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GENDER DIFFERENCES IN BRAND LOYALTY TOWARDS FASHION BRANDS AMONG GENERATION Y STUDENTS

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—Abstract—

The purpose of this study was to determine African Generation Y male and female students' brand loyalty towards their preferred fashion brands. In South Africa, the African Generation Y cohort (individuals born between 1986 and 2005) represents an important market segment particularly to fashion marketers, given the size of this market segment and their spending on products such as clothing. The increase in the number of international fashion brands available in South Africa has given these consumers more brands from which to choose. This, of course, means that the competition among fashion retailers and brands is more intense than ever before. As a result, effective differentiation such as branding is increasingly essential in targeting consumers, including Generation Y consumers. In addition, fashion marketers and brand managers need to understand their target markets' preferences and how to earn brand loyalty. A self-administered questionnaire was used to collect the data from a convenience sample of 750 students registered at three South African public higher education institution campuses in Gauteng. The collected data were analysed using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis and multiple regression analysis. The findings suggest that for African Generation Y male students, brand awareness and brand association predict their brand loyalty, whereas with female students, perceived quality, brand awareness and brand association predict their brand loyalty. As such, marketers should focus on enhancing brand awareness and brand association of fashion clothing when targeting both male and female students, as well as on improving perceived quality when targeting female students.

Keywords: Fashion brands, brand loyalty, South Africa, African Generation Y students, gender

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JEL Classification: M30, M31

1. INTRODUCTION

With an annual revenue of up to US$2.5 trillion globally (Gunther, 2016), the fashion industry is considered one of the key players in the global economy (Singer, 2015). In 2016, the textiles, clothing, footwear and leather goods industry in South Africa recorded retail sales of approximately R172 billion, 10.5 percent more than the previous year (Stats SA, 2017). While this industry is one of the main contributors to the retail trade sales in South Africa, it does not come without challenges. South-African fashion retailers are experiencing more competition now than ever before, as a result of low-priced and low-quality clothing imports (Brand South Africa, 2014), and numerous international brand such H&M, Cotton On and ZARA, which have expanded into the South African market (Douglas, 2016). In addition to the increased number of clothing brands available to consumers, fashion retailers also have to face changes in consumers' lifestyles and shopping patterns (Kurtulus & Ertekin, 2015), including their demand for fast fashion trends (Comins, 2016). These challenges, along with consumers' spending that are under pressure (Mahlaka, 2017) due to limited household budgets (Moodley, 2016), emphasise the importance of effective differentiation (PRNewswire, 2015).

Branding is an important means of differentiating one's product from competing products (Sinha, Ahuja & Medury, 2011), and involves linking a specific logo or name to a product (Das, 2011). A fashion brand would be any apparel, accessory or cosmetic product with distinctive characteristics that differentiates it from competing products (Levy & Weitz, 2012). The value that the brand adds to a product in addition to its functional benefits is known as brand equity (Elliot, Rundle-Thiele & Waller, 2012), which is a vital concept to improve brand loyalty (Huang & Cai, 2015). This brand equity gives a brand a sustainable differentiated advantage (Neal & Strauss, 2008) and significantly influences consumers' decision-making (Creutz & Senning, 2006). Consumers generally respond differently to branded products compared to unbranded products (Maher, 2014). In addition, international brands are generally favoured over national brands due to the higher status associated with international brands (Lee, Kumar & Kim, 2010). This proves that brands are valuable intangible assets (Matzler, Grabner-Kräuter & Bidmon, 2006). However, effective brand management is essential for building or maintaining a strong brand (Kang, 2010).

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Brand management focusses on creating and maintaining a positive perception of the brand in the consumers' minds (Spindler, 2011), typically by making use of marketing activities (Nasrabadi & Zandi, 2015; Yoo, Donthu & Lee, 2000). More specifically, this process involves adapting a brand as changes in the market occurs (Mohammadian & Dehabadi, 2012) as well as leveraging existing brands or establishing new brands (Sandner, 2009). A strong brand conveys a perception of positive brand equity, hence greater value (Healey, 2008), which subsequently encourages brand loyalty among consumers (Funk & Levis, 2009; Schäfer, 2005). Given the competitive and economic benefits that brand loyalty provides to a company and its essential role in brand management, building strong brands and gaining consumers' loyalty are significant to marketing managers (Matzler et al., 2006).

The term brand loyalty refers to a consumer's insistence on a particular brand. This behaviour is seen when a consumer repeatedly purchases the same product (Lee et al., 2010). For a customer to become loyal to a brand, the consumer should be satisfied with the brand (Funk & Levis, 2009) as well as resistant to switching to alternative brands (Aaker & McLoughlin, 2010; Neal & Strauss, 2008). While brand loyal customers are considered a valuable asset (Aaker & McLoughlin, 2010), building and maintaining such loyalty is a challenge (Dibb, Simkin, Pride & Ferrell, 2012). This, of course, emphasises the importance of understanding how brand loyalty is created as well as the factors that influence and drive brand loyalty. According to Tong and Hawley (2009) and Yoo et al. (2000), a consumers' brand loyalty is typically driven by their brand awareness, perceived quality and brand associations.

Brand awareness represents a brand's presence in the consumers' minds. In terms of purchase decision-making, brand awareness is a requirement for a brand to be taken into consideration (Jooste, Strydom, Berndt & Du Plessis, 2012). This means that a consumer's awareness of a specific brand increases the probability of that brand being considered within decision-making (West, Ford & Ibrahim, 2010). That is, a consumer will not purchase a specific brand without first being aware of that brand (Malik, Ghafoor, Iqbal, Riaz, Hassan, Mustafa & Shahbaz, 2013). In order for a brand to register in a consumer's memory, a high level of exposure to that brand is required. Through repeated exposure to a brand, the consumer's familiarity with the brand increases, which, subsequently, creates brand awareness (Conradie, Roberts-Lombard & Klopper, 2014). This brand awareness is a precursor to the formation of brand associations, including

perceptions of brand quality (Buil, Chernatony & Martínez, 2013) and, ultimately, brand loyalty (Tong & Hawley, 2009).

Perceived quality signifies a consumer's perception or personal judgment about the overall quality of a brand compared to competing brands (Chattopadhyay, Shivani & Krishnan, 2009). In addition, perceived quality often indicates a consumer's perception of the product's benefits relative to its price. As such, perceptions of high quality translate into a brand being viewed as being both superior to and offering better value than other brands (Yoo et al., 2000). Aaker and McLoughlin (2010) warn that the perceived quality of a product or brand could be different from the actual quality, given that the consumers' quality perceptions are subject to their interpretation of cues such as product quality, advertising, price and other product users. Regardless of the fact that the consumers' quality perceptions may be different from the actual quality, their perception will have an influence on their brand associations (Tong & Hawley 2009), which then will influence their attitude towards the brand (Schäfer, 2005), as well as their brand selection (Yoo et al., 2000).

Brand association refers to any connection, direct or indirect, that a consumer attaches to a brand (Aaker & McLoughlin, 2010; West et al., 2010). These associations may be tangible attributes, human characteristics, specific people that are associated with the brand or even relate to the company's skills (Jooste et al., 2012). According to Ergin, Özdemir and Özsaçmacı (2006) and Jooste et al. (2012), brand associations will influence the consumer's attitudes or feelings towards a brand. As a result, brand associations play a profound role in consumers' decision-making (Chen, Yeh & Jheng, 2013). Yoo et al. (2000) advise that increased brand exposure leads to stronger brand associations. As a result, the brand would be differentiated more effectively from alternative brands (Ergin et al., 2006), which ultimately assists in building brand loyalty (Abdullah, 2012).

According to Jin and Koh (1999) and Lee (2011), male and female consumers go through different formation processes when developing loyalty towards clothing brands. This comes as no surprise given that gender is known to influence consumers' attitudes, perceptions, preferences and purchase decisions (Pandian, Varathani & Keerthivasan, 2012). For this reason, Pandian et al. (2012) indicate that gender is a valuable variable for understanding consumer behaviour. In terms of brand awareness and association, Bae and Miller (2009) report that female college students are more brand aware than males, specifically regarding sports apparel. Likewise, Yasin (2009) found that in comparison to male consumers,

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female consumers tend to be more brand aware and more prone to seek out well-known brands. In line with these findings, Chen et al. (2008) found that Taiwanese female consumers form a greater number of brand associations than males. Ünal and Ercis, (2008) explain that because female consumers are often concerned about buying new and trendy fashion products, they tend to purchase different brands from various stores in order to obtain the latest trends. Conversely, male consumers are less likely to purchase products that are different to those that they are familiar with. With regard to perceived quality, Shabbir and Safwan (2014) found that both male and female Pakistani consumers are quality conscious when it comes to apparel. However, in a study conducted by Bae and Miller (2009), female college students were found to be more quality conscious than males. Ünal and Ercis (2008) explain that female consumers will go to great lengths to obtain high quality products, whereas for male consumers while it is important to have attractive styles and quality products, they will not make extensive efforts to find high quality products.

The Generation Y cohort (individuals born between 1986 and 2005) (Markert, 2004), also known as millennials, is considered the largest consumer segment in the world (Foscht, Schloffer, Maloles & Chia, 2009). In South Africa, the Generation Y cohort accounted for 37 percent of the total South African population 2016, with 84 percent of this generation cohort comprising African individuals (Stats SA, 2016), making the African Generation Y market segment a particularly valuable target market in South Africa. Those pursuing a university education are likely to be especially important to marketers in that a tertiary qualification is generally associated with a higher future earning potential (Bevan-Dye, Dhurup & Surujlal, 2009) and, consequently, higher future disposable income and aggregate spending (Bevan-Dye, 2015). The student population in South Africa consist of 985 212 students (Student Village, 2017), which typically range between the ages of 18 and 24 years (Tan, Teoh, Tan, Teo & Tan, 2013). These South African students spend more than the average South African consumer, with premium clothing being one of the product categories that accounts for most of Generation Y consumers' high value expenditure (Student Village, 2017). This shows that for Generation Y consumers, the emphasis is no longer placed on merely purchasing a clothing product but rather on purchasing a brand name (Fernandez & Lean, 2009). Therefore, it is no surprise that these consumers are quality (McDevitt, 2013) and brand conscious (Hanzaee & Aghasibeig, 2008) and, as a result, have preferred clothing brands that they are attached and loyal to (Fernandez, 2009). In light of this, it is anticipated that most

of the brand loyal Generation Y consumers will remain loyal to the brands that they currently purchase (Schawbel, 2015). Therefore, it is essential to earn their loyalty as early as possible. Given the important role gender is believed to play in understanding apparel brand selection behaviour, the purpose of this study was to determine African Generation Y male and female students' brand loyalty towards their preferred fashion brands.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The target population used in this study was defined as full-time undergraduate African Generation Y students aged between 18 and 24 years. Non-probability judgement sampling was used to select three higher education institution campuses in the Gauteng province to ensure that the sample included students from a traditional university, a university of technology and a comprehensive university. The Gauteng province was selected as it has the largest share of the South African student population (DHET, 2016). A single cross-sectional non-probability convenience sample of 750 students was selected to be part of the main study. The convenience sampling method was employed, given that the selection of sample elements is depended on the lecturers' willingness to allow their students to participate in the study. In order to determine African Generation Y male and female students' brand equity perceptions of their preferred clothing brand, a scale in accordance with the literature pertaining to the brand equity dimensions was used. A self-administered structured questionnaire that included a cover letter explaining the purpose of the study, and a Section A and B was used to collect the required data for this study. Section A included questions requesting the participants' demographic information. Section B was designed to measure the participants' brand equity perceptions and included 17 items harvested from the scales of Gil, Andrés, and Salinas (2007), Tong and Hawley (2009) and Yoo et al. (2000). The scale items were divided into four constructs, namely brand loyalty (five items), brand awareness (four items), perceived quality (four items) and brand association (four items). The scaled responses were measured on a six-point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (6).

Prior to embarking on the main study, the questionnaire was piloted to assess the internal-consistency reliability of the scale items. A convenience sample of 41 participants took part in the pilot study. The brand equity perceptions scale returned a Cronbach alpha value of 0.873, which exceeds the recommended level of 0.70 (Field, 2009), suggesting internal consistency reliability. Following the pilot study, the questionnaire was administered to the sample of the main study.

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The study was approved by the Ethical Committee of the North-West University (Vaal Campus) and the questionnaire obtained an ethics clearance number (ethics clearance number: ECONIT-ECON-2014-017). Lecturers at the three higher education institution campuses were contacted and asked to distribute the questionnaires to their students during class time. The ethics clearance certificate and a copy of the questionnaire were shown to the participating lecturers. Once consent was given, the questionnaire was distributed to the students for voluntary completion during a single class period. The data were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), Version 23.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Of the 750 questionnaires distributed, 625 questionnaires were usable. As shown in Table 1, the sample of this study comprised more female participants than males. Concerning the higher education institutions, the largest portion of the sample came from a traditional university. Furthermore, the majority of the participants were 20 years of age, followed by those who indicated being 21 years of age.

Table 1: Sample description

Gender	Percent (%)	Institution	Percent (%)	Age	Percent (%)
Male	47%	Traditional University	43%	18	17%
Female	53%	University of Technology	32%	19	17%
		Comprehensive University	25%	20	25%
				21	20%
				22	11%
				23	8%
				24	3%

The Cronbach alpha and the average inter-item correlation coefficients were computed for each brand equity dimension in order to assess the internal-consistency reliability of the measurement instrument. The Cronbach alpha values of the individual dimensions ranged between 0.773 and 0.857, exceeding the recommended level of 0.70 (Field, 2009), thereby indicating acceptable internal-consistency reliability.

The descriptive statistics were calculated, followed by the calculation of the Pearson's Product-Moment correlation to determine the relationship between

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brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality and brand association. The means, standard deviations and correlation coefficients are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics and Correlation coefficients

Constructs	Mean	Standard deviation	Brand loyalty	Brand awareness	Perceived quality	Brand association
Brand loyalty	4.31	1.04	1			
Brand awareness	5.13	0.78	0.380*	1		
Perceived quality	5.05	0.89	0.320*	0.434*	1	
Brand association	4.78	0.78	0.421*	0.479*	0.441*	1

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

The means of all four brand equity dimensions were above 3.5, indicating that the combined sample of male and female African Generation Y students are brand aware, have high quality perceptions of branded clothing, perceive their preferred clothing brand to be clearly differentiated from competing brands and are brand loyal to their preferred clothing brand. As indicated in Table 2, there are statistically significant positive relationships between all four brand equity dimensions, ranging between ($r=0.320$; $p<0.01$) and ($r=0.479$; $p<0.01$).

Subsequent to the correlation analysis, regression analysis was conducted to determine the influence of African Generation Y male and female students' brand awareness, perceived quality and brand association on their brand loyalty. The regression model summary and ANOVA results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Regression model summary and ANOVA results

	R	R^2	Adjusted R2	F	p-values
Model 1 (Brand loyalty among males)	0.475	0.226	0.218	27.973	**0.000**
Model 2 (Brand loyalty among females)	0.480	0.230	0.223	32.837	**0.000**

As is evident in Table 3, the significant F-ratios ($p \leq 0.01$) suggest that Regression Model 1 predicts African Generation Y males' brand loyalty towards their preferred clothing brand and Regression Model 2 predicts African Generation Y females' brand loyalty towards their preferred clothing brand. The R^2 values of Models 1 and 2 indicate that almost 23 percent of the variance in African Generation Y male students' brand loyalty towards their preferred clothing brand

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(Model 1) and 23 percent of the variance in African Generation Y female students' brand loyalty towards their preferred clothing brand (Model 2) is explained by the three independent variables. However, since 77 percent of the variation in Model 1 and Model 2 is not explained by these three dimensions, it is clear that other factors influence African Generation Y male and female students' brand loyalty towards their preferred clothing brand.

The next step after performing the regression analysis is to determine how much each dimension contributes toward the prediction of brand loyalty towards clothing brands, as reported on in Table 4.

Table 4: Contribution of independent variables to predict brand loyalty among male and female students

	Males			**Females**		
Independent variables	**Standardised beta coefficient**	**t-values**	**p-values**	**Standardised beta coefficient**	**t-values**	**p-values**
Brand awareness	0.160	2.464	**0.014**	0.225	4.060	**0.000**
Perceived quality	0.098	1.502	0.134	0.118	2.206	**0.028**
Brand association	0.301	4.569	**0.000**	0.267	4.834	**0.000**

The results shown in Table 4, suggest that brand awareness ($\beta = 0.160$, $0.014 < 0.05$) and brand association ($\beta = 0.301$, $0.000 < 0.05$) have a statistically significant positive influence on African Generation Y male students' brand loyalty towards their preferred clothing brand. The largest beta coefficient was recorded on brand association, which means that brand association makes the strongest contribution to explain African Generation Y male students' brand loyalty towards their preferred clothing brand.

For African Generation Y female students, the findings suggest that brand awareness ($\beta = 0.225$, $0.000 < 0.05$), perceived quality ($\beta = 0.118$, $0.028 < 0.05$) and brand association ($\beta = 0.267$, $0.000 < 0.05$) have a statistically significant positive influence on their brand loyalty towards their preferred clothing brand. Brand awareness and brand association had the largest beta coefficients, therefore make the strongest contribution to explaining African Generation Y female students' brand loyalty towards their preferred clothing brand.

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4. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Brands and brand management are becoming more important for all fashion brands and retailers, especially since effective differentiation from competitors is imperative to survive in the highly competitive fashion industry. This challenge combined with the limited budgets of most South African households, highlights the importance of earning consumers' loyalty as early as possible. By understanding the factors that drives consumer loyalty towards fashion brands, brand managers and marketers are in a better position to implement strategies that are more effective in terms of earning customers' loyalty. The findings of this study suggest that brand awareness and brand association have a statistically significant positive influence on African Generation Y male students' brand loyalty towards fashion brands, with brand association being the largest contributor towards male students' brand loyalty. Conversely, African Generation Y female students' brand loyalty towards fashion brands is significantly influenced by all three of the brand loyalty drivers, namely brand awareness, perceived quality and brand association, with brand association also being the strongest driver of female students' brand loyalty.

The significant influence of brand awareness and brand association on both African Generation Y male and female consumers' brand loyalty towards fashion brands suggest that these consumers purchase and become loyal to fashion brands that they are highly aware of and have strong brand associations with. In order to enhance brand loyalty, marketers and brand managers should increase consumers' awareness of the brand and strengthen the brand associations. As such, it is recommended that marketers and brand managers, targeting African Generation Y consumers, align their marketing strategies to create as much exposure to the brand as possible. In addition, it is advised that marketers and brand mangers engage more effectively with their customers and create a better brand experience for their customers by ensuring positive interactions with the products, in stores and on social media in order to link the desired feelings and perceptions to the brand. Although perceived quality did not have a significant positive influence on the brand loyalty of African Generation Y male students, it does not necessarily mean that quality is not important to these consumers. Quality remains important to African Generation Y males, however, compared to their female counterparts, they will not make extensive efforts to find high quality products or brands. Moreover, for male consumers, other factors such as the price of the brand may be a more important deciding factor than quality, especially with the South-African

household budgets being limited. For African Generation Y female consumers, perceived quality have a significant positive influence on their brand loyalty towards fashion brands. This suggests that African Generation Y female consumers will go through extensive efforts to find high quality products and brands, which subsequently, could lead to brand loyalty. Therefore, marketers and brand managers wishing to target female African Generation Y consumers should consider focusing on providing quality products and enhancing the quality features of the product. Moreover, marketers and brand managers should increase the quality appeal of their brand in their marketing communications.

5. LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Despite the contribution of this study, some limitations can be identified, which provide opportunities for future research. A single cross-sectional approach was followed in this study. By following a longitudinal approach, the changes in African Generation Y students' brand loyalty could be determined. Furthermore, this study focused on African Generation Y consumers in Gauteng, South Africa. As a result, the opportunity exists to conduct a comparative study across South Africa as well as across various countries. The study could also be extended to other generational cohorts, which will provide a basis for comparisons. Lastly, the findings of the study revealed that 77 percent of the variance in African Generation Y students' brand loyalty towards their preferred clothing brand is not explained by brand awareness, perceived quality and brand associations. Consequently, the opportunity exists to determine the other factors that influence African Generation Y students' brand loyalty towards their preferred clothing brand.

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