conscious of

fashion styles.

Fashion leaders express their individuality by learning and purchasing the latest fashion trends as a way of keeping themselves updated with the latest trends (Goldsmith, Freiden, & Kilsheimer, 1993). Women are reported to be more innovative in terms of fashion, opinion leadership and possess higher spending capacity than men (Stith & Goldsmith, 1989).

Evidence has shown that women are more fashion-oriented (Pentecost & Andrews, 2010; Qureshi et al., 2015; Vieira, 2009). Qureshi et al. (2015) found that female consumers were observed to be more fashion conscious compared to male consumers. Vieira's (2009) study also confirmed the positive relationship between fashion consciousness and public self-consciousness among women. Shephard et al. (2016) mentioned that women's fashion consciousness is strengthened by investing in fashionable outfits as this feature of individuals helps them to apply their awareness of fashion to their external outlooks.

However, the cumulative effect of media influences, profit-making practices and gender role transformation have contributed to the establishment of new cultural norms in which Generation Y men are no longer strangers to fashion awareness and fashion involvement (Bakewell, Mitchell, & Rothwell 2006). Men who are perceived to have higher fashion consciousness eventually become leaders influencing other men to be aware of their outlooks (Shephard et al., 2016).

Media Exposure

Media exposure relates to the usage of media. It refers to the degree to which an audience or viewers have encountered specific messages or media contents (Slater, 2004). Audiences are picky in the media selection. Sun and Guo (2014) explained that audiences choose their media options in accordance to their interest to gain information. Western styles are currently assimilated by young Koreans due to the expansion of global media and rising travel opportunities (Park, 1996). The TV viewers and magazine readers' desire to purchase are triggered by the exposure towards social models, thus leading to change in attitude and behaviour (Wok & Mohd, 2008).

The media is a platform where individuals learn about new trends. In a study conducted in Pakistan by Sabir, Azam, Majid, Mahmud, and Sabir (2020), it was proven that the bandwagon effect is proportional to the purchase intention where it has a positive influence on the consumption of fashion goods. Parilti and Tunc (2018)

carried out a survey on postgraduate students in a private and state university in Turkey. They found out that bandwagon purchase of branded items is fueled with an increase level of anxiety in an individual. This is in-line with the study by Tsai, Yang, and Liu (2013) which mentioned that the bandwagon effect results in other individuals purchasing the same product due to the increase in demand for the aforesaid product. There is a sense of being equal to a certain group of people possessing a luxurious or branded item. The bigger the consumer pool, the greater the bandwagon effect (Parilti & Tunc, 2018).

Between mass media and personal media, the former has positively influenced fashion consciousness among male consumers. Shephard et al. (2016) justified that at the initial stage, exposure of mass media causes men to be more fashion conscious and later seek personalized and specific fashion-related media once they have acknowledged their awareness and become fashion leaders. Women portrayed similar pattern with regards to domination of mass media over personal media.

Media exposure is the precedent of social comparison: consumers have tendencies to compare their appearance with celebrities' image in advertising messages (Workman & Lee, 2011). The increase of information about the latest fashion trends on social media propels the purchase of new fashion items, thus increasing likelihood of exposure to that information among fashion conscious individuals, which later motivates them to visit fast fashion retailers more frequently (Michaela & Orna, 2015). According to Bandura (2001), an individual's fashion orientation is influenced by environmental behaviorial and cognitive processes via the perceived meanings obtained from mass media and personal media. However, Gul et al. (2014) found social media to have little influence on fashion consciousness.

Theoretical Framework

Self-discrepancy theory

Self-discrepancy theory was developed by Edward Tory Higgins in 1987. This theory revolves around the relationship in various types of discrepancies between self-state representations with distinct emotional vulnerabilities. Each type of self-state representation is constituted by oneself domain (actual; ideal; ought) and oneself standpoint (own; significant other). Agitated emotions such as fear and restlessness are caused by discrepancies between the actual self-state and ought to self-state. It is the individuals' aim to decrease the

magnitude of the gap to overcome the negative feelings. Fashion is a domain which varies across individuals. Exposure to media, peer influence, lifestyle and socio-economic status may affect the degree of fashion consciousness among individuals. As an example, media users are exposed to various kinds of fashion trends through reality shows, movies and updates in social media by celebrities. Those artistes and social media influential figures have minimal or almost absent discrepancy between their ideal and actual states as their fashion trends are up-to-date. Social media followers and media users on the other hand begin to idealise the fashion choice of the celebrities thus creating gaps between their actual and ideal fashion. Studying the influence of Instagram on body image satisfaction among youth, Ahadzadeh, Sharif, and Ong (2017) stated that individuals' outlook schemas may be triggered and initiated via exposure to peers or celebrities' idealised body images on Instagram, which in turn affects the process of self-relevant information related to appearance. This phenomenon according to Ahadzadeh, Sharif, and Ong (2017), is known as schematicity, which makes self-discrepancy important to the individual. Sun and Guo (2014) also found that social comparison carries special weight in Chinese society in connection with fashion clothing involvement. Individuals with high level of self-discrepancy are said to have higher social comparison.

Social cognitive theory

This theory, developed by Albert Bandura in 1986, explains that human behaviour is continuous mutual interaction between cognitive, behavioural, and environmental factors (Lee, Ho & Lwin, 2017). This theory posits how behavioural factors (practices), environmental factors (social norms) and cognitive factors (personal factors) affect human behaviour. A cognitive meaning is created within an individual's mind-sets upon coming across the three contributing factors. Shephard et al. (2016) applied the social cognitive theory in their study about media influence, fashion and shopping with regards to gender differences. Individuals are strongly influenced by their social surroundings through both textual and visual cues, which affect cognitive processes and behavioural outcomes (Shephard et al., 2016). For instance, advertisements of fashion items and fashion trends set by media icons are able to trigger the desire of having similar items among viewers and subsequently trigger the purchase intention. Considering that fashion consciousness is the central topic in this study, this theory would aid in exploring how respondents reflect the messages obtained from the media.

Methodology

The current study employed a qualitative approach to provide a deeper intuition and understanding of the impact of media exposure on fashion consciousness among youth in Malaysia.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect the required data. A set of open-ended questions with relevant questions was asked. Two major questions regarding fashion consciousness and media exposure followed by at least 10 sub-questions were imposed to the interviewees. A total of nine Malaysian Chinese students majoring in different subjects from a private university in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, were interviewed. All selected interviewees had a significant interest in fashion and were able to provide rich inputs, contributing to the findings of the study. Two sampling methods were employed to facilitate the search of suitable respondents for this research namely purposive sampling and snowball sampling. The scope of this research revolved around fashion consciousness and media exposure. Hence, the first one or two interviewees were required to have interest in fashion trends and purchase because a vast amount of rich data was required to contribute to the research questions. Secondly, snowball sampling was used to search for other respondents. This was right after the interview with the respondents obtained from purposive sampling to ensure respondents fit in contributing insights in the study (See Table 1 for information on Interviewees).

The interview session took place with the audio recorded via a tape recorder in a mobile phone. Transcripts were then reviewed to further modify the question set if needed to as the phenomenon of

fashion consciousness was being explored in this study. The first two interviewees selected via purposive sampling then recommended subsequent potential interviewees which fit in the criteria, and the entire procedure was repeated (snowball sampling). Each interview session lasted between one to one and a half hours. The data collection process took place between 6th to 19th June 2018. After conducting in-depth interviews with nine individuals, the feedback from the respondents were transcribed and sorted into different groups accordingly and analysed via thematic analysis. The themes were formulated by recoded codes. Themes and codes were described, classified, and interpreted according to the existing literature on the topic.

Results

Analysis of data is presented in this section.

Media Exposure

Respondents' exposure to media such as television, radio, newspaper, magazine and billboard were explored to see if exposure to those media affected their fashion consciousness in any way. Respondents stated that they spent minimal time watching TV and explained that they used to follow TV series back in their younger days. The ubiquitous nature of radio made it accessible for most participants, but less fashion content is found on it. As for newspapers, participants either opted for digital media to get the latest updates or spent minimal duration reading newspapers. As for magazines, respondents were selective in the media selection as they had different interests with the other respondents having zero exposure to magazines. Billboards on the other hand were rarely noticed with regards to fashion with the only exception being fashion ads on sales.

Respondents' exposure to new media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube and website) in comparison to traditional media was explored to identify if new media had a different impact on their fashion consciousness. All respondents had Facebook profiles and spent a minimum of one hour on Facebook daily.

The stronger impact of new media as opposed to traditional media could be seen in the respondents' feedback. Twitter was the only exception, in which most participants did not have Twitter accounts. Most participants allocated a certain amount of time daily to browsing through social media sites for various purposes.

Table 1 Interviewees' information

No.	Name	Age	Gender	Course
1	MN	23	Female	Food Science and Nutrition
2	Jacky	25	Male	English, Language and Communication
3	Ben	21	Male	Mass Communication
4	Elliotte	22	Female	Diploma in Architecture
5	Kelvin	22	Male	Mass Communication
6	ET	21	Female	Fashion Design
7	Donnie	25	Male	Nutrition with Wellness
8	Nicole	21	Female	3D Animation
9	Sally	21	Female	Multimedia Design

Self-Discrepancy

Most respondents had some celebrities they looked up to with regards to fashion. Most respondents noticed a gap between them and their fashion idols. They had intentions to decrease the gap by purchasing items worn by the celebrities or at least getting hold of alternative items which could help them achieve the aspired looks, with the condition that the styles were applicable in the Malaysian context and were suitable for them. Only two respondents were not affected by celebrities' outlooks as they emphasised self-independence.

Social Cognitive

The respondents picked up trends from the media and adapted it in their own ways, which later on triggered purchase intention.

Bandwagon

The culture of bandwagon could be a result of media exposure as people pick up trends from the media and adopt it. Therefore, a culture of bandwagon could be a result of media exposure as people pick up trends from the media and adopt such. One of the respondents mentioned that he eventually purchased three long line shirts at one time after observing how people on the internet wore it. Another respondent commented that individuals have tendencies to follow the trends blindly without considering the suitability of the trends with their personality. In fact, the desire to appear cool and in-style outweighs the suitability of the trends.

Applicability

The conservative nature in Malaysia was highlighted in relation to some attire such as certain pants, which would attract a lot of unwanted attention. It was mentioned that fashion from abroad would take some time to be incorporated in Malaysia, and there may be some risks involved. Using a chainmail dress, for example, is suitable now if a cardigan is worn over the dress. This is because society is becoming more accepting. In other words, others normally paid little attention to what others thought about someone's dressing but paid respect to the occasion.

Most of the respondents highlighted the conservative nature in Malaysia by stating that attire such as pants that go up to half of the bottom part of the body would attract a lot of unwanted attention and added that fashion from

abroad would take some time to be incorporated in Malaysia, and there may be some risks involved.

Fashion Consciousness

Respondents who were fashion conscious were aware of how they dressed, placed high emphasis on their outlook, adopted the latest trends, followed fashion icons on media and had high interest in observing trends. In contrast, respondents who were not fashion conscious tended to be less attentive to fashion trends and placed much emphasis in selecting daily outfits.

Some considered themselves to be fashion conscious as they were aware of how to dress up on occasions as they considered it important to be presentable in the eyes of the audience. On the other hand, others did not consider themselves to be very fashion conscious even though they were aware of what the current trends were. Those opposing fashion consciousness reasoned that they retained what looked good on them.

Discussion

The study revealed how the interviewees opted for new media over traditional media when sourcing information. The interviewees had higher Facebook exposure as some of them are connected to Facebook whenever they watch videos on YouTube and alternate between Facebook and Instagram. Generally, interviewees spent a minimum of one hour on Facebook daily. This contrasted with Meier and Gray's 2014 study which found that the majority of their respondents used Facebook for half an hour to an hour daily whereas only 8.7 percent of them used Facebook more than two hours per day.

The results of this study were somewhat consistent with past studies in terms of media exposure (Tiggemann & Polivy, 2010). For example, focusing on thin ideal commercials, adolescents reported weekly exposure to TV, monthly exposure to newspapers, magazines and billboards. Females had higher exposure to traditional media ads compared to males (Chang, Cheung, & Tang 2013). However, concerning online ads, both male and female respondents of this study reported an equal exposure as purchase intention was triggered when they saw ads on online platforms.

While previous studies showed that students spent between 30 to 60 minutes daily using social networking sites (SNSs), particularly Facebook (Coyne, Padilla-Walker, & Howard, 2013), respondents of this study

exceeded that duration. Comparing new media and traditional media usage, the findings were similar to Mokhtari, Reichard and Gardner's (2009) study, as in both studies, the Internet usage was higher compared to television watching and print media reading.

In this study, interviewees had the intention to decrease the gap between their actual and ideal self. Their ideal self consisted of celebrities and social media influencers. Taking the Malaysian context into consideration, they would look into ways to purchase the items if they had the financial capacity. Findings were in line with Sun and Guo's (2013) study, as most respondents mentioned that they engaged in dissonance reduction approaches coming across their perceived ideal role models.

Moreover, it could be seen how both genders are equally fashion conscious as they look out for trends. Similar to the findings of Shephard et al. (2016), mass media exposure had an impact on both male and female interviewees. However, several female respondents reported purchasing directly from retail shops. For them, the authenticity of online platforms became an issue, contradicting Shephard et al.'s (2016) findings with regards to how fashion leadership has a greater influence on non-conventional retail shopping compared to conventional retail formats.

Differing from Ghazali (2011) findings, male and female respondents had almost similar radio exposure as some respondents opted to stream music via Spotify. As for online usage, male and female respondents portrayed similar inclination towards social media usage.

The respondents' exposure to online shopping platforms and posts triggered purchase intention in line with Gul et al.'s (2014) study. However, respondents of the present study attributed new media to contribute to their fashion consciousness, supporting the findings which found a relatively positive relationship between social media exposure and fashion consciousness. Findings of the current study confirmed Ghazali's (2011) findings, which explained how the role of television, being the dominant media influencer, has decreased with the evolution of media consumption.

The interviewees' responses of how media affected their fashion choice in addition to window shopping support the findings of Iravani, Ghojavanda, Taghipourb, and Masomic (2012), and Sun and Guo (2014). Our research participants obtained their ideal images of self via media and either adapted it to their own styles or retained their own styles. Some participants did not see a need to achieve their media figures' looks as they wanted to portray their own identity through clothes.

Others emulated their 'idols' and saw how they could adapt it to their own style. Hence, the findings of this study partially supported Van Vonderen and Kinnally's (2012) study of internalization of thin ideal relating to self-esteem.

Concerning how trends spread from the West, the Malaysian Ministry of Tourism and Culture can come up with initiatives to remind youngsters of the essence of traditional attire to avoid the total depletion of traditional costumes. One interviewee mentioned how batik is a potential fashion piece. Perhaps the ministry can investigate ways to leverage on the uniqueness of batik. As an example, globalisation can be an aspect to be considered by infusing the batik design into dresses. Here, fusion of dresses (Western) and batik (local) shows how local designs are embedded in Western attire. Moreover, the Malaysian Ministry of Tourism and Culture can also benefit from this study as the research results would provide an insight about the fashion consciousness phenomenon in Malaysia as only a limited number of studies about this aspect has been conducted in Malaysia.

Findings from this study only provide a prospect of how media exposure impacts fashion consciousness among youth of a private university. The results obtained from youth subjects in this study do not represent all students' perception in the same university. Moreover, students from other universities may have differing opinions due to different context. Besides that, the study was conducted in Malaysia and is subjected to Malaysian cultural norms and customs. The research may be replicated in neighbouring countries, such as Singapore, Indonesia and Thailand, to see how youngsters' fashion consciousness is impacted by media exposure. Time constraint was another limitation in this study. More interviews could have further enlightened the subject matter. A mixed method research is also suggested to validate the results. Finally, since various social media sites like Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest and Instagram have become an inseparable part of the lives of youths, the newly revolutionized and dominant world of social media, particularly for Malaysian youth, requires researchers to conduct further studies on the effect of each of these social media types and the relevant ideas and perspectives on fashion consciousness.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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