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Clothing Problems of Upper Middle Socio-Economic Group (Females) in Nigeria (Pp. 48-60)

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Abstract

Clothing is one of the basic needs of man. It includes any garment, accessory, ornament and apparel placed on the body to adorn, protect, project or communicate intent. This paper focuses on the clothing problems of affluent female consumers in the upper middle socio-economic group, who have money to spend, as well as some access to retail fashion. Their clothing problems were discussed in relation to fashion leadership, fashion involvement, brand typologies, maintaining an interest in fashion and looking young, influence of the media and price and prestige issues. Recommendations for improving the clothing problems include that rather than ban imported clothing, Government should issue importation license for them and impose huge taxes on them. This will help in making the desired imported clothing available for the women, reducing the smuggling of these textiles and as well as increasing the internally generated revenue base of the county.

Introduction

Since prehistory, all societies have perceived hierarchy among their members. Leaders and followers, strong and weak, rich and poor: social classifications are universal. Humans have invented numerous ways to classify people—by wealth, power, or prestige; by ability, education, or occupation; even by where they live. Such classification is popularly known

as Socio-Economic Status (SES). As Boushey, Heather and Weller (2005) noted, Socioeconomic status (SES) is a combined total measure of a person's work experience minus their measure of an individual's or family's economic and social position relative to others, based on *income, education, and occupation*. Socioeconomic status is typically broken into three socio-economic groups or categories, high SES, middle SES, and low SES to describe the three groups a family or an individual may fall into.

Socio-Economic Group

A socio-economic group is a division of society that shares a similar social and economic status. It is often distinguished by unequal access to desirable resources (such as money, goods, and services) or personal gratification (such as prestige or respect). Indicators of socioeconomic status, typically based on educational attainment, income, wealth, or occupation, are used in classifying socio-economic groups. Table I depict the Academic class Models of Socio-Economic group from three American Authors.

This typology is adopted and modified for this paper. The low socio-economic group (often referred to as "working class" or blue-collar workers) is generally associated with people with low levels of education, unskilled or semiskilled occupations, and low income. Middle-socio-economic group (often seen as "white-collar" workers) generally have more education, usually having graduated from high school or college, hold technical or mid-level managerial positions, and earn average to above average incomes. High socio-economic group tend to have high education, the highest salaries, and the most prestigious occupational positions. The affluent in the society belong to the upper middle socio-economic group and is the focus of this paper.

Upper Middle Socio-Economic Group or the Affluent

The upper-middle class include professionals with a college education, and more often with postgraduate degrees like MBA's, Ph.D.'s, MD's, JD's, MS's, etc. (e.g., doctors, dentists, lawyers, bankers, corporate executives, university professors, scientists, pharmacists, airline pilots, ship captains, high level civil servants, politicians, and military officers, architects, artists, writers, poets, and musicians). This group includes employees of the state or the private sector, in administrative-managerial and professional-technical positions. They exercise some authority and enjoy relative autonomy. In this category are those who are employed in economic activities and social

services of the state. Those employed in the administrative or managerial position in the political apparatus of the state are also included here.

This paper is specifically focused on the affluent female socio-economic group within the upper middle class. This group is mostly found in the urban areas in Nigeria. Most females in this class are aged 35+60, married, employed, and had higher education levels. The majority of them had some college, a degree, or advanced degree. The interest in this group is as a result of the observation that this class of women controls most of the annual household expenditures in Nigeria (United Nations Development Programme, 2004). This statistic also indicates that the number of affluent women in the upper middle socio-economic group grew by 68% from 1997 to 1999, compared with a 36% growth of affluent men within the same period. Due in part, to higher education, the upper middle class affluent women have increased their earning power in the workforce and are now responsible for more than half of annual clothing expenditures in the United States alone (McGuinn, 2000). This implies that the affluent women's clothing market is growing as an increasingly important financial segment. In the United States, Barletta (2003) found that upper middle class affluent women are responsible for 83% of all consumer clothing purchases.

Clothing is one of the basic needs of man. It includes any garment, accessory, ornament and apparel placed on the body to adorn, protect, project or communicate intent (Xu, 2000). Jones (1990) stated that clothes are worn among people for six common reasons: protection, modesty, occupational identity, attraction, social status and traditional identity. The way people dress can tell us a lot of things about them. Ukpore (2006) pointed out that different socio-economic classes typically dress differently as a matter of class identification to impact the information to other members of the class, family or community. People are careful in clothing so that when people go to a place important for them, they should make sure that their appearance is immaculate and they should consider comfort of their outfit.

Problems of Clothing among Female Middle Socio-Economic Group in Urban Areas

The clothing problems among this socio-economic group are discussed under the following sub-headings:

- 1) Product Branding
- 2) Fashion Leadership

- 3) Too much of Fashion Involvement (Materialism and motives for consumption)
- 4) Media Influence
- 5) Negative price perceptions and Prestige sensitivity
- 6) Inferiority Complex
- 7) Affluenza
- 8) Economic Wastages

Product Branding

Because clothing products have different meanings to different people, consumers form differing attachments to them. Unique consumer-product relationships develop specific to the individual and the situation, but the nature of the product is also highly relevant. The meaning of products may ultimately depend more on the nature of consumers rather than the nature of products (Martin, 1998; Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981). Upper middle class women prefer clothes from popular brand designers such as Marks and Spencer, Yves St Laurent, Etc. In Nigeria, these brands are imported. This makes it difficult for the affluent women to access them. Some of them have to travel out of the country to do their shopping so that they could purchase their desired brands. In Auty and Elliott's (1998) study of fashion involvement, self-monitoring and the meaning of brands; perceptions of brands were perceived differently according to the age and sex of the respondent. The findings suggest that upper middle class women were most positive about their trendiness in product branding and could go all the way to get their desired brand. Even when they go for Nigerian designers, they prefer the popular designers who often delay sewing their clothes because of work load and time. Under such situations, they fail to wear their desired clothes to specific occasions and anger, bitterness and resentment occur.

Fashion Leadership

Many upper middle class women are fashion leaders. Fashion leaders comprise a unique and important segment of the apparel market. Because they are among the first to purchase apparel when new styles appear on the market, their reactions to new styles may be crucial to the eventual success or failure of the product (Goldsmith, Moore, & Beaudoin, 1999). Fashion leaders have an impact and an influential effect on later adopters. They want to influence fashion followers by providing them with exposure to new styles. The fashion leader-consumer has historically been important to

fashion researchers and marketers because fashion involved consumers are seen as the drivers, influentials, and legitimists of the fashion adoption process (O’Cass, 2000). Women from this group who are fashion leaders spend more money on apparel, read more fashion magazines, go shopping more often, and tend to be younger than fashion followers (Beaudoin, Moore, & Goldsmith, 1998). Goldsmith (2002) found that fashion leaders have a unique self-image and opinion leadership was associated with heavy clothing purchases. This makes them engage in extravagant life-styles sometimes to the detriment of their other family needs and resources (Belleau, Nowlin, Summers, & Xu, 2001).

Too much of Fashion Involvement (Materialism and motives for consumption)

Another problem of this group is that they are highly involved in fashion. Fashion involvement is a consumer’s perceived importance of fashion clothing (O’Cass, 2001). Tigert (1976) found that fashion involvement is composed of five dimensions of fashion adoption-related behavior: a) fashion innovativeness and time of purchase, b) fashion interpersonal connection, c) fashion interest, d) fashion knowledgeability, e) and fashion awareness and reaction to changing fashion trends. Even where women from upper middle class socio-economic group do not provide fashion leadership, they are highly involved in fashion and wearing reigning clothes. Because of the attention they pay to fashion, this socio-economic group must figure highly in any study of clothing (Auty & Elliott, 1998). Results demonstrated that the highly fashion involved consumer is also a heavy fashion clothing buyer (O’Cass, 2001). Because of too much of fashion involvement, some women purchase clothes on credit and might be insulted or assaulted if they fail to pay their credits on time as agreed. Materialism and motives for consumption were found to have a statistically significant relationship with consumer’s level of fashion clothing involvement and could lead to life dissatisfaction.

Media Influence

Upper middle class female consumers have been influenced by several media such as television, the internet, and traditional catalog based shopping. Furthermore, affluent females are more apt to have become accustomed to media that depict affluent and opulent lifestyles (Bakewell & Mitchell, 2003). Media influence makes this group of females to desire more textiles, jewelries, styles, designs, colour and couture in order to belong.

Another aspect of media influence is over publicity. The upper middle class women are regarded as celebrities and they often over dress to be noticed. They often attract the attention of the media and with or without their permissions; their photographs are often displayed in newspapers. Some of them that do not like too much publicity might detest this and seek legal means of redress.

Negative Price Perceptions and Prestige Sensitivity

Price perceptions have effects on their purchase behavior. Consumers perceive price differently for different products. Upper middle class women have individual price perceptions and buy products that are priced at what they are willing to pay for those products (Ehrenberg, Schriener & Barnard, 1997). Consequently, the products they prefer are over-priced. High price may be considered a sign of quality or a prestige signal it sends to others about the purchaser. A strong price/quality perception suggests a firm belief that the price of a product is a good indicator of its quality and is a symbol of prestige.

Prestige sensitivity can be viewed as the tendency to make attributions about other consumers, or to be sensitive to attributions made by other consumers, on the basis of the price level of purchase. Prestige sensitivity is related to socially visible behaviors, whereas price/quality perceptions are influenced by cues that reinforce the validity of using price to imply quality (McGowan & Sternquist, 1998). Affluent women are also concerned with the prestige associated with higher priced products. Perhaps because of their high income levels, they are more willing to pay for the prestige associated with higher priced products. If product price is high, research has shown that the female high class consumer may be more interested in purchasing the product. In essence, they do not prefer buying cheap clothing even though the quality may be good. They often lead to inferior materials being sold to them at exorbitant prices or defrauding them of their money under the pretence of traveling to purchase prestigious clothes for them.

Inferiority Complex

Some women in this group do not want to be beaten when it comes to clothing. They want to be exquisitely and best dressed in every occasion they attend. In any case where they feel that somebody else is better dressed than them, they begin to feel inferior and uncomfortable. This also happens when they are not noticed at or flattered at occasions. Some of them that use clothing to hide

defects such as skin blemishes, obesity or wasting, might feel that people are staring at their defects rather than their clothing. This makes them sad, depressed, loose self-confidence or become public-self-conscious. In Solomon and Schopler's (1982) study, public self-consciousness was designed to measure the extent to which people are concerned about their appearance, style of behavior, and the general impression they make on others. Results indicated that clothing measures showed a consistent and pervasive correlation with scores on public self-consciousness. Where females of upper socio-economic status negative public self-consciousness, their self worth is diminished.

Size Problems

Since many people in this group prefer ready-made imported clothes, getting their sizes may be difficult for them. Also, weight gain and obesity are associated with affluence as many Nigerian affluent ladies have soaring levels of obesity. This makes it difficult to get clothes that fit. McGuinn, (2000) noted that many 35+ affluent consumers find it very hard to get a good fit in clothing. This is partly a size issue as plus sizes or extra large sizes are not frequently found in the younger market segment they desire.

Affluenza

It seems that females from the upper middle socio-economic group are falling victim to the epidemic of Affluenza. Williams (2007) defined affluenza as the dysfunctional relationship between the acquisition of wealth and other sources of self-esteem. This disorder is constantly reinforcing itself at individual and social levels, forcing people to derive their identities and sense of place in the world through our consumption and materialistic gains. Affluenza among the females in the upper middle socio-economic group leads to overdressing, yields greed, debt, overwork, waste, and harm to the environment, leading to psychological disorders, alienation, and distress. Females in the upper middle socio-economic group suffer the problem of influenza when they seek buying more clothes than they need. Over-exposure to finer clothing in life can lead to overindulgence and attitudes of entitlement. Friendships with other affluent people may support insularity and snobbery and ultimately females from these group who suffer this problem may become unable to delay gratification, have low self confidence and insecurity, display tension, nervousness, or irritability without provocation

Economic Wastages

Some upper middle socio-economic women are always burdened with the problem of over quantity of clothing. They buy high quantities of imported clothing which the government sees as economic waste. This is because they like to be always noticed and have some money to spend on items of clothing. Some of them have more clothes than they need and these clothes stay in the wardrobe until they are out-of fashion. Some people are not willing to give out the old fashioned clothes to charity because of superstitious beliefs. Moreover, the market for made-in-Nigeria second hand clothes is not popular. Therefore, these out-of-fashion clothes are often burnt or discarded, in either case they become economic wastes.

Recommendations for Improving the Clothing Problems of the Upper Middle Socio-Economic Women

Based on the identified clothing problems of the upper middle socio-economic women, the following recommendations are made;

- 1) Rather than ban imported clothing, Government should issue importation license for them and impose huge taxes on them. This will help in making the desired imported clothing available for the women, reducing the smuggling of these textiles and increasing the internally generated revenue base of the county.
- 2) More people should be encouraged to go into fashion and designing. Scholarships should be given for people to study fashion and designing in higher institutions so that they could produce the clothing that meets the required tastes of the upper middle class women.
- 3). Textile producers should produce high quality materials for this group.
- 4). To avoid problems with fit and the plus size, allowances should given in women clothing for adjustments. This will ensure that as plus sizes are frequently found in this market segment.
- 5) Tailors should make efforts to train their staff to offer knowledgeable, polite and quality inter-personal services to their customers.
- 6) Multi-channel marketing of clothes is a must. Many upper middle class consumers are techno-savvy, so multi-channel such as media, Internet, magazines and television could be used by retailers to reach this group.
- 7) Government should sponsor television jingles, drama and talk shows to sensitize the upper middle socio-economic group on appropriate clothing and value of local clothing items.

- 8) Government should redeem our ailing textile industries. They should give loans to the industries, revive them and provide them with power (Electricity) so they meet the clothing demands of the people.
- 9) People, irrespective of socio-economic group should learn to develop self-confidence and not to depend on their clothing for self-esteem.

Conclusions

This paper focuses on affluent female consumers in the upper middle socio-economic group, who have money to spend, as well as some access to retail fashion. Affluent females are basic clothing consumers. Their clothing market, and the consumers in it, is worth getting to know. It's a growth sector not just in consumer numbers but also sales value - some in the industry believe it will outperform the overall clothing market over the next few years. However, they have clothing problems of fashion leadership, fashion involvement, brand typologies, maintaining an interest in fashion and looking young, influence of the media and price and prestige issues. Clothing marketers can benefit from this information by developing pricing and promotional tactics to appeal to this market. Retailers can also benefit from this study by knowing what to consider when pricing products and promoting to affluent female consumers. Educators can use this research as a basis for developing new studies examining affluent females new strategies can be developed in terms of design, development, and selling of clothing for female upper middle class women.

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Table 1: American Models of Socio-Economic Group

Academic Class Models					
<u>Dennis Gilbert, 2002</u>		William Thompson & Joseph Hickey, 2005		<u>Leonard Beeghley, 2004</u>	
Class	Typical characteristics	Class	Typical characteristics	Class	Typical characteristics
Capitalist class (1%)	Top-level executives, high-rung politicians, heirs. Ivy League education common.	Upper class 1%	Top-level executives, celebrities, heirs; income of \$500,000+ common. Ivy league education common.	The super-rich (0.9%)	Multi-millionaires whose incomes commonly exceed \$350,000; includes celebrities and powerful executives/politicians. Ivy League education common.
				The Rich (5%)	Households with net worth of \$1 million or more; largely in the form of home equity. Generally have college degrees.
Upper middle class ¹ (15%)	Highly educated (often with graduate degrees), most commonly salaried, professionals and middle management with large work autonomy	Upper middle class ¹ (15%)	Highly educated (often with graduate degrees) professionals & managers with household incomes varying from the high 5-figure range to commonly above \$100,000	Middle class (plurality/majority?; ca. 46%)	College educated workers with incomes considerably above-average incomes and compensation; a man making \$57,000 and a woman making \$40,000 may be typical.
Lower middle class (30%)	Semi-professionals and craftsmen with a roughly average standard of living. Most have some college education and are white collar.	Lower middle class (32%)	Semi-professionals and craftsman with some work autonomy; household incomes commonly range from \$35,000 to \$75,000. Typically, some college education.		

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Working class (30%)	Clerical and most blue collar workers whose work is highly routinized. Standard of living varies depending on number of income earners, but is commonly just adequate. High school education.	Working class (32%)	Clerical, pink and blue collar workers with often low job security; common household incomes range from \$16,000 to \$30,000. High school education.	Working class (ca. 40% - 45%)	Blue collar workers and those whose jobs are highly routinized with low economic security; a man making \$40,000 and a woman making \$26,000 may be typical. High school education.
Working poor (13%)	Service, low-rung clerical and some blue collar workers. High economic insecurity and risk of poverty. Some high school education.	Lower class (ca. 14% - 20%)	Those who occupy poorly-paid positions or rely on government transfers. Some high school education.	The poor (ca. 12%)	Those living below the poverty line with limited to no participation in the labor force; a household income of \$18,000 may be typical. Some high school education.
Underclasses (12%)	Those with limited or no participation in the labor force. Reliant on government transfers. Some high school education.				

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