

## **INFLUENCE OF STATUS CONSUMPTION, MATERIALISM AND SUBJECTIVE NORMS ON GENERATION Y STUDENTS' PRICE-QUALITY FASHION ATTITUDE**

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### **—Abstract —**

Fashion is regarded as one of the world's largest consumer industries, generating up to 2.5 trillion US Dollars in consumer spending in 2016. South Africa is one of the leading fashion markets in Africa, reaching recorded retail sales revenue of approximately ZAR172 billion by end of 2016. Owing to the intense competition, effective marketing strategies are essential in order for fashion marketers and retailers to differentiate themselves and to target their markets effectively, including when targeting Generation Y consumers. Generation Y are described as the largest and most profitable consumer group for marketers and retailers, representing approximately 36 percent of the South African population in 2018. This generation represents a salient current and future market segment for a variety of industries, including the fashion industry. Therefore, understanding their attitudes towards using price as an indicator of quality for fashion products is likely to be essential in designing marketing strategies to ensure sustained success and growth. As such, the purpose of this study was to determine Generation Y students' price-quality fashion attitude and the influence of the materialistic dimensions of success and happiness, together with the dimensions of fashion status consumption and fashion subjective norms thereon. The study followed a quantitative research approach, whereby self-administered questionnaires were completed by a non-probability convenience sample of 600 students, who were registered at the campuses of three South African public higher education institutions situated in the Gauteng province. The collected data were analysed using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis and regression analysis. The findings of this study suggest that status consumption, materialism and subjective

norms significantly influence Generation Y students' price-quality fashion attitude.

**Key Words:** Fashion marketing, price-quality fashion attitude, Generation Y students, South Africa

**JEL Classification:** M31

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The global fashion industry is regarded as one of the world's largest consumer industries, generating up to 2.5 trillion US Dollars in consumer spending in 2016. With an annual growth rate of 5.5 percent (Amed, Berg, Brantberg & Hedrich, 2016), the fashion industry is regarded as a significant sector of the global economy (Anon, 2018). South Africa's fashion industry is one of the top fashion markets in Africa (Brown, 2013). In 2016, retail sales for fashion consumer goods were recorded at approximately ZAR172 billion (Statistics South Africa, 2017) and continues to experience sound growth in line with inflation, despite a challenging economic climate in recent years (Euromonitor International, 2017). However, the competition amongst fashion marketers and retailers is intense (Brand South Africa, 2014). Therefore, it is essential for fashion marketers and retailers to strengthen their competitive position by developing effective marketing strategies to differentiate themselves and to target their markets effectively (PRNewswire, 2015), including when targeting Generation Y consumers.

Generation Y includes individuals born between 1986 and 2005 (Markert 2004). Described as the largest and most profitable consumer group for marketers and retailers globally (Hassler, 2017), this generation is especially salient to fashion marketers and retailers (Cassidy & Van Schijndel, 2011). Compared to preceding generations, Generation Y individuals were raised in a media- and information-saturated world, which has contributed to them being more connected and, hence, more informed (Bevan-Dye & Surujlal, 2011). Research suggests that they are fashion conscious (Cassidy & Van Schijndel, 2011), sophisticated and consumption-orientated, with a significant level of spending power (Eastman & Liu, 2012). In South Africa, members of the Generation Y cohort represented approximately 36 percent of the South African population in 2018 (Statistics South Africa, 2018). The university student segment of this generation, generally defined as being between 18 and 24 years (Kumar & Lim, 2008), is deemed as being particularly important because individuals who have a tertiary education are likely to have a higher future earning potential, resulting in greater spending

power and social status (Bevan-Dye & Akpojivi, 2016). Generation Y represents an essential current and future market segment for various industries, including the fashion industry, and understanding their attitudes towards using price as an indicator of quality for fashion products is likely to be important for fashion marketers and retailers in developing marketing strategies to ascertain sustained success and growth (PRNewswire, 2015).

Perceived quality is a consumer's evaluation of a product's overall excellence or superiority (Zeithaml, 1988) and influences their product choice (Khare, Ahtani & Khattar, 2014). Consumers evaluate product quality differently, using different cues, such as product experience and price. Specifically, retail price is viewed as the most established predictor of product quality, referred to as the price-quality inference (Priilaid & Hall, 2016), where consumers perceive the price and the quality of a product to be highly correlated (Lichtenstein & Burton, 1989). This consumer tendency suggests that higher-priced products are perceived as being of higher quality than lower-priced products (Lichtenstein, Ridgway & Netemeyer, 1993). A possible reason for the use of price as an assessment of quality is that price is one-dimensional and easier to assess than other multi-dimensional quality indicators. Moreover, price may be assumed to reflect production costs, meaning that high quality products are assumed to be more expensive to produce and, as such, are likely to have a higher price (Gorostidi-Martinez, Xu & Zhao, 2017).

Various studies focusing on the positive relationship between price and quality have been conducted (Wang, Cui, Huang & Dai, 2016; Dodds, Monroe & Grewal, 1991; Rao & Monroe, 1988), including for fashion products (Muruganantham & Priyadharshini, 2017; Parguel, Delécolle & Florence, 2015). While studies pertaining to the antecedents influencing consumers' fashion consumption behaviour, namely status consumption (Heaney, Goldsmith & Jusoh, 2005), materialism (Aydin, 2017) and subjective norms (Ting, Go & Isa, 2018) have been conducted, there is a lack of research on the influence of these antecedents on Generation Y students' price-quality fashion attitude. This is pertinent information for both local and international brands seeking to enter the South African market. As such, the purpose of this study was to determine Generation Y students' price-quality fashion attitude and the influence of materialism, together with the dimensions of fashion status consumption and fashion subjective norms thereon, in the South African context.

## **2. FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE ATTITUDES TOWARDS PRICE-QUALITY RELATIONSHIPS IN THE FASHION INDUSTRY**

### **2.1. Status consumption**

Social status is defined as the hierarchical position or rank held by an individual in a society or a group in the eyes of their significant others (Phau & Teah, 2009; Eastman, Goldsmith & Flynn, 1999). This position is based on their relative wealth, power and prestige and is often conferred by material possessions, measured using factors such as the individual's level of income, type of occupation and education level (Schiffman, Kanuk & Wisenblit, 2010). Therefore, the more possessions an individual has, or the more expensive one's possessions are, the more status one tends to have (Schiffman *et al.*, 2010). Status consumption is the process of obtaining status or social standing by purchasing and consuming products that are considered to be of a high status by the consumer and their significant others (Goldsmith, Flynn, & Kim, 2010). Consumers consuming products for status are motivated by a desire for status and involve a desire to procure status symbols (Sandhu & Paim, 2016), including fashion products and brands (O'Cass & Frost, 2002). Notably, status consumption is not limited to certain social classes or income groups, as some consumers would rather spend their disposable income on status symbols like expensive and branded fashion items rather than on necessities such as food or shelter (Phau & Teah, 2009). According to Eastman and Liu (2012), younger consumers are likely to spend a significant amount of money on branded and status products. Butcher, Phau and Shimul (2017) found that consumers classified under Generation Y have a desire to increase their social status and convey their wealth to others. According to Goldsmith *et al.* (2010), consumers' purchase behaviour is influenced by their desire to increase their social standing or status identity, especially regarding observable products, such as fashion products.

### **2.2. Materialism**

Materialism is a complex, multi-faceted phenomenon (Larsen, Sirgy & Wright, 1999). While generally considered as a negative characteristic associated with greed (Lipovcan, Prizmic-Larsen, Brkljacic, 2015), it also has positive societal influences, such as increasing economic wealth (Richins & Rudmin, 1994). Theoretically, materialism has been viewed from different perspectives, either as a personality trait, relating to possessiveness, non-generosity and envy (Belk, 1985), a set of attitudes (Chan & Prendergast, 2007) or as a continuum value, consisting of success, centrality and happiness (Richins & Dawson, 1992). From a

personality trait approach, Belk (1985) defines materialism as the value a consumer attaches to worldly possessions, whereby “at the highest levels of materialism such possessions assume a central place in a person’s life and are believed to provide the greatest sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction”. Chan and Prendergast (2007) view materialism as a set of attitudes, which “regard possessions as symbols of success, where possessions occupy a central part of life, and which include holding the belief that more possessions lead to more happiness”. Another widely accepted approach to materialism is that it is the value consumers give to possessions and should be studied within the context of the larger value systems that consumers hold. Therefore, materialistic individuals consider the acquisition of possessions as being central to their lives, bringing them happiness and success (Richins & Dawson, 1992). Based on this value-system approach, Richins and Dawson (1992) developed a scale to measure an individual’s materialistic values, encompassing three themes, namely that possessions are central in a person’s life, that success can be assessed by things people own and the beliefs that possessions lead to happiness. This scale is widely used to measure an individual’s materialistic value (Dingus, 2014) and is a significant predictor of a consumer’s level of fashion consumption (Fitzmaurice & Comegys, 2014). In particular, the two dimensions of success and happiness were assumed essential indicators of materialistic tendency towards the acquisition of fashion products. As such, this study focused on determining Generation Y students’ materialistic tendency towards acquisition as the pursuit of happiness and possession-defined success concerning fashion products.

### **2.3. Subjective norms**

Subjective norms are defined as the social pressure an individual perceives regarding performing or not performing a particular behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), such as to adopt or not adopt a fashion product. Subjective norms are determined by the individual’s normative beliefs concerning others’ expectations, together with the individual’s motivation to conform to those beliefs (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). An individual’s subjective norm influences them to believe that individuals forming part of noteworthy reference groups expect them to perform a specific behaviour (Kim, Lee, Yoon, 2015). Normative beliefs start from an individual’s perceived expectations of specific reference groups or others, including friends and family, as well as their motivation to engage in the behaviour (Hoyer, MacInnis & Pieters, 2018; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Kang (2010) concurs that subjective norms are the extent to which individuals are aware of or influenced by the opinions of a salient referent regarding how they should behave. Subjective

norms are integral to purchase behaviour, as purchase behaviour is a function of purchase intention, which, in turn, is a function of subjective norms (Polonsky Vocino, Grau, Garma & Ferdous, 2012). Therefore, consumers who perceive stronger subjective norms pertaining to adopting a fashion product will most likely show greater intent to purchasing a fashion product (Chaplin & John, 2010). Subjective norms are thus the sum total of normative beliefs and motivation to act (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) and have a significant influence on attitude (Schepers & Wetzels, 2007). As such, it is important to determine the role that subjective norms play in the prediction of Generation Y students' attitudes towards price-quality relationships in the fashion industry, in the South African context.

### **3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

In this study, the descriptive research design was followed by applying a single cross-sectional approach.

#### **3.1. Sampling method**

The population that was targeted in this study was university students aged between 18 and 24, registered at South African public higher education institutions (HEIs). The sampling frame included the 26 registered South African public HEIs (Universities South Africa, 2015), which comprised six universities of technology, nine comprehensive universities and 11 traditional universities. Using non-probability judgement sampling, the sampling frame was reduced to three HEI campuses based in the Gauteng province, namely one university of technology, one comprehensive university and one traditional university. From this sampling frame, a non-probability convenience sample of 600 full-time Generation Y students was selected (200 per institution).

#### **3.2. Measurement instrument and data collection procedure**

A self-reporting survey questionnaire was used to collect the required data for this study. The questionnaire comprised a section requesting the sample participants' demographic data and a section containing scales from published studies measuring the influence of the various antecedents on Generation Y students' price-quality fashion attitude. In particular, the scale comprised 19 items, divided into five constructs. The five-item scale developed and validated by Eastman *et al.* (1999) was employed to measure status consumption. A three-item scale was adapted to measure the materialistic dimension of success, while a three-item scale was applied to measure the materialistic dimension of happiness, which were harvested from the 18-item scale developed and validated by Richins and

Dawson (1992). Subjective norms were measured using a five-item scale, which was adapted from the study by Wang, Zhang, Zang and Ouyang (2005). Generation Y students' price-quality attitude was measured using a three-item scale, adapted from the four-item scale developed and validated by Lichtenstein and Burton (1989). Participants had to answer how much they agree or disagree with the statements on a six-point Likert scale that ranged from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (6).

Prior to questionnaire distribution to the main sample, the questionnaire was pre-tested using the debriefing approach. Two experienced researchers were invited to participate in the debriefing process. All the remarks and suggestions obtained during the debriefing process were carefully considered and the subsequent changes made to the questionnaire. Following pre-testing, the questionnaire was administered to the main sample. After permission was solicited from lecturers at each of the three HEI campuses, fieldworkers distributed the questionnaires to those lecturers' students. Lecturers were requested to inform students clearly that participation was voluntary. The data captured from the questionnaires were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (IBM SPSS), version 25.

## **4. RESULTS**

### **4.1. Participants**

From the 600 questionnaires administered, 491 complete questionnaires were returned, which results in an 82 percent response rate. A frequency analysis was conducted to identify any missing values that may suggest problematic items. After it was determined that there were no missing values, the Mahalaobis distance was employed to identify outliers, which were assessed using the chi-square at  $p \leq 0.01$ , with the degrees of freedom (df) equating to the number of constructs (Weiner, Schinka & Velicer, 2003). Outliers may seriously alter statistical findings as they represent a marked deviation from the population (Hair, Black, Babin & Anderson, 2010). In this study, there were five constructs, so therefore, any case with a Mahalanobis distance greater than 20.515 (chi-square value for  $\alpha=0.001$  at 5 df) constitutes an outlier. Two outliers were detected and removed, which resulted in a total sample size of 489.

The sample comprised each of the seven age groups defined in the target population that ranged from 18 to 24 years of age. There were more female (55.4%) than male (44.6%) participants in the sample. The sample included participants from each of South Africa's nine provinces, with the majority

originating from Gauteng (61.1%), followed by those from Limpopo (12.7%) and Mpumalanga (6.5%). The sample included all of South Africa’s 11 official languages, with the majority indicating being Southern Sotho (25.8%), followed by those indicating being Zulu (21.3%) and Northern Sotho (10%). Table 1 represents a description of the sample participants.

**Table 1: Sample description**

Age	Percent	Gender	Percent	Province	Percent	Language	Percent
18	13.3	Female	55.4	Eastern Cape	4.5	Afrikaans	5.5
19	22.3	Male	44.6	Free State	5.5	English	4.1
20	19.4			Gauteng	61.1	Ndebele	0.8
21	20.9			Kwazulu-Natal	4.5	Xhosa	8.8
22	13.3			Limpopo	12.7	Zulu	21.3
23	6.3			Mpumalanga	6.5	Northern Sotho	10.0
24	4.5			North-West	0.8	Southern Sotho	25.8
				Northern Cape	3.7	Tswana	9.8
				Western Cape	0.6	Swati	3.5
						Venda	3.1
						Tsonga	7.4

**4.2. Descriptive statistics and reliability coefficients**

The descriptive statistics and reliability coefficients computed are outlined in Table 2.

**Table 2: Descriptive statistics and reliability coefficients**

Constructs	Means	Standard deviations	Cronbach alpha values
Price-quality fashion attitude	4.77	1.000	0.635
Status consumption	3.67	1.247	0.845
Material success	4.02	1.208	0.662
Material happiness	4.44	1.189	0.727
Subjective norms	4.87	1.000	0.846

With mean values above 3.5 recorded on a six-point Likert-type scale, as presented in Table 2, the evidence of the sample suggests that Generation Y university students do consider the opinions of others, such as their family, friends and peers (mean = 4.87), have a positive attitude towards using price as an indicator of quality fashion products (mean = 4.77), exhibit materialistic tendencies towards acquisition as the pursuit of happiness (mean = 4.44) and possession-defined success (mean = 4.02), as well as exhibit status consumption tendencies (mean = 3.67) towards fashion products. All the Cronbach alpha values exceeded the recommended level of 0.6, thereby indicating satisfactory internal-consistency reliability (Pallant, 2013).

### 4.3. Correlation

Pearson’s product-moment correlation coefficients were calculated and assessed to ascertain whether there were statistically significant relationships between status consumption, the materialistic dimensions of success and happiness, subjective norms and Generation Y students’ price-quality attitude towards fashion products. These correlation coefficients are given in Table 3.

**Table 3: Relationship between price-quality fashion attitude, status consumption, materialism and subjective norms**

Constructs	Price-quality fashion attitude	Status consumption	Material success	Material happiness	Subjective norms
Price-quality fashion attitude		0.404*	0.396*	0.350*	0.485*
Status consumption			0.537*	0.327*	0.337*
Material success				0.322*	0.374*
Material happiness					0.276*
Subjective norms					

\*Significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

The correlation coefficients reported in Table 3 provide a clear indication that there are statistically significant positive relationships between Generation Y students’ price-quality fashion attitude, their tendency to engage in status consumption when purchasing fashion products, material success and happiness tendencies and the influence subjective norms have on their fashion consumption. The strongest relationship occurred between status consumption and material success ( $r=0.537$ ,  $p\leq 0.01$ ), followed by price-quality fashion attitude and

subjective norms ( $r=0.485$ ,  $p \leq 0.01$ ), price-quality fashion attitude and status consumption ( $r=0.404$ ,  $p \leq 0.01$ ), price-quality fashion attitude and material success ( $r=0.396$ ,  $p \leq 0.01$ ), and material success and subjective norms ( $r=0.374$ ,  $p \leq 0.01$ ). The weakest correlation coefficient occurred between material happiness and subjective norms ( $r=0.276$ ,  $p \leq 0.01$ ). To determine the influence of status consumption, material success, material happiness and subjective norms on Generation Y students' attitudes towards using price as an indicator of quality for fashion products, regression analysis was conducted. The regression model summary and ANOVA results are given in Table 4.

**Table 4: Regression model summary and ANOVA results**

	<b>R</b>	<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>Adjusted R<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>F</b>	<b>p-value</b>
<b>Model 1</b>	0.582	0.338	0.333	61.83	0.000

As shown in Table 4, the significant F-ratio ( $p \leq 0.01$ ) suggests that the regression model predicts Generation Y students' price-quality attitude towards fashion products. The  $R^2$  value indicates that 33 percent of the variance in Generation Y students' attitude towards using price as an indicator of the quality of fashion products is explained by the four independent variables. However, as 67 percent of the variation is not explained by these four variables, clearly other factors also influence this generation's price-quality fashion attitudes. The next step was to evaluate the contribution of each antecedent's influence on attitude towards using price as an indicator of the quality of fashion products, as reported in Table 5.

**Table 5: Contribution of independent variables to influencing price-quality fashion attitude**

<b>Independent variables</b>	<b>Standardised coefficient</b>	<b>beta</b>	<b>t-values</b>	<b>p-values</b>
Status consumption	0.170		3.77	0.000
Material success	0.127		2.79	0.006
Material happiness	0.161		4.01	0.000
Subjective norms	0.335		8.19	0.000

The results reported in Table 5 suggest that subjective norms ( $\beta = 0.335$ ,  $0.000 \leq 0.01$ ), status consumption ( $\beta = 0.170$ ,  $0.000 \leq 0.01$ ), material happiness ( $\beta = 0.161$ ,  $0.000 \leq 0.01$ ) and material success ( $\beta = 0.127$ ,  $0.006 \leq 0.01$ ) all have a statistically significant positive influence on Generation Y students' price-quality fashion attitude. The largest beta coefficients were recorded on subjective norms

and status consumption, which means that these two antecedents make the strongest contribution to explaining Generation Y students' attitude towards using price as an indicator of quality for fashion products.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This study sought to determine the influence of status consumption, materialistic dimensions of success and happiness and subjective norms on Generation Y students' price-quality fashion attitude. The research instrument used in this study comprised 19 items drawn from the existing literature (Wang *et al.*, 2005; Eastman *et al.*, 1999; Richins & Dawson, 1992; Lichtenstein & Burton, 1989). Like previous studies, this study established that Generation Y students exhibit significant status consumption and materialistic tendencies (Bevan-Dye, Garnett & De Klerk, 2012), consider the opinions of others (Kim *et al.*, 2015) and have positive price-quality fashion attitudes (Hanzaee & Taghipourian, 2012). The findings of this study suggest a statistically significant relationship between South African Generation Y students' price-quality fashion attitude, their tendency to engage in status consumption when purchasing fashion products, material success and happiness tendencies and the influence subjective norms have on their fashion consumption. This suggests that Generation Y students' price-quality fashion attitude can be influenced by status consumption, materialistic tendency towards acquisition as the pursuit of happiness and possession-defined success and subjective norms. Specifically, subjective norms and status consumption were found to make the strongest contribution to explaining Generation Y students' price-quality fashion attitude. Marketers and fashion retailers should consider the influence that these antecedents have on price-quality fashion attitude among consumers, and adapt their marketing strategies accordingly. Although all four antecedents are significant positive predictors of Generation Y students' price-quality fashion attitude, the reasonable low  $R^2$  value suggests that other factors also influence their price-quality fashion attitude. Possible additional factors that may influence this target population's price-quality relationship include past experience, brand name, marketing activities, retail store image, celebrity endorsement and product placement. This suggests the need for future research pertaining to the influence of these antecedents on the Generation Y cohort's price-quality fashion attitudes.

Certain limitations in this study are identified. A non-probability convenience sampling was employed to survey the study's participants, which must be considered in interpreting the results. Furthermore, a single, cross-sectional approach was applied; hence, an opportunity exists for a longitudinal study to

determine the changes in South African Generation Y students' price-quality fashion attitudes.

Possible practical marketing implications include, pertaining to subjective norm, marketing campaigns, which can utilise the power and reach of social media to engage with consumers and promote their fashion products, as well as possible increasing positive word-of-mouth. Fashion marketers and retailers should adapt their advertising campaigns to appeal to Generation Y students' material happiness, material success and status consumption tendencies. Owing to Generation Y university students' positive attitude towards using price as a quality indicator towards fashion products, fashion marketers and retailers should aim their advertising campaigns to appeal to the trend-setting characteristics and fashion-conscious nature of the Generation Y members.

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