

The Power to Influence: Gen-X Females, Depicting Self Via Fashion

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Structured Abstract

This research aims to examine how Generation-X females navigate the fashion market, to better understand how this cohort perceive their identity and their place within society. The research seeks to examine Generation-X females from a sociological perspective to develop an understanding of this demographics' use of fashion to portray self in the world. Fashion research concerning identity creation has predominantly focused on younger consumers (Twigg, 2013; Fregolente et al, 2019). Furthermore, identity research concerning ageing has overlooked mature female consumers and stigmatisation (Chaney et al, 2019). Therefore, this research intends to enrich fashion research by examining the identity formation of Generation-X females and possible instances of stigmatisation.

Generation-X females do not fit fashion's youthful ideal, as such, limited fashion research has addressed this demographic or the process of ageing (Twigg, 2013; Fan & Zimbardo, 2018). Research conducted by Freedman (2015) found that the fashion industry considers youthfulness to end at 40. The fashion industry continues to overlook Generation-X females, focusing instead on younger demographics, such as Generation-Y. The fashion industry appears to be excluding a prosperous consumer base, research conducted by Johansson & Persson (2019) found that Generation-X made more online purchases than any other generation. Furthermore, research conducted by Mintel (2020) found that Generation-X females are as likely as younger female demographics to have shopped for

clothing in the last year. In targeting Generation-X females, the fashion industry could reap many rewards. Goshtai (2018) explored the spending power of various generational cohorts within the UK, finding that Generation-X females are the most powerful female demographic, both in terms of earning and spending power. Therefore, this study intends to provide solutions to enable fashion retailers to target this demographic.

Fashion influencers are essential in enabling fashion retailers to promote their product offerings to young consumers (Eastin & Lee, 2020). There are conflicting viewpoints within the literature regarding Generation-X females' responsiveness to social media influencers. Bejan et al (2018) explored intergenerational consumer behaviour to aid marketers in targeting a diverse range of consumers, the study concluded that Generation-Y are more receptive to online recommendations and fashion influencers than Generation-X. Conversely, a study conducted by Urlick (2017) which examined Generation-X and their influence on society found that they are technologically savvy and value social media platforms. Therefore, due to the conflicting viewpoints within the literature, further research must be conducted to evaluate the importance which Generation-X females place on social media platforms.

This research seeks to evaluate the extent to which Generation-X females utilise social media influencers to moderate feelings of identity stigmatisation. Research conducted by Nash (2019) found that fashion retailers are posting social media content that is not relevant to Generation-X females. Furthermore, a study conducted by Wolff (2017) which explored how mature female consumers are turning to 50 plus fashion influencers for fashion advice, found that this demographic cannot relate to mainstream fashion advertising. Furthermore, the Elastic Generation Report (2018) found that older women are turning to fashion influencers, to reduce feelings of stigmatisation. To evaluate the extent to which Generation-X females utilise social media influencers to moderate feelings of identity stigmatisation, this study intends to utilise the model of stigmatised-identity cues and their effects on consumer behaviour created by Chaney et al (2019). This framework could aid in examining Generation-X female's perceptions of how fashion retailers cater to multiple demographics and evaluate the extent to which Generation-X females are impacted by the use of stigmatised-identity cues within the fashion industry. Chaney et al (2019) suggested that further research be conducted into stigmatised-identity cues within various industries to improve the model. Therefore this research seeks to fill a gap in knowledge by exploring the extent to which Generation-X females are impacted by the use of stigmatised-identity cues within the fashion industry, thus aiming to build upon the model of stigmatised-identity cues and their effects on consumption.

Stigmatisation has been widely acknowledged within the literature, however, there is a gap in knowledge regarding the impact which stigmatised identity cues have on fashion consumption behaviour and expression (Chaney et al., 2019; Christman & Wooten: 2019).

Christman & Wooten (2019:140) state that:

“consumers can be stigmatised based on many factors including their demographics, preferences, needs, or wants.”

This study will be guided by the definition provided by Christman & Wooten (2019) in order to explore the extent to which Generation-X females are neglected within fashion advertising and ultimately ascertain the extent to which this neglect causes this demographic to face identity stigmatisation. Qualitative stigma studies have explored the interrelationships between stigma and other constructs, such as identity. A study conducted by Crosby (2012) combined the concepts of stigmatisation and neglect, exploring African-American women’s lived experiences with stigmatisation. The study concluded that stigmatisation can create identity gaps and feelings of neglect, which encouraged the women to consume certain fashion items to fit in with what they perceived to be the norm. Crosby (2012) argued that it is important for consumer behaviour scholars to understand how consumption can exacerbate and even contribute to the creation of stigmatisation and neglect and suggested that further research is conducted on other female demographics to identify how they manage their stigma and the identities they project to those around them. Therefore, this research seeks to build upon the findings of Crosby (2012) by identifying how Generation-X females manage feelings of neglect and stigmatisation via fashion consumption.

This research intends to take on a social constructionist understanding of identity as situationally created in the relationship between how Generation-X females define themselves internally and how others define this demographic externally (Machat-From, 2017). The intended data collection method is Z-MET interviews. ZMET was created using visual and other sensory images to obtain consumer metaphors, which in turn adds robust insights and explanations to research-especially in the field of consumer behaviour (Sugai, 2005). Data collection will be conducted remotely, as such, a mediated interface for collage construction is being developed that incorporates online video chat technology. Research conducted by Bean and Lindley (2016) found that with a few adaptations, such as developing alternative ways for the capture of imagery, data collection methods like ZMET could be deployed remotely rather than requiring face-to-face interaction.

The intended analysis process will follow an iterative procedure involving narrative analysis and metaphoric analysis. To develop an understanding of how Generation-X females construct their identities through clothing, participants will be asked to conduct a wardrobe audit, which will involve taking photographs of 8 garments of clothing from their wardrobe, to which they have some form of emotional attachment. The photographs will be used in an in-depth ZMET interview, with participants being asked open-ended questions about each of the selected garments. The Interview questioning technique will be based on an adapted version of the model of stigmatised-identity cues and their effects on consumer behaviour (Chaney et al, 2019). It is predicted that by using this model to guide the ZMET interviews, an understanding of how Generation-X females construct their self-identity and their perceptions of how fashion retailers cater to their demographic in comparison to fashion influencers of their age could be obtained.

This research could enrich the field of consumer behaviour research whilst informing fashion design, marketing, and management practices regarding how to target Generation-X females. Fashion marketers are failing to effectively target Generation-X females, as such, this demographic are turning to social media platforms for fashion inspiration. It is envisaged that in using a ZMET approach this research could enable fashion retailers to gain a competitive advantage by providing them with opportunities to engage with mature female consumers. ZMET is capable of aiding researchers in understanding how a new offering fits with consumers' existing mental models (Geurts & Lawrence, 2006). Therefore in employing a ZMET methodology this research could enable marketers to identify how existing product offerings could be altered to generate superior connections with Generation-X females. Finally, according to Chaney et al (2019) stigmatised-identity safety cues signal to consumers the value a company places on a targeted social group, therefore in developing an understanding of how retailers could make Generation-X females feel less stigmatised, retailers could gain the loyalty of this powerful demographic.

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