Body Image and the Male Clothing Consumer

Keywords: body image / masculinity / men / shopping / clothes / fashion

Abstract

>   *Purchasing clothes not only involves making decisions about one's appearance but is also part of an overall life pattern that reflects attitudes towards fashion, aesthetics and materialism (Tatzel 1982). Men are starting to mimic the shopping habits of women by focusing on aesthetic beauty and grooming; a habit which has been historically associated with feminine traits (McFedries 2003; Atkinson 2007).*

>   *According to Brent (2004) men have hesitated to vary from the norm of conservatism for fear of being considered effeminate and foppish and also because it is threatening to their masculinity. The current 'metrosexual' concept of masculinity (Simpson 1994) has however sought to change masculine constructs due to changes in society's ideals and acceptance. Furthermore, existing myriad of celebrity led fashion and lifestyle magazines, and advertising being targeted at fashion consumers has redirected the male consumer to view clothes for image projection and fashionability and not just as a utility.*

>   *Marketers are increasingly recognising that it is outmoded not to view men as consumers of fashion, especially in the case of generation Y males (Bakewell et al 2006). Mintel (2007a) report that the clothing market is the second largest in UK retail; and the menswear market is beginning to see rising volumes, although the market value growth has been slow (Mintel 2007b). Traditional habits are changing, fuelled by celebrity endorsements and effective marketing strategies. The changes in male shopping habits have opened up a big gap in the fashion retail market, which is worth exploring. This study utilises data obtained from a survey of male consumers aged between 19 – 38 years and focuses on body image (perception of physical appearance) and buying behaviour of the fashion conscious male consumer.*

Introduction

Fashionable clothing is now no longer exclusively made available for women's consumption. A novel 21st century concept of masculinity has emerged as the current focus among producers, marketers and consumers of clothing and fashion products. Apart from being functional, clothes have historically been considered to be a reliable sign of identity and used for various purposes including decoration and communication. They are widely seen as

symbolic of the individual's status and morality; both actual and contrived (Finkelstein 1991) and can be regarded as important to a person's well-being. Clothes have been linked to body image (Sproles & Burns 1994) and are a crucial factor to the consumption and marketing of clothing and fashion in general.

Without understanding the basis upon which a consumer makes a purchase, it would be difficult to respond to their needs and wants effectively (Wright 2006). As men have started to reflect traditionally-linked feminine behavioural traits, values and interests in appearance, marketing strategies have been implemented to accommodate their needs.   This is more prominent in younger men as opposed to much older men and has given rise to the term 'metrosexual'; indicative of a man who likes to shop and takes great pride in his appearance.

For decades, the impact of clothing and fashion advertisements has been exclusively directed at women, many of whom have been made to feel insecure by image ideals of 'the perfect body'. Cohane and Pope (2001); and Botta (2003) have argued that there is also a 'striking' increase in body image concerns among men and therefore the need for more research in this area.

Masculinity versus Femininity
Compared to femininity, the study of masculinity and its impact on clothing and fashion has had limited attention in academic literature over past years.   According to Levant and Kopecky (1995) the traditional masculine norm has been an avoidance of femininity, pursuit of achievement and status; self-reliance, strength, aggression and homophobia.   Hyman (2004) argues that traditional masculinity has collapsed and this has impacted the changes in society due to revolutionizing social and culture acceptances. He maintains that masculinity is always interpolated by culture and the combined influence of feminism and the gay rights movement. Such and multiculturalism (Kimmel edited by Brod, & Kaufman 1994) have now liberalised and altered men's general attitude to fashion.

Kacen (2000) puts forward that traditionally men 'produce' and women 'consume'. Berger (1995) speculates that men's attitudes and behaviours are strongly influenced by societal expectations; therefore as society changes, men's perceptions unconsciously alter. It is argued (Gotting 2003) that the feminist movement has been the biggest contributor to the men's market since its development which has resulted in men now competing to impress their female counterparts. The 21st century breakdown of sexuality stereotyping, racism, shifts in equality, changes in family units and the growing acceptance of homosexual relations publicised through the media, have had a major impact on 're-asserting

conventional masculinity' (Burton 2006). It has also challenged core constructions of masculinity and femininity and subsequently they way individuals manage their appearance.

Metrosexuality and body image perspectives among males

C.A.R.D (2006) argues that the mass media and other debates that condemn traditional male attributes and masculinity have promoted a confusing identity being referred to as *'metrosexual'*. The metrosexual male refers to an urban male of any sexual orientation who has a strong aesthetic sense and spends a great deal of time and money on his appearance and lifestyle (Simpson 1994). Gogoi (2006) promotes that it simply defines a male consumer who likes to shop and look good. This orientation has opened up a wide opportunity for marketing of men's products. According to Gotting (2003), the cosmetic brand Ella Bache claimed that 40% of their clientele were men as opposed to before. Another study that focussed on men's reactions to the portrayal of the male body in magazine adverts concluded that men were being expected to conform to two different ideals of masculinity that combined softness and strength. This description of men as 'soft' is similar to definitions of the metrosexual male, a phenomenon based on recent trends in which men are portrayed as image-conscious. According to Pringle (2004) the metrosexual man displays many character traits and behaviours that would have been once regarded, pejoratively, as effeminate.

Research substantiates that the pursuit of achievement and status has changed. A key shift has been in culture and attitudes towards appearance management. Fashion reflects our society, culture and reflects how people define themselves (Solomon & Rabolt 2004). Crane (2000) highlights that technological advancement and global communications since the 20th century has had an impact on status and trends, with men's fashion being used as a status symbol for portraying aspects of identity, occupation and social class. Today's image-conscious, metrosexual man can be compared with 'yuppies' (young, highly-paid fashionable professionals) and 'dandies' (men who are concerned with the elegance of their appearance). It is debatable whether or not these trends are due to gradual changes of masculine constructs as a result of effective marketing strategies or simply owing to changes in society's ideals and acceptance.

Celebrity endorsements, icons and the role of body image in marketing

It may be hypothesised that new technologies and changes in lifestyles contribute to the fashion industry in general, and that the direction of the industry is mainly dependant on changes in society. Currently, celebrities are the propelling force of good product sales (Peterson 2006) and in popular culture; alongside the media they possess great influence on

the public's buying decisions. This rationalizes the concept of celebrities' endorsement of sale products. Pringle (2004) argues that because the public want to *"own a little piece of their icons",* celebrity endorsements can be seen as a positive feature in the constant desire to achieve a lifestyle that is impossible to have. Hunt (2005) on the other hand insists that celebrity endorsement rather draws consumers' attention to products. It stands to reason that irrespective of whichever view is considered, celebrities can be linked to trends and fashion products.

Currently, masculine role models of the 60s such as James Dean have now been replaced by celebrities from the background of music, film and sports that are image conscious. The likes of David Beckham for instance, has contributed to new ideologies of masculinity by wearing sarongs, pink nail vanish and sporting various hairstyles (Hunt 2005). Milligan (2004) emphasises that his cross-dressing has raised a lot of excitement and provoked debate about what is appropriate in fashion as well as establish his image as metrosexual. McLaughlin, edited by Bruzzi and Gibson (2000) suggests that clothing can be significantly linked to music and illustrates that music artists can and do influence image and appearance. This can be traced back to legendary music artists such as Elvis Presley (Costantino 1997). Film star icons since the advent of cinema in 1910s, have also impacted fashion and continue to affect the way men view physical appearance.

Men are gradually focusing on their appearance and body image (Beaudoin et al 2003) and efforts in marketing activities on grooming could rival those for women. They have become more creative in developing their own fashion sense and playing a significant role in the process of fashion diffusion (Beaudoin et al 2003). As a result, they expect as consumers to see new, exciting products constantly in the stores (Bruce & Daly 2006). Solomon (2002) indicates that successful endorsements change or reinforce consumer brand perception, which can effectively result in good product sales. For example, David Beckham has been idolised and branded as the 'ultimate metrosexual' (Simpson 2002) with an ideal image that contributes to good sale of products (Hale 2003). His popularity which extends worldwide (Hewitt & Baxter 2004) enables him to appeal to a wide range of people, regardless of gender, sexuality, race or age.

The retail environment and shopping decisions among male fashion consumers
Wu and DeLong (2006) claim that categories of clothing and fashion influence consumer's perception. Generally, men have hitherto been routinely considered to despise shopping and have a lack of interest in fashion trends. It has been reported (Mintel 2004) that they are rather more strictly inclined to be drawn towards items of utilitarian value and basic needs.

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According to Taylor (2005), British men's traditional dislike of shopping for clothes have changed, as well as their general attitude towards shopping tasks. Subsequently, shopping for clothes is no longer being seen as just to fulfil the needs and acquire necessary items, but more as an entertaining leisure activity.

Marketers view advertising as integral part of promotional strategy. However, earlier scarcity in reporting about men's shopping habits perpetuated the belief and stereotypes that they are just not bothered about fashion (Franklin edited by LeDuc, Niemi & Norris 1996). Foxall et al (1998) underscore that consumers act on the perceptions derived from information they receive therefore producers need to gain an understanding of the current perceptions that potential consumers hold of themselves, their social environment and the products that surround them. Bromley (1993) also distinguishes that consumer behaviour is influenced by their needs, desires, attitudes and expectations. Traditional habits are changing; findings suggest that men are now more likely to buy their own clothes than they were a decade ago. The changes in male shopping habits have opened up a big gap in the fashion retail market, which is worth exploring.

Methodology

Body image is associated with the awareness and perception of one's body and how that is projected. This has been linked to clothing, appearance management and shopping habits (Law et al 2004; Cash edited in Cash & Pruzinsky 1990) and particularly relates to consumers who seek to conform to the latest trends and fashion. This study highlights the significance of body image and its impact on clothing consumption among males. It investigates into their fashion consciousness and psychological preferences and relates them to their buying behaviour.

Data are based on a random survey carried out among male clothing consumers in a shopping district of an inner UK city. The study employed opportunistic sampling procedures involving one hundred and sixty three 19-38 year olds, of which 80 were aged between 19-23, 40 aged between 24-28, 25 aged between 29-33 and 18 aged between 34-38. Amongst the sample, 16% were of black ethnicity, 66% were white and 18% were of Asian origin.

Results and Discussion

Clothing retail experiences

When asked to indicate where they shopped for clothes, an overwhelming majority (77%) disclosed that they shop from high street stores, 48% from departmental stores, 49% from

chain stores, a further 46% purchased from designer shops, 41% from independent (including vintage) shops and 19% revealed they also purchased from giant retail supermarkets, which was also the least popular with all age groups. A breakdown of responses by age group is presented in Figure 1. 45% pointed out that they normally stick to brand labels and retailers whose sizes fitted them well, whereas 55% rarely just stuck to specific retailers or brand labels and bought on ad hoc basis.
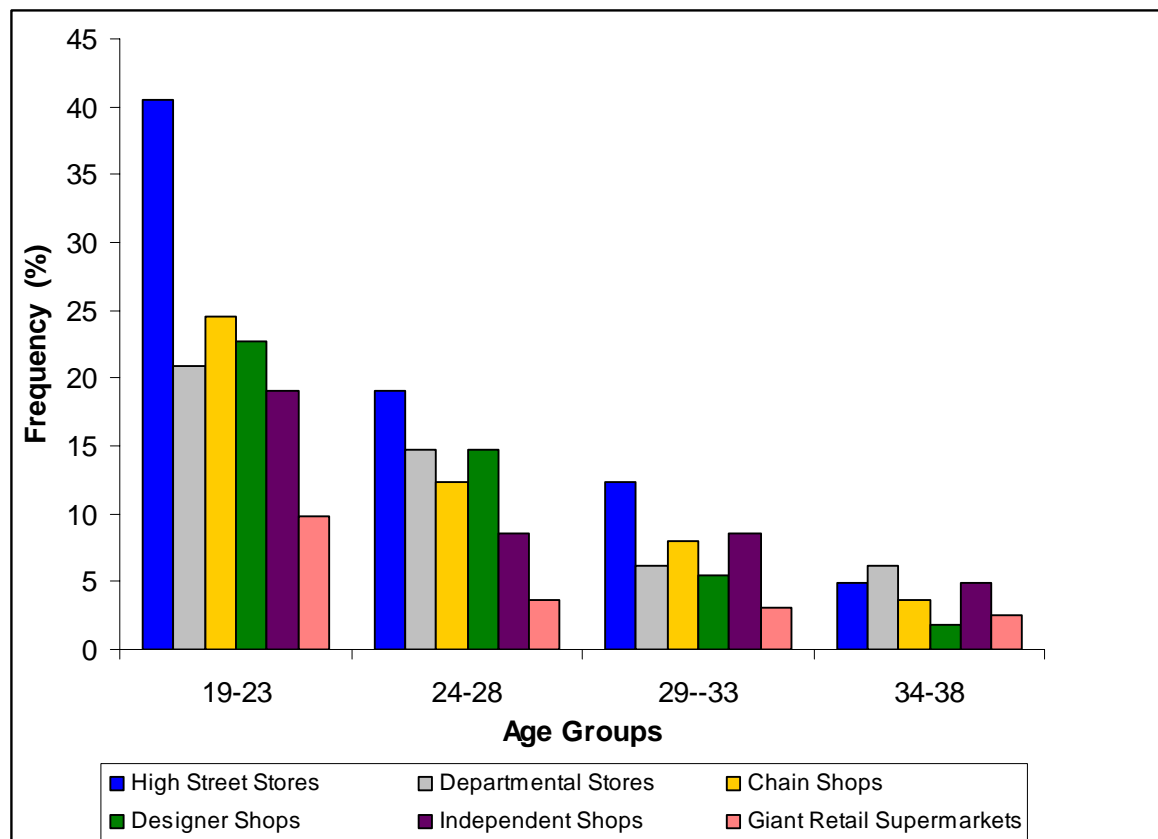
Figure 1. Distribution of clothing outlet choice by age group

56% of respondents stated that they did not necessarily rely on retail assistants and other people to recommend garments that would suit them. However, 26% sometimes did and 18% regularly enlisted the help of a second opinion.

Of the respondents surveyed, 46% stated that they typically take notice of shop window displays of retailers they regularly bought from or intend to buy from. When asked to specify the extent to which they liked shopping for clothes, 14% confessed that they disliked it, 23% revealed that they entirely enjoyed it and 63% were indifferent to shopping for clothes.

Buying behaviour of clothing and fashion items

Consumer behaviour regarding the purchase of goods and service for personal use (Wright 2006) is important in today's fashion business environment. 80% of respondents declared that they were interested and willing to spend on fashionable clothing items. However with regards to trendy items, 28% often bought more classic garments to be conventional, compared to 36% who regularly considered and purchased trends. As much as 58% indicated that they tend to be often influenced by cost whilst 21% were rarely deterred by the cost if they wanted the item.

Whilst 30% remained unsure whether what they see other people wear around them informed them of what items to buy, 36% said they were often persuaded to buy what they see others wear. Furthermore, 23% disclosed that they often chose to buy garments that friends or family recommended for them, unlike 34% who seldom subscribed to the recommendations of friends and family. Stalnaker (2000) suggests that people now rely on personal networks or peer group opinions when purchasing products.

Update on fashion and current trends

It has been argued that the media contributes to the spread and adoption of fashion and current trends (Gotting 2003; Tebbel 2000). For instance, the rise of the metrosexual phenomenon reflected upon the amount of adverts on male grooming and fashion, which increased by 35% during 2003 (Gotting 2003). Respondents in this study indicated how they updated themselves on fashion and current trends. 28% acknowledged that they referred to glossy magazines and fashion catalogues, 31% got tips from film and television and 42% took advice by word of mouth either from friends, relatives or clothing retail assistants. A further breakdown by age groups is presented in Figure 2.
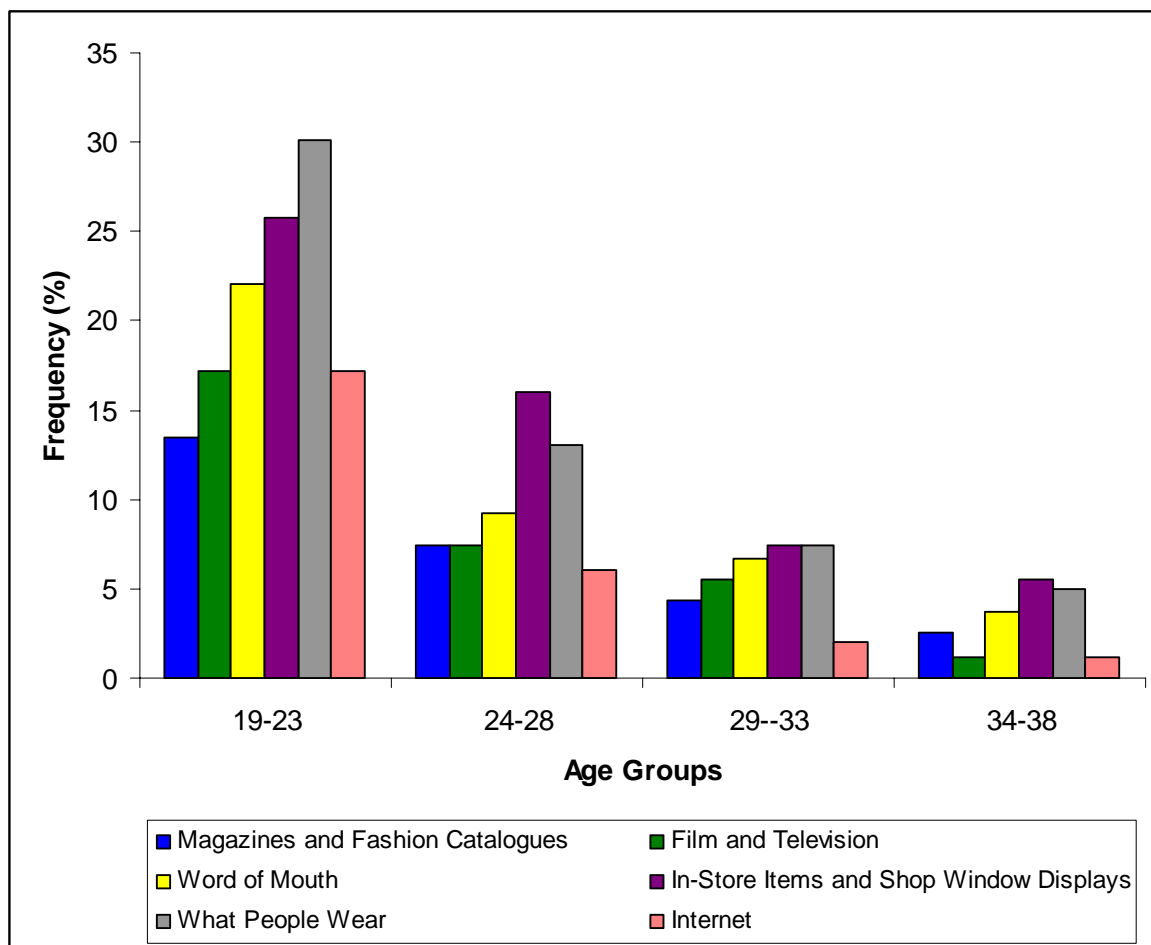
Figure 2. Self update on fashion and current trends

It has been suggested that store atmospherics influence customers' perceptions (Fernie et al 2003) and when fashion and current trends are introduced can encourage purchase. It is interesting to note that this reflected on 55% who took their cues from in-store items and shop window displays. Whilst 26% turned to the Internet, 56% simply looked around to see what people were wearing.

Clothing suitability and sizing issues

Respondents were asked to rank from a list of factors, the order of importance when assessing clothing suitability. This was on a scale of 1 to 5 scoring, with one being the most important and 5 being the least (Table 1).

Ranking:	1	2	3	4	5	Total
Style	**39%**	32%	12%	9%	8%	100%
Fit	**37%**	29%	21%	9%	4%	100%
Colour	5%	14%	**35%**	33%	13%	100%
Cost	12%	18%	20%	22%	**28%**	100%
Fabric	7%	7%	12%	27%	**47%**	100%

Table 1. Scoring for clothing suitability

Results showed that the consumers considered style and fit as the most important determinants of clothing suitability. The factor which they considered fifth in making choices was fabric. Half (50%) of them claimed they were able to assess how well a garment would suit them by just looking at it.

Majority of the respondents (70%) believe that the build of a person determines how well a particular garment fits. Most of them (84%) also agreed that identical clothes can look different on different body sizes and body build. 63% acknowledged that parts of their body they were content or not content with (body cathexis) influenced their choice of clothes; as presented by age groups in Figure 3.
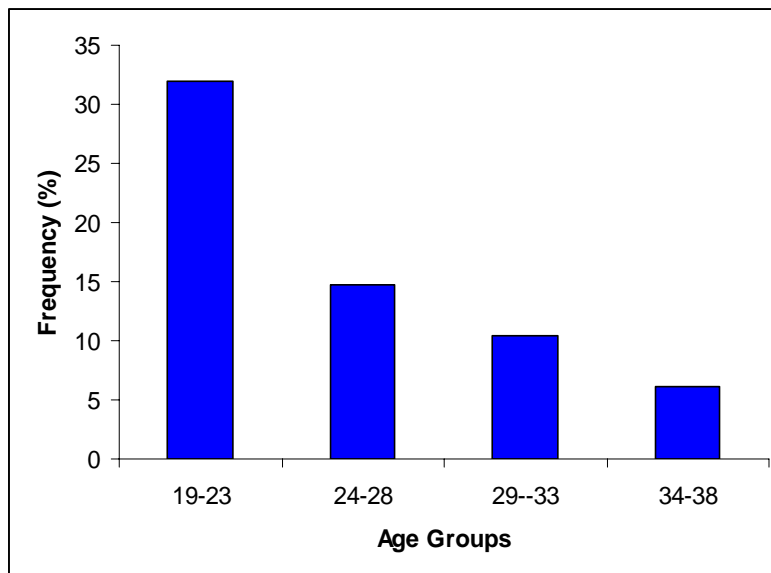
Figure 3. Influence of body cathexis on choice of clothes by age group

A significant 81% disclosed that they try clothes on to check for fit before making a purchase however, only 42% admitted they always stick to and purchase clothes that meet their fit

preference regardless of cost. These results concur with Otieno et al (2005) by indicating that fitting rooms are essential in the retail of clothing items, even for male consumers. Almost all (92%) indicated that they had experienced variability in clothing sizing among retailers and 86% pointed out that sizing was important to them.

**Perception of body form and clothes size**

In describing their body build, 55% said they were of medium build whilst 19% said they were small and 26% said they were large. This linearly correlated with the perception of their weight, of which the same respondents (55%) who indicated that they were of medium build said that they were of average weight, the small built (19%) thought they were under weight and the large respondents (26%) suggested they were overweight. 21% perceived their height as short, 37% as very tall and 42% indicated they were of average height.

40% of the consumers reported that they regularly exercise to maintain or improve their physical form, whilst 46% irregularly exercised. 7% obsessively exercised and a further 7% never did. With regards to dieting to maintain or improve their physical size, 18% regularly did, 48% irregularly did, 3% obsessively dieted and 31% do not go on diets to change their physical form.

47% of the respondents disclosed that their usual clothes size in shirts and tops was medium, 19% said theirs was small, 28% indicated large and 6% disclosed they wore extra large. With regards to clothes size in trousers, 54% indicated that they wore medium, 18% wore small, 26% wore large and 2% disclosed they had to wear extra large.

Fashionability and appearance management

Evans (1989) infers that people's appearances present their identity, shows their values, expresses their moods and can indicate their attitude. It has also been suggested (Welters & Lillethum 2007) that individuals symbolically signal their identity through managed appearances to proclaim identity. Whilst 46% of the respondents surveyed disclosed that they would like to be considered as fashionable, 32% were unsure and 22% were not bothered if they were considered fashionable or not. This is reflected in Figure 4, which further presents a breakdown within the age groups.
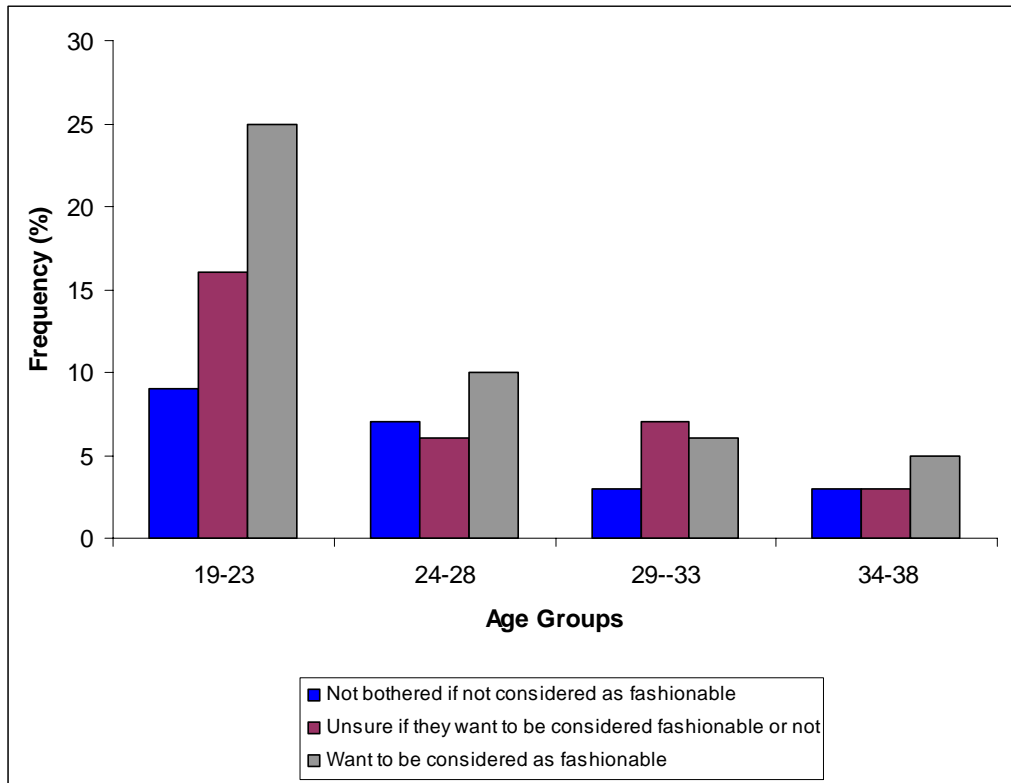
Figure 4. Consideration of Fashionability

An overwhelming 78% confessed that they were conscious of their body and how a garment fits them (Figure 5 indicates a breakdown based on age groups).
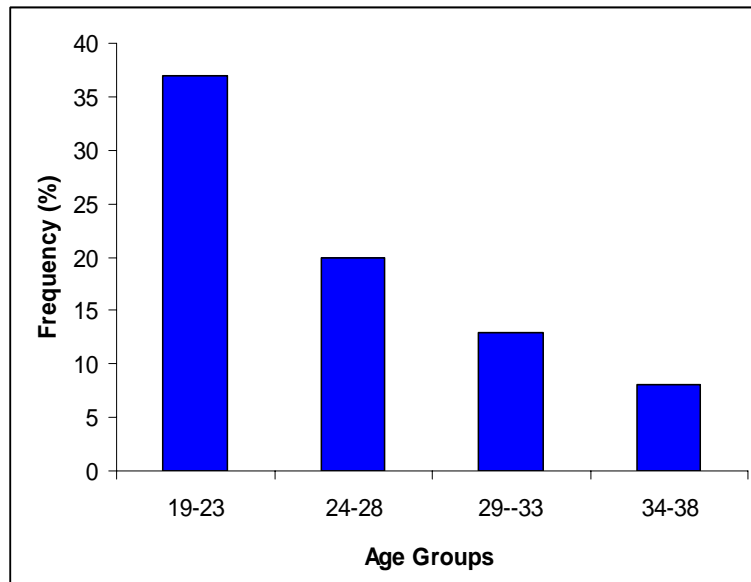
Figure 5. Body consciousness relating to garment fit assessment

However, 68% admitted that not all styles of garments that often appealed to them would suit them. Whereas 24% were unsure, 8% were confident that garments that appealed to

them were always ones that would suit them. 48% often choose to wear clothes that reflect their age, compared to 20% who don't necessarily consider their age when making clothing choices and 32% who occasionally did.

More respondents (51%) disagreed than agreed (26%) that an important factor in assessing how a garment fits a body is how fashionable the garment is. 23% neither disagreed nor agreed. However, 74% would not wear clothes that do not fit them very well even if they were fashionable and expensive, although 11% said they would and 15% remained indecisive.

Self expression and social representation

The body and the way it is clothed and presented is a medium of expression (Solomon & Rabolt 2004; Johnson & Lennon 1999). Individuals send messages to other people and societies through physical appearance; expressing how they see themselves and would like others to value them (Tungate 2005; Solomon 2006). In this survey, more respondents (49%) said they tend to express themselves through clothes they wear, compared to 25% who indicated that they do not seek to express themselves through clothes they wear. Half of respondents (50%) said they like to blend in with most people and reflect that through what they wear, whilst 20% prefer to be exclusive and stand out in the crowd.

Solomon and Rabolt (2004) emphasize that clothing has reflected the social position of the wearer throughout history. 36% of respondents believe that suitability of specific clothes and assessment of how they fit relates to cultural acceptance. It appears that clothing consumers constantly manage their appearance in order to participate in everyday activities and meet social standards especially in public. As much as 53% maintained that their fashion sense is frequently influenced by their social setting (Figure 6), whilst 16% indicated that theirs is rarely or never influenced by their social setting.
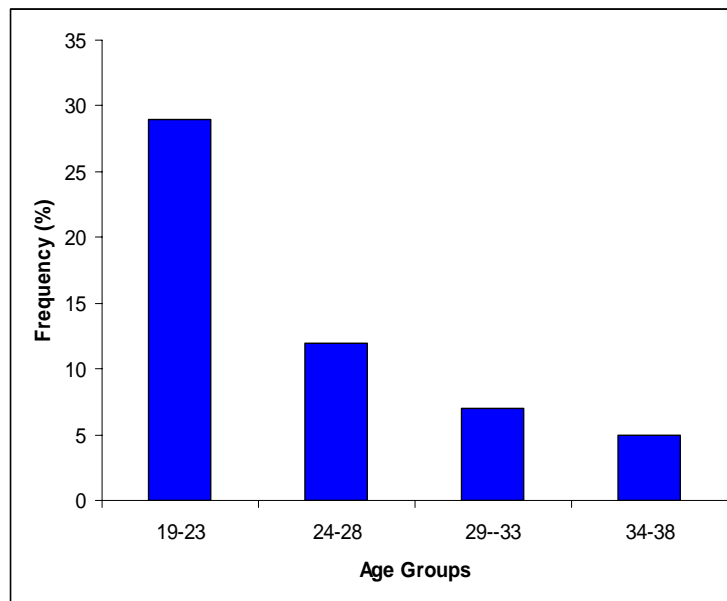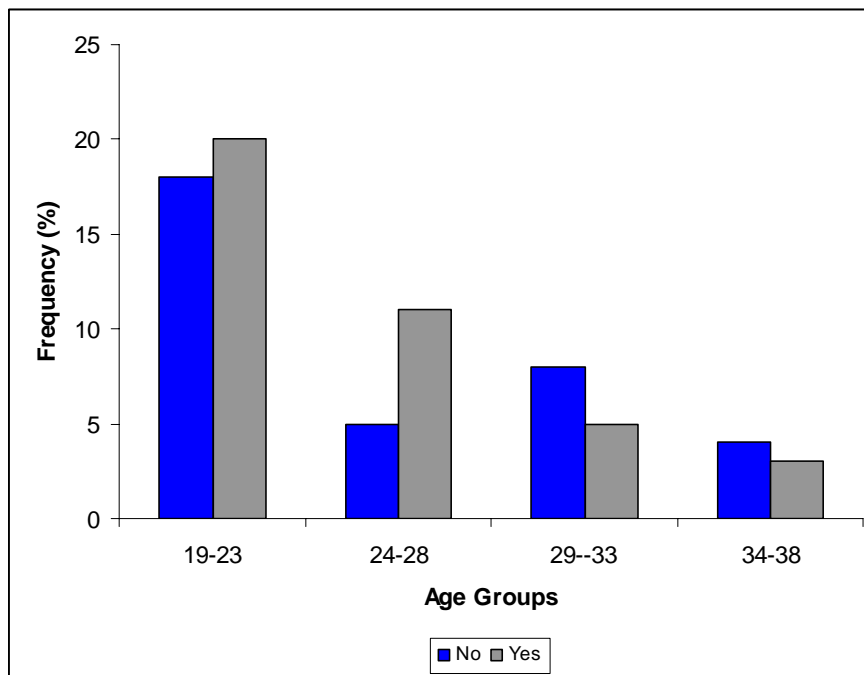
Figure 6. My body image is a reflection of my social status (response by age groups)

Wright (2006) has described self-esteem as one's feeling of high or low self-worth operating at both the conscious and unconscious levels. This has long been recognised as one of the most important motivational drivers of consumer decision making (Grubb & Grathwohl 1967). 52% of respondents disclosed that specific clothes they chose to wear at times reflected how they feel and that wearing trendy clothes in general boosted their self-esteem. However, it did not make any difference to 26% of them. Whilst 59% of respondents persistently wear clothes that reflect their lifestyle, 27% sometimes choose to wear clothes that reflect their lifestyles and 14% do not necessarily make any attempts to wear clothes that reflect their lifestyle.

Body image and clothing consumption

There have been various perspectives of clothing-related manifestation in general. Psychologists view it as a hunt for individuality; sociologists see class competition and social conformity to norms; historians offer evolutionary explanations for change; and aestheticians present artistic components and ideals of beauty (Kaiser 1990; Sproles & Burns 1994; Sproles 1985). However, the general consensus associates it with consumer adoption, expression and social interpretation.

Fashion has been viewed as a political instrument consisting of representations of social relations and values imposed by people (Johnson & Lennon 1999). There was a narrow margin between 39% of respondents who stated that their body image is a reflection of their social status and 35% who said it was not (Figure 7 presents this breakdown by age group).

Figure 7. My body image is a reflection of my social status

Blackwell et al (2006) argue that 'clothes make statements about people'. In this study, most (81%) agreed that clothes can be used to project various images. Majority (70%) also expressed that they would like to regularly wear clothes that reflected an image they wish to project. It is evident (Welters & Lillethun 2007) that humans develop an image of their identities, which can be of the real image (as one is) or the ideal image (as one would like to be) and clothing can be used to project these images. These directly impact consumption behaviour.

Influence of celebrities on body image

Grant and Stephen (2005) highlight that celebrities and other role models have a major impact on consumer choices and buying behaviour. A vast majority (75%) of respondents believed that celebrities influenced or altered the perception of an ideal body image (a breakdown of related age groups is presented in Figure 8).
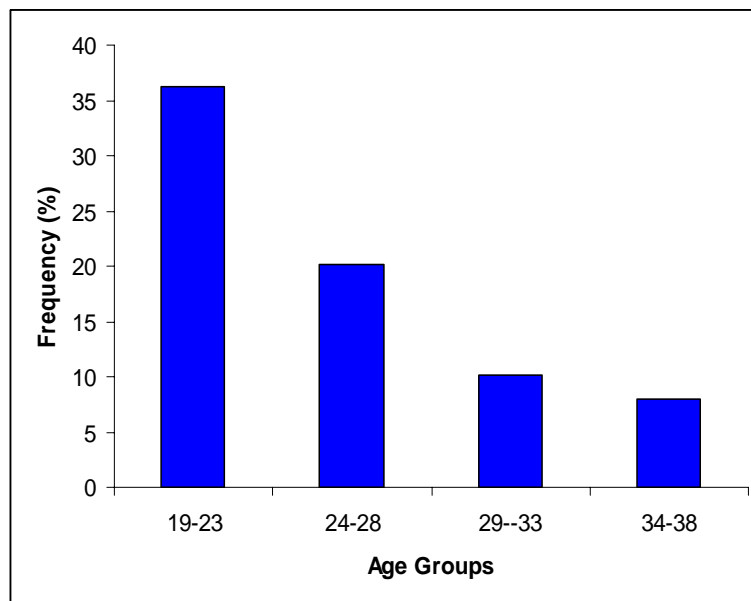
Figure 8. Perception of age group relating to influence of celebrities
on body image

Although only 4% confessed that they were always influenced by celebrities when choosing what to wear, a further 46% said they were sometimes influenced and half (50%) claimed they were rarely influenced.

Respondents were asked to nominate which male celebrities in their opinion currently influence the perception of body image ideals. Responses were received from 111 out of the 163 people asked. Nominations mainly reflected sports personalities (74), music icons (63), film stars (60) and television personalities (19). Other nominations added up to 10. Out of the number of celebrities, the most counts in order of significance were David Beckham (sports personality), Brad Pitt (film star), Justin Timberlake (music icon), P. Diddy (music icon), Pharell Williams (music icon), Kanye West (music icon) and Russell Brand (television personality). It is interesting to note that all the key celebrities nominated are style icons that regularly feature in media presented materials and have direct impact on image conscious consumers.

Lifestyles are the result of the economic, cultural and social life that contributes to human qualities (Blackwell et al 2006). Currently, information on lifestyles, fashion and trends is more than ever being widely disseminated due to the myriad of fashion and lifestyle magazines and technological advances in television and the Internet. 15% of the people surveyed indicated that they consistently found and bought current fashion they knew celebrities were wearing, whilst 25% only sometimes bought and 60% seldom found and bought current fashion they knew celebrities were wearing.

Conclusions and Implications

The outcome of this study accords with (Seo et al 2001) in presenting that the fashionable apparel market is no longer exclusively for females. Findings confirm signs that traditional masculinity is collapsing and this has impacted the changes in society due to refined cultural acceptances. Changes in culture and attitudes towards masculinity have been made visible in the media through television and advertising and by the promotion of metrosexuality. This can be associated with consumer constructs and buying behaviour of clothing items. It supports Welters and Lillethum (2007) who define the trade as a social and an intellectual phenomenon. It is evident that consumers use their personal belief, aspirations, social requirements and fashion knowledge to meet their clothing needs.

Results reflect that men's interests and involvement in shopping for clothing and other fashionable items are on the rise and being reflected in their shopping habits, which is progressively emulating that of women. Although they mainly shop for clothes on the high street, they also purchase from other retailing vendors. As a result, more high street retailers are beginning to focus on the menswear market across the various levels of markets. So far, advancement in technology has favoured a horizontal flow of fashion diffusion, by speedily presenting introductions of fashions and trends; and initiatives involving media publicity of celebrities to increase social visibility of new products and enhance sales.

This study additionally finds that visual merchandising is important and can incite buying decisions among male clothing consumers, as a significant number are influenced by exhibition of in-store items and shop window displays. Many also look around to see what others are wearing. Although more men indicated that they enjoyed shopping for clothes than hated it, majority of the respondents were still indifferent to the activity.

This study hypothesises that men are beginning to be concerned about their body form and how clothes fit them. Style and fit are considered as the highest determinants in assessing how suitable a garment is; however when purchasing trends, a considerable number of them are also influenced by cost. The study observes that as much as clothing sizing is important to men, there is currently sizing variability among retailers. It also highlights that a good number of male clothing consumers are loyal to retailers and brands that provide them with good fit. This presents evidence that there is a market out there for retailers who focus on well fitted clothes for men, although based on the correlation between perceptions of their

body and usual clothes size worn there could be a degree of subjectivity possibility relating to age however, this factor was not tested in this study.

Although it appears that men are becoming more interested in fashion, there is still a large proportion of them who do not care much about style and trends. Currently, men do not make much effort to update themselves on fashion and trends as much as women do. Most are influenced by their social settings and this is reflected upon their option and preference for clothes that reflect their lifestyles. They are even so beginning to pay attention to their physical appearance, reflected by efforts to improve or maintain their form.

It appears that 21st century men are seeking their identity and role in society, as they find themselves in a vortex of social, political and economic change. Majority would like to blend in with most people. However, a fraction would like to stand out in the crowd and express themselves through clothes they wear. Today's society is surrounded by fashion brands and advertising images. This is a result of the mass media and debates that promote new personal identities. This study concurs with Lewis and Bridger (2000) in asserting that shopping for clothes may not merely be the acquisition of utilitarian items but also the purchasing of identity and self-expression. It is consistent with O'Cass (2004); and De Chernatony and McDonald (2003) in asserting that clothing and fashion allow appearance in general to be processed into a code and that consumers buy items which they believe support their desired image. Celebrities' endorsements and perception of image ideals have become the driving force towards the public's buying decisions by drawing attention to worthwhile brands and ideal fashion trends. This rationalises the concept of celebrities' endorsement of products and confirms that celebrities and icons do impact the fashion industry and the clothing consumer. The concept of status and how this is expressed is also important for marketers, as evidence (Wright 2006) shows that many people define themselves within society by their acquisitions.

Although this study to some extent corroborate McCracken's (1989) meaning transfer model which makes links between celebrities, endorsed products, and consumption; it's applicability only extends to the consumption of clothing among trendy men who are conscious of their body image and seek to project it.

There is opportunity and scope for retailing fashionable menswear in the clothing market. Concurring with (Otieno et al 2005), this study emphasises that retailers can increase their competitiveness by closely targeting and fulfilling their customers' needs. It underscores that consumer behaviour relating to male clothing and body image is a subject marketers need to

investigate and understand to adequately meet needs and demands. A study on a larger sample is therefore recommended.

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