A Study of Female Consumer Behaviour and Consumption Experience on Fashion Products with Ethnic Elements in China

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Abstract: In the past two decades, the use of ethnic elements in fashion in practical has been emphasized, and ethnic elements have become a popular theme in the development of contemporary fashion product in China. To combine the ethnic elements with modern fashion products will be able to input the culture value in modern fashion, and will also bring the innovation into the fashion products. Hence, the aim of this study is to take womenswear as the cut-in point, and to explore the consumption experience and purchase behaviour of Chinese female consumers in fashion products with ethnic elements. The findings show that there is a large audience among female consumers for ethnic elements fashion products in China. However, some of the consumption behaviour of Chinese female for such products is different from that for the ordinary fashion products. The results also revealed the importance of 'design' in fashion product with ethnic elements. In addition, consumers reported the design features they found most unacceptable in fashion products with ethnic elements according to their purchasing experience. The finding of this study will give fashion designers and fashion enterprises a better understanding of the target consumer groups, thereby to help designers and fashion industries with fashion products innovation and development.

Keywords: Consumer Behaviour, Consumption Experience, Fashion Products with Ethnic Elements, Female Consumers

1. Introduction

In the 21st century, the rise of fashion industry has brought new development opportunities to the economy of many countries. However, fashion has gradually carried more and more cultural significance in the long-term development process. Embodying cultural heritage in a brand may well be a tool of enabling the brand to form authentic values and strengthen the competitiveness [1]. In the past two decades, the use of ethnic elements in fashion in practical has been emphasized, and ethnic elements have become a popular theme in the development of contemporary fashion product in China. To combine the ethnic elements with modern fashion products will be able to input the culture value in modern fashion, and will also bring the innovation into the fashion products.

However, for those who wish to understand the essence of the fashion business, it is key for them to understand their consumers [2]. The fashion industry is a highly individualized industry, whereby stable relationship are created between the contact of sellers and customers, and so the parties in the relationship know each other. Therefore, the development of the relationship will lead to the positive behaviour of the customers as purchasing intention, loyalty [3]. So, to gain a comprehensive understanding of the target consumers' purchasing behaviour and consumption experience related to products, it is crucial in the development and innovation of products. Despite numerous previous studies addressing consumers' behaviour and experience in fashion product consumption, few studies have specifically targeted fashion products imbued with ethnic elements in China. A representative related research is a study on investigation of the preference of Chinese female university students to the style, price and overall design of fashion product with ethnic elements by Xiaoyu Xu in 2017 [4] .

According to the National State Statistical Bureau, womenswear market accounted for the largest proportion in China's fashion industry in 2022, reaching 40%. It is estimated that the scale of China's

Womenswear market will reach 1071.2 billion Chinese yuan in 2023, an increase of 8.5% year-on-year [5]. Additionally, compared to male consumers, female consumers prefer fashion products and they tend to be more sensitive to apparel cues [6]. It can be seen that womenswear occupies a dominant position in the fashion market, and womenswear is the most representative fashion products in the fashion industry.

Therefore, the aim of this study is to take womenswear as the cutting point, and to explore the consumption experience and purchase behaviour of Chinese female consumers in fashion products with ethnic elements. The finding of this study will give fashion designers and fashion enterprises a better understanding of the target consumer groups, thereby to help designers and fashion industries for fashion products innovation and development.

2. Literature Review

From a historical viewpoint, culture results from the evolution of 'human language, environmental adaptation, settlements, and economic systems'. Mohammed concluded that culture is 'the product of symbolic forms and conventions, negotiated over time and imbued with conventional meanings' [7]. Ethnic identity is a term that based on the common historical background, ancestors and knowledge of identifying symbolic elements like nation, religions and language, a group share common identity. Seen as a sub-cultural group in a dominant culture, minority ethnic group possesses unique cultural background, and it is different from dominant culture by externally visible features, which may be tangible or cultural [8].

Fashion is physically expressing one's identity and personality through fabric and other body adornment. It is about the outward appearance or visual aesthetics of an individual, society, group, sub-group, culture or religion. Fashion seen as a language and a code, communicate self expression, emotions, status, sexuality (femininity, masculinity and asexuality), politics, national identity, religion, occupation, youth and age, reflect values, morals and inculcate beliefs, express aspirations, desires, pleasure and pain [9]. However, the symbolic meanings associated with clothing may vary greatly among different consumers and nations depending on personal tastes, needs, fashion consciousness, and sociocultural values [10].

It is important for all areas of design to study culture [11] [12]. Culture studies is an interdisciplinary field where certain concerns and methods have converged. This convergence is very useful. It enables us to understand cultural phenomenon and social relations which cannot be gained from other subjects, so that it can enrich our cognition of an object category, fashion. And this cognition has obviously functioned as a pivotal role throughout the cultural / social process [13]. The stimuli of fashion product creativity have always came from a variety of sources. Even in the past few years, we have seen the impact films, exhibitions, writers, geographic regions, traditional culture and urban phenomena. It seems that fashion can appropriate practically anything and turn it into a 'look', which of course depends on its resonance with the culture/social concerns of the time [14]. Valerie Steele launched the Fashion Theory Journal with the definition of fashion as 'the cultural construction of the embodied identity'. Hence, culture and fashion interact and promote each other all the time [15].

The main sectors in the fashion industry include womenswear, menswear, childrenswear, footwear, and accessories, in addition to sportswear, millinery, and functional apparel and lingerie [16]. Women are a consumer group with huge potential. According to the 2019 National Economic and Social Development Statistical Bulletin of the People's Republic of China, the female population accounts for approximately 48.9% of the total population of the country [17]. Women in China have become the main force of consumption due to multiple reasons such as their social status, and are always at the top of the consumption trend [18]. As the famous Chinese economist Dong Fufeng said, women are an important consumer group, and they are the most sensitive and accurate to market changes. Therefore, women's aesthetic conceptions affect the trend of social consumption [19]. Hence, to choose womenswear as an entry point to study ethnic element fashion products has great representativeness.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Sampling Method

Convenience sampling was employed in the questionnaire survey design. Convenience sampling methods place primary emphasis on generalizability [20] [21], and the aim of the research is to seek the a general opinion of womenswear with ethnic elements from Chinese female consumers. The criteria for

inclusion in the sample were female consumers aged 20-40 who were interested in fashion and had fixed clothing consumption habits. Hence, the questionnaire will be sent to several Wechat groups (the most popular social software in China) created by high street womenswear fashion brand shops located in Guangxi for their regular customers. According to Cassidy and Kettley, fashion generally operates at three market levels: high street, ready-to-wear, and haute couture [22]. High street is the market most designers are employed in; here, garments are mass manufactured. Greenland & Newman also mentioned that, high street retailing refers to retail activity in the traditional shopping areas of town, city, urban, and suburban locations [23]. The reason to select consumers in this age range is that previous research reported that young consumers were more sensitive to fashion trends and were more receptive to new clothing styles than older demographic groups [24]. Therefore, when sending the questionnaire survey to the WeChat groups, a statement has also been given to explain that the questionnaire only invited female consumers aged 20-40 to participate.

3.2. Instrument

A close-ended questionnaire survey was employed. The uniformity of close-end questions makes them easier to code, record and analyse results quantitatively [25]. Multiple-choice questions were used for the survey. The respondent are required to select an option that best describes their feelings for the ethnic elements fashion products.

The questionnaire survey consists of 7 questions. The questions include demographic data like age and consumption expense level, and also focus on consumers' shopping experience of ethnic fashion products, such as shopping channels (online vs offline), ethnic culture perception and the most unacceptable thing in ethnic fashion products.

A pilot test has also been held for 50 participants. The plot test will contribute to the research in ensuring whether defects, limitations or other weak points exist in the interview design, and will permit him or her to amend before conducting the study [26]. During the pilot test, two participants has referred to some unclear expressions of the questions. Some minor adjustments have been made in order to refine the questions.

The initial questions for questionnaire survey were developed for English-speaking people by the researcher. After the refinement of questions by consulting, an accurate translation of the questionnaire was carried out by the author for Chinese speaking participants. Then a professional translator has checked again to ensure that the survey instrument was conceptually consistent in terms of the meaning expressed in English and Chinese.

For the validity, the question list has also been estimated by two experts, one was from fashion design field and another was from marketing field to ensure each of the questions allowed researcher to gain valid and accurate data. The question list was refined following the suggestions that two experts provided.

3.3. Data Collection

The questionnaire survey has been sent into Wechat groups created by high street womenswear fashion brand shops located in Guangxi for their regular customers through WJX, an online crowdsourcing platform in Chinese mainland which provides functions equivalent to Amazon Mechanical Turk. As China has a vast territory and a large population, it is unable to conduct nationwide sampling in limited time and resources. In this research, after consideration of practicability, the samples are only collected from Guangxi province. According to Guangxi Statistical Yearbook, by the end of 2019, total female population of Guangxi province was 26,970,000 [27]. Thus this questionnaire survey needs at least 384 samples. This sample size is calculated by Creative Research Systems on the basis of 5% confidence interval.

During the data collection, totally 440 data were collected through the online survey. However, some were rejected from the data set due to the data come from females in wrong age range, for example, below 20 years old or over 40 years old. As a result, the usable data for final analysis are 420.

3.4. Data Analysis

The collected data were downloaded from WJX online crowdsourcing platform, and then digitally loaded to Microsoft Excel. Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) were employed to process the data.

An appropriate analysis can well serve to research data which is beneficial to depict, illuminate or sum up information validly in a helpful method so that modes may appear and accomplish each situation of the information [28]. It is a most essential action for executing statistical analysis of data [29]. The data in this stage were analyzed with the aid of descriptive statistics. The demographic data in section A was analyzed with the frequencies in the descriptive statistics, to gain the simple percentages and frequency tables.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Age and Consumption Level on Fashion Products

As previous mentioned, the participants were all female consumers (n=420). Table 1 presents data on respondents' demographic characteristic such as age and consumption level on fashion products. As one of the criteria for inclusion in the sample, all participants are between 20-40 years old. Specifically, the sample was composed of 182 females (43.4%) between 20-30 years old and 238 females (56.7%) between 31-40 years old. Therefore, all samples meet the criteria for inclusion.

In the survey, we used the Chinese currency Yuan (CNY) to collect information about participants' monthly fashion-related expenditures. The data shows that out of the 420 participants, 71 participants representing 16.9% spent less than 300 CNY, 112 participants representing 26.7% spent 300-600 CNY, 126 participants representing 30.0% spent 600-1000 CNY, and 111 participants representing 26.4% more than 1000 CNY per month on fashion products. This means for expenditures of fashion products, 83.1% of participants in this survey spent more than 300 CNY each month. According to the 2022-2023 China Apparel Industry Development and Consumption Trend Investigation and Analysis Report [30], in terms of the fashion products purchasing amount, Chinese females who spent 401-600 CNY each month accounted for the largest proportion, accounting for 31.7%. More than half of Chinese females spent 201-600 CNY for fashion consumption each month, accounting for 56% of the total number. Therefore, the consumption level of the majority of consumers participating in this survey on fashion products is higher than or equal to the average consumption level of Chinese women, which means that the majority of participants in this survey are from the main consumer group of women's fashion products.

Table 1: Summary of Respondents' Demographic Characteristics

Age	Frequency	Percent
20-30 years old	182	43.4
31-40 years old	238	56.7
Expense on fashion products per month (CNY)	Frequency	Percent
Less than 300	71	16.9
300 - 600	112	26.7
600 - 1000	126	30.0
More than 1000	111	26.4
Total	420	100

4.2. Consumption Experience on Ethnic Elements Fashion Products

As the data shows in table 2, 80.5% respondents (n=338) reported that they have bought such products before, which means only a small portion of respondents (19.5%) have no purchase experience of ethnic elements fashion products. This result shows that there is a large audience among female apparel consumers for ethnic elements fashion products in Guangxi province.

Table 2: Consumption Experience of Ethnic Elements Fashion Products

Items	Frequency	Percent
With the purchase experience	338	80.5
Without the purchase experience	82	19.5
Total	420	100

Table 3 presents the details of consumption experience from participants who have purchased ethnic elements products before.

Among those 338 participants who have purchased such products before, nearly half of them (48.8%) purchased such products through online platform, 36% bought this kind of products at tourist attractions,

and only 15.2% of participants purchased in the shops. According to the 2022-2023 China Apparel Industry Development and Consumption Trend Investigation and Analysis Report [30], 67.9% of Chinese apparel consumers purchased fashion products through online platform and 38% purchased such products in shops. Through comparison, it can be seen that currently the consumption channels of ethnic elements fashion products are significantly different from those everyday womenswear, which is mainly reflected in that more than one-third (36%) consumer participants chose to buy ethnic elements fashion products at tourist attractions.

Table 3: Details of the Consumption Experience

Purchase channels	Frequency	Percent
Online platform	165	48.8
In the shops	51	15.2
At tourist attractions	122	36.0
Total	338	100
With the knowledge on the ethnic elements on fashion products	Frequency	Percent
Yes	209	61.8
No	129	38.2
Total	338	100
The perception of ethnic culture from fashion products	Frequency	Percent
Yes	299	88.4
No	39	11.6
Total	338	100

The findings from questionnaire survey shows that the consumption channels of female in Guangxi for ethnic elements fashion products is quite different from their daily consumption habits. According to the findings of an in-depth interview the researcher held earlier, one of the most important reason is that a large proportion of consumers only purchase such products for photographs during travel or as souvenirs for tourism. Another reason is that it is not easy to find such products in the high street shops.

More than half of the participants (61.8%) reported that they knew which ethnic group the ethnic elements on the fashion products they purchased were derived from, 38.2% participants gave the negative answer. Interestingly, although there are more than one-third (38.2%) participants with purchasing experience reported they had no knowledge which ethnic group the ethnic elements on the fashion products were derived from, 88.4% of them stated that they have perceived the ethnic culture from fashion products. One of the important reasons may be related to one of the popular purchase channels, that is, more than a third participants bought such products at tourist attractions in ethnic areas. Therefore, consumers can better perceive the ethnic culture from the design elements on the fashion products when surrounding by the ethnic culture environment and atmosphere at tourist attractions. Conversely, a perceived value associated with the product and socio-cultural determinants also affects the purchase intentions of fashion consumers [31]. To some extent, this also explained the reason that participants who buy such products at tourist attractions accounted for a large proportion. That is, although consumers have very few knowledge about the ethnic elements on the products, they were still touched by the ethnic style and pretty design.

In a focus group interview held by the researcher earlier, consumer participants expressed the most unacceptable design for fashion products with ethnic elements, including unstylish, too ethnic style color matching such as too flamboyant or too dark colors, too fancy shape of the clothes, poor quality, unreasonable price and uncomfortable and difficult later care. Table 4 shows the responding of this question in a wider range of target consumer population based on this feedback. Participants who chose each item in this question accounted similar proportion. Relatively speaking, participants who considered 'the color match is too ethnic' as the most unacceptable design in fashion products with ethnic elements accounting for the largest proportion as 23.3% (n=98). Participants who chose 'unstylish', 'too fancy shape', 'poor quality', 'unreasonable price', and 'uncomfortable and difficult later care' accounted for 18.8% (n=79), 12.6% (n=53), 16% (n=67), 16% (n=67) and 13.3% (n=56) respectively.

The responding in the survey is highly consistent with the results of the in-depth interviews for consumer participants. The results of earlier focus group interview indicated that too ethnic color match is the most unacceptable design for consumers as they considered 'clothes with this color match were not suitable to be worn in everyday life'. Apart from 'too ethnic color match', items like 'too fancy shape' and 'poor quality' are all presenting the implication of 'not daily'. This has also been emphasized in the in-depth interview by consumer participants, as 'if the design is too ethnic, such as too fancy color and clothes style may not look like the everyday clothes, we will not wear at daily time'.

Table 4: The most unacceptable Design in Fashion Products with Ethnic Elements

Items	Frequency	Percent
Unstylish	79	18.8
The color match is too ethnic (Too flamboyant or too dark color)	98	23.3
Too fancy shape	53	12.6
Poor quality	67	16.0
Unreasonable price	67	16.0
Uncomfortable and difficult later care	56	13.3
Total	420	100

'Poor quality' is also a common problem for the current ethnic elements fashion products, so that 16% participants in this survey concerned with this item. The reason that 'poor quality' linked to the 'not daily look' is that consumer participants referred in the focus group interview, 'the fashion products with ethnic elements currently they had seen were not designed for everyday wear, but for photographs when travelling at some specific tourist areas'. Therefore, when designing and producing such products, quality is not one of the important consideration for designers. However, for everyday womenswear, quality is one of the most essential consideration to consumers.

In addition, participants who chose 'unstylish' as the most unacceptable design accounted the second largest proportion. This is also in line with the concerns of some Chinese fashion designers, that is, young consumers have an 'outdated' stereotype of fashion products with ethnic elements. So how to combine ethnic elements with the latest fashion trend is another crucial design consideration that fashion designers should taken into.

5. Conclusion

The result of this research has presented Chinese female's specific purchase behaviour and consumption in fashion products with ethnic elements. The findings show that the consumption behaviour of Chinese female for ethnic elements fashion products on the consumption channels is quite different from their daily consumption habits, that is, more than one-third of consumers purchase such products from tourist attractions. That means at present, a large portion of ethnic element fashion products are not designed as everyday wear, but designed and sold as tourism souvenirs. However, 80.5% consumers reported they have bought ethnic elements fashion products before, which means such product has a large audience and huge market potential. This view is not consistent with the current understanding among Chinese fashion designers and fashion enterprises that ethnic elements fashion product represents a niche market.

Moreover, the results also revealed the importance of 'design' in this kind of products. Consumers are still touched by the ethnic style and pretty design of the products then resulting in purchase behaviour, even though they have very few knowledge about the ethnic elements on the products.

Finally, consumers reported the design features they found most unacceptable in fashion products with ethnic elements, including unstylish, too ethnic style color matching such as too flamboyant or too dark colors, too fancy shape of the clothes, poor quality, unreasonable price and uncomfortable and difficult later care. Some of these unacceptable design items like 'too ethnic color match' and 'too fancy shape' are closely related to the 'not daily enough style'. This means that consumers prefer such products to be designed as everyday wearable clothing rather than tourist souvenirs. Therefore, when designing the fashion product with ethnic elements, it is important for designers to consider the wearing occasion of the product and focus on creating 'everyday wear'. Overly ostentatious design might not meet the aesthetic standards of Chinese women for everyday wear. Meanwhile, designers should consider about combining ethnic element fashion products with the latest fashion trend to improve the issue of 'unstylish' in such products.

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