

# Symbolic Product Attributes and Emulatory Consumption: The Case of Rodeo Fan Attendance and the Wearing of Western Clothing

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## Abstract

*Clothing is an ideal product for the study of emulatory consumption because it is visible, accessible, and relatively inexpensive. This study addresses the relationship between the purchase and usage of symbolic products (western clothing) and involvement with reference groups (rodeo society). Data presented are from a survey which was distributed to 1,559 rodeo fans who attended the 1991 National Finals Rodeo in Las Vegas, Nevada.*

## Introduction

Western dress plays a significant role in one's acceptance in rodeo society. "The importance and degree of uniformity in Western dress in the ranching and rodeo society cannot be overemphasized" (Lawrence 1982, p. 93). Aside from the selection of functional and traditional western clothing in ranching and farming environments, professional rodeo cowboys are required to wear western dress. Moreover, media representatives at professional rodeos are also required to wear long-sleeved shirts, boots, and a western hat. These requirements support a policy of encouraging rodeo fans to wear western dress (Lawrence 1982). Not surprisingly, research has shown that the opportunity to wear western clothing is significantly correlated with rodeo fan attendance (Daneshvary, Schwer, and Rickman 1993). The desire of rodeo fans to wear western clothing may reflect, as suggested by Haggard and Williams (1992), that "leisure activities symbolize discrete sets of identify images, which generalize from one sample to another, and which may be seen as a motivation for participation in specific leisure activities" (p.1). Thus, rodeo fans may wear western clothing to symbolize to themselves and to others that they are individualists, independent, tough, and stoic--images frequently associated with cowboys.

Purchasing behavior, like all human action, may be both purposive and emulatory. For example, consider the case of Wrangler jeans, which has become number

one in western wear (Fisher 1992). This ranking may be attributed in part to Wrangler's 45-year association with the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association (PRCA) as its exclusive apparel sponsor and the recent surge in popularity of country music stars who wear the Wrangler jeans (Fisher 1992). Yet, "Wrangler's big strength is its Western authenticity. Wrangler jeans are standard equipment for the rodeo cowboy, just like the rope, saddle, and boots. It's the brand of the working cowboy. People want to emulate that" (Fisher 1992, p. 38).

## Theoretical Framework

Economists historically have given short shrift to societal effects in their consumption analysis. To be sure, many knew of these effects, for example, the archetypical neoclassical economist Alfred Marshall (Leibenstein 1950). Yet, no doubt, finding the issues complex for treatment within their optimization treatment, they assumed societal problems away, preferring to focus on more manageable issues. Whereas, scholars more open to other methodological frameworks continued to pursue the phenomena of fashion, social status, and consumption. Not surprisingly, modern mainstream economists, having no theory of fashion and, perhaps believing they have broken new ground, belatedly find a rich treatment of social behavior and consumption rooted in emulatory behavior.

Emulatory behavior as espoused by T. Veblen (1899), focuses on socially affected consumption, especially conspicuous consumption. More specifically, the Veblen effect, one of the societal effects in consumption, occurs when people buy goods simply because they are expensive.<sup>1</sup> Leibenstein (1950) added two additional emulatory societal effects--the bandwagon effect (people buy what is widely being bought) and the snob effect (people buy what is not being widely bought). The former effect "reflects the desire to purchase a commodity in order to get into 'the swim of things,' in order to conform with those they wish to be associated with, in order to be fashionable or stylish" (Leibenstein 1950, p. 51). The latter effect reflects people's desire to be different--to dissociate themselves from the "common herd" (p. 52).

Steiner and Weiss (1951) proposed the counter-snobbery effect. To contend with the prosperous nouveau and to maintain the status quo, the old elite adopted a new prestige system whereby they mock wealth. This is achieved by deploring ornateness and adoring simplicity (albeit at a painfully high price). Thus, the nouveau, at long last financially able to engage in exhibitionism, finds that the old elite refrains from ostentatious display. In essence, the old elite exhibits inverse exhibitionism. More recently, Lea (1980) proposed a counter-Veblen effect. In this case, people buy cheaper to avoid ostentation, in other words, conspicuous nonconsumption. Thus, emulatory behavior lends itself readily to explanations of fashion and consumption.

The sociological theory of symbolic interaction has its origin in the work of the social philosopher G.H. Mead (1934) and it has gained increasing acceptance since the mid-1950s as a basis for analysis (Leigh and Gable 1992, p. 28). We note two important premises from symbolic interactionism. First, individuals' consumption patterns strongly reflect societal reference group behavior. Second, individuals act on the basis of the symbolic meanings that society has given to goods. Thus, societal effects have increasingly found acceptance in marketing and other noneconomic fields of study.

Emulation and symbolic interaction themes of Veblen and Mead share a common foundation in pragmatist philosophy (Harvey and Katovich 1992). As such they share parallels in their work. Fontana, Tilman, and Roe (1992) note similarities regarding Mead's and Veblen's views on inter-individual actions, symbolic representations, temporal concepts of human existence, social change, economics, and motives. For example, regarding symbolic representation, they conclude that "Veblen and Mead both explain the role of symbols and gestures by showing that it is through their development that people form new relationships to their own existence" (1992, p. 252). Thus,

one finds a theoretical convergence between emulatory behavior and interactive symbolism.

The converged theoretical framework of emulatory behavior and symbolic interaction posits that consumers will adopt the behaviors and products of reference groups. Reference groups are those "with which an individual closely identifies himself and so become the standards of evaluation and the sources of his personal behavior norms" (Mason 1981, p. 24). After identifying the reference group, the consumer then "must determine exactly what certain products mean to group members" (Leigh and Gavel 1992, p. 28). The use of these products is a means of expressing one's self-concept or self-image.

The issues of fashion in the context of emulatory and symbolic interaction have been studied using the case method, but these studies have been largely descriptive and nonempirical, for example, Mason (1981). Indeed, Mason concluded that "specialist research into the subject has given us a highly fragmented and often inconsistent picture of conspicuous economic display and it is clear that a quite explicit multi-disciplinary approach needs to be taken if further progress is to be made" (Mason, p. x). One noteworthy empirical effort has been the work of Basmann, Molina, and Slottje (1988, 1983). Using extensively aggregated data they found the presence of emulatory responses. Hence, issues of clothing and emulatory behavior, however, remain ripe for empirical study since measurement is easily made at the individual unit.

### **Clothing and Emulatory Behavior**

Research has shown that the more similar a product is to one's self-image, the more likely a consumer will prefer the product (Feinberg, Mataro, Burroughs 1992, Sirgy 1982, 1985, 1992). Sirgy (1982, 1985, 1992) used the term self-congruity to refer to the extent that a product image matches a consumer's actual self-image and ideal congruence to describe the matching of the product image with the ideal self-image. Ericksen and Sirgy (1992) used the self-image/product-image congruity framework to predict the clothing preferences of employed women. While these studies lend support to the self-congruity theory, they failed to address the role of the self-image and the product image in determining actual purchase behavior.

Research has also demonstrated that observers can make inferences about individuals based on clothing cues (Buckley and Roach 1974, Feinberg, Mataro, Burroughs 1992). One can surely agree that certain items of clothing evoke strong images. To be sure, cowboy hats, cowboy boots, and a neck handkerchief, for instance, are standard equipment of the cowboy.<sup>2</sup> However, the western wear of cowboys also evokes association with the West. Moreover,

these images have been portrayed extensively in the media. As a consequence, the cowboy has become a reference group with widely recognizable and clearly identifiable images. That is, cowboys symbolize individualism, independence, toughness, and stoicism (Lawrence 1982). If a noncowboy wished to symbolize to oneself and to others that one possessed these qualities, the noncowboy would do so by emulating the cowboy. By far, one of the easiest and most visible means would be by the wearing of western clothing. It is far easier to emulate another's style of clothing than to adopt their attributes.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the noncowboy would be motivated to purchase and to wear these symbolic products.

Leigh and Gavel (1992) identified group characteristics which will affect the amount of symbolic purchasing behavior that an individual exhibits. These include exclusive groups, distinctive groups, homogeneous groups, formal groups, and frequently-interacting groups. They suggest that the more often an individual interacts with the reference group, the more often one can evaluate and emulate the behavior of that group. The question is, does increased involvement with the reference group significantly affect emulative purchasing behavior and usage of symbolic products?

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this case study is to assess the presence of emulatory consumption via the use of symbolic products. We estimate an empirical relationship between involvement with a reference group (rodeo society) and the purchase and usage of symbolic products (western clothing). Involvement is defined as "the general level of interest in the object, or the centrality of the object to the respondents' ego" (Day 1970, p. 80). General level of interest in this study is operationally defined as the frequency of rodeo attendance, the watching of rodeos on television, and agreement with the expression of personal interests as reflected in following rodeo activities throughout the year. The specific objective of this study is to determine if, after accounting for socioeconomic characteristics, involvement with a reference group (rodeo society) can be used to predict the purchase and usage of symbolic products (western clothing). As a consequence, this case study contributes to the fledgling empirical research base on symbolic products and emulatory purchasing behavior.

### **Methodology**

Five thousand questionnaires were distributed to rodeo fans at the National Finals Rodeo (NFR) in Las Vegas,

Nevada during December of 1991.<sup>4</sup> The NFR is the biggest event on the rodeo circuit (Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association 1988). The questionnaires were distributed to a random selection of rodeo fans at the start of five different performances and were collected at the end of each. Two thousand two hundred fans completed the questionnaires for a 44.6 percent response rate. A total of 1,559 complete questionnaires were used in the analyses of this study (questionnaires with missing data were deleted).

To determine western clothing purchase, respondents were asked if they had purchased the following items within the last sixty days: western hat, cowboy boots, belt buckle, and other western apparel. These items have strong stereotypic images for principal players of rodeo society, namely professional rodeo cowboys. Dichotomous responses to each of the four items were used as the dependent variable in four separate probit regression analyses. To determine western clothing usage, respondents were asked how often they wear western clothing. Four ordinal ranking response categories were provided: never, only to rodeos, occasionally, and regularly. The response to this question constitutes the dependent variable in an ordered probit regression model. The included measures of involvement with the reference group were: the frequency of rodeo attendance, whether the respondent watched rodeo on television, and whether the respondent followed professional rodeo activities throughout the year. The socioeconomic control variables used were age, gender, education, occupation, place of residence, and income. The same set of explanatory variables is used in the purchase and the usage models.

### **Data Description**

Sample means for the variables used in the regression models are given in Table 1. Particularly noteworthy is that the majority of respondents were involved with rodeo society. Approximately 71 percent of the fans attended rodeos "often/very often." An overwhelming majority of the fans (96.3 percent) watched rodeo on television and 87.0 percent followed rodeo throughout the year. Over seventy-five percent of the respondents regularly wear western clothing. The mean age of the respondents was 45.63, 53.18 percent were female, the majority had attended college (61.12 percent), and their annual household income was approximately \$48,000. Less than one-fifth of the respondents were employed in ranching or agriculture. Yet, the largest group of respondents lived on a ranch, farm, or in a rural area (35.3 percent). About 29, 14, and 21 percents, respectively, of the remaining respondents lived in a small town, a city, and a metropolitan area.

**Table 1**  
**Sample Means and Percentages**

Variable	Means and Percents
Purchase of western clothing (%)	
Western hat	22.19
Cowboy boots	44.90
Belt buckle	25.27
Other western clothing	83.52
Frequency of western clothing usage (%)	
Never	1.28
Only to rodeos	1.73
Occasionally	19.76
Regularly	77.23
Frequency of rodeo attendance	
Once per year	7.93
Sometimes	20.73
Often	37.36
Very often	33.97
Watch rodeo on television (%)	96.28
Follow rodeo throughout the year (%)	87.04
Age	45.63
Annual income (\$ thousands)	48.73
Gender (female) (%)	53.18
Residence (ranch/farm/rural) (%)	35.28
Occupation (ranch/agriculture) (%)	16.68
Education (%)	
Some high school	8.35
Completed high school	30.53
Attended college	61.12

### Findings from Simple Probit Regression

Simple probit regression results for the purchase of each of the western clothing items are presented in Table 2. Three socioeconomic variables (having an occupation related to ranching, income, and completed high school) and one involvement with the reference group variable (frequency of rodeo attendance) were significant determinants of the purchase of a western hat within the past sixty days. Those who had completed high school were more likely to purchase a western hat than those who had not completed high school. The behavior of those who had attended college did not differ from those who did not finish high school.

Three socioeconomic variables proved to be significant determinants of purchase of cowboy boots within the past sixty days: income, completed high school, and age. The

coefficient for age was negative and significant. Older respondents were less likely to purchase cowboy boots than were younger respondents. Of the three involvement with reference group variables, two had statistically significant coefficients: watching rodeo on television and frequent rodeo attendance augment the probability of cowboy boot purchase. Income was the only significant determinant of purchase of a belt buckle within the past sixty days.

The socioeconomic variables income and age were the only significant socioeconomic variables determining the purchase of other western clothing. The coefficient for age was negative and significant. Older rodeo fans were less likely to purchase other western clothing than were younger fans. All the involvement variables, watch rodeo on television, frequency of rodeo attendance, and follow rodeo throughout the year, were significant.

**Table 2**  
**Probit Estimates for Purchase of Wearing Western Clothing<sup>(a)</sup>**

Variable	Western Hat	Cowboy Boots	Belt Buckle	Other Western Clothing
Constant	-4.581 (-5.543)	-4.384 (-5.965)	-2.735 (-3.509)	-2.422 (-2.868)
<u>Involvement with the Reference Group</u>				
Frequency of rodeo attendance	0.164*** (3.722)	0.182*** (4.667)	0.038 (0.923)	0.218*** (4.790)
Watch rodeo on television	0.157 (0.763)	0.544** (2.840)	0.299 (1.487)	0.333* (1.798)
Follow rodeo throughout the year	0.011 (0.088)	0.070 (0.647)	-0.038 (-0.331)	0.306** (2.672)
<u>Socioeconomic</u>				
Age (10 <sup>-3</sup> )	0.005 (-1.461)	-0.006* (-2.257)	-0.004 (-1.168)	-0.014*** (-4.381)
Annual income (log)	0.289*** (4.125)	0.307*** (4.923)	0.184*** (2.745)	0.258*** (3.559)
Gender (female)-0.118	-0.057 (-1.565)	0.003 (-0.829)	-0.059 (0.036)	-0.070 (-0.702)
Residence <sup>b</sup> (ranch/farm/rural)	0.005 (0.066)	0.021 (0.299)	-0.030 (-0.401)	0.120 (1.364)
Occupation <sup>b</sup> (ranch/agriculture)	0.316** (3.182)	0.152 (1.624)	0.080 (-0.793)	-0.04 (-0.374)
Completed high school <sup>b</sup>	0.264* (1.766)	0.252** (1.963)	-0.057 (-0.427)	0.080 (0.536)
Attended college <sup>b</sup>	0.234 (1.622)	-0.003 (-0.021)	-0.152 (-1.177)	0.069 (0.479)
Chi-squared (df = 10)	55.348***	82.600***	13.880***	91.366***

(a) t values are in parentheses, \*, \*\*, and \*\*\* denote significance at the 10%, 5%, and 1% levels, respectively.

(b) Excluded categories are small town (less than 10,000), city (10,000 to 100,000), and metropolitan area (more than 100,000), armed forces, homemaker, professional/managerial, sales, services, secretarial/clerical, technical/trades, and some high school.

### Findings from Ordered Probit Regression for Wearing Western Clothing

The ordered probit estimates for frequency of western clothing usage are found in Table 3. Living in a rural area, frequency of rodeo attendance, and follow rodeo throughout the year significantly increased western clothing usage. Note that the coefficients for age and gender were negative and significant. Older respondents were less likely to wear western clothing than were younger respondents. Females wore western clothing less frequently than males.

In summary, two of the three variables which measured involvement with the reference group proved to be significant determinants of western clothing usage. Individuals who attended rodeos frequently and those who followed rodeo throughout the year wore western clothing more often than those who did not. Frequent rodeo attenders have the opportunity to observe and to assess the clothing behavior of their reference group. Furthermore, individuals who attend rodeos frequently have opportunities to wear western clothing, thus, influencing western clothing purchase. And indeed, all the involvement variables were significant determinants of western clothing purchase. Thus, our findings agree with Leigh and Gavel's (1992) premise that the more often an individual interacts with the reference group, the more often one can evaluate and the more likely one will emulate the behavior of the group.

### Conclusion

The findings imply that purchase of western clothing is related to involvement with rodeo society. Involvement with the reference group is operationally defined (or proxies) as the frequency of rodeo attendance, watching rodeo on television, and following professional rodeo activities throughout the year. The frequency of rodeo attendance has significant impact on the purchase probability of a western hat, cowboy boots, and other western clothing. Watching rodeo on television influences the purchases of cowboy boots and other western clothing. Following professional rodeo activities throughout the year is not a significant determinant of western hat purchase, belt, buckle, and cowboy boots.

Of the socioeconomic variables, income is the only variable that significantly increases the probability of western clothing purchases. Nevertheless, having an occupation in ranching and having completed high school are significant determinants of the purchase of western hat and cowboy boots.

The findings also show that frequency of western clothing usage is related to involvement with a reference group. Two of the reference group variables, frequency of

**Table 3**  
**Ordered Probit Estimates for Frequency of Wearing Western Clothing<sup>(a)</sup>**

<u>Variable</u>	<u>Estimate</u>
Constant	1.271 (1.627)
<u>Involvement with the Reference Group</u>	
Frequency of rodeo attendance	0.345*** (8.242)
Watch rodeo on television	0.242 (1.341)
Follow rodeo throughout the year	0.352*** (3.301)
<u>Socioeconomic</u>	
Age (10 <sup>-3</sup> )	-0.013*** (-4.348)
Annual income (log)	0.017 (0.256)
Gender (female)	-0.178** (-2.234)
Residence (ranch/farm/rural) <sup>b</sup>	0.376*** (4.486)
Occupation (ranch/agriculture) <sup>b</sup>	0.052 (0.479)
Completed high school <sup>b</sup>	-0.002 (-0.013)
Attended college <sup>b</sup>	-0.049 (-0.370)
Chi-squared (df = 10)	196.29***

<sup>a)</sup> t values are in parentheses, \*, \*\*, and \*\*\* denote significance at the 10%, 5%, and 1% levels, respectively.

<sup>(b)</sup> Excluded categories are small town (less than 10,000), city (10,000 to 100,000), and metropolitan area (more than 100,000), armed forces, homemaker, professional/managerial, sales, services, secretarial/clerical, technical/trades, and some high school.

attendance at rodeos and follow rodeo throughout the year, are significant determinants of western clothing usage. Of the socioeconomic variables, living in a rural area is the only positive and significant determinant of western clothing usage. Older individuals and females use western clothing less than younger people and males, respectively.

Clothing is an ideal product for the study of emulatory consumption because it is visible, accessible, and relatively inexpensive. Furthermore, if one's behavior and appearance conform to that of a reference group, then the desired attributes associated with a reference group are readily bestowed upon the emulator. The emulator, however, need not possess the desirable attributes. Hence, the quandary: does "Clothes maketh the man" or is "The man all hat and no cattle?"

### Suggestions for Future Research

In general, the findings imply that the purchase and usage of symbolic products are influenced by one's involvement with a reference group. Since this study examined only one reference group and one symbolic product, it may be somewhat injudicious to generalize the results to other reference groups and symbolic products. That is, one's level of involvement with the golfing, bowling, or tennis societies may (or may not) influence the purchase of golf, bowling, or tennis clothing and respective clothing usage. Further study of involvement with reference groups and symbolic products would enable such generalizations and may lend support to the association between involvement with a reference group and emulatory consumption. ☞

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### \*\*\* Endnotes \*\*\*

1. The law of conspicuous consumption as it relates to the leisure class fails to explain the emulatory consumption of all types of apparel and in all time periods. Plausible explanations for this failure come from two Veblenian scholars. Tilman (1992) claims that Veblen did not regard all imitative behavior as invidious (status-seeking)--"only that which aimed at status enhancement by virtue of the display of ability to pay" (p. 216). Mason's (1981) analysis of Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption suggests that it is time bound in that his observations were limited to the American "nouveau riches" during the "Gilded Age." And since this period was "perhaps atypical it should not serve as a standard against which other observations are judged and categorized" (p. ix).
2. The primary function of cowboy dress was utilitarian, primarily for protection from the environment. The heel on the cowboy boots ensured that the foot would not slip out of the stirrup; the hat provided protection from the natural elements such as sun and rain; the leather and wool chaps protected the cowboy from brush, rope burns, and horns of cattle; and the colorful

neck handkerchief protected the neck from the sun and shielded the dust (Frantz and Choate 1955; Newark 1982; Darby 1981).

3. It seems safe to assume, that wearing western clothing would be much easier than adopting the cowboy way of life. For example, one only needs to note the characters in the movie, "City Slickers."
4. This study is part of a larger study sponsored by the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association.

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