



The Role of Fashion Retail Buyers in China And the Buyer Decision-Making Process

Journal:	<i>Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management</i>
Manuscript ID	JFMM-03-2018-0033.R5
Manuscript Type:	Original Article
Keywords:	retail buyer, China, supplier management, fashion buying, Decision making, Merchandising

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3 **Purpose** – The Chinese fashion market is becoming increasingly important in terms of
4 consumption volume and value. A critical aspect of the Chinese fashion market is the role of the
5 fashion retail buyer, however there exists little literature on their role and their decision-making
6 process. This paper, therefore, explores the role of Chinese fashion retail buyers, their
7 decision-making process as well as the key factors that influence the retail buyer's
8 decision-making process.
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15 **Design/methodology/approach** – Informed by the inductive approach within Sheth's (1981)
16 framework, in-depth interviews with a number of retail buyers in seven leading fashion companies
17 in China were carried out to explore fashion retail buyers' decision-making processes.
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22 **Findings** – The results show that management mentality, type of merchandise and type of
23 decision context were the most influencing factors regarding merchandise requirements. Fashion
24 retail buyers in China are substantially restricted by the management style of the firm, which also
25 influences the product mix choice. To evaluate merchandise, fashion buyers take into account
26 consumer demand, company position, geographical differences and fashion trends. In regards to
27 supplier selection, production stability coupled with quality and cost factors become paramount.
28 The study also demonstrates that country of origin is less significant factor in the fashion buyer's
29 decision-making process.
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38 **Originality/value** – This is the first study that explores the fashion retail buyer's decision-making
39 processes in the Chinese market. The results show Chinese fashion buyers' decision-making
40 processes differ significantly from other markets. This paper offers guidelines for an efficient and
41 effective fashion retail buying process in China. The findings offer important avenues for further
42 research and provide insights for fashion professionals in the Chinese and other emerging markets
43 contexts.
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50 **Keywords:** retail buyer; fashion retailing; merchandising, decision-making, supplier management;
51 China.
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Introduction

Global fashion markets are becoming increasingly unpredictable. The nature of competition has changed substantially in recent decades. This is further compounded by fickle and more demanding consumers, who want a faster turnaround, creating a grand challenge for managing consumer expectations for fashion retailers and their buying team (Shaw and Koumbis, 2017). Such challenges are even more complex in rapidly growing markets like China wherein fashion consumption in terms of both volume and value has increased manifold in the past few years (MarketingChina, 2018). With expanding merchandise range, increased competition with the arrival and emergence of large-scale retailing, and ever-changing consumer buying patterns, the fashion buying landscape within China is evolving rapidly. However, to date, academic literature has largely ignored the specific practices of fashion buying (Perry and Kyriakaki 2014, Bahng, 2018).

Fashion retail buyers play a vital role within fashion retail organisations (Talaya, Oxborrow and Brindley 2018), through their selection of product mix; they can affect the scope and type of consumers that are targeted by the firm. Thus, retail buyers act as gatekeepers of consumer choice as they can substantially influence a company's present bottom-line and future prospects (Perry and Kyriakaki 2014). Moreover, they are not only involved in purely operational-orientated issues such as retailer type, location and management mentality, but they are also involved in more strategic decision-making such as product and supplier selection, among many other areas of influence. Thus, in view of the dynamic market context in which fashion retailers are placed, the role of fashion buyers is a worthy and under-researched area of study (Bruce and Daly, 2006).

Although the fashion retail buyer's decision-making processes have been studied in Europe and other developed markets (Perry and Kyriakaki, 2014), there has been lack of research in the Chinese market. Since different buying situations require different decision-making processes (Bunn, 1993), it cannot be assumed that the decision-making process for the European fashion retail sector, which is highly characterized by a large proportion of independent retailers, can be similarly applied to fashion retail buyers in China.

Moreover, the buying behaviour of Chinese consumers is distinct from European consumers on account of diverse cultural and geographical traits. For example, the Chinese are considered to have a fairly collectivistic culture, while Americans and Europeans seem to be more individualistic (Hofstede, 1991). Leng and Botelho (2010) suggest that consumers from

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3 individualistic cultures tend to be more quality conscious than consumers from collectivistic
4 cultures (2010).
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7 Furthermore, whilst the buying system in Europe is comparatively more mature, it is still
8 relatively undeveloped in the fashion industry in China, for example the UK's merchandising
9 functions can be considered the most developed in Europe. Additionally, the role of the fashion
10 retail buyer is relatively well established in developed markets, however in China this role is at an
11 emerging and growing stage. For example, the degree of supplier-buyer relationship and
12 interaction is typically stable in developed markets. However, in China such relationships can
13 experience significant transformation, as new suppliers and buyers enter the market.
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20 This paper explores the role of Chinese fashion retail buyers, their decision-making
21 process as well as the key factors influence the retail buyer's decision-making process using
22 Sheth's decision-making framework. Thus, the findings of this research will further extend
23 validate and extend previous findings and propose more effective and efficient buying procedures
24 for the fashion market in China.
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35 **The Role of Fashion Retail Buyers and the Buying Decision-making Process**

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37 Fashion buyers' (sometimes collectively referred to as the buying team) major role is to
38 select products for a retailer (Lee, Tony and David, 2007). According to Shaw and Koumbis
39 (2017), they are responsible for a number of functions including researching trends, sourcing
40 materials and/or merchandise, forming seasonal buying plans and working with external designers
41 and vendors to produce a range that will be distributed to physical store locations, online stores,
42 and catalogues. The fashion buyer creates trade-offs between multiple factors, including price,
43 delivery, packaging and assortment (Dandeo et al., 2004). On the one hand, retail buyers are
44 similar to consumers in that they select and buy finished products as opposed to components or
45 raw materials, yet on the other they perform similar activities as industrial buyers – specifically in
46 terms of how they buy, and by focusing on profit maximization and cost control (Manjeshwar,
47 Sternquist and Good, 2013). Buyers transmit a variety of information, including purchase orders,
48 sales, markdowns, open-to-buy reports, product development review sheets, as well as advertising
49 and promotional materials for review (Fiorito, Gable, and Conseur, 2010). They may also
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3 demonstrate smart risk-taking in business and product decisions, and efficiently manage their
4 team to execute these decisions from the showrooms to the sales floors.
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8 Despite economic growth, emerging markets such as China have been experiencing
9 cultural change and transformation in demographics, which has seen a subsequent increase in the
10 retail market (Javalgi and Grossman, 2016). According to the eMarketer report, released 23
11 January 2019, retail sales in China will reach more than \$5.6 trillion in 2019, approximately \$100
12 billion more than in the United States. The result has afforded a marked rise in purchasing power
13 and average spending per person (ChinaDaily.com, 2019). Fiorito and Gable (2012) have stated
14 that China is a brand-driven society, with its history of consumers viewing big brands as a proxy
15 for reliability and quality. Indeed internationally, Chinese consumers are associated with a high
16 level of brand consciousness and loyalty. Xu, Chi and Su (2018) also argue that Chinese
17 consumers have been found to hold a discriminant preference for global brands over Chinese
18 domestic brands. As a matter of fact, some renowned brands dominate in China more than
19 elsewhere and consumer demand extends across product categories. Citizens are increasingly
20 acquainted with lifestyles from the West and ambitiously aim to move socially upward; they make
21 purchasing choices as an indication of both status and aspiration (Sheth, and Sinha, 2015).
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32 According to Independent (2005), the buying department is fully structured and advanced
33 in developed markets - the buying team typically comprises the following key personnel: assistant
34 merchandise planner, merchandise planner, buying admin assistant, assistant buyer and buyer
35 (Shaw and Koumbis, 2017). However, in China, the majority of the buyer's role is transferred
36 from experienced sales person to fashion related roles such as stylist, visual merchandiser and
37 personal shopper etc. without any particular level-to-level processes.
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43 Buying decisions are influenced by country-specific, institutional, and social factors
44 (Srivastava et al., 2012; Sternquist and Chen, 2006; Sternquist et al., 2008). Sternquist et al. (2008)
45 discovered that a company's strategy and environment determined whether buying teams were
46 utilised in China. Buyers based in the West are often provided with strategic information from
47 their company board, which is integrated into the operational activity. Margaret and Lucy (2007)
48 demonstrated the flat hierarchical structure, so often found in some UK retailers, aids the transfer
49 of strategic and operational information during the whole of the buying function, ensuring a good
50 mix between strategic and operational activity. Firms are clearly moving away from hierarchical
51 structures and towards flexible teams (Webb, 2007). Existing models on organizational buyer
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3 behavior are based on the experiences of buyers in Western countries, thus they are limited in
4 their reliability and credibility when applied to other countries such as China (Samli et al., 1988).
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8 The decision-making process of retail buying has been commonly considered as a
9 mysterious and intuitive activity (Ettenson and Wagner, 1986). Somewhat problematically,
10 Sternquist and Chen (2006) also stated that the decisions of Chinese buyers are often based on an
11 unscientific and imprecise information system, for instance, an intuitive approach that leads to
12 enormous differences in decision, outcome, and success. However, buying has become a strategic
13 function, playing a vital role in both product and supplier selection and the management of the
14 supply portfolio (Gundlach et al., 2006; Ordanini and Rubera, 2008), as well as having a
15 significant influence on the overall financial performance of the firm (Faultrier and Towers, 2011).
16 Additionally, Perry and Kyriakaki (2014) demonstrated the buying process was based on
17 statistical analysis of historic sales rather than any element of intuition, and therefore the buying
18 risk was low. Currently there is little literature based on retail buyers' decision-making process
19 within the fashion sector (or fashion retail buyers within the Chinese market). However, the
20 literature on generic retail buyers and retail buyers in a number of other sectors has been more
21 extensive (Sternquist and Chen, 2006, Manjeshwar, Sternquist and Good, 2013). Consequently,
22 the review of literature on generic retail buyers' decision-making processes will be covered in this
23 section.
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27 A common analysis on generic retail buying includes the three main elements: supplier
28 management, product development and foreign production management. The advantage of such
29 an analysis is that these elements can be frequently applied to mid-market fashion buyers when
30 they produce their own-brand collections for fashion retailers (Bruce and Daly, 2006, Goworek,
31 2010). However, there is one important factor, which influences these three elements - the buying
32 circle. Fiorito (1990) has explained that not only is the buyer's job filled with uncertainty and risk,
33 but it is also further complicated by a shortened fashion circle. Indeed, the buying circle has
34 become increasingly shorter in China because of the rapid fashion change in recent years and
35 weather differences geographically.
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39 A commonly applied structure for retail buying has been Sheth's (1981) Decision-making
40 Framework. It is a broad framework that is repeatedly used in the research of fashion retail buying.
41 It has also been used in an adapted version (Dandeo et al., 2004, Fairhurst and Fiorito, 1990). For
42 example, Fiorito's (1990) research tested a portion of Sheth's (1981) theory on merchandise
43 requirements in order to better understand the components in buyer decision-making in a
44 small apparel retail company. Fiorito found that several Product-Specific Variables as well as two
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3 other Merchandise requirement variables (size and merchandise type) are important to the
4 decision-making process. Silva, Davies and Naude (2002) argues that Sheth's (1981) model offers
5 a generic framework of organizational buying, characterizing organizational buyer behaviour.
6 Sternquist and Chen (2006) stated testing of merchandise-buying behaviour models have been
7 undertaken, focused on requirements such as the accessibility of a supplier. They also illustrated
8 that when Chinese food retailers make decisions on new product acceptance, their criteria are
9 similar to that of food retailers reported in research focused on countries in the West. Perry and
10 Kyriakaki (2014) claimed that qualitative data were analysed thematically according to the
11 theoretical constructs drawn from Sheth's (1981) model of merchandise buyer behavior.
12 Specifically, constructs in Sheth's (1981) model were applicable to the luxury fashion retail
13 context in Greece in determining the selection of brand and product mix in independent stores.
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22 Sheth's (1981) approach (see Table 1) shows that buying decision-making processes rely on
23 two essential elements: the merchandise requirements and supplier accessibility (Sheth, 1981;
24 Fairhurst and Fiorito, 1990).
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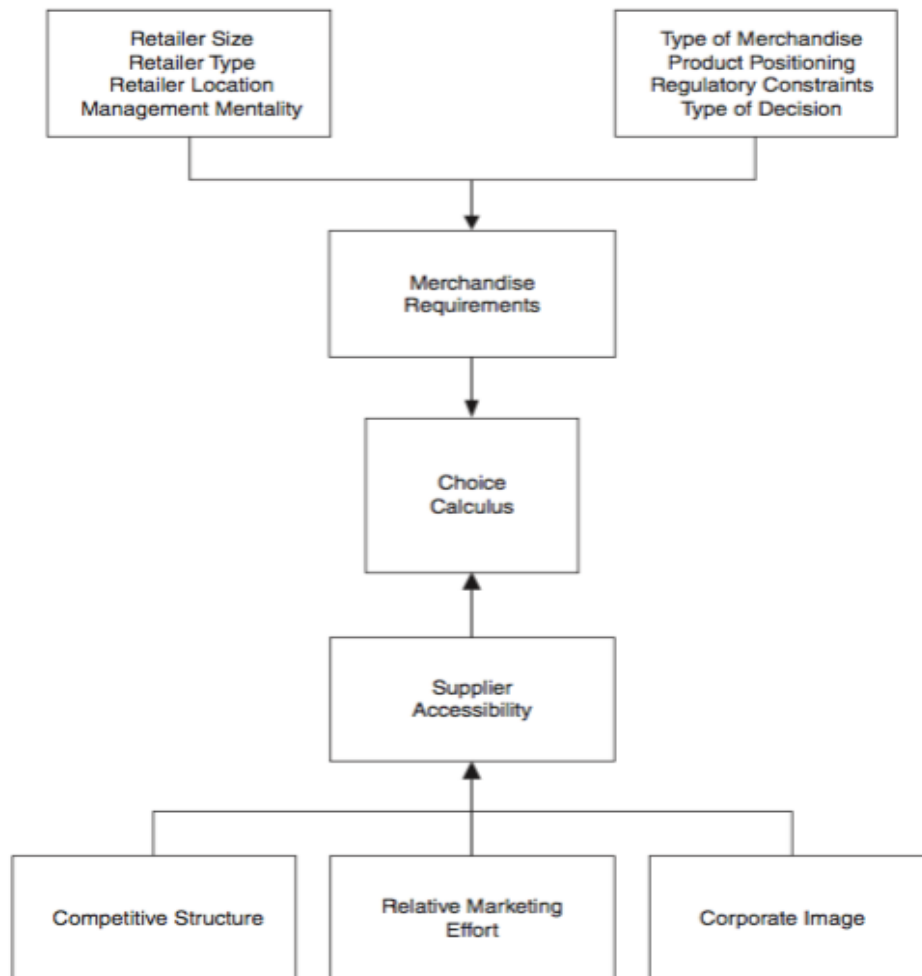


Table 1: Elements of Choice Calculus in Sheth's (1981) theory of merchandise buying behavior

Merchandise requirements (MR) refer to the merchandise-buying intentions, needs, and related purchase criteria of the firm (Fiorito, 1990). Sheth (1981) explained that MR could be functional or non-functional in nature. The non-functional MR demonstrate buyers' buying criteria and purchasing behavior that are not directly based on consumer's demands or desires (Fiorito, 1990). These may include buyer's personal values, the retail store's past traditions and reciprocity engagements with vendors and manufacturers. Sheth (1981) also noticed that product sales could be poor if non-functional MR are utilised as the only source for merchandise-buying decisions. Functional MR refer to those buying needs which are a direct representation and reflection of the retailer's consumer desire in merchandise at their stores. Thus, it is crucial for a successful retailer to access its customer's wants and needs and translates them into its MR (Sheth, 1981). In the Chinese fashion market, functional MR normally adapts to small and medium companies as buyers often rely on direct historical data and previous consumer buying behavior.

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3 The other main element, supplier accessibility (SA), which refers to a series of options
4 given to retailers to satisfy their MR, for instance, competitive structure, relative marketing effort
5 and corporate image (Fiorito, 1990). In the fashion industry, the competitive structure and the
6 relatively low barriers to entry lead to numerous suppliers for merchandise categories (Sheth,
7 1981). Moreover, some suppliers are able to better support the marketing effort of retailers, for
8 example they may be able to offer more timely production. This has been particularly rewarding
9 in the area of Fast Fashion. Furthermore, Perry and Kyriakaki (2014) demonstrated that the
10 corporate image refers to supplier business practices and the country of origin effect (COO). COO
11 has been described as "the overall perception consumers form of products from a particular
12 country, based on their prior perceptions of the country's production and marketing strengths and
13 weaknesses" (Rashid, Barnes and Warnaby, 2016). In a word, MR of Sheth's model addresses
14 what the retailer is willing to buy, while the SA addresses what is available to purchase (Fiorito,
15 1990).

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The Chinese fashion market is also an evolving and growing market and is therefore
fundamentally different to the fashion markets typically studied in other research. The Chinese
retail market is evolving with accelerated pace; the efficient movement of products in itself is
proving to be a key success for fashion retailers. In the Chinese market, in contrast to other
developed markets, the price, trade assistance and the performance of suppliers are key factors
influencing the buyers' decision-making process (Sternquist and Chen, 2006).

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative case study approach. The fashion industry exists within
a social context and dimension, which further strengthens the need for an approach that gains
in-depth insight into the dynamic phenomena within organizations. Therefore, qualitative method
provides this paper a more collective and unified understanding of the factors for analysis.

The inductive approach within Sheth's (1981) framework was applied in order to gain a
detailed understanding and meaning of the interactions and elements, using the method of
structured interviews. The structured interviews were used instead of questionnaires because they
gave the opportunity to capture a richer set of results, enabling the interviewer to gain a wider

variety of responses, as well as articulate questions, responses and follow upon any themes. The ‘explicative themes’ formed the penultimate stage of the explicatory method used in this research. The purpose of using this approach was to collect significant information for all interviews, more specifically to direct the interview questions to individuals so as to understand the buying decision-making process, for example reviewing historical data and drawing conclusions based on the themes that appear in interviews (Jankowicz, 2005).

Myers (2008) argues that interviews offer an excellent ‘window’ into a firm. One-to-one interviews were conducted as it offers a great way to achieving research objective. This research utilised individual interviews with a purposive sampling of nine Chinese fashion retail buyers, who are involved in this particular area of research. From July 2016 to November 2019, ‘face to face’ and ‘video call’ interviews took place, which lasted between 40 to 60 minutes. These were carried out in Mandarin to ensure clarity and ease for respondents. Interviews were recorded either by video or audio recording, then translated to English and simultaneously transcribed. This allowed the sampling plan to be identified, and the notes to be coded to identify main themes and sub-themes. Furthermore, the translation was also examined by another bilingual expert who agreed on the quality and meaning of the translation. All the respondents remained anonymous and are labelled Firm A to Firm I.

Open-ended questions (see Table 2) were based on Sheth’s (1981) theory of merchandise buying behaviour in order to recognize participants’ most important and relevant decision-making factors (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). Question 1-10 which related to Merchandise requirements were mainly based on Sternquist and Chen (2006), Shaw and Koumbis (2017) and Perry and Kyriakaki’s (2014) research, while questions 11-15, related to Supplier accessibility, were based on Perry and Kyriakaki (2014) and Manjeshwar, Sternquist and Good’s (2013) theory.

Up-front questions:
How many years of fashion buyer experience do you have? Where do you work? What kind of buyer are you?
Merchandise requirements:
1. What kind of company do you work for?
2. What is the size of your company?

3.	How does the company choose its retail locations?
4.	What is the daily role of being a fashion buyer? How important is the role to the company?
5.	What is the management style in your company? For example, is it a family business? How much power does a buyer have in terms of selecting products or brands?
6.	How long is the buying circle?
7.	What are the factors that influence the buying circle?
8.	In terms of merchandise selection what are the factors that you would consider? How do you meet consumer demand?
9.	In terms of product positioning, what are the factors that influence the product type you choose?
10.	What type of decision do you usually make, for example new tasks or repeat purchases?
Supplier accessibility:	
11.	Does your company usually cooperate with one supplier or many suppliers? How do you approach new suppliers? What are the requirements?
12.	What factors do you need to consider when making a brand selection or supplier selection?
13.	Do marketing efforts impact the decision-making process?
14.	Does the relationship between suppliers and buyers influence the decision-making process?
15.	How do you make the buying decision-making process more effective and efficient in order to adapt to the evolving fashion market in China?

Table 2. Interview Questions

All the participants in the sample are fashion retail buyers in different fashion companies based in Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen, China (see Table 3). Participants were selected with at least 3 years' experience in the role, with responsibility for managing the planning and buying processes within their firms. Participants also needed to have considerable industry experience in the buying role (3 participants had 3 years' experience, 2 participants had 4 years, and 4 had 5, 7 and 17 years' experience, respectively). The participants have also had exposure to working in different fashion retail contexts, such as concept stores, discounted stores, digital stores, wholesalers and co-operatives. Additionally, participants have experience in a diverse range of fashion sectors from ladies-wear, menswear, leather goods and accessories.

Firm	Gender	Age	Buyer Length	Location	Company Profile	Interview Date	Interview Form
A	Female	32	4 years	Shanghai	Korean Company (HighStreet/Premium Brand)	01/07/2016	Face to Face

B	Female	28	4 years	Guangzhou	Chinese Company (Masstige /Premium Brand)	06/07/2016	Video Call
C	Female	30	7 years	Shanghai	Western Company (Premium Brand)	07/07/2016	Video Call
D	Female	26	3 years	Shanghai	Online Platform (Premium Brand)	08/07/2016	Face to Face
E	Male	40	17 years	Guangzhou	Chinese Company (Premium Brand)	10/07/2016	Video Call
F	Male	28	3 years	Guangzhou	Chinese Company (Masstige Brand)	15/07/ 2016	Video Call
G	Female	29	5 years	Shenzhen	Western Company (Premium Brand)	18/07/ 2016	Video Call
H	Female	30	3 years	Guangzhou	Chinese Company (Premium/Luxury Brand)	10/11/2019	Video Call
I	Female	33	7 years	Guangzhou	Chinese Company (Premium/Luxury Brand)	13/11/2019	Video Call

Table 3: Participants' Profiles

By following the inductive method, unrelated themes that appeared in primary data were removed, allowing for an exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis. Qualitative data collection provides large amount of data, the first stage in data analysis is the data reduction via coding and categorization so as to draw meaningful conclusions about the data (Sekaran and Bougie, 2013). Coding was used to pull out key themes from the interviews. Afterwards, the researcher watched the following interviews to ensure the coding was appropriate.

Results and Analysis

The Role of Fashion Retail Buyers in China

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3 The role of being a fashion retail buyer in China can be divided into three areas of work,
4 which consist of historical statistics analysis, consumer needs research, and fashion trend
5 prediction:
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12 *The daily role of a buyer is normally based on sales analysis of the products, improve buying*
13 *problems while paying attention to the level of stock (Firm F).*

14 *I need to check the sales statistics and inventory every day. It is normal for me to have*
15 *business trips to other cities (Firm B).*

16 *I often focus on market researches, fashion trends as well as the feedback of historical buying*
17 *data (Firm I).*

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25 Additionally, Chinese fashion retail buyers are expected to expend a higher amount of
26 effort to investigate developed market trends – a theme that is appears in all interviews. For
27 example, there may be frequent long-distance trips to European or other Western countries:
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33 *I normally need to see the fashion show at London fashion week and make orders in the*
34 *showroom (Firm D).*

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40 Moreover, the fashion retail buyer has an important liaising role within a firm. For
41 instance, the fashion buyer is required to make frequent and effective communication across the
42 buyer team, sales department and the production team. They are crucial to the success of the firm,
43 as confirmed by Firm A and several other respondents:
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50 *It is important meeting with my buyer team to predict the fashion trends of the next season.*
51 *[...] when we purchase a sample product, we also need to select materials to put them into*
52 *production and negotiate with the production sector. Additionally, we need to communicate*
53 *with the local retailer about the window display (Firm A).*
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3 A fashion retail buyer's purchases are intrinsically linked to the firm's sales, which in turn
4 are affected by production resources. The fashion buyer's activities feed into fundamental areas of
5 a firm's business, demonstrating the strategic importance of the fashion buyer's decisions.
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10 11 12 13 14 **Merchandise Requirements**

15 16 17 **• Retailer Size and Location**

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20 In the decision-making process of fashion retail buyers the retailer size is a key element
21 shaping the buyers' buying process. This is because different retailer sizes have different
22 purchasing requirements (in fact Shaw and Koumbis (2017) identified it as one of the essential
23 factors in buying). The buyer in Firm C noted that they have over 200 retail stores with a number
24 of brands in China. Meanwhile, Chinese consumers have traditionally viewed large retailers as
25 proxy for quality and reliability (Shaw and Koumbis, 2017). Large retailers can attract more
26 customers and gain customer loyalty in China.
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33 Also, the buying process varies based on different types of store platforms. For example,
34 if it is an own-brand store, the buyer's role would be focused on product selection; if it is a
35 multi-brand store, the buying activity would more about brand selection and collaboration. There
36 were two retailer types in this research, which were online retailer and department store. Firm D is
37 an online multi-brand fashion platform:
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45 *We have a lot of premium brands and some small independent designer brands. We often*
46 *cooperate with the designers, who have certain characteristics that fit our company vision*
47 *such as creativity, uniqueness, fun and difference (Firm D).*
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54 Furthermore, retail location represents a vital factor in the buyer's decision-making
55 process. In retailing, the decisive factor for success is location, location, location (Chevalier and
56 Gutsatz, 2012). Outside of the limitations of property budget expenses, the selection of retailer
57 location is mostly based on brand or company position according to all participant firms. The
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3 buyer in Firm A noted that masstige fashion brands are normally located in some popular
4 shopping streets as it is easily for shoppers to discover the brand and while doing everyday
5 shopping. For premium and luxury brands, it is important to be located in a department store or
6 shopping mall:
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14 *If it is a masstige brand, then the retail location must be a popular business area. If it is a*
15 *niche brand [...] we will choose an area with a comfortable environment. It will also have*
16 *enough space to display products. This kind of environment can make customers feel relaxed*
17 *for shopping (Firm E).*
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22 *The location we choose for our flagship store is a big shopping mall or business centre with a*
23 *conspicuous location, as we are a premium retailer. We want to have other same-level brands*
24 *nearby (Firm G).*
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27 *As we are a multi-brand company which has almost 80 retail stores in China. Most of our*
28 *brands are located in big shopping malls, which have nice shopping environment and great*
29 *brand-mix (Firm I).*
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34 Therefore, it can be seen that the retailer location is crucial for the brand's development,
35 which aligns with Perry and Kyriakaki's (2014) findings. Although homogenous trends and tastes
36 exist in the Chinese fashion industry, the location can influence maximum retail sales.
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40 41 42 43 • **Management Mentality**

44 45 ***Autocratic (Family Business)***

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48 There are essentially two types of management styles in the Chinese market: autocratic and
49 hierarchical. In family-based businesses, an autocratic management style tended to dominate as
50 the buyer team needed to closely follow the instructions of the owner or their relatives. Perry and
51 Kyriakaki's (2014) also argued that in family companies, the owner would often have a crucial
52 input into the buying decisions. Such instructions typically specified the family's personal
53 preferences and subjective intuitions, rather than utilising sales data or alternative information:
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3 *This family often put their relatives and local employees into more important positions, while*
4 *leaving others' opinions behind. The management style has had a negative impact on the sales*
5 *performance in the last couple of years (Firm B).*

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8 *We need to follow the boss's (brand) instruction. We don't actually have full power in the*
9 *product selection process (Firm G).*

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13 The fashion buyer's role was not seen to have a strategic function within these firms and
14 was given less responsibility. This is also confirmed by Firm C:

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21 *The buyer's role is partly decisive and is mainly based on the requirement of the boss. The*
22 *boss selects products and we only place the order for a certain quantity (Firm C).*

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24 *Our buying team would normally make a buying plan before each buying activity, however the*
25 *CEO is the key person who selects the product from the brands (Firm H).*

26 27 28 29 ***Hierarchical (Non-family Business)***

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31 In contrast to the above, fashion buyers in non-family businesses were considered to have
32 more autonomy in the decision-making process:

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38 *We can select products independently according to different brand positions, the selling*
39 *analysis of previous season and next season's prediction (Firm A).*

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41 *The buying plan should be based on instruction from the brands first. Then analyses of the*
42 *store sales statistics need to be done to ensure the buying plan will be effective (Firm I).*

43
44
45 *The responsibility of a fashion buyer in our company is to discover more excellent small*
46 *designers and cooperate with them, gather their unique products together on our website, and*
47 *make orders with relatively correct quantity (Firm D).*

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54 Additionally, there were levels of seniority within the buyer power team, with
55 decision-making limited to one's seniority. To elaborate, there are three buyer levels in the buyer
56 team, buyer assistant, entry buyer and buyer director:

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3 *In terms of the level of power, it actually depends on the buyer's position. An entry buyer*
4 *doesn't have much power, with the final buying decision-making often confirmed by buyer*
5 *director (Firm E).*
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11 In comparison with Western buyers, the structure of the buying operation is relatively
12 flat among the UK retailers, with the buyer reporting to the director for their department, who then
13 reports to the executive director (Margaret and Lucy, 2007). This allows decisions to be made
14 rapidly which is crucial in the fast-paced fashion business. Also, the buying teams are
15 multi-functional in Western countries, with the buyer, merchandiser and product specialist
16 working closely together to determine budgets, build ranges and source products.
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23 Therefore, the management mentality is an important factor that influences the buying
24 process as it directly determines how much power a buyer has within the company. The family
25 business owner selects the products that are most linked to their personal preferences or
26 non-market factors, which may not benefit the company's objective. Additionally, the success or
27 failure of buyers of fashion goods depends on the consumer needs. And the merchandise
28 displayed in the buyers' stores reflects the most current and desirable fashion (Fiorito and Gable,
29 2012). Hence the power of the fashion buyer with accurate prediction of fashion trends directly
30 impacts on the company's bottom line.
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40 *• Type of Merchandise*

41 42 43 *Buying Circle (Stock Status, Seasonal Changing and Historical Data)*

44
45 In recent years, the dramatic growth of the fast-paced fashion industry influenced the
46 retail buying circle, which led to an increased number of buying activities as well as more
47 demanding consumers. Firm B, Firm C and Firm F confirmed that a normal buying circle for a
48 high street brand and masstige brand is once per week or twice per month in order to meet
49 consumer demand:
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58 *We often update new products every week and the buying process normally lasts only three*
59 *days. It happens at a very fast speed (Firm B).*
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3 *We usually buy new collections every month or 2-4 times a season (Firm F).*
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8 In Chinese fashion markets, the stock status and seasonal changes influence the buying
9 process – something confirmed by Firm A and Firm B:
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15 *The most important factor is the stock status. If we have a lot of stock, the buying activity*
16 *must be slower than before (Firm B).*
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19 *In Shanghai, the changing season is very obvious, so it is normal and appropriate to*
20 *prepare the autumn collection in the summer (Firm A).*
21
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26 However, the buying circle in premium and luxury brand selection differs from a
27 masstige brand. It often depends on the update speed of the brand or is set by the brand itself,
28 according to Firm C and D. Most of the buyers confirmed that they could benefit greatly from
29 analysing historical statistics to guide trend forecasting, although there are other considerations to
30 be taken into account, such as brand position, market demand and fashion trends:
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38 *We usually use previous sales statistics to predict consumer demand. But the fashion trend is*
39 *also very important, for instance, the new style in Gucci is very popular now, but it doesn't*
40 *fit our brand as well as our target customer needs, because it is really hard to sell (Firm B).*
41
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44 *We choose merchandise mainly based on the historical sales statistics and the current*
45 *season's market demand. This will affect such things as fashion trend, design, colour etc.*
46 *(Firm G).*
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49 *We have auto-replenishment for the classic styles and best sellers. However, for the new*
50 *season selection, fashion trend is the key (Firm H).*
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56 Buying branded products requires the buyer to pick those elements of the branded range
57 that best fits their own customer profile. Hence, buyers who have a clear understanding of
58 consumer behaviour are in a much better position to purchase and promote merchandise that
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3 meets the customers' needs. As trend forecasting is an important role of the fashion buyer, and the
4 technology used to assist such forecasting has not changed, it is not surprising that similar
5 decision-making processes exist in China as in other markets. Additionally, factors such as
6 branding, and product positioning would be expected to impact the decision-making as well.
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10 11 12 13 **Product Positioning**

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16 Product positioning can be identified into own-label products and national brands
17 according to Sheth's (1981) theory. In the Chinese fashion market, retailers have their own-label
18 products or national brands according to what type of retailer they fall into. For example, the
19 buyer in Firm A mentioned that they have two brands, one is a masstige brand and the other one is
20 a premium brand, so both brands have different positioning and product requirements. The buyer
21 in Firm A claimed that a clear understanding of product positioning is vital – something that the
22 buyer in Firm C also touched on:
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32 *When you have 100 products to choose from, you must have the ability to choose 50 of*
33 *them very quickly and must ensure they are suitable for your company position and market*
34 *demand (Firm C).*
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41 However, buyers in western countries need to balance commercial pieces and best-selling
42 pieces to drive revenue, which will communicate the retailer's fashion credentials and act as a
43 publicity mechanism.
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50 **Open to Buy**

51
52 Open-to-buy (OTB) planning is a tool that, in the hands of a fully committed retailer, can
53 profoundly improve financial performance. It allows a retailer to manage inventory, plan
54 purchases, and budget effectively (Markus and Alander, 2005). Firm C and Firm G also claimed
55 that OTB is important regarding product positioning:
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3 *The factors that we need to consider are the product type, the price, and also the open-to-buy*
4 *(Firm C).*

5
6 *The most vital factor is the OTB. We need to use SKU (Stock Keeping Unit) to allocate the*
7 *product type based on OTB (Firm G).*
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10 11 12 13 14 15 ***Exclusive Distribution***

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18 Some firms are willing to provide collaborations or request exclusive editions from other
19 brands to maximise sales:
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22
23 *We had cooperation with the NMD limited collection of Adidas this year. Our company is*
24 *Adidas's only online partner in China. Also, we have attracted a big number of customers*
25 *because of the limited collection and the huge customer base (Firm D).*

26
27 *The new Disneyland opened in Shanghai this year and there was a group of exclusive products*
28 *that needed to be ordered, this was completely out of our original buying plan (Firm C).*
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37 The benefits of brand collaboration have been well documented in marketing literature and
38 therefore provide a significant value to a firm. Such collaborations offer a significant product
39 differentiation compared to competitors. Fiorito (1990) also discovered that exclusive distribution
40 was beneficial for small fashion retailers in order to increase competitive advantage and establish
41 the retailer's positive image.
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46 47 48 49 50 ***Type of Decision***

51 ***One Time/Repeat Buying Task***

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54 There are two types of buying decisions in fashion retailing: one time purchase and repeat
55 purchases (Sheth, 1981). The difference between these two decisions can be converted to fashion
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3 goods and continuity goods within the Chinese fashion context. Both exist in the buying process
4 according to Firm D and other respondents:
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10 *We continue to buy the products with good sales such as some basic collections, and keep*
11 *purchasing new products and new brands in order to give customers more choices (Firm D).*

12
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14 *Apart from some best sellers, seasonal animated products will be selected to attract different*
15 *clients (Firm H).*

16
17 *We have to buy the same products constantly whilst purchasing new collections every new*
18 *season (Firm A).*
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25 **Company Positioning & Trend Forecasting**

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28 The buyer in Firm B also confirmed that the majority of buying tasks are one time or new
29 purchases according to company position and fashion trend. Nevertheless, they still need to have
30 repeat purchases with good sales performance, based on previous sales data, because of the risk in
31 the buying process:
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37 *90% of the new tasks can be made because we are a fast-paced fashion brand; we need to*
38 *follow the constantly changing fashion trend and our customers always look for something*
39 *new and special. However, we have 10% of repeat orders, according to the historical*
40 *statistics of the best seller (Firm B).*
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47 **Consumer Demand**

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49 China is geographically larger than most countries, and more populous than any other;
50 therefore, there exists diverse consumer buying behaviours, climactic and geographical
51 differences that lead to different consumer needs. The buyer in Firm B explains:
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56 *The purchasing products are different in Guangzhou, Shanghai and Chengdu because of*
57 *different weather. The leather goods cannot be a best seller in Guangzhou as the weather is*
58 *too hot. In Chengdu, also a fashionable city in China, we can sell very artistic products*
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3 *because many of the consumers are art-lovers. And the customers in Shanghai may like more*
4 *exquisite products because they seek out a high-quality life (Firm B).*
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10 Therefore Chinese fashion retail buyers need to be adept at understanding classic
11 products based on geographical differences, and how to maximise profits from repeat purchases
12 rather than simply focusing on newer products in premium markets. It is vital to have a clear
13 understanding of consumer demand and fashion trends in the buying tasks within the fast-paced
14 fashion and masstige brands.
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25 **Supplier Accessibility**

26 • *Competitive Structure*

27 ***Supplier Selection (Exclusivity and Stability)***

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33 Sheth (1981) discusses that the fashion industry is highly competitive with a
34 tremendous range of possible suppliers. It can be expected that supplier selection would be a
35 significant factor for the fashion buyer's decision-making process, in any geographic market.
36 However, in the Chinese market it is not only important to have fixed suppliers, but also important
37 to discover new suppliers. The current brand positioning of retailers highlights the accessibility of
38 many potential suppliers. Firm B confirmed that the main requirement for new supplier selection
39 is that products fit their brand position. Moreover, in this study, it can be found that two key
40 elements need to be taken into consideration when conducting a new supplier selection, the
41 exclusivity and the stability of the supplier:
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53 *The key requirement for new suppliers is that they need to provide us with exclusive products*
54 *and must ensure they do not offer their products to the other fashion companies (Firm A)*
55

56
57 *Our suppliers are basically the brands, they should be able to continuously provide products*
58 *with stability (Firm I).*
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6 Moreover, all the participants explained that they are working with a number of fixed
7 suppliers and discover new suppliers constantly:
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13 *Basically we have one main supplier and many subsidiary suppliers, because the main*
14 *supplier can ensure the products' quality and maintain stable delivery time (Firm G).*

15
16 *We want to provide better goods to our customers, so we are continuing work with new*
17 *suppliers and cancel some cooperation with the old suppliers (Firm E).*
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24 Chinese fashion retail buyers value stability in supplies but also value the ability to
25 produce quality goods and lower costs. Sternquist and Chen (2006) affirmed that product
26 characteristics that meet consumer need, such as uniqueness and quality, are vital factors in
27 supplier role performance. However, the Chinese market may face unique problems, for example
28 stable supply in China may be significantly valued, where many suppliers could provide this
29 service. Additionally, given the necessity to offer better value for money to Chinese consumers,
30 suppliers must also be able to provide good value for money to retail buyers, in addition to stable
31 supply.
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39 Thus, the competitive structure is an important element that retailers should consider when
40 conducting supplier selection, as well as cooperation with quality, stable suppliers. It would be
41 essential to a successful and profitable company in the long-term development.
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47 • *Relative Marketing Efforts*

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50 **Firm H and Firm I both confirmed that** many international brands make massive
51 investments in global marketing campaigns each season **and it influences the buying activities.**
52 While a substantial outlay, this can save the need for smaller marketing methods, according to
53 Firm D. However, in terms of the exclusive retail environment of the online platforms use by Firm
54 D, they indicated that it is possible to invest marketing efforts into small independent designers to
55 make their company more competitive and unique:
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6 *Some smaller brands have great products, yet they don't have enough money to promote their*
7 *products. We would love to do this for them. This is an advantage to attract more designers to*
8 *cooperate with us (Firm D).*
9
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11 12 13 14 15 ***Retailer-Supplier Relationship*** 16

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18 In addition, if there are quality flaws or if the sales were poor and products stayed unsold
19 at the end of the season, then it is beneficial to have the right to return products. Because of poor
20 sales, the option to return items and carry the budget over to the next season minimises the effects
21 of poor buying decisions. Hence, the good or poor relationship between supplier and retail buyer
22 can directly impact on the goods return policy. In fact, success in developing buyer–supplier
23 relationships have become one of the great sources for attaining sustainable competitive
24 advantage (Frazier, 1999):
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34 *The good relationship between supplier and us is based on a long-term collaboration, so if the*
35 *products need to be exchanged or returned we have the flexibility (Firm D).*
36

37 *We have built good relationships with some brands as we have cooperated with each other for*
38 *a long time, it not only reflects a flexible return policy but also gives us an easier way to*
39 *expand the brand into multiple locations (Firm H).*
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45 This finding is also in accordance with Leung, Lai, Chan, and Wong (2005) and
46 Sternquist and Chen (2006) who discovered, when they examined stable relationships between
47 buyers and suppliers, that good relationships increase satisfaction. Trusting relationships can take
48 a long time to cultivate (Shaw and Koumbis, 2017) – something confirmed by Firm B:
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55 *If it is a new supplier, I would like to consider its stability. If it can only supply products for*
56 *one season or if there's a chance it may change style very quickly, I will consider whether it*
57 *can be our future supplier for a season or not, and then make final decision (Firm B).*
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6 However, the buyers in Firm C, F and G mentioned that this relationship could have
7 limited influence on buying decision-making processes because a buying plan is fixed and is
8 adhered to strictly.
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10 11 12 13 14 · *Corporate Image*

15 16 17 *Country of Origin*

18
19 Sheth's (1981) framework highlights that corporate image includes factors such as
20 Country of Origin (COO), product quality and business practices. COO can be essentially
21 understood by the consumer perceptions of product quality, with symbolic and emotional values
22 being tied to the COO, thus COO can build a significant source of brand equity (Margaret and
23 Lucy, 2007). Interviewees from Firm A, Firm E and Firm H illustrated this:
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31 *Most of our products are made in Korea, although it may cost more, the quality can be more*
32 *reliable and the design can be more creative. Customers are willing to pay more for Korean*
33 *products designed and made in Korea (Firm A).*
34
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37 *For some certain product categories, the COO still matters to customers, such as leather*
38 *goods should be made in Italy or France to ensure the great quality; watches should be made*
39 *in Switzerland etc. (Firm E).*
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43 *For luxury products, people expect goods to be produced in Europe rather than in China*
44 *(Firm H).*
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51 There are many product-specific factors that contribute to the generation of
52 country-of-origin biases, along with moderating factors influencing the effect. Positive COO
53 image builds a 'halo effect', providing other products from the country a favourable evaluation.
54 On the other hand, if the bias is negative, it will have a 'black cloud' effect (Balabanis et al.,
55 2002). This being said, in recent years COO has become less vital to customers, and the negative
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3 perception of outsourcing of manufacture to China has been reduced. The buyer in Firm E and
4 Firm I explain:
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8 *The COO is not so important as it once was, because we are mainly focusing on clothing; a lot*
9 *of products were made in China and nowadays the production in China is advanced (Firm E).*
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12 *The quality of the products is the most essential thing as it generates buying rotation. However,*
13 *the COO only matters when it is a luxury brand (Firm I).*
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20 China is making the move from being known for cheap, inferior quality to an image of
21 advanced technology, innovation, and superior product performance, especially in the fashion
22 industry. To further strengthen its image, Chinese fashion businesses will need to focus on
23 delivering authenticity, a key driver of consumer preference, as well as understanding when and
24 how to leverage its COO in its own future brands. Consequently, COO is a decreasingly less
25 significant factor in the fashion buyer's decision-making process. Gurhan-Canli and Maheswaran
26 (2000) found that some Western buyers stated that collectivistic cultures have the tendency to
27 constantly favour domestic over foreign products.
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37 **Conclusion**

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40 This paper shows that Sheth's framework of Merchandise Buying Behaviour - can be
41 used when analysing the buying decision-making process among fashion buyers in China. The
42 key constructs that underpin their buying decision-making process were merchandise
43 requirements and supplier accessibility. The seven main themes to come out of this research are
44 clearly summarised in the conceptual model below (see Table 4).
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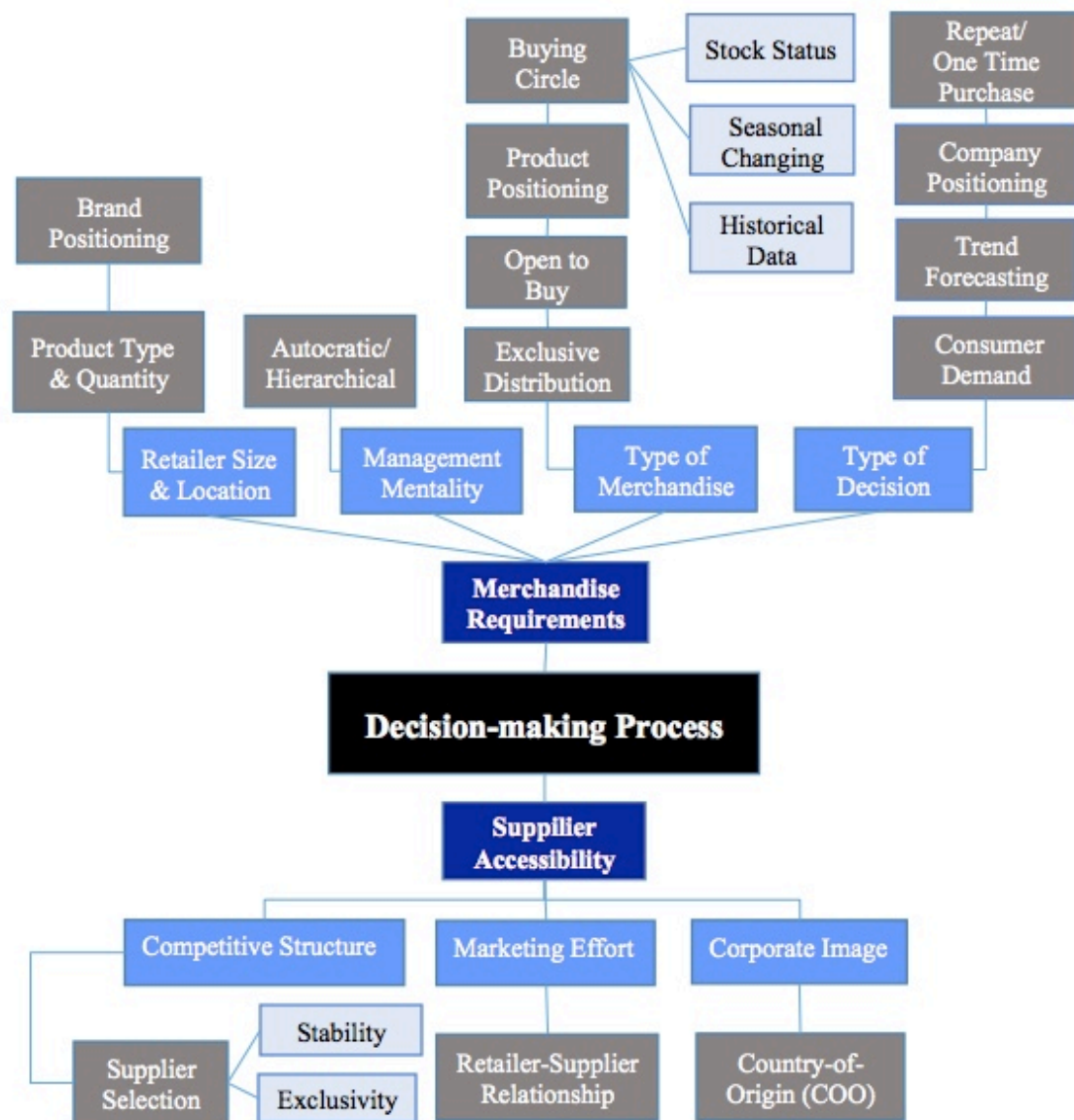


Table 4: The Decision-making Process of Chinese Fashion Buyers

Merchandise Requirements

The most influential elements are retailer size, retailer location, management mentality, type of merchandise, product positioning and type of decision. Retailer size demonstrates the type and quantity of fashion products or brands that could be selected, while retail location represents a vital factor for the retailer's success, which also depends on the brand positioning. In terms of management mentality, the fashion buyer role tends to be strategic and constrained depending on two contrasting management styles in Chinese firms: autocratic and hierarchical. Management

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3 approaches can constrain the decision-making power of the fashion retail buyer, particularly in
4 family owned businesses, hence the product-mix in Chinese fashion retailers is less determined by
5 fashion buyer's decision-making.
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9 The type of merchandise depends on the brand positioning. The buying circle is one of
10 the most important components, which is influenced by historical data, stock status and seasonal
11 changes. Also, the exclusive distribution in product positioning is essential, which allows for a
12 competitive advantage for the retailer.
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17 The type of decision normally influences the decision-making process, as buyers may
18 utilise decision type to conduct their selection. This would include the buying task, company
19 position, consumer demand and fashion trend. Chinese fashion retail buyers have a complex task
20 in forecasting trends. This is partly due to the need to expend effort and resources to stay familiar
21 with trends in developed markets (such as in Europe or the US). Further, significant variations
22 exist in China due to the large population and geographic diversity of the country.
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31 ***Supplier Accessibility***

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33 The elements influencing buyers' decision-making are competitive structure, cooperate
34 image and marketing efforts. For competitive structure, it can be found that in supplier selection,
35 some suppliers are normally selected for stable production supplies, whilst another set of
36 suppliers are frequently sought out to provide cheaper and higher quality products. This can be
37 attributed to the unique market features in China.
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43 For corporate image, the COO concept has evolved into a complex notion as global
44 production operations became increasingly diverse, and new market opportunities continue to
45 emerge in both developing and developed countries. The product quality is more vital than the
46 COO as Chinese manufacturing has become sophisticated and advanced in recent years and
47 consumer perception about higher quality goods made in China has improved.
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53 Regarding marketing efforts, although some buyers mentioned that the relationship
54 between supplier and retailer would not affect the buying decision-making process, as the buying
55 contract is fixed, it can influence the product return policy or ability to launch new products. The
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3 credibility between supplier and buyer can build long-term cooperation within the Chinese fashion
4 market.
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10 11 12 **Implications**

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15 The findings of this research indicate that the buying procedure is a strategic role
16 determining the success of the organization, which debunks Sternquist and Chen's (2006)
17 argument that Chinese fashion buyers' decision-making is an intuitive approach which is often
18 based on an unscientific and imprecise information system. In family-run firms, business owners
19 have final say on the selection of products, which may be a more intuitive decision based on
20 personal preferences which may lead to less profitable sales. Thus, the results of this study may be
21 useful to understand fashion buyers' buying behavior and may enable the selection of products.
22 However, the decision-making power of retail buyers in non-family businesses is stronger and
23 they likely have a larger contribution to the profit of company business. These buyers prefer to use
24 statistical analysis of historical sales data as a means of decreasing risk and enhancing prediction
25 accuracy. They are capable of evaluating feedback from vendors and salespersons about data
26 outlines (Aufreiter et al., 2003). Moreover, the significant investment in stock needed before each
27 season demonstrates that fashion prediction and the understanding of consumer demand are
28 essential to the success or failure in the seasonal buying.
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41 In addition, the impact of shorter product life cycles in the fast-paced fashion market and
42 an increasing number of independent designer brands is proved by the rise of cruise and
43 pre-season collections in the premium and luxury sectors. Clodfelter (2013) has indicated that
44 many fashion buyers' decision-making process is related to the experience of product life cycles
45 and fashion trends. With shorter product life cycles and higher levels of diversity, arises larger
46 uncertainty in fashion predicting. Therefore, it is crucial to adapt a scientific, rather than an
47 intuitive or instinctive rationale, approach to the buying decision process.
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55 Silva, Davies and Naude (2002) stated that buying is not an exact science, however
56 improving decision-making is always possible. This paper reveals several practical implications
57 and also gives a guideline for an efficient and effective fashion retail buying process specifically
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3 in China. Firstly, this research can contribute more scientific decision-making to Chinese fashion
4 retail buyers, allowing them to learn from the outcomes of such analyses by using Table 4,
5 especially because there has not been a concrete buying framework to adapt to the Chinese
6 fashion market before. Secondly, retail buyers can pay attention to vital MR and SA elements in
7 this study to avoid poor decision-making and result in growing sales for the company. Finally, this
8 buying framework can be used for suppliers to improve their stability and exclusivity in order to
9 create long-term business relationships with buyers as well.
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21 Further research

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23 This paper could be read as a call for further research, including the need to address the
24 issue of family ownership in fashion retail performance. A growing body of literature highlights
25 that family businesses have fundamentally different management cultures and styles to non-family
26 businesses, which can affect the firm in many ways (including the role of fashion buyers). As
27 family businesses are common in Asia, this would be a pertinent area to investigate. Also, a
28 comparative study between Chinese and Western retail buying is much needed, because fashion
29 buyers must be aware of the enormous decision-making differences between these two important
30 markets when conducting business.
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38 Finally, corporate governance issues in terms of ethical factors are becoming an
39 increasingly important issue for fashion retailers. Literature on ethical fashion companies and
40 their use of socially responsible strategies is sparse. There is a lack of research that covers
41 both social and environmental sustainability in the fashion market. The need for research is
42 underscored by buyers' relatively new perceptions of what constitutes ethical fashion. Simply
43 put, a growing number of buyers are influenced by socially and environmentally responsible
44 businesses. However, such issues have not been significantly investigated in the Chinese market
45 and may well become a crucial business issue as the Chinese market has the world's highest
46 purchasing power.
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