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Consumption Motivations of Women as a Mother and a Wife

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Abstract

This study explores the effect of women's social roles in their purchase behavior of clothes. One of the qualitative research methods, named as construction technique is used to investigate the topic. Nine women were selected as the sample of the study. The technique, which includes conducting in-depth interviews, helped obtaining answers directly relevant to the research as the participants express their ideas more directly and frankly. The results of the interviews revealed that the women change their purchase behavior of clothes when they got married or when they have babies. The main determinants of clothes for women are their social status as a wife or a mother. It was seen that the decision maker for their preferences is not themselves but their husband and their social status.

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1. Introduction

In the postmodern world, people consume products for their symbolic meaning to reflect their self identity. Thus they create meaning through consumption and communicate with others via these symbolic meanings. Symbolic consumption also helps an individual to reflect his/her connection to a particular social group (Elliot, 1997). In this research, women's social roles as a mother and wife, and the symbolic meanings they ascribe to their clothes were chosen as the subject of the study. The complex nature of the topic and cultural patterns direct researchers to handle the topic in depth via qualitative research methods. Therefore, the goal of the current study is to explore whether there is a difference in the clothes of women when they get married or have a child, if so what causes these changes, and which meanings they ascribe to being a mother or wife while purchasing clothes.

2. Conceptual Background

The increase in real income, innovations in product technology and product quality seem to induce consumption in today's world, however those are still insufficient in explaining the consumption patterns of consumers. The main definition of consumption identifies motivation as the raison d'etre of satisfying needs and wants. However, the functions of products and services are not the main determinants of this process during and pre-consumption periods. There are more important motivators for consumers such as achieving social recognition and status, reflecting his/her self-image or expressing group conformity (Witt, 2010). The roots of this phenomenon reside in the explanations of the popular culture and postmodernism.

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As Woodruffe-Burton (1998) states in postmodernity, the self is hypothesized as something an individual creates, through consumption to some extent. The authors also cited Featherstone (1992)'s notion suggesting "postmodern consumers make lifestyle a life project and display their individuality and sense of style in the particularity of the assemblage of goods, clothes, practices, experiences and bodily dispositions they design together into a lifestyle". In the light of this background, it would be possible to state that postmodern consumption culture gives birth to symbolic consumption. This inference suggested by Elliot (1997) who says that consumers consume products for their symbolic meaning rather than their material utilities according to postmodern consumption theories. These symbolic meanings perform in two directions. The first one is outward and provides constructing the social world, named as social-symbolism. In social-symbolism, consumption is a way both to bond social ties and to have a place in social life. The second one is inward and helps to construct self-identity, named as self-symbolism. Self-symbolism also helps others to make inferences about us so they could behave us accordingly.

The other point used in explaining consumption motivation was popular culture which states that consumption becomes a determinant of the culture rather than a being supplement to it. Today, the construction of an identity is meant to relate the symbolic meanings of the products owned with the self identity (Belk, 1988). As stated earlier, this identity construction process is also closely related to the postmodern consumption culture. In postmodern culture, individuals construct identity by switching between the images produced by consumption culture and use these images to build strong identities. Thus, the postmodern individual tries to express that all the products s/he consumes are specific to her/him (Binay, 2010). Thus, consumers develop individual symbolic interpretations of themselves via socialization process. They use these symbolic meanings to construct and maintain an identity (Elliot and Wattanasuwan, 1998).

Handling consumption motivations from the perspective of consumers' needs, Bhat and Reddy (1998) asserts that consumers' needs could be classified as being either functional or symbolic. Functional needs serves solving the specific and practical consumption problems, whereas symbolic needs are related to self-image and social identification. People also use consumption as a means to encode and decode messages. They encode messages to others through consumption and decode messages from the consumption practices of others'. The owner of a product, as an encoder, uses it to communicate something about him/herself through this specific product (Belk, 1982). The communication process becomes meaningful when a decoder attaches symbolic meaning to the product as well (Schoenbachler et al., 2004). The important point behind using products or consumption in this manner is hidden behind the symbols of the offering. Socially recognized symbols in the offerings will provide a successful communication. Products should have agreed symbols, socially confirmed quality, and approved consumption symbols (Witt, 2010).

3. Method

In this study, it was aimed to discover the preferences of women in their clothing consumption as a mother or wife. Moreover, it would be explored whether being a mother or a wife brings some restrictions in choosing clothes. The research question resulted from the above-explained literature and the findings of a previous study (Aydin-Unal et al., 2012) conducted by the authors to discover which socio-cultural factors affect Turkish middle-aged women's clothing purchase behavior. The study included semi-structured interviews conducted with 11 middle-aged women and the results revealed that socio-cultural dynamics affect participants' purchase behaviors. The results were match with the literature. In the literature the consumption motivations of individuals achieve social recognition, status, and express group or rather family conformity (Witt, 2010). Similarly, the results of the previous study displayed

that the women consider clothing as an expression of their social identity and this is believed to be specific to Turkish women. This remarkable finding raised the research question proposed in the current study.

The method in this study is one form of the projective techniques. Projective techniques allow participants to project their own thoughts onto something or someone other than themselves. The essential point of the method is that these techniques strengthen the possibility of expressing thoughts, and feelings. Moreover projective techniques use a stimulus to learn thoughts, and feelings of participants in a way in which they would otherwise not feel able to respond (Boddy, 2005).

In the literature, there are some categorizations of the projective techniques. Group projective techniques are in five categories (Linzey, 1956). These are associative techniques, construction techniques, completion techniques, choice or ordering techniques, and expressive technique. In the study construction technique, which requires respondents to construct a picture or story, is adopted. This technique is originally based on Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) (Catteral and Ibbotson, 2000).

Construction technique is used in this study. As it is stated, this technique is based on Thematic Apperception Test (TAT). Henry A. Murray develops TAT and the original form consists of 20 pictures. In this test, the respondent is shown each picture and is asked to make up a story around it (Zober, 1956). One of the main strengths of TAT is encouraging respondents to express their feelings and thoughts freely.

As it is stated in the literature, a series of depth interviews should be made before designing a TAT situation and a person trained in social research should make consultancy in designing pictures (Zober, 1956). Thus, the findings of the interviews conducted in the previous study directed the authors to apply TAT in order to understand the phenomenon in depth. In determining the pictures for TAT, two researchers from qualitative research orientation (except the authors) gave consultancy. The main reason of adopting this technique is the belief that pictures would be better tools in providing a deeper understanding of women's hidden consumption motivations as a mother or a wife.

Accordingly, women pictures from various magazines were collected. Pictures contain unknown women of different clothing styles, ages, and social status. Afterwards, pictures were grouped according to the similarities of the clothing styles. Consequently, three pictures from each group, totally 21 pictures were included in the research. Faces of the pictures were intentionally painted to avoid distraction and to ensure focusing only on clothes. The purpose of the study is to explore the factors that affect women's cloth choices after they become a wife or mother. For that reason only women who have children were selected as the sample. The research was conducted with 9 participants. The women were aged between 30-50 years old and all of them were employed in a public institution. Initially, the women were shown 21 pictures, and requested to scan each of them. Then, they were asked to respond to the questions based on clothing styles. First question asked was "is there a woman who you could say married?" When they responded this question they were asked to choose the women who they thought would have a child. In each answer, the women were requested to explain the reason behind. If a participant gave short answers to the questions without interpreting pictures, she was asked to make up a story about demographic characteristics of each picture.

4. Findings

Analyzing the interviews conducted with the women, it could clearly be seen that their clothing preferences differ when they get married or have a child. The findings suggest that women pay more attention to their clothes after they become a wife or a mother as they consider this as a new social status whose norms they should obey. The participants state that the main determinants of their preferences are their husbands' views and the social norms ascribed to them as a wife or mother. Six of the women interviewed stated that their husbands interfere with their clothes. On the other hand, three of them asserted that they voluntarily changed their clothing styles after they got married. Women use "independent", "cool", and "crazy" to describe the pictures that they define as a single woman. Moreover, they characterize the pictures of women who wear red or short clothes as striking and they add that a married woman could not be clothing like that. They state that an "arty" woman clothing like that could also be single, rather than married. Participants' thoughts about pictures are given in Table 1.

Table 1. Thoughts of Participants on The Pictures

She should be a wife/ a mother because…	She should be single because…
"…she seems like not doing her personal care well"	"…she seems to be free to wear what she wants"
"…she is overweight"	"…she looks striking"
"…she looks mature"	"…she looks like paying attention to her-self care"
"…she is not striking"	"…she is cool"
"…she does not prefer bright colors"	"…she looks like freaky"
"…her husband must be setting constraints to her clothes"	"…she wears short skirts and tight clothes"
"…she wears comfortable clothes to be able to run after children"	"…she looks like having no responsibility"
"…she choices more conservative clothes"	

Six of the participants state that after they got married their husbands interfered with their clothes. The husbands do not want their wives to wear short skirts, low-neck blouses, or tight clothes. They even forbid wearing all these clothes. One of the participants explains this situation as: "my husband does not let me wear red clothes. He wants me to wear clothes that do not attract attention".

This case, which is common in Turkish culture, has become one of the main factors in women's choice of clothes. In addition to the restrictions of their husbands, women also state that they intentionally change their clothing style when they become a mother or wife. One of the participants said that she believes she should not wear some of her old clothes after her baby was born because she was disturbed by the look of the people around. Another participant mentioned: "after you get married, your behaviors change. More importantly, the views of other people towards you also change, as you become a married woman. I am now more careful when speaking to men". The same participant stated that she is amazed with what she was wearing before she had a baby. She finds these clothes too short to wear now. One of the participants expressed the social status she gained through marriage: "when you get married, you join to a new family and have a place in situations where important topics are discussed. I think it would not be suitable to wear a short skirt in such a meeting".

It could be concluded from the above explained findings that the women participated in the research give priority to the social roles that are ascribed to them by the society and by their husbands in all aspects of their lives. They pay attention to behave in accordance with their role in society such as being a mother or a wife. They choose clothes, which they thought to reflect their status as a mother or wife in both their working and private lives. Thus their clothes are mainly chosen by the influence of their husbands and they become wearing clothes that are more conservative and that match with their proper image. The women reflect their respect to their husband and family by changing their clothing styles after they get married or have children. They thought that behaving in this manner one of their responsibilities, therefore they should act properly.

5. Discussion

In this study women have different clothing styles pre and after marriage. The results show that women overrate their social roles, which could be explained by symbolic consumption. As stated in the literature, the main consumption motivations of consumers are to achieve social recognition and status and to reflect self image (Witt, 2010). Women consume clothes for their symbolic meaning, which is the conformity of their clothes with their social roles such as marital status. Women encode messages about their social roles to others through consumption of clothing and decode messages from others again through their clothing. After they become a mother, they choose clothes accordingly to reflect their status as a mother and a wife.

Further studies can be undertaken to generalize the findings to the Turkish culture. For this aim, housewives and women from different jobs could be selected as the sample. After extending the sample, the effect of Turkish culture on clothing purchase behavior of women could be identified.

Besides above contributions, the method used in the study is original. In the literature, there is not a similar study conducted with this method about Turkish women purchase behaviors of clothes. The method provides explaining opinions about the subject.

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