

# An Investigation of Intimate Apparel Buying Behaviour among Fashion Conscious and Non-Fashion Conscious Chinese Hong Kong Female Consumers

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## Abstract

The complex physical nature of the intimate apparel and the unique physiological make-up of each female wearer combine to suggest that consumer behaviour for intimate apparel will be different from that for other apparel. This study examines intimate apparel buying behaviour among fashion conscious and non-fashion conscious Chinese Hong Kong female consumers. The purpose of the study was to examine similarities and differences in need recognition, information search media and purchasing criteria in intimate apparel among these two group consumers. The results show that there are significant differences in need recognition and information search media between fashion conscious and non-fashion conscious consumers. However, both groups have same similar concerns including fit, product quality, style and store atmosphere in purchasing intimate apparel. Retailers specializing in Intimate Apparel can adopt the findings as their initial concern when launching a new sales or product development program.

*Keywords:* Intimate apparel buying behaviour

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## 1. Introduction

Apparel has been a popular choice for studies of consumer behaviour. In contrast to the outer-wear, there are very little studies about consumer behaviour for the essentially invisible and highly personal category of intimate apparel. Recently, the intimate apparel retailing is changing, customers besides considering the functional side of the product, they also consider the fashion element on the product, examples can be found in high-end brands (Victoria's secret) to mass-market brands (M&S) and the trend is getting popular. The complex physical nature of the bra and the unique physiological make-up of each bra wearer combine to suggest that consumer behaviour for bras will be different from that for other apparel.

## 2. Background and research objectives

There are numerous of research works investigated the consumer behaviour of outer-wear, but lack of literature examined the consumer behaviour of inner-wear.

Richards and Sturman (1977) studied how the lifestyle acted as a basis for segmentation the bra market. This research revealed that the important information about how consumer-life-value and attitudes affect the bra decision process. The authors defined five segments as the "conservative consumer", the "fashionable consumer", the "outgoing consumer", the "brand conscious consumer", and the "price oriented consumer". However this paper did not compare that the differences between bra and any other fashionable apparel.

Laurent and Kapferer (1985) examined the involvement of a wide range of product categories, including bras and dress as two items of apparel. In the study they examined the risk, sign, pleasure and importance of the product categories and comparative findings for these two products. They concluded that bra consumer is highly

involved with the bra as a product. But they did not indicate the reason for bra is regarded as high-risk purchase. When the bra is compared with the dress, it is perceived as relatively lower pleasure value.

Hart and Dewsnap (2001) examined the consumer decision process for intimate apparel. The key findings of the study were highly involved consumer is motivated by a complex range of interlinked factors like perceived risk and self-concept. But they did not propose the link between a pleasurable bra shopping experience and the consumer's propensity to re-engage in the decision making process.

To summarise, the aim of this research is to investigate consumer buying behaviour for bras using the Engel, Miniard and Blackwell's (1982, 1993, 2001) consumer decision process model (EMB model). This model was to analyze how individuals sort through facts and influences to make decisions that are logical and consistent for them.

More specifically, the objective of this study is to explore similarities and difference in buying behaviour in intimate apparel among fashion conscious and non-fashion conscious Chinese Hong Kong female consumers. Accordingly, the aim is to explore the shopping habits for intimate apparel and compare the psychographic differences between these two groups' consumers of shopping inner-wear.

## 3. Research Methodology

Quantitative approach was chosen as the data collection method. 318 questionnaires were distributed to age 18-35 Chinese Hong Kong females among the Universities in Hong Kong and the Shopping malls by the means of a convenience, non-probability sampling method. A pilot test was conducted with 25 respondents before conducting the questionnaires to improve the words and select the appropriate questions for the research

Twenty questions were used to investigate the intimate apparel decision making process among fashion conscious and non-fashion conscious consumers.

Subjects aged at 18-35 were selected as the study target. The rationale was they are the most fashion conscious group.

Spoles's (1986) Consumer Styles Inventory (CSI) was used in this research to measure the eight mental characteristics of decision making in order to classify consumer into fashion and non-fashion conscious consumers.

The data was entered into SPSS 12.0 software in the computer for data processing. After all data were scanned and entered for accuracy, the analytical tools in the SPSS software were used. The reliability test was used to test the relation of statements in each factor to see whether they were reliable or not. The independent sample t-test was used for determining the differences between fashion conscious and non-fashion conscious consumers when buying inner wear and outer wear.

#### **4. Result and Discussion**

A total 318 questionnaires were distributed, and 250 questionnaires were returned with a response rate of 78.6%. After eliminating all uncompleted questionnaires, 234 sets were used for data analysis.

The findings of this study are structured in line with the Engel, Miniard and Blackwell's (1982, 1993, 2001) consumer decision process model (EMB model). Based on the EMB model, the composite of the consumption decision making, which divided into several stages: need recognition, information search and purchasing criteria.

##### **Need recognition**

In terms of need recognition, the majority of the respondents were prompted into the bra buying process by situational factor. Replacement of the existing inner-wear becomes the main reason for consumers to purchase inner-wear especially when the garment lost of functional support through deterioration of elasticity, decline in a bra's aesthetic appearance, and change in the wearer's bra size.

For fashion conscious consumers, new season, style and fashion, and buy inner-wear for special occasions were the factors to prompt into inner-wear buying process. However, non-fashion conscious consumer would not prompt into inner-wear buying process with these factors.

The findings also showed that both sets of customers prompted into inner-wear purchasing during the discount and promotion period. It is interesting to find that both fashion and non-fashion conscious consumers thought fashion was not an important index when buying inner-wear.

##### **Information search**

Considering the consumers' wide experience of the product and the frequency with which bras are replaced in their wardrobe. They still have to take an extensive search for a new bra. To shorten the extensiveness search of inner-wear, both fashion conscious and non-fashion conscious consumers thought brand can be shorten the searching process as it can lower the perceived risk of mis-purchase. Repeat purchase is a commonly practice in buying inner-wear (Hart 2001). Both sets of consumers will patronize those stores that have depth of range, size availability and professional advice.

For the means of information search, both fashion conscious and

non-fashion conscious consumers search information from the window displays. As it is important to communicate store image and brand attributes to the passing or potential customers (Lea-Greenwood 1998).

Fashion conscious consumers read the inner-wear information from the advertisement of magazines and sub-way posters. On the other hand, non-fashion conscious consumers got the inner-wear information from the salesladies because they will provide professional and update information about the products. Fashion conscious consumers were more aware of the brand and window display to shorten the information search time comparing with the non-fashion conscious consumers.

##### **Purchasing criteria**

Purchasing criteria were categorized into functional and aesthetic concerns. Fashion conscious and non-fashion conscious consumers had the similar functional concern and aesthetic concern when purchasing inner-wear.

For the functional concern, both sets of customer thought fit, product quality and price were the most important criteria when buying inner-wear. The findings matched well with the previous research which identified comfort and fit were the key criteria in selecting a bra (Mintel 1997).

For the aesthetic concern, both sets of customer thought style and store atmosphere were the most important aesthetic concern when purchasing inner-wear. Store atmospheric enhances pleasure for consumer (McCarthy 1992) and the atmospheric devices are influencing on consumer's patronage and behaviour (Kotler 1973).

Non-fashion conscious consumers concern more about customer service when purchasing inner-wear. They want to seek for specialize advice for correct measurement and good fitting to avoid mis-purchase. Moreover, both sets of consumers felt not comfortable to shop if the salesperson were too pushy. Non-fashion conscious consumers were also more concern about the price.

#### **5. Conclusion**

In conclusion, the research in this study demonstrated the consumption decision process of the Hong Kong female on intimate apparel. The research findings support the assertion that consumer behaviour for inner-wear from the Hart and Dewsnap's (2001) study.

In this study, consumers were classified into fashion conscious and non-fashion conscious consumers. Hong Kong females still emphasized the functional concern of the inner-wear, as from the result, fashion was not an index when they were purchasing inner-wear. They purchased inner-wear for the replacement of the existing garment instead of special occasions and fashion trend.

Window display was the most popular way to search information for both inner-wear and outer-wear. Advertisement was another means to get the inner-wear information, for example, the poster in the sub-way and magazines.

Brand was able to shorten the extensive search of information of inner-wear, as consumers wanted to re-purchase at the same store to avoid financial loss from mis-purchasing.

Fit and comfort were considered as key criteria of purchasing inner-wear for both fashion conscious and non-fashion conscious consumers. Therefore, it is suggested that the retailers offer highly trained sales specialist to provide a professional measurement advice to the consumers.

Store atmosphere such as a pleasurable shopping environment

was an important factor to affect inner-wear purchasing. Proper visual merchandising strategy influenced consumers' browsing and purchasing behavior in the store.

Both fashion conscious and non-fashion conscious consumers not only have the same purchasing criteria for the functional concern but also a similar aesthetic concern of buying inner-wear. Retailers specializing in Intimate Apparel can adopt these findings as their initial concern when launching a new sales or product development program.

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