Project #I97-A11:

Consumer Preferences for Apparel and Textile Products as a Function of Lifestyle Imagery

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Abstract

We have developed a web-based interactive data collection technique that allows us to efficiently track evolving product and style preferences in a national sample of fashion-forward women. Our procedure is unique because it lets industry researchers obtain rapid feedback about visual product options, and they can relate these preferences to important psychological and socioeconomic characteristics of selected market segments. These fashion innovator segments are identified and incorporated into a panel with the cooperation of the Stanford Research Institute (SRI). SRI, our industry partner, has given us access to their widely used consumer typology known as VALS2, which allows us to specify precise psychographic profiles of female innovators and recruit these women into a national panel that will respond periodically to our tracking study via the web. This tool will be the foundation for an ongoing instrument that will monitor the changing tastes and product preferences of key textile/apparel customers, and thus facilitate prediction of mass-market acceptance of clothing/textile designs and products. An overview of this project plus other spinoffs including student theses can be accessed at:

http://www.fafnir.berry.edu/ConsumerResearchOnLine

Project Goals

1. To understand how the lifestyle aspirations of fashion innovators influence their preferences for textile/apparel products.

2. To explore how these preferences are affected by relationships with choices of products in other categories that together are used to express a desired lifestyle.
3. To develop a web-based, quick-response data collection tool capable of capturing preferences for specific product/style images in a national sample of fashion-forward American women.

Project Overview

The viability of the American textile industry hinges on the ability of manufacturers, advertisers, and retailers to predict, develop, and communicate styles of apparel and other textile products that resonate with the desires of the consuming public.

We are constructing a visual database to explore the role played by the perceived "fit" between a product and a valued lifestyle in shaping the wants and needs of twentysomething female customers for textile and apparel products. Our conceptual framework emphasizes the role of consumer aspirations in shaping behavior, as well as the crucial role played by the media in shaping the lifestyle connotations of specific products. And, while most research on apparel choices tends to be confined to a specific product category, we instead emphasize how textile and apparel products are evaluated in the context of other products with which they are jointly consumed to make a lifestyle statement.

Selection of respondents and analysis of results is facilitated by the cooperation we have secured from the Stanford Research Institute to integrate its widely used VALS2 (Values and Lifestyles) consumer typology with our program of research. The VALS2 framework is a consumer segmentation system that divides the American public into eight general categories (and numerous subcategories). Consumers are differentiated in terms of resources available and self-orientation (principle-oriented, status-oriented, and action-oriented). The VALS2 typology is provided in Figure 1.

In addition, the VALS2 database is linked to the Simmons Study of Media & Markets, a major syndicated database that provides detailed consumption information obtained from a panel of over 20,000 American consumers. Information from this database will be used for respondent recruitment, classification, media selection, and data analysis. Prior work conducted by SRI indicates that innovations tend to be adopted first by certain VALS types and then diffuse at a differential rate across other sectors. SRI’s work in this area has emphasized innovativeness in the adoption of high technology products; we are expanding this domain to focus on the parallel
yet distinct issue of fashion innovativeness. Fashion-forward opinion leaders tend to be found in the high-resources region of the VALS typology and in the status- and action-oriented segments. We have selected the most appropriate VALS2 subtypes, and we are in the process of compiling visual stimuli based upon media usage data provided by SRI and Simmons.

![Figure 1. The VALS2 Consumer Typology. Courtesy of Stanford Research Institute, Menlo Park, CA.](image)

**Research Methodology**

The research program builds upon the PIs’ prior work in the study of consumers’ product preferences, and emphasizes how consumers' preferences are influenced by their desires to attain aspirational lifestyles and to distance themselves from avoidance lifestyles. One key question addressed by this program is to learn how consumers integrate information from mass-media (including advertising, entertainment, and editorial vehicles) depictions of these lifestyles as they form their own preferences for products and styles. A more detailed discussion of this theoretical perspective has been provided in prior Reports and is available from the authors.

The fashion-forward, twentysomething participants in our opinion leader panel will provide input by reacting to visual images culled from a variety of media, by supplying their own desired and undesired visual images, and by responding to research instruments intended to assess their perceptions of a range of products or styles from several product categories they
associate with lifestyle ideals. We have developed the software required to provide this web-based visual interface that will become the data collection platform for our project. This tool is comprised of a browser-based software interface with an extensive database layer, which handles storage and retrieval of visual images. We have completed the conceptual work on the data structures from both software modules and are currently testing the data flow from the software into our database files. A data flow analogous to a “state-change” matrix is created for each individual respondent. Several measures are derived from this matrix to capture different aspects of the respondent’s behavior at the web sites. As shown in Figure 2, databases are maintained and continuously updated on the server.

By emphasizing how consumers’ aspirations are expressed visually as they evaluate and select products, we hope to forge tools that will help the industry better understand the specific lifestyle images sought by its customers. The tracking procedure we are developing will allow us to provide continuing information about the evolving stylistic and lifestyle preferences of a key consumer segment. This will add an important layer of empirically grounded information for the

Figure 2. Schematic of Web-Based Survey Platform Architecture

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development of strategic positioning strategies by apparel manufacturers and retailers. Furthermore, we are hopeful that the project will facilitate efforts by American firms to penetrate global markets, where the issues of appropriate and timely product design and lifestyle positioning are even more pronounced. We have initiated a collaborative effort with a group of European academics to pursue this research issue.

**Data Collection Procedure**

The instrument can be administered to study respondents in a central testing facility or in their own homes via the web. The web site is password-protected to ensure that only qualified respondents can access the instrument. When the respondent logs on and is properly identified, she is introduced to “Jennifer,” a twentysomething woman much like herself. The respondent is taken to an opening page (shown in Figure 3) that specifies a social scenario (e.g., Jennifer is hosting a dinner party for work colleagues), and she is told she must go to Jennifer’s Closet and help Jennifer to get dressed for this occasion. Different social scenarios will be included in the study to determine how product choices are influenced by contextual cues. The respondent is then asked to make selections from six discrete categories: outfits, shoes, perfumes, watches, hairstyles, and purses. This screen is shown in Figure 4.

Descriptive information such as price points, available colors, etc. can easily be included in the label presented, so that if desired conjoint analyses can be performed to address such issues as the optimal price points to assign to a given product line. The order in which these categories are accessed is up to the respondent and we will assess the sequences chosen by tracking the “clickstream” of our respondents.
Figure 3. Scenario Screen with Access to Jennifer’s Closet.

Figure 4. Access to Product Categories
When the respondent clicks on a category heading, she is shown a set of thumbnail images (see Figure 5). Each product image can be enlarged for closer inspection as illustrated in Figure 6; additional product information can also be provided.

Figure 5. Thumbnailed Product Images

Figure 6. Example of an Enlarged Thumbnail Product Option.
This process continues until a final selection is made for each of the six product categories. Each time a product is chosen it becomes part of a “collage” that represents the emerging group, or ensemble, of products that the respondent thinks belong together for the scenario presented. An example of a completed collage of “ideal” products is shown in Figure 7.

The system also possesses the capability to follow up selections with probing questions that can be answered in either closed-end or open-end formats. Then, the respondent is shown a summary page that presents her choices in collage form. She is given the opportunity to make changes and when she is satisfied with the selections she has made the choices are submitted and incorporated in a transparent database layer for transmission back to our server. Responses are then aggregated across respondents to determine the dominant choices and assess choice variation across social situations.
Current Status

Data Collection: The web interface is completely designed and initial beta testing with female undergraduates has been completed. The procedure for selecting and scanning images has been implemented. Our objective is to provide respondents with a detailed set of product selections corresponding to those they would encounter during their normal media exposure. Specific media vehicles were selected by identifying the magazines most heavily read by the VALS2 subtype we will be targeting (Actualizer/Experiencers). Our national sample of twenty-something women is being qualified and recruited. The first wave of data collection will be completed in November 1999.

Academic Activity: The browser-based system is adaptable to a variety of other research issues entailing the presentation of visual stimuli to large samples concurrently. We are working with academic teams in the U.S. and Europe who will be adapting our software to conduct research on brand image, consumer web navigation, brand communities, and related topics. Four graduate students currently are conducting research that employ aspects of the system and apply the underlying conceptual perspective.

Journal articles and conference presentations:


Industry Implementation:

Numerous companies and trade associations have expressed strong interest in our system. Our significant industry contacts to date include: Stanford Research Institute, Animated Images, Inc., DDB Needham Worldwide, Total Research, Levi Strauss, Vanity Fair, Milliken, American

A feasibility study to apply this methodology to apparel product testing is being funded by Vanity Fair Corporation. Data collection will commence in mid-October. In addition, a graduate student thesis using the system is being supported by Lion Apparel and involves testing of corporate uniform styles.

An overview of this project plus other spinoffs including student theses can be accessed at: [http://www.fafnir.berry.edu/ConsumerResearchOnLine](http://www.fafnir.berry.edu/ConsumerResearchOnLine)