



Exploring the Prime Aesthetic Across Generational Cohorts

Jeremy M. Bernardoni
University of North Texas

Mary Ruppert-Stroescu
Washington University in St. Louis

Keywords: Aesthetic Science, Generational Cohorts, Emerging Adulthood, Dress Preferences

Generational cohort membership can have a significant influence on fashion tastes, preferences, and consumer behavior (Dobre, 2021, Kim, 2019, Williams & Page, 2011). Generational cohorts represent groups of individuals who are born relatively at the same time and share common values and experiences (Strauss & Howe, 1991). Such shared attitudes and preferences are exhibited in consumer behavior (Williams & Page, 2011). Although a large part of research on generational cohorts focuses on demographics (Twenge et al., 2010), fashion-specific generational cohort research reflects aspects of consumer attitudes, behavior (Dobre, 2021, Mochis & Mochis, 2019), and clothing attributes (Park & Lennon, 2006).

Notably missing in generational cohort literature is attention to aesthetic preferences in fashion or dress, specifically the impact of sensitive developmental moments on those preferences, such as the Prime Aesthetic. The Prime Aesthetic is the “cumulative Aesthetic Dress Preferences (ADP) imprinted from influences during the sensitive period of emerging adulthood” (Bernardoni & Stannard, 2022). The theory of the Prime Aesthetic offers an explanation about the relationship between the ADP imprinted during emerging adulthood and an individual’s current ADP (Bernardoni & Stannard, 2022). Thus, the purpose of this research was to explore ADP influences during emerging adulthood across generational cohorts through the lens of the Prime Aesthetic by asking the following questions: a) How does generational cohort membership influence the Prime Aesthetic? b) How do the cohorts differ? c) How are the cohorts similar?

Exploring the Prime Aesthetic across generational cohorts is significant in that the results provide valuable insights into ways different groups of individuals experience the world, and inform strategies for engaging generational groups in topics related to fashion preferences consumer behavior (Kamenidou et al., 2020; Lissitsa & Kol, 2021). Additionally, generational cohort research highlights societal trends and changes in attitudes and behaviors over time and identifies patterns in and changes to dress practices and preferences (Pentecost & Andrews, 2010). This study is particularly valuable as it captures generational ideas on fashion from women for whom, due to advanced age, the window of data collection is limited.

Methods and Procedures

Following IRB approval, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 female participants who were raised in the US, possessing some knowledge of fashion, and with birth

years ranging from 1924 to 1992. Online interviews were conducted via Zoom™ in 2022. Participants were separated into two generational cohorts of fifteen participants each: a modern cohort with birthdays in or before 1945 and a postmodern cohort with birthdays in or after 1946. The areas of inquiry included establishing characteristics of the participant's ADP and identifying the period of forming their Prime Aesthetic.

Data were analyzed using constant comparison analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), which is comprised of open, axial, and selective coding. Open coding parses data into units of meaning or concepts, naming codes to represent concepts and grouping codes into categories based on common traits. The second phase, axial coding, creates subcategories and joins them to the categories that were created during open coding. Finally, selective coding is a process to refine categories and develop emergent themes for developing theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Results

Analysis revealed six themes related to the influence of generational cohort membership on the Prime Aesthetic: 1) identity formation and the Prime Aesthetic, 2) body image, 3) consistencies and inconsistencies of ADP over time, 4) conformity and cultural/societal trends on the Prime Aesthetic, 5) Shopping habits and sustainability, and 6) influence of career and professions.

Participants from both cohorts discussed how fashion was important for identity expression. A participant from the modern cohort said that although she felt she had to conform to dress code of the time “I would add a colorful scarf or unique piece of jewelry to show my individuality” (P8). Whereas a post-modern participant stated that she “didn't care if people thought it was weird or not” (P5) and that wearing what she wanted was a way of expressing her individuality. Body image emerged as an important theme in both cohorts, employing their ADP to accentuate or minimize features on their bodies. While participants in both cohorts discussed some aspects of ADP that had changed over time, they acknowledged that ADP remained relatively consistent over time. A modern cohort member stated, “Even though trends have come and gone, I've always been drawn to these timeless looks” (P14), and a post-modern participant reflected “I still love to wear bold colors and patterns. It's part of my personality and makes me happy” (P1). Both cohorts discussed the influence of conformity and societal trends on their Prime Aesthetic. For example, one modern participant stated that “when I went to college, and that was 1971, we weren't allowed to walk out the front of the dormitory in pants” (P25), whereas the post-modern group expressed a greater freedom to express individuality and nonconformity. In terms of shopping habits, the post-modern cohort spoke more frequently about sustainability and ethical concerns, while the modern group mentioned in-store shopping or relying on what they already have. Most participants from both cohorts mentioned that their career or profession either limited or expanded their Prime Aesthetic. A post-modern participant stated “I think I was influenced by the shift in my sort of career path... I started sort-of dressing more professionally or buying clothes that I thought I could wear to work” (P4). Similarly, a modern cohort member stated, “it was [the time period] when I spent the most time on dressing when I first started teaching” (P13).

Conclusions, Limitations, Future Studies

The findings suggest that generational cohort membership influences the participant's Prime Aesthetic and that cohorts exhibited similarities and differences. Specifically, the two cohorts were unified in their belief that fashion played a crucial role in identity expression and, with few exceptions, that their ADP remained relatively consistent with their Prime Aesthetic over time with aspects such as aging and the body affecting wearing of their Prime Aesthetic presently and a desire for comfort and physical agency in their ADP. Both cohorts also acknowledged the influence of career and profession on their Prime Aesthetic. On the other hand, participants differed in their approach to conformity and societal trends, with the modern cohort experiencing pressure to conform to social norms, while the post-modern cohort prioritized self-expression and individuality during emerging adulthood. The modern cohort participants expressed a preference for shopping in physical stores, while the post-modern cohort emphasized the convenience of shopping online and reported a greater interest in sustainability and ethical fashion choices.

Overall, this study highlights the importance of understanding the role of generational cohort membership in shaping the Prime Aesthetic and thus longitudinal ADP. By examining the unique attitudes of different cohorts, fashion designers and marketers can better tailor products and messages to meet the needs and desires of those target audiences. Given this study's qualitative approach, the findings may not be generalizable to a larger population yet provide a rich foundation to further explore the Prime Aesthetic across generational cohorts gathering larger data sets to address that limitation. Future studies could also explore participants of other genders, cultural backgrounds, and socioeconomic situations.

References

- Bernardoni, J. M. & Stannard, C. R., (2022) *The Prime Aesthetic: Imprinted Aesthetic Dress Preferences*, International Textile and Apparel Association Annual Conference Proceedings 79(1). <https://doi.org/10.31274/itaa.15850>
- Dobre, C., Milovan, A. M., Dușu, C., Preda, G., & Agapie, A. (2021). The common values of social media marketing and luxury brands. The millennials and generation z perspective. *Journal of Theoretical and Applied Electronic Commerce Research*, 16(7), 2532-2553.
- Kamenidou, I., Stavrianea, A., & Bara, E. Z. (2020). Generational differences toward organic food behavior: Insights from five generational cohorts. *Sustainability*, 12(6), 2299.
- Kim, J. H. (2019). Imperative challenge for luxury brands: Generation Y consumers' of luxury fashion brands' e-commerce sites. *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management*.
- Lissitsa, S., & Kol, O. (2021). Four generational cohorts and hedonic m-shopping: association between personality traits and purchase intention. *Electronic Commerce Research*, 21(2), 545-570.
- Moschis, G. P., & Moschis, G. P. (2019). Efforts to study consumers over their life span. *Consumer Behavior over the Life Course: Research Frontiers and New Directions*, 19-36.
- Park, J., & Lennon, S. J. (2006). Psychological and environmental antecedents of impulse buying tendency in the multichannel shopping context. *Journal of consumer Marketing*, 23(2), 56-66.
- Pentecost, R., & Andrews, L. (2010). Fashion retailing and the bottom line: The effects of generational cohorts, gender, fashion fanship, attitudes and impulse buying on fashion expenditure. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 17(1), 43-52.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research techniques*. Citeseer.
- Strauss, W., & Howe, N. (1991). *Generations: The history of America's future, 1584 to 2069*. William Morrow.
- Twenge, J. M., Campbell, S. M., Hoffman, B. J., & Lance, C. E. (2010). Generational differences in work values: Leisure and extrinsic values increasing, social and intrinsic values decreasing. *Journal of management*, 36(5), 1117-1142.

Williams, K. C., & Page, R. A. (2011). Marketing to the generations. *Journal of behavioral studies in business*, 3(1), 37-53.