Media Use, Social Comparison, Cognitive Dissonance and Peer Pressure as Antecedents of Fashion Involvement

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Abstract: The current study examines theoretical connections between media exposure and fashion involvement in Chinese society within a predictive framework that also includes social comparison, cognitive dissonance and peer pressure. Two studies were performed using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Results indicate that fashion involvement is motivated by social comparison and is a function of exposure to fashion media, cognitive dissonance reduction and peer influence. Traditional media, particularly magazines, are as strong in explanatory power as new media in the model of fashion communication. Social implications of the study help to inform understanding of fashion phenomenon in Confucian culture and contribute to knowledge of intercultural communications.

Keywords: Media use, fashion involvement, social comparison, cognitive dissonance, peer influence

1. Introduction

Involvement is a broad umbrella construct and its definition a main source of scholarly frustration. Despite the concept's intimate tie with human behavior, there are in existence as many conceptual and operational definitions of it as there are definers. This state of disarray is in no way alleviated when involvement is theoretically connected with fashion (i.e. O'Cass, 2000; 2004). Studies have shown that fashion involvement, however defined, is a function of powerful influences stemming from a vast repertoire of individuals' social anchoring and psychological attributes.

For most people, information on fashion or luxurious products comes from the mass media: traditionally mainstream sources such as fashion magazines, television, and newspapers. The Internet, being a relative late comer, apparently demonstrates an inherent bias in favor of young and well-educated people. In this study, we attempt an explication of fashion involvement and its relationships with media exposure and some social psychological variables.

Although the phenomenon was observed more than a century ago (e.g., Fechner, 1876), the idea that repeated exposure alone is capable of increasing favorable attitude toward a stimulus continues to inspire studies from diverse academic disciplines and social settings. Following the mere exposure tradition, we elaborate its conceptual model and raise a set of new research questions: What are some of the major antecedents of fashion involvement? What is the relationship between media exposure and fashion involvement? What predictive structure can be identified between social comparison, cognitive dissonance reduction strategies, peer pressure, and fashion involvement? We contextualize our research in China, focusing particularly on the

younger segment of the population.

This article presents the results of two studies. In the first study, we collected data through a random sampling survey. To cross-validate the survey findings, a second study adopting the method of group interviews was conducted.

2. Conceptualization

2.1. Fashion Involvement

According to the definition by Rothschild (1979), "involvement" refers to the motivational fettles of arousal and interest of an individual caused by both external factors, such as situation, product, communication and others, and internal factors, such as ego, center and values among others. Zaichkowsky (1985) defines involvement as "a person's perceived relevance of an object based on inherent needs, values, and interests" (p. 42). Quite often, studies on consumer behaviors tend to relate involvement to possessions and individuals' psychological attachment to his/her possessions (Mittal & Lee, 1989; Ohanian, 1989). Some researchers even identify involvement as the most important predictor of purchase behavior (Evrard & Aurier, 1996; Martin, 1998). According to Kim (2008), involvement determines the tendency of an individual to pay more attention to particular products or to engage actively in particular product acquisition activities.

Reviewing the previous studies, some researchers argue that "fashion clothing involvement has been identified as being at the heart of the person-object relationship" (O'Cass, 2004, p. 870) and that fashion involvement is "the relational variable most predictive of purchase behavior" (Evrard & Aurier, 1996; Martin, 1998).

In the current study, involvement is defined as the extent to which the consumer views fashion clothing as a central part of their life, "a meaningful and engaging activity in their life" (O'Cass, 2004, p. 870). This definition places an implicit emphasis on people's internalized values and beliefs that are capable of motivating and guiding cognitive elaboration, impression management and purchasing behaviors. People who are drawn to fashion tend to think of fashion frequently and are likely to dwell on fashion related self-references (O'Cass, 2000).

2.2. Social Comparison

Festinger (1954) proposed that people are drawn into habits of mental comparisons of alternatives mainly because they are driven by the need for self-evaluation. Such comparisons typically occur within groups and in face-to-face situations with similar others. Jones and Gerard (1967) found that individuals use other people as references for making judgment about the validity of their attitudes and actions when objective sources are not available. Kruglanski and Mayseless (1990) define social comparison as "comparative judgments of social stimuli on particular content dimensions" (p. 196).

In Western societies, the media are a main source of virtual information about others (Hendriks & Burgoon, 2003), and individuals often use the media to obtain information necessary for social comparison, particularly in relation to physical appearance and beauty

norms (Botta, 1999; Martin & Kennedy, 1993; Richins, 1991). Prior studies suggest that the more individuals make comparisons, the more they endorse and cling to an ideal image (e.g. Botta, 1999). That is, when individuals are encouraged to compare themselves to the models or some other symbolically constructed ideals, such endorsement becomes reinforced.

2.3. Cognitive Dissonance

When an individual confronts new events or information inconsistent with his or her existing cognition, a state of dissonance occurs (Festinger, 1957). Since dissonance may lead to psychological discomfort, individuals are pressured toward reducing or eliminating dissonance to achieve consonance. Clearly, the cognitive dissonance theory is premised on people's lack of tolerance of inconsistency (Cooper, 2007).

According to Festinger (1957), an effective outcome of dissonance reduction strategies (e.g., changing behaviors and environment, etc.) is selective exposure to information that supports the existing cognitions. When conflicting information becomes unavoidable, people tend to activate certain psychological processes to reduce or eliminate the state of dissonance (Festinger, 1957).

One of these processes involves changing the relative importance of the cognitive elements involved (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1981). Based on previous studies, two processes are included: trivialization, which refers to devaluing the importance given to the dissonance (Simon et al., 1995) and bolstering, which refers to placing more importance on the cognitive elements consistent with existing cognitions (Cooper, 2007). We will take these two processes into consideration when examining the relationship between cognitive dissonance reduction and fashion involvement.

2.4. Peer Influence and Fashion Involvement

Much of previous studies about the impact of peer influence on body image and appearance focus on perceived power of criticism (Eder et al., 1995); linkage between critical appearance comments and negative body image (Levine et al., 1994; Thompson et al., 1999; Oliver & Thelen, 1996); body dissatisfaction of adolescent girls (Jones et al., 2004; Paxton et al., 1999); and peer influence on weight and eating (Taylor et al., 1998). According to Jones, Vigfusdottir and Lee (2004), conversations with friends about appearance can be especially influential. Dohnt and Tiggemann (2005) found peer perception to be the strongest predictor of body dissatisfaction among girls.

2.5. Media Exposure and Fashion Involvement

In the majority of media effects studies, *use* is generally equated to exposure and is most often measured by asking respondents how frequently they consume a specific medium (Hollander, 2006). In keeping with previous research, we operationalize media exposure as total time spent with the media.

The claim that mass media serve as a powerful socializing agent is perhaps one of the least

contested in political communication research. Individuals learn and internalize common sense and some of the most fundamental values, beliefs and norms from a life-long accumulated exposure to a multitude of media products.

Based on the cultivation theory (Gerbner et al., 1980), continuous exposure to specific types of person, values, and themes constructed by the media can strongly affect audience members' perceptions of reality. Successful transfer of media's obsession with body image to the minds of viewers is a case in point. Thin, attractive females that colonize the cover of fashion magazines set the baseline of beauty judgment and their omnipresence in TV programs, websites, and other media outlets makes exposure inevitable (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2003).

However, fashion magazines and websites are distinct, not only because of the traditional-new media demarcation, but more importantly because they carry different kinds of fashion messages.

Images in print media are static, relying heavily on textual descriptions (e.g., captions, picture stories, etc.). Contrarily, information on fashion is replete with words, images, sounds, footages, and archival materials, etc. from shows, awards ceremonies, and so on. With new media technology, fashion comes to people through trendy, new media channels.

More than a decade ago, Wilson (1997) was already arguing that the mass media market as a determining factor for everyday information will not give in to competition from new technology because advantages (e.g., reach, focal attention by a large group of audience at the same instant, etc.) of traditional media are more likely to be a complementary rather than a competing factor for the latter. The two forms of media tend to coexist in their joint fulfillment of human information, entertainment, and communication needs. Moreover, different media have their own distinctive content profiles (Nguyen & Western, 2006). Fashion media promote various types of lifestyle by "showing how beauty, sexuality, career success, culinary skill, and social status can be bought in the consumer marketplace" (Croteau & Hoynes, 2003, p. 188).

Numerous studies have attempted to examine the linkage between media exposure and involvement (e.g., Hollander, 2006). According to Hollander (2006), "involvement affects not only whether attitude change takes place but how and when the process takes place." Furthermore, "the dominant models within social psychology view involvement or personal relevance as a cornerstone in how or whether people deal with new information and communication" (pp. 377-378). According to Bandura (1977), "in view of the efficacy of, and extensive public exposure to, televised modeling, the mass media play an influential role in shaping behavior and social attitudes" (p. 39). Bandura emphasized the wide-ranging effects of the media and their implications on social learning. Put differently repeated portrayal of extremely fashionable and ideal models may result in consumers' unrealistic expectations for fashion clothes and mode of imitations.

2.6. Social Context in China

Buzzwords such as consumerism, consumer society, and middle class frequently appear on mass media and have entered everyday vernacular in the Chinese version of popular culture. In the late 1990s, industrial production in China saw severe surpluses because of rapid development in technology. Thus, stimulating consumption became paramount and one of the

most important economic policies. This, according to Tao and Jin (2005), has become "a very important criterion to evaluate the economy development in China" (p. 118). Consumerism in China is more like a new product model mixed with traditions and new ideas (Zhao, 1997).

Ostensibly, the relationship between fashion and individual consumption patterns in Chinese culture is different from that in the West where fashion is characterized by trends, changes, and proliferation of styles (Davis 1992; McCracken 1988), and, more importantly, imitation and emulation (Simmel, 2001). In Chinese society, fashion reflects an individuality that sets them apart from others (Branding in China, 2007). People manage their self-image to meet the criteria of the society; particularly, when they attempt to look better and avoid looking bad (Giacalone & Rosenfeld, 1989).

In Confucian culture hierarchy is not only legitimate but revered and conformity to group norms is acceptable (Chan, 2008). Therefore, individuals are constantly reminded of their place on the social ladder, institutionally by family, media, and school, and individually by peers.

According to Hu (1944), the notion of Chinese social face (*mianzi*) is used interchangeably with success and status. The value of the social face inspires individuals to impress themselves and even to overtly compare themselves with others in the social hierarchy (Wong & Ahuvia, 1998). Owning luxury goods simply symbolizes a successful life and good taste (Branding in China, 2007).

In sum, existing literature that theoretically connects fashion and communication and our own conception of that relationship point to a clear direction of research. Guided by previous studies, we raise the following research questions and theoretical model:

RQ1: What is the relationship between exposure to fashion media and fashion clothing involvement?

RQ2: Do demographics, social comparison, cognitive dissonance reduction, and peer influence affect fashion involvement?

RQ3: Does the social comparison moderate the relationship between media exposure and fashion clothing involvement?
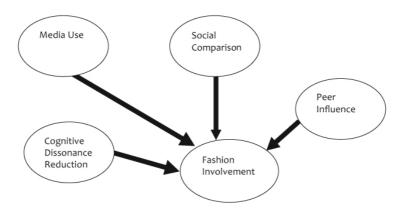

Figure 1. Theoretical Model

3. Study 1

3.1. Method

3.1.1. Sample

Data for this study were collected through a random sample survey in 2011. A total of 574 young residents were selected through random digital dialing in Guangzhou. Among them, 58.4 percent were males and 41.6 percent females. Nearly 60 percent of the respondents were between the ages of 18 and 24. The 25-30 age group constituted 42.5 percent of the respondents. Table 1 lists detailed sample characteristics.

Table 1. Sample Statistics

Demographics	%
Gender	
Male	58.40
Female	41.60
Age	
18-24	57.50
25-30	42.50
Education	
Primary school and under	34.40
Junior high school	25.90
Senior high school	8.00
College	6.20
Postgraduate and above	25.50
Annual Income	
Below RMB 40,000	45.6
RMB 40,000-80,000 (include RMB 40,000)	25.3
RMB 80,000-120,000 (include RMB 80,000)	14.8
RMB 120,000-160,000 (include RMB 120,000)	6.2
RMB 160,000-200,000 (include RMB 160,000)	3.3
Above RMB 200,000 (include RMB 200,000)	4.8
Marital Status	
Unmarried	74.5
Married	25.5

Note: N = 574

3.1.2. Measurements

Fashion clothing involvement was measured using four 5-point Likert-scale items (1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree) based on the product involvement measure constructed by O'Cass (2000). The four questions are: 1) "Fashion clothing is a significant part of my life;" 2) "I am very much involved in fashion clothing;" 3) "I would say that fashion clothing is central to my identity as a person;" and 4) "I pay a lot of attention to fashion clothing." Reliability across the four items was more than adequate (Cronbach's α = .89). A factor analysis (principal component Oblimin rotation, eigenvalue > 1) generated one single factor which was labeled the fashion clothing involvement scale (see Appendix 1). In subsequent analysis, this factor rather than the individual items is used. The scale accounted for 70% of the variance in the factor.

Media exposure was measured by asking respondents for their frequency in using two forms of media: fashion magazines and fashion websites. A 3-point continuous scale (1 = never; 2 = sometimes; and 3 = often) was used. These measures were accompanied with three open-ended questions "How many fashion magazines do you often read?", "How much time do you spend on website browsing every time? "How many fashion websites do you often surf?"

Social comparison was measured using four 5-point Likert-scale items (1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree). Questionnaire items were: "I compare my body and looks to actors' and celebrities' bodies and looks that I see in magazines or website," "I compare my dress and adornments to actors' and celebrities' dress and adornments that I see in magazines or website," "At parties or other social events, I compare my body and physical appearance to the bodies and physical appearance of others," and "At parties or other social events, I compare my dress and adornments to dress and adornments of others." Reliability across the four items was adequate (Cronbach's α = .76). A factor analysis (principal component Oblimin rotation, eigenvalue > 1) generated one single factor which was labeled the social comparison scale (see Appendix 2). The scale accounted for 58% of the variance in the factor.

Measurement of cognitive dissonance reduction corresponded with the three dimensions cited in the conceptualization part: changing behaviors, changing environment itself, and reconciling dissonance. Three questionnaire items for cognitive dissonance reduction polarized respondents for purpose of maximizing variance: 1) If I am not satisfied with my body, I will not mind too much and continue to be myself, 2) If I am not satisfied with my body, I will take some actions, for example, to buy new clothes, to go to the gym etc. 3) If I am not satisfied with my body, I will switch my attention to other things. Again, five-point Likert-type scales with poles from strongly disagree to strongly agree were used.

Items for the index of peer influence were selected from the inventory constructed by Oliver and Thelen (1996) whose sociocultural models ascribed a powerful role to peers on body image (Thompson et al., 1999). All questions were related to the individuals' perception of the importance their friends place on appearance norms, especially for clothing related issues. Three questions, all measured with "yes" (2); "sometimes" (1); and "no" (0), formed the index: 1) my friends worry about how they look; 2) my friends and I talk about how our clothes look; and 3) my friends and I talk about the size and shape of our bodies. Internal reliability was adequate for the three items (α = .74).

Although they primarily serve the purpose of controls, social demographic variables

include gender (1 = male; 2 = female), age (1=under 18; 2=18-24; 3=25-30), education (ordinal measures from primary school, junior high school, senior high school to college and graduate school), monthly household income (total income from all members of the family), marital status (1 = unmarried; 2 = married), and occupation.

Since all the dependent variables are continuous, this study relied mainly on ordinary least square multiple regression methods in data analysis. For the moderation model, we created two interaction terms (i.e., social comparison multiplied by magazine and social comparison multiplied by website) to address RQ3.

3.2. Results

3.2.1. Predicting Fashion Clothing Involvement (RQ1 & RQ2)

Two regression analyses were performed to test the predictive power of magazine and website exposure on fashion clothing involvement, both controlling for demographics. Results show strikingly similar patterns in the predictive structure across the two independent variables (Table 2). Exposure to website browsing registered a slightly, albeit not significantly, higher impact on fashion involvement than fashion magazines ($\beta_{website}$ = .24, p < .001; $\beta_{magazine}$ = .22, p <.001). Given the high correlation between the two independent variables (r = .57, p <.001), it appears as if the need for fashion information takes precedence over the channel through which that information is disseminated.

Across demographics, women are significantly more likely than men, not surprisingly, to pay close attention to fashion clothing (β = .19; p < .001), consistent with previous findings (Auty & Elliott, 1998; Browne & Kaldenberg, 1997; Goldsmith et al., 1996; Tigert et al., 1980). Intuitive as this particular finding is, the complete absence of significant prediction from the rest of the three demographic attributes is somewhat perplexing. One expects, for example, that income would contribute positively to fashion involvement and education would work in the opposite direction.

When it comes to social comparison, we found that social comparison carries special weight in the Chinese culture in connection with fashion involvement (β = .34; p < .001). As far as dimensions of Cognitive Dissonance Reduction are concerned, only one of the three summary types (ways) relates significantly to fashion involvement. "Changing behaviors" as part of dissonance reduction shows a strong beta (β = .25; p < .001) in predicting fashion involvement. Individuals take actions (e.g. shopping) to reduce or remove cognitive dissonance. Neither changing environment itself nor reconciling dissonance is related to fashion involvement.

The state of discomfort produces motivation to restore consistent cognition by shifting beliefs to realign them with behaviors (Balcetis & Dunning, 2007). For the mode of changing an environmental cognitive element, people engage in biased seeking for constant information which supports their prior belief. They might pay no more attention to body shape, and search for information about another issue that is consistent with their state. Consistent with the other mode of reducing dissonance, dissonance reconciliation occurs when the importance of the dissonant elements is reduced. People tend to trivialize the importance of body image to their lives. With their focus mainly oriented to other issues and trivialized excuses, the inclination

against fashion involvement is not hard to understand. When people fail to achieve their ideal self, they are motivated to reduce the cognitive dissonance. In the domain of fashion, this should lead to actions that will allow one to become fashionable by, for example, getting more fancy clothes.

Finally, peer influence was identified as a significant and positive predictor of fashion involvement $(\beta = .32; p < .001)$. Clearly, pressure from people within one's immediate life space and social contacts for fashion involvement cannot be underestimated.

Table 2. Predicting Fashion Clothing Involvement

Demographics	
Gender	.19***
Age	.01
Education	-.01
Marital Status	-.09*
Income	.06
R² (%)	3.70**
Social Comparison	.34***
Incremental R² (%)	11.50***
Cognitive Dissonance Reduction	
Changing Environment Itself	.00
Changing Behaviors Reconciling Dissonance	.25*** -.03
Incremental R² (%)	6.60***
Peer influence	.32***
Incremental R² (%)	7.90***
Media exposure	
Magazine	.22***
Website	.24***
Incremental R² (%)	13.60***

Notes: Entries are standardized OLS regression beta coefficients (N = 565). All figures controlled for demographics. # p < .10; *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001

3.2.2. Moderation Effect (RQ3)

Research Question 3 is mainly concerned with the possibility of a joint effect between media exposure and social comparison on fashion clothing involvement. With previous research as the frame of reference, we empirically tested a model of moderation effect. In the process, an

interaction term was created by multiplying the social comparison factor with magazine and website exposure respectively. Regression analysis betas controlling for demographics for the two interaction terms were identical (β = .19, p > .05 for magazine and social comparison; and β = .14, p > .05 for website and social comparison).

These findings imply at least two plausible explanations: 1) Consistent with findings in Table 2, exposure to the two forms of media does not seem to show discriminant validity in terms of exhibiting distinct paths of influence. Although they are conceptually unique, fashion magazines and websites appear to be interchangeable empirically; and 2) as the data pattern suggests, the effect of media exposure on fashion involvement is not moderated by social comparison.

3.3. Discussion and Conclusion of Study 1

Of the total of 574 respondents in the sample, more than half (496) were regular readers of fashion magazines, and about the almost same number (480) reported reliance on fashion websites for information needed. The observed distribution is consistent with that of previous studies. For example, Chaffee and Tims (1982) found that most magazine readers are also fond of other forms of media (e.g., Shirky, 2008).

Although in this study, we did not adopt the uses and gratifications (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1973) explanation in the theoretical explication of fashion media use, however, the notion that audience members actively engage in rational choice of media outlets and content cannot be brushed aside. The process of gratification seeking and receiving is an indication that people are aware of their needs for either information or entertainment and they base their selection of fulfillment on these needs. The content of fashion media and its appeal to a particular segment of the population may be constricted and special, but the mind-message interaction could very well conform to the model specified in the uses and gratifications research tradition.

While the uses and gratifications theory emphasizes social attributes of individuals in guiding media content selection, the mere exposure hypothesis directs attention to micro-mechanisms that connect repeated exposure and favorable attitude. In terms of fashion, there is no lack of empirical evidence as well as everyday examples in support of that relationship. However, very specific mental activities are yet to be identified to give the relationship its solid construct validity.

Fashion clothing involvement is a single factor summing four questionnaire items measuring both cognitive and emotional commitment to materialistic and symbolic meanings of fashion. The four indicators, when combined, point to an obsessive self-consciousness about fashion, much to the pleasure of the fashion industry. Although there is no data linking the intensity of impression management and purchase intention, we believe the former is a necessary condition for the latter.

4. Study 2

4.1. Method

Almost all the previous empirical studies of cognitive dissonance relied on experiments (e.g.

Cooper, 2007; Festinger, 1957). It is altogether possible that cognitive changes may also be elicited by in-depth interviews or focus group studies. In Study 2, we combined depth interviews with focus group analysis and conducted several rounds of group interviews to explore opinions, attitudes and understandings shared by people from the same background.

4.1.1 Sample

A total of 20 participants were recruited by means of purposive sampling in Zhuhai, a major metropolis in southern China, and Hong Kong. The participants in the first group are five ladies, who have already formed their own dressing style and known fashion very well. They are primarily middle-class women, aged 36 to 40. Four of them work in local media in Zhuhai as news anchor, director, editor or reporter. The last one has her own business. We named this group "artistry group".

We recruited six young ladies in the second group. These young ladies, aged 24 to 32, were developing their fashion consciousness and on their way of formulating personal style and taste. One is a primary school teacher, two are research staff at a local university and the remaining three are office ladies. All of them are well-educated and have at least a bachelor's degree. This group is named "employee group".

The third group comprised five college girls no more than 25 years old. This group is named "student group". The last group contained four men, aged 25 to 33. They all come from various businesses. This group is named "male group".

4.1.2. Group Interviews

Group interview sessions (between 60 and 90 minutes in length in Chinese) were video-recorded and facilitated by a doctoral candidate. The same set of questions was asked in the group interview session, which included general questions, for example: "How much money do you spend on dress?", "What do you think of yourself? "Are you satisfied with yourself?" etc. Questions about media use included, for instance, "What media do you often use to get fashion information? Please name them.", "What kind of fashion information do you look for from the media?" etc. Questions about peer influence included, "What do you think of the opinions of your friends, colleagues or other peers?" and "Do they influence the way you dress and how you look?".

4.2. Results

4.2.1. Influence of Media Use on Fashion Involvement

One objective of this study is to find out the sources of fashion information and their influence on individuals. Table 3 shows the details of media use. All of the respondents agreed that the media, such as television, fashion magazines and the Internet, played an important role in their ways of dressing. Window shopping was another important means to get information. Arnett (1995) believes that the information in fashion magazines is primarily used by readers in the

identity development and gender socialization process. Respondents had different opinions of fashion magazines: "We subscribe to one fashion magazine in our office, but nobody ever reads it. The magazine is not good and not useful at all. The inherent taste of fashion is more important (Radio director, from artistry group)". "I like to read fashion magazines. I used to buy *Elle* in my college life. Later I find that there is one small version of *Fashion*. It is convenient so I read it on the way home (Xu, from employee group)". Interestingly, all respondents of the artistry group said that they did not buy fashion magazines. They preferred to get information from the Internet and television. One respondent (radio presenter) said that she browsed a popular web store site every day, and almost all her apparels were bought from it. In contrast, respondents of the employee and student groups reported that they read fashion magazines regularly. One respondent (Wang) preferred to watch Fashion Show online to look for the latest season information. One respondent (Zilin) liked to read the electronic magazines. Another respondent (Wu) would like to watch fashion programs online, for example *Project Runway*. Respondents from male group got fashion information through different ways, such as magazines, TV, internet and window shopping.

Table 3. Transcript: Group Discussion of Media Use

Facilitator (generally)	Where do you get fashion information? What are they?
Artistry group	
Meng (radio director)	TV fashion channel
Liang (radio presenter)	*Taobao* website
Qian (business director)	Internet
Wang (TV editor)	Internet
Zhang (Journalist)	Internet
Employee group	
Wu	TV fashion program
Xu	Fashion magazines: *Elle; Fashion*
Zhang	Magazines: *Vogue; Rayli; Cosmetics*
Dai	www.163.com; window shopping
Yuan	Fashion show online
Hui	Window shopping; Fashion magazines: *Rayli*
Student group	
Xiang	www.163.com
Lu	Magazines; Fashion show online
Xiao	Magazines; Peers
Zilin	Internet; Magazines: *Bazaar; Rayli; Vivi*
Ran	Internet: *Hers*
Male group	
Liangyong	Window shopping
Zhu	TV: *CCTV3;*
Lai	Magazines: *Don't Touch*; *1626*
Zeng	Internet: *Taobao*

When asked what kind of fashion information they look for from the media and whether they follow the suggested ideas, most respondents from the artistry group said they paid little attention to the current fashion trends. They focused more on their own style, sight and sense. Particularly, the radio director (Meng) preferred to dress opposite to the main fashion trends. As Liang (Meng's colleague) mentioned that "Meng always likes to dress exactly opposite to the so called trend. For example, if all people wear skirts, she will wear pants; if others wear jeans, she will wear skirt. In short, she never follows the fashion trends and likes to be different." In contrast to the artistry group, employee, student and male groups were more likely to follow the trend on the media. They looked for the latest fashion and learned how to select and match clothes. Even so, they were selective. When it comes to fashion issues, the artistry group was clearly more passive in information seeking, whereas the rest of groups were more active and initiated. As such, the fashion media are more important to the latter than the former.

Table 4. Transcript: Group Discussion of the Media Information

Facilitator (generally)	What kind of fashion information do you look for from the media? Do you follow the ideas suggested by the media?
Artistry group Meng (radio director)	I loved dressing in Bohemian style before. In recent years, I haven't cared too much about the trends. I only follow the frame of my mind and sense. All of my clothes are bought according to my taste, not the fashion trends.
Liang (radio presenter, gave her opinion about Meng)	Meng always likes dressing exactly opposite to the so-called trend. For example, if all people wear skirts, she wears pants; if others wear jeans, she will wear skirt. In short, she never follows the fashion trends and likes to be different.
Liang (radio presenter)	Some suggestions such as how to match clothes are really fresh. If I think it is good, I will try; otherwise, I don't care about those suggestions.
Qian (business director)	I focus on the materials of clothes, such as silk, cotton, and details.
Wang (TV editor)	I only pay attention to clothing quality.
Zhang (Journalist)	I like wearing casual clothes and don't follow the suggestions.
Employee group Wu	I see the pictures firstly, and I read the following words if only the picture is really attractive. I never try some items, such as legging, no matter how sexy models look like in wearing them.

Dai	I read the title firstly, and I will read contents if the title is attractive. I can't follow their suggestions, for my body is different from the models.
Xu	I pay attention to how the models select and match their clothes. Their suggestions are too many to remember; however, if I can recall them when I go shopping, I may try.
Zhang	Some TV programs teach how to wear and look like thin, and I follow their suggestions.
Wang	I mostly notice the color, style and main fashion factors.
Hui	I look for the fashion trend from the magazines and window shopping. I want to change my dressing style. However, I can't change it completely.
Student group	
Xiang	Normally I look for the current fashion trend from magazines. I can get some new ideas such as this legging may match those boots. It is good and I like to try it.
Lu	I prefer to look for the popular style from the magazines. However, I never follow them. I always buy the classical ones.
Xiao	I often follow some brands for the fashion trend.
Zilin	I look for the fashion factors. For example, the wallet with fur is popular this season and I have bought one.
Ran	I only want to see those beautiful models from the media. If their clothes are suitable for me, I follow them a little bit. I began to wear high-heel shoes after I saw those models.
Male group	
Liangyong	Due to my job, I like to observe the fashion trends. But I don't follow them myself.
Zhu	I follow the trend. It is better if the popular color is my favorite.
Lai	I see the fashion trend. I may follow a little bit. It depends sometimes.
Zeng	I learn how to match clothes from the media. But in my own case, I prefer to follow the fixed brands.

4.2.2. Influence of Comparison on Fashion Involvement

The respondents of the artistry group looked elegant with good taste. They set up their confidence of self- image through comparing with others. When asked if they compare with others in terms of dress and appearance, they said:

Meng: When I attend an activity, I dress up and judge myself from others' eyes, and I can feel that there is some space for improvement

Prior studies suggest that individuals have good emotions (Wills, 1991) and high self-esteem in downward comparison (Morse & Gergen, 1970). On the other hand, upward comparison leads to negative emotions (Bower, 1991) and low self-esteem (Morse & Gergen, 1970). Based on the words of these respondents, comparison plays an important role in fashion involvement. For example:

Liang: I always dress up and I feel very good when staying with those ugly women.

Qian: If someone in the same age group as mine looks older than I, I feel good about myself. However, if I look at the movie stars, I feel that I am getting old quickly in comparison. I will dress better in next gathering.

Wu: I'm definitely more beautiful than some of my friends. When clubbing,   they always wear sexy clothes and look more attractive than I. So I will wear short dress next time.

Dai: I require my friends not to wear high-heel shoes because I am short. One of my friends is very tall. I will wear high-heels if I go out with her.

Zhang: My friend is very beautiful. I feel pressure going out with her. I pay much attention to my dress when I go out with her.

Xiao: I compare with my classmates and friends. I try to make up and dress well when going out with them.

The other respondents also mentioned the influence of comparison. Xiang and Lu (from student group) preferred to be unique and special among classmates. Zeng (from male group) wanted to improve himself and Zhu (from male group) wished to dress like a model. In other words, the more the respondents made comparisons, the more attention they paid to their appearance and dressing, and the more they wanted to improve.

4.2.3. Cognitive Dissonance Reduction

Most respondents admitted to have engaged in dissonance reduction strategies when exposed to the ideal models. They mentioned specific ways: Meng (from artistry group) tried to control her weight; Liang (from artistry group) reduced weight through jogging and going to the gym; Qian (from artistry group) also reduced weight and paid more attention to the dress; Zhang (from employee group) would like to dress up when going out. Hui (from employee group) wanted to take a yoga class. Xiang (from student group) did exercises and went upstairs. Xiao (from student group) only ate vegetables for dinner and bought lots of new clothes. Zeng (from male group) tried to get better and Zhu (from male group) tried to wear better. All of them preferred to change behaviors. Some respondents tried to reconcile dissonance: Dai (from employee group) thought that her body image was totally different from those models. Xiao and Zilin (from student group) thought models are unrealistically thin. Lai (from male group) never

thought to dress like a model. Liangyong (from male group) thought he would look as good as a model if wearing the same clothes. Some respondents chose to divert attention. Xu (from employee group) and Ran (from student group) reduced dissonance through focusing attention on something other than fashion.

4.2.4. Peer Influence

Peers such as colleagues or friends also play an important role in one's fashion consciousness (see Table 5). Respondents from the artistry group thought that working environment might influence the way people dress themselves. According to Wang (from artistry group), journalists from radio stations were good at dressing, whereas editors from TV stations did not care much about their appearance. "In our TV station, nobody notices your dress even if you have worn the same coat for more than one month (Wang)". Another respondent Meng (from artistry group) mentioned that: "one of our colleagues came from a newspaper agency and did not care about dressing before; however, she has completely changed since entering our radio station. Once, I wore the same coat for three days and one of my colleagues couldn't help asking me to change it." Most respondents from the employee and student groups agreed that peers might influence their appearance. Interestingly, most respondents from the male group would like to accept peers' suggestions to some extent. In this study, peers had slightly, albeit not significantly, higher impact on females than males.

Table 5. Transcript: Group Discussion of Peer Influence

Facilitator (generally)	What are the influences of your friends, colleagues or others on the way you dress?
Artistry group	
Meng (radio director)	One of our colleagues came from a newspaper and didn't care about dress; however, she has completely changed since entering our radio station. Once, I wore the same coat for three days and one of my colleagues couldn't help asking me to change it.
Liang (radio presenter)	I feel that peers are very important. For example, my previous colleagues were all actresses, and I learned to pay attention to every detail of my appearance.
Qian (business director)	I like to go shopping with my friends because we have similar taste.
Wang (TV editor)	In our TV station, nobody notices your dress even if you have worn the same coat for more than one month.
Zhang (Journalist)	I finally know the reason why I never change my dressing style, because all of my colleagues are males.

Employee group	
Wu	If the opinions of my friends are reasonable, I'd accept their suggestions. I do not wear makeup if my friends don't use cosmetics.
Dai	If my friends' ideas are in accord with my taste, I may dress likewise.
Xu	When I go shopping with my friends, we buy the same item sometimes.
Zhang	I think that my friend is fashionable, so I accept her suggestion when shopping.
Wang	Peers can't influence me too much.
Hui	I only wear jeans and pants. Not influenced by others too much.
Student group	
Xiang	My fashion sense is influenced by my friend. I begin to change the way I dress.
Lu	I only listen to some of my friends' suggestions, for example, dress color.
Xiao	I am totally influenced by my friends. They often tell me how to dress and catch the current fashion. I listen to their suggestions when shopping.
Zilin	When I come to Hong Kong, I begin to wear appropriate clothes in different occasions. These local students influence me.
Ran	My Japanese friends put on makeup for more than one hour every day. They look beautiful. What I learn from them is to look perfectly relaxed.
Male group	
Liangyong	Friends may influence me to some extent. I adopt their suggestions only if I think they are right.
Zhu	I go shopping with my friends. We often talk about clothes.
Lai	Usually I give suggestions to my friends.
Zeng	If my friend's taste is good. I may accept his suggestion.

4.3. Discussion and Conclusions of Study 2

The media including Internet, TV, and fashion magazines have significant influence on respondents' perceptions about dress and appearance. According to the dissonance theory, audiences are active rather than passive, which means that media users prefer to deliberately choose certain messages over others and retain certain messages. According to Klapper, audiences would like to select message in accordance with their preexisting attitudes to protect the integrity of their belief structures (cited in Hollander, 2006). In this study, TV and Internet are helpful to both active and passive fashion information seekers, whereas fashion magazines are particularly popular among the latter. The artistry group members do not read fashion magazines regularly, nor follow fashion trends unless they think it is reasonable. To compare with the artistry group members, respondents from employee and student groups are more likely to talk about international brands, and care more about the price.

Most respondents from the three female groups admit that notions of the ideal model may cause them to be dissatisfied with their body. On the other hand, most male group members do not get very depressed being exposed to the models. In accordance with the cognitive dissonance theory, they diet or do exercise (changing behavior), switch to another issue (changing the environment itself), or focus on self-conditions (reconciling dissonance).

5. General Conclusion

Findings of Study 2 supplement those generated from Study 1 in several aspects. First, media measurement focused on exposure frequency in Study 1. The results only show how often respondents read fashion magazines or surf the Internet. In Study 2, media source and their influences were added, revealing participants' attitude and inclination toward different media. Second, Study 1 confirms the effect of social comparison on fashion involvement, which is consistent with previous studies (e.g. Festinger, 1954).

Study 2 cross-validates the social comparison effect through a different method (i.e., interviewing). More importantly, in Study 2, we were able to identify respondents' psychological processes when comparing with others. Results of Study 1 and 2 both confirm the role of peer pressure on fashion. Through group interview, we find that peer influence can separate individuals into active or passive involvement. Third, as a tradition, scholars are more likely to adopt experiments to study cognitive dissonance (e.g. Cooper, 2007). Our study diverted from that tradition: we conducted a survey in Study 1 and depth interviews in Study 2.

The combined findings should contribute to the development of cognitive dissonance theory. Qualitative data describe how respondents feel when exposed to ideal image and reveal the concrete methods with which they reduce cognitive dissonance. Quantitative data from the random sampling survey lead to inferences about behavior change as a result of fashion clothing involvement.

As mentioned earlier in the conceptualization section, development in consumerism and patterns of consumption in China are unequal. Consumption associated with identity and taste is confined within a relatively small minority of high-income groups. Those high-income groups are the vanguard consumers of fashion in general, imported luxury goods in particular. Prior

studies have found Chinese consumers to have strong preference for Western brands (e.g. Sin et al., 2000; Zhang, 1996). Young, affluent and well-educated people are much more likely to try new products. However, being unique is not a value for Chinese who use products to express their belonging to rather than detachment from the group (Schmitt, 1997).

In sum, increase in demand for fashion communication has propelled academic attention to the complex relationships between various social and psychological antecedents and fashion related information seeking and its theoretical and social implications. Cross-disciplinary concepts such as social comparison, dissonance reduction, patterns of media use, peer pressure and their differential effects on individual behaviors are being closely scrutinized. The current research is part of this revived interest in effects of fashion communication.

On the assumption that individuals are affected by how others see them in the social context, research questions raised in this study are aimed at advancing theory in the field of intercultural communication in general, and fashion cognition and behavior in particular. The psychological process people engage in and experience when comparing with others in the social hierarchy contributes in significant ways to the ways they manage their social image. Our empirical findings indicate the strong relevance of the "synching" of internal mental activities and external socio-cultural environment.

Among the various factors influencing fashion involvement, we found that the media exposure variables (i.e., magazine and web) register the highest predictive power after controls of demographics, suggesting that impact of information seeking is neither random nor trivial. One direction for future research, therefore, could be decomposing media use into finer dimensions such as focal attention to specific types of content, psychological attachment to a particular media outlet, media reliance, and message selection strategies.

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Appendix 1

Factor Analysis (Principal Component with Oblimin Rotation) on Fashion Involvement Indicators

	Fashion Involvement
Fashion clothing is a significant part of my life	**.76**
I am very much involved in fashion clothing	**.78**
I would say that fashion clothing is central to my identity as a person	**.80**
I pay a lot of attention to fashion clothing	**.63**
Variance accounted for (%)	**70.00**

Note: Loadings on the factor are sufficiently clean that no cross-loaders at or larger than .25 are observed. (*N = 574*).

Appendix 2

Factor Analysis (Principal Component with Oblimin Rotation) on Social Comparison Indicators

	Social Comparison
I compare my body and look to actors' and celebrities' bodies and looks that I see in magazines or website.	**.73**
I compare my dress and adornments to actors' and celebrities' dress and adornments that I see in magazines or website.	**.76**
At parties or other social events, I compare my body and physical appearance to the bodies and physical appearance of others.	**.81**
At parties or other social events, I compare my dress and adornments to dress and adornments of others.	**.78**
Variance accounted for (%)	**58.98**

Note: Loadings on the factor are sufficiently clean that no cross-loaders at or larger than .25 are observed. (*N = 574*).