

A Abordagem do Modelo da Cadeia Meios-Fim para o Desenvolvimento de Produtos de Moda

A Means-End Chain Model Approach for Fashion Product Development

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Resumo

O objetivo deste estudo foi testar uma ferramenta metodológica apta a dar suporte à tomada de decisão de equipes de desenvolvimento de produtos. A abordagem considerou três principais interessados: Consumidores, Designers e Empresas. Análises qualitativas e quantitativas foram realizadas, tendo como base dados primários coletados no Reino Unido, Brasil e China. O modelo da Cadeia Meios-Fim de Gutman (1982), composto por Atributos, Benefícios e Valores foi utilizado. Os resultados demonstraram que Designers e Empresas estão distantes de atingir uma sinergia com Consumidores. O modelo utilizado demonstrou efetividade no processo de tomada de decisão em design de moda.

Palavras Chave: Design de Moda, Gestão do Design, Métodos de Pesquisa.

Abstract

The main aim of this study is to find a methodological tool able to support product development decision-making teams. The approach considers three main stakeholders: consumers, designers and companies. Qualitative and quantitative analyses were carried out based on primary data gathered in the UK, Brazil and China. The Gutman's Means-End Chain Model (1982), comprised of Attributes, Consequences and Values, was used for the analyses. The results demonstrate that designers and companies are far from achieving synergy with consumers. The Means-End Model blending stakeholder interests seems to be an effective tool to support the decision-making process in fashion design.

Keywords: Fashion Design, Design Management, Research Methods.

Anais do 8º Congresso Brasileiro de Pesquisa e Desenvolvimento em Design

8 a 11 de outubro de 2008 São Paulo – SP Brasil ISBN 978-85-60186-03-7

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Introduction

The economic globalisation process has compelled companies to implement plans aimed at maintaining their competitive positions. For the fashion and clothing industries, design is at the core of this process. Design research, as a scientific field, has to consider the environment and confront changes and interconnected trends, such as economic and cultural globalisation (Dicken, 1999), the spreading of connectivity (Solomon, 2004), the rise of information (Frings, 2002) and the search for sustainability (Manzini and Vellozi, 2002).

The features of clothes and their relation to the user's perception of needs and satisfaction are underlying factors in the design of new products. It is necessary to understand people through a holistic approach approaches. This means seeing people not merely as users with cognitive and physical characteristics, but also understanding people's values, lifestyles, relationships, hopes, fears, dreams, etc. – the very things that make us human (Jordan, 2002). For this it is necessary to think and act in an interdisciplinary context.

The Fashion Industry

The fashion industry is one of the fastest growing industries in the world. In mature European markets, the approach of using trend forecasting allied to the short lifecycle of the product allows this industry to develop. It is not easy to define what precisely the fashion industry is, as sometimes it is very similar to the clothing industry - although fashion and clothing industries don't present the same range of products and address different consumer expectations.

Originating from textile production, clothing and fashion industries have operated within the arena of global design and information provided by diverse specialised agencies. Studies about consumption provide interesting access to the type of information that the companies lack: on tastes, needs, desires, attitudes, opinions and the interests of consumers and the most relevant social groups (Branco et al., 2000).

In the last two decades globalisation is becoming an increasingly important issue. Brazil joined with Russia, India and China is called BRIC, the four nations that together, according to a Goldman Sachs report (1999) will outdo the current G7 in economic output in the next three to four decades, which means even more eager consumers will be joining the mass buying class (Trendwatching, 2005).

Changing the Direction of Management

The traditional approach to developing and offering products is based upon the capability of companies to produce and offer something based on their past record of success, or their production capacity. In this respect, the marketing function is there to stimulate the consumption of goods or a service.

The increasing power of the consumer in contemporary marketplace dynamics, and the pace of change enabled by faster and more effective communication and information technologies, requires companies to adopt new approaches. The respect for the consumers' rights and priorities has become a must for companies searching for the right approach.

Especially in the fashion-clothing industry, where the lifecycle of a product is so short, market requirements need to be directly linked into the working process of design teams. By the same token, because of the dynamic nature of the fashion process, decisions need to be made at management level.

From the consumers' viewpoint, the traditional user-based approach and attitude taken by the designers seems to be one of the most effective in their search for product satisfaction. This approach also makes the relationship between companies and consumers more human orientated.

The Purpose of the Study

This research is aimed at adding value to the strategic planning process for companies. Putting consumer centred production into action will, in many cases, require a cultural change inside companies. This process also gives greater responsibility and control to designers, by putting them in as members of decision-making boards.

The main aim of this study was to find a methodological tool able to support product development decision-making teams. The approach considers the three main stakeholders of the consumption cycle: consumers, designers and companies. The challenge was to find a feasible way of measuring the three stakeholders' attitudes in relation to fashion products in order to facilitate consumer satisfaction, professional recognition for fashion designers and competitiveness and profitability for companies.

The premises of the Means-End Chain Model (Gutman, 1982) were adapted from a marketing tool to a design management tool and this is presented as a main outcome.

The Indicators for Fashion and Clothing Consumption

Previous studies by the researcher (Rocha, 1999) into fashion and clothing consumption revealed 28 indicators that influence consumer choices in Brazil. These indicators were derived from qualitative and quantitative research carried out using a sample of 380 Brazilian consumers from Recife in 1999 and subsequently a further sample of 820 Brazilians from four different cities in 2002. A follow up study among UK consumers in 2004 extended the indicators to 38 (Rocha et al., 2005). These consumer studies have provided the insights and evidence to build the conceptual framework for this research.

The Means-End Chain Model

The theory of Means-End Chain Model seems to be appropriate for qualitatively classifying the Indicators for Fashion and Clothing Consumption. The Means-End Chain Model theory is a way of systematically representing the hierarchy. The first level is comprised of the Attributes (A), which are the characteristics, components and parts of the product. The following level of the hierarchy is dedicated to the Consequences (C) of these attributes; the way consumers will benefit from the products. The consequences are more subjective and the results can be positive or negative. At the top of the chain are the Values (C), which give the direction of the model and represent the aims of the consumers (Reynold and Gutman, 1984; Woodruff and Gardial, 1996).

The levels represent many factors from the physical aspects of a product to personal values related to it. This technique offers a better understanding of the consumers' rationale behind their feelings towards the product. The technique can help measure the relevance that a consumer gives to a product in relation to his/her life as well as its functional properties. The theory's approach is based on the supposition that consumers see products as means to important ends (Mulvey et al., 1994).

The most common way to achieve a Means-End Chain Model analysis is using laddering, a tool known to describe a cognitive structure of a person or groups, mainly based on individual interview. Laddering is an effective method of analysing simultaneously all aspects of consumer behaviour affecting product choice. The adapted model offers the opportunity of comparing the degree of importance the designers and the companies give to value, consequence and attribute indicators and then compare to those of the consumers.

There are three ways to ask consumers about the principal attributes of a product: (1) triadic sorting – three different products are presented to the consumer and s/he might identify the similarities and differences between them; (2) preferences-consumption differences – where the consumer will indicate his/her preferred product and (3) differences by occasion – where the consumer, inserted in a consumption situation will describe the reasons for the choice. Although Gutman's theory is based on consumers' spontaneous response, in this work the data were supplied giving the consumer opportunity to add new indicators related to their consumption process. One of the main reasons for this was the size of the samples, which made individual responses not feasible.

During this process, sometimes the consumers' answers came in an unexpected order as regards values and consequences. From this point, the hierarchical value map could be built. The sequence of questions should be related to the degree of importance and sometimes a similar question needs to be posed allowing the researcher to map precisely.

The laddering data analysis process is comprised of four stages: (1) content analysis (2) the implication matrix development; (3) the hierarchical value map construction and (4) the dominant perceptual orientation determination.

The content analysis stage is the one where the result is a set of elements related in a sequence A-C-V, expressing the reasoning of the consumer in relation to attributes, consequences and values. The role of the researcher is very important and intensive as all the other phases will be based on these analyses.

The following phase, the implication matrix development, is comprised of actions to transfer all results from the early stage into a matrix of rows and columns using numeric codification. At this moment, the aggregate of presence/absence of relationship is done as well as a blend of qualitative and quantitative methods are incorporated.

The construction of the hierarchical value map offers a visualization of the direct and indirect relationship among elements. Normally, not all the relationships are shown but only the ones higher than the cut off point established by the researcher. The process is based on the structure of Means-End Chain in order to facilitate the interpretation of the data.

The last stage of the process is the determination of the dominant perceptual orientation Means-End chains. From the base elements (attributes) to the top ones (values) the numbers

of internal relationships are ranked and the chains with the higher score are considered to be the most important. As the scope of this research relates to a broad approach towards inclusivity, this stage was not considered appropriate.

Research Methods

A survey was conducted in the United Kingdom, Brazil and China, with consumers being asked about the degree of importance for fashion-clothing product attributes. This approach was selected to consider the distinctions between a mature market, and emerging western and eastern markets. A random survey of 265 consumers from the UK took place in May and June 2004, 310 questionnaires were completed in the Brazil during August and September 2004 and 226 Chinese consumers were involved in this field research during November and December 2004.

Great Britain is in many respects a traditional country with a long historical background (compared to Brazil) and an acknowledged role around the world. Its former Empire, until the last century, enabled the British influence to pervade different societies. As a consequence of its old colonies, the United Kingdom nowadays has a multicultural society incorporating a wide variety of different backgrounds (Census, 2001). The boldness of young British designers and tradition of innovation determine its avant-garde position in the fashion world.

Brazil is a comparatively young country in South America. Brazilian cultural roots are predominantly from Portugal, but influenced by other European societies, as well as African and indigenous peoples. After World War II North America became the foreign reference point for Brazilian people (Caldas and Alcadipani, 2003). Some recent changes in internal politics and the recognition of Brazilian multiculturalism abroad seems to have reinforced the creation of a Brazilian style, but it is acknowledged that its society has a long way to go in trying to minimize the foreign influence on its own consciousness. In recent years, the Brazilian fashion industry has nurtured new professionals, exported burgeoning talents, and consolidated its design and textile industries.

China as a target market is growing into the largest market to which any company would like to offer products. The last two decades in particular have seen the rise of a middle class and a massive interest in western products. However, inside China, there are currently many distinct groups of consumers that are geographically spread over this densely populated country. Cui and Liu (2000) suggest that consumers from different regions in mainland China have a diversity of attitudes, lifestyles and consumption patterns. Chinese clothing industry is a world leader. Some initiatives are being held inside China to make design as strong as production ability, although as yet in a limited way.

Questionnaires were distributed through educational institution staff and alumni in the UK, using voluntary participants who circulated them through their personal networks. The same procedure was adopted via Brazilian and Chinese institutions, also using volunteer investigators.

All consumers were more than 15 years old on the assumption that they had some income and could choose without parental interference. The samples included both genders. The nature of the samples was no way selective and all consumers were welcome. The

consumers' profiles were mapped based on socio-cultural, socio-economics and socio-physical information given by them.

A survey, based on interviews, was undertaken with fashion designers. A total of twenty interviews took place: six interviews were completed in the UK in June and July 2005, nine in Brazil from July to September 2005 and five in China in November 2005. For the Chinese sample, the researcher conducted all interviews with translation support. Fashion designers were invited to participate in the research based on their interest, diversity of work and availability. Within each national sample, it was seen as important to include well-known fashion designers, brand-diffusion fashion designers and emerging new generation fashion designers.

All the designers are performing within the competitive fashion industry in different markets: mature or emergent, local or global, western or global. Both quantitative and qualitative analysis was used as a method of inquiry to investigate the designers' educational background and skills as well as their company's position, target groups and anticipated developments.

During the same period cited for designers, a survey of 20 fashion companies was held in the UK (6), Brazil (9) and China (5) based on interviews. Similar criteria to that adopted for involving the designers was utilised for the companies. Size, market strategy, strategic group and product value parameters were used to support the initial selection of companies. When it was possible, the CEO was the interviewee, although in some cases the interview was carried out with a middle manager. A database framework was created using the original data collected from consumers, designers and companies and placed into SPSS software.

Qualitative and quantitative analyses were carried out based on primary data gathered in the UK, Brazil and China. Content analysis was used to design the hierarchical value map for fashion-clothing consumption using the Gutman Means-End Chain model (1982). A Likert type scale measured the degree of importance that consumers, designers and companies give to the Indicators for Fashion and Clothing Consumption. Quantitative analysis supported the stakeholders' comparison in order to feed evidence for the recommendations.

The Findings

The final arrangement for the categorization of the 38 Indicators for Fashion and Clothing Consumption into Attributes, Consequences and Values according to the Means-End Chain Model was done.

Mapping Indicators

A hierarchical cognitive map was built, in order to explain the relationship between the indicators. Figure 1 shows the mains-end chain (Gutman, 1982) of Attributes, Consequences and Values for fashion products.

Consumers see products as a set of Attributes (Peter & Olson, 1999). The attributes can be classified into concrete (physical, tangible) and abstract (emotional, intangible).

Consumers also see products as a set of benefits (Peter & Olson, 1999). Understanding benefits as Consequences, they can be functional (tangible results from a direct experience of the consumer) or psychological (psycho-social results of product consumption).

Consumers can see products as a way to satisfy Values (Peter & Olson, 1999). The values represent the final aims of the consumer and are divided into instrumental (dictated by the society) and terminal (built individually).

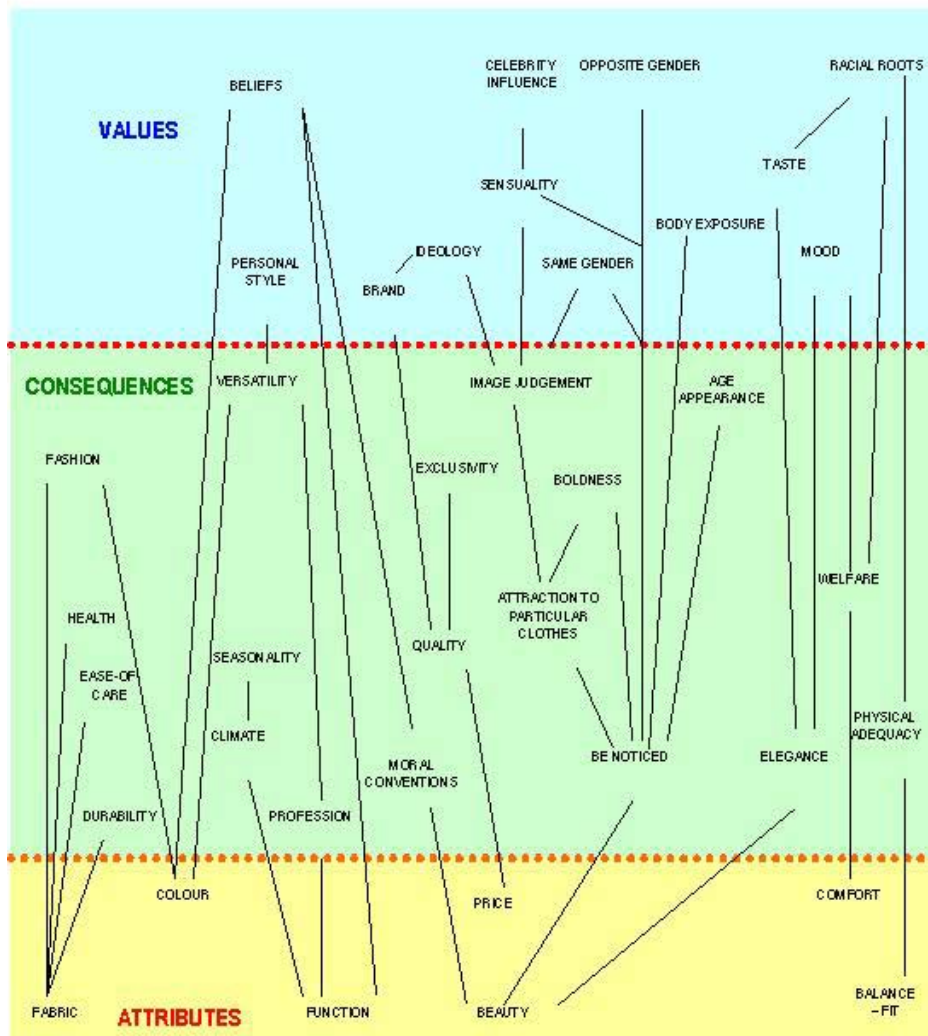


Figure 1 - Hierarchical Value Map for Fashion-Clothing Consumption

Analysing the A-C-V Chain

Using the Means-End Chain model, the following analysis is a comparative study of the Indicators for Fashion and Clothing Consumption from the point of view of consumers, designers and companies from the three countries.

In these analyses it is important to mention that all consumers, designers and companies tend to maximize the degree of importance they give for an indicator, which makes these comparisons well balanced.

Consumers were asked to mark from 1 to 4 (totally disagree to totally agree) the degree of their agreement with the concepts expressed in the questionnaire based on the Indicators

for Fashion and Clothing consumption. An analysis using quantitative data was made within the means of these indicators.

Even so, there are differences around the prevalence of categories in the national samples of this study: the ten highest means were almost solely from the same indicators. Welfare was the most important, followed by Physical Adequacy and Balance. Functionality, Colour, Be Noticed, Versatility and Age Appearance appear as the following highest means for the whole consumer survey.

Designers and Companies were asked to mark into a 5-point Likert scale, the degree of importance they gave to their products in relation to the Indicators in Fashion and Clothing Consumption.

The Designers from all countries seems to have in common the awareness for the following indicators in this order: Personal Style, Taste, Quality and Beauty. In the consumers' opinion Personal Style appeared with a relative low rank position, which indicates some lack of "tuning" between designers and consumers. For British designers Balance-Fit seems to be most important indicator, Beauty is the top one for Brazilians and Comfort is the indicator that Chinese designers give more attention to.

Comparing the consumers' results with the ones from the companies; it is possible to find some divergence in the degrees of importance. Due the size of the companies' survey and the intention of a global industry analysis, the countries results were blended. For British, Brazilian and Chinese companies, the most important indicator is Balance-Fit. Although for companies Quality is one of the most important indicators, it has not presented as high ranking for consumers. A similar result is observed with the indicator Brand. It seems that companies are putting their energy into indicators that are not the most significant for consumers.

Some controversial indicators like Beliefs and Racial Roots were ranked low but especially from designer and company surveys. This result doesn't mean that they are not very important to a few consumers but generally other aspects were far more important.

The first point of consideration is related to the attributes of a piece of clothing. These indicators – Fabric, Function, Comfort, Balance-Fit, Colour, Beauty and Price -are embedded in the concept of a product and are related to tangibles parameters.

Chart 1 compares the aggregate frequency mean values (UK+BR+CN) of the attributes judged by the three target groups: consumers, designers and companies. For consumers, the question was related to the degree of importance they give to the attributes. For designers and companies the question was which degree of importance they think their consumers give to these attributes. It is interesting to point out that designers and companies have a quite similar opinion about the attributes.

On the other hand there's a significant distance between the opinions of consumers and what designers and companies consider consumer opinion to be. This is particularly true in relation to Functionality, Price and Colour. Beauty and Comfort, on the other hand, seem to have a much greater importance for designers than consumers.

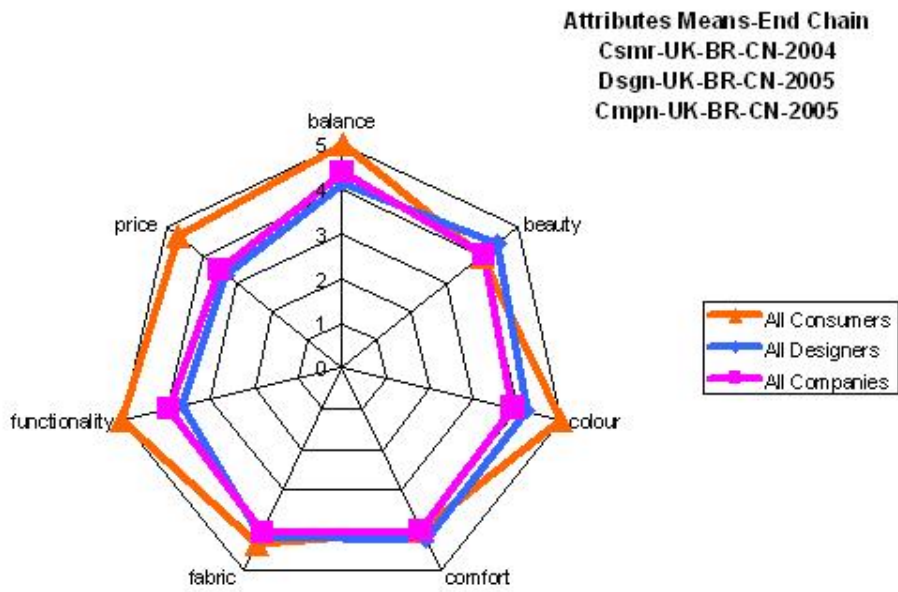


Chart 1 – Attributes for Fashion-Clothing Consumption as Expressed by Stakeholders

The analysis of the Consequences’ descriptives inside a Means-End Chain has revealed some points for reflection (Chart 2). Consumers gave the maximum score to five of the indicators: Versatility, Welfare, Age Appearance, Be Noticed and Physical Adequacy. Health is an underestimated indicator by companies, which means that fashion businesses could demonstrate more social responsibility.

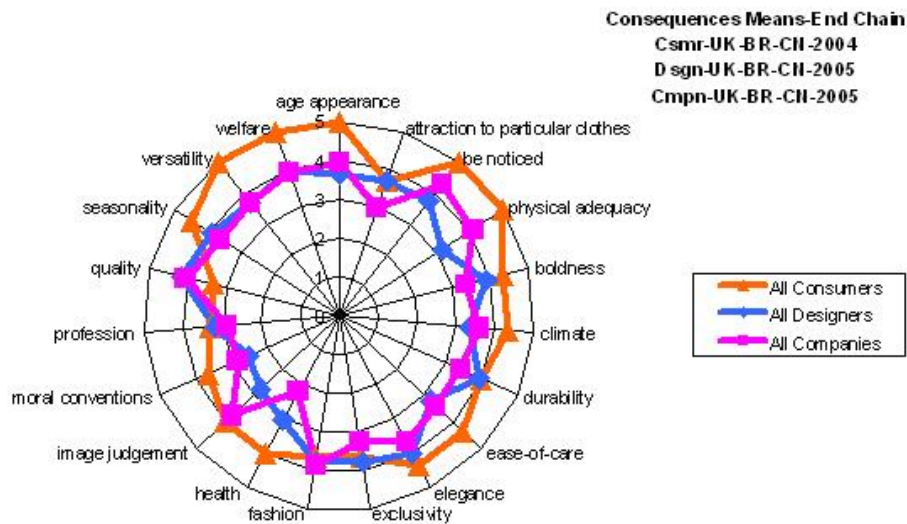


Chart 2 – Consequences for Fashion-Clothing Consumption as Expressed by Stakeholders

Designers do not value the Moral Convention indicator in comparison with the other two target groups. Quality is the indicator least important within the consequences measured. This fact does not mean that consumers are not interested in product quality but possibly it is a consequence of the short life cycle of the fashion-clothing product and a wide spread of an

acceptable standard level for fashion products. Another very interesting finding is related to Physical Adequacy. Designers, the ones who should be thinking about the support of the clothing, the human body, are the group that give least value to this aspect.

The analysis of the Values within a Means-End Chain, presented in Chart 3, showed the most heterogeneous result compared with those of Attributes and Consequences. Some values were overestimated by designers and companies in comparison with the thoughts of the final consumer. Companies underestimated the Ideology value for consumers, although they, closely followed by designers, gave substantial more value to Brand. This may explain the increased tension for branding inside companies' marketing departments. Brand, however, had the least important value among consumers.

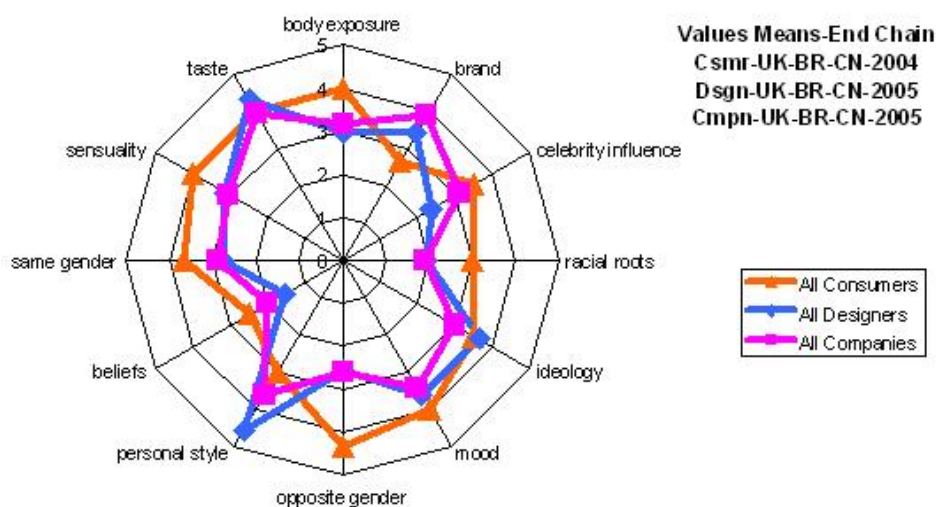


Chart 3 – Values for Fashion-Clothing Consumption as Expressed by Stakeholders

Designers' answers demonstrate a lot of importance for Personal Style, possibly, as a direct consequence of their own individuality expressed through their creative process. Taste, also, being subjective, was higher scored by designers. The Opposite Gender is, perhaps surprisingly, the most important value for consumers. Female consumers seem to be constantly aware of surrounding people, particularly if they are men. The results indicate that the same happens with male consumers when in an environment with women. The nature of the research did not consider issues of sexual orientation so no comment can be made about gay attitudes in this context. Beliefs and Celebrity Influence are values especially underestimated by designers.

Conclusions

When considering the consumer viewpoint, the approaches traditionally used by designers seem to be the most effective for their search for satisfaction. Designers in general have user-based knowledge and attitudes. However, the outcomes indicate that fashion designers do not have access to adequate information on consumer needs.. The reason for this varies from brand-diffusion designers whose briefings are supplied by marketing departments,

to designer-name brands where the conceptual ideas of the designer-chief are the core of the briefing.

There is growing evidence to suggest that consumers are not satisfied with fashion companies' performance. Companies need to lose preconceived ideas about older consumers, and add value via fashion products that transcend all ages. The evidence suggests that the fashion industry needs to be more aware of consumer indicators when targeting consumers.

Companies need to remove their stereotypical ideas of overweight consumers, and respect cultures and aesthetics differences, creating fashion products that transcend all races. Companies need to expand their understanding of distinct ways of living. This approach should make the relationship between companies and consumers more human-led, and should help to provide a tool for effective and more focused decision-making techniques for developing better fashion products. These results indicate that a dramatic change in the way fashion-clothing companies manage their businesses is needed to ensure future growth or commercial success.

The continuous measurement of the attributes, consequences and values inside a Means-End Chain is suggested to be an innovative way to target different types of consumers. The model offers the possibility of working with qualitative and quantitative data in a complementary and more assured way. Qualitative analysis can be fed by data gathered from focus groups and the indicators can be measured by surveys included in a consumer register with a loyalty card or any sort of poll.

Recommendation

The decision making process of a fashion company needs to consider not only the market report, but a constant update of consumer information crossed with an analysis of the designers' thoughts. This practice may improve the consumer satisfaction and should offer more responsibility and distinction to the role of all professionals inside the product development team.

The idea of analysing a fashion product based on attributes, consequences and values may not only be innovative, but also give the opportunity for all stakeholders to be able to anticipate what garments should become an object of desire and why.

The Means-End Chain Model was created, basically, for consumer marketing analysis. However this study shows the benefits of this method for achieving improved product development evaluation. The model attempted to create a link between perceived product attributes and values. The use of indicators from qualitative research with categories can help in the accounting process of quantitative data within everyday decision-making practices.

Limitations and Implications

The considerable difference between the quantity of respondents within the consumer survey in relation to the designer and company segments possibly suggests greater accuracy in the consumer results. Even so, this ratio represents with some reliability the real scenario within the fashion industry.

The sample was confined to three countries. Limiting the sample in this way offered control in interest, but also limited application of results. These demographic groups are, however, meaningful in investigating global trends including mature and emergent markets, from west and east cultures. There is the opportunity for further research in other areas of design management activity in the fashion industry.

Acknowledgements

This paper is part of the first author's PhD thesis in Fashion Design awarded by the University of Kent/University College for the Creative Arts at Rochester, United Kingdom in 2007. Thanks to the supervisory team's insights and contributions (second and third authors). Special thanks to CAPES, a Brazilian Government Agency, for the support given to this research.

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