FINDING SYNERGY IN FASHION APPAREL DECESION-MAKING CONSTRUCTS: A GENERATION Y COHORT ANALYSIS IN AN EMERGING MARKET

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Abstract

This paper investigates the relationship between quality consciousness, product novelty, fashion consciousness, brand consciousness and brand loyalty in the purchase of fashion apparel within the Generation Y age cohort. A quantitative approach using the cross sectional survey design technique was used in which a six-section questionnaire was administered to a randomly selected sample consisting of 254 Generation Y individuals drawn a South African university of technology. Hypotheses were tested using a combination of non-parametric Spearman's correlation analysis and multiple regression analysis. The results indicate that quality consciousness, product novelty and fashion consciousness were positively related to and predicted brand consciousness. In turn, brand consciousness was positively related to and predicted brand loyalty. The study provides important implications for fashion apparel retailers and marketers regarding continuous need to give emphasis to factors such as product quality, product novelty and branding of fashion apparel in order to generate greater opportunities for sales amongst the Generation Y cohort of consumers.

Keywords: Quality consciousness, product novelty, fashion consciousness, brand consciousness and brand loyalty, Generation Y

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the years, interest in fashion has grown tremendously and overarches to almost all types of products such as clothing, vehicles, decoration, music and sport, among others. This paper particularly focuses on the clothing industry, which in 2006, accounted for an estimated USD1, 252.8 billion worldwide (Le Bon & Meruka, 2009:1). This high spending pattern triggered an avalanche of interest and attention from both researchers and marketers, as they sought to develop a deeper understanding of the concept of fashion and to find plausible explanations regarding consumer behaviours. Fashion is widely regarded as a unique trend which is recognised, valued and adopted by many people in a limited frame of time and in a defined space (Le Bon & Merunka, *ibid*). Dressing in new clothes exerts an influence on the mood of an individual as dictated by factors such as; *inter alia,* colour, print, style, fabric, emotions, situation and occasions (Omair, 2009:412). Therefore, fashion is a universal phenomenon that has an effect on the personality of an individual.

Subhani, Hasan and Osman (2013:183) define fashion as a broadly based behavioural phenomenon evidenced in a variety of material and non-material contexts, which enables it to represent a personal identity. Vieira (2009:179) mentions that fashion is conceptualised both as an object and behavioural process. A number of scholars (Gronow, 1997:37; Solomon & Rabolt, 2004:54; Piamphongsant & Mandhachitar, 2008:438) also underscore that most consumers use fashion in order to differentiate themselves from others and as a way of managing their group affiliations. As a result, clothing turns out to be another primary a means of communicating both an individuals' personal identity as well as their social identity (Noesjirwan & Crawford, 1982:157). Recently, there has been an explosion of design and image in the fashion sector, making shopping a popular pastime amongst people from all age groups, genders and cultural backgrounds (Moody, Kinderman & Sinha, 2010:161). However, various issues need to be resolved during the process of purchasing every item of clothing, if proper decisions are to be made. Thus, consumers face the obligation to exercise due consideration during the process of buying fashion apparel merchandise.

Age can be a valuable factor that facilitates the understanding of developing trends and established patterns amongst consumers (Van Rooi, 2011:44). The age-based subculture is one that is composed of a group of people who have certain a commonalities in social, political, historical and economic domains (Koutras, 2006:124). According to Schiffman and Kanuk (2010:410), the construct 'Generation Y', refers to a group of people who were born either between the years of 1977 and 1994 or between 1982 and 2000. In the context of South Africa, Generation Y individuals were the first generational cohort to experience the establishment of democracy in 1994 (Dlodlo & Mafini, 2013:3).

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The primary objective in this paper was to use data collected from a cohort of Generation Y students at a South African University of Technology to investigate the relationship between quality consciousness, product novelty, fashion consciousness, brand consciousness and brand loyalty. In order to achieve this primary objective, the following secondary objectives were set for the study;
- To establish the influence of quality consciousness on brand consciousness;
- To determine the influence of product novelty on brand consciousness;
- To establish the influence of fashion consciousness on brand consciousness;

- To determine the influence of brand consciousness on brand loyalty.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: The next section analyses literature associated with the four constructs under scrutiny in this study; namely, quality consciousness, product novelty, fashion consciousness, brand consciousness and brand loyalty. Thereafter, the paper gives an expose' of the conceptual framework as well as the summary of hypotheses that were formulated for this study. This is succeeded by a discussion of the research methodology used in the study as well as the results and discussions. The closing sections of the paper discuss the limitations and implications for further research as well as the conclusions.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Quality Consciousness

Quality consciousness refers to a state of being in which an individual's awareness - that is his or her cognisant purpose in being - is focused on producing a quality outcome from his or her actions (Hong, Pecotich & Schultz, 2002:25). According to McConnell (1968:300), when consumers perceive that a particular brand is of a high quality, they inadvertently relate that high quality to the differentiation and superiority of that particular brand and may prefer it ahead of competing brands. In support, Doyle (2001:186) opines that consumers oftentimes develop perceptions about a brand based on the quality of that brand. Furthermore, Ko, Kim and Lee (2009:681) reiterate that consumers may intend to purchase a brand or become brand conscious when they recognise that the brand provides their preferred features, quality and performance. A consumer typically considers the quality and durability of products so that they can use these products for a long time (Donner, 2008:143). The design of the product is also an important motivation for purchasing fashion, particularly as regards to garments since many consumers allocate increased relevance to aesthetical appearance, such as the line and look, value, style and quality of the product (Wickliffe & Psysarchik, 2001:103). This triggers the view that quality consciousness amongst Generation Y consumers leads to higher brand consciousness.

3.2 Product Novelty

Product novelty is a person's curiosity to pursue variety and difference in the products they consume (Michaelidou & Dibb, 2006:447). It may also be considered to be new or unique products introduced into the market, that gain the thrust and excitement from consumers who seek and try them out (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2008:63) Consumers who seek out for product novelty attempt to express themselves by being the first to try the style and their desire to keep up with the current trends (Phau & Teah, 2009:20). Sproles and Kendall (1986:272) acknowledge that product novelty is an important attribute in consumer decision-making. Based on these views, this paper posits that product novelty leads to higher brand consciousness amongst Generation Y consumers.

3.3 Fashion Consciousness

In this paper, fashion consciousness is defined as a consumer's perceived personal relevance and interest towards fashion clothing (Engel, Blackwell & Miniard, 1995:92). Dress mirrors cultural and material facets of society and has significance in economic and social terms (Workman & Lee, 2011:54) because it represents figurative values that are endorsed by a

particular group (Piamphongsant & Mandhachitar, 2008:441). Thus, this paper proposes that Generation Y consumers are more likely to become brand conscious if they have developed a heightened consciousness in fashion.

3.4 Brand Consciousness

According to Grant and Stephen (2006:106), brands are at the very heart of marketing and are a robust means of attracting more consumers to purchase particular products, particularly clothing. Fan and Xiao (1998:275) substantiate that brand consciousness remains an element of the decision-making process of consumers who are often concerned with buying expensive and popular national and international brands of clothing. Consumers who may be interested in fashion brands tend to pay attention to both the physical properties as well as the features of clothing such as quality and fit (Kaiser, 1997:61). As mentioned by Jamal and Goode (2001:484) a brand conscious consumer places significance on attributes that may include brand names. Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Aleman (2005:189) further state that as far as similar levels of product quality are concerned, consumers naturally prefer buying brand-name products. With the influence of media advertising and globalisation, international brands have emerged as popular in local markets that offer high possibilities of purchase (Bello & Holbrook, 1995:127). In view of these affirmations, it is suggested that brand conscious Generation Ys are likely to have a positive perception concerning brand loyalty.

3.5. Brand Loyalty

In this paper, the suggestion by Sheth and Mittal (2004:122) that brand loyalty is a constant re-purchase of a particular brand which is complemented by a favourable brand attitude, was adopted. Brand loyalty leads to a consistent preference for one brand over competing brands (Lamb, Hair, McDaniel, Boshoff & Terblanche, 2004:19). This preference constitutes a conscious decision to continue buying the same brand (Solomon, 2002:95). Consumers naturally possess an affinity for a particular brand and accordingly, demonstrate brand loyalty in the purchase of fashion apparel, but are less likely to show a high brand loyalty in the purchase of low involvement products (e.g. foodstuffs such as salt and vegetables) (Sheth & Mittal, 2004:397).

4. PROPOSED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Based on the literature review, the conceptual framework shown in Figure 1 was developed. The conceptual framework indicates that quality consciousness, product novelty and consumer fashion consciousness are input constructs that act as antecedents to brand consciousness. In turn, brand consciousness, which is a mediating construct, is an antecedent to brand loyalty, which is the outcome construct.

Figure 1: Proposed conceptual framework
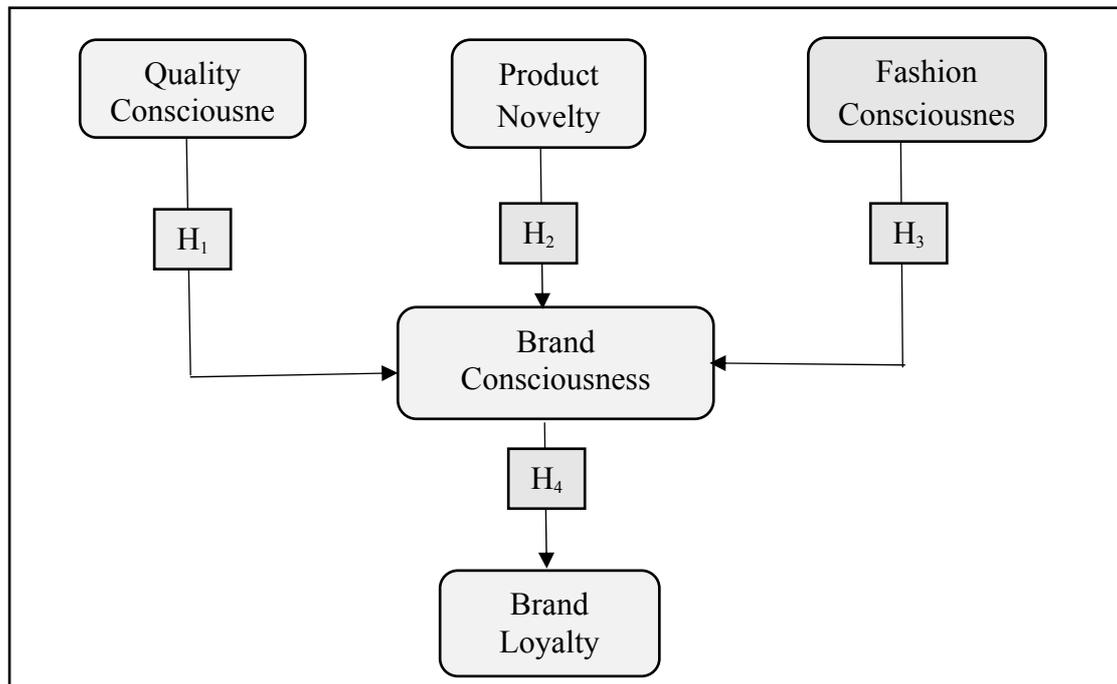
5. PROPOSED HYPOTHESES

Based on the review of literature, a null hypothesis (Ho) and an alternative hypothesis (Ha) were put forward for each proposed relationship between the constructs. These hypotheses are summarised below:

Proposition 1
Ho_1: There is no relationship between quality consciousness and brand consciousness amongst Generation Ys
Ha_1: Quality consciousness positively and significantly influences brand consciousness amongst generation Ys

Proposition 2
Ho_2: There is no relationship between product novelty and brand consciousness amongst Generation Ys
Ha_2: Product novelty positively and significantly influences brand consciousness amongst Generation Ys

Proposition 3
Ho_3: There is no relationship between fashion consciousness and brand consciousness amongst Generation Ys
Ha_3: Fashion consciousness positively and significantly influences brand consciousness amongst Generation Ys

Proposition 4
Ho_4: There is no relationship between brand consciousness and brand loyalty amongst Generation Ys

Ha$_4$: Brand consciousness positively and significantly influences brand loyalty amongst Generation Ys

6. METHOD

A quantitative research approach using the cross-sectional survey technique was used in this paper, since the research was intended to examine the interplay between various research constructs.

6.1 Sample

The sample consisted of 254 Generation Y individuals recruited at a university of technology located in the southern part of Gauteng Province, South Africa. University students were chosen because of three reasons; (1) most of them are Generation Ys in terms of their age groups; (2) their predisposition to indulge in fashion apparel; and, (3) students a constitute the next generation of employees in the workplace who are likely to enhance value towards a better understanding of consumer buying behaviour. All respondents were randomly selected from undergraduate and post graduate programmes. The Integrated Tertiary Software system (ITS) of the University was used as the sample frame from which the list of students was drawn. Participation in the survey was strictly on a voluntary basis and respondents were assured of the confidentiality of their responses.

6.2 Instrument

Data were collected by means of a six-section structured questionnaire. Section A elicited information on the demographic profile of respondents. The rest of the sections consisted of questions eliciting information on each of the research constructs; namely, quality consciousness, product novelty, fashion consciousness, brand consciousness and brand loyalty. These questionnaire items were adapted from the original 40-item Consumer Styles Inventory (CSI) developed by Sproles and Kendall (1986:267). Respondents were requested to indicate their views regarding each question based on five-point Likert scales configured with 1 representing strongly disagree to 5 representing strongly agree. The questionnaire was pre tested on conveniently selected sample of 40 students in order to ascertain its psychometric properties.

7. RESULTS

In the results section the issues discussed are; sample and composition, reliability and validity, correlations amongst constructs and regression analysis.

7.1 Sample Composition

The sample comprised 35% (n=89) males and 65% (n=165) females. The majority of the students, (51%; n=129) were below 22 years of age. To most of the respondents (96%; n=244) online newspapers and magazines were the most popular media where information on where and what kind of fashion apparel to purchase could be obtained. The majority of students (94%; n=238) were of the Black African race. In addition, boutiques located in shopping malls were the most popular (36%; n =90) where most of the respondents shopped for fashion apparel and accessories. Most of the respondents (81%; n=206) used cash as their usual method of payment for purchases made. The purchases made by the majority of respondents (84%; n=214) were sourced from the parents to the respondents.

7.2 Reliability and Validity

The reliabilities for the various scales was analysed for internal consistency using the Cronbach alpha value. All scales exceeded the minimum criterion of 0.70 (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988:76). The reliability values for the various scales as reported in Table 1 ranged from 0.835 to 0.960. In addition, the Cronbach alpha values provided support for the construct validity of the various scales used in the study. Convergent validity was assessed through the computation of correlations among the various constructs (quality consciousness, product novelty, fashion consciousness, brand consciousness and brand loyalty). The results of the correlation analysis provide support for convergence as all the constructs were either moderately or strongly correlated with each other. Predictive validity was established through multiple regression analysis. Both the models (model 1 and model 2 in table 2) showed significant levels of predictive relationships thus confirming predictive validity.

7.3. Correlations amongst Constructs

In order to establish the relationship among the variables in the study, non-parametric (Spearman's) correlation analysis was undertaken. The result of the correlation analysis is reported in Table 1.

Table 1: Correlations, means and reliability

Constructs	Quality consciousness	Product novelty	Fashion consciousness	Brand consciousness	Brand loyalty
Quality consciousness (QC)	1.000	.349**	.261**	.372**	.165**
Product novelty (PN)	.349**	1.000	.496**	.348**	.189**
Fashion consciousness (FC)	.261**	.496**	1.000	.321**	.199**
Brand consciousness (BC)	.372**	.348**	.321**	1.000	.201**
Brand loyalty (BL)	.165**	.189**	.199**	.201**	1.000
Mean	4.27	3.54	3.18	3.68	3.33
SD	0.68	0.94	1.02	0.80	1.07
Cronbach α	0.843	0.887	0.960	0.867	0.835

*** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)*

The correlation matrix (Table 1) reveals that fashion consciousness had a positive relationship with quality consciousness (r= 0.261; p<0.01), product novelty (r=0.496; p<0.01), brand consciousness (r=0.321; p<0.01) and brand loyalty (r=0.199; p<0.01). Quality consciousness showed positive relationships with product novelty (r=0.3496; p<0.01), brand consciousness (r=0.372; p<0.01) and brand loyalty (r=0.165; p<0.01). Product novelty showed positive associations with brand consciousness (r=0.348; p<0.01) and brand loyalty (r=0.189; p<0.01). Finally, brand consciousness showed positive associations with brand loyalty (r=0.201; p<0.01).

7. 4 Regression Analysis

In order to examine the predictive relationship of fashion consciousness, quality consciousness and product novelty with band consciousness multiple regression analysis was conducted. Initially multi-co linearity tests were conducted by examining the variance inflation factor (VIF) associated with each independent variable. The VIF values did not exceed 10.0 (with the highest being, 1.362) indicating that multi-co linearity did not constitute

a problem in the study and the independent variables are not highly correlated (r= 0.90 and above) (Tsiotsou & Alexandris, 2009:359). The results are reported in Table 2. In model 1 Fashion consciousness, quality consciousness and product novelty were entered into the regression equation as independent variables and brand consciousness as the dependent variable. In model 2, brand consciousness was entered into the regression model as the independent variable and brand loyalty as the dependent variable.

Table 2: Regression analysis

Dependent variable: Brand consciousness	Beta	t	sig	Collinearity Statistics	
Model 1: Independent variables				Tolerance	VIF
Quality consciousness	.318	4.533	.000	.908	1.101
Product novelty	.162	2.870	.004	.734	1.362
Fashion consciousness	.113	2.206	.028	.759	1.318
R=0.449 $R^2 = 0.201$ Adjusted $R^2 = 0.192$ R change = 0.201 F change = 21.003					
Dependent variable: Brand loyalty	Beta	t	sig	Collinearity Statistics	
Model 2: Independent variable				Tolerance	VIF
Brand consciousness	.191	3.095	.002	1.000	1.000
R=0.191 $R^2 = 0.037$ Adjusted $R^2 = 0.033$ R change = 0.037 F change = 9.579					

In terms of the regression analysis (model 1), fashion consciousness, quality consciousness and product novelty explained approximately 45% of the variance in the brand consciousness of fashion apparel consumers. In terms of the regression analysis (model 2), brand consciousness explained approximately 3% of the variance in brand loyalty.

8. DISCUSSION

The first alternative hypothesis (Ha$_1$) suggested that quality consciousness exerts a positive and significant relationship on brand consciousness among Generation Ys. In this study, this hypothesis found support and was accepted. The results of the correlation analysis (r=0.372; p<0.01) were positive while the results of the regression analysis (β= 0.318; P=000) were significant. These results demonstrate that among Generation Ys, an increase in quality consciousness triggers an increase in brand consciousness, and vice versa. These results are congruent to those found in a study by Kim and Shim (2002:32) that reveal that quality consciousness is an important factor during the acquisition of fashion products. As argued by Mafini, Dhurup and Mandlazi (2014:9), quality consciousness remains an enduring o determinant of consumer buyer behaviour, and most consumers ultimately consider both the perceived quality and durability of the clothing as they prefer clothing materials that can be used for a longer period of time. Furthermore, Yoo, Donthu and Lee (2000:198) opine that brand consciousness increases by a promoting positive perceived product quality. Thus, Generation Ys that are quality conscious are also bound to be brand conscious in the purchase of fashion apparel.

The second alternative hypothesis (Ha$_2$) proposed that product novelty positively and significantly influences brand consciousness amongst Generation Ys. In the present study, this hypothesis found support and was accepted. The acceptance of this study was based on the view that in the correlation analysis, a positive relationship (r=0.348; p<0.01) was observed between product novelty and brand consciousness while in the regression analysis (β=0.162; P=004), product novelty was statistically significant. These results denote that amongst brand conscious Generation Y consumers, the higher the novelty of the fashion apparel product, the higher the extent of the brand consciousness. The results further imply that Generation Y consumers are likely to derive both excitement and pleasure from seeking out new fashion apparel products, and they are inspired to keep abreast with styles and fashion trends (Sproles & Kendall, 1986:273). Furthermore, as reported by Bakewell & Mitchell (2003:95) such consumers tend to exhibit variety-seeking behaviours. Hence, they have a habit of becoming more brand conscious, and continue to seek out both national and international clothing brands (Beaudoin, Moore & Goldsmith, 2000:58). Therefore, Generation Y consumers who have a high affinity for novel fashion products are likely to exhibit a high consciousness towards specific brands.

The third alternative hypothesis (Ha$_3$) advanced that fashion consciousness positively and significantly influences brand consciousness amongst Generation Ys. In this study, this hypothesis was supported and was accepted. As the premise for accepting the hypothesis, the results of the correlation analysis revealed a positive relationship (r=0.321; p<0.01) between fashion consciousness and brand consciousness. In addition the results of the regression analysis (β= 0.113; P=0.028) showed that fashion consciousness was statistically significant in predicting brand consciousness. These results illustrate that fashion consciousness amongst Generation Y consumers of fashion apparel has a positive and predictive linkage with their brand consciousness. Brand consciousness performs an important part in the consumer purchase process and during consumer decision-making, it has a causal relationship with the degree of fashion consciousness (Gutman & Mills, 1982:64). As such, generation Ys seem to have a strong sense of fashion, which they derive from the global mass media, and they tend to consider it prior to shopping (Kim, 1998:25). It is therefore clear that Generation Y consumers who are fashion conscious are also brand conscious.

The final alternative hypothesis (Ha$_4$) stated that brand consciousness positively and significantly influences brand loyalty amongst Generation Ys. This hypothesis was supported and accepted in this study. For endorsement of this decision, reference is made to the correlation analysis where a positive relationship (r=0.201; p<0.01) was observed between brand consciousness and brand loyalty. Further endorsement of the decision to support hypothesis Ha$_4$ is found in the regression analysis (Model 2) where brand consciousness (β= 1.91; P=0.02) was statistically significant in predicting brand loyalty. By implication, brand consciousness within Generation Y consumers of fashion apparel has a stimulus effect on their brand loyalty, and vice versa. Being conscious of a brand is likely to lead to brand loyalty. This view is consistent with the results of a study by Atilgan, Aksoy and Akinci (2005:237). Therefore, brand conscious Generation Ys are bound to be loyal to specific fashion apparel brands as well.

9. LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The study is limited in its use of a small sample size (n=254) which was drawn from a single geographic location. Caution should therefore be exercised when generalising these results to

other contexts. Similar studies could be conducted in the future using larger sample sizes as well as other consumer cohorts since different populations may show different shopping styles and preferences. Another limitation of the study is that the sample was restricted to fashion apparel purchase only. In future, similar studies could be conducted using other categories of consumer products. Furthermore, despite focusing on fashion apparel in general, the study did not distinguish between the diverse types of apparel used and did not specify whether the apparel used were either national or international brands. In future studies, these dichotomies should be specified clearly in order to accurately capture the scope of the study. Since the majority of the respondents were of the Black African race, it could be worthwhile to extend the study to other universities that have greater diversity in terms of racial and cultural groups.

10. CONCLUSION

This paper offered a snapshot of the possible relationships existing between quality consciousness, product novelty, fashion consciousness, brand consciousness and brand loyalty within a Generation Y cohort in a university setting. It emerged in the study that quality consciousness, product novelty, fashion consciousness exert a positive influence on brand consciousness with the later exerting a positive influence on brand loyalty.

The results of the study have research and managerial implications. The paper contributes to the existent literature by giving current evidence on the behaviour of the Generation Y in their consumption of fashion apparel. The research could also be used as a conceptual background in future studies focusing on similar constructs within the fashion apparel market. The results may also assist fashion apparel retailers to better understand the shopping behaviours of Generation Ys. This knowledge may facilitate the development of better marketing initiatives that appeal to the Generation Y consumers.

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