

MASS-CUSTOMIZED PRODUCTS: ARE THEY BOUGHT FOR UNIQUENESS OR TO OVERCOME PROBLEMS WITH STANDARD PRODUCTS?

ABSTRACT

Mass customization has the potential to offer individualized products at little additional cost. Extensive research exists on the manufacturing side of mass customization; however research on consumer attitudes to such products is sparse. This research addresses how customers perceive customized products. A conceptual model is developed and tested using a large sample of real-world consumers. We found two main motivators to pay a price premium for mass customized products. First, customized products address the need for uniqueness. Second, customized products are a way to avoid the disadvantages of standardized, off-the-shelf products. The results suggest the existence of four customer segments, each with a distinct attitude to customized products. The results extend the theory of mass-customization and provide valuable insights to retailers in optimizing their decisions to add mass-customized products to their product assortments.

INTRODUCTION

Advances in technology have made mass customization economically viable. Consumers increasingly have access to mass-customized products. Perhaps the best-known example is Dell which allows consumers to combine off-the-shelf modules to create their ideal computer. Mass customized jeans are another example. Customers of Tommy Hilfiger's Web site can enter data such as the shape of their thighs in order to design and their perfect pair of jeans. Mass customization is becoming mainstream; yet, until recently, this important phenomenon has scarcely been addressed by marketing researchers. With the exception of a few researchers, e.g., Huffman and Kahn (1998); Wind and Rangaswamy (2001), most business research on mass customization had been on the supply side, that is, in the operations management literature. In the past year more research on the demand side of customization has appeared in the marketing literature. Topics that have been addressed include consumer readiness for mass-customization (Bardakci and Whitelock 2005), the relationship marketing of mass-customized products (Dellaert and Stremersch 2005), and consumers' evaluation of customized offers (Simonson 2005).

In spite of this flurry of activity, none of these authors has empirically studied the underlying motivations for choosing mass-customized products. What are the key drivers of the demand for customized products? Do these drivers differ by consumer segment? What are the antecedents of these drivers? This research attempts to answer these important questions.

In the next section, we examine relevant existing findings by marketing researchers and develop a framework relating the antecedents and consequences of consumers' demand for customized products. The hypotheses derived from this framework are tested using data from randomly sampled 571 real-world consumers. After presenting the results, the paper

concludes with a discussion of the results, research limitations and directions for future research.

CONCEPTUAL MODEL

The conceptual framework on which this research is based is presented in Figure 1. The model suggests that consumer willingness to pay a premium for customized products depends on the products use for self representation and the desire for unique products. Furthermore, customers are also willing to pay more if and when standard products have negative attributes which can be avoided through mass customization. Each of these relationships is discussed below.

Willingness to Pay for Customization

Consumers choose products on the basis of the products' perceived attributes. These attributes represent the positive and negative utilities that the consumer perceives from its ownership. For example, a consumer derives a benefit from a comfortable pair of jeans. If a consumer tries on a pair of jeans that are uncomfortable, the jeans may be rejected, even though they may be perfect in every other way. In this situation, a consumer would likely be prepared to pay a little more if the jeans could be adjusted to make them fit more comfortably. Alterations, for a small additional fee, are a common means of resolving such situations. Thus consumers are prepared to pay a premium to overcome negative product attributes. Similarly, customers who perceive that a customized product overcomes a negative product attribute will be prepared to pay a higher price for this product, relative to a standardized off-the-rack product.

H1: The more a consumer perceives customized products to overcome negative product attributes, the higher his or her willingness to pay a price premium for these products.

In contrast with avoiding negative attributes, customized products also embody symbolic meaning related to self presentation. For example, a figure-hugging pair of jeans in the latest style signals to others that the wearer appreciates the importance of fashion. To the extent that a consumer uses the product as a self-presentation tool, an individualized product that sends the right message attains additional value as compared with a purely functional product and therefore commands a price premium.

H2: The higher the consumer's need for positive self-presentation, the higher his or her willingness to pay a price premium for these products.

In addition to their functional and self-presentation benefits, some consumers feel a desire for unique products for their own sake, rather than for instrumental reasons related to their benefits. The desire for unique consumer products is defined as the extent to which consumers hold as a personal goal the acquisition and possession of consumer goods, services, and experiences that few others possess (Harris and Lynn 1996). Individualized products, by their very nature, are less likely to be possessed by the masses. Consumers with a high desire for unique products are unlikely to find standardized products acceptable and are therefore likely to pay a premium for a product that is out of the ordinary.

H3: The higher a consumer's desire for unique products, the higher his or her willingness to pay a price premium for these products.

As Simonson (2005) has suggested, customers may differ in their preferences and in their insight into these preferences. The three antecedents of willingness to pay for individualized products discussed above represent very different motivations for paying this price premium. For example, the consumer who chooses clothes primarily for comfort has very different characteristics from the *fashionista*, who is different again from the true individualist. It is therefore suggested that distinct consumer segments will exist that are motivated primarily by one of the three value drivers.

H4: The willingness to pay for individualized products varies among consumers of these products.

Need for Uniqueness

A consumer's need for uniqueness is defined as his or her pursuit of differentiation relative to others that is achieved through the acquisition, utilization, and disposition of consumer goods for the purpose of developing and enhancing one's personal and social identity (Tian, Bearden, and Hunter 2001). Need for uniqueness has been found to be a multifaceted construct, with distinct creative choice and avoidance of similarity components (Tian, Bearden, and Hunter 2001).

Research has found positive relationships between need for uniqueness and the desire for unique products (Lynn 1991). Customized products provide possibilities both for creative choices and for avoidance of similarity. Thus we hypothesize that the positive relationship between need for uniqueness and the desire for unique products will hold for each of the components.

H5: The higher a consumer's need for creative choice, the higher his or her desire for unique consumer products.

H6: The higher a consumer's need for avoidance of similarity, the higher his or her desire for unique consumer products.

Consumers' need for uniqueness may also be related to their use of products for self-presentation. Researchers in the area of consumer involvement have identified that some consumers believe that they are judged by the products they purchase and display (Jain and Srinivasan 1990). Consumers who subscribe to this belief are likely to be those who have high needs for both creative choice and for avoidance of similarity.

H7: The higher a consumer's need for creative choice, the higher his or her use of products for self-presentation.

H8: The higher a consumer's need for avoidance of similarity, the higher his or her use of products for self-presentation.

Perceived Product Category Risk

Consumer involvement is defined as a person's perceived relevance of the product based on inherent needs, values, and interests (Zaichkowsky 1985). An empirical study of the construct yielded two factors related to perceived risk: risk importance and risk probability (Jain and Srinivasan 1990). Risk importance assesses the perceived negative consequences of a poor product decision. Risk probability assesses the perceived level of uncertainty that the product chosen is in fact a good choice. If a consumer views a product category as having high risk importance, then the consumer is motivated to find just the right product. Similarly, if a category is seen as one in which product decisions have high uncertainty of being incorrect, then the consumer is motivated to find a product that is certain to meet his or her needs. These arguments lead to the following hypotheses:

H9: The higher the perceived risk importance of a product category to a consumer, the higher his or her desire for unique products.

H10: The higher the perceived risk probability in a product category to a consumer, the higher his or her desire for unique products.

In addition to the above hypothesized relationships between risk and desire for unique products, perceived risk is also likely to increase consumers' need for creative choice and avoidance of similarity. The logic behind this is that product categories perceived as high-risk elicit perceived needs for uniqueness that manifest themselves as increased need for creative choice and avoidance of similarity in the product category. Thus the following hypotheses:

H11: The higher the perceived risk importance of a product category to a consumer, the higher his or her need for creative choice.

H12: The higher the perceived risk probability in a product category to a consumer, the higher his or her need for creative choice.

H13: The higher the perceived risk importance of a product category to a consumer, the higher his or her need for avoidance of similarity.

H14: The higher the perceived risk probability in a product category to a consumer, the higher his or her need for avoidance of similarity.

RESEARCH METHODS

We tested the hypotheses by collecting data from a random sample of 2000 Swiss-German consumers between the ages of 18 and 70 years in May 2003. A mail survey was used to collect the data. A mail survey was chosen in preference to an Internet survey to avoid sampling bias. The product category was leisure clothing. This category was chosen because it is a category with which all respondents would have had experience. Unlike work clothing, leisure clothing allows consumers to express their individuality. This was important, since one of our focal constructs was the extent to which products are used for self-presentation.

Measures

Where possible, existing scales, or translations of existing scales were used. The two components of perceived category risk were measured using translations of existing consumer involvement sub-scales (Jain and Srinivasan 1990) The two components of need for uniqueness were also measured using translations of existing scales (Tian, Bearden, and Hunter 2001), as was desire for unique products (Lynn and Harris 1997).

A new scale assessed avoidance of negative product attributes. Participants were asked the extent to which they would choose a mass-customized product to overcome negative attributes of an off-the-rack product. Since many different negative attributes were involved, this scale was treated as a formative measure.

A single-item direct measure available in German (Wricke and Herrmann 2002) was chosen to assess the acceptable price premium associated with a customized product as compared with a standardized product. This is appropriate since this measure involves a simple price estimate, rather than measurement of a complex psychological attitude.

The scales were pretested on a sample of 62 customers, representing all age groups and education levels. Following the pretest, the scales were purified as described in the Analysis section. Details of the final scales (with English translations, where applicable) are provided in Appendix 1. The German wording is available from the authors on request.

Analysis

We received 577 responses, a 29% response rate. A comparison of the early and late responses showed no significant differences, suggesting that response bias did not pose a problem (Armstrong and Overton 1977).

We performed a scree-test for missing values on the 577 responses and eliminated six cases with six or more missing variables. The remaining missing values were imputed by multiple imputation (MI) (Schafer 1997; Schafer 1999). We then performed an exploratory factor analysis. Two constructs were excluded from the exploratory factor analysis. One construct measures avoidance of negative attributes and is a formative rather than a reflective scale, and another construct (willingness to pay) was measured directly with a single item. The resultant factor structure is shown in Table 1. Items that were omitted from further analysis are crossed out.

Since our model consists of both formative and reflective scales, we use PLS Graph instead of covariance structural modeling software such as LISREL, EQS, or AMOS (Fornell and Cha 1994; Schneeweiss 1991). Within PLS Graph, convergent validity can be assessed by a bootstrapping procedure. Critical t-value of the Outer Model Loadings is 1.96 (Gefen

and Straub 2005, p. 97). Correlations between items and the related construct must be higher than correlations with other constructs. Usually, the correlations are higher in PLS than in Principal Component Analysis (Gefen and Straub 2005, p. 104). In our data, there are no substantial cross-correlations, indicating discriminant validity. The second test for discriminant validity compares the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) with the correlations between the constructs. While no threshold level has been established in the literature (Gefen and Straub 2005, p. 105), our data indicate discriminant validity.

Desire for unique consumer products has been found to be negatively correlated with age (Lynn and Harris 1997). To take into account possible demographic effects, we included age, gender, and education level as directly observed independent variables into the model. None had a significant impact on the dependent variable. Finally, we performed a two-step cluster analysis (SPSS 14), using all the independent variables, without defining the numbers of clusters upfront. Four clusters were identified using all the independent variables as predictors. Separate causal models were estimated for each of the four clusters.

RESULTS

The causal model estimated from the entire data set is shown in Figure 2. Path coefficients are shown for each significant path and the proportion of variance explained is shown next to each dependent variable. Similar causal models for the four clusters are shown in Figures 3 through 6. Tests of specific hypotheses are presented below.

Willingness to Pay for Customization

The model estimated from the complete data set showed significant positive relationships between willingness to pay and avoidance of negative attributes (H1), self-

presentation (H2) and desire for unique products (H3). Taken together, these three antecedents explain 16 percent of the variance in consumer willingness to pay. Thus our first three hypotheses are supported.

Hypothesis 4 proposed that consumers differ in their motivations to pay more for customized products. Four distinct segments emerged from the cluster analysis. As shown in Figure 3, Cluster 1 (n=184) is similar to the sample as a whole, in that all three predictors of willingness to pay for customization are significant. Cluster 2 (n=64), shown in Figure 4, represents a consumer segment who are motivated to pay more for customized products only in order to avoid negative product attributes. Consumers belonging to Cluster 3 (n= 187), shown in Figure 5, are not motivated to pay more for customization by any of the three antecedents studied in this research. Finally, Cluster 4 (n=132) represents consumers who are motivated by the symbolic aspects of the product (products as self-representation and a desire for unique products). The existence of these four segments provides support for Hypothesis 4.

Need for Uniqueness

Hypotheses H5 and H6 proposed positive relationships between consumer desire for unique products and two components of need for uniqueness: creative choice and avoidance of similarity, respectively. As shown in Figure 2, both paths are positive and significant, supporting H5 and H6. Hypotheses H7 and H8 proposed positive relationships between use of products for self presentation and creative choice and avoidance of similarity, respectively. Figure 2 shows a significant path between creative choice and use of products for self presentation, supporting H7; however H8 is not supported.

Perceived Product Category Risk

Hypotheses H9 and H10 proposed positive relationships between the two risk factors and consumer desire for unique products. The path between category risk importance and

desire for unique products is significant, supporting H9; however since the path between category risk probability and desire for unique products is not significant, H10 is not supported.

Hypotheses H11 and H12 proposed positive relationships between the two risk factors and creative choice. The path between category risk importance and creative choice is significant, supporting H11; however since the path between category risk probability and creative choice is not significant, H12 is not supported.

Hypotheses H13 and H14 proposed positive relationships between the two risk factors and avoidance of similarity. The path between category risk importance and avoidance of similarity is significant, supporting H13; however since the path between category risk probability and avoidance of similarity is not significant, H14 is not supported.

DISCUSSION

In this research, we set out to address three major research questions. First, what are the key drivers of the demand for customized products? Second, do these drivers differ by consumer segment? Finally, what are the antecedents of these drivers?

Our results suggest that the drivers of the demand for customized products include the avoidance of negative attributes, a desire for self-presentation, and a desire for unique products; however, these three antecedents explain only 16 percent of the variance in consumer willingness to pay for mass customization. This low explained variance could imply that this part of our model does not include all the relevant drivers of willingness to pay. On the other hand, these results might also be at least partially attributable to the lack of precision in our dependent variable, since we used a direct, single-item measure. Whatever the reason for the low explained variance, there are clear and statistically-significant

relationships between each of our proposed drivers and willingness to pay for mass customized products.

Perhaps more importantly, we have shown that consumer motivation to pay more for mass customization varies among consumers. In our sample, approximately one third of consumers (32.2%) were motivated by a combination of avoidance of negative attributes, use of products for self-presentation, and a desire for unique products. Almost another one third (32.7%) were motivated both by the use of products for self-presentation and by a desire for unique products. A much smaller group (11.2%) was motivated primarily by avoidance of negative product attributes. Finally, almost one quarter of respondents (23.1%) were not significantly motivated to pay more for mass-customized products.

These findings are important to retailers, since they strongly suggest that segments of customers have very different motivations to buy mass-customized products. Some are willing to pay more because these products are better than standardized products; some others because they are not “as bad as” standard products. These two motivations are not product- or brand-specific, but segment- specific. Therefore, manufacturer and retailers have the opportunity to address these different segments differently. This can be achieved by different advertising copy in different media, or by combining a “uniqueness” oriented visual approach with a rational text message.

The final research question involved the antecedents of the drivers of willingness to pay for customized products. Here the most important finding was that category risk *importance* is a significant antecedent of both the desire for unique products and creative choice, while category risk *probability* is not. Hence it appears that consumers make choices relating to product uniqueness on the basis of the importance of the product category, but not on the likelihood of making a wrong choice in the category.

Finally, a comparison of the results of the cluster-specific causal models with the aggregate model shows that when estimating path models, dealing with the “average” customer can lead to underestimating path coefficients. After testing a model with the full sample, clustering the cases and running partial models with the cluster can provide significant insights, as shown in our study. One reason why this is often not done, despite theoretical foundations, is the lack of critical sample size. Here, PLS Graph offers an interesting alternative to covariance-based algorithms such as LISREL, even after the full model has been confirmed with such an algorithm.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The research was conducted in a single product context, in a single country, so the results may not generalize to all product classes and to all regions. Future research conducted across multiple product categories and multiple countries would overcome this limitation. A single-item, direct, measure was selected for willingness to pay. The future use of a conjoint-type measure would probably provide a measure more closely resembling actual behavior.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research demonstrates that consumers choose mass-customized products for a number of different reasons. Their choice may be driven solely by a desire for the uniqueness that these products provide, solely by the fact that they overcome disadvantages of standardized products, or by a combination of the two. The implication for retailers is that, in promoting mass-customized products, both aspects need to be highlighted.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

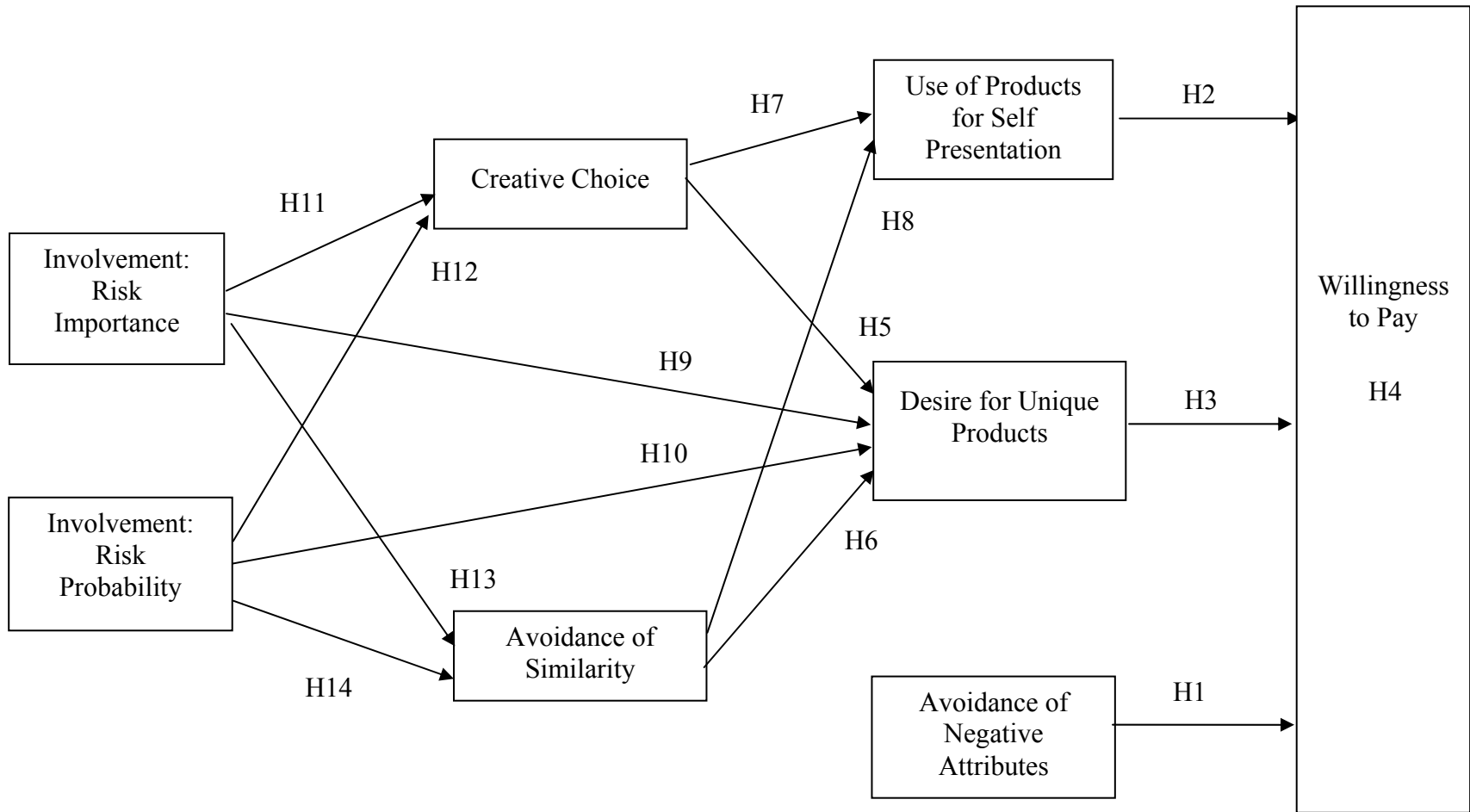
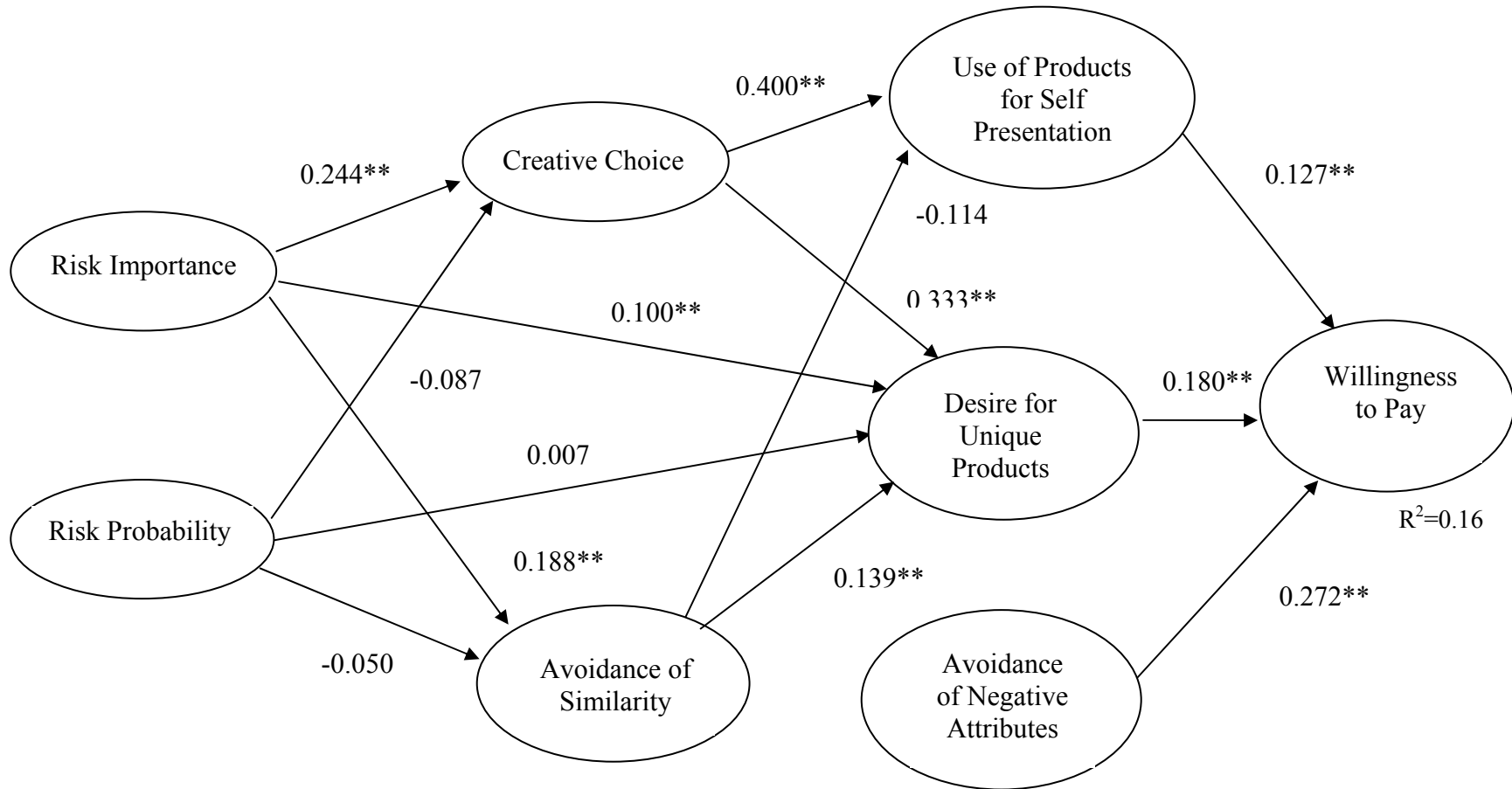
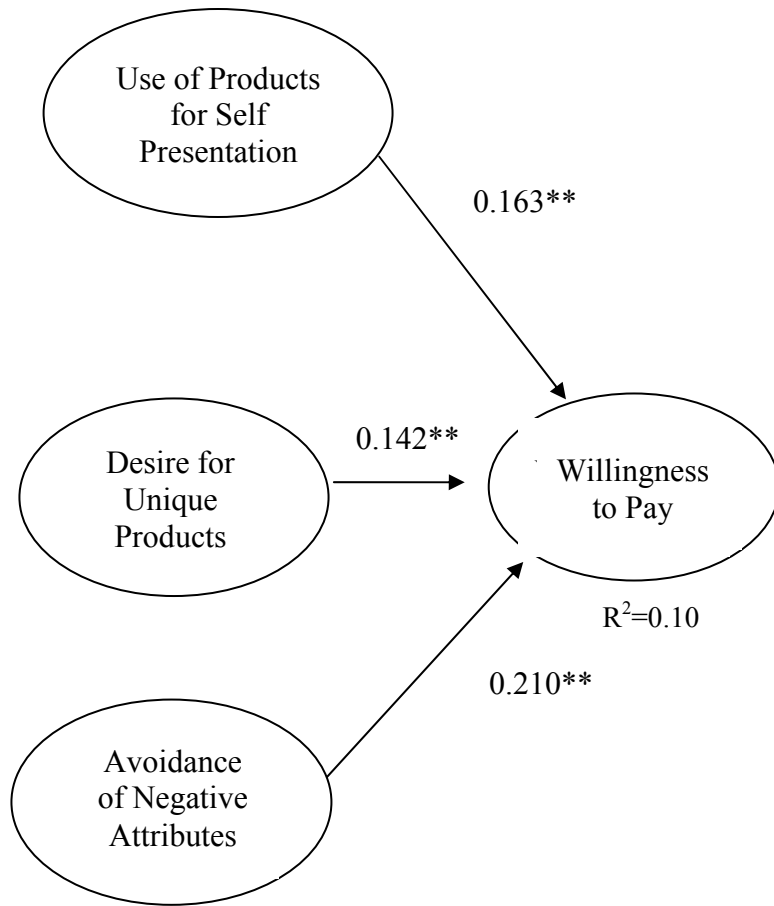


Figure 2: Causal Model (n=571)



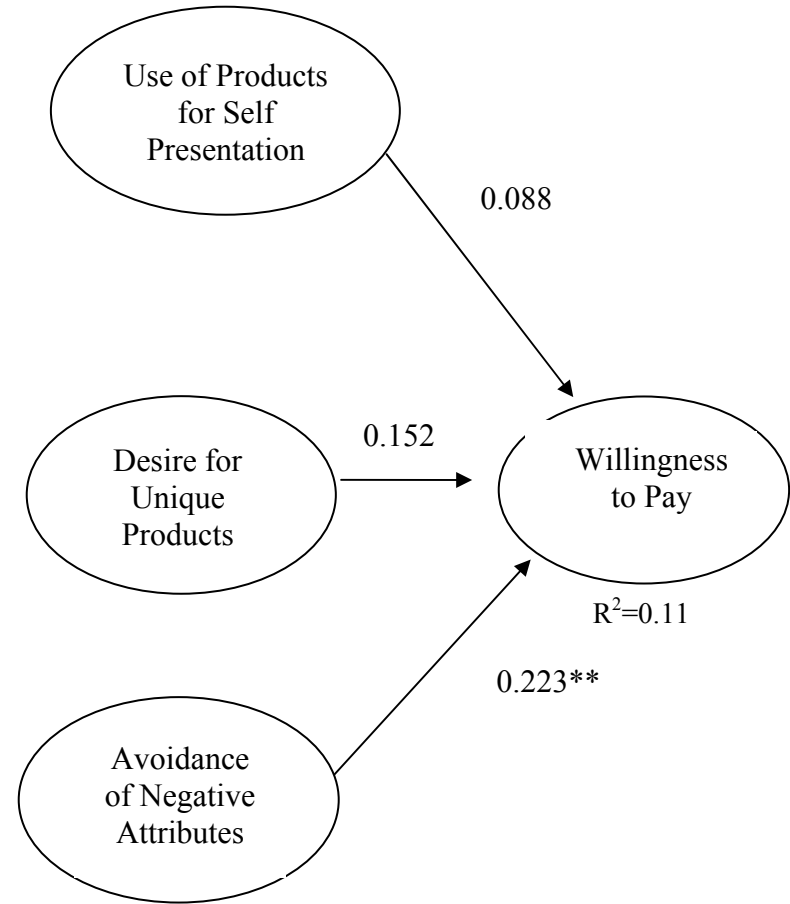
Note: ** denotes $p < 0.05$ (two-tailed)

Figure 3: Causal Model for Cluster 1 (n=184)



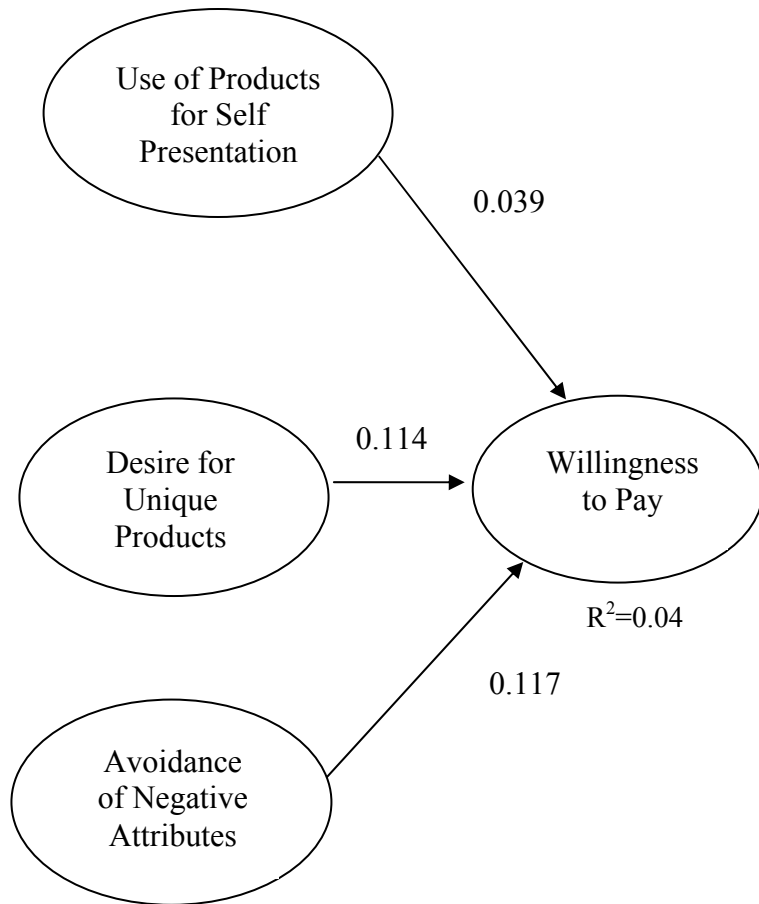
Note: ** denotes $p < 0.05$ (two-tailed)

Figure 4: Causal Model for Cluster 2 (n=64)



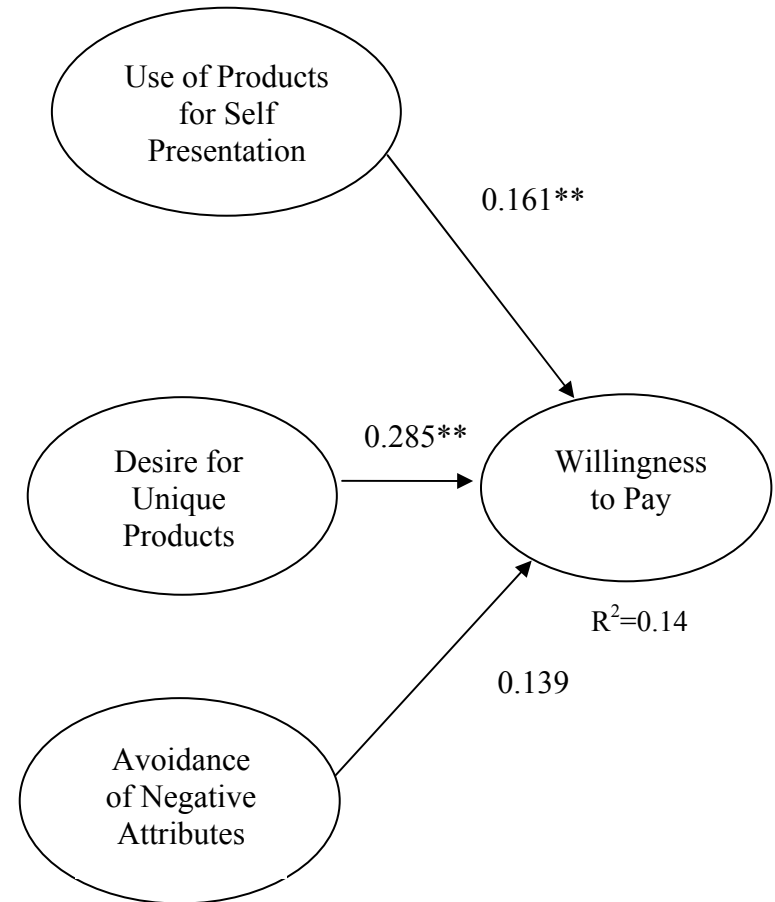
Note: ** denotes $p < 0.05$ (two-tailed)

Figure 5: Causal Model for Cluster 3 (n=187)



Note: ** denotes $p < 0.05$ (two-tailed)

Figure 6: Causal Model for Cluster 4 (n=132)



Note: ** denotes $p < 0.05$ (two-tailed)

Table 1: Rotated Component Matrix

	Component									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
ek5	.832									
ek3	.770									
ek14	.765									
ek4	.764									
ek10	.752									
ek9	.742									
ek6	.741									
ek13	.726									
ek2	.695									
ek1	.654									.419
b5	.522						.415			
eg12	.467	.730								
eg8	.505	.708								
eg7	.512	.670								
eg11	.446	.625								
irw5			.789							
irw2_re			.782							
irw10			.723							
a4			.637							
if8				.706						
if3_re				.686						
if15_re				.600		.41				
ib12				.559		.4		.450		
is6				.479		.41				
irb9_re					.821	.2				
irb4					.811					
irb1_re					.650					
is11_re						.80				
is7						.2				
b3						.79				
b2						.4	.817			
ib13							.733			
ib14_re								.801		
u1								.740		
u6									.867	
									.403	

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

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Appendix 1 Measurement Scales

Item Code	Scale and Items
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Category Risk Importance

- | | |
|------|---|
| irb1 | I stand to lose a lot from a poor choice of leisure clothing. |
| irb4 | I am very concerned if I make a mistake in choosing leisure clothing. |
| irb9 | A poor choice of leisure clothing would be very upsetting. |

Category Risk Probability

- | | |
|-------|---|
| irw2 | In purchasing leisure clothes, I am certain of my choice. |
| irb5 | I never know whether I am making the right purchase. |
| irb10 | I feel a bit lost when selecting leisure clothes. |

Creative Choice Counterconformity (Tian, Bearden, and Hunter 2001)

- ek1 I collect unusual products as a way of telling people I'm different.
- ek2 I have sometimes purchased unusual products or brands as a way of to create a more distinctive personal image.
- ek3 I often look for one-of-a-kind products or brands to create a style that is all my own.
- ek4 Often when buying merchandise, an important goal is to find something that communicates my uniqueness.
- ek5 I often combine possessions in such a way that I create a personal image for myself.
- ek6 I often try to find a more interesting version of run-of-the-mill products because I enjoy being original.
- ek9 I actively seek to develop my own personal uniqueness by buying special products or brands.

- ek10 The products and brands that I like best are the ones that express my individuality.

- ek13 I often think of the things I buy and do in terms of how I can use them to shape a more unusual personal image.
- ek14 I'm often on the lookout for new products or brands that will add to my personal uniqueness.

Avoidance of Similarity (Tian, Bearden, and Hunter 2001)

- eg7 I often try to avoid products or brands that I know are bought by the general population.
- eg8 As a rule, I dislike products or brands that are customarily purchased by everyone.
- eg11 I give up wearing fashions I've purchased once they become popular among the general public.
- eg12 The more commonplace a product or brand is among the general public, the less interested I am in buying it.

Involvement: Symbolic Product

- is6 My casual clothing says a lot about me.
- is7 Others judge me by my casual clothing.
- is11 My casual clothing portrays my image to others.

Desire for Unique Products

- b2 For my free time, I would prefer to have custom-made clothes rather than ready-made clothes.
- b3 I have always wanted to design my own clothes.

Avoidance of Negative Attributes

In answering the following questions, assume that mass-customized clothing is no more expensive than regular mass-produced (off-the-rack) clothing.

- I would have clothes custom made if off-the-rack clothes ...
- bf8a ... were of lower quality
 - bs8b ... did not appeal to me
 - bf8c ... did not fit me properly
 - bs8d ... were too ordinary
 - bf8e ... were uncomfortable
 - bs8f ... were too unattractive

Willingness to Pay (Wricke and Hermann 2002)

- Z How much would you be prepared to pay for custom-made casual clothing?
 - 1= much more than for a standardized product
 - 2= somewhat more
 - 3= unchanged
 - 4= somewhat less
 - 5= much less