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Fashion forward: insights into the style choices of South African Generation Y

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Fashion forward: insights into the style choices of South African Generation Y

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Abstract:

Fashion is a multifaceted and dynamic phenomenon that permeates various aspects of consumption, reflecting society's constant inclination towards change. The fashion industry, a significant contributor to both global and South African economies, operates in a dynamic and fast-paced environment marked by intense competition and evolving consumer preferences. Young adult consumers, currently encompassing members of Generation Y, play a pivotal role in driving social change and shaping fashion trends, making them a crucial market segment for the fashion industry. This paper aims to explore fashion trends among South African Generation Y consumers to gain insights into their style choices for market segmentation purposes. By reviewing existing literature, this research seeks to uncover the distinctive fashion preferences and behaviours of South African Generation Y, shedding light on their conspicuous status consumption tendencies and fixation on style. Understanding the unique characteristics of this market segment will assist fashion marketers and retailers in effectively targeting and engaging Generation Y consumers in the South African fashion market.

Keywords: Fashion trends, Generation Y, market segmentation

1. INTRODUCTION

Fashion is a multifaceted and dynamic phenomenon (Rocamora & Smelik, 2016) that pervades various realms of consumption, including but not limited to art, music, architecture, dance, home furnishings, food, automobiles, apparel, and beauty products (Macchion *et al.*, 2015). However, in its simplest form, fashion encompasses both tangible and intangible elements that consumers incorporate into their lives to shape their outward appearance (Solomon *et al.*, 2020). Primarily, the fashion industry revolves around two prominent categories, namely apparel (Rath *et al.*, 2012), which encompasses clothing, footwear, and accessories worn on the body (Aspers & Godart, 2013) as well as products applied to the body (Pentecost & Andrews, 2010) like beauty products. While fashion is not restricted to apparel and beauty product styles, they are viewed as the most evident manifestations of fashion (Snodgrass, 2014).

As a catalyst for the creation, production, distribution and promotion of fashion-related products and services, the fashion industry is a significant contributor to both global (Shahbandeh, 2021) and South African economies (Le Guern, 2020). In 2022, the global apparel and footwear sector generated up to 1.5 trillion USA dollars in consumer spending and is expected to grow to approximately 2.9 trillion USA dollars by 2029 (Statista, 2024a). Despite the size and ongoing growth of the fashion industry, fashion role players such as designers, brand marketers and retailers face significant challenges, including intense competition and the ever-evolving preferences and behaviours of consumers (Kurtulus & Ertekin, 2015). This sector operates in a dynamic and fast-paced environment (BoF & McKinsey, 2020) marked by considerable uncertainty (Wang, 2016), as fashion, inherently linked to time, reflects society's constant inclination towards change (Cholachatpinyo *et al.*, 2002). To remain competitive, the fashion industry needs to adapt to new trends through product innovation, creating new designs and fostering new fashion trends (Poorthuis *et al.*, 2020). As such, the fashion industry is in a constant state of change as emerging fashion trends supersede previous trends. Paramount to the success of the fashion industry is the ability of fashion role players to predict and react swiftly to emerging trends (Błaszczuk & Wubs, 2018).

Throughout modern history, the youth of each generation have played an important and conspicuous role in the initiation and diffusion of new fashion trends (Sproles, 1974), making them a salient target segment in the fashion industry. Young adult consumers, currently encompassing members of Generation Y (individuals born between 1986 and 2005) (Markert, 2004), are of particular interest given the size of the segment and their significant and growing spending power (Netzer, 2020). This market segment is known to have strong conspicuous status consumption tendencies (Jain, 2024) and to be fixated on style (Danziger, 2019). As with previous generations of youths, Generation Y members are at the forefront of driving social change and are considered trendsetters in the fashion industry. Moreover, Generation Y individuals are recognised as having a significant influence on their parents and other generations' consumption behaviour (Moreno *et al.*, 2017). Taken together, Generation Y can therefore be viewed as an important segment in the current fashion market.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the fashion trends amongst Generation Y in the literature in order to gain insights into their style choices, with specific reference to South African Generation Y individuals, for market segmentation purposes.

2. SIGNIFICANCE OF GENERATION Y TO THE FASHION INDUSTRY

Members of Generation Y, the first to come of age in the new millennium, are characterized by their digital astuteness and extensive connectivity (Holicza & Kaděna, 2018). Growing up with digital devices such as smartphones, computers, laptops, tablets, and gaming consoles, they have seamlessly integrated technology into their daily routines, profoundly affecting their access to information (Fadhilah & Aruan, 2023). Social media platforms like TikTok, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube play a central role in their lives, offering quick and easy access to information (Dhama & Joshi, 2020). Utilizing Web 2.0 functionalities, they engage in peer-to-peer content sharing on a global scale (Lin *et al.*, 2017). This connectivity has empowered Generation Y, making them the most informed consumers in history (Bevan-Dye, 2020). They dedicate significant time to the digital realm, employing advanced applications to manage various aspects of their lives (Dhama & Joshi, 2020). In 2023, global statistics indicate that they spend approximately 3.5 hours per day on mobile internet and 2.5 hours per day on internet usage via desktops, laptops, or tablets (Statista, 2024b).

As consumers, members of the Generation Y cohort have a fondness for shopping and their impact on shopping is prevalent worldwide (Bedgood, 2023). They have ample time and sufficient money to spend and are likely to spend fast and easily (Willett-Wei, 2023). Growing up in an era where shopping is not just a necessity but also a form of entertainment, they view it as a leisure activity (Petra, 2016) and an opportunity for socializing with peers and family (Feger, 2023). Therefore, it is not surprising that Generation Y consumers frequently visit shopping malls (Feger, 2023), where they enjoy looking for the latest trends, new sensory experiences and entertainment (Lachman & Brett, 2013), earning them the title of ‘mall-rats’. Raised in dual-income households, many members of Generation Y learned to make independent shopping decisions from a young age (Shanthakumari & Vigneshwaran, 2014). They are also inclined towards trying out new products (Viswanathan & Jain, 2013), preferring established retailers (Petra, 2016) due to their high brand awareness, although they may not always exhibit brand loyalty (Collins, 2020). Despite their awareness of ethical and environmental concerns in fashion, price and quality remain paramount factors influencing their purchasing decisions (Kestenbaum, 2017).

Compared to the young adult consumers of previous generations, members of Generation Y grew up in a more consumer-driven contemporary culture and are more materialistic and fashion-conscious (Fu, 2020); factors which influence their motivations and attitudes towards fashion consumption. While with previous generations, fashion awareness, consciousness and consumption were traditionally more associated with female consumers, findings from international studies suggest that Generation Y male consumers also exhibit fashion awareness and fashion consciousness (Noh *et al.*, 2015). Furthermore, findings from international studies suggest that Generation Y individuals are more brand-aware and have a strong desire for variety to maintain a trendy social image (Fu, 2020). Moreover, they are concerned with status consumption (Bevan-Dye *et al.*, 2012), spend more and attempt to define themselves based on their purchase consumption rather than the product itself (Bedgood, 2023).

For Generation Y, shopping isn't just about fulfilling needs; it's a way to express their identities. Their clothing and accessory choices reflect their personalities, lifestyles, and values, symbolizing who they are and what they stand for. These choices are influenced by the attributes of the fashion brands they associate with. (Ayaydin & Baltaci, 2014). Furthermore, in contrast to their older counterparts, today's youth have greater self-esteem, display more independence, assertiveness and notably less consumer ethnocentrism fuelled by the widespread internationalisation of popular culture and increased access to global brands (Gonzales-Fuentes, 2019). In addition, Generation Y individuals are more beauty-conscious and spend a significant amount of their disposable income on beauty products (Dhanoa & Goyal, 2018). In 2022, the Generation Y segment's spending on beauty products accounted for approximately 20 billion USA dollars of retail sales (Helplama, 2023).

Generation Y consumers have a strong preference for well-known brands, including luxury brands (Collins, 2020). In 2019, Generation Y consumers accounted for 35 percent of the luxury fashion market which is predicted to increase to 40 percent by 2025 (D'Arpizio *et al.*, 2020). Members of Generation Y frequently purchase well-known brands for status and to mark significant events like birthdays and graduations (Collins, 2020). Moreover, in contrast to older generations, they are more likely to buy on impulse (Crouch, 2017), often spoiling themselves by purchasing luxury brand items (Deloitte, 2017). In particular, the female segment of this generation was found to spend more on luxury purchases than their male counterparts (Kim & Jang, 2014). Interestingly, compared to other generations, this generation was also found to be more likely to purchase counterfeit products (Zahari *et al.*, 2016). A possible reason for this is that while they aspire to own luxury fashion brands, they may, as young adults, lack the required financial resources to do so currently.

Generation Y individuals are highly influenced by their social environment, encompassing media exposure and interactions with family, friends, and social media connections (Amid *et al.*, 2019; Collins, 2020). Seeking acceptance and augmenting their self-confidence, they often seek validation from their peers, especially regarding conspicuous products (Fernandez, 2009). For Generation Y individuals, social media plays a pivotal role in their lives. They are constantly connected to their social circles online and are viewed as the generation most influenced by social media (Holicza & Kaděna, 2018). They heavily rely on social media for product reviews, including fashion and beauty items, from their peers, influencers, and celebrity bloggers (Tighe, 2021). Marketers leverage social media to prompt Generation

Y consumers to emulate the lifestyles of celebrities and influencers, driving the demand for trendy items associated with success (Collins, 2020). Moreover, the desire to stay current with fashion trends has led to collaborations between fashion brands and technology companies, resulting in the development of wearable technology that seamlessly merges functionality with style (Anand, 2023).

Generation Y university students, often considered the intellectual and economically prosperous segment of their cohort, typically possess higher earning potential due to their graduate qualifications. This elevated educational status also bestows upon them a higher social standing within society and among peers (Bevan-Dye & Akpojivi, 2016). Additionally, university students frequently serve as catalysts for social change and exert significant influence over fashion trends within their generation and beyond (Bevan-Dye, 2019). Consequently, they serve as a pertinent reflection of their generation's consumer behaviour in the fashion realm, rendering them an attractive market segment for fashion marketers and retailers.

3. STYLE CHOICES OF SOUTH AFRICAN GENERATION Y STUDENTS

In South Africa, individuals falling within Generation Y comprised an estimated 34 percent of the country's population of 60.6 million, as per the mid-year population estimates recorded in 2022 (Stats SA, 2022). In terms of fashion-conscious behaviour among Generation Y in South Africa, research aligns with international findings, indicating a strong awareness of fashion. Specifically, male university students from this generation show a keen interest in fashion and a desire for uniqueness. This need for uniqueness significantly influences their fashion awareness, consciousness, and fashion-conscious behaviour. It suggests that South African Generation Y males use fashion as a means of expressing their individuality, status, and self-image. Consequently, marketers targeting male Generation Y should focus on appealing to their desire for uniqueness and prestige. (Motale, 2015).

Aligned with their global peers, South African Generation Y university students demonstrate a propensity for status consumption and materialism (Pelser *et al.*, 2023). However, contrary to findings from international studies, they also exhibit a notable degree of consumer ethnocentrism toward local brands. Interestingly, while a substantial positive correlation exists between their materialistic inclinations and status-consumption orientation, neither of these tendencies significantly correlates with their consumer ethnocentrism, suggesting a gap in the South African market for developing and marketing national luxury status brands targeted at Generation Y consumers (Bevan-Dye *et al.*, 2012).

Within the retail industry, including the fashion industry, marketers and retailers need to understand consumers' underlying shopping motives to successfully target a market (Ozen & Kodaz, 2012). In keeping with their global counterparts, South African Generation Y consumers enjoy shopping and they have plenty of time to shop. Research indicates strong positive motivations among South African university students for both hedonic (De Klerk & Dalziel, 2016) and utilitarian shopping (Dalziel & De Klerk, 2017). Primary hedonic shopping motives include seeking value for money, exploring new trends, socializing, and fulfilling familial roles, with mood alleviation and stress relief ranking lower (De Klerk & Dalziel, 2016). Conversely, utilitarian motives centre on achieving goals and efficiency, such as saving time and resources, particularly among male consumers. Notably, females are more driven by hedonic motivations compared to their male counterparts (Dalziel & De Klerk, 2017).

Like their international counterparts, South African Generation Y university students enjoy visiting shopping malls. According to the literature they have strong motives for visiting shopping malls and visit a mall frequently, ranging from once a day to at least once every two months, spending two to four hours per visit at one to more than nine different stores. They allocate between five to 20 percent of their monthly disposable income to mall spending (Jooste, 2016). Their most important motives for visiting a shopping mall are the desire for shopping convenience, followed by the aesthetic stimulation of the mall and the desire for flow; that is, having the opportunity to lose a sense of time because of the pleasurable state of absorption. Additional motives include the need to enact a role, such as shopping for bargains and sales, as well as to socialise with others. As such, to attract consumers from this market segment, developers, managers, and marketers should focus on convenient experiences, enhancing mall aesthetics, layout, and décor, and considering factors like location, operating hours and store variety (De Klerk & Jooste, 2022).

Similar to global trends, South African Generation Y university students are prone to engaging in impulse purchases, particularly for fashion items. Research indicates that internal factors, such as cognitive and affective responses, significantly influence impulse buying behaviour. Among external antecedents, sales promotions are identified as the most influential, followed by salespeople, in-store atmospherics, reference groups, and in-store browsing (Neves, 2017). Notably, these antecedents, excluding salespeople, shape their affective response to impulse buying, while in-store atmospherics, browsing, and promotions positively impact their cognitive response (Neves *et al.*, 2018). This highlights the role of emotions in driving Generation Y consumers' impulse buying behaviour, surpassing external influences. Regarding situational factors, they perceive money availability as more impactful than time availability on their impulse purchases. Furthermore, female Generation Y students exhibit a significantly higher propensity for impulse buying compared to their male counterparts (Neves, 2017).

Consistent with global research, female Generation Y university students exhibit favourable attitudes and intentions toward the usage and purchasing of beauty products. Various factors influence their consumption intentions, including the perceived significance of appearance in their lives, price consciousness, desire for variety, inclination towards status consumption, need for product innovation, subjective norms, and the impact of media, celebrities, and reference groups, as well as their attitude towards beauty products (Dalziel, 2017). Empirical evidence indicates a strong correlation between female Generation Y students' attitudes toward beauty products, their inclination for variety-seeking and status consumption during purchases, and the influence of media on beauty product perceptions (Dalziel & De Klerk, 2018). Moreover, their perceived physical vanity, preference for variety, and status consumption tendencies, along with media and celebrity influence, positively impact their innovativeness in beauty product selection, consequently affecting their intentions to use and purchase such products (Dalziel, 2017). Additionally, the media and reference groups, including friends, family, and peers, significantly shape female Generation Y students' subjective norms, which subsequently influence their purchasing attitudes towards beauty products (Dalziel & De Klerk, 2021). Furthermore, their price consciousness, level of innovativeness in beauty product choices, and subjective norms directly influence their purchase intentions for beauty products (Dalziel, 2017).

The primary marketing activities contributing to the development of clothing brand equity among South African Generation Y university students are product-related initiatives, followed by pricing, store image, and advertising efforts. This underscores their preference for brands offering trendy products with distinctive features, similar to their global peers. Advertising endeavours are crucial in building brand awareness, fostering brand loyalty, and ultimately enhancing clothing brand equity (Marais, 2016). While both male and female students share similar perceptions regarding the significance of product and advertising activities in brand equity development, females prioritize store image activities more than males, who prioritize pricing activities (Lues & De Klerk, 2016). Generation Y students display brand awareness, perceiving their preferred clothing brands as high-quality and distinct, fostering strong brand loyalty and elevated brand equity. Influenced by store image and advertising, their brand awareness positively affects perceived quality, which in turn influences brand associations. Their brand loyalty, shaped by awareness, perceived quality, and brand associations, significantly enhances overall clothing brand equity (Marais, 2016). Notably, while brand awareness and associations predict male students' brand loyalty, perceived quality, brand awareness, and brand associations predict female students' brand loyalty (Lues & De Klerk, 2017).

Amidst a notable global rise in demand for counterfeit luxury fashion items, governments worldwide, including South Africa's, are actively exploring measures to deter consumers, particularly the youth, from purchasing such products (Teah *et al.*, 2015). Despite South African Generation Y consumers valuing designer clothing as indispensable, even above happiness (Seopa, 2008), financial constraints as students or first-time employees may lead them to consider purchasing counterfeit luxury fashion brands (De Klerk, 2016). Contrary to international trends, South African Generation Y individuals exhibit negative attitudes towards purchasing counterfeit luxury fashion items. They perceive such products as detrimental to the intellectual property, interests, and rights of original fashion brand manufacturers and the fashion industry in general. Moreover, both male and female Generation Y members share similar negative attitudes towards purchasing counterfeit luxury fashion items. The negative stance on counterfeit purchases benefits authentic fashion brands and South Africa's economic growth. Given Generation Y's potential influence on future attitudes, this holds significant importance (De Klerk, 2016).

Research conducted in the South African context indicates that Generation Y individuals hold a favourable attitude towards and intend to use wearable activity-tracking devices (Muller, 2019). They perceive these devices as attractive and trendy (Muller & De Klerk, 2020), contributing positively to their social image and worth the cost (Hatting, 2019), while also being easy to use and beneficial to their lives in general (Hatting, 2019; Muller, 2019). Furthermore, they feel pressure from their significant others such as friends, family, or peers to utilize these devices (Muller, 2019). Additionally, factors such as brand name, social image, and subjective norms are positively associated with their favourable attitude towards wearable activity-tracking devices (Muller *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, design aesthetics and brand name significantly impact their intention to use these devices (Muller & De Klerk, 2020). Report findings highlight that brand name and subjective norms play a significant role in influencing their intention to use activity-tracking devices, while perceived usefulness and ease of use positively affect their attitudes towards these devices, ultimately influencing their intention to use them (Muller, 2019).

Similar to their global counterparts, South African Generation Y university students exhibit favourable attitudes towards using price as an indicator of fashion product quality. Evidence from the literature suggests they consider the opinions of their family, friends, and peers, when making fashion purchases and demonstrate materialistic and status consumption tendencies in acquiring fashion products. Additionally, significant positive relationships exist between their favourable price-quality fashion attitudes, their tendency to engage in status consumption, material success, happiness tendencies, and the influence of subjective norms on their fashion consumption. Among these tendencies, subjective norms and status consumption exert the strongest influence on their favourable price-quality fashion attitudes. This highlights that Generation Y students' attitudes towards price-quality in fashion are influenced by status consumption, materialistic tendencies, and subjective norms (De Klerk, 2020).

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper provided insights into the multifaceted nature of fashion, particularly focusing on Generation Y consumers, with specific reference to South African university students. The findings underscore the significant role of Generation Y in shaping fashion trends and driving consumer behaviour in the fashion industry. First, the paper highlighted the dynamic and evolving nature of the fashion industry, emphasizing its substantial contribution to global and South African economies. Despite its size and ongoing growth, the industry faces challenges such as intense competition and evolving consumer preferences. To remain competitive, fashion role players need to adapt to new trends through product innovation and timely responses to emerging market demands. Secondly, the paper explored the significance of Generation Y to the fashion industry, emphasizing their digitally savvy nature, strong consumer influence and substantial spending power. As the first generation to come of age in the new millennium, Generation Y individuals are highly informed and empowered consumers who spend a significant amount of time online, particularly on social media platforms. Their shopping behaviour, characterized by a fondness for shopping, desire for convenience, and a preference for well-known brands, make them an important market segment for fashion marketers and retailers. Thirdly, the paper delved into the style choices of South African Generation Y university students, highlighting their fashion-conscious behaviour, status consumption tendencies, and preferences for both local and international brands. The findings revealed gender differences in shopping motivations and attitudes towards fashion, with female students exhibiting a stronger inclination towards hedonic shopping motives and brand loyalty compared to their male counterparts. Moreover, the paper discussed Generation Y's attitudes towards counterfeit luxury fashion products, wearable activity-tracking devices, and the use of price as an indicator of quality for fashion products. Despite valuing luxury fashion items, including beauty products, South African Generation Y individuals exhibit negative attitudes towards purchasing counterfeit luxury fashion items. They also demonstrate a favourable attitude towards using wearable activity-tracking devices and consider price as an important factor in determining the quality of fashion products.

Based on these insights, several recommendations can be made for fashion marketers and retailers targeting Generation Y consumers in South Africa. Use digital platforms and social media channels to engage with Generation Y consumers effectively. This involves building a strong online presence, creating engaging content and fostering meaningful connections with their target audience. Furthermore, product innovation and adaptability to emerging trends to meet the evolving preferences of Generation Y consumers are essential. By pursuing the latest fashion trends, fashion role players can maintain their relevance and appeal to this dynamic market segment. Also, fashion marketers and retailers should emphasize authenticity and ethical practices to resonate with Generation Y consumers who value transparency and social responsibility. By communicating brand values and engaging in sustainable practices, brands can build trust and loyalty among socially conscious consumers. Overall, this research paper provides valuable insights into the preferences, behaviours, and attitudes of South African Generation Y individuals in the fashion industry. By understanding the unique characteristics of this market segment, fashion marketers and retailers can tailor their strategies to effectively engage and resonate with Generation Y consumers, driving growth and success in the dynamic fashion landscape.

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