Abstract. *In recent years, issues of responsible consumption and environmental sustainability have received increased attention in the literature. Many scholars in the apparel scholarship have researched for solutions to promote responsible consumption of apparels in consumers. Despite the promotion of responsible consumption of apparels by various scholars and marketers, observations show that consumers remain upbeat in apparel acquisition and are continuously buying apparels in large quantities and frequencies, which may seem that most consumers are purchasing more than what they actually need. Other areas of marketing and consumer behaviour have showed that consumers are in fact aware about the importance of responsible consumption and environmental sustainability, and thus, there may be some hidden rationales for consumer on-going rise in purchase and consumption of apparels. This study, therefore, attempts to fill in this gap by extending knowledge in the current scholarship by exploring for the underlying reasons for consumer apparel acquisitions. The study is exploratory in nature and employs a qualitative research approach using in-depth interviews as a method of data collection. Findings from the study suggest that consumers acquire apparels due to peer pressure, self-identity, job requirement, price and convenience, and retailer's influence. Notably, consumers see it to be more beneficial to consume more apparel to avoid lesser disappointments in relation to personal and societal expectations. Implications and recommendations from research findings are also presented.*

Keywords: Apparel acquisition, more is less, consumer behaviour.

APPAREL ACQUISITION: WHY MORE IS LESS?

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1. Introduction

The idea of responsible consumption has gained much momentum in recent years (Niinimaki, 2010). As time passes, more and more consumers are starting to engage in acts of responsible consumption, such as reducing unnecessary purchases and recycling whatever that can be recycled (Carrigan and Pelsmacker, 2009). In particular, patterns of over consumption have helped raise movements for social responsibility in the promotion of responsible consumption (Charbonneau, 2008).

A growing concern for the environment and social change was researched since the 1970s. However, it was not until the late 1980s and early 1990s that researchers in the apparel and textiles discipline started to explore socially responsible consumption as a new phenomenon. With a growing interest in area of social responsibility, scholars in the textile and apparel scholarship have been presented with a task to define socially responsible consumption in the context of apparel acquisition (Dickson and Eckman, 2006). The work of Charbonneau (2008) revealed that responses were directed toward concerns for the environment and its consumers, a blend of ethics and morality with profit, and business actions relating to the environment and its consumers. The study further argued that as a relatively new concept to the textile and apparel discipline, socially responsible consumption is an important phenomenon worldwide. Since then, many studies have been devoted towards an understanding on how socially responsible apparel acquisition can be promoted to the society, such as studies by Connell (2011) who explored consumers' perceptions of eco-conscious apparel acquisition behaviours and Jaegel et al. (2012) who explored individual values and motivational complexities in ethical clothing consumption.

While existing studies on apparel acquisition has point towards a direction that suggests a need to responsibly consume apparels and textiles for aims of environmental sustainability, ethics and morality, the consumption of apparel among consumers remain at very high levels. Despite the promotion of responsible consumption of clothing by various scholars and marketers, observations show that consumers remain upbeat in apparel acquisition and are continuously buying clothing in large quantities and frequencies, which may seem that they are purchasing more than they actually need. Critics have been fast to point the blame to these consumers as those who consume irresponsibly and have contribute towards environmental deterioration (Lowey, 2010). Such critics, however, may be unjust as conclusions of consumer irresponsibility have often been made based on assumptions that consumers remain ignorant to environmental degradation and remain spendthrift in their purchases. Before such conclusions can be made, there is a need to understand consumer considerations in apparel acquisition in the contemporary era, in which there may be valid reasons on why consumers are observed to be increasing purchases and consumptions of apparels. Accordingly, this study aims to explore the underlying reasons for consumer apparel acquisitions. The study is exploratory in nature as it seeks to find out the factors that explains why consumer purchase patterns and consumption patterns of apparels in the modern era. A qualitative research approach is

adopted and in-depth interviews are employed as a research method to obtain the required research data. The outcome of this study will contribute towards an understanding on the rationales for consumer apparel purchase and consumption patterns and decision in contemporary times.

2. The apparel consumer and apparel consumption

The idea of apparel acquisition describes the apparel consumption of consumers. The statement 'more is less' explains that consumers who purchase exceeding the required amount of apparels deter them from responsible consumption. Judgements on purchase quantities of apparels which is more than necessary is often deemed as a subjective evaluation, but when the act of buying deteriorates the environment and society, the consumption is perceived as irresponsible. A socially conscious consumer is defined as a consumer who takes into account the public consequences of his or her private consumption, in which he or she may also attempt to use his or her purchasing power to bring about social change. According to Webster (1975), a consumer who is aware of societal and environmental problems must believe that he or she has the power to make a difference, in which active participation in the society or community is often required. More recent scholars, on the other hand, suggests that a socially responsible consumer is one who purchases products and services perceived to have a positive (or less negative) influence on the environment, in which he or she may patronize businesses that attempt to effect related positive social change (Roberts, 1995). As such, the conceptualization of a socially responsible consumption in the contemporary era assumes two dimensions which are: (i) environmental concern; and (ii) a more general social concern (Lau, 2010).

Purchasing apparels is often a complicated decision faced by consumers as not all apparels look the same nor do all apparels fit into each individual personal style. According to a survey study conducted by Joergens (2006) focusing on the negative perspective of the responsible consumption market, little evidence showed that ethical issues such as responsible consumption have any effect on consumers' fashion purchase behaviour. More specifically, consumers have not stopped buying fashion products because of ethical or environment reasons. Instead, the most important factors that influence their buying decisions are style and preference for the product. Other factors such as brand image and price were found to have higher weights of importance in consumer considerations for fashion product purchases (e.g. apparels). Ma and Koh (2001) further explained that fashion brands focusing on a particular market segment often develop clothing lines with similar styles, colours, and fabrics. Apparel goods are also extremely sensitive to fashion change, thus influencing their perceived appeal to customers. In other words, it is unlikely that qualities of products or brand assortments can differentiate retailers in customers' minds in a market brimming with choices. Consequently, maintaining on-going service relationships with customers may be an important strategy for survival in the competitive environment of fashion retailing.

Sharma (2001) argued that retailing considerations are important when considering consumer apparel consumption. Retailing is unique in that the customer offering is not just a product or service, but a melding of the two. As customer demands grow and target markets become more fragmented, retailers will increasingly need to provide customized services to strengthen and maintain relationship.

From the perspective of a positive responsible consumption within the apparel industry, social responsibility is a philosophy that aims to balance ethics with profitability by producing apparel products that positively affect, or minimally harm, consumers and the environment. It encompasses a broad range of issues, including those related to environmental protection, labour practices in and trade with developing countries, consumerism and body image (Dickson and Eckman, 2006). Results from a survey by Connell (2011) showed that consumers are engaged in a number of perceived eco-conscious apparel acquisition behaviours such as adhering to acquisition limits by acquiring apparel based on need and extending the lifetime of the apparel, acquiring apparel having attributes perceived as environmentally preferable and acquiring apparel through sources believed to be environmentally preferable.

From the perspective of the source of the problem, the consumption of consumer products, including apparel, transforms matter and energy and therefore, is environmentally consequential. Consumption is environmentally important to the extent that it makes materials or energy less available for future use, moves a biological system toward a different state, or through its effects on those systems, threatens human health, welfare, or other things consumer value (Stern et al., 1997). However, it is important to understand that prior to consumers acquiring and using apparel, manufacturing occurs. Associated with manufacturing processes are arrays of negative environmental consequences, including decreased air, water, and soil quality, decreased biodiversity, increased emissions of greenhouse gases, depleted water sources and other renewable resources, and reduced non-renewable resources. Therefore, the negative environmental effects of apparel and textile manufacturing are also indirect environmental effects of apparel consumption (Allwood et al., 2006).

The direct environmental effects of apparel consumption are the result of two primary factors. The first is the pollution and solid waste generated as consumers use, care for and discard apparel (Chouinard and Brown, 1997). Apparel consumption behaviours such as garment care and disposal require raw material inputs such as fossil fuels, water, and chemicals. Therefore, the second major way that the consumption of apparel directly contributes to environmental change is through the depletion of natural resources. Therefore, apparel consumption, in the aggregate, is an environmentally significant behaviour and a contributing cause of environmental change. Furthermore, the development of a socially responsible apparel industry requires the encouragement of eco-conscious consumption behaviours among consumers.

The current review of the literature, therefore, provides a background on the current trend of consumer research in the apparel and textile scholarship. While many researchers have devoted efforts and focus in the promotion of responsible consumption of apparels, such efforts have yielded limited results (Lowey, 2010).

Other areas of marketing and consumer behaviour have showed that consumers are in fact aware about the importance of environmental sustainability, and thus, there may be some hidden rationales for consumer on-going rise in purchase and consumption of apparels. Therefore, this current study will attempt to address this gap and extend knowledge in the scholarship by exploring for the underlying reasons for consumer apparel acquisitions.

3. Research design

This study is an exploratory study which employs a qualitative approach using in-depth interviews to explore for consumer rationales to purchase and consume apparels in the contemporary era. In-depth interviews were employed as it was an appropriate method of to elicit qualitative data when attempting to understand consumer behaviour. The interview guide was loosely structured as the purpose of the interview was to elicit consumer reasons for apparel acquisition. The contact method employed was personal as it allows the flexibility for interviewers to provide immediate explanation and clarification on any uncertainties posed by informants. Mechanical devices such as voice recorders and laptops were used as research instruments.

Selection of research participants began by using mall-intercept systematic sampling to randomly select fifteen informants from shopping malls around Klang Valley, Malaysia. Relying on Strauss and Corbin's (1998) concept of data saturation, data collection should continue until no new themes surfaced, which occurred after collecting data from thirteen consumers. Consumer responses from the in-depth interviews were transcribed in a verbatim manner and initial transcription were sent back to research participants for verification. Initial analyses of the research data were arranged according to themes and were further discussed with scholars in the field of responsible consumption, fashion marketing and consumer behaviour. The final findings are presented in the following section.

4. Findings and discussion

This study set out to explore for the reasons for consumer apparel acquisition. In order to achieve this objective, in the interviews, the participants were asked what motivated them to purchase and consume apparels in contemporary times. The notation of 'contemporary times' refers to the modern era of that consumers live in today. Research participants understood that the reason for purchase and consumption of apparels is no longer as simple as satisfying the physiological need for clothing. The participants' responses provide evidence that there are indeed hidden reasons for consumer on-going rise in purchase and consumption of apparels. The findings of the current study are arranged according to themes which represents consumer rationales for apparel acquisition. In particular, xxx themes are presented and discussed: (i).

4.1. Peer pressure

The first theme explains about the influence of peer pressure that causes consumers to purchase more than the needed amount of apparels. Basically, they represent consumers who generally focus more on their wants than needs when deciding on apparels purchases.

> *"I have a whole closet of clothes that some are only worn once and kept away. There are times I wonder why I bought that dress in the first place that when I tried it on again, it did not seem as nice as when I tried it in the store's fitting room. Finally, it ends up at the bottom of the pile."*

The statement above shows that little thought about other factors, such as the functionality and worth of the purchase, were considered before deciding on buying the apparel. This can be due to peer pressure influence on consumers who wants to be known as being fashion savvy or fashion forward. This type of consumers are active socialisers as they frequently spend time going to places, meeting up or having meals with a group of fashion conscious friends during leisure, or often attend events which require attendees to have a certain dress code following the theme of the event. They will slowly feel the need to be updated with the latest trends as not to be left out from their cliques. To keep up with this type of lifestyle, they are constantly informed of the latest trend and styles through fashion magazines, media reports on the attires worn by stylish fashion influential people such as celebrities, models and even members of the royalty, advertising efforts and online sources on latest trends of fashion houses or retailers.

> *"My friends are always changing clothing and this makes me pressure to do so as well."*

> *"When we go to celebrations or events, we cannot be seen wearing the same dress twice as when we take photos, we will look awkward. My friends are wearing the same dress only once so I guess that's the trend I ought to follow to in order to fit in."*

> *"Do you remember the blue dress Kate Middleton wore during her engagement to Prince William that she bought at a department store in the United Kingdom? I wished that store offered online delivery service so that I can own a piece of that beautiful dress."*

However, there are some who slowly develop the interest in fashion which initiated from peer pressure influence. This increases their willingness to spend more on apparels to owning a wider collection of different type of apparels beyond their need in which the amount of outfit owned exceeds the chances of them wearing it.

> *"I wasn't a fashion person when I during my high school days. After I came out to college and work, I notice my friends and peers starting to dress up and I guess there's where I started to dress up. From then on, I will update myself with the latest fashion trends and apparels to fit in and hopefully stand out among my peers."*

4.2. Self-identity

Apart from peer pressure, the thought of being fashionable depicts one's self identity is also associated as a rationale as to why consumers feel that it is never enough when it comes to the purchase and consumption of apparels. Consumers perceive that the way they present themselves in terms of the outfit worn is very important in expressing their self identity. They tend to put lower emphasis on character building than personality as the latter focus on personal outlook and material items owned, as in this case, fashion apparels. The findings shows that a large amount of money earned by young consumers who have part-time jobs and working adults are spent on apparel acquisition for the purpose of building a certain perceived image or personal style. They hold by the saying that "first impression matters", especially in what they wear, whether it is to achieve the corporate or stylish look. This perception encourages consumers to spend on a variety of apparels, more than necessary, to always look their best in the image they want to portray.

> *"I have come across a friend who has never worn the same dress twice to events and meetings or even outings to clubs. As she likes to take pictures and upload it on Facebook, she does not want her friends on her online social network to notice a same dress worn for different events."*

> *"What I wear reflects who I am. I don't want to be associated as someone who is cheapskate or who cannot afford to buy clothing."*

> *"The more clothing I have, the better or more concretely I can express myself in the society."*

> *"I'm a hip-hopper so naturally I will need a lot of apparels and its accessories to project my identity. Trends also plays an important role so I can't really say how much of apparel purchases are sufficient as I will need to keep up with the trend that reflects on my identity."*

4.3. Job requirement

On the other hand, there are some jobs, such as public relations officer and event manager, who are highly involve in socializing requires them to look presentable as part of the nature of their work, hence, the emphasis on suitable and a wide variety of apparel acquisition.

> *"Because of my job, I will need to have a variety of apparels to suit the occasion."*

> *"Being in the events line, I cannot be seen wearing the same attire twice. If not, I will be getting some stick from my bosses and clients!"*

> *"It wouldn't be professional, especially for females, to be seen in the same attire often at different events."*

4.4 Price and convenience

The next theme explains about how apparel prices and the convenience in obtaining the apparels cause the oppose practice of responsible consumption in consumer apparel acquisition. Consumers who have financial freedom tend to have the financial power to spend on their wants, in this case, apparels. Nowadays, there is a broader apparel market which not only caters to consumer's needs but encourages their want to become needs. There is a wider variety of apparel businesses that offer products for different target segments. Even within a certain target segment, there exists increasing competition between apparel business owners which leads to abundance of choices. Hence, it encourages spending among consumers as their wants are very likely to be satisfied by the available options. For example, the Internet has been a useful tool for not only sourcing for information, but also, for buying products within the ease of the click of the mouse button. Therefore, the notion of online shopping has been a common practice by many consumers. Whether it is established apparel retailers that open their market to online users or emerging online apparel businesses, this provides the convenience to consumers to purchase apparels through the Internet. At the comfort of their home and the scroll of the apparel catalogue, apparel purchasing in the modern day becomes easier. New apparel businesses tend to minimise risk at the expense of lower cost by operating online, such as through blog shops or online selling sites, hence, the prices of their apparels sold are cheaper than retail outlets at shopping premises.

> *"The first time I online shopped, I could not believe how easy it was and end up buying so many things as the items were very cheap too. I was spoilt for choices of clothes and accessories surfing from one store website to another. All of them looked nice in pictures online. As I did not have a credit card then all I needed to do was email to arrange a meet up to receive the purchases and pay cash on delivery (COD). I seldom can resist buying clothes and accessories online since then."*

As such, when purchasing procedure is simpler and the apparels sold are cheap, consumers, who either prefer to own a variety of apparels or spoilt for choices and indecisive, buy in excess.

4.5. Retailer's role

The last theme found from the interviews is the retailer's role as a factor in exceeding responsible consumption in apparel acquisition. The stiff competition in the apparel market gives organizations no choices but to generate ideas to stay profitable. There is a need to promote spending among consumers, in other words, tempt consumers to purchasing more apparels and change their wants to needs. Fashion labels and apparel organizations produce a wide range of apparel styles and designs. High fashion brands usually create season collection of apparels complement with matching accessories. Some of the apparels organizations' concept has a few apparel

ranges to match different consumer styles. These organizations concentrate on brand marketing strategy to capture the consumer's perceived value associated with the apparels. Hence, it encourages customer loyalty and belief in the companies' products. Besides that, promotional efforts such as discounts, season sales and member cards attract consumers to make more purchases, which is often unnecessary ones. The other value added services and facilities such as accommodating sales personnel, flexible after sales warranty, even the retail store ambience, layout and the arrangement of the products also play an important role in satisfying customer needs and in encouraging apparel purchases. When the consumers are satisfied and their needs are met, consumers will feel more confident of their choice in the apparel selections provided by the retailer. One of the most effective marketing strategies is the advertising efforts from print advertisement to event apparel launches especially by established fashion labels. An interview participant recalled how she was attracted to the apparels by a fashion label:

> *"After watching the Victoria's Secret runway show, I am amazed at the companies' inner wear in which designs are creative, accentuates women feminine nature and comfortable fit which was well exhibited by confident, charismatic and polished to perfection models."*

Further responses show how impactful the retailer's roles in promoting their product have significant effect on consumers purchasing decisions, loyalty to the products and quantity of products purchased.

> *"Many of the promotional strategies, such as buy one at the original price and the second one at a fifty percent discount, motivates me to buy more because of the savings that I could get. Also, there are many member days for various apparel retailers which gives me even more reason to buy because of the good deals I could get, which on normal days, will be way more expensive."*

5. Implications and recommendations

The findings of the current study present several implications and recommendations. From the current study, several rationales have emerged to explain consumers purchase and consumption of apparels. Firstly, the influence of peer pressure has caused consumers to acquire more apparels as to keep up with fashion trends among their peers. In order to fit in, consumers feel a need to adhere to the fashion attires worn by their peers, including its changes and the number of times that apparels are worn. More specifically, consumers tend to avoid wearing same apparels multiple times as consumers in the contemporary time take many pictures and do not want to be in the same apparel. Secondly, the study found that self-identity is a reason for apparel acquisition. To contemporary consumers, the apparels that they wear reflect who they really are. Most consumers do not want to be associated as someone who always wear the same apparels or who cannot afford to buy apparels. Moreover, some consumers have an identity that they need to keep in relation to the fashion

trend, thereby initiating a need to continuously purchase apparels to reflect their fashion conscious identity. Thirdly, there are job requirements which require consumers to have a variety of apparels, in which it would be best to avoid wearing the same apparels to multiple events. These jobs, in particular, are mostly jobs which require socialization with other members of the society and those which are often in the limelight. Fourthly, the price and convenience of apparels in the modern day contributes to consumers purchase and consumption of apparels. In particular, apparels are easily accessible today, such as on the Internet which only requires a few clicks to purchase an apparel, are available in a wide range of varieties, and are priced competitively where consumers today are able to get very good deals on apparels, and thus are no longer a burden to their pockets. Lastly, retailers were found to have an influential role in motivating consumers' apparel acquisition. Due to stiff competitive in the apparel industry, retailers are now coming up with effective marketing strategies that create a lucrative opportunity for consumers to capitalize on in terms of the deals and satisfaction offered through the purchase of offered apparels. Overall, it seems that there is a situation whereby consumers ought to have a wide range of apparels which are to be constantly updated to avoid events of humiliation and promote a higher sense of self-esteem and self-confidence. Such results are seen to be valued more than the price paid for apparels, in which some consumers who over acquire apparels perceive it as worthwhile due to the personal benefits that they are able to obtain through such patterns of purchase and consumption. It other words, consumers see it to be more beneficial to consume more apparels to avoid lesser disappointments in relation to personal and societal expectations. Thus, the idea of responsible consumption is one which becomes controversial. While it is undeniable that consumers may not need as many apparel as they are buying physiologically, they may need that amount socially in order to fit into the societal norms and standards set by the society.

The current phenomena, however, can be placed into a better context through several recommendations afforded by the current study. A common trend occurred in the current study – it is desirable to avoid wearing apparels multiple times, and more than once for events and social meetings. Apparel marketers and retailers can view this as a lucrative marketing opportunity to create a business model which looks into the loaning of apparels to consumers. This will provide an opportunity for consumers to be able to wear apparels only once or depending on the number of times deemed fit to social events and meetings. For consumers who remain determine to own their own apparels instead of loaning them from retailers, apparel manufacturers can consider manufacturing apparels that are made from eco-friendly and bio-degradable materials to minimize the impacts from the high demands of apparels on the environment. To motivate responsible consumption and promote environmental sustainability while maintaining demand for apparels, apparel manufacturers and retailers can consider accepting used apparels from consumers and provide them with a discounted price for new apparel purchases, in which old apparels can be reprocessed into new ones or be disposed in an environmentally friendly manner while consumers are able to satisfy

their needs and demands for apparel acquisition. Nonetheless, educational campaigns that promote the moderation of apparel acquisition among consumers are encouraged and alternatives, such as apparel loaning, should be introduced in these campaigns to foster responsible consumption of apparels.

6. Conclusion, limitations and future research directions

This study has, hopefully, provided the rationales for consumer apparel acquisition in the contemporary time. Five rationales were found to explain consumer purchase and consumption of apparels, including – peer pressure, self-identity, job requirement, price and convenience, and retailer's influence. More notably, consumers see it to be more beneficial to consume more apparel to avoid lesser disappointments in relation to personal and societal expectations. The study has also provided several recommendations to better the current phenomena, including introducing of apparel loaning, using eco-friendly and biodegradable materials in apparels, accepting second hand and unwanted apparels to be remanufactured of disposed in an appropriate manner, and educational campaigns to inform and educate consumers to foster the responsible consumption of apparels.

Nonetheless, no research is without any limitations, and this is the same for the current study. Firstly, because the study was limited to only fifteen participants, a limitation of this study is that conclusions are not generalisable to a wider population. However, because this was the first study to identify the rationales for consumer apparel acquisition, the intent was more exploratory in nature. Therefore, the number of individuals participating in the study does not jeopardize the integrity of the findings (Connell, 2010). Nonetheless, to improve the generalizability of the findings, a large number of participants from different research contexts are encouraged for future researches. Secondly, no distinction was made between consumer demographics. It would be worthwhile for future researchers to see if there are any differences in findings among different consumer demographics, such as across ages and ethnicity. Cross-cultural comparison of consumer apparel acquisition could also provide fruitful insights.

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