BUYING SECOND HAND CLOTHES: AN EXPLORATORY APPROACH USING DIFFERENCES IN CONSUMERS' DISGUST SENSITIVITY

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ABSTRACT

Buying used goods has been a growing phenomenon since the 1980s. Clothing purchased through second hand shops, flea markets and web sites is part of this new trend of exchange, despite socio-psychological risks related to such purchases. Among emotions, this research explores the role of disgust as a relevant concept for understanding individual differences in buying second hand clothes. A relation between disgust sensitivity and acceptance/rejection behaviours was found. For disgust sensitive subjects, rejection is bound to the buyer's perceived image of the former wearer, whereas, for less sensitive subjects, used clothing is appraised on its intrinsic merits without reference to its past.

Keywords : second hand market, emotions, disgust sensitivity

INTRODUCTION

The fact that consumers are turning to the second hand market in ever-increasing numbers has created a trend in Britain and America for research into these practices and modes of exchange (Belk, Sherry, & Wallendorf, 1988; Sherry, 1990a, 1990b; Stone, Horne, & Hibbert, 1996; Gregson & Crewe, 1997). Buying used goods on the second hand market works to the buyers' advantage as they can acquire goods at relatively low prices (Razzouk & Voight, 1985). Among other things, clothes are part of this new consumption trend. Beyond monetary gain, one can wonder about the status of the perceived risk usually associated with symbolic products (Midgley, 1983), outstandingly increased in the context of second hand goods.

The purpose of the research is to explore the kind of judgment, purchase intent or behaviour consumers report about the purchasing of second hand clothes. Classical theory of perceived risk emphasizes a bi-dimensional structure: uncertainty and negative consequences related to the choice (Bauer, 1960; Cunningham, 1967; Bettman, 1973). Even though physical, social and psychological risks stand out as some of the possible negative consequences attached to buying second hand clothes, an approach based on emotion could usefully enlighten this specific context (Chaudhuri, 1997). In particular, the emotion of disgust, and especially interpersonal disgust, could explain a form of aversion to physical or moral contact with strange or undesirable persons (Rozin, Haidt, & McCauley, 2000).

With only limited knowledge regarding disgust in a marketing context, exploratory research seems initially most appropriate. A two-phase qualitative experimental procedure was adopted. The first phase consisted of in-depth interviews with 18 consumers about their judgments and behaviours concerning second hand clothes. In the second phase, 220 respondents were asked (a) to answer open-ended questions related to their purchase/avoidance behaviour, reasons to do so, and types of ideas and perceptions linked to

the former wearer and (b) to complete the 8-item interpersonal disgust subscale of the Disgust Scale 2 (Haidt, McCauley, & Rozin, 2002).

This paper only reports on the results of the second phase. The analysis of discourses reveals the psycho-social representations that underlie different patterns of behaviours, and preliminary findings show significance between mean scores of disgust and avoidance/acceptance of buying second hand clothes. High disgust scores are related to negative meanings and undesired self when associated to second hand clothes. Conversely, respondents with low disgust scores show a high degree of detachment from the clothes' story and their former owner and an easy (re)-appropriation process.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The consumption of clothes has been examined from different approaches such as the satisfaction of needs, psychological perspectives and social-comparison processes (Solomon, 1985; Sproles & Burns, 1994). Dressing appears as a consumption of functional and symbolic products that meets various needs such as protection, modernism, symbolic differentiation and social affiliation.

Psychological approach focuses on individual differences in fashion adoption, identifying fashion innovators and followers of fashions (Summers, 1970; Schrank & Gilmore, 1973). The main cognitive orientation that may affect innovativeness in clothing and fashion adoption is the level of perceived risk. Researchers have stressed differently the importance of the types of perceived risk for different products. According to Jacoby and Kaplan (1972), Derbaix (1983) or Midgley (1983), psycho-sociological risk appears to be more important than others for search goods characterized by highly visible attributes such as clothing. Bearing in mind the importance of psychological negative consequences in clothing choice, approaches based on affects and emotional reactions could usefully enlighten this specific context (Chaudhuri, 1997).

From this perspective, the social-comparison theory sheds light on people's importance in evaluating their appearances in relation to others and to shape their self-concept from these interactions. Individuals receive positive or negative evaluations from others with regard to appearance. As Jensen and Ostergaard (1998) point out, dressing contributes to express individuality as well as the need to conform to others. Consequently, clothing can be related to the individual's self-concept. In this way, importance of clothing choices has been studied in relation to the negative aspects of the self (Banister & Hogg, 2001). This approach is of particular relevance when considering symbolic consumption. What Ogilvie (1987) calls

the "undesired self" has been identified as what a person is afraid of becoming and therefore is manifested by a "refusal" of tastes and products that are imbued with negative meanings (Bourdieu, 1984). These types of distastes or dislikes tell much about one's important reference points and personal meanings, thus explaining consumption decisions and rejections.

From psychological perspectives, the undesired self has been bound to feelings of repulsion, revulsion and rejection (Rozin, Haidt, & McCauley, 2000). Disgust has been studied primarily as a category of food rejection and threat of oral incorporation of offensive entities such as animal and human waste products. Rejection proves to be a contamination response induced by the sympathetic magical law of contagion, which holds that "once in contact, always in contact" (Frazer, 1890/1981; Mauss, 1902/1950). Everything we might eat or touch could be potentially contaminated. Beyond this physical context, a second law of sympathetic magic, the law of similarity, holds that if things are superficially similar, then they resemble each other in a deep sense as well. In other words, appearance is reality.

These principles support the research topics we investigate in this paper: (i) could attitudes toward second hand clothes be explained by a fear of both physical and moral/interpersonal contamination related to the hygiene, values or behaviours of the former wearer? (ii) to what extent this potential threat could trigger a fear of self-concept contamination such as 'I am what I wear'? (iii) and how variations in interpersonal disgust account for differences in second hand clothes buying behaviours? as hypothesized by Haidt, McCauley and Rozin (1994)

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

With limited knowledge on disgust in a marketing context, exploratory research seems most appropriate as a first step. A two-phase qualitative experimental procedure was adopted. The first phase consisted of in-depth interviews with 18 consumers about their judgments and behaviours regarding second hand clothes. Two-thirds were women, and all respondents were between 22 and 62 years. A combination of purposive and convenience sampling was used, aimed at involving information rich cases as Patton (1990) suggests. Firstly, the purpose was to explore the reasons for buying, wearing or rejecting second hand clothes, and secondly the psychological and social perceptions embedded therein. An interview guide was developed for the data collection.

In the second phase, 220 respondents were recruited randomly from a core sample of students studying at a French university who then passed on the request around them. The

proportion of women also reached two-thirds, probably because of their particular interest in fashion. On the other hand, a fairly even spread of ages and education levels was achieved. Respondents' ages ranged from 22 to 62, with an average of 38 years. The education levels were distributed across four groups (elementary and secondary, 27%; undergraduate, 44%; postgraduate, 29%). This convenience sample was deemed acceptable because of the exploratory purpose of the research, which was aimed at testing theory.

Through three open-ended questions, subjects were asked to relate as fully as possible: firstly, their purchase or avoidance behaviour concerning second hand clothes in general or specific clothes in particular; secondly reasons to do so; and thirdly attitudes, impressions, perceptions associated with this topic, including social and psychological stereotyping of product imagery and previous belonging. Free elicitation techniques were frequently used to encourage participants to think of a character or person associated with the former wearer and to personify their emotional responses to second hand clothes. All the discussions were taped and then transcribed.

At the end of the interview, respondents had to complete the 8-item interpersonal disgust subscale of the Disgust Scale 2 (Haidt, McCauley, & Rozin, 2002). As stated by the authors, the improved 32 item Disgust Scale 2 has four subscales indicated by factor analyses: core disgust related to food, animals and body products; death/envelope violations, interpersonal; and sex. The four subscales can be used separately for specific studies. Accordingly, for the purposes of this research we selected the 8 items related to interpersonal disgust (appendix 1). As the data material was gathered in France, the items were translated into French by the author. To ensure the quality of the measure, they were then retranslated from French into English by two teachers, both native speakers. The translation proved to be accurate. Though quite unusual in a marketing context, all questions were asked on a four-point scale according to the authors who have argued that, by doing so, the Disgust Scale 2 has improved psychometric properties.

A thematic content analysis was performed first in order to extract main themes, stereotypes and attitudes related to used clothing. An investigation was then conducted into the psychometric properties of the interpersonal disgust scale. Finally, the interaction between disgust sensitivity (measured by the individual mean score on the disgust scale) and acceptance/avoidance behaviour toward second hand clothes expressed by the subjects was tested.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

The thematic analysis of the interviews initially revealed different types of experiences concerning second hand clothes. Nearly two-thirds of the respondents had had a previous experience of used clothing. Among them, a quarter of the total sample buy second hand clothes regularly, more often for economic reasons but sometimes as a way to express their identity through original pieces. They express no kind of concern about the previous owner and possible interpersonal contamination vanishes by laundering:

"…I don't mind buying used clothes if they appeal to me. No, it doesn't bother me. I wash them and that's all… No matter to whom it belonged before!" (Anne, 24, student)

The other respondents familiar with used clothes can be divided in three equal groups: some buy occasionally, in case of a good bargain or for special occasions such as a fancy-dress ball; some wear second hand clothes acquired from parents or relatives but never buy them from strangers; the latter used to wear or buy this type of clothes before but are now reluctant to continue because they see it as a poor and negative experience associated with a socially degrading self-concept. In most of these cases, intimacy with the previous wearer seems to play an important role. For example, wearing a second hand evening dress for a special event doesn't create a real appropriation and doesn't last long enough to cause a real contamination from the former owner. In the same way, clothes deemed too personal, such as underwear, are mostly excluded from an appropriation process. Smells, energies, meanings are impregnated in the clothes and cannot be unglued. As a woman expressed:

"Clothes that have been previously worn are filled with the personality of their owner… It is just as if they had a memory." (Sophie, 48, postgraduate, teacher)

On the contrary, friendly or familiar links with the former wearer produce a positive sympathetic magic and transference of kind energies:

"I often bought one of my friends' trousers and some shirts and dresses, perhaps because I found her very lovely. By wearing her clothes, I found myself prettier. She had indirectly spread her beauty on me." (Claire, 25, student).

Concerning respondents with no experience of used clothing, 10 % of the total sample had never bought second hand clothes but expressed favourable opinions toward it. On the contrary, 30 % appeared to be against the idea of buying or wearing used clothes, finding them dubious or dirty, even though laundered. The main reasons for rejection are linked to the imaginary perception of the former wearer. Ideas related to death and suspicion of a lack of hygiene trigger a fear of physical or moral contagion. But ultimately, only 44% of the respondents express a real embarrassment about this experience.

A principal component analysis with varimax rotation was applied to the 8 items of the interpersonal disgust subscale and revealed a two-factor solution (eigenvalues ≥ 1). The best factor structure was obtained with 5 items accounting for 82.2% of the variance (table 1). Two items (5 and 6) have been suppressed because they loaded higher than 0.3 on both factors. We also dropped the first item, which presented a low communality (0.36) and a moderate loading on the first factor (0.59). The 5 items solution shows an acceptable reliability ($\alpha = 0.73$). The first factor, accounting for 51% of the variance, may be labelled *physical contagion,* as it involves offensive entities such as germs and potential oral contamination. The second factor, accounting for 31.2% of the variance, may be labelled *symbolic contagion*. It reveals aversion to contact with strange or otherwise undesirable persons. In this regard, the last item reveals a lower consistency with the construct.

TABLE 1. COMPONENT MATRIX WITH VARIMAX ROTATION OF A 5 ITEMS SOLUTION

Item n°	COMMUNALITY	Physical contagion F1	Symbolic Contagion F2
3. Go to my favourite restaurant if the cook had a cold	0.830	**0.911**	
4. Hold a dollar bill between my lips	0.824	**0.902**	
8. Wearing your friend's underwear after a washing	0.844		**0.913**
2. Problems for buying and wearing used clothing	0.817		**0.897**
7. Someone you despise used to live in your house	0.796		**0.892**
Eigenvalues		2.542	1.569
Cumulated Variance explained		50.84 %	82.21 %

A confirmatory analysis on a 5-item solution was performed (using AMOS) with a maximum likelihood method, which is held to tolerate moderate deviations from normality (skewness below |0.48|; kurtosis below |1.2|; multivariate = -2.9). The model had a chi square value of 7.23 with 5 degrees of freedom (p<.204). The other estimates indicate a good fit to the data: GFI = 0.987; AGFI = 0.961; RMR = 0.036; RMSEA = 0.045). All factor loadings were ranging between 0.744 and 0.898. Reliability was correct for the two dimensions with respect to the small number of items (Joreskog ρ F1 = 0.659; ρ F2 = 0.725). Therefore the psychometric properties of the interpersonal subscale of the Disgust Scale 2, which was tested for the first time in a marketing field, appear to be reasonably strong.

Finally, we performed an independent-samples t test to examine the interaction effects between disgust sensitivity and type of acceptance/avoidance behaviours concerning second hand clothes. Subjects were assigned to a buyers' or wearers' group (n=124) or to a non-buyers'/ wearers' group (n=96) according to the behaviour they had reported during the interview. Initially, a Levene' s test was performed and revealed that the variances in the different groups were not statistically significant, confirming that the hypothesis of homogeneous variances could be accepted. Subjects reluctant to wear or buy second hand clothes scored higher on the interpersonal disgust subscale (M = 2.75) than subjects who are familiar with this experience (M = 2.09). The t test allows us to refute the hypothesis of equality of means between the two groups (t = 9.06; sig. = .000). The validation of this hypothesis supports the predictive validity of the scale. With regard to age, gender and level of education, no significant result was found.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this exploratory research was to highlight the role of the emotion of disgust in avoidance/acceptance behaviour toward second hand clothes. The results show that disgust is a relevant concept in such a context. Higher scores on the disgust scale are associated with rejection of used clothing whereas lower scores are prevalent in consumption experiences. But these results support only correlations and causal studies should be carried out. It could be appropriate as well to explore the specific contribution and the differences between this approach and classical models of perceived risk, the one based on emotions, the others on cognitive evaluations.

From a managerial point of view, second hand retailers should take great care of the appearance of what they sell as the look plays a key role in the appraisal of a used item. According to the law of similarity, what looks good is good. They could also drop the reference to previous use embedded in the term second hand, which produces mostly negative perceptions. In the video game sector, some retailers such as Micromania have adopted the label "recycled games" which is associated with positive connotations of environmental concern. More broadly, it should be worth taking into account the emotion of disgust to highlight negative feelings, dislikes and psychological discomfort in consumption when socio-moral considerations are embedded. Many research fields began to be explored from the point of view of aversion triggered by strangeness, misfortune and also moral taint. Additional research on moral emotions and moral disgust (Haidt, 2003) leads the way to a complementary and useful perspective on phenomena that are affected by condemnation of

inappropriate behaviours. This point could have significant implications for managers in terms of brand perceptions related to companies' bad business practices, especially the lack of commitment to corporate responsibility, both environmental and social. Actually, it would seem incumbent upon market researchers to delve more frequently into the effects of such emotions on consumers' negative perceptions and judgments.

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Appendix 1. The Disgust Scale, Version 2 (Haidt, McCauley, & Rozin, 2002). – items related to interpersonal disgust

Please indicate how much you agree with each of the following statements, or how true it is about you. Please write a number (1,2,3 or 4) to indicate your answer:

1 = Strongly disagree (very untrue about me)
  2 = Mildly disagree (somewhat untrue about me)
    3 = Mildly agree (somewhat true about me)
      4 = Strongly agree (very true about me)

_____ 1. I try to avoid letting any part of my body touch the toilet seat in a public restroom, even when it appears clean.
_____ 2. I have no problem buying and wearing shirts from used clothing stores.
_____ 3. I probably would not go to my favourite restaurant if I found out that the cook had a cold.
_____ 4. I would not hold a dollar bill between my lips (like if I needed a free band), because so many strangers have touched it with their dirty hands

How disgusting would you find each of the following experiences? Please write a number (1, 2,3, or 4) to indicate your answer:
1 = Not disgusting at all, **2** = Slightly disgusting, **3** = Moderately disgusting, **4** = Very disgusting.
If you think something is bad or unpleasant, but not disgusting, you should write **"1"**

_____ 5. You take a sip of soda and then realize that you picked up the wrong can, which a stranger had been drinking out of.
_____ 6. You sit down on a public bus, and feel that the seat is still warm from the last person who sat there.
_____ 7. You find out that someone you despise used to live in your house, and sleep in your bedroom.
_____ 8. While travelling for 2 weeks with a friend, you discover that your underwear got mixed up in the wash, and you are wearing your friend's underwear.