

Analysing the significance of Social Experiences for Young Consumers in Apparel Buying

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Abstract

One of the key factors influencing fashion purchase and consumption is the 'experience' associated with these activities. Apparel buying is impacted by various different types of experiences, such as product experience, price experience, retail space experience, service experience, social experience, lifestyle experience and so forth. This research is focused on the social experiences obtained through direct & indirect social interactions and influences of elements of the social environment on young consumers' apparel buying. The paper is empirical in nature. The objective of the research is to identify the most significant determinants of social experience that impact young consumers' apparel buying. The paper also analyzed the differences in importance given to social experiences in apparel buying by young consumers belonging to different demographic profiles, i.e., age groups, gender and monthly income or allowance.

Keywords: *Customer experience, Social experiences, Young consumers, Apparel buying, Digital Social Marketing*

1. Introduction

Fashion consumers today are probably the most confused set of consumers with a number of brands to explore, variety of product options, an array of retail channels and store formats, intriguing and mesmerizing shopping ambience and unique services that make shopping an exciting activity, but at the same time complicate the decision making process.

The scenario poses challenges for marketers also, as maintaining customer loyalty becomes arduous. Trends of increasing inter-brand and inter-store competition at one end and increased consumer awareness on the other end require immense consumer involvement and assessment during the phases of information search, evaluation of alternatives, final decision making and actual purchase.

Apparels constitute one of the 'high-involvement' product categories. It becomes important to identify the significant factors that affect apparel consumers' experiences and subsequently their buying decisions. Apparel purchase and consumption involves different experiences. Various factors such as the product, retail channel, service-scape, store attributes, fashion trends, consumers' personal factor and the social environment are instrumental in creating different types of customer experiences. These experiences further impact consumer psychology and buying behaviour.

Youth as consumers are complex; yet it is the consumer segment whose specific buying preferences and patterns require focused attention of brands and retailers. The current study focuses on the determinants of social experience that are significant for young consumers in apparel buying. The study also aims to know if differences occur in the importance given by youth of different demographic profiles to the determinants of social experiences in their apparel buying activities.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Understanding Customer experience

Pine and Gilmore (1998), emphasizing the importance of managing customer experience, suggested that businesses must create memorable events for their customers in such a dedicated and intense manner that the memory itself becomes the product, called "experience". This 'experience', as the company's offerings, moves beyond products and services. Schmitt (1999) coined the term 'Experiential Marketing' and explored how companies create experiences by making customers feel, sense, think, act and relate to a company and its brands. According to Palmer (2010), experience is 'the feeling of emotions and sensations as opposed to 'thinking' and 'involvement in what is happening'. Roebuck (2012) defined customer experience as the sum of all experiences at different touch-points that a customer has with a supplier of goods and/or services, over the entire duration of their relationship with that supplier.

2.2 Nature of customer experiences

'Experience' is a unique interpretation of every customer; it is holistic in nature and involves the customer in rational, emotional and sensorial, physical and social dimensions (Pine and Gilmore 1998, LaSalle and Britton, 2003; Gentile, Spiller and Noci, 2007; Lusch et al., 2007; Verhoef et al., 2009).

Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) pioneered the notion of experience in consumption and denoted it through consumer fantasy, feelings and fun. Consumption experience is a key element in comprehending consumer behaviour (Addis and Holbrook, 2001) and marketing activities of firms (Schmitt, 1999; LaSalle and Britton, 2003) of the future times. Barry, Carbone and Haeckel (2002) suggested that companies must arrange all the 'clues' that customers detect in a purchase process in order to provide them with a satisfactory experience. Experiences have been associated with benefits that customers accrue during purchasing and consuming phases. These benefits are personal values that consumers attach to brands, products or services (Keller, 1993) and satisfy experiential needs such as sensory pleasure, variety and cognitive simulation. Park, Jaworski and MacInnis (1986) emphasized on experiential needs as one of the basic consumer needs, along with functional and symbolic needs, which the brand concept aims to fulfil.

According to Schmitt (1999), there exist five strategic experiential modules, (i) Sensory experiences created through elements of sound, sight,

sound, taste, smell and touch, (ii) Emotional experiences, created through customers' feelings and emotions, (iii) Cognitive experience, generated through customers' problem-solving and intellectual appeal, (iv) Behavioural experiences, manifested through different lifestyles and alternative ways of doing things, and (v) Relational experiences, emerging from individual's endeavor to expand beyond self to obtain a social identity and form social associations.

Gentile et al. (2007) identified six dimensions of customer experiences, (i) Sensorial component consisting of stimuli that affect consumers' stimulation of senses - touch, smell, sight, taste and hearing to arouse pleasure, satisfaction and excitement, (ii) Cognitive component that relates to the mental processes and problem solving related to the product, (iii) Emotional component involving the affective system through creating moods, feelings and emotions, (iv) Pragmatic component, derived from the practical act of doing something, (v) Lifestyle component that comes from the adoption of a lifestyle, a set of activities adopted by a person as a consequence of his or her affirmation of the system of values and ones beliefs, and (vi) Relational component, involving the person and his /her relationships with others, his social context and on top of this his ideal self, inducing shared consumption.

2.3 Importance of the 'social component' in overall customer experience

Various researchers have established the importance of the social component in customers' overall experience related to purchase and consumption. Experience involves inputs from environment and also from the person-environment interaction (Filser, 2002; Luomala, 2003; Fornerino et al., 2005; Jüttner, 2009; Gentile et al., 2007). Boztepe (2007) emphasized the importance of creating 'value for users' in product development. Four major categories of user value are presented as emotional value, utility value, social significance value and spiritual value. Product design and development should facilitate the social significance objectives of product purchase and consumption. Carù & Cova (2007) concluded that as part of the consumption experiences, consumers search for an identity in their social surroundings. This relational component of consumer experience is referred to by them as 'communicative experience'. According to Peter & Olson (2008), social environment includes social units (organizations, reference groups, family, media) and all social interactions between and around people associated with the buying and consumption process.

Macro social environment includes the indirect interaction and represents the larger and more distant group of people that affect consumers' purchase behaviour. Micro social environment consists of the direct or personal social interactions among smaller social groups such as family, close friends and reference groups.

Baker (1986), and Daucé and Rieunier (2002) concluded that the 'social' environment including store staff and other customers affects customers experiences. Some major indicators of social environment are consumer interaction with employees (Baker et al., 2002), education groups and shopping associates (Haytko & Baker, 2004), peer group, family and group cohesiveness (Lou, 2005), reference group (White & Dahl, 2006), customer climate (Lin & Liang, 2011), and social community consisting of friends, colleagues and other contacts (Nasermoadeli et al., 2013). Pullman and Gross (2004), Meyer and Schwager (2007) and Verhoef et al. (2009) confirmed that elements of the service environment and the social responses to brand or retailer, or 'influence of others' are important constructs of customer experiences.

2.4 Defining social experiences

Social experiences are the experiences that consumers accrue from their social environment, primarily consisting of family, friends and reference groups. This category of experiences is also drawn from social interactions, group associations, feelings of belongingness, and activities on social media.

Noci et al. (2007) studied experience components that co-create value for customers. They refer to social experience as 'Relational Experience', which they define as "Experience involving the person, his relationship with others, his social context and most importantly, his ideal self." Thus experiences have "something to do with others who are directly or indirectly involved in purchase and consumption processes". Shaw and Ivens in their ongoing work titled "Customer Experience: Emerging trends" define social experience as a technology enabled social interaction that assists the fulfilment of psychological needs for safety, love, esteem and self-actualization (Maslow's motivation factors), and the resultant emotions evoked. Technology creates digital social experiences through faster, wider and more frequent interactions (Shaw, 2014).

Hence social experiences emerge from both direct and indirect social relationships that form the 'immediate social context' of an individual created through close contacts as well as 'distant social influencers' such as acquaintances and other people

met on social occasions. Social experiences also emerge from technology-enabled social interactions that are gained from the 'digital social world' in which consumers connect, share and comment through technology. It can be inferred that social experiences can be created through digital or non-digital, personal or impersonal, near or distant cues from the social environment in which a consumer does his purchase and consumption-related activities.

According to Owyang (2009), social experiences have evolved through five phases. The phase of 'Social Relationships' started in 1990s when people began to connect to each other using 'friendship' profiles for discussion and information sharing. 'Social Functionality' emerged since 2007 with social networks evolving into platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter etc. that supported interactive applications for social communities. 'Social Colonization' witnessed the blurring of social network boundaries and traditional websites through emerging technologies like OpenID. The phase of 'Social Context' emerged with social sites providing customized experiences to users on the basis of their behaviour, preferences and friends. In the phase of 'Social Commerce' social networking platforms became huge repositories of identities and relationships, and emerged more powerful and 'intelligent' than corporate websites and CRM data warehouses. According to Owyang (2009), social communities and the 'connected consumer' will be the driving force for innovation, customization and creation of unique experiences in coming times.

3. Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study were –

- I. to identify the significant social factors that affect apparel buying experiences of young consumers
- II. to find if the importance of social factors in apparel buying differs with demographic profiles of consumers, i.e. gender, age group and monthly income or monthly allowance

4. Hypothesis statement

Hypotheses H₁, H₂ and H₃ were formulated, and tested using statistical techniques. Hypothesis H₁ tested if there exist significant non-digital social factors that affect apparel buying experiences of young consumers.

H₁: Non-digital social factors do not significantly affect apparel buying experiences of young consumers.

Hypothesis H₂ tested if there exist significant digital social factors that affect apparel buying experiences of young consumers.

H₂: *Digital social factors do not significantly affect apparel buying experiences of young consumers.*

Hypothesis H₃ tested if differences exist in the importance given to social experience factors in apparel buying according to demographic profile of consumer (age groups and monthly income or monthly allowance). Three sub-hypotheses were formulated to test H₃.

H₃: *There is no significant difference in the importance of social experience factors in apparel buying according to different demographic profiles.*

- H_{3a}: *There is no significant difference in the importance of social experience factors in apparel buying according to gender.*
- H_{3b}: *There is no significant difference in the importance of social experience factors in apparel buying according to age groups.*
- H_{3c}: *There is no significant difference in the importance of social experience factors in apparel buying according to monthly income or monthly allowance.*

5. Methodology

5.1 Research approach

An empirical and cross-sectional study was undertaken. Respondents were young male and female consumers in age groups of 15 to 35 years. Purposive sampling technique was used. Responses were collected from schools, colleges, offices and shopping malls. For the purpose of analysis, respondents were grouped into 5 age groups (given in Analysis section). Data was analyzed using statistical techniques according to respondents' age-group, gender, monthly income (for earning respondents) or monthly allowance (for non-earning respondents).

5.2 Research Tools and Data Collection

Data was collected using a structured questionnaire with close-ended questions. Elements of digital and non-digital social environment were formed as two constructs, (I) Digital (with 12 items) and (II) Non-digital social environment (with 14 items). Table I depicts the constructs and their respective items.

Table I. Elements of social environment identified from Literature Review

	Determi-nants		Items used in consumer survey
I		I	Recommendations by friends

Non-digital social elements	ii	Recommendations by family	
	iii	Recommendations by peers	
	iv	Influence of other people at social occasions	
	v	Interaction with other customers in the store	
	vi	Interaction with store staff	
	vii	Influence of reference groups	
	viii	Customer testimonials available in the store	
	ix	Brand/ Store image in the market	
	x	Advertisements and promotional messages from the brand / store	
	xi	Impact of the celebrity endorsing the brand	
	xii	Reviews in new-papers and magazines	
	II	Digital social elements	xiii
		xiv	Comments and tweets on Facebook, Twitter etc.
		xv	Feeds such as Facebook newsfeed, Instagram instafeed
		xvi	Company's pages on Facebook, Twitter etc.
		xvii	Followers on Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram etc.
		xviii	Images on Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram etc.
		xix	Quality (content, duration, language) of video about product information-features and usage on YouTube, Facebook, Instagram etc.
		xx	Frequency of video uploads by brands/stores
		xxi	Number of subscribers for YouTube channels or other video platforms such as Vine, Instagram
		xxii	Online reviews of the brand or store and its products affects shopping of clothes on other review & comparing sites
		xxiii	Customer testimonials on brands/ retailers' website
		xxiv	Customer feedback / rating of product on brands/ retailers' on other e-retailers website
		xxv	Brand or product information from blogs

The digital and non-digital social experience items were identified from literature review including research papers related to social dimensions of customer experiences and consumption behaviour, social media research articles and reports. The non-digital social elements included recommendations by friends, family, peers, influence of other people on social occasions, interaction with other customers in the store, interaction with store staff, influence of reference groups, customer testimonials & feedback available in the store, brand/store image in the market, advertisements and other communication from the brand/store, impact of the celebrity endorsing the brand and reviews in new-papers and magazines. The digital social elements were consumer tags, pins, share and likes on social media, comments & tweets, feeds such as newsfeed and instafeed, company's pages on social media, followers, product, store or brand-related images available on social media, quality (content, duration, language) of videos about product features and usage on social media, frequency of video uploads by brands/stores, number of subscribers for YouTube channels and other video platforms such as Vine, Instagram, online reviews of the brand or store and its products on other review & comparing sites, customer testimonials on brands/ retailers' website, customer feedback and ratings of product on e-retailers website and brand/product information from blogs. Studies by Social Media Today in April 2015, Social Media Examiner in May 2015 and Small Business Trends in July 2015 on usage of social media by marketers and consumers were referred for the current study. It was found that Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Google+, YouTube, Pinterest and Instagram were the top seven platforms used by marketers, with Facebook leading the list.

800 questionnaires were distributed, from which 775 filled questionnaires were collected. From these, 706 questionnaires were found complete and valid for the study. There were 332 male and 374 female respondents classified into 5 different occupation categories - students, salaried, self-employed, home makers and others.

5.3 Data Analysis

SPSS version 22 was used for data analysis. The two-fold aim was to identify the digital and non-digital social experience determinants significant for young consumers in apparel buying, and to examine if there exist significant differences in the importance of the social experience determinants in apparel buying, according to different demographic profiles of consumers. Consistency and reliability analysis was conducted. Exploratory Factor Analysis was used to determine the significant

social experience determinants that affect consumers' apparel buying. To compare the difference between two groups (independent variables according to demographic profiles such as gender), Independent samples t-test was used. In case of more than two groups (such as age groups, monthly income or monthly allowance groups), analysis was done through one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA).

The reliability of measures of the two scales was established using Cronbach's Alpha and Split Half reliability coefficients. A Cronbach's Alpha of 0.6 or more is acceptable for internal consistency (Malhotra, 1993). Both the scales had Cronbach Alpha greater than 0.6 showing that the scales were reliable. Consistency of different items was checked through item-total correlation. Item-to-total correlation values were compared with the critical value of 0.4 (Nunnally, 1967). Items depicting item-to-total correlation value less than 0.4 were rejected from the study. Items at Serial No. 22, 23, 24 and 25 were found inconsistent and were dropped. Table II depicts the consistent items.

Table II. Reliability and Consistency Analysis

Scale	Cronbach's Alpha	Item-to-total correlation
I. Non-digital social elements	0.764	
Recommendations by friends		0.741
Recommendations by family		0.757
Recommendations by peers		0.744
Influence of other people at social occasions		0.747
Interaction with other customers in the store		0.745
Interaction with store staff		0.760
Influence of reference groups		0.765
Customer testimonials available in the store		0.735
Brand/ Store image in the market		0.734
Advertisements and promotional messages from the brand / store		0.746
Impact of the celebrity/ model endorsing the brand		0.752
Reviews in new-papers and magazines		0.745
II. Digital social elements	0.814	

Consumer tags, pins, share and likes on social media	0.787
Comments & tweets on Facebook, Twitter etc.	0.798
Feeds such as Facebook newsfeed, Instagram instafeed	0.794
Company's pages on Facebook, Twitter etc.	0.778
Followers on Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram etc.	0.798
Images uploaded on Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram etc.	0.795
Quality (content, duration, language) of video about product information-features and usage on YouTube, Facebook, Instagram etc.	0.784
Frequency of video uploads by brands/stores	0.810
Number of subscribers for YouTube channels or other video platforms such as Vine, Instagram	0.811

5.4 Identification of significant social experience factors that affect consumers' apparel buying

Exploratory Factor Analysis with Principal Component Analysis and Varimax rotation was used. Significant result (0.00) was obtained for Bartlett's test of Sphericity (Pallant, 2005). With significant KMO value of 0.799 (> 0.5), the data was found suitable for factor analysis. Items with factor loading of 0.4 or higher were extracted. Twenty one items were extracted by four factors. Factors having eigenvalue greater than one surfaced as the significant social determinants that influence young consumers in apparel buying. The four extracted factors were named i) Digital social media, (ii) Marketing communication, (iii) Close social connections, and (iv) Distant social acquaintances. Amongst these Digital Social Media emerged as the most significant factor (eigenvalue of 4.40 and total variance explained 20.9 percent). Marketing Communication (eigenvalue 2.79 and total variance explained 13.3 percent) followed as the second most significant factor driving social experiences in apparel buying. These factors accounted for 48.785 percent of total variance explained. No cross-loadings were found.

5.5 Finding difference in the importance of social experience factors according to demographic profiles of consumers

i) Difference in importance of social experience factors according to gender

Independent samples t-test was used. Levene's test was found significant at $p < 0.05$ for Digital Social Media, indicating that there is sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis; we can assume that the variances in the importance that male and female consumers give to Digital Social Media were not equal. However, variances in the importance of Marketing Communications, Close Social Connections and Distant Social Acquaintances were found to be significantly equal in the males and the females at $p > 0.05$.

Then the value of the t-statistic was examined. In the outcome the two-tailed value of p was less than 0.05 ($p = 0.019$) for Digital Social Media, and the p value was greater than 0.05 for Marketing Communications, Close Social Connections and Distant Social Acquaintances (p values of 0.49, 0.08 and 0.08 respectively). Thus, it can be inferred that there is no significant difference between means of the male and female respondents importance of Digital Social Media (i.e., considered equally important in apparel buying by male and female consumers), whereas differences were found in the importance given to Marketing Communications, Close Social Connections and Distant Social Acquaintances by the male and female consumers.

ii) Difference in importance of social experience factors according to age groups

ANOVA and Post hoc analysis were performed. The respondents were grouped into 5 age groups. The groups were constituted as, Group I -School students (ages from 15 to 17 years), Group II – Students of Undergraduate courses (ages from 18 to 21 years), Group III – Students of Post-graduate courses (ages from 22 to 25 years), Group IV- Young professionals and home makers (ages from 26 to 30 years) and Group V – Settled professionals and home makers with families (ages from 31 to 35 years).

For Digital Social Media, p value was $< .001$, denoting significant difference in importance of this factor in different age-groups. Post hoc analysis revealed that Groups 1 and 2 differed significantly from Group 5. Group 2 also showed significant differences from Group 4. The mean importance of Digital Social Media in creating experiences was found to be highest in Groups 1 & 2 as compared to other groups.

With p value 0.40 (> 0.05), no significant differences amongst groups were seen for Marketing Communication. With p value of 0.001 (< 0.05), significant difference was found in importance of

Close Social Connections in different age groups. Post hoc results revealed that Groups 1 and 2 differed significantly from group 5. The mean importance of Close Social Connections in creating experiences was found to be highest in Groups 1 & 2, followed by Group 4 as compared to other groups. For the factor, Distant Social Acquaintances, p value of 0.25 (>0.05) indicated no significant differences in importance of this factor in the different age groups.

iii) Difference in importance of social experience factors according to monthly income or monthly allowance

Groups were constituted on basis of the monthly income (for financially independent respondents) and monthly allowance (for financially dependent respondents). Group 1 constituted of respondents having monthly income/allowance $<$ Rs. 5000, Group 2 -Rs. 5000 to Rs. 10,000, Group 3 - Rs. 10,000 to Rs. 20,000, Group 4 - Rs. 20,000 to Rs. 30,000, Group 5 - Rs. 30,000 to Rs. 40,000, Group 6 - Rs. 40,000 to Rs. 50,000, and Group 7 had respondents having monthly allowance or income $>$ Rs. 50,000.

At p value <0.001 , significant differences were found in the importance of Digital Social Media in respondents' according to Monthly Income/Allowance. Post hoc result revealed that Group 1 showed significant differences when compared to Group 3, Group 4 and Group 5 in the importance of Digital Social Media as determinants of customer experience in apparel buying. No significant differences amongst groups were found for importance of Marketing Communication (p value = 0.471), Close Social Connections (p value = 0.613), and Distant Social Acquaintances (p value = 0.222).

6. Results and Discussion

I) *Identification of the most significant social experience factors that impact apparel buying experiences of youth*

From the study four factors emerged as the most significant determinants of social experiences of youth in apparel buying. These factors were (i) Digital Social Media, (ii) Marketing Communications, (iii) Close Social Connections and, (iv) Distant Social Acquaintances. Hence, Hypotheses H_1 and H_2 were rejected and it could be inferred that both non-digital and digital social elements significantly impact young consumers' apparel buying experiences.

II) *Differences in importance given to social experience factors in apparel buying according to consumer demographic profiles*
a) *According to consumer gender:*

Hypothesis H_{3a} was rejected. There was found to be significant difference in the importance of social experience factors in apparel buying for male and female consumers as the importance given to Digital Social Media in apparel buying was found to be different amongst the two groups. However, the importance of Marketing Communications, Close Social Connections and Distant Social Acquaintances in apparel buying was found to be same amongst the male and female consumers.

b) *According to consumer age groups:*

Hypothesis H_{3b} was rejected as the results established that there exists significant difference in the importance of social experience factors in apparel buying for consumers of different age groups.

The impact of social experiences through the use of Digital Social Media is significantly pronounced in the younger age-groups of consumers, mostly school and college going undergraduate students in the age groups of 15-21 years. These age groups are majorly affected by Digital Social Media as determinants of social experiences in apparel buying. The importance that these groups lay on Digital Social Media was remarkably more as compared to older groups of consumers in age-groups of 26-35 years. The second social factors which varied in importance for creating social experiences in youth's apparel buying was found to be Close Social Connections, i.e influence of friends, family, peers and people met during social occasions. The importance of this factor was also seen highest in younger consumers, age-groups, of 15-21 years, as compared to consumers in the age-groups of 26-35 years. The study found no significant differences for importance given to Marketing Communications and Distant Social Acquaintances according to consumer age-groups.

c) *According to consumer monthly income /allowance:*

The study rejected hypothesis H_{3c} as the results established that there exists significant difference in the importance of social experience factors in apparel buying for consumers of different monthly income /allowance. Significant difference was found in the importance given to Digital Social Media by young consumers having monthly allowance less than Rs. 5000/- as compared to other working groups with a monthly income. This implies that students and home-makers, majorly the financially dependent (non-earning) consumers who meet their shopping

requirements through monthly allowance, give a strong importance to Digital Social Media in their apparel buying activities. No other significant differences were found among the groups for Marketing Communications, Close Social Connections and Distant Social Acquaintances for groups according to difference in monthly income or allowances.

7. Conclusion

The study concluded that amongst the various digital and non-digital social elements, four major factors act as significant determinants of apparel buying experiences for young consumer. These include Digital Social Media, (ii) Marketing Communications, (iii) Close Social Connections and (iv) Distant Social Acquaintances. These factors impact the apparel buying behaviour of young consumers.

The study also found that the importance of these significant social factors in apparel buying differs across consumers having different demographic profiles. The findings show that there is a marked influence of Digital Social Media on young apparel consumers. This is followed by influence and recommendations of Close Social Connections such as friends, family members and peers. These are the two prominent elements that define the social experiences of young consumers and impact their apparel purchase. The study proposes some important managerial implications. Digital Social Media has emerged as a very strong and effective tool in marketing and advertising which captivates consumers through its intriguing features. Modern day young consumers like to be 'engaged' with the brand or the retailer and value social experiences in apparel buying.

Hence, the connecting with the customers effectively through digital social media and emphasizing on satisfied and delighted customers for positive word of mouth, review and recommendations has become essential for brands and retailers to increase sales, increase customer retention & develop stronger loyalty.

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