

WALKING THE TALK IN THE SPORT FOOTWEAR INDUSTRY: A GENERATION Y COHORT ANALYSIS OF CONSUMER-BASED BRAND EQUITY DIMENSIONS AND PURCHASE INTENTION

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—Abstract —

The footwear market has recently witnessed a proliferation of various brands with consumers being exposed to several international brands. Building strong brands and brand equity has thus become an important source of competitiveness and differentiation for manufacturers and retailers. Brand equity is a core marketing asset that forms distinctive ties between companies and their audiences, which nurtures long-term buying behaviour. This paper examines the influence of the dimensions of brand equity on purchase intentions in the sport footwear industry in South Africa. A cross-sectional survey was conducted among a Generation Y cohort through a structured questionnaire. Correlations and regression analysis were conducted to examine the relationship between brand equity dimensions (brand awareness, brand association, brand loyalty) and purchase intentions. Reliability was established through internal consistency (Cronbach alpha), which was deemed satisfactory. The results show that the brand awareness has a positive influence on brand quality and brand loyalty. Brand association also showed a positive influence on brand quality and brand loyalty. Finally, brand quality and brand loyalty positively influenced brand purchase intention. Brand managers and marketing planners should consider the importance of these constructs in their overall brand equity evaluation. Limitations and implications for further research are discussed.

Key Words: *Brand, brand equity, quality, brand awareness, brand associations, loyalty, purchase intentions*

JEL Classification: M30, M31

1. INTRODUCTION

Brands are considered one of the important assets for a firm, as strong brands create customer awareness, improved market share and shareholder value (Jones, 2005). In the footwear product category, sport footwear is one of the most branded areas in the global apparel market (Tong and Hawley, 2009) with Nike, Adidas and Reebok claiming approximately 33 percent of the global active sportswear and athletic footwear market (Newbery, 2009). Similarly, a study conducted in 2014 (BizCommunity, 2014) revealed Nike (14.16%), Converse All Star (11.95%) and Adidas (11.26%) were perceived as the coolest footwear brands by approximately 6000 South African youths between the ages of 8-23 years. This is in comparison to the 2016 rankings that disclosed Nike as still being the preferred brand among the Millennials, with Adidas ranking second and Converse fifth (Sunday Times Brand Survey, 2016). Moreover, it is estimated that an average of 9 million to 17 million pairs of athletic footwear is sold in South Africa annually (Sports Trader, 2007). Therefore, brand equity plays an important role in assisting brand managers to gain a competitive edge. When correctly measured, it is an important metric for evaluating the long-term impact of marketing decisions (Simon and Sullivan, 1993). Aaker (1991:15) refers to brand equity as “a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name and symbol that adds to or subtracts from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or to that firm’s customers.” Similarly, Farquhar, Han and Ijiri (1991) cite brand equity as “the added value endowed by the brand name.” Keller (1993) suggests that brand equity rests solely on the consumer and contends that for a brand to have value, the customer must value it. Simply explained, it is the biased behaviour that consumers display towards certain associated brands. Once consumers are exposed to an array of product choices, it is then that their need for brand equity arises. This behaviour is displayed frequently in their disposition to pay premium prices in order to acquire certain brands (Holden, 1992).

For the purposes of this study, emphasis is placed specifically on consumer-based brand equity, which is defined as “the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand” (Keller, 1993:8). Differential effect is determined by comparing consumer responses to the marketing of a brand with the same response to the same marketing of a fictitiously named or unnamed version of a product or service. Brand knowledge incorporates brand awareness and brand image. Consumer perceptions incorporate consumer preferences and behaviour arising from a marketing

mix activity. Moreover, positive customer-based brand equity can lead to greater revenue, lower cost and higher profit, which requires the creation of a familiar brand that has favourable, strong and unique brand associations (Keller, 1993). The consumer segment of interest to the researchers is the Generation Y cohort. Generation Y or Millennials are the children of Baby Boomers and are born between 1977 and 1994 (Kotler, Armstrong and Tait, 2016). Unlike previous generations, they are described as having a kinship towards particular brands (O’Cass and Choy, 2008). This kinship is attributed to this cohort being raised in an era where everything surrounding them is branded (Morton, 2002).

2. BRAND EQUITY DIMENSIONS AND PURCHASE INTENTION

Brand equity is a multidimensional concept comprising brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, brand loyalty and other patented branded assets as conceptualised by these authors, namely Aaker (1991), Keller (1993) and Aaker (1996).

2.1 Brand awareness

Brand awareness is conceived as an important component of brand equity that pertains to the ability of prospective buyers to distinguish or recollect that a brand belongs a certain product category (Aaker, 1991, Keller, 1993; Aaker, 1996). The level of brand awareness depends upon the level of noticeability that is achieved by a brand in the marketplace, so the higher the level of awareness, the more dominant is the brand, increasing the likelihood that the brand is considered in purchase situations (Calvo-Porrá, Martínez-Fernández, Juanatey-Boga and Lévy-Mangin 2015). Powerful brand associations linked to consumers buying experiences further heighten this recollection (Keller, 1998). The rationality being that the brand awareness of a product can be created in the mind of consumers prior to brand associations taking place in memory (Pitta and Prevel Katsanis 1995; Atilgan, Aksoy and Akinci, 2005; Pappu, Quester and Cooksey, 2005). Further, consumers who are aware of a particular brand, are knowledgeable of the brand and have undergone positive experiences with a brand seem to be brand loyal. Several authors have asserted that an interrelationship exists between brand awareness and brand association (Keller, 1993; Cobb-Walgreen, Ruble and Donthu, 1995; Atilgan, *et al.*, 2005).

2.2 Brand association

Brand association is outlined as anything that is linked to the retention of a brand by a consumer (Aaker, 1991). Brand association “consists of all brand-related thoughts, feelings, perceptions, images, experiences, beliefs and attitudes that is linked in memory to a brand” (Kotler and Keller, 2006:188). Cheng-Hsui Chen (2001) is of the notion that brand associations frequently “bear” the meaning of the brand for consumers therein reflected in specific features of the product or aspects independent of the product. Nevertheless, organisations can utilise brand association as a tool for collecting crucial consumer information and when applied effectively can aid brand differentiation, thus contributing to more eminent brand loyalty (Yoo, Donthu and Lee, 2000; Van Osselaer and Janiszewski, 2001; Atilgan *et al.*, 2005).

2.3 Brand quality

The quality of the brand is a core facet of the brand equity framework (Aaker, 1996). Brand quality is not the real quality of the brand but the customer’s perception of the overall quality or superiority of the product or service (Zeithaml, 1988). Since the objective quality of a brand refers to the technical, measurable and verifiable nature of products/services and processes, which is not easily discernible, for customers to make a complete and correct judgement of the quality, they rely on the perceived quality attributes that they associate with the product/service (Zeithaml, 1988). Cox (1967) and Olsen (1972) opine that products comprise either extrinsic or intrinsic cues that can be indicative of quality to consumers. Often extrinsic cues are considered as product-related dimensions that relate to the price, brand name and packaging, whereas, intrinsic cues address the physical attributes such as the ingredients (Richardson, Dick and Jain, 1994).

In the footwear market consumers, therefore, may look at style, fit, comfort, colour, form and appearance to infer quality (Acebrón and Dópico, 2000). These features, coupled with positive consumer experiences as ascertained by others brands from the ‘parent brand’, will aid in affirming that quality as several notable scholars have highlighted quality as being pre-emptive of purchase behaviour (Krishnan and Chakravarti, 1993; Nakamoto, MacInnis and Jung (as cited by Janiszewski and Osselaer, 2000).

2.4 Brand loyalty

Brand loyalty is a major constituent of brand equity and is defined as “the attachment that a customer has toward a brand” (Aaker, 1991:39). Oliver (1997) denotes brand loyalty as the inclination demonstrated by a consumer’s intent to purchasing a brand as a preferred choice. From a behavioural perspective brand loyalty is defined as the degree to which a customer concentrates his/her purchases over time on a particular brand (Schoell, Guiltinan, Pritchett and Pritchett, 1990) and is related to how often and how much consumers purchase a brand (Aaker, 1991). It also encompasses the comparison of the brand with other brands offering similar benefits (Aaker, 1996). From an attitudinal perspective, brand loyalty is defined as an inclination to be loyal to a particular brand, which is often demonstrated by an intention to purchase a brand (Oliver, 1997). Brand loyalty is important in the sports footwear industry as it provides a set of habitual buyers for a long period of time, who are less likely to switch to a competitor. Waddell (1995) and Oliver (1999) proposed that a relationship between quality and satisfaction exists. It is widely accepted in the marketing sphere that a satisfied customer is inclined to be more favourable towards a product or brand (Bloemer and Kasper, 1995; Gommans, Krishnan and Scheffold, 2001), hence contributing to future repurchase behaviour (Fornell, 1992; Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Anderson and Sullivan, 1993; Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Alemán, 2001).

2.5 Purchase intentions

According to Schiffman and Kanuk (2000) purchase intentions measure the likelihood of a consumer to buy a product and the higher the purchase intention is, the higher a consumer’s willingness is to buy a product. This characteristic is particularly significant to an organisation since it is cheaper to retain an existing customer than getting acquainted with a new one (Spreng, Harrell and Mackoy, 1995). The purchase intentions of consumers depend entirely on the brand awareness and brand loyalty of the particular brand (Macdonald and Sharp, 2000; Malik, Ghafoor, Hafiz, Riaz, Hassan, Mustafa and Shahbaz, 2013). It has been found that brand loyal consumers typically do not assess products prior to purchase as choices are grounded on past experiences (Wong and Sidek, 2008). The literature suggests that consumers’ purchase intentions are highly motivated by the store where the product is sold (Grewal, Krishnan, Baker and Borin, 1998).

5.1 Population and sample

The target population selected was confined to individuals between the ages of 18 and 36 years. The population included Generation Y male and female consumers who had purchased branded sport footwear brands in the last three months. The sampling frame comprised consumers located in the southern Gauteng province. A non-probability convenience sample of 320 Generation Y consumers was taken at four major shopping malls within the region.

5.2 Research instrument and data collection

The research instrument used for the study was adopted from scales developed by Yoo and Donthu (2001) and Lassar, Mittal and Sharma (1995) on brand equity, namely brand awareness (eight items), brand associations (six items), perceived quality (nine items), brand loyalty (eight items) and purchase intentions (seven items) for sports footwear. Section A included questions designed to elicit demographic and general information from the sample. Responses to the scaled items in Section B were evaluated using a five-point Likert scale ranging from (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree). Questionnaires were administered with the assistance of an experienced fieldworker. Participation in the survey was strictly on a voluntary basis. Of the questionnaires that were completed, 292 were used for the analysis.

6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

6.1 Sample composition

Findings from the study revealed that the majority (37.3%; n=109) of the participants had in the last three months purchased Converse branded sports footwear, followed closely by Adidas (30.1%; n=88) and Nike (22.3%; n=65) The rest (9.9%; n=29) did not specify their choice of footwear. The majority of the sample comprised male respondents (56.5%; n=165) with females in the minority (43.5%; n=127). In terms of age, consumers' participation was made up as follows: between 18-22 years 53.1 percent (n=155), between 23-27 years 25.0 percent (n=73), between 28-32 years, 12.0 percent (n=35) and the remaining 9.9 percent were between 32-36 years of age (n=29).

6.2 Scale reliabilities

The reliability of the questionnaire was checked by Cronbach's alpha measure of internal consistency.

Table 1: Scale reliabilities

Variables	Mean	Std. Deviation	Cronbach alpha
Brand awareness (BAW)	4.2526	.49546	.704
Brand association (BAS)	4.2962	.51611	.701
Brand quality (BQL)	4.2272	.46599	.733
Brand loyalty (BLO)	3.9957	.64064	.778
Purchase intention (PIN)	4.1272	.56579	.737

According to Malhotra (2010), when calculating the Cronbach alpha, the coefficient value ranges between zero and one, whereby a value above 0.60 translates into an acceptable scale reliability. However, Pallant (2007) is of the view that a Cronbach alpha value of between 0.7 and 0.8 is preferable. Table 1 indicates that a Cronbach alpha range of between 0.701 and 0.778 was reported for the scales. This denotes that the research instrument utilised for the survey is reliable.

6.3 Correlations

The results of the correlation analysis are reported in Table 2. The results show moderate to strong positive associations between brand awareness and brand association ($r=.474$; $p<0.01$), brand awareness and brand quality ($r=.535$ $p<0.01$), brand awareness and brand loyalty ($r=.331$; $p<0.01$), and between brand awareness and purchase intention ($r=.401$; $p<0.01$). Brand association showed a strong positive correlation with brand quality ($r=.592$; $p<0.01$), a moderate positive correlation with brand loyalty ($r=.460$; $p<0.01$), and a strong positive correlation with purchase intentions ($r=.505$; $p<0.01$). Brand quality showed moderate positive correlations with purchase intention ($r=.421$; $p<0.01$). Finally, purchase intention showed moderate correlations with brand awareness ($r=.401$; $p<0.01$). According to Buil, De Chernatony and Martinez (2008) and Chang, Hsu and Chung (2008) brand equity is a multifaceted concept comprising brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations and brand loyalty. Tong and Hawley (2009) affirm that brand association and brand loyalty constitute the dimensions of brand equity. On the other hand, Severi and Ling (2013) established kinship between brand awareness and brand equity is mediated association where brand association and brand equity is arbitrated by brand loyalty.

Table 2: Correlations among variables

Variables		BAW	BAS	BQL	BLO	PIN
Brand awareness	Correlations	1.000	.474**	.535**	.331**	.401**

Variables		BAW	BAS	BQL	BLO	PIN
(BAW)	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000	.000	.000	.000
Brand association (BAS)	Correlations	.474**	1.000	.592**	.460**	.505**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.	.000	.000	.000
Brand quality (BQL)	Correlations	.535**	.592**	1.000	.461**	.421**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.	.000	.000
Brand loyalty (BLO)	Correlations	.331**	.460**	.461**	1.000	.473**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.	.000
Purchase intention (PIN)	Correlations	.401**	.505**	.421**	.473**	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.

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

6.4 Regression analysis-brand equity variables with purchase intention

Since moderate to strong positive correlations were established among the constructs, linear regression analysis was performed using the enter method. The model summary is reported in Table 3.

The Model 1 summary reports on the regression analysis between brand awareness and brand quality. The predictor that was held constant was brand awareness (independent variable) and the dependent variable that was entered into the regression equation model was brand quality. On the examination of the relationship between brand awareness and brand quality, the adjusted $R^2=0.316$, indicating that brand awareness explained approximately 32 percent of variance in brand quality. The beta coefficient for brand awareness ($\beta=0.562$) suggests that there is a strong positive predictive relationship between brand awareness and brand quality of sports footwear. Thus, customers who are aware of the brand are more likely to be aware of the perceived quality of the footwear brand. *The hypothesis: H_1 : Brand awareness has a significant positive influence on perceived brand quality, therefore, is supported.* Hoyer and Brown (1990) concluded that when consumers are aware of a brand then the quality is insignificant. However, when brand awareness is absent, they become more cognisant of the brands quality.

Table 3: Linear regression analysis - brand equity variables with purchase intentions

Model 1: Brand awareness and brand quality					
Dependent variable: (Brand quality)	Unstandardised coefficients		Standardised coefficients	t	sig
Independent variable	B	Std Error	Beta		
Brand awareness	.529	.046	.562	11.57	.000*

R = .562	R ² =.316	Adjusted R ² .314	F Change = 133.893		
Model 2: Brand awareness and brand loyalty					
Dependent variable: (Brand loyalty)	Unstandardised coefficients		Standardised coefficients	t	sig
Independent variable	<i>B</i>	Std Error	Beta		
Brand awareness	.408	.073	.316	5.66	.000*
R = .316	R ² =.100	Adjusted R ² .097	F Change = 32.139		
Model 3: Brand association and brand quality					
Dependent variable: (Brand quality)	Unstandardised coefficients		Standardised coefficients	t	sig
Independent variable	<i>B</i>	Std Error	Beta		
Brand association	.568	.041	.629	13.76	.000*
R = .629	R ² =.395	Adjusted R ² .393	F Change = 189.508		
Model 4: Brand association and brand loyalty					
Dependent variable: (Brand loyalty)	Unstandardised coefficients		Standardised coefficients	t	sig
Independent variable	<i>B</i>	Std Error	Beta		
Brand association	.581	.064	.468	9.02	.000*
R = .468	R ² =.219	Adjusted R ² .216	F Change = 81.364		
Model 5: Brand quality and purchase intention					
Dependent variable: (Purchase intention)	Unstandardised coefficients		Standardised coefficients	t	sig
Independent variable	<i>B</i>	Std Error	Beta		
Brand quality	.503	.065	.414	7.75	.000*
R = .14	R ² =.172	Adjusted R ² .169	F Change = 60.084		
Model 6: Brand loyalty and purchase intention					
Dependent variable: (Purchase intention)	Unstandardised coefficients		Standardised coefficients	t	sig
Independent variable	<i>B</i>	Std Error	Beta		
Brand loyalty	.414	.046	.469	9.03	.000*
R = .468	R ² =.219	Adjusted R ² .216	F Change = 81.364	* sig at p <0.05.	

Model 2 examines the predictive relationships between brand awareness and brand loyalty. The predictor variable (independent variable) that was held constant was brand awareness and the dependent variable was brand loyalty. The adjusted R²=0.100, indicating that brand awareness explained approximately 10 percent of variance in brand loyalty. The beta coefficient for brand awareness ($\beta=0.316$; sig at $p<0.05$) suggests that there is a strong positive predictive relationship between brand awareness and brand loyalty of sports footwear. *The hypothesis: H₂: Brand awareness has a significant positive influence on perceived brand loyalty, therefore, is supported.* Chi, Yeh and Yang (2009) emphasised that

whenever consumers' brand awareness is eminent, the result is that their brand loyalty heightens.

In Model 3 the predictive relationship between brand association (independent variable) and brand quality was examined to show an adjusted $R^2=0.393$, indicating that brand association explained approximately 39 percent of variance in brand quality. The beta coefficient for brand awareness ($\beta=0.629$; sig at $p<0.05$) suggests that there is a strong positive predictive relationship between brand awareness and brand quality of sports footwear. *The hypothesis: H₃: Brand association has a significant positive influence on perceived brand quality, therefore, is supported.* Low and Lamb (2000) discovered that consumers' brand associations differ across brands and product categories. In a study examining status brands and the consumption thereof, findings showed that where the products conformed to consumer image, those brands were perceived as having high status (O'Cass and Frost, 2002; Roy and Chau, 2011). Consumers often associate status products with quality.

In Model 4, the independent variable that was entered into the regression equation was brand association and the dependent variable was brand loyalty. The adjusted $R^2=0.219$, indicating that brand association explained approximately 22 percent of variance in brand loyalty. The beta coefficient for brand awareness ($\beta=0.468$; sig at $p<0.05$) suggests that there is a strong positive predictive relationship between brand association and brand loyalty with regard to sports footwear. *The hypothesis: H₄: Brand association has a significant positive influence on perceived brand loyalty, therefore, is supported.* In their observations, Gladden and Funk (2001) established that brand associations could have a positive relationship on brand loyalty. The relationship, however, is dependent on the variables being measured within the brand association spectrum.

Model 5, which reports on the regression analysis with brand quality, entered into the regression equation as the independent variable and purchase intention as the dependent variable shows the adjusted $R^2=0.169$, indicating that brand quality explained approximately 17 percent of variance in purchase intention. The beta coefficient for brand awareness ($\beta=0.414$; sig at $p<0.05$) suggests that there is a strong positive predictive relationship between brand quality and brand purchase intention. *The hypothesis: H₅: Brand quality has a significant positive influence on purchase intention, therefore, is supported.* In a separate

study, consumers divulged that the quality of a store's website directly affected their purchase intention (Poddar, Donthu and Wei, 2009).

The final model (Model 6) which examined the predictive relationship between brand loyalty and purchase intention show an adjusted $R^2=0.216$, indicating that brand loyalty explained approximately 22 percent of variance in purchase intention. The beta coefficient for brand awareness ($\beta=0.469$; sig at $p<0.05$) suggests that there is a strong positive predictive relationship between brand quality and brand purchase intention. *The hypothesis: H_6 : Brand loyalty has a significant positive influence on purchase intention, therefore, is supported.* Malik *et al.* (2013) posit that it is paramount to promote brand awareness together with brand loyalty as both these variables contribute towards positive purchase intention.

7. LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The study utilised non-probability sampling with the sample limited specifically to Generation Y consumers between 18 to 36 years. Hence, caution must be taken not to extrapolate the results to other cohorts. Furthermore, only 320 questionnaires were distributed in the southern Gauteng province. Further research should probe into a wider demographic age segment and efforts to focus on a large sample size must be considered. Whilst this study was based primarily on Aaker's (1996) model and merely four variables were measured, future studies ought to include other models like that of Keller (1993) to evaluate other concepts such as trust, country of origin, brand image, perceived value, social responsibility and social influence. A mixed mode research design through a qualitative and quantitative study could provide more information on consumer brand equity dimensions.

8. CONCLUSION

The purpose of the study was to examine the influence of brand equity dimensions on purchase intention in the sport footwear industry amongst Generation Y consumers. Brand awareness was observed as having a positive relationship with brand quality and brand loyalty, where brand association is interlinked with brand loyalty and both brand quality and brand loyalty influence purchase intention. Therefore, it is crucial that marketers of sport footwear position themselves correctly in the mind of the consumer. Generation Y consumers have an affinity towards branded products. As such, footwear directed at

this cohort needs to have distinctive features, while maintaining the criterion consumers associate with their preferred brand. In doing so, consumers are unlikely to interchange between competitor brands.

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