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# Understanding Fashion from the Malaysian Youth Perspective: A Qualitative Approach

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### ABSTRACT

Despite the increase in interest in fashion in Malaysia, there has not been any in-depth research conducted on the motives behind this concept. Hence, this study aims to fill this gap by searching for patterns, ideas, or issues to answer specifically "what is Malaysian youth understanding of fashion?" Twelve respondents were selected through Facebook by virtue of their fashion pictures. An in-depth interview was conducted on one to one basis. The outcome indicated that these youth concur with the concept of fashion. This information will assist and be valuable to marketers in designing fashion.

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### Introduction

#### Background

The study of fashion is still widely conducted, even though numerous researches have been conducted in the past. This fashion interest continues to be of interest for researchers because of the changes in fashion itself and how people view fashion. Individuals, be it rich or poor have long been interested in fashion, especially in how people dressed themselves. Studies in the phenomenon of fashion is evolutionary and is mediated by consumers having a certain perception of time. Fashion that is adopted over a period of time through a series of stages that define the different levels of innovativeness in consumers (Goldsmith and Reinecke, 1992; Beaudoin, Lachance, and Robitaille, 2003).

Diaz and Rodriguez (2010), in their empirical study discovered that the needs for social acceptance is important and it arouses interest in new tendencies as well as causing unpleasant emotions such as anxiety. Moreover, fashion is more emotionally positive if it has the quality of future.

This interest stems from the fact that clothes are important for people. Most of them, when shopping for clothes, makes decisions that directly affect their fashion sense. These consumers are more likely to enjoy shopping activities (Sproles, 1979), and according to Lee and Kim, (2008); and Shim and Kotsiopoulos, (1993), have specific lifestyles, motivations and opinions. Therefore, their shopping habits reflect their social and recreational identities.

Previous studies in fashion have been numerous and quantitative in nature (Chang et al 2004; Kawabate and Rabolt 1998; Khan & Mohd. Naim 2011; Goldsmith et al 1991; Wan et al., 2011, Mohd. Naim & Khan, 2012). This positivistic approach does not allow participants for opportunities to express their many views, especially where fashion is concerned. It is with this reason that the focus of this research will look into youth market, specifically college students in Malaysia. Malaysian youth makes up thirty percent of the population (Statistics Malaysia, 2011) and of this thirty percent, it is estimated that these college students spent more than ten percent of their monthly income on clothes (Zafar, Ghingold & Dahari, 2005). On top of that, in the last two years, the market has

shown an increase of twenty five percent in spending for clothes.

This increase in spending is due to changing lifestyle, economic development and rising income. Therefore, the youth market is an attractive market for fashion retailers, and because college students whose spending power is substantial, makes it an attractive segment to study.

However, majority of the research in fashion is empirical (Kawamura, 2011) in nature, and for this reason this research will be focusing on the qualitative aspects. However, the domination of research by means of quantitative methods between the 1920s and the 1980s meant that little progress was made with the technique.

This research attempts to offer a novel approach to studying peoples feeling and perception in fashion.

#### Fashion Terms

In reviewing various literature, there is no one fashion theory per se that is universally accepted. Many of these researches, requires different perspectives and approaches and interpretations. Fashion is seen as a way of expressing one's identity and to enhance one's public image. Fashion is also a means of communication (McCracken & Roth, 1989). Fashion decisions are characterized by fashion perfection, brand consciousness, novelty-fashion consciousness, recreational and hedonistic shopping, price and value for money, impulsive buying, confusion from over choice and habitual or brand loyalty towards consumption (Sproles & Kendall, 1986).

In order to understand fashion and its terms, Kawamura (2011) pointed out that fashion terms must be defined, as different writers used different terms in their research. In studying this subject, many researchers use "fashion", "dress" and "clothes/clothing" interchangeably; however, there are some researchers separate these concepts. Kaiser (1998) looks at fashion research as adornment, apparel, appearance, clothing, costume, dress, fashion, style and wearable art. These terms may be culturally specific or gen specific. Some scholars chose not to use the term fashion as it has specific meaning. However, Jonson, Torntore & Eicher (2003), argued that dress can also be body modifications such as scarification and tattooing as well as sartorial covering.

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Kawamura (2011) argues that fashion exist in many aspects of life, including food, home furnishings and the way human thinks. However, dress became the focus of discussion and that it represents clothing fashion that is considered trendy and adopted by society.

Arguably, Barnard (2007) discussed that scholars came up with different theories of fashion based on their academic training. Mature subjects purchased apparel for pleasure or need, but less for conformity. Decisions were influenced more by fit and comfort than by fashion, despite suggestions that dressing stylishly was important. New fashions were encountered via catalogue illustrations, social gatherings and window displays. This paper intends to look at the understanding of the fashion concept.

**Methodology**

Research conducted within the qualitative paradigm is depicted by its commitment to collect data from the context in which social phenomena naturally occur and to generate an understanding which is grounded in the perspectives of research participants (Bryman, 1988; Lofland, 1971; Marshall and Rossman, 1995; Miles and Huberman, 1994). This means that the methods used in this qualitative research must allow the researcher to enter into the social world in which they are interested and to have an empathetic understanding of the participants' experiences of the social phenomenon under investigation. The collection of social data, then, is best conducted in the environment in which social phenomena naturally occur and the methods used must be open and attentive to the internal logic of participants.

Before the interview was conducted, participants were asked to sign a consent form. Twelve college students were interviewed to gather their understanding of the concept of fashion. The selection of these students were based on their Facebook pictures of fashion. These interviews last between one and half hours to two hours.

The interviews began with general questions regarding their demographic background. Once participants were at ease, Questions were posed to the students :”what do you about fashion?” The table below is a summary of the respondents answers.

During the course of the twelve interviews, the researcher found a degree of repetition in the information obtained, confirming that a degree of saturation had been reached. All the interviews were taped and later transcribed.

**Discussion**

Results indicate that students in general are aware of the fashion concept, and do not show any difference as regards to economic and aesthetic values irrespective of the faculty they belong. However, educational background does make an impact on clothing behavior and this is reflected through their difference in clothing behavior which is related to economic and social value.

Another interesting finding is that students who give very high importance to fashion/clothes exhibit socially influenced behavior through their clothing.

Miss A—twenty something female I think fashion is a way for people to communicate about themselves, their identities Different from the apparels that we wear everyday [sic], fashion emerges from art and	Miss B—a nineteen year old college student Fashion to me is something that is in trend in the current period especially among the youth it means that there is particular elements that is popular to be included in the daily wearing style.
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personality. Miss C—a twenty year old student i think fashion is a way of people expressing their personality like for example... some people are very brand conscious.. so their sense in fashion would be branded clothing and accessories like Gucci, Chanel and so on... then you also have the type who dont [sic] really bother about the type of clothes they wear as long... this type of ppl [sic] would go for the usual type of clothing like casual jeans and a shirt...then there are also girls who dress up very manly and guys who dress up a little feminine	Miss D—a twenty year old college student Fashion is what you wear on your routine basis. Diff people have different sense/style of fashion- What i wear and How i wear it. Fashion to me is how we go about our changes in trend surrounding us. This is based on what/how we wear as an outfit.
Miss E—a twenty five year old female I think fashion should bring out one's personality and embrace it at the same time One suppose to let it's personality shine with the help of fashion, not just follow it blindly. Its not like everyone will look good in the same piece of garment. Certain styles are only meant for certain people, not the whole public. Eg, the lady gaga's fashion	Mr. F—twenty year old male student It's one of the most frequent changing lifestyle after technology (Gadgets/phones/tablets)Lifestyles* Nowadays it can said that most groups of friends have a trendsetter among themselves and the sense of fashion-consciousness causes ppl [sic] to change to dressing from time to time
Miss G—twenty one year old college student I think fashion is a trend that is constantly updated. It does not necessarily be only clothing. Updated in my context of elaboration would be - changing or upgraded according to seasons (Unpredictable time frames)	Miss H—twenty one year old student fashion[sic]is a trend that well accepted and popular among the public. It change [sic] variably in accordance of seasons. If the trend doesnt[sic]able to catch the eyes of the majority, it wouldnt[sic]be able to become the fashion trend that in pursuit by the youth.
Miss I—nineteen year old student hmmm, fashion.. our attire shows our personality so fashion is a very important known trend nowadays for me, fashion is by buying the suit or attire that suit myself the most i don't go for branding	Mr. J—twenty one year old male In my opinion, fashion is a current trend of outfits and accessories that accepted and preferred[sic]by most of the consumers. The trend mostly manipulated by the current leading artists like the Koreans.
Miss K—twenty four year old student I think that fashion is something very special,it can be very luxury or it	Ms N—twenty five year old female Fashion is about being comfortable in what you wear. It does not necessarily follow the trend, but wearing what you like.

can be simple according to different people's preferences and taste. You can create your own fashion as long as you love the way you look and the way you style up yourself.	
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### Implications for Practitioners

There are some benefits and limitations in this research. The adoption of any research approach and the use of all methods of collecting and analysing data necessarily involve "trade-offs" (Patton, 1987). While this research outcomes generated have been only very briefly described, the understanding of the contents of fashion and the impact which these had on the development of fashion/clothes, which has been presented, demonstrate the value of the qualitative approach used. Specifically, the findings presented shows that the adoption of a qualitative approach and selection of the researcher as "instrument" for data collection and analysis enabled the researcher to get "close" to participants and develop with them trusting relationships which allowed the researcher to penetrate their realities and uncover issues of relevance to understanding the substantive research problem. However, with any research project, this study was constrained by the methods chosen.

In collecting such data, it is possible that despite the sampling strategy and tactics employed, respondents may not always truthful, because of societal pressure. Second, the extent to which the findings to emerge from this research can be generalized to the wider population of other university students is constrained. As the aim of this research was to generate a substantive understanding rather than to test the validity and reliability of a hypothesis deduced from previous research, the findings to emerge from this study cannot be generalized to the wider population of small firms.

### Conclusion

The research offers insight into the key values influencing their understanding of fashion. The findings give insight into how marketers can best meet the needs of this important aspect of fashion market by understanding about the motivating values that lead to fashion decisions and behaviour. The in-depth interview employed in the research allowed respondents to express themselves in their own language, revealing the deeply cultural nature of values and suggesting further research is needed to understand the implications of these values for marketers and practitioners.

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