

BEYOND EMPLOYMENT STATUS: CONSISTENCY IN WOMEN'S CLOTHING PURCHASE DECISION-MAKING

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Abstract

Although women's participation in formal employment has increased, many continue to fulfil primary caregiving and household responsibilities alongside work demands. These dual roles often lead to time pressure and heightened stress. Shopping has been identified as a potential leisure activity and coping mechanism; however, limited research has examined women's clothing purchase decision-making styles (DMS), particularly in relation to employment status. Despite managing more than half of household consumption, women's DMS remain under-explored. This quantitative, non-experimental comparative study investigated DMS in clothing among 228 South African women aged 18–65. Data were collected via an online questionnaire incorporating a 40-item Consumer Styles Inventory (CSI). Exploratory factor analysis identified eight DMS factors. Contrary to expectations, three dominant styles, habitual/brand loyalty, recreational/hedonistic orientation, and price/value consciousness, remained consistent across employment groups. Employed women (EW) reported more planned and enjoyable shopping experiences, suggesting a potential coping function, whereas unemployed women showed greater demonstrated price sensitivity. Overall, employment status influenced contextual constraints but did not fundamentally alter underlying cognitive and affective decision-making orientations. These findings highlight the psychological consistency of women's clothing DMS across employment categories and contribute to applied consumer psychology

Keywords: *Clothing purchase behaviour, decision-making styles, employment status, women consumer.*

1. Introduction and objectives of the study

The modern woman increasingly occupies dual roles: participation in formal employment while remaining primarily responsible for caregiving and household management. Despite societal shifts, gendered expectations surrounding women's domestic responsibilities persist and are even increasing (Vandecasteele et al., 2021). These dual demands frequently result in work–life conflict and elevated stress levels among employed women (Dreyer et al., 2025). Consumer behaviour research suggests that shopping may serve as both a coping mechanism and a leisure activity, particularly for women (Bisht & Desu, 2024). From a psychological perspective, consumption behaviour may serve the functions of emotional regulation, stress reduction, and identity construction (Chen & Pham, 2018). However, limited research has examined whether employment status meaningfully alters women's decision-making styles (DMS) during clothing purchases.

Women represent a powerful consumer segment, controlling more than half of household expenditure in South Africa (IQBusiness, 2020). They frequently purchase not only for themselves but also for spouses and dependents. While employed women (EW) may face time scarcity and stress, unemployed women may experience different constraints, particularly financial limitations. This difference in employment status could, in theory, influence women's cognitive and affective decision-making processes. Higher income, as in the case of EW in this study, can lead to increased purchasing, and research suggests it would influence an individual's DMS (Alavi et al., 2016) making this study, which compares employed and unemployed women consumers, particularly relevant.

The present study, therefore, aimed to explore and describe the clothing purchase DMS of South African women in relation to their employment status. The first objective is to describe these DMS, followed by the second objective to determine whether these DMS differ according to employment status. This study advances applied consumer psychology by shifting the focus from traditional socio-economic segmentation to the underlying stability of DMS. By demonstrating that these psychological traits transcend employment status, the research challenges the conventional reliance on professional standing as a primary predictor of consumer behaviour. These insights advocate for a more robust, unified framework for understanding the female consumer, enabling practitioners to implement precise targeting strategies that remain effective regardless of shifting labour market demographics.

2. Decision-making styles as psychological constructs

Consumers' decision-making is influenced by many factors, but research shows that all consumers use one or more DMS when making purchases (Sproles & Kendall, 1986). These DMS reflect the mental orientations that guide attitudes and purchases, shaped by heuristics, and express consumers' personalities through their buying choices (Sproles & Kendall, 1986; Van Romburgh et al., 2026). Sproles and Kendall (1986) developed the 40-item CSI scale, identifying eight consumer DMS types that define purchasing behaviour including: Brand-aware consumers who believes price equals quality and prefers well-known brands; Recreational/Hedonistic conscious consumers who often shop for fun; Impulsive consumers who make unplanned, spontaneous purchases without considering price or value; Habitual/brand loyal consumers who generally purchase specific brands or at specific stores out of habit; Price-conscious consumers who compare products to find the lowest price and best value; Confused by over choice consumers who easily get overwhelmed by too many options; High-quality conscious consumers who seek the best items and make careful, deliberate purchases and Fashion conscious consumers who stay on trend, regularly buying new items and enjoying the variety.

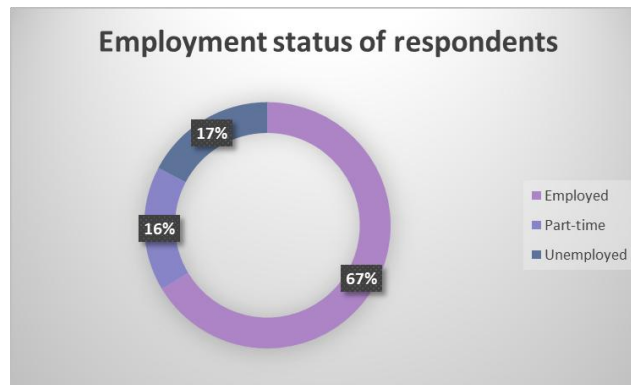
3. Research design

This study employed a quantitative, non-experimental, comparative cross-sectional design to examine clothing DMS among employed and unemployed South African women. A non-probability purposive sampling approach was used to recruit respondents who met predefined inclusion criteria (female, 18 years or older, South African resident, purchasing their own clothing, with internet access, and basic English proficiency). Data was collected through a self-administered online questionnaire created in Google Forms and distributed via social media platforms. The instrument comprised screening and demographic items, as well as a 40-item Consumer Styles Inventory (CSI) 5-point Likert scale adapted from Sproles and Kendall (1986) and applied in South African research (Potgieter et al., 2013; Le Roux et al., 2017) to measure clothing DMS (1 = Strongly disagree; 5 = Strongly agree). A total of 228 valid responses were obtained. Data was analysed using SPSS (version 25), applying descriptive statistics, exploratory factor analysis (EFA), reliability testing (Cronbach's alpha), and ANOVA to determine differences between employment groups. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value (0.81) confirmed sampling adequacy for factor analysis on the DMS (the factor solution explained 51.94% of variance), and reliability coefficients ranged from $\alpha = 0.70$ to $\alpha = 0.87$, indicating good reliability (Field, 2013). Mean factor scores are used for discussion of the findings and are interpreted as follows: <2.5 = disagree; ≥ 2.5 and <3.5 = neither agree nor disagree; ≥ 3.5 and <4.5 = agree, and ≥ 4.5 = strongly agree. Ethical approval was obtained (XXX-00932-19-A1), and further ethical standards were upheld through electronic informed consent, voluntary participation, and confidentiality of responses.

4. Findings

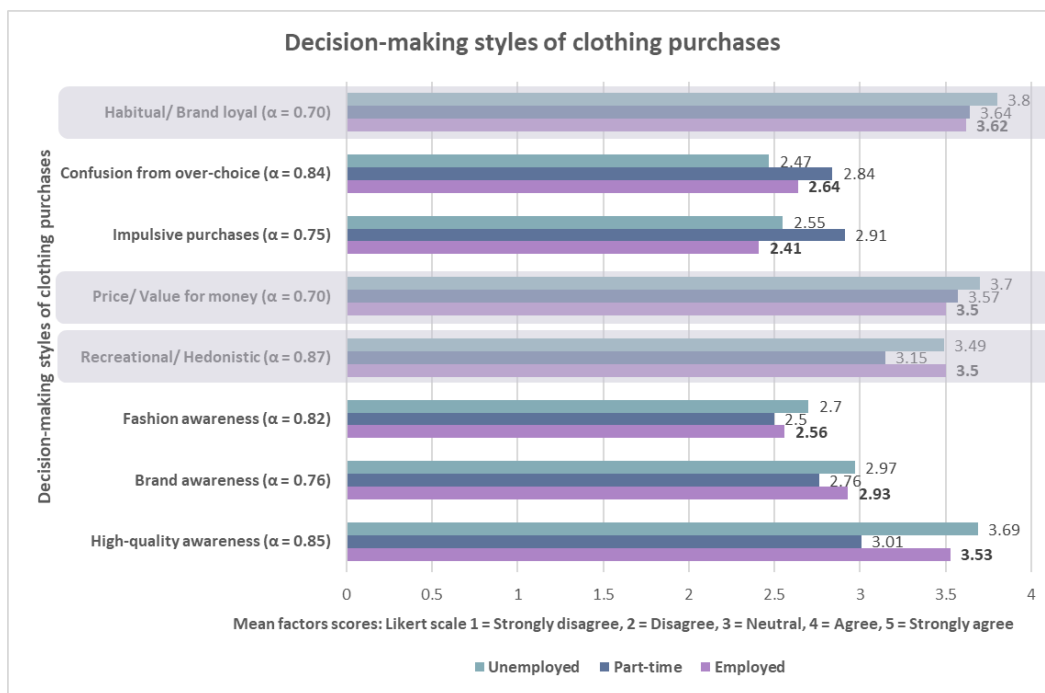
The findings revealed that most respondents were employed full-time (Figure 1) and under 30 years of age. Nearly half (44.7%) purchased clothing only for themselves, while the remainder also bought clothing for spouses, children, or parents. Almost half of those surveyed purchased clothing once a month, regardless of employment status. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was employed to address the first objective of this study: to describe the DMS of the study population. The influencing consumer DMS extracted from the EFA to which all the respondents agreed were "price/value for money" ($m = 3.66$; $SD = 0.73$), "habitual/brand loyalty" (mean = 3.54; $SD = 0.77$) and "recreational/hedonistic" ($m = 3.52$; $SD = 0.92$) while respondents were neutral towards "fashion awareness" ($m = 2.92$; $SD = 1.06$), "high quality awareness" ($m = 3.47$; $SD = 0.76$), "confusion from over-choice" ($m = 2.47$; $SD = 1.00$), "impulsive purchases" ($m = 2.62$; $SD = 0.86$), and "brand awareness" ($m = 2.58$; $SD = 0.73$).

Figure 1. Employment status of respondents (N=228).



Although differences were anticipated, three DMS emerged as the most consistently applied across employment statuses: “price/value-for-money”, “habitual/brand-loyal”, and “recreational/hedonistic” (Figure 2). Employed women indicated increased clothing-planning purchase behaviour and described shopping experiences as enjoyable. This suggests that clothing shopping may function as a psychologically restorative activity, which underscores the recreational/hedonistic DMS that emerged as a prominent factor. This might indicate a possible coping strategy among employed respondents who may often face unmet expectations and therefore regard shopping as a recreational activity and a possible way of lowering experienced stress levels. On the other hand, unemployed respondents may have more time available but show greater price and value-for-money consciousness when shopping for clothing, likely reflecting income constraints. However, the underlying DMS remained largely comparable.

Figure 2. Decision-making styles of respondents towards clothing purchases (N=228).



5. Discussion and conclusion

From the results, eight DMS emerged, which compare well with the original study by Sproles & Kendall (1986) and the adapted studies by Potgieter et al. (2013) and Le Roux et al. (2017), from which the CSI applied in this study was derived. The findings suggest psychological consistency in decision-making regarding women's clothing purchases across DMS, despite structural differences in employment status. While employment status influences factors such as time and income, respondents' DMS regarding clothing purchases remain similar. Consequently, dominant DMS, price/value for money, habitual/brand loyalty, and recreational/hedonistic orientation were consistently present across employment categories.

Although unemployed respondents exhibited slightly stronger price and value consciousness, reflecting rational economic adaptation rather than a distinct psychological orientation, this DMS was also among the dominant styles observed in EW, who reported more structured and enjoyable shopping experiences. These variations reflect contextual adaptation rather than divergent decision architectures. Both employed and unemployed women displayed habitual brand loyalty, likely because familiar brands save time, reduce decision-making effort, and offer a sense of trust and reliability in their purchases. Furthermore, the prominence of the recreational/hedonistic DMS among EW may reflect adaptive coping strategies by possibly providing emotional regulation. While employment affects available time and income, it does not appear to fundamentally alter women's cognitive shopping styles. These findings support the view that DMS function as relatively stable psychological traits, suggesting that women, regardless of employment status, represent a largely homogeneous consumer group in terms of DMS, even though purchase frequency and expenditure may vary.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings support trait-based models of consumer behaviour (Sproles & Kendall, 1986; Van Romburgh et al., 2026), suggesting that DMS function as relatively stable cognitive-affective schemas guiding evaluation, heuristic processing, and choice. Employment status serves as a situational moderator that influences constraints, but not the foundational orientation toward consumption. The prominence of recreational/hedonistic shopping among EW further aligns with affect-regulation and emotional coping mechanisms (Bisht & Desu, 2024). In contexts of dual work-family demands, clothing purchases may serve as emotion-focused coping episodes that facilitate temporary psychological restoration. Importantly, this coping function coexists with value consciousness and brand loyalty, indicating that emotional and rational orientations are not mutually exclusive but integrated within stable decision styles.

Finally, the findings suggest that structural socio-economic differences do not necessarily translate into psychologically distinct consumer identities. Women appear more homogeneous in decision orientation than demographic segmentation models assume, reinforcing the value of psychographic frameworks in applied consumer research

6. Implications and recommendations

This study provides evidence that women's clothing DMS functions as relatively stable cognitive-affective orientations rather than context-dependent reactions to employment status. Although employment shapes structural constraints such as time availability and income, the dominant styles, namely price/value consciousness, habitual/brand loyalty, and recreational/hedonistic orientation, remained consistent across groups.

These findings reinforce the trait-based conceptualisation of DMS proposed by Sproles and Kendall (1986), positioning them as enduring decision schemas that guide heuristic processing and evaluative judgement. Importantly, the prominence of recreational/hedonistic shopping among EW strengthens theoretical linkages to affect-regulation and coping frameworks. In line with psychological models of emotion-focused coping, shopping may operate as a short-term coping strategy that temporarily reduces stress associated with dual work-family demands. Employment status, therefore, appears to moderate contextual pressures, but not the underlying psychological architecture of consumption.

Practically, the findings challenge demographic segmentation models that prioritise employment categories. Instead, psychographic positioning based on stable decision orientations offers greater strategic precision. Retailers should emphasise value transparency, loyalty reinforcement, and cognitively efficient shopping environments across segments, while recognising the potential affect-regulatory function of experiential retail elements. Methodologically, the study confirms the contextual robustness of the CSI in a South African female sample and highlights the need for longitudinal and mediation-based designs to directly test coping mechanisms and psychological well-being outcomes.

Overall, the findings suggest that structural employment participation does not fundamentally reconfigure women's consumer identities, suggesting marketers can treat them as a largely homogeneous consumer group when designing strategies around brand loyalty, price sensitivity, and hedonistic convenience. By demonstrating the psychological continuity underlying behavioural variation through the vehicle of DMS, this study contributes to a more theoretically integrated and application-oriented understanding of female consumption.

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