Symbolic Consumption in Teenagers' Clothing

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Abstract: Consumers today do not only seek to satisfy their needs any more, they also seek to create the experience and symbols. One of the most important aspects of consumption that allows individual expression is clothing. Since the clothing is able to provide the information of one's social status, personality, or attractiveness, clothing can be defined as the medium of communication which provides the wide array of social information. Among all demographic segments teenagers are the most sensitive group when it comes to clothing. Since today's teenagers present themselves as the 'trend setters' who are going to accept 'new 'trends faster than anyone Authors assume that current cultural trends will be better illustrated by this group. Furthermore they represent experimental consumer who are 'fancy' to explore many new things. Therefore, the teenagers are very suitable marketing target group, but very hard to analyse and predict.

Key words: Symbols · Consumtion · Symbolic Consumption · Teenagers · Clothing

INTRODUCTION

The view that many brands possess symbolic values and that consumption of products or services depends rather on symbolic than functional features of the product became the important part of the consumer research. The changes on the market as well as the changes within the consumer's needs are the results of transition from modernism to postmodernism. Cova [1] argues that postmodernity created a new reality called 'hyper reality' which is based on the images, illusions and simulations. This 'hyper reality' brought changes in the marketing management and created a new framework. In this framework marketing has to include the consumers not as a target for products but as a creator of the experience [1]. Hence, consumers do not only seek to satisfy their needs any more, they also seek to create the experience and symbols. As the result the consumption based symbolism as well as the symbolic values of product became very important part of consumer research.

Self in the Social World: "Our self – concept; our sense of who we are contains no just our personal identity (our sense of our personal attributes) but our social identity" [2]. The social identity can be defined as 'part of the self-concept that derivers from our membership of social group' [3]. Gelder and Thornton [4] maintained that

people employ consumption in order to demonstrate the attachment to certain life style group. Similarly Cova [1] stated that people 'consumed symbols' in order to acknowledge the belonging to particular tribe or community which is usually based on "structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand" [5].

In order to examine the relationship between the self and consumption researchers conducted numerous studies about congruence of self-image and images of desired brands from various product categories. The existing results showed that consumption-based stereotyping and a consumption-based inference tent to be the strongest in the case of clothing [6]. Cox and Dittmar [7] maintained that since of all possession clothing perhaps has the closest intimate contact with self-image. Additionally, since the self-concept is not an individual process and it can reflect the image of one person within the society our body, therefore clothing can be considered as "central and integral part of our selves" [8]. Clothes work as "a system of non-verbal communication and are put to use to mark social and cultural boundaries" [9] and he influence of personal and social identity on the clothing consumption of adolescents [10]. They are used as a "weapon of exclusion" (Slater [11] and inclusion and allow a means of control over conformity to social norms. Furthermore, Jezkova Isaksen and Roper [12] found that as a result of

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peer pressure and the importance of conformity among adolescents, consuming the correct possessions at the right time, is essential for social acceptance, gaining and maintaining friendships and thus self-esteem.

Symbolism in Clothing: Since the clothing is able to provide the information of one's social status, personality, or attractiveness clothing can be defined as the medium of communication which provides the wide array of social information [13]. Similarly Barthes [14] suggested that since the clothing contains the informational character it could be also defined as the language. Bearden and Etzel [15] classified clothing as a "public necessity where reference group influence on the product category is weak, but their influence on the brand choice is strong". Thus it seems that with its symbolic nature clothing can significantly indicate the membership of a certain sub-group [16]. Therefore, we can point out that clothing is primarily a means of communicating, not personal identity, but social identity and clothing is symbolic of that (social) identity and the values espoused by the group. The same values serve as a yardstick for judging the clothing worn by others and the social identity symbolized by it.… Advertisements that project an implied social identity through a model's clothing are likely to have quite different effects on different kinds of consumers.

Although many research recognized the communicational function of clothing there were very few researchers who studied the way that this communicational function works. One of them was McCracken who conducted the research which suggested that "clothing, like language, depends on a 'code' when it serves as a means of communication?" [17]. Besides McCracken there were some other authors (such for example Holman), who also supported the idea of using the clothing as a code [18]. The code could be defined as "knowledge that must be shared by the addressor and addressee of a clothing message in order for the former to create this message and the latter to understand it" [17].

Also, the McCracken's research which showed that not everyone wants to provide the same information and message about themselves using clothing as communication. Thus it seems that "the knowledge of a code might have more uneven distributions for products than it does for language". Also, they maintained that knowledge of the clothing codes highly depend on the social location of the individual and the characteristics of the clothing 'look' [17].

Symbolic Consumption among Young Consumers: Although there have been a number of studies about adults recognition of consumption symbolism, very few gave attention to symbolic consumption among young consumers although Hite and Hite [19] reported that brand reliance can be established among two year old children.

Another research about the symbolic inference among young children was conducted by Belk *et al.* [20]. They conducted the study which involved participants from 4 to 15 years old, college students and adults. The study showed that young children make their judgment mostly randomly while the inferences of older children were more consistent with adult's one. Thus it seems that children will be more able to make symbolic consumption inferences as they become older. Therefore Belk et al. hypothesized that consumption-based stereotyping and a consumption-based inference is going to increase with age. These findings were also supported by Piacentini's and Miler's research [21]. More over these studies showed that the highest level of symbolic consumption was showed within eight graders and a college sample. Additionally it is also noticed that comparing college and adult sample, the level of consumption – based stereotyping was lower within adults. Thus it seems that symbolic based inferences are the strongest among teenagers. This phenomenon is result of 'identity crisis' within adolescent [21]. The period of transition from childhood to adulthood is a major shift for all of us. The adolescent period is the time of great transaction, [22], and it is crucial for the socialization [23]. Therefore, Hogg and Vugham [24] maintain that fashion goods "perceived to be a product category where children would have particularly strong views about brand image". This previous statement can be supported with the Beatty's and Talpade's study [25] about shopping patterns among young consumers. This study showed that parents are not the primary source of information any more. Moreover considering the clothing choice they also do not hold the central role in decision making process any more. Using the friends as the most important source of information adolescent hold strong attitude about what they would like to wear and consume. Media is the second factor for sure [26].

Clothing and especially fashion have very important role in teenager's social life. Therefore, Elliott and Wattanasuwan [27] maintain that "understanding how people interpret clothing, and how different groups of people make different judgments about the same brand of clothing is critical to clothing manufacturers and their

advertising agencies. During this period we are usually not aware how we are and who we want to become. Indeed in this transaction period we are relying mostly on symbolic consumption in order to create a self-concept. Furthermore it should be emphasized that social life among teenagers is very active and considering the different stages in one's life social identity tend to be most important in the adolescent period [28]. Fashion and elite brands are significantly important for young generations [29]. Some studies showed that students from the lower social class employ symbolic properties of fashion and clothing in order to be accepted as a part of the group. In other words they wanted to show that they are not poor, and that they are not different from others. On the other hand students from the higher social classes use clothes in order to position themselves in society. "The identity phenomenon of the person is embodied in body by clothing and fashion" [30].

CONCLUSION

One of the most important aspects of consumption that allows individual expression is clothing. Also, consumers today do not only seek to satisfy their needs any more, they also seek to create the experience and symbols. This stands for all demographic groups that make the consumption decisions about clothing individually or at least mostly individually. In the past decades teenagers are not any more guided in clothing by their parents, but more by their friends and media. Researches show that young people employ symbolic properties of clothing in order to locate themselves with society and in order to create social concept. Therefore they represent very vulnerable group when it comes to the influence of marketing actions and campaigns, but also very interesting for research because of possibilities of quick shifts of trends in teenagers culture.

Since today's teenagers present themselves as the 'trend setters' who are going to accept new trends faster than anyone [31] we can assume that current cultural trends will be better illustrated by this group. Furthermore, they represent experimental consumer who are 'fancy' to explore many new things. Therefore, the teenagers are very suitable target market for the innovative brands and Authors plan to make a regional research upon attitudes of teenagers in regard of clothes consumption in order to further investigate this issue and predict trends that could be useful both for marketers and researchers in the fields of culture, marketing and others.

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