

Causative Factors for the Acceptance of Denim as a Clothing Fashion by Sri Lankan Consumers

MUNASINGHE. K.R.^{1*}, and SENANAYAKE. R.²

^{1,2}Department of Integrated Design, Faculty of Architecture, University of Moratuwa, Sri Lanka

¹kaweeshamunasinghe@gmail.com, ²ruwandikas@uom.lk

Abstract – “Denim” has united the world from its origin to the present day, playing different roles to satisfy different requirements of society as a clothing fashion. This has been accepted throughout the world due to different factors that are unique to a specific community, context, or period of time. This research was a comprehensive study to identify the factors that have caused the acceptance of denim as a clothing fashion in Sri Lanka despite its extrinsic origin. The study was done using a mixed methods approach where both qualitative and quantitative data were gathered through literature, structured interviews, and questionnaire surveys to support the analytical framework, which was modified from the consumer behaviour process. The behaviour of Sri Lankan Denim consumers has been observed through a dual perspective approach to identify the causative factors for the acceptance of Denim. As the final outcome of this research, a set of causative factors that were identified by the consumers and supported by the manufacturers, designers, or marketers were analysed in three phases of the consumer behaviour process to elaborate on how the acceptance of Denim has occurred and continued within the context of Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Denim, fashion acceptance, consumer behaviour process, dual perspective approach

*Contact: phone +94 717059598

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I. Introduction

Clothing fashion can be considered a recurring process that moves from its emergence to consumer acceptance. Depending on the level of acceptance, a clothing fashion introduced into one social system will spread to other social systems (Kim & Rhee, 2001). If the diffusion process of a clothing fashion spreads in diverse contexts, that fashion may be reshaped or modified to suit the respective context, which is furnished by its physical, social, cultural, economic, and political aspects (Sproles, 1974). Understanding these aspects portrays the acceptance of a specific fashion in the clothing culture of a specific context (Swinker & Hines, 2006).

'Denim' is a globally recognized material that is designed and manufactured with a specific functional performance of resisting heavy usage as workwear in the 18th century (Beazley, 2015). But it has been able to enter even the world of high fashion and settle as the single most common form of everyday attire. At any given moment, more than half the world will be wearing this single textile (Miller & Woodward, 2007). "Nearly everyone has at least one garment made of this fabric in their closet these days." (Banerjee & Banerjee, 2019). 'Denim' is also a material-based fashion that persisted over a greater span of time. As a writer mentioned in American Fabrics Magazine (1969), "Denim is one of the world's oldest fabrics, yet it remains eternally young" (Downey, 2014).

II. 'Denim' in Sri Lankan Clothing Practices

The history of fashion and Sri Lankan dress can be traced through available records from the 5th to the 18th centuries, but nothing about denim is mentioned (Dilhani, 2015). The introduction of denim as a material-based fashion into the context of Sri Lankan clothing practice is a significant event that has had a great impact on the local fashion trends (Perera, 2016).

By 1960, the Sri Lankan film industry had developed, exposing foreign lifestyles and clothing styles to the locals. At that time, there were records of denim fabric being purchased in Kollupitiya town for the first time in Sri Lanka (Perera, 2016), which only people with high social and financial status could wear after getting them tailored to showcase their money, power, and position (Randeniya, 2009). The implementation of open economic policies in 1977 by President J.R. Jayewardene caused a rapid expansion in the garment industry (Embuldeniya, 2015). This opened the doors to globalisation, industrialization, and the development of local media and communication. The introduction of television, radio, access to foreign magazines and news, and later access to the internet had a greater influence on the spreading of denim fashions around the country. By 2000, reputed international denim brands such as Levi's, Diesel, Tommy Hilfiger, and GAP also started to send their manufacturing quotas to Sri Lanka. Hirdaramani Industries, which is currently a leading denim manufacturer, was one of the pioneers who promoted denim as a garment in Sri Lanka (Dheerasinghe, 2009).

This development has encouraged reputable denim brands to open retail stores in Sri Lanka, broadening the scope of denim fashion among the local society and clothing practices. Simultaneously, this has encouraged the emergence of local denim fashion brands that are meeting international standards since they are also manufactured within the same standards and procedures in the same garment factories as the international brands. Long Island Clothing

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Company, which has a good experience in the clothing industry and was relaunched as LiCC in 2011, is a leading brand that targets the mid- and upper-market segments. 'LiCC Jeans' has become the biggest local Denim brand in the Sri Lankan clothing industry as a subsidiary of Hirdaramani Industries. 'LiCC Jeans' has been identified as a brand developed to suit Sri Lankan Denim clothing practices while maintaining global standards.

As indirect marketing strategies in Sri Lanka, the rejected denim products with slight faults belonging to high-end brands are sold in small scale retail stores for lower prices, and the offcuts and remaining denim fabrics are sent to apparel production and fabric markets such as Pamunuwa, which is situated in Maharagama town (Dheerasinghe, 2009), so that people can use these denim fabrics for their requirements. In the present days, considerable attention has been given to Denim through events like 'Responsible Fashion Summit' conducted by 'Colombo Fashion Week' on Upcycling denim garments to minimise the adverse environmental impacts of denim while promoting many green and eco-friendly concepts to society. Many academic and industry collaborated projects are actively being developed to improve and advance denim fashion and denim-related technologies.

III. Consumer Behavior and Local Acceptance of Denim Fashion

Consumer behaviour can be defined according to the book *Consumer Behavior in Fashion* as "the study of processes involved when individuals or groups select, purchase, use, or dispose of products, services, ideas, or experiences to satisfy their needs and desires" (Solomon & Rabolt, 2004, p.37). Therefore, it acts as the link that ties materials or objects to individuals in a society and their culture, allowing the individuals to become personalised consumers of the clothing culture (Perera, 2016).

According to Solomon et al. (2013), consumer behaviour is considered more than just a phenomenon of the purchase or exchange of money for goods or services; it is an ongoing process that interlinks the ends to become a continuous process. In this process, consumers and marketers play a contributory role mutually to maintain the balance between demand and supply throughout the three stages of the consumer behaviour process, such as the pre-consumption phase, on-consumption phase and post-consumption phase. The factors causing the acceptance of a certain product can be analysed by studying the consumer behaviour process of its consumers and the contribution made to it by the manufacturers, designers, and marketers of the same product.

IV. Methodology

The study was conducted to identify and evaluate the factors that cause the acceptance of Denim, as a clothing fashion in the context of Sri Lanka by following a dual-perspective approach on consumer preferences and their behaviour throughout the phases of the consumption process as the analytical framework.

According to Creswell (2014), Convergent parallel mixed method was used for the study by collecting both qualitative and quantitative data in a parallel manner and then analysing and interrelating them together to interpret as research findings. Data was gathered from two different perspectives; the consumer's perspective and the manufacturer's /designer's

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/marketer's perspective on Denim fashions. Two separate procedures have been used in data collection from each perspective with separate instruments and methods.

Required data from the consumer's perspective is collected using a questionnaire survey that is given to a sample group of 100 participants, ranging in age from 18 to 28 years, who are undergraduates in universities within the district of Colombo. A structured questionnaire was composed of three main parts, each of which had the aim of collecting information on;

- Part 1 - Demographic data of consumers
- Part 2 - Behavioural pattern as a Denim consumer
- Part 3 - Experience and attitude towards Denim fashions as a consumer

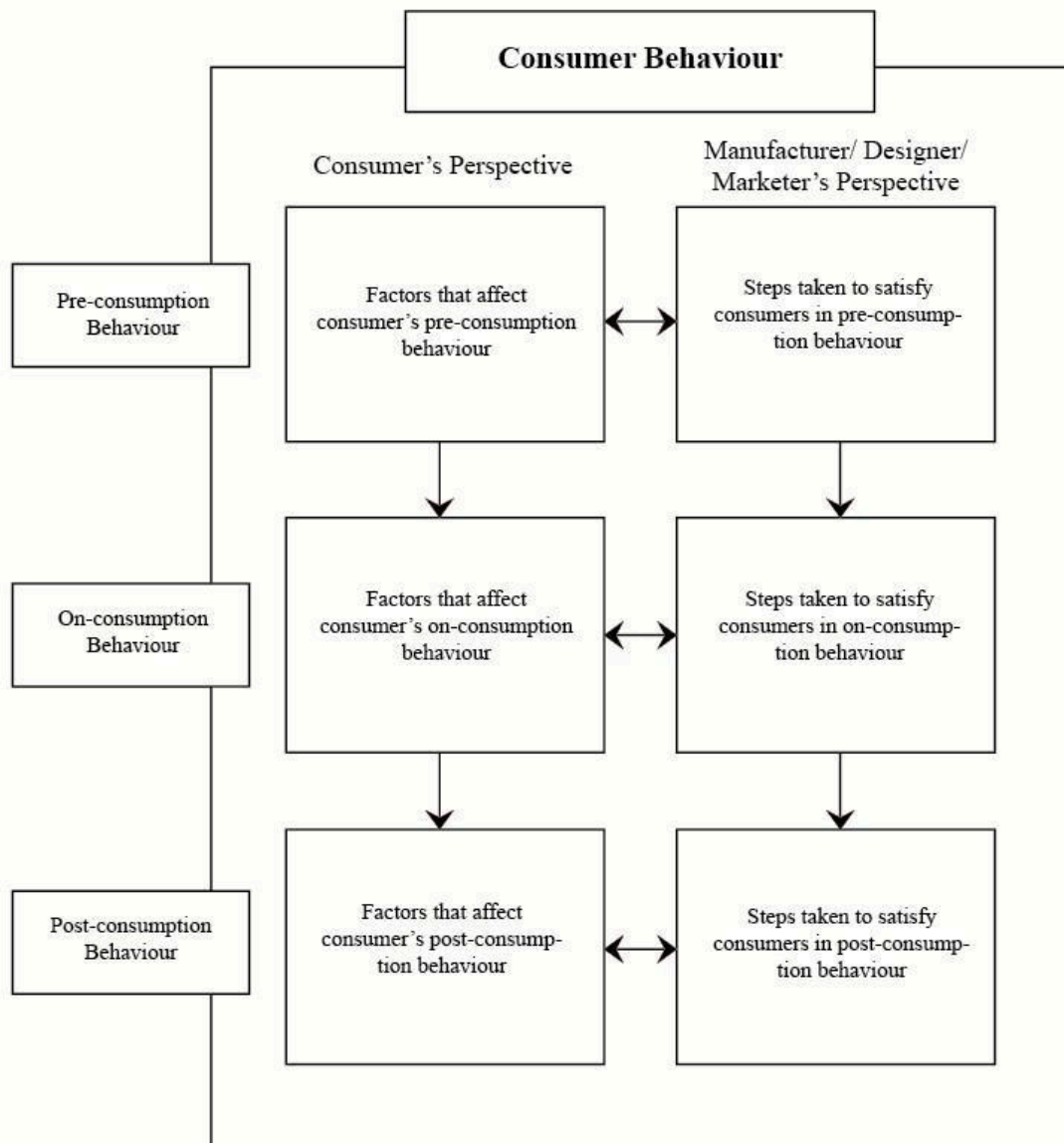
Required data from the manufacturer's /designer's /marketer's perspective was gathered through a case study on a reputed local Denim brand, Long Island Clothing Company, which was re-launched recently as 'LiCC Jeans' by considering its local origin, long-lasting experience, familiarity with local Denim consumers, and local Denim industry while maintaining global standards. An in-depth interview was conducted with two professionals working under the brand, and available secondary data were also used. The interview is conducted according to a semi-structured interview questionnaire divided into three main parts to get information on;

- Part 1 - Local trend setting, Denim material and process development
- Part 2 - Demand and sales frequencies of the product types and ranges
- Part 3 - Consumer identification and actions taken towards them

V. Analysis of Findings

The data gathered from Sri Lankan Denim consumers and the data obtained on how a reputed Denim brand contributes to Denim fashions are combined together to identify the factors that cause the acceptance of Denim as a clothing fashion in current Sri Lankan clothing practices through the mutual contribution of the consumer's perspective and Manufacturer's /designer's /marketer's perspective within different stages of the consumer behaviour process.

Figure 1



A. Causative Factors during Pre-consumption (Before Purchasing Denim Clothing)

In general, current trends, requirements, prior usage experiences, and attitudes matter the most in making a buying decision (Hines & O'Neal, 1995). These factors were further tested through the survey. According to the survey responses, prior experience and the requirement are considered more significant in making the buying decision or the acceptance of Denim than the current trends.

Another main factor that is important in this phase of the consumer behaviour process is the attitude of the consumers toward Denim fashions. According to the responses, the vast majority (92%) of the consumers consider Denim an essential clothing option for their wardrobes. A specified set of attitudes among local denim consumers were tested according to prior experiences they were having with their Denim clothing. According to the responses, a majority considered that Denim fashion made them look active, energetic, confident, relaxed,

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casual, sexy, beautiful, young, thin, and fashionable. But a slighter majority agreed that Denim fashion makes them self-expressive and creative. There were mixed responses about different moods like independent, rustic, and radical. They had mixed responses to society's opinion and their status as denim consumers. Making it clear that denim is not a symbol of high social status anymore and that it has been generalised.

On the other hand, as a Denim brand, LiCC contributes to this phase by setting new trends and promoting international trends within the country through their new collections and new product lines such as Denim Kids-wear collections, Denim maternity wear collections called 'Momanista', Denim Batik collections by 'Kanch' aiming at ceremonial seasons, and sponsored collections like 'Premier Jeans' collections specially crafted for the Sri Lankan team taking part in the ICC Cricket World Cup 2019. These new varieties also contribute to the emergence of new requirements within the market. LiCC uses different promotional strategies to encourage and expand its clientele through social media, sponsored events, etc. They base their missions through consumer research to analyse the consumer and take many measures to cater to their requirements successfully.

B. Causative Factors during On-consumption (When purchasing the Denim clothing)

The satisfaction of the consumer at the time of purchase triggers the buying decision. There are numerous factors affecting this experience, which in turn matters for the overall acceptance of Denim as a clothing fashion in Sri Lanka.

The majority of survey responses agreed that the availability of a considerable variety in product ranges, sizes, styles, cuts, colours, and material properties gives different options to the consumers to choose Denim according to their interests and suitability, increasing its overall acceptance. The product attributes like quality of stretch, fit, stitches, attachment details, fabric wash, and easy access, both within the country and within the store, are another main set of factors that consumers significantly consider during purchasing. In general, the brand of a product also matters in the purchasing decision. In the Sri Lankan Denim market, it is seen that the better the brand, higher the price. Sri Lanka being a developing country, general consumers are incapable of spending more on their fashion requirements. Therefore, they always go for the best options provided in the lowest price ranges, regardless of the brand. According to the survey, the majority of the respondents expect to spend 1000-3000 LKR (73%) on denim items, proving this fact.

On the other hand, LiCC is introducing different themed fashion collections targeting different consumer groups, special seasonal events, and consumer requirements. And due to the high demand for jeans, shorts, and shirts, the collections have been expanded with many different colours, finishes, cuts, and fits. The 'perfect fit' is an iconic character of the brand, as LiCC has done a comprehensive study on Sri Lankan body measurements and developed original Sri Lankan size charts, standards, and fits. The fits are classified as skinny fit, slim fit, semi-slim fit, and regular. These are further varied with the different cuts, such as straight cut, skinny cut, boot cut, and slim cut. The quality of the LiCC products is assured by maintaining international standards and using the greenest technologies. LiCC focuses more on providing easy access to its products by continuously establishing more outlets, agents, and online shopping platforms. Their effort is further evident by the iconic, creative, and user-friendly store interior

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merchandising methods. According to the brand's position and the target clientele LiCC's prices range from 1500 LKR to 15000 LKR and upwards. But as they have identified that a majority of Sri Lankan Denim users demand products with lower price ranges, LiCC has come up with different tactics, such as grading their products with low priced options and launching a sub or diffusion brand with low-priced products.

C. Causative Factors during Post-consumption (After purchasing the Denim clothing)

Once a consumer buys a product, if that product satisfies the consumer with the promised purposes, those factors that caused that satisfaction are considered in this phase as affecting the acceptance. Because it gives a greater tendency for that consumer to continue buying the same type of products and to recommend them to others. This interlinks the cycle of consumer behaviour processes by transforming post-consumption satisfaction into a positive prior experience at the pre-consumption phase, ensuring continuous acceptance.

Durability is an original value of Denim material. Therefore, people use denim clothing comparatively for a longer period. According to the responses, a greater majority tends to use denim clothing for a period of 2-3 years (53%) and even longer (18%), proving its durable nature. It is also seen that the majority agrees that comfort, fashionableness, giving protection, multi-functional and occasional usability, low maintenance, and its ability to match with any fashion or clothing have become positive factors that affect the acceptance of Denim fashion. However, a minority of survey respondents identified Denim's ability to be reused and up-cycled as a factor in its acceptance during this phase.

On the other hand, LiCC tries its best to fulfil the promised functions and consumers' expectations to satisfy them during the post-consumption phase. Therefore, LiCC has become the Center of Technological Innovation in the apparel industry, experimenting on materials, comfort, aesthetic appeal, functionality and sustainable practices. Their every collection is given out by following international trend forecasting, and they experiment on adding further value to denim by integrating local traditional techniques like batik, up-cycling techniques, the greenest manufacturing techniques, material innovations, etc.

Summary of the Analysis

All the factors identified by the consumers and all the steps taken by the manufacturer/designer or marketer (LiCC) can be called the facts that are causing the acceptance of Denim as a clothing fashion in current Sri Lanka. All the data that was collected under the study was summarised in the following table by analysing the factors causing acceptance according to the sections and classifications in the analytical framework 'Dual Perspective on Consumer Behavior Process' to get a systematised understanding of the research findings.

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Table 1
Summary of the Analysis

Phases of the consumer behaviour process	Consumer's perspective (Factors affecting the consumption)	Manufacturer's /designer's /marketer's perspective (Steps to satisfy the consumption)
Pre-consumption (Before purchasing the Denim clothing)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Current local and international trends - Personal and social attitudes towards Denim fashions - Requirements - Prior usage experience (Factors affecting Post-consumption phase) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Setting new trends and promoting them - Promotion of the product image and the product psychology to affect attitudes - Creation of new product lines to create new requirements
On-consumption (When purchasing the Denim clothing)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Easy access to the products - Availability of a variety of the products (types, styles, sizes, colours) - Quality of products - Brandedness - Low price rates 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Island wide product distribution - Pleasant product display - Designing new collections and making modification to their specifications - Developing the brand image - Introducing low priced diffusion brands or sub brand - Grading the products to sell at different price rates - Stock clearance sales and other promotional measures
Post-consumption (After purchasing the Denim clothing)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Comfort (material, fit, stretch) - Durability - Fashionability - Strength and resistance to heavy usage - Protection - Easy handling and maintenance - Multi-functional and occasional usability (versatility) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Quality material and production processes - Material development and innovations - Embracing sustainable and eco-friendly concepts

Therefore, as per the research findings, 16 factors were identified as the causes for the acceptance decision of Denim fashion according to the consumer's perspective. They are;

- Current local and international trends
- Personal and social attitudes towards Denim fashions
- Prior usage experience (Factors affecting Post-consumption phase)
- Requirement
- Easy access to the products
- Availability of a variety of products (types, styles, sizes, colours)
- Quality products
- Brandedness
- Low price rates
- Comfort (material, fit, and stretch)
- Durability
- Fashionability
- Strength and resistance to heavy usage
- Protection
- Easy handling and maintenance
- Multi-functional and multi-occasional usability (versatility)

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In addition to the factors listed above, another set of factors was identified to support the consumer's satisfaction in the acceptance of Denim fashions through the perspective and contribution of the Manufacturers/designers/marketer.

They are;

- Setting new trends and promoting them
- Promotion of the product image and the product psychology to affect attitudes
- Creation of new product lines to create new requirements
- Island wide product distribution
- Pleasant product display
- Designing new collections and making modification to their specifications
- Developing the brand image
- Introducing low priced diffusion brands or sub brand
- Grading the products to sell in different price rates
- Stock clearance sales and other promotional measures
- Quality material and production processes
- Material development and innovations
- Embracing sustainable and eco-friendly concepts link.

Conclusion

By the time of the introduction of Denim to Sri Lanka, Denim itself had already passed many milestones on global levels as a clothing fashion. By being a colony for a longer period of time, Sri Lankan people developed an affinity for respecting Western fashions and attire as noble. Under this background, in its initial stages, Denim was also considered a fashion that symbolises wealth and nobleness. Following the implementation of open economy policies in late 1970's, entire systems of living and thinking patterns were drastically altered. Then people got access to new industries, imported products, and audio and visual media, giving them the capacity to think and accept fashions in a novel way. Then only Sri Lankan society started to accept Denim as a clothing fashion.

This continuous acceptance of Denim in Sri Lanka depends on some factors. These factors can also be known as the values of Denim which are of two types: original values of Denim and created values of Denim. Denim consumers have identified these factors and given them the norm of 'values'. The original values of Denim are the positive characteristics of Denim material, but created or man-made values are introduced to the world by the manufacturers/designers/marketers. These values are created within a product or a fashion to uplift their ventures. This is the same as the relationship between demand and supply. Manufacturers/designers/marketers supply what the consumer demands, and sometimes they tend to create new values that create new demands. If the balance between these two aspects is maintained properly a good product or a good fashion can be developed with strong persistence and continuous acceptance within a specific society or context. As long as the causative factors identified through this study are ensured within the scope of Denim fashion while maintaining equilibrium in the consumer behaviour process by the mutual contribution of manufacturers/designers/marketers and consumers, Denim will be accepted by the society as a clothing fashion in the context of Sri Lanka.

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Contribution

This study was conducted based on the field of fashion design, focusing on aspects such as society, culture, economy, and industry. This helps to understand how fashion is accepted by a society, how that acceptance is affected or influenced by the society, culture, and economy of that specific context and vice versa, and the nature of the consumer behaviour process of such fashion with the contribution of its consumer base and the industry. To any stakeholder who falls within the scope of fashion design, the above understanding is quite significant to thriving in the rapidly changing fashion and apparel industry. Because the ultimate success of fashion always lies in the long and persistent acceptance of it by a loyal consumer base within a specific society or culture confined to a context. And aforesaid acceptance is caused by a set of factors, also known as the values of a fashion, through the mutual involvement of consumers and the industry, which includes designers, manufacturers, and marketers. The researchers selected 'Denim' as the most appropriate subject to interpret the above phenomenon due to the strong and continued evolutionary pathway of Denim fashion within the context of the world as well as in Sri Lanka.

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