

**National Textile Center
FY 2003 (Year 12) Continuing Project Proposal**

Project No. SO1-AC21

Competency: Management Systems

An Online Measurement, Analysis and Feedback System for the Assessment of Cross-Category Consumer Preferences Across the Lifespan

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Objective:

Our first objective is to explore the theoretical and strategic ramifications of *consumption constellation theory*, which stresses the symbolic ability of products from a range of categories (including both apparel and home furnishings products) to jointly allow consumers to express desired lifestyles. A second objective is to develop a web-based methodology to identify and track cross-category product preferences. The goal here is to develop highly automated data collection, analysis, and presentation tools to provide more timely and cost-effective feedback concerning cross-category customer preferences to the textile and apparel industry. This methodology will also enable us to empirically explore the conceptual validity of consumption constellation theory and to identify the nature of these cross-category dynamics as they shift across the lifespan.

Progress Statement:

Using industry experts in the areas of apparel and home furnishings, we identified sets of photographic exemplars representing contemporary style categories in each domain. This task proved to be a significant challenge because no reliable taxonomy exists in either product category. Indeed, the procedure we formulated to identify and validate these categories (using a Multi-Dimensional Scaling [MDS] methodology) will itself be the focus of an article on cognitive representations of stylistic categories we plan to submit in Spring 2003. Although we began the process with the judgments of industry practitioners, their choices now are being validated via an MDS procedure using non-professional consumer samples. To avoid possible contamination of specific feature effects in exemplar photographs, artists have been engaged to produce more abstract visual representations of each stylistic category within each product domain (i.e., apparel and home furnishings).

In addition to the style exemplars, we have assembled sets of specific product images corresponding to six discrete product categories within apparel and interior furnishings respectively. These photos have been sourced from apparel/interiors media (both print and online) and have been supplemented by contributions from manufacturers (e.g., Hickory Chair).

This extensive image archive will allow us to probe for specific stylistic preferences in both apparel and home furnishings after respondents have selected their preferred aesthetic domains. Choices of specific product ensembles (in either apparel or home furnishings) and the degree of coherence among these choices within different consumer segments will be related to consumers' stylistic preferences in each domain (apparel or home furnishings). A

comprehensive literature review of life stage measures has also been completed. As a result of this literature review questionnaire items have been developed that will permit classification of respondents according to lifestage.

The online research application that will be used in the planned series of studies has been programmed and is currently being pilot tested. The pilot study will use a limited age-range population (20-something consumers) and will include lifestage classification measures relevant to this age demographic. The study is being conducted using a national U.S. sample of 800 women. One outcome of this study will be to field test the overall procedures involved in the presentation of the visual materials online, the measures of cohesiveness of consumer choices and the measures of lifestage as well as other psychographic measures now being pilot tested (e.g., level of individual “cultural capital,” social class, etc.).

Several graduate student projects related to the project are also underway, including a dissertation that recently received the Best Dissertation Award from the American Academy of Advertising. We have produced more than a dozen presentations (both academic and industry audiences) and articles related to this project (details are in the Annual Report).

Next Year’s Goals:

Once the online pilot study and style category stimulus testing and development are complete and analyses have been conducted (late spring/summer 2003), we will make any required changes to the computer software that administers the online research protocol and modify the stimuli and measures as necessary. During this period, we will continue to add to the photographic archive of product images to ensure that adequate imagery is available for the full age range of respondents that will be surveyed. Beginning in late summer/early fall we will launch three successive waves of data collection. Each wave will sample a different age demographic (roughly 800-1000 respondents per age demographic), such that by the end of Fall 2003 we will have covered the lifespan ranges addressed in the project proposal (Generation Y, Generation X, Baby-Boomers).

Data analyses will explore contingencies among choices in apparel and home furnishings categories, and test our hypotheses that contingencies among choices are (1) more cohesive among members of an age cohort who share lifestage characteristics (e.g., those who have recently or are expecting the birth of first child, or the purchase of a first/new home, etc.), (2) choices will be more cohesive among younger as compared with older age cohorts as accumulated purchase experience diminishes the influence of stereotypy, and (3) choices in one product domain will be systematically related to choices in the other. We expect to make several presentations of this work to academic and practitioner groups, to prepare several academic manuscripts for publication and to support one to two graduate students in connection with the project.

Approach:

Our prior research supports our basic premise that consumers organize product information in memory based on stylistic interrelationships spanning merchandise categories. While most industry research is product-specific, consumers integrate information about many different items (pants, tops, shoes, or rugs, couches, wallpaper) when choosing design options. Furthermore, these relationships are hypothesized to vary in intensity across the lifespan. Since a lifestage transition is associated with consumer learning of a new “life role,” we expect to find that the cohesiveness of preferences across diverse product domains (e.g., apparel and home furnishings) will be greatest immediately prior to and after the point of transition (e.g., marriage,

birth of a first child, and so on). As the consumer acclimates to the role, this cohesiveness is expected to diminish and stylistic preferences will become more idiosyncratic. Similarly, we expect that as consumers become more experienced buyers (across the lifespan), their preferences will become more self-expressive and less stereotypical.

Thus, one goal of this part of the project is to explore fundamental theoretical issues concerning the relationship between life-stage role transition and the “cohesiveness” of tastes between apparel and interior décor product categories. We will also examine the moderating effects of individual difference measures such as household income, social class and psychographic variables. The resulting database will allow us to conduct several critical “experiments” to probe (1) the relative strength of cross-category relationships (apparel style --> home furnishing product choices v. home furnishing style --> apparel product choice), (2) the relationship between lifestage “time lags” (the immediacy of a life transition) to cohesiveness, (3) the role of consumer experience in determining the cohesiveness (or stereotypy) among product sets chosen, and (4) the moderating effects of consumer demographic and psychographic characteristics on the foregoing relationships.

The cross-category preference dynamics that we are studying in this project and their relationship to the consumer characteristics described above have important ramifications for the way apparel and home furnishings products are developed, tested, and merchandised. Thus, for example, the methodology used in this work might be used by industry to better formulate product development and marketing strategies that involve cross-merchandising and brand licensing across apparel and home furnishing product categories aimed at particular consumer segments (definable by the lifestage and other measures used here). In addition, the project makes a fundamental contribution to our understanding of how consumer lifestage transitions influence how product information and preferences are represented cognitively, and the degree to which consumer segments do (or do not) agree on perceived “appropriateness of specific choices.” Finally, our approach further demonstrates the general utility of conducting consumer research using online tools to systematically explore stylistic interrelationships among diverse categories of products relevant to the textile and apparel industry.

Outreach to Industry:

In addition to the practitioners we consulted to validate our approach, several companies have expressed interest in the project, including DuPont, Unifi and NFO WorldGroup. We will work toward sharing the project with other firms by making industry presentations and by making available our academic reports of the project.

New Resources Required:

New computer hardware and software systems to handle the large scale databases that will be generated by the project and the associated analysis needs. Resources to support the sample recruitment and compensation costs associated with generating the consumer samples needed in the project. Support for graduate students.