



## An Investigation into Cultural Influences on Consumer Behavior with Regards to Propaganda Textiles during World War II

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The purpose of the research was to understand the nature, or the mindset, of women who represented a prominent consumer base in the United States during World War II, specifically between the years 1935 to 1945. This research adds value to the field of fashion history related to World War II. In particular, the topic of propaganda-related consumer fashion behavior lacks full documentation in the literature. It is important to gather first-hand data from the population of women who engaged in fashion activities during WWII, particularly as this generation is reaching end-of-life and will soon be unable to provide first-hand, personalized and reflective accounts of their fashion practices.

The study of products that are produced for the purpose of consumption in a particular culture at any given moment in time offers a unique perspective into the predominant cultural ideals of that period (Solomon & Rabolt, 2009). Theoretical framework in the research is used to illustrate the motives behind female consumer behavior during the time period; one of the theories included Harry Triandis's (1979) theory of interpersonal behavior that is comprised of social behavior relations involving the consumer field. Solomon Asch's (1955) theory of conformity was also utilized in this study to demonstrate the context of cultural influences among the participants. The focus of the study was on the purchases of propaganda textiles that consisted of any clothing item or cloth that adorned the body that had political or military inspiration. Some examples include handkerchiefs with American images on them, sweaters with patriotic motifs, women's suits that included the Eisenhower-style jacket, or the large military overcoats for females.

### Method

Twenty three women currently aged 83 to 97 (thus ages 16 – 30 in 1945) were identified through purposive convenience sampling. Participants were gathered through various sources including social events involving the target group of women, personal introductions done by researcher, and a distribution of flyers to local churches, retirement homes, and a senior citizens community center. Each woman participated in a one hour interview, using a structured interview protocol. Questions focused the participant describing what she had worn during World War II instead of answering an explicit question about propaganda clothing and textiles. The study was to measure the attitude and behavior along with the participant's view of patriotism with regards to World War II.

In addition to qualitative data about each woman's fashion behaviors with respect to propaganda textiles, quantitative data including 10 questions with a 5-point Likert scale were collected. The interviews enabled a holistic analysis, encompassing both past and present

explanations that surround cultural influence pertaining to consumerism. Subsequently, the interview data were related to the theories identified above.

This study was limited to women living mostly in the South-East Ohio region and provides further comprehension into future studies relating to fashion during times of conflict or war pertaining to women with regards to consumer behavior.

## Results

It was found that the participants did support propaganda textiles on a small scale; for example, buying USO scarves, even though the women did not refer to these items as propaganda textiles specifically. This indicates support for Asch's theory of conformity; as one of the participants pointed out, "...when you're a teenager all you remember is everybody copied everyone else." Fashion choices relating to conformity of what their peers were wearing, such as the use of leg makeup, as well as certain items being rationed during the war were significant themes that emerged, and were discussed in the research, from the respondents interviewed.

Also, patriotic textiles were sometimes advertised as focusing on skirt lengths and trim lines (Weatherford, 2010). Some of the women did point out that they recognized the new sleek look with little or no "frills" during the war, but did not recognize this as being specifically patriotic, this also implies that the participants were engaged in Asch's conformity theory (1955).

Other women did not feel that it was necessary, or respectful, to express their patriotism through the use of propaganda items pertaining to fashion; this can be seen as an example of Triandis's (1979) theory of interpersonal behavior with respect to what he calls moral considerations. Moral considerations can be seen as self-instructions where the individual considers what is, and is not, morally correct with regards to personal decisions (Triandis, 1979).

The historical perspective presented in this research provides better insight into evaluating how the past can impact the present regarding fashion trends (Flynn & Foster, 2009). After the 9/11 attacks in 2001, style observations were made that noted how shoes and clothing had become more utilitarian in most instances and women wore running shoes or heels no taller than one-inch instead of the stiletto heels that had been popular the previous fall (Pham, 2011).

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