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Perceptions of branding in the clothing industry: a survey among black adolescents

ABSTRACT

Young Black adolescents can no longer be ignored as an important and strategic market segment in the South African clothing industry. Yet, very little research has been undertaken in the academic domain on their perceptions and attitudes on fashion in general and certain clothing items in particular. Psychological aspects influencing the buying behaviour of young male and female Black consumers have not been explored in great depth.

The focus of this article was young Black consumers' perceptions of branded versus unbranded clothes. The results of this exploratory study indicated that (i) both male and female Black adolescents share positive perceptions towards branded clothes; (ii) although unbranded items were perceived as less favourable, their worth was not denied; and (iii) when it comes to possible differences in the two genders' perceptions of designer labels versus non-designer labels, they speak with one voice: designer labels are much preferred.

The article concludes with recommendations to marketers in the South African clothing industry as well as some comments on future research on this increasingly important topic.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Within the current marketing environment, the competition between products and services is becoming increasingly tough. Each producer of goods and services attempts to obtain a share of the market potential by making consumers believe that they have the answer to all their personal needs and desires.

Branding was introduced to differentiate homogenous products such as clothing. Clothing items (products) can now be bought according to the psychological elements that they represent and not only for their physical characteristics and need-satisfying properties (O' Cass, 2000:546). Due to this psychological nature of purchasing, which is increasingly becoming a part of consumer behaviour, it is crucial that manufacturers in the clothing industry become familiar with the perceptions and attitudes of the consumer.

In South Africa, however, a large part of society has remained neglected in the marketing processes, while traditional predominantly white markets have become saturated. In not attending to the Black community, a considerable number of profitable opportunities have been lost. Little has been written in the past exploring the Black consumer as a lucrative spender, giving rise to sparse information on consumer patterns, perceptual motivation and other market and peer influences. To enable South African marketers to face future challenges and to be fully focused marketing successes, information on particularly the Black consumers and their purchasing patterns has become crucial.

More than twenty years ago, Gottschalk (1980:6-7) attempted to answer the pressing question of why there is such a great lack of research on Black communities in South Africa. He was of the opinion that:

- In the past, the fear of divulging information led to the unwillingness of Black consumers to participate in research surveys.
- Ethical issues surrounding the "correct" answering of questions also led to respondents giving answers they thought the researcher would want to hear.
- Because of the diversity of the Black community, the sampling could not possibly represent the views of all the different cultural groups.

This clearly illustrates the dilemma of research to adequately collect information sought from Black consumers in South Africa. However, the gauging of perceptions regarding products in the commercial world, in which all businesses function, could prove even more problematic.

The purpose of this article is to relay the findings of an exploratory study conducted to determine the perceptions of Black adolescents regarding branding in the clothing industry.

2. DEFINING THE MAIN CONSTRUCT AND KEY CONCEPTS

A *construct* is an image or idea specifically invented for a given research and/or theory-building purpose, and constructs are built by combining simpler concepts, especially when the idea or image intended for conveyance is not subject to observation (Cooper & Schindler, 2001:41).

On the contrary, a *concept* is formally defined by Cooper and Schindler (2001:39) as a bundle of meanings or characteristics associated with certain events, conditions, situations, etc.

Within the context of this study, consumer behaviour was regarded as the main construct. Branding, clothing (the fashion industry), the Black consumer and their consumer behaviour, perceptions and the adolescent were regarded as the relevant concepts used in this study.

To introduce the main construct of consumer behaviour and the key concepts used, some definitions should be discussed:

2.1 Consumer behaviour

Consumer behaviour is described as the behaviour patterns of decision-making units (individual and families) that are directly involved in the acquisition and usage of products and services that satisfy specific needs (Van Der Walt, Strydom, Marx & Jooste, 1996:76). This includes the decision-making processes that precede these behavioural patterns.

2.2 Branding

Branding is originally an identifier, but technically a trademark. According to the UK Trademarks Act of 1994, a brand is any sign capable of being represented graphically, which is capable of distinguishing goods or services of one undertaking from those of another undertaking (Robertson, 2000:18). Branding is more than just a naming *per se* or the creation of an external indication that a product or service has received an organisation's imprint or mark (Kapferer, 1995:15). Harris (1995:2) adds to the above-mentioned statements by posing that: "the word brand stands as a surrogate for reputation thus representing the organisation that gave it its life". It is crucial to recognise that brand names are not just mere names, terms, symbols and designs and that they are elements with attributes specifically designed to single out products and services for the consumer. It can therefore be concluded that brands create trust, take

away uncertainty, identify products and services, and are more of a psychological assurance than a tangible item.

2.3 The clothing industry

The clothing industry is classifiable as a subdivision of the larger fashion industry within a business context. Fashion industry in a broad context is used to define all the manufacturing processes involved in making accessories, clothing, footwear, active wear, fashion apparel and bags (Marx, Van Rooyen, Bosch & Reynders, 1998:282).

This study acknowledges the existence of diverse manufacturing disciplines within the broader fashion industry, but in the interest of simplifying the research process, focus was placed exclusively on clothing.

2.4 Perceptions

Noesjirwan and Crawford (1982:155) are of the opinion that clothing is likely to form an integral part in the enactment of social encounters and it is also seen as a very important channel of non-verbal communication. Clothing is therefore used as a code, which allows messages to be created and understood selectively (Auty & Elliott, 1998:109). They state further that perceptions of brand users have been found to differ for identical brands within a product category.

Within the context of this study, perceptions regarding branded clothing were tested. Therefore the need for information about the symbolic nature of clothing is crucial to demonstrating how perceptions are formed and interpreted in society.

2.5 Black consumer behaviour

In the context of this research, Black consumer behaviour is discussed on a secondary level in order to establish a concrete foundation for the concept of "adolescent". The definition addressing consumer behaviour is relevant and applicable to this consumer group.

2.6 Adolescent

Adolescents are usually defined as young people in the broad category of 13-20 years of age. Through the ages, this particular age group has been labelled as one of the most difficult and traumatic stages in the human cycle of development (Grinstein & Sterba, 1957:278). Although physical changes may occur rapidly, the emotional

development of the individual tends to be slower. This imbalance within one individual is to a large extent responsible for a great deal of trauma and confusion, necessitating the search for stability in the external existence. This fact is pertinent in adolescents' perceptions and their buying behaviour of branded clothing.

3. PROBLEMSTATEMENT: CHALLENGES NECESSITATING THE RESEARCH

The introduction addressed some of the main concerns and issues that have a bearing and an impact on this research. These concerns and issues are:

- Large-scale competition between producers within the clothing industry, in particular, necessitates accurate, current and reliable information on which to base all managerial decision-making. Within the current South African market and information environment, there is a lack of information meeting the above criteria. If information on the Black consumer market is procured, it cannot always be considered contemporary. This inhibits thorough decision-making.
- There is a sensitive nature of information procurement within the Black community. As described in the introduction, Gottschalk (1980) supplied possible solutions to the difficulty researchers could encounter while researching the Black community. Due to South Africa's turbulent political history, many individuals within the larger population are potentially still not comfortable with the process of supplying information for research purposes. This causes difficulties in obtaining information and perpetuates the lack of crucial research data for decision-making.
- The nature of the study warrants investigation. Within the research fraternity, perception testing has for very long been the almost exclusive domain of psychological and sociological studies. Business researchers tended to shy away from psychological types of measurement due to its difficult and fickle nature. It is however important that advertisers and brand managers become aware of perceptions carried by current and potential consumers of products and services. Knowledge in this regard engenders better decision-making, market segmentation and a superior quality of service delivery and customer relationships.
- It can lastly be remarked that Black adolescents are not only an under-investigated market segment, but definitely also a segment that can no longer be ignored. These individuals are increasingly being exposed to new media and better levels of education than their predecessors. This propels them into the unique position of educators and trendsetters within their community. Better opportunities for Black young people see them gaining access to immense spending power as their professional careers mature. From a marketing perspective, this necessitates extensive and relevant knowledge of the Black adolescent as a consumer. Potential influences of the community and peer groups can also not be ignored in this quest for knowledge on the young Black consumer as these externalities could have major influential powers on their perceptions and decision-making in the buying of clothes.

4. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The primary research objective of the study was to determine whether the branding of clothes (branded versus non-branded clothes) influenced the perceptions of the Black adolescent consumers regarding clothing items.

The secondary objectives were:

- To establish the influence of peers on the purchasing behaviour of the Black adolescent consumer segment where branded clothing is concerned.
- To determine whether a significant difference existed between the perceptions of the Black adolescent consumer segment regarding branded and unbranded clothing.
- To determine whether a significant difference existed between the perceptions of male and female Black adolescent consumers regarding branded clothing.
- To determine whether male and female respondents assigned values differently to the branded and unbranded clothing attributes tested.
- To establish whether the self-image of the respondent influenced the perceptions of branded clothing.

5. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

5.1 Questionnaire design

A self-administered questionnaire was used. The questionnaire consisted of four sections and 52 individual statements and/or questions. Questions and statements were set in English only and the language was simplified, taking into consideration the fact that all the respondents were young second-language English speakers. The process of setting the questionnaire and the formulation of statements was initiated through the reading of articles on branding and perceptions regarding branding as well as an exploratory study on this specific topic undertaken by Kola (2000). The format of the questionnaire and the statements was designed to encourage ease of usage.

5.2 Sampling design and data collection

A non-probability sampling design (convenience sample) was used to draw the sample. Data was collected at Ed U College, a private college responsible for the education of students from Grades 8 – 12, in Pretoria. The questionnaires were disseminated among 16 - to 19-year-old learners. Firstly, the objective of the study was explained to the respondents. Thereafter, the researcher and one fieldworker discussed the process of the questionnaire completion. Opportunity was given to clarify any possible problems or questions regarding the process of completing of the questionnaires. After completion, all the questionnaires were personally distributed and collected by the researcher.

5.3 Data processing

Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation), cross-tabulation, reliability (Cronbach Alpha coefficient) and inferential statistics (t-tests for significant differences at a 95% confidence level) were executed by using CSS Statistica computer software.

6. RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

The following hypotheses were formulated and tested:

- H1: A significant difference exists between the perceptions of boys and girls (males and females) regarding branded clothing.
- H2: A significant difference exists between the perceptions of branded clothing versus unbranded clothing among Black adolescents.
- H3: A significant difference exists between the perceptions of boys and girls (males and females) regarding branded jeans on the attributes tested.
- H4: A significant difference exists between the perceptions of boys and girls (males and females) regarding unbranded jeans on the attributes tested.

7. RESULTS

A total of 142 questionnaires was handed out at Ed U College and a sample of 110 was realised. The remaining 32 questionnaires were discarded for one of the following reasons:

- Non-compliance with the set age parameters.
- Incorrect completion of questionnaire.
- Too many fields of data missing.

7.1 Section A

This section included ten statements on perceptions regarding branded clothing by means of a five-point Likert scale. The questions posed were adapted from the work of O' Cass (2000:560) where a study was conducted investigating consumer involvement in the processes of product consumption, purchase decision involvement, advertising involvement and involvement with the product itself.

Table 1 depicts mean scores and standard deviations on perceptions regarding branded clothing.

Statements	* Mean	Standard deviation
A1: I buy branded clothes because my friends wear branded clothes	1.981	1.157
A2: Having branded clothes is very important to me	3.131	1.346
A3: Branded clothes create my identity: it is part of who I am.	2.914	1.489
A4: In my culture, people who wear branded clothes are seen as successful, rich and high class	3.168	1.422
A5: Price is not important when I buy branded clothes (I don't mind paying a lot of money for it)	2.893	1.371
A6: Buying branded clothing is a habit: I do not need to think a lot before buying a branded item	2.612	1.278
A7: I think branded clothes are of very high quality	4.075	1.167
A8: It is very important to me what others think of me	2.697	1.453
A9: I identify strongly with advertising about branded clothes: I want to be like the people in the advert	2.664	1.381
A10: Wearing branded clothing makes me feel good about myself	3.743	1.350

* = Measurement was done on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 = strongly disagree with the statement and 5 = strongly agree with the statement.

Table 1: Perceptions regarding branded clothing

It can be deduced from Table 1 that the *highest degree of agreement* was for statement A7 with a mean score of 4.075, followed by statements A10 (3.743) and A4 (3.168). The *lowest degree of agreement* with a mean score of 1.981 was achieved by statement A1.

7.2 Section B

In this section, branded and unbranded jeans were compared by means of a *semantic differential scale*. Attributes addressed in this particular questionnaire were adapted from the work of Auty and Elliott (1998:116) as well as Evans (1989:7-16).

Table 2 depicts the mean scores and standard deviations for branded jeans versus unbranded jeans.

Semantic Differential variable	Branded		Unbranded	
	* Mean	Standard deviation	* Mean	Standard deviation
B1: Unknown / Known	6.421	1.447	3.055	2.155
B2: Cheap / Expensive	6.385	1.407	2.273	1.827
B3: Low quality / High quality	6.138	1.481	3.173	1.929
B4: Not stylish / Stylish	6.145	1.305	4.055	2.036
B5: Poor image / Good image	5.869	1.548	4.056	1.889
B6: Not Fashionable / Fashionable	6.250	1.529	3.898	2.100
B7: Not desirable / Desirable	5.980	1.393	3.734	1.947
B8: Uncomfortable / Comfortable	5.870	1.454	4.380	2.099
B9: Group / Individual	4.676	2.250	3.981	2.122
B10: Not sexy / Sexy	5.722	1.685	4.245	1.994

* = Measurement was done on a 7-point Likert scale

Table 2: Branded jeans versus unbranded jeans

It can be deduced collectively from Table 2 that the branded mean scores and standard deviations are indicative of a positive feeling towards branded jeans. On the contrary, the unbranded mean scores and standard deviations are indicative of a less positive feeling towards unbranded jeans.

7.3 Section C

In this section, branded clothing and self-image were measured by means of a dichotomous scale with only true or false options. Snyder's revised self-monitoring scale in Snyder (1974) and in Snyder and Gangestad (1986) was used and the language was adapted to simplify the response process for second- language respondents of this age group. This test was included in this research study because it had been utilised with great success in the past and due to its simplistic nature and ease of use. No problems or questions were encountered in Section C during the pre-testing phase of the questionnaire, but when the reliability of this section was tested, it did not yield a Chronbach Alpha coefficient > 0.7.

There could potentially be many motivations behind the failure of the Snyder and Gangestad (1986) scale to yield satisfactory and reliable results in the context of this research. Owen (1995:85) states that since the early measurements of human personality and potential it became apparent that these measurements were most definitely class and culture bound. He states further that any tests measuring complex processes such as intelligence and personality carry levels of bias that will be prejudicial against some cultural groupings.

This result renders Section C of the measurement instrument unreliable and it was discarded for any further statistical processing.

7.4 Section D

Section D comprised demographic variables of relevance within the context of the study. The following results can be reported:

- 44% male and 56% female; and
- 63.64% (70/110) of the respondents indicated that their mother tongue was Setswana (39/110) and Sepedi (31/110). This could be attributed to the fact that the majority of the learners attending the school live in either the Gauteng or Mpumalanga Province. *This was handled with great caution during the interpretation of the results.*

Table 3 indicates the percentages of buying groups for branded clothing.

Branded clothing per buying group	Percentage
Parents	65%
Family	2%
Myself	4%
Myself and parents/family	29%
Other	0%
TOTAL	100%

Table 3: Percentage of branded clothing per buying group

It is evident from Table 3 that parents are highly (*in 65% of all cases*) involved when branded clothing is bought.

7.5 Reliability

Reliability tests were employed on the statements in Sections A and B by means of the Cronbach Alpha coefficient. These reliability tests yielded the following results:

- A Cronbach Alpha coefficient of 0.791 was yielded for Section A.
- Cronbach Alpha coefficients of 0.869 and 0.849 were yielded for the branded and unbranded jeans respectively for Section B.

7.6 Hypotheses testing

All the tests were executed at a 95% confidence level and the decision rule that a p-value 0.05 is indicative of a significant difference in mean scores was applied. With the application of the above-mentioned decision rule the hypotheses were accepted or rejected as follows:

- No significant difference existed between the perceptions of boys and girls regarding branded clothing. Therefore, H1 was *rejected*.
- Significant differences existed between the perceptions of branded clothing versus unbranded clothing among Black adolescents. Therefore, H2 was *accepted*.
- No significant difference existed between the perceptions of males and females regarding branded jeans on the attributes tested. Therefore, H3 was *rejected*.
- No significant difference existed between the perceptions of males and females regarding unbranded jeans. Therefore, H4 was *rejected*.

8. CONCLUSION

The findings of the empirical study can be regarded as valid and reliable, based on the research results. Based on the validity and the reliability of this study, the following major conclusions are drawn:

- General perceptions regarding branded clothing are positive and flourishing among the Black adolescent market. Adolescent males and females share these positive perceptions regarding branded clothing.
- Unbranded clothing was perceived relatively less positive than the branded garments, but these items are still not perceived unfavourably to such an extent that adolescents will refrain from realising their worth.
- Perceptual differences between the two genders did not present significant differences.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE CLOTHING INDUSTRY

Although boys and girls react very similarly to the tested elements regarding branded and unbranded clothing in this study, the advertising industry should not make the error of regarding them as a single consumer segment. Adolescent boys and girls consider different elements of branded clothing to be important and have individual perceptions of these clothing items. It is therefore important that the industry embraces these unique groups and creates marketing strategies that will appeal to the males and females on an individual level.

Due to the great influence of idols, trend-setters and opinion leaders in the Black community and particularly among Black adolescents, the careful usage of these groups to endorse brands as part of a communication and marketing strategy could prove extremely beneficial. In making a prominent peer or opinion leader the spokesperson for the brand, credibility is increased and an aspirational need is created among the adolescent group.

Frequent opinion measurements could be greatly beneficial in measuring the perceptions of this consumer group. Clothing is one of the consumer items that is very vulnerable to fashion trends and influences, and it is therefore important to remain in constant contact with the consumer market and test whether their perceptions of the brand(s) has changed.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Recommendations for future research are divided into recommendations based on the literature review and recommendations based on the empirical research.

10.1 Recommendations based on the literature review

More literature is needed in South Africa on the brand perceptions across various race and cultural groups.

10.2 Recommendations based on the empirical research

Firstly, to design local measurement instruments that are able to undertake an accurate assessment of psychological aspects such as perceptions in the clothing industry.

Secondly, to do a comparative study among White adolescents of the same age group to determine possible similarities and/or differences in their perceptions of branded and unbranded clothing items.

Thirdly, to duplicate this study among a representative sample of both genders that will represent all African mother tongues equally.

Fourthly, to conduct qualitative research that could be valuable to probe respondents and to gain qualitative perceptual inputs on additional dimensions regarding self-image and the influence thereof on consumer behaviour in the fashion and clothing industries.

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