

Making apparel last: Examining psychological factors motivate the adoption of customized products

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Background: Today, prevailing “economic paradigm” puts extreme emphasis on the materialism, which leads consumers to keep pursuing something novel and unique. The widespread of fast fashion has contributed to excessive consumption, thereby resulting in enormous clothing wastes (Ertekin & Atik, 2015). Approximately, over 13 million tons of apparels were ended up into landfill each year. To confront such an environmental crisis and to fulfill consumers’ desires for self-expression and uniqueness, customization has been proposed as a new marketing strategy to meet individual consumer’s heterogeneous demands. In fashion industry, customized products have become increasingly popular since this strategy can satisfy consumers’ personal needs and tastes (Park, et al., 2013). Customization is also considered as an approach to reduce landfill wastes (Medini, et al., 2015). Through customization, consumers build robust emotional bond with customized products when their functional or artistic desires are satisfied (Niniimaki & Hassi, 2011). Such emotional attachment may lead consumers to cherish and preserve the customized products, thus extend the lifespan of products.

Consumer’s decision-making process heavily depends on individuals’ psychological values. It is beneficial and insightful to examine the impacts of psychological factors on consumers’ acceptance of customized products. People tend to express their identities in a way to differentiate themselves from others by possessing unique products (Park, et al., 2013), and customization provide those consumers with an approach to create one-of-a-kind products. Social identity refers to an individual’s natural instinct for trying to well fit into groups as a member. Individuals with high social identity are likely to suppress expressing distinctive personal appearances by strictly following visual norms within a group (Kim & Park, 2011). Sometimes, obtaining customized product can be an effective tactic for people who want to express one’s personal image regardless other’s opinions. Additionally, Lee and Sundar (2014) found that people who are more conscious about others’ opinion tend not to be interested in standing out from their surroundings by possessing customized products. However, people with need for uniqueness tend to place emphasis on “scarcity” (Park, et al., 2013), it may have positive attitude toward customized products.

The purpose of this study was to identify the influence of a variety of psychological factors on consumers’ adoption of customized products; and to investigate if customization will build special attachment between consumers and the customized products, and whether such emotional attachment will affect the lifespan of the products.

Method: A convenience sampling strategy was utilized, with an online survey set up in Qualtrics. Participants were recruited in the US through email survey link in a large university. Data cleaning yield 158 valid sample out of 182 returned responses, with completion rate of 89.3%. The majority of participants are females (86.8%), and 86.7% of the sample are 18-25 years old. 79.7% of the participants are college students. All items were adopted from previous research and were measured utilizing a 5-point Likert scale with “1 = strongly disagree” and “5= strongly agree.” Self-expression ($\alpha=.701$), need for uniqueness ($\alpha=.867$), other-directedness ($\alpha=.748$), and product attachment ($\alpha=.836$) were all measured by three items. Self-extension ($\alpha=.936$) was measured by four items. Social identity ($\alpha=.886$) was measured by five items. Additionally, the intention to

purchase customized apparel products was measured by one item. A definition of customized apparel products was first described, and then the participants were requested to respond the question, "I am willing to buy customized apparel products in the next 12 month:" with "1 = strongly disagree" and "5= strongly agree."

Results: The confirmatory factory analysis (CFA) results indicated a good model fit ($\chi^2_{(df=428)} = 607.361$, $p < .000$, $\chi^2/df = 1.42$; RMSEA = .052; CFI = .934; TLI = .924; SRMR = .059). All factor loadings were statistically significant as $p < .001$, and in the .565-.896 range. Further, a structural equation model (SEM) was then conducted to examine the influences of psychological factors on the intention toward customization, as well as the relationship to product attachment and self-extension. The statistic outputs revealed an acceptable model fit ($\chi^2_{(df=383)} = 593.244$, $p < .000$, $\chi^2/df = 1.56$; RMSEA = .059; CFI = .914; TLI = .902; SRMR = .074). The results illustrated that only self-expression ($\beta = .313$, $p < .016$) and need for uniqueness ($\beta = .198$, $p < .047$) were positively associated with consumers' intention to purchase customized apparel products. However, no significant relationships were found between social identity ($\beta = -.112$, $p = .312$) and other-directedness ($\beta = .065$, $p = .491$), with the intention toward apparel customization, which is not predicted. As predicted, significantly positive relationships were found between intention toward apparel customization with product attachment ($\beta = .298$, $p < .000$) and self-extension ($\beta = .332$, $p < .000$). This result shows that people are more likely to build an emotional bond with the customized products and are attached to those products.

Discussion: The results point out the positive influence of self-expression and need for uniqueness on consumers' intention toward apparel customization, which indicates that people who would like to express themselves in a creative way or stand out from the crowd are more likely to take part in apparel customization. However, non-significant influences of social identity and other-directedness were also illustrated. Given the fact that the survey was conducted in the US where people are allowed to express themselves freely and openly, which may explain why social identity and other-directedness had limited influences on the adoption of customized products. To satisfy consumers' need for novelty and self-expression, providing more options for consumers to choose in the process and offering wide range of products would be beneficial. The result also confirmed that people are more attached to their customized product. Such emotional attachment contributes to the increase of product's lifespan due to owner's great care and constant repair, thus reduce landfill wastes.

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