

How Society Influences Young Consumers' Perceptions of Fur and Leather Goods

**Kendall Belton
Bridgett Clinton***

University of Maryland Eastern Shore (UMES)

Abstract

Why young consumers make decisions to buy fur and leather goods and how the culture of society influences these purchases are important for retailers to understand the role society plays in setting standards or product acceptance for these items. Survey results show that young consumers have positive attitudes towards both leather and fur. However, when society's influence is considered, there is a difference between young consumers who are more influenced by society and less influenced by society and their attitudes towards fur.

Keywords: fur, leather, social conformity, young consumers

Introduction

The relationship between consumers' perceptions of certain apparel items and human behavior can be explained through characteristics of society. Society largely impacts the way in which consumers behave towards evaluating, purchasing, and using products. America is characterized as a consumer society where individual identity is related to consumption, so that consumers' judgments of themselves and others are related to the lifestyle that is created by consumption activities (Goodwin, Ackerman, & Kiron, 1997). Clothing is one of the most noticeable aspects of adolescent culture and is an important means by which individual adolescents express their identities. One manifestation of society's influence on adolescents is evident in the clothing they choose to wear (Wilson & MacGillivray, 1998). Clothing is an important means by which adolescents gain social appreciation and develop positive self-esteem. A need to fit in and be accepted is a constant for teens; it drives much of adolescents' behavior (Zollo, 1999).

The current literature provides a vast amount of information regarding consumers' attitudes concerning the use of animal products for clothing in popular literature (trade publications, newspaper articles). However, there is little literature from scholarly journals, specifically research that examines young consumers' attitudes and perceptions towards leather and fur apparel. Furthermore, because of societal changes, previous studies may have found results that vary from those of recent years. To help illuminate the topic and add to current research in this area, this study will investigate the impact of social influences on young consumers' attitudes towards leather and fur apparel.

This study seeks to expand the existing knowledge about teenage buying habits by exploring the impact that society has on young consumers' attitudes and perceptions of leather and fur apparel. Why teenage consumers make decisions to buy fur and leather goods and how the culture of society influences these purchases, are important for retailers to understand the role that society plays in setting standards or product acceptance for these items. Clothing importance and clothing interest have been recognized to be at their peak during adolescence. The way one chooses to dress can be socially meaningful, acceptable, or even controversial (Lachance, Beaudoin, and Robitaille, 2003).

Leather and Teenage Consumers

Even though fur and leather both require the killing of animals, leather remains a popular consumer item (Stone, 2004). Yingjiao Xu (2000) conducted a study that evaluated consumer reasoned behavior toward alligator leather

products and factors affecting consumer's intention to purchase the items. There were six variables of purchase intention measured: attitude toward purchase based on product attributes, subjective norm with respect to purchase, traditional attitude toward fashion products, personality traits, price perception, and demographics. 1800 mail surveys were given to females with household incomes of \$75,000 or more in the U.S. metropolitan area; 690 were returned. The data were analyzed using GLM analysis, t-tests, and correlation analyses. The GLM analysis showed that attitude had the most significant influences on purchase intention. Subjective norm which is determined by an individual's beliefs that significant others think they should or should not perform the behavior, coupled with motivation to comply, also had a significant influence on purchase intention.

In the article "Alligators in Fashion, Who's Interested?" consumers' perceptions of and attitudes toward alligator leather products were determined as well as factors influencing consumer purchase intention of the product were evaluated through a mail survey. 1771 female consumers, residing in eight U.S. metropolitan areas were surveyed. 690 surveys were useable with a response rate of 39%. The study revealed that consumers' attitudes toward alligator leather products had the most significant influence on their purchase intentions. The more favorable their attitude towards leather, the more likely they were to purchase it. Consumers' perceptions of social pressures by others regarding the purchase of alligator leather products was the second most important influence on their purchase intention and the stronger the perceived social pressure of purchasing the product, the more likely the purchase intention. Consumers who had some college education seemed to have had a significant higher purchase intention than other respondents.

Fur and Teenage Consumers

Once worn only by the rich or for formal occasions, furs are now bought and worn by many kinds of consumers for many occasions. Fur symbolizes luxury, glamour, and status. Because so many furs are worn by celebrities and musicians in music videos in today's society, younger women are frequenting fur stores. In addition, "young people think it's cool to wear fur" (Stone, 2004, p. 129). However, fur fashions have always been rejected by animal rights groups, who actively fight for the rights of animals and protest the wearing of animal fur as cruel and inhumane.

In the survey entitled "Attitudes towards fur" (2006), which was conducted by Mori Research, 1,946 adults ages 15 and up were interviewed face to face in Great Britain. The study revealed that 87% of adults would never wear fur. Some reasons included: didn't approve, too expensive, unfashionable, and thought others may disapprove.

Simon Ward (2004), Director of the Fur Commission, examined consumer's beliefs and values in a Gallup survey entitled, "Young Americans Find Fur More "Moral" than Research, Is Public Relations the Key?" One thousand adults across America were questioned about the moral acceptability of buying and wearing clothing made of animal fur. The results showed that the majority of Americans support this activity. Gallup's contributing editor found in her analysis of the poll, that "animal rights issues don't currently strike a chord in the hearts and minds of most Americans." Sixty-three percent of the respondents found wearing fur acceptable and an activity seen as being "moral" or "immoral" based on the perception of whether the end justifies the means (Ward, 2004). Fur clothing seemed to be justified on many different levels, but few would still consider it an absolute necessity.

Based on our literature review, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1a: Consumers who are more influenced by society will be less likely to wear fur.

H1b: Consumers who are less influenced by society will be more likely to wear fur.

H2: Consumers who would wear leather will also be likely to wear fur.

H3: Consumers who place more emphasis on the importance of clothing will be more likely to wear leather and fur.

Method

The components of the study included identification and selection of the participants, data collection via a survey, and data analysis. There were no specific characteristics that were needed from the participants besides being

enrolled in a university. The instrument was disseminated by the researchers. The participants were told that participating was completely voluntary and that all of their answers would be confidential. The survey took about 5 minutes to complete.

In order to categorize participants as more or less influenced by society, the independent variable, social conformity was divided into two groups. The sample was split at the midpoint (3) of the response format for the social comparison scale, which was rated on a 6-point scale. All participant responses that fell at the midpoint were omitted. Consumers who were more influenced by society were identified as those participants whose scores were above three and consumers who were less influenced by society were those whose scores were below three. The same process was followed for identifying participants who placed more or less emphasis on clothing importance. Using the fashion involvement factor, which was rated on a 5-point scale, participants' whose mean scores were 3.17 or lower were identified as placing less emphasis on clothing and those with a mean score of 3.67 or higher were identified as placing more emphasis on clothing.

Design

This study adopted a quantitative research method through survey with the following independent variables: fashion involvement factor and social conformity. The dependent variables include leather attitude and fur attitude. Participants' attitudes towards leather and fur were measured using the attitude toward the act scale with a 3-item scale anchored by a seven-place response format. Reliabilities ranged from .8128 to .8393. Participants' clothing interest was measured using the fashion involvement factor (FIF) scale with a six-item 5-point Likert type (strongly disagree to strongly agree) summated rating scale. The FIF scale assesses individual's involvement with and enjoyment of clothes. The reliability of this scale was .8063. Participants' level of social conformity, which reflects an individuals' behaviors or opinions as a result of real or imagined pressure from society, was measured using the attention to social comparison information scale; a 13 item semantic differential scale anchored by a six-place response format. The reliability of this scale was .7546 (see Table 1.).

Table 1. Scale Reliabilities for Dependent and Independent Variables

| Dependent Variables | |
|----------------------------|-------|
| Leather Attitude | .8128 |
| Fur Attitude | .8393 |
| Independent Variables | |
| Fashion Involvement Factor | .8063 |
| Social Comparison | .7546 |

Materials

A self-report survey was the instrument used to obtain the information needed for this study (see Appendix).

Results

Sample

The sample consisted of 122 (male= 55; female= 66) college students enrolled at the University of Maryland Eastern Shore. The majority of the participants were of African American decent (79.5%), in the sophomore class (31.1%), and female (54.1%). They were selected based upon accessibility and data were gathered during class hours as well as after school hours (see Table 2).

Table 2. Sample Characteristics

| Age | F | 100% |
|------------------------|----------|-------------|
| 18 | 12 | 9.8 |
| 19 | 34 | 27.9 |
| 20 | 23 | 18.9 |
| 21 | 20 | 16.4 |
| Other | 32 | 26.2 |
| Sex | | |
| Male | 55 | 45.1 |
| Female | 66 | 54.1 |
| Classification | | |
| Freshman | 23 | 18.9 |
| Sophomore | 38 | 31.1 |
| Junior | 24 | 19.7 |
| Senior | 33 | 27.0 |
| Other | 2 | 1.6 |
| Race | | |
| White/Caucasian | 6 | 4.9 |
| Black/African American | 97 | 79.5 |
| Asian | 3 | 2.5 |
| Spanish/Hispanic | 12 | 9.8 |
| Other | 4 | 3.3 |
| Family Income | | |
| Under 25,000 | 19 | 15.6 |
| 25,000 to 34,999 | 13 | 10.7 |
| 35,000 to 49,999 | 17 | 13.9 |
| 50,000 to 74,999 | 34 | 27.9 |
| 75,000 to 99,999 | 16 | 13.1 |
| 100,000 and over | 17 | 13.9 |

SPSS was used to analyze the data. A t-test was used to determine the relationship between independent variables, social conformity and fashion involvement and dependent variables leather attitude and fur attitude. Hypothesis 1A predicted that consumers who are more influenced by society will be less likely to wear fur. The results were significant. There is a difference between consumers who are more influenced by society and less influenced by society and their attitudes towards fur. ($t = 2.193$; $df = 102$; $p = .031$) (see Table 3.).

Table 3. T-Test Results for Hypothesis 1A

| | Independent Variable: | N | Mean | Standard Deviation | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference |
|--|-----------------------|---|------|--------------------|---|----|-----------------|-----------------|
| | Societal | | | | | | | |

| | Influence | | | | | | | |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------|----|--------|---------|-------|-----|------|---------|
| Dependent Variable: Fur Attitude | Less influenced group | 24 | 5.6250 | 1.86841 | 2.193 | 102 | .031 | p=.9542 |
| | More influenced group | 80 | 4.6708 | 1.87026 | | | | |

Hypothesis 1B predicted that consumers who are less influenced by society will be more likely to wear fur. The independent sample t-test revealed that consumers who were less influenced by society expressed more of a positive attitude towards fur

(M= 5.6250; SD= 1.86841) than consumers who were more influenced by society (M= 4.6708; SD= 1.87026). Therefore, hypothesis 1B was supported.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that consumers who would wear leather would also be likely to wear fur. A correlation between consumers' attitudes towards leather and fur revealed that the two independent variables were highly correlated (p= .000). This sample expressed positive attitudes towards both leather and fur; supporting Hypothesis 2 (see Table 4.).

Table 4. Correlation Results for Hypothesis 2

| | | Leather Attitude | Fur Attitude |
|------------------|---------------------|------------------|--------------|
| Leather Attitude | Pearson Correlation | | .712*** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | | .000 |
| | N | | 122 |
| Fur Attitude | Pearson Correlation | .712*** | |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 | |
| | N | 122 | |

Hypothesis 3 predicted that consumers who place more emphasis on the importance of clothing would be more likely to wear leather and fur. The independent sample T-test revealed that the level of importance consumers' placed on clothing did not impact their attitude towards leather and fur (t= 1.562; df= 96; p=.122). Therefore, hypothesis 3 was not supported (see Table 5). It appears that clothing importance is not a factor when considering consumers' attitudes towards leather and fur.

Table 5. T-Test Results for Hypothesis 3

| | Independent Variable: Importance of Clothing | N | Mean | Standard Deviation | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference |
|--|--|----|--------|--------------------|-------|----|-----------------|-----------------|
| Dependent Variable: Leather and Fur Attitude | Less importance on clothing | 49 | 4.9456 | 1.75673 | 1.562 | 96 | .122 | p=.5510 |
| | More | 49 | 4.3946 | 1.73595 | | | | |

| | | | | | | | | |
|--|---------------------------|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|
| | importance on clothing | | | | | | | |
|--|---------------------------|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|

Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to investigate the buying habits, of young consumers by exploring the impact that society has on their attitudes and perceptions of leather and fur apparel. In addition we sought to uncover why young consumers make decisions to buy fur and leather goods and how the culture of society influences these purchases. Fur and leather are both important materials in the fashion industry. However, the use of fur for clothing has been a controversial issue in society and looked upon as an unethical behavior (Robolt and Solomon, 2004). Based upon this premise we proposed that our young sample of college students would exhibit varying attitudes towards fur based on the level of influence of society. In the article, "Return of Fur" written by Eugene Lapointe (2006), states that fur is increasingly being worn again by young people and suggests that the ethical issues against fur are not being passed on to generations. This can be seen in our sample, which expressed positive attitudes towards both leather and fur products. This study's finding regarding leather and fur supported what we hypothesized; without taking into account society's influence or the level of importance placed on clothing, participants expressed positive attitudes towards leather and fur. This study had some limitations that diminish its generalizability. The results of this study can only be generalized to represent the opinion of local college students. For more valid and representative measures, future studies should be conducted, with a larger sample, to observe the consistency of participant attitudes towards leather and fur to determine whether our results were indeed accurate. Another study should be conducted taking samples from a larger, more diverse population.

Conclusion

As society continues to impact the way in which young consumers behave towards evaluating, purchasing, and using products, retailers should continue to seek understanding of the role that society plays in setting standards for leather and fur apparel. According to Bryner and Meeks (2006), teenagers are now viewed as an important source of purchasing power and to the future business of retail. Young consumers make a wide variety of purchases, whether it be leather or fur or with their parents or alone. Teenagers, with available cash from allowances and part-time jobs, spend more than \$120 billion per year on clothes, electronics, music, and all kinds of other goodies (Applegate, 2001).

Today's youth have many issues to deal with that their parents' generation did not have. The animal rights issues are not currently present in the hearts and minds of most young Americans (Ward, 2004). According to Castlebury and Arnold (1988), teenagers' concerns regarding clothes and appearance seemingly reflect the emphasis society places on appearance. When it comes to purchasing apparel, today's teenagers are considering purchasing leather and fur. As retailing has become more competitive, many retailers have come to recognize a major market in capturing the adolescent business, which has become impossible to ignore (Applegate, 2001).

The major contribution of this study lies in the finding that young consumers have positive attitudes towards both leather and fur apparel. However, the social implications, positive or negative, that may be associated with leather and fur apparel certainly impact young consumers' attitudes towards these materials. Further research should examine the impact of consumer involvement with leather and fur products. For example, how does the use of leather and fur influence consumers' purchase behaviors toward high involvement products (furniture), as opposed to low involvement products (apparel)? Further examination of these issues should improve retailers' understanding of consumers' behaviors in situations regarding consumer purchase intentions and perceptions of fur and leather goods.

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APPENDIX

Consumer Shopping Survey

As part of an undergraduate research project at the University of Maryland Eastern Shore I am conducting research on how college students make decisions that may affect their shopping intentions in regards to certain products. Your participation in this survey is completely voluntary. I would like you to complete this questionnaire and all answers will be treated with strict confidence and be completely anonymous. The survey should take about 5 minutes for you to answer. I greatly appreciate your participation.

Section I.

Please fill in the blank or check the appropriate response for each question.

1. Age: ____ 18 ____ 19 ____ 20 ____ 21 ____ other (please specify ____)

2. Gender: ____ Male ____ Female

3. Classification: ____ Freshman ____ Sophomore ____ Junior ____ Senior

____ Other (please specify ____)

4 Please answer by placing an "X" in the space that corresponds with the race or ethnic background that you most identify with:

____ White/Caucasian ____ Spanish/Hispanic/Latino

____ Black/African American ____ American Indian

____ Asian

____ Some other race (please specify ____)

5. Please check the following category that most accurately identifies your total annual family income:

____ under \$25,000 ____ \$25,000 to \$34,999 ____ \$35,000 to \$49,999

____ \$50,000 to \$74,999 ____ \$75,000 to \$99,999 ____ \$100,000 and over

Section II.

The statements below concern your personal reactions to a number of different situations. Consider each statement carefully as it applies to you by circling one of the numbers (1-6).

| | Always False | | | Always True | | |
|--|-----------------|---|---|----------------|---|---|
| 1. It is my feeling that if everyone else in a group is behaving in a certain manner, this must be the proper way to behave. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 2. I actively avoid wearing clothes that are not in style. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 3. At parties I usually try to behave in a manner that makes me fit in. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 4. When I am uncertain of how to act in social situations, I look to the behavior of others for clues. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 5. I try to pay attention to the reactions of others to my behavior in order to avoid | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |

being out of place.

- | | | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 6. I find that I tend to pick up slang Expressions from others and use them as a part of my own vocabulary. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 7. I tend to pay attention to what others are wearing. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 8. The slightest look of disapproval in the eyes of a person with whom I am interacting is enough to make me change my approach.. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 9. It's important to me to fit into the group I'm with. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 10. My behavior often depends on how I feel others wish me to behave. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 11. If I am the least bit uncertain as to how to act in a social situation, I look to the behavior of others for cues. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 12. I usually keep up with clothing style changes by watching what others wear. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 13. When in a social situation, I tend to not follow the crowd, but instead to behave in a manner that suits my particular mood at the time. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |

Section III.

Please respond to the following statements by circling the number (1-7) that most closely indicates your level of agreement or disagreement.

- | | Yes,
definitely | | | No, definitely
not | | | |
|--|--------------------|---|---|-----------------------|---|---|---|
| 1. When shopping for various fashion items, I consider leather apparel as a possible option. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 2. If I am shopping for fashion items, I will actively seek out leather apparel. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 3. I will buy leather for myself if I found an item I liked. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |

Section IV.

Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with each of the following statements by circling the appropriate number.

- | | Always
False | | | Always
True | |
|--|-----------------|---|---|----------------|---|
| 1. I usually have one or more outfits of the very latest style. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2. An important part of my life and activities is dressing smartly. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 3. I like to shop for clothes. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 4. I like to think I'm a bit of a swinger (a person who actively seeks excitement and moves with the latest trends). | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 5. For my fashions needs, I am increasingly shopping at boutiques or fashion specialty stores rather than department stores. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 6. When I must choose between the two, I usually dress for fashion, not comfort. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

Section V.

Please respond to the following statements by circling the number (1-7) that most closely indicates your level of agreement or disagreement.

| | Yes, definitely | | | | | No, definitely not |
|--|--------------------|---|---|---|---|-----------------------|
| 1. When shopping for various fashion items, I consider fur apparel as a possible option. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 7 |
| 2. If I am shopping for fashion items, I will actively seek out fur apparel. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 7 |
| 3. I will buy fur for myself if I found an item I liked. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 7 |

THANK YOU FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION!