

'Fashion-itis'

'Fashion' (fə'shən) noun.

1. The prevailing style or custom, as in dress or behaviour:
2. Something, such as a garment, that is in the current mode:

Throughout the centuries people have been aware of, and sought to some degree to follow, the latest fashion. Fashion applies to almost everything that we purchase and consume in today's highly sophisticated and sensitive society; from fashionable pro-biotic yogurts, the cars we drive, and even the nappy bags we use!¹ It is, however, in the clothes we choose that the influence of fashion is greatest. Our clothes are the most visible symbol of our values, attitudes and personalities, and enable friends, peers, colleagues and strangers alike to discern much about us as individuals at a mere glance. It is this conspicuous and highly visible consumption that ensures that we are highly sensitive to what we wear; does our current look comply with our 'sense of fashion'.

'Fashion Market Trends'

Sales trends demonstrate that sales of clothing are increasing at a steady rate. The UK clothing market now exceeds £37bn, and has grown by 18.8% in the four years between 2000 and 2004.² These growth figures appear more dramatic when we realise that price deflation has characterised the market over this period (due largely to the weak dollar and the abolition of quotas from China); not only are consumers spending more money on clothing, but this money is buying them a substantially bigger 'wardrobe'. While some of this growth in fashion spending is likely to be due to growing levels of disposable income³ it is evident that consumers are becoming more fashion sensitive and lured into greater purchasing.

¹ 'Diaper bag double take', *Discount Merchandiser* (March 2000).

² Mintel, *Clothing Retailing – UK – July 2005*

³ BBC News On-line, *Bank Forecasts Strong UK Growth*, 11th February 2004

In September last year a significant study into UK consumers' use of their leisure time found that shopping or 'looking around the shops' is now the nation's fourth favourite past-time, with 34% of the total sample (2,102 adults aged 18+) stating that shopping is a usual 'weekday' activity, and 37% stating that it is a usual 'weekend' activity. Only reading, listening to music or eating out were ranked higher (Figure 1).⁴

Figure 1: Leisure activities undertaken, September 2005

| | Weekday % | Weekend % |
|--|-----------|-----------|
| Reading magazines, newspapers or books | 66 | 61 |
| Listening to music | 58 | 54 |
| Eating out e.g. pub, restaurant | 39 | 42 |
| Looking around the shops | 34 | 37 |

Source: NOP/Mintel ⁴

It is interesting that this survey finds that while women are more likely to enjoy 'looking around the shops', this activity is also popular with men. However large demographical influences can be seen (Figure 2), with single women aged 18-24 being the most prevalent shoppers while married men between 35 and 55 are likely to be the least enthusiastic. Research suggests that women are predominant in influencing fashion purchasing decisions, with 48% of males relying on advice from a partner whilst shopping⁵.

Along with growing expenditure on clothing, consumers are spending an increasing amount of their leisure time shopping. As previously identified this is in part due to our growing wealth but due more to the growing importance of fashion. Since 1995 average working hours have decreased and become more flexible. This provides a

⁴ Mintel, *Leisure Time – UK* – February 2006

⁵ Mintel, *Clothing –UK* – March 2000

greater opportunity to 'shop', with traditional retail opening hours complimenting peoples 'atypical work patterns'⁴.

Figure 2: Looking around the Shops, by Gender, Age, Socio-economic group and marital status

| | Weekday % | Weekend % |
|-------------|-----------|-----------|
| All | 34 | 37 |
| Men | 25 | 30 |
| Women | 43 | 43 |
| 18-24 | 40 | 44 |
| 25-34 | 33 | 41 |
| 35-44 | 29 | 38 |
| 45-54 | 29 | 38 |
| 55-64 | 36 | 34 |
| 65+ | 41 | 31 |
| AB | 32 | 40 |
| C1 | 35 | 41 |
| C2 | 31 | 32 |
| D | 33 | 34 |
| E | 41 | 34 |
| Married | 31 | 36 |
| Not Married | 40 | 39 |

Source: NOP/Mintel ⁴

'Sense of Fashion'

While shopping is enjoyed as a leisure activity, it is clear that different people have a different 'sense of fashion' – why in the same society do people seek a quite different look and aspire to different trends? Each of us has an ideal of beauty which is well developed and governs our judgement of fashions and trends. Recent research highlights how well this sense is developed, suggesting that infants are able to discern attractiveness from as young as two months!⁶ This ideal of beauty is, however, individual, with each of us holding individual preferences and choosing to use this highly visible consumption as a means to communicate just those values we wish to emphasise.⁷

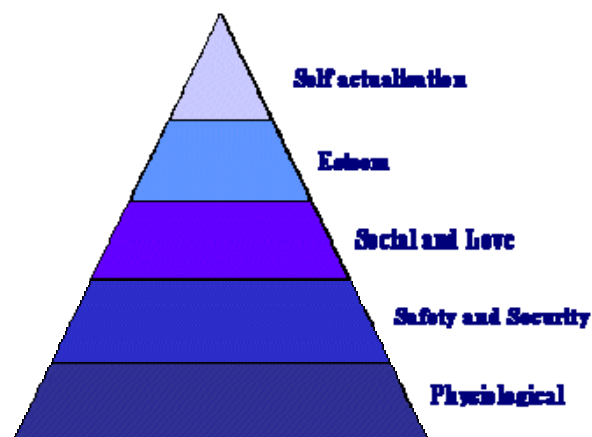
⁶ Jane E. Brody, 'Notions of beauty transcend culture, new study suggests', New York Times (21st March 1994): A14

⁷ Schiffman, L., Kanuk, L., (2007) Consumer Behavior Prentice Hall, New Jersey

It is therefore quite natural that different people will aspire to conform to different fashions at the same time. It is also clear that these 'Ideals of Beauty' are dynamic and will change over time due, largely to the changing role models in our society and the fickle opinions of our 'Cultural Gatekeepers' – in this case the media, who portray the fashion of the day and choose which celebrity's style is focused upon.⁸ So while we have our own individual 'ideal of beauty', and thus sense of fashion, we are all influenced to some degree by the actions of the media, and the images that they promote.

Evidence has shown that humans are highly concerned about the opinions others hold about us. Research has for centuries highlighted our human desire to be loved, be popular and have a sense of 'belonging' in society. In his seminal work of 1968, Psychology Theorist Abraham Maslow⁹ proposed a hierarchy of needs (Figure 3). This work outlined that humans have numerous physiological and psychological needs.

Figure 3: Maslow's Hierarchy of needs



Source: Adelard-Steel ¹⁰

⁸ Solomon, M., Bamossy, G., Askegaard, S., Hogg, M., (2006) *Consumer Behaviour: A European Perspective*. Prentice Hall, London

⁹ Maslow, A., (1968) *Toward a Psychology of Being*. Van Nostarnd, New York

¹⁰ Maslow's Hierarchy of needs. Anon. <http://www.adelard-steel.com/maslow.shtml>

Individuals will seek to satisfy needs progressively starting at the bottom of the hierarchy. Once basic physiological needs are satisfied our attention turns to feeling that we are valued and belong in society. While this model may appear slightly outdated in today's society, continually we are finding it easier to satisfy these lower level needs leading to greater emphasis being placed upon how we are viewed in society. The quickest and easiest ways in which to do this is through the clothes we wear.

People continually 'self assess'¹¹, and form an opinion of themselves. It is this self assessment in comparison with the individual's 'ideal self' (how they would like to be) that shapes their 'Self-Esteem'¹². A high level of self-esteem will result if they deem themselves to be close to their 'ideal', while a low self-esteem is inevitable if there is a significant gap between how they picture themselves vis-à-vis their 'ideal'. It is this relationship which governs much of our discretionary purchasing behaviour.

Consumers with a low self-esteem are likely to use 'retail therapy' in order to help them 'bridge the gap'. Their fashion purchases are likely to be conforming to the prevalent fashions of the day, continually seeking a sense of belonging and popularity. Conversely those people who have high levels of self-esteem will be more individualistic in their clothing choices, but will still consume heavily in order to maintain and defend their high 'self-image'.

Our outward appearance is fundamental to how we and others judge us and so highly influential to our levels of self-esteem.¹³ It is clear that shopping for clothes forms an important part of this presentation, and a relatively easy means to attract positive attention from your peer group and colleagues – leading to higher self-esteem. There are many positive benefits with this cycle: High levels of self-esteem

¹¹ Cooley, C. H. (1902) *Human Nature and the Social Order*. Scribner's. New York

¹² Yoffe, E., (1990) *You are what you Buy*. Newsweek 4th June 1990. Vol. 59

¹³ Snyder, M., Gangestad, S., (1986) *On the Nature of Self-monitoring: Matters of Assessment, Matters of Validity*, Journal of Personality and Social Psychology. Vol. 51 pp. 125-139

are associated with confidence, happiness and having a high sense of security. Due to these factors, they expect to be more successful, will take more risks and are more willing to be the centre of attention.¹⁴ Conversely those with low self-esteem do not expect that they will perform very well and they will try to avoid embarrassment, failure or rejection.¹² It can be seen from this that our outward appearance is of great significance in shaping our attitudes, enjoyment and possibly even success. What is equally true, is that with a growing number of consumers paying greater attention to their fashion each of us needs to do more in order to compete!

'Fashion-itis'

With the combination of growing disposable incomes, greater amounts of leisure time and increasing importance being assigned to clothing purchases it is clear that big opportunities exist and some significant changes in the market structure are likely. This greater demand for fashion is changing our attitudes and the ways in which we shop for clothes. It is a shrinking minority who view clothes shopping as a chore and purchase products on a utilitarian basis¹⁵; a growing proportion purchase on pure emotion and feeling – the 'hedonism of fashion buying'. To these individuals the quest for the new look, the ultimate outfit and the chicest wardrobe is contagious, and often leads to near compulsive shopping behaviour. Increasing numbers of shoppers are submitting to the symptoms of 'Fashion-itis'. The term 'Fashion-itis' is not new, dating from the 1920's¹⁶, however it is clear that the behaviours that it describes, while historically rare, are becoming ever more prevalent.

The term 'Fashion-itis' describes the behaviour where clothes shopping is highly hedonistic, forms a significant social and leisure activity, and becomes almost obsessional. This customer gets a real buzz out of buying, and conversely will become

¹⁴ Faber, R., (1992) '*Are Self-Esteem Appeals Appealing?*' Proceedings of the 1992 Conference of the American Academy of Advertising, ed. Reid, L., (1992): pp. 230-235

¹⁵ Mintel (2000) Clothing – March 2000

¹⁶ Post, E., (1922) '*Etiquette in Society, in Business, in Politics and at Home*'. Funk & Wagnalls, New York

depressed if they are unable to find the style or product that they like. Numerous celebrities have described experiencing such symptoms, with Tara Palmer-Tomkinson regretting a recent £50,000 shopping trip, and Elton John admitting to a £40m spree.

Behavioural indicators of 'Fashion-itis' may include the purchase of one item in several different colours if it is highly regarded; the purchase of items only to discover that you already own something very similar, and purchasing items that will actually never be worn. Recent surveys have shown that a significant proportion of all clothes bought are never worn, with the average women owning 14 unworn items of clothing at a total cost of £305.48¹⁷. It has been found that men are slightly less susceptible to this, owning on average 9 unworn items at a cost of £168.12. The incidence of this almost obsessional shopping is growing with people going to increasingly dramatic lengths to get the look they desire. Recent articles have described an increasing band of consumers who are undergoing reconstructive foot surgery to help them fit the latest creation of Jimmy Choos¹⁸.

Some years ago the height of fashion involved closely following the trends set by celebrities and seeking the same look on the high street. A number of the mainstream fashion chains have built their strategies upon this with Zara, for instance, being proud of their ability to spot a design on the cat-walk and have close imitations in their stores just four weeks later¹⁹, and online trader ASOS (as seen on screen) explicitly adopting this strategy²⁰. This trend for celebrity inspired fashion has led to the conception of numerous magazines tracking almost daily the clothing choices of the nation's favourite (and sometimes least favourite!) faces.

¹⁷ Churchill Home Insurance Survey

¹⁸ Harris, G., 'If Shoe won't Fit; Fix the Foot' The New York Times 7th December 2003: American Orthopaedic Foot & Ankle Society (2006) Foot Fashionitis <http://www.aofas.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=3388>

¹⁹ Anon. (2005) 'How Zara Fashions its Supply Chain' Strategic Direction. Vol. 21 No. 10 pp. 28-31

²⁰ <http://www.asos.com/>

While this desire to be led by the fashion choices of celebrities and our role models is still prevalent in some areas it is also clear that more and more consumers are seeking more individual look. As consumers climb up Maslows hierarchy of needs⁹, and gain higher levels of self-esteem they are increasingly likely to take risks and seek individualism rather than conformity. This change in attitudes is most obvious in the area of fashion purchasing. This growing band of fashion consumers face a difficult task however, with the fashion market in the UK being the most concentrated in Europe, with just five retailers accounting for over 44% of all clothing sales²¹, making true individualism difficult to attain. Due to the size of these retailers they are able to produce and market clothing at very low prices which, while attractive to some, is not likely to secure the custom of all.

The outlook for boutique style stores and shopping areas which offer the consumer truly individualistic pieces seems to be assured a successful future as this trends increase looks set to continue.

²¹ Mintel (2005) Clothing Retailing - UK