



Fashion Adoption Groups and Consumer-Brand Relationships

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Conceptual framework. It is often assumed that economic success of a new fashion style depends on fashion change agents (i.e., innovators and opinion leaders). But fashion followers are the largest group of consumers, so economic success ultimately depends on acceptance and diffusion of a new style by fashion followers. Research into fashion adoption groups has focused on differences in personal traits and behaviors and has neglected brand variables. Available research shows that fashion innovativeness was positively related to brand sensitivity (e.g., Beaudoin & Lachance, 2006) and that fashion change agents (vs. followers) were higher in brand conscious shopping orientation (Workman & Cho, 2012). Relationship theory is one framework for better understanding consumers' connections with brands (Fournier, 1998). Brand relationships provide emotional, functional, psychological, and social advantages (e.g., positive impression formation; Fournier, 1998). According to Fournier (1998), brands can and do serve as feasible relationship partners even though brands are merely perceptions in the consumer's mind. Marketing activities imbue a brand seemingly with action or thought or feelings. Relationship theory was used as a framework for this study of fashion adoption groups and consumer-brand relationships.

A desirable consumer-brand relationship is one in which the brand holds the customer's attention, affection, and enthusiasm. The definitive marketing goal is to create a connection (e.g., brand attachment) and, even better, an intense bond (e.g., brand love) between consumers and a brand; one ingredient of this bond is trust (Hiscock, 2001). Establishing a strong consumer-brand relationship requires analysis of psychological or affective connections such as brand attachment (a strong connectedness between a brand and the consumer's self; Thomson et al, 2005), brand love (degree of passionate emotional attachment for a brand; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006) and brand trust (consumer's feeling of security in interaction with a brand; Delgado-Ballester et al, 2003).

Purpose of the study: The goal of the study was to compare fashion adoption groups on brand variables linked to consumer-brand relationships. Hypotheses were: Fashion change agents and fashion followers will differ in (a) brand attachment, (b) brand love and (c) brand trust.

Method. The questionnaire contained demographic items and measures of fashion innovativeness and opinion leadership (Hirschman & Adcock, 1978), brand attachment (Thomson et al, 2005), brand love (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006), and brand trust (Delgado-Ballester et al, 2003). Based on a favorite fashion brand name they listed, participants provided responses using a 7-point scale.

Data were collected in large lecture classes from 269 students in 50 majors at a mid-western US university (138 men, 131 women; m age = 21.96). Data were analyzed with descriptive statistics and M/ANOVA. Reliability was acceptable; Cronbach's alpha ranged from .70 to .92.

Results. Using Hirschman and Adcock's procedure, participants were categorized as fashion change agents ($n=68$) and fashion followers ($n=195$). MANOVA with fashion adoption groups (change agents/followers) as the independent variable, and brand attachment, brand love, and brand trust as dependent variables was significant [$F(3,259) = 3.09, p < .027$]. ANOVA revealed that fashion followers scored significantly higher ($p < .05$) than change agents on brand attachment ($M^{\text{followers}} = 3.64; M^{\text{change agents}} = 3.17$), brand love ($M^{\text{followers}} = 5.19; M^{\text{change agents}} = 4.87$) and brand trust ($M^{\text{followers}} = 5.25; M^{\text{change agents}} = 4.94$). Thus, all hypotheses were supported.

Discussion & Implications. This study found that fashion followers indicated stronger brand relationships than change agents. Perhaps followers depend on brand names as a safe and trustworthy way to keep up with trends without being a trend-setter. Each season brand companies offer minor changes to existing styles (e.g., new colors, slight changes in design) allowing consumers to try new ideas within safe boundaries. Recognizing the connection that fashion followers have with their favorite brands may encourage a marketing approach that focuses on fashion followers. For further study, a variety of variables related to consumer-brand relationships need to be investigated such as brand engagement, brand loyalty, or brand commitment. Also, it would be significant to explore brand love, brand attachment, and brand trust for fashion adoption groups within and across cultural contexts.

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