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Research in brief

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Materialistic girls watching a materialistic world: fashion TV series and women's copy-cat intentions

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Abstract: Inspired by the popularity of TV series such as *Gossip Girl*, *The City* and *The Hills* which revolve around the world of fashion, this article examines whether and how these series are related to young women's willingness to purchase products that allow them to replicate the appearances of the main characters. The results demonstrated that in particular women with materialistic orientations would like to emulate the main characters. The mechanisms underlying this relation are that materialistic women watch fashion TV series to gain fashion inspiration; subsequently they watch these series more frequently, and this behavior is related to increased copy-cat intentions.

Keywords: brand placement, materialism, copy-cat intentions, viewing frequency, uses and gratifications

1 Introduction

TV series such as *The Hills*, *The City*, and *Gossip Girl* are immensely popular among young women (Dehnart, 2008; Seidman, 2010). These series revolve around the world of beauty and fashion and therefore provide a unique environment for purposefully incorporating brands into editorial content (i.e., brand placement; Bullen, 2009; Leppert and Wilson, 2008; Van Reijmersdal,

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Neijens, and Smit, 2007; Van Reijmersdal, Tutaj, and Boerman, 2013). For marketers, these programs are interesting outlets to showcase their products because young women who watch these series may choose to mimic the appearance of the characters and purchase products that are similar to the products modeled by the main characters. This is referred to as copy-cat behavior.

Up till now, it remains undetermined whether young women watching series like *The Hills*, *The City*, and *Gossip Girl* actually have the intention to perform such copy-cat behavior and which types of women are most susceptible to these influences. We propose that some women are more prone to engage in this type of behavior than other women; women who already possess materialistic values might be most likely to be influenced by brand placements in these 'fashion TV series'. A potential explanation of this assumption is that materialistic people possess "an orientation emphasizing possessions and money for personal happiness and progress" (Churchill and Mochis, 1979, p. 29), which is a value that is typically also promoted in fashion TV series. However, no study has empirically tested whether materialism is related to copy-cat intentions. Therefore, the first aim of this paper is to provide insight into *whether* the materialistic orientation of viewers is related to copy-cat intentions induced by watching fashion TV series.

The second aim of the paper is to provide insight into *how* such an influence would take place. This will provide new theoretical insights into the processes that explain the effects of these series. In this paper, two related underlying mechanisms will be examined: viewing motivation and viewing frequency. First, materialistic women may watch fashion TV series with motivations and needs that are dissimilar to the motivations and needs of less materialistic women. Materialistic women may watch these series to obtain fashion inspiration and to follow trends. This viewing motivation may result in intensified copy-cat intentions because fashion TV series usually fulfill this need. Second, materialistic women may watch fashion TV series more frequently than less materialistic women because these series correspond to the tendency of materialistic women to orient toward possessions. Repetitive exposure may consequently influence their copy-cat intentions.

2 Theoretical background

2.1 The relation between materialism and copy-cat intentions

Consistent with Belk (1985) and Richins (2013), we treat materialism as a trait rather than as a state. The reason is that the possession of a set of materialistic

values is usually a personality trait that is rather consistent over time, whereas there is also literature that has shown that exposure to advertising can enhance materialistic values in the long run (Buijzen and Valkenburg, 2000; Oprea, Buijzen, Van Reijmersdal, and Valkenburg, 2013). Materialistic people have a nearly limitless desire to possess material things (Oprea et al., 2013; Richins, 2013). Previous research has demonstrated that materialistic people are extremely responsive to advertising because advertising helps people decide which products to purchase (Goldberg, Gorn, Peracchio, and Bamossy, 2003). Moreover, advertising promotes the ideology that possessions are important and that desirable qualities, such as beauty, happiness, and success, can be obtained by acquiring material possessions (Belk and Pollay, 1985; Buijzen, Rozendaal, Moorman, and Tanis, 2008; Oprea, Buijzen, and Valkenburg, 2012; Pollay, 1986; Richins, 1995). This line of reasoning can be extended to fashion TV series because brands are often purposefully integrated in the content of fashion TV series (i.e., brand placement, Van Reijmersdal et al., 2007) making it an embedded or hidden form of advertising (Cain, 2011). Moreover, products are used by people who are famous and/or extremely attractive. Advertising and fashion TV series display a level of wealth that is unattainable for the average consumer and depict idealized versions of life within the contexts of the brands placed (Oprea et al., 2012; Richins, 1995; Belk and Pollay, 1985; Pollay, 1986; Sirgy et al., 2012).

Social comparison theory suggests that women tend to make positive comparisons with the characters in these series (based on Festinger, 1954; e.g., Eyal and Te'eni-Harari, 2013; Hill, Martin, and Chaplin, 2012). These marketing tactics create associations between brands and desirable outcomes and promote consumptive behavior (Eisend and Möller, 2007). Materialistic consumers are increasingly convinced that the purchase of desired products will transform their lives in meaningful ways; as a result, they act on these beliefs by purchasing additional products (Watson, 2003). To incorporate parts of the lives that are portrayed in fashion TV series in their own lives, materialistic viewers are expected to be more susceptible to imitating the brand-related behaviors in the series. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 states:

[H1] Women who are more materialistic have a higher intention to exhibit copy-cat behavior than women who are less materialistic.

2.2 The mediating role of viewing motivation

The uses and gratifications approach proposes that people use specific media content to serve or gratify their specific needs (e.g., Katz, Blumler, and Gure-

vitch, 1973; for a recent review, see Papacharissi, 2008). Young women who view fashion TV series may have various needs. In this paper, two specific needs are central. First, young women may watch fashion TV series to relax and have a good time. Second, they may watch to follow trends and gain fashion inspiration. We expect that this latter need plays an important role in explaining *how* materialism influences copy-cat intentions because personality traits, such as materialism, shape the gratifications that are sought from media (Hall, 2005). Materialistic women may primarily watch fashion TV series to gain fashion inspiration and follow trends because this type of media corresponds to their personality and they expect that these needs can be fulfilled by watching fashion TV series. Consequently, the ideas that materialistic viewers acquire about the importance of material products is strengthened by the idealized worlds portrayed in fashion TV series; thus, it is more probable that they will emulate the appearances in the fashion TV series than will their non-materialistic counterparts. Although non-materialistic women may also watch fashion TV series, their decision to view may be primarily based on the motivation to relax and have a good time. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 states:

[H2] Women who are more materialistic watch fashion TV series (a) to gain fashion inspiration more frequently than women who are less materialistic, (b) which subsequently influences copy-cat intentions.

2.3 The mediating role of viewing frequency

A second explanation for the relation between materialism and copy-cat intentions is the frequency with which young women watch fashion TV series. Selective exposure theory (Klapper, 1960) states that people favor information that is consistent with their existing beliefs. People tend to select media content that reinforces their beliefs. One factor that may influence individual beliefs and the selection of media content is personality. Personality characteristics, such as materialism, are known to influence the frequency with which people watch specific genres of media. People tend to watch genres that match their personality more frequently than genres that clash with their personality (Hall, 2005). Research on advertising and brand placement has demonstrated that repetitive exposure to media content results in stronger effects (Harmon-Jones and Allen, 2001; Van Reijmersdal et al., 2007; Zajonc, 1968).

In addition, cultivation theory predicts that viewers of a significant amount of television have distorted perceptions of the world (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli, 1994), or that “those who spend more time watching television

are more likely to perceive the real world in ways that reflect the most common and recurrent messages of the world of fictional television” (Morgan and Shanahan, 2010, p. 337). The idea of cultivation is also applicable to specific genres (Hetsroni, 2014; Morgan and Shanahan, 2010). In the case of fashion TV series, repeated exposure to idealized images influence women’s perceptions of how their lives should function, particularly in terms of material possessions (based on Richins, 1995; Hill et al., 2012), and it is likely that women act on this belief through shopping (Watson, 2003) and the purchase of luxury brands (Shrum, 1999). Thus, when young women watch fashion TV series more frequently, it is more likely that the brands that are integrated in the series influence their copy-cat intentions. Therefore, Hypothesis 3 states:

[H3] Women who are more materialistic (a) watch fashion TV series more frequently than women who are less materialistic, (b) which subsequently increases copy-cat intentions.

2.4 Viewing motivation and viewing frequency as mediators

Viewing motivation and viewing frequency can also be related; the combination of these factors might explain the relation between materialism and copy-cat intentions. Based on the uses and gratifications framework, it can be argued that materialistic women watch fashion TV series to gain fashion inspiration, whereas non-materialistic women are more likely to watch these series with other motivations, such as relaxation. The uses and gratifications framework also poses the idea that when these gratifications are satisfied by media, people are motivated to continue using the same type of media (Busemeyer, Townsend, and Stout, 2001; Slater, 2007). Thus, materialistic women may frequently watch fashion TV series because the gratifications they seek are likely to be attained by watching these series. Ultimately, frequent exposure to fashion TV series may result in stronger effects, such as copy-cat intentions (Harmon-Jones and Allen, 2001; Hill et al., 2012; Richins, 1995; Van Reijmersdal et al., 2007; Watson, 2003). Therefore, Hypothesis 4 states:

[H4] Women who are more materialistic (a) watch fashion TV series to gain fashion inspiration more frequently than women who are less materialistic, which (b) subsequently results in an intensified viewing of fashion TV series and (c) ultimately increases copy-cat intentions.

3 Methods

A preliminary content analysis of three fashion TV series (*The Hills*, *The City*, and *Gossip Girl*) was conducted to provide insight into the appearance of brand placements in fashion TV series. A survey was conducted to analyze the influence of materialism on copy-cat intentions and the mediating roles of viewing motivation and viewing frequency.

3.1 Content analysis

Sample and procedure. Three fashion TV series were selected: *The Hills*, *The City* and *Gossip Girl*. These series were chosen because fashion plays an important role in each of these series. For each series, one season was coded (i.e., the final seasons of *The Hills* and *The City* and season four of *Gossip Girl*). The content analysis was conducted from April 2011 to May 2011. A total of 30 episodes were coded. To assess whether the coding instrument was sufficient and to resolve any coding problems, one episode was coded by two different coders.

Coding instrument. Brand placements were defined as brands, logos, or other brand identifiers which are embedded in the series. A coding instrument was developed to code the number of brand placements and several characteristics of the specific brand placements. The number of brand placements was counted and the brands involved were coded. We also coded which character was using or wearing the brand in the placement and how long the brand was modeled and/or talked about by the characters during a single episode (0–5 seconds, 6–10 seconds or 11–15 seconds). A second coder performed the coding of two episodes for each of the three fashion TV series; six episodes were coded twice. The percentage agreement between the number of brands included in the series was calculated to determine the inter-coder reliability (.79). This result demonstrated that the instrument could be applied in a reliable manner (Neuendorf, 2017).

3.2 Survey

Procedure and sample. An invitation with a direct link to the online survey was distributed by e-mail to the personal network of the second author. A total of 150 women between the ages of 13 and 37 years old ($M = 22.30$ and $SD = 4.02$) participated in the study. Due to incomplete data, the final sample consisted of 129 women. The levels of education of the respondents ranged from high school

to college (master's degree). The majority of the respondents held at least a bachelor degree (73.8%).

Measures. To measure materialism, the Youth Materialism Scale (YMS) of Goldberg et al. (2003) was employed. Materialism was measured by seven statements: for example, 'more money makes me happier', 'I admire people who dress well', 'I would like to have more money so I can buy more', and 'I like to think about all the stuff I possess' on a scale ranging from 1 (*fully disagree*) to 5 (*fully agree*). The scores were averaged to create a single measure of materialism ($\alpha = .73$; $M = 3.14$; and $SD = 0.58$).

To measure whether the respondents watch fashion TV series to gain inspiration about fashion, we asked how likely it was that they watch fashion TV series 'to follow trends' and 'to gain fashion inspiration' on a scale ranging from 1 (*very unlikely*) to 5 (*very likely*). The scores were averaged to create a single measure of fashion inspiration motivation ($M = 3.03$, $SD = 1.09$, $r = .78$, and $p = .00$). Using an equivalent scale, the survey queried how likely it is that they watch fashion TV series to *relax* ($M = 4.51$, $SD = .60$).

To measure viewing frequencies for fashion TV series, the following questions were posed: 'How frequently do you watch ...', with *Gossip Girl*, *The City*, or *The Hills* inserted in each question, on a scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*daily*) (*Gossip Girl*: $M = 2.69$ and $SD = 1.20$; *The City*: $M = 2.65$ and $SD = 1.05$; and *The Hills*: $M = 2.72$ and $SD = 1.03$). The scale ends were adopted from Lee, Hornik, and Hennessy (2008).

Copy-cat intentions were measured by three questions. First, the respondents were asked to select a character from the three fashion TV series that they considered the most stylish. The use of respondents' favorite characters was based on research on social comparison such as that of Eyal and Te'eni-Harari (2013). The respondents selected people from a list of characters that made frequent appearances. Second, the respondents were asked how likely it is that they would dress like that character and how likely it is that they would purchase clothing, shoes, handbags, and accessories modeled by that character. These questions were measured on a scale ranging from 1 (*very unlikely*) to 5 (*very likely*). Last, the respondents were asked to indicate how often they focus on what their favorite celebrity is wearing and buying on a scale from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*). Mean scores were calculated to create a single measure of copy-cat intentions ($\alpha = .83$; $M = 3.22$; and $SD = 0.74$).

4 Results

4.1 Content analysis

The content analysis revealed that a total of 350 brand placements existed in the three seasons of the three fashion TV series. Brands appeared most frequently in *The City* with an average of 19.6 brand placements per episode, *Gossip Girl* contained the next highest number with an average of 10.1 brand placements per episode. *The Hills* contained the lowest number of brand placements with an average of 5.3 per episode. The majority of brand placements were fashion-related: clothing (30.3%), (fashion) magazines (18%), and handbags (12.3%). Electronic equipment (18.6%) was also a popular category. The brands that appeared most frequently in the three series included the fashion brands ELLE (11.4%) and Chanel (9.4%). A significant percentage (42%) of the brand placements aired for one to five seconds.

4.2 Survey

The relation between materialism and copy-cat intentions. To assess whether materialism influences the copy-cat intentions of women (H1), a regression analysis was conducted, with materialism as the predictor and copy-cat intentions as the dependent variable. The results revealed that materialism is a significant predictor of copy-cat intentions ($B = 1.89$, $SE = .69$, $t = 2.72$, $p = .01$). This finding indicates that respondents who are more materialistic exhibit more copy-cat intentions than women who are less materialistic. Therefore, H1 is supported by the data.

The mediating role of viewing motivation. To assess whether the relation between materialism and copy-cat intentions is mediated by watching fashion TV series to gain fashion inspiration (H2), we performed a regression analysis with watching to gain fashion inspiration and materialism as the predictors and copy-cat intentions as the dependent variable. The results indicated that materialism is a significant predictor of watching to gain fashion inspiration ($B = .78$, $SE .38$, $t = 2.05$, $p < .001$). In addition, the effect of materialism on copy-cat intentions is not significant ($B = 1.37$, $SE = .71$, $t = 1.91$, $p = .06$), which suggests mediation. To assess whether the indirect effect of materialism via watching fashion TV series to gain fashion inspiration on copy-cat intentions is significant, we used the PROCESS macro developed by Hayes (2013, model 6). This macro offers a statistical test of mediation using bootstrapping. The method is superior to the Sobel test because it respects the non-normality of

the sampling distribution of the indirect effect (Preacher and Hayes, 2008). The analysis showed a significant mediation effect ($B = .44$, $SE = .27$, and bias-corrected 95 % confidence interval [.10, 1.32]) for materialism on copy-cat intentions via watching fashion TV series to gain fashion inspiration because zero is not included in the confidence interval. Based on these results, it can be concluded that materialistic women watch fashion TV series to learn about fashion, which intensifies their copy-cat intentions. Thus, H2 is accepted.

The mediating role of viewing frequency. To assess whether the influence of materialism on copy-cat intentions is mediated by viewing frequency (H3), a regression analysis was conducted with materialism and viewing frequency as the predictors and copy-cat intentions as the dependent variable. The results indicate that viewing frequency is a significant predictor of copy-cat intentions ($B = 2.12$, $SE = .44$, $t = 4.79$, $p < .001$). In addition, the effect of materialism on copy-cat intentions is no longer significant ($B = 1.23$, $SE = .66$, $t = 1.87$, $p = .06$). To determine whether the indirect effect of materialism via viewing frequency on copy-cat intentions is significant, we again employed the PROCESS macro. The analysis revealed a significant mediation effect ($B = .69$, $SE = .41$, BC 95 % CI [.09, 1.79]) of materialism on copy-cat intentions via viewing frequency because zero was not included in the confidence interval. Based on these results, it can be concluded that materialistic women watch fashion TV series more frequently, which subsequently influences the copy-cat intentions of women. For that reason, H3a and H3b are accepted.

How viewing motivation and viewing frequency together explain the effect of materialism on copycat behavior. To assess whether the effect of materialism via fashion motivation and viewing frequency on copy-cat intentions is significant (H4), we employed the PROCESS macro developed by Hayes. This macro enables a statistical test of serial mediation using bootstrapping. Because zero was not included in the confidence interval, the analysis showed a significant serial mediation effect ($B = .40$, $SE = .25$, and BC 95 % CI [.10, 1.07]) of materialism on copy-cat intentions via watching fashion TV series to gain fashion inspiration and subsequently via viewing frequency. This finding indicates that women who are more materialistic watch fashion TV series to gain fashion inspiration, which results in higher viewing frequencies and ultimately results in intensified copy-cat intentions. We also tested whether the direction of the relations between our variables would be the other way around, but these analyses revealed that the relationships were not reversed. Thus, H4 is accepted.

5 Conclusion and discussion

This study aimed to provide insight into popular fashion TV series. The results of a preliminary content analysis showed that these series included a substantial number of well-known luxury brands. The survey tested individual susceptibility to the idealized world of fashion TV series which revolve around brands and possessions. We investigated not only whether materialistic women have the intention to engage in increased copy-cat behavior but also investigated the mechanisms through which this influence took place.

The most important conclusion from this study is that women who are more materialistic have a greater tendency to exhibit copy-cat behavior than women who are less materialistic. The results provide two interrelated explanations for this influence. First, women who are more materialistic watch fashion TV series to gain fashion inspiration; because this need is satisfied by watching fashion TV series, they also engage in copy-cat intentions. Second, women who are more materialistic watch fashion TV series more frequently than women who are less materialistic, which is related to their copy-cat intentions. We discover that these explanations account for the effect of materialism on copy-cat intentions and provide important and innovative theoretical insights into the impact of fashion TV series on viewers. Materialistic women watch fashion TV series to gain fashion inspiration; eventually, they watch these series more frequently, which is related to increased copy-cat intentions.

The study makes important contributions. Generally, literature on materialism is not related to literature on brand placement. By providing insight into the underlying mechanisms of the relation between materialism traits and persuasive outcomes, our study is the first project to connect these two fields. More specifically, we demonstrate that viewing motivation and viewing frequency are critical for explaining how materialistic women are influenced by fashion TV series. We believe studying series like *The Hills*, *The City* and *Gossip Girl* is important given their recent popularity and strong viewership among teens and young adults.

The most important limitation of the current study is that it is difficult to evaluate the direction of the relationships and their causality. We concluded that materialism causes copy-cat intentions: The results of the analysis confirmed the predicted relationships and revealed that the relationships were not reversed. However, the process may be more complicated as proposed in Slater's (2007) model of reinforcing spirals which stresses that the use of a particular type of media content is likely to strengthen desires and preferences that initiated the use of the media content and maintain desired gratifications

(Slater, 2007). Future experimental or longitudinal data may provide specific insight into this issue.

The findings have important implications for marketing, consumer policy, and viewers of fashion TV series and their parents. This study provides marketers with insights into the effectiveness of the integration of brands into fashion TV series. The results reveal that the integration of luxury brands into fashion TV series is an effective marketing tool: Young women are willing to purchase luxury products, which are observed while viewing fashion TV series, with the intent of reproducing the appearance of the characters. However, the results also indicate that women who previously held materialistic tendencies are especially willing to replicate the fashions that they observe in fashion TV series. For women, the motivation to watch fashion TV series plays an important role in triggering copy-cat intentions. Copy-cat intentions are more likely to occur when women watch fashion TV series to gain fashion inspiration, rather than when they watch fashion TV series to relax. Thus, the effectiveness of integration brands in fashion TV series might be limited to a specific group of women.

For policy makers who aim to help young women to protect themselves from compulsive buying behavior, the study provides insight into the type of women that should be targeted in interventions. The results reveal that women who already possess materialistic values are especially vulnerable to the idealized world of fashion TV series. Therefore, it can be concluded that implementing policy or interventions may be more viable for reducing materialism in young women than limiting the integration of brands in TV series or warning against brand placements (Van Reijmersdal et al., 2013).

For viewers of fashion TV series and their parents, the results give indications on how to protect themselves and their children against unwanted persuasion. A way to help to guard against undesirable persuasion is to limit the time teens or young adults spend on watching fashion TV series, since viewing frequency was shown to be an important underlying mechanism that explains how materialism influences the tendency to copy.

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