

Impact of Branding on Gen Y's Choice of Clothing

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the impact of branding on Gen Y's choice of clothing as it is hypothesised that they are brand conscious. This research looks specifically at college students aged between 18-24 years old located in the Klang Valley. This study aims to determine if this group of Gen Y are brand conscious in their choice of clothing. Survey questionnaires were developed to obtain quantitative data from one hundred respondents for statistical analysis and personal interviews were conducted on eight interviewees for qualitative implications. The findings suggest that Gen Y are brand conscious as the right choice of clothing helps them create an image and identity for themselves. Peer influence plays a crucial role in their choice of brands as it aids in their socialisation process. In addition, advertising is an important variable in conferring brand values and establishing an image for the brand. Celebrity endorsements have a huge impact on branded clothing too as they promote certain attributes like image, quality and status. The results of this study are, however, limited as it was conducted within a single segment. In addition, the research does not follow the individuals over time to see how brand choices change. The researcher recommends that to retain Gen Y's loyalty, brand managers need to build an emotional attachment to make the brand special and bring lasting competitive advantage. Additionally, advertising should be used to not only create awareness but influence brand image and preference. A buzz should be created through celebrity endorsement to reach out to this segment. Gen Y establishes their brand preferences between the ages of 15 and 25 and therefore targeting this consumer group is rewarding because with careful promotions marketers can create a pool of brand loyal customers for the future. However, young people do not like being manipulated by marketers, have short attention spans and are media-savvy in choosing what messages they wish to receive. Therefore, marketers of branded clothing need to act ethically as brands should hold up a window, not a mirror, and let youth understand the brand and decide for themselves.

Keywords: Advertising, brand, celebrity endorsement, clothing, Gen Y, peer influence

1. INTRODUCTION

Branding is a powerful tool in marketing today. A brand is a name, phrase, design, symbol, or combination of these used to identify a product and distinguish it from those of its competitors (Kotler *et al.*, 2005). Brands give a product an identity, a value and a meaning. To understand the full potential of branding to drive growth, marketers need to identify the

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sources of brand meaning, understand brand meaning, and manage brand meaning in a changing environment (Jevons *et al.*, 2005).

Marketers view Gen Y who is born between 1977 and 1994 as part of this changing environment. Most consumer companies target this segment as they are very market savvy when it comes to brands. They are viewed “as a generation with very high buying power” as they have annual incomes totaling USD211 billion and spend USD39 billion per year (Nowak *et al.*, 2006: 316).

In addition, Nowak *et al.*, (2006) reveal that the Gen Y population is much larger than their previous generation, the Gen X’ers. They affirm that the Gen Y market segment in the USA alone is estimated to be 46 million and is considered the largest consumer group in American history. The International Data Base of U.S. Census Bureau (2007) indicated that in 2005, out of a total population of approximately 24 million people in Malaysia, the Gen Y population stood at about 9 million. This represented almost 38% of the total population of Malaysia. The Census Bureau expects the Malaysian population to grow to about 33 million in 2025 and the Gen Y population to increase to 11 million. This will represent nearly 33% of the total population in 2025. Hence, Gen Y will be a lucrative and profitable target segment for Malaysian marketers as they have an enormous drive to spend and have the financial ability to satisfy their wants and desires.

Taylor and Cosenza (2002: 393) highlight that Gen Y who are children of baby boomers spend family money, and have the pester power to influence the spending habits of their parents. They add that Gen Y are “future consumers” that are “vital to the continuing health of marketing” as they “establish their brand preferences between the ages of 15 and 25”. They further state that this large and growing segment has an impact on business as they “love to shop” especially for clothing. Bakewell *et al.* (2006: 170) maintain that Gen Y “have unprecedented purchasing power of which two-thirds goes on clothing.”

As such, this study will look at the impact of branding on Gen Y’s choice of clothing. The study will specifically look at college students located in the Klang Valley who are aged between 18 – 24 years old as the majority of college-going students in Malaysia fall under this age group. It is hypothesised that Gen Y are brand conscious. Therefore, this study will aim to determine if Gen Y are brand conscious in their choice of clothing. The buying behaviour of Gen Y will be examined to determine if they are brand conscious as this will aid marketers identify the core associations evoked by a purchase choice and determine the formation of associations with branded clothing, if any.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Profile of Gen Y Consumers

Gen Y individuals were raised in a more nurturing environment during economic prosperity and are regarded as optimistic and entrepreneurial. However, they have greater diversity than any other lifestyle group and are therefore regarded by marketers as an elusive group that is difficult to reach. In line with this, Martin and Turley (2004: 464) describe Gen Y as a “free spending but hard to reach generation.” They identify the 19 – 25 years old age group as the wealthiest members of the Gen Y who are either employed part-time or full-time and are also either part-time or full-time college students. Additionally, Gardyn (2002) asserts

that this group is profitable to US retailers as their buying power exceeds USD200 billion annually (cited in Martin and Turley, 2004: 464).

The Gen Y generation has more economic clout than their predecessors the Gen X. This is supported by Grant and Stephen (2005) as they indicate that the Gen Y demographics is a rich target with economic power unlike anyone before them. They add that Gen Y is therefore viewed by retailers as an attractive growth market. In addition, Gen Y has an influence on their parents' spending habits. This is supported by Grant and Stephen (2005) who highlight that this segment's spending habits are a result of distinct social trends like couples having established careers, fewer children and more discretionary income to spend on the children. They emphasise further that with increasing divorce levels and a rising number of households where parents hold full time jobs, the guilt factor drives parents to indulge their children with designer clothes. This has definitely made the majority of Gen Y to be more self-indulgent and materialistic. Corresponding to this, Tan (1999: 370) adds that youth today are hedonistic and "live for the moment" and thus "have expectations of greater material wealth than their parents."

2.2 Motivation Factors

Gen Y's choice of clothing can be influenced by many factors such as individuality, functionality, prestige, social influences, purchase situation and other psychological variables. Individuality at this stage in their life is of paramount importance as they are at a period of transition where they are still searching and learning to establish their individual identities (Eadie *et al.*, 1999). Tan (1999: 367), however, affirms that the young's claim for individuality is ironic as it is "highly conformist in terms of clothes, music, sports and language." He states that the young in search of acceptance and identity place much emphasis on their clothing as they are conscious of how others will assess them and this trait explains their obsession with brands. As suggested by Eadie *et al.* (1999:105) "conspicuous brands can perform a vital social function for young people seeking the acceptance of peers while still retaining a capacity to express their individualism and personal tastes through the goods they purchase." Consequently, young people maintain commitment to the group by stating their "allegiance to, and being seen, in culturally accepted" brands (Schroeder and Salzer-Morling, 2005: 160).

2.3 Role of Reference Group

Consumer attitude towards a brand plays a vital role in the decision-making process Lamb *et al.* (2002), Stokes (2002) and Ross and Harradine (2004) add that education, economic circumstances, family, age, experience, the law and social background shape the attitude of consumers (cited in Grant and Stephen 2005: 453). In addition, Feltham (1998) stresses, that the reference group plays a vital role in attitude formation. Family and friends are part of the reference group which influences the behaviour of youths through their social communication activities (Feltham, 1998).

The youth of today generally seek acceptance from their peers to boast their self-confidence and to blend with their social surrounding. As such, Lawrence (2003: 44) affirms that for the young "the brand is king" as the intense influence of the peer community and

the need to be accepted by their peers has made the young more brand conscious (cited in Grant and Stephen, 2005). Spero and Stone (2004) highlight that the young are aspirational and strongly influenced by peer pressure. As a result, many teen clothing marketers are employing “peer-to-peer” marketing strategy to create market demand (Dotson and Hyatt, 2005: 36). Wang (2006) further confirms that group or social factor is an important element of this segment and their interaction with brands and consumerism. As such, successful lifestyle brands among the Gen Y market are “those that are more inclusive rather than isolated” (Wang, 2006). Grant and Stephen (2005) emphasise that to a great extent, consumer behaviour is carried out under the influence of others and through the socialisation process. Additionally, Bakewell *et al.* (2006) claim that the young prefer to buy clothes with their peers rather than parents at an earlier age as they are concerned about peer approval.

2.4 Decision Making Process

Gen Y is a free spending generation because of their economic clout. Further, an increased presence of brand names has created brand awareness and preference among Gen Y at an earlier age. Therefore, it is important to know how Gen Y forms attachments to brands. The brand concept which refers to the image of a particular brand plays a crucial part in the decision making process. According to Liu (2002), there are two common brand concepts, namely function-oriented brands and prestige-oriented brands. Function-oriented brands are associated with product performance like reliability and durability whereas a prestige-oriented brand concept is associated with luxury and status. Liu (2002) adds that brand concepts have an impact on how consumers evaluate the product as these concepts facilitate the formation of associations with brands. Taylor and Cosenza (2002) state that normative decision process starts with a stimulus which provokes need recognition. They state that this is then followed by information search, evaluating competing alternatives followed by a purchase decision. They report that demographic characteristics like education and income level have an impact on decision making. They alert that as a consumer grows older, information search and evaluation of product decreases.

Therefore, the Gen Y is crucial to marketers as it is important to capture this market and establish brand loyalty before they move into their mid-twenties and beyond. Taylor and Cosenza (2002) explain that female Gen Y is more prone to buying on impulse, ignoring information search as they seek instant gratification and therefore prefer branded apparel as clothing brands give them an avenue to express themselves. Bakewell *et al.* (2006) reveal that on the other hand Gen Y men have a “self-oriented” approach and focus on the functional benefits of clothing like warmth and durability which may include extended problem solving situations in their purchase decision. They explain that Gen Y females are “other-oriented” and clothes are used as symbolic value for achieving approval and acceptance from peers. Nevertheless, they conclude that Gen Y males, just like Gen Y females, are fashion conscious and have an understanding of fashion brands and their desirability.

2.5 Role of Advertising

Duncan (2005) states that advertising has historically been the main communication choice for marketers as it can quickly increase brand awareness and brand knowledge though

advertising impact is difficult to measure. Advertising plays a conspicuous role in marketing as it operates more visibly than other marketing variables (Eadie *et al.*, 1999). Advertising is important in influencing brand image; however, McLaughlin (2000) claims that Gen Y “are skeptical of advertising because they have been inundated with it” (cited in Parker *et al.*, 2004: 179).

Critics of advertising on the other hand argue that advertising has the strongest influence on the consumption patterns of Gen Y cultivating materialistic values in them (Strong and Eftychia, 2006). Tan (1999) reveals that advertisements of fashion goods convey meanings to the young as it is an object of human behaviour that is derived from social interaction and communication. As such, he discloses that brands act as a social tool for communication. Advertisements of branded clothing have made the young equate owning certain products with personal attainments and marks of distinction.

Through advertising therefore, brands may evoke associations based on attributes, benefits, celebrities or events that are linked to it (Liu, 2002). Zollo (1995) state that some of the top reasons that make a brand popular among the young are: “quality”, “it’s for people my age”, “advertising”, “if cool friends or peers use it”, and “if a cool celebrity uses it” (cited in Martin and Bush 2000: 441). Park *et al.* (2006: 442) add that these positive emotions increase fashion-oriented impulse buying. In addition, O’Guinn *et al.* (2006: 373) state that celebrities increase the advertisements’ “ability to attract attention and produce a desire in receivers to emulate or imitate the celebrities they admire”. Belch and Belch (2001) confirm that each celebrity brings meanings pertaining status, class, gender, and age as well as personality and lifestyle to the brand in the endorsement process.

Dotson and Hyatt (2005: 36-37) highlight that for Gen Y “it is not buying a pair of jeans, but buying GAP or Tommy Hilfiger or Abercrombie & Fitch” as these brand names offer the “irresistible promise of instant cool.” They claim that as a result of advertising the Gen Y are exposed to more commercial propaganda in their daily lives. They add that this has resulted in an increased presence of brand names in society creating a “heightened brand awareness and preference” among children at an earlier age. They further state that the Gen Y is greatly affected by celebrity endorsements made by sports, music and entertainment stars who pitch for well known brand name products. Public Broadcasting Service (1999) confirms that advertising using celebrity endorsement make the products socially conspicuous and therefore it becomes an affirmation of Gen Y’s individuality, in order to make a statement (cited in Dotson and Hyatt, 2005: 37).

3. RESEARCH METHOD AND DATA COLLECTION

3.1 Research Method

This study uses both qualitative and quantitative research methods. The quantitative aspect was covered by survey questionnaires that comprised close and semi open-ended questions. The close-ended questions were both multiple-choice and dichotomous. The multiple-choice questions offered the respondents options from which a response could be chosen. This gave the respondents an indication of the kind of answers that are relevant to the research and makes the respondent’s task easier. Some questions allowed multiple responses

and in the semi open-ended questions, the respondents were given an option to write down a response that was not provided. The intent is to give respondents an option and to obtain additional information in the respondent's own words.

A pilot test was conducted on 10% of the sample size to detect errors and fine-tune the questionnaire before it was administered to the respondents. This ensured that the quality of the data was not compromised and the questions were both reliable and valid.

The qualitative aspect was covered by personal interviews on a one-to-one basis to obtain unrestricted comments or opinions and to better understand the opinions on the choice of branded clothing as well as the reasons for them. It provided an avenue for the interviewees to express their thoughts and experiences widely and deeply. The data from this method was useful for understanding individual decision making behaviour, how brands are perceived, and the emotional aspects of the consumers' lives. The personal interviews were conducted to help better understand the responses obtained in the questionnaire survey as it could generate rich, deep and in-depth responses to support the findings from the quantitative survey.

3.2 Sample Size

This cross-sectional study drew a sample that is representative of college going Gen Y aged between 18–24 years. The study was conducted in five colleges located in the Subang Jaya, Sunway and Petaling Jaya areas. The colleges are Monash University Malaysia, Taylor's University College, Sunway University College, INTI International University College and Metropolitan College.

One hundred and thirty respondents were chosen for the questionnaire survey and eight respondents for the personal interview. Quota sampling, a non-probability sampling method was used to choose the sample size to ensure that there are an equal number of male and female respondents for both the quantitative and qualitative methods.

3.3 Data Collection

The questionnaire was self-administered and was distributed fifteen minutes before the end of class. One hundred and thirty questionnaires were distributed but one hundred questionnaires were used for the final analysis after eliminating those that were partially completed or uniformly answered and that did not fall into the 18–24 age group.

The computer software, SPSS, was used to analyse the close-ended questions. The semi open-ended questions were to be analysed manually. However, respondents choose only from the options provided therefore eliminating the need for the data to be analysed manually.

The personal interviews were conducted on eight students on campus during the student's break period. The responses from the interview were recorded and transcribed manually to look for common themes that may emerge from this form of research. These themes helped to support and give a clearer understanding of the findings from the questionnaire survey.

Table 1. Q. 1: Gender

Valid	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Male	50	50.0	50.0	50.0
Female	50	50.0	50.0	100.0
Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Table 2. Q. 2 : Age

Valid	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
18 - 19	34	34.0	34.0	34.0
20 - 21	42	42.0	42.0	76.0
22 - 24	24	24.0	24.0	100.0
Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Table 3. Q. 3: How frequently do you shop in a year?

Valid	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
1 to 4 times	26	26.0	26.0	26.0
5 to 8 times	15	15.0	15.0	41.0
9 to 12 times	21	21.0	21.0	62.0
More than 12 times	38	38.0	38.0	100.0
Total	100	100.0	100.0	

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Quantitative Analysis

Table 1 indicates that the sample comprising 100 respondents had an equal number of male and female respondents. This enabled the researcher to obtain data that was gender balanced and reflective of college going Gen Y.

Table 2 shows that all respondents fell between the 18 to 24 age group. The majority fell into the 20–21 age bracket. The distribution in the age group is not expected to have an impact in the overall findings as their views on clothing and branding are expected to be similar among this college-going segment.

Table 3 shows that the majority (38%) shopped more than 12 times in a year, and that 21% shopped more than 9 times in a year. This supports that Gen Y loves to shop. This is implied in the literature as they have the spending power. In addition, their increasing demographic size and significant purchasing power has made them the prime target for

Table 4: How frequently do you shop for clothing in a year?
Gender Cross-tabulation (Q. 1 & Q. 3)

Gender		How frequently do you shop in a year?				Total
		1 to 4 times	5 to 8 times	9 to 12 times	More than 12 times	
Male	Count	22	11	8	9	50
	% within Gender	44.0%	22.0%	16.0%	18.0%	100.0%
	% with How frequently Do you shop in a year?	84.6%	73.3%	38.1%	23.7%	50.0%
	% of Total	22.0%	11.0%	8.0%	9.0%	50.0%
Female	Count	4	4	13	29	50
	% within Gender	8.0%	8.0%	26.0%	58.0%	100.0%
	% with How frequently Do you shop in a year?	15.4%	26.7%	61.9%	76.3%	50.0%
	% of Total	4.0%	4.0%	13.0%	29.0%	50.0%
Total	Count	26	15	21	38	100
	% within Gender	26.0%	15.0%	21.0%	38.0%	100.0%
	% with How frequently Do you shop in a year?	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
	% of Total	26.0%	15.0%	21.0%	38.0%	100.0%

many marketers. It can mean that marketers have been successful in making them aware of their ability to purchase and become trendsetters. As a result, marketers have become the beneficiaries of the substantial amount of money spent by this group of consumers.

The cross-tabulation between gender and how frequently the respondents shop indicates that the majority of females (58 %) shop for clothing more than 12 times in a year. There is an increasing trend in the frequency of shopping among female respondents as Table 4 indicates that only 8 % shop four or less times in a year. In comparison, the male respondents show a reverse trend as the majority (44 %) shop four or less times in a year while only 18 % shop more than 12 times in a year.

This gender breakdown shows a significant difference pertaining to male and female respondents' frequency in shopping. This may be the result of their differing consumption motivations and differing perceptions towards branded clothing where females are more 'other-oriented' and seek instant gratification whereas males are more 'self-oriented' and look at the functional benefits of branded clothing.

Table 5 indicates that the literature supporting peer influence in the choice of brands holds true as 61% of the respondents shopped for clothing with their friends. This indicates that the right choice of clothing is important as it has social outcomes. It reinforces that 'peer-regard' plays a crucial role in social affiliation among this group.

Table 5. Q. 4 : Who do you shop for clothing with most frequently?

Valid	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Friends	61	61.0	61.0	61.0
Parents	22	22.0	22.0	83.0
Siblings	6	6.0	6.0	89.0
Alone	11	11.0	11.0	100.0
Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Table 6. Q.5: Favourite brands

Brand	Yes	No	Frequency	Percent
Levis	38	62	38	38
Calvin Klien	32	68	32	32
Timberland	12	88	12	12
Tommy Hilfiger	12	88	12	12
Guess	45	55	45	45
MNG	35	65	35	35
FCUK	25	75	25	25
Zara	53	47	53	53
Padini	30	70	30	30
Others	42	58	42	42

All 100 respondents indicated more than one favourite brand. *Zara* was the preferred brand among 53% of the respondents, followed by Guess (45%), Levis (32%) and Calvin Klien (32%). 42% chose other brands like British India, Somerset Bay, Topshop, Seed, D&G and Espirit (Table 6). This indicates that members of this consumer group have preferred brands when it comes to clothing regardless of how often they shop or who they shop with.

Table 7 shows that a majority of the respondents have a positive affinity about branded clothing. Positive attributes like quality assurance, an expression of individuality and status symbol, and value for money scored highly in the survey. This supports the literature that these associations through advertising make a brand popular. In comparison, only 20% indicated that branded clothing was expensive and unaffordable while the remaining 10% expressed that it was a waste of money though they indicated that they had a favourite clothing brand in Question 5. It can therefore be implied that advertising has been successful in evoking these positive associations for branded clothing among this consumer group.

Table 8 highlights that 38% of the respondents are staunch purchasers of branded clothing. However, the 60% who purchased branded clothing 'sometimes' are a lucrative segment for marketers as they can be converted into the 'always' category. This can be achieved as the majority (63%) of the respondents associated branded clothing with quality assurance. The literature supports that positive emotions can directly affect fashion-oriented

Table 7. Q. 6 : What does branded clothing mean to you?

Meaning	Yes	No	Frequency	Percent
Status Symbol	43	57	43	43
An expression of self	61	39	61	61
Quality assurance	63	37	63	63
Value for money	39	61	39	39
Expensive and unaffordable	20	80	20	20
Waste of money	10	90	10	10

Table 8. Q. 7: Do you purchase branded clothing?

Valid	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Always	38	38.0	38.0	38.0
No	2	2.0	2.0	40.0
Sometimes	60	60.0	60.0	100.0
Total	100	100.0	100.0	

impulse buying. In addition, this consumer group will also be entering the working world soon and attributes like quality assurance, individuality and status symbol have a high probability of impacting their choice of branded clothing in the future.

Cross-tabulation between Question 1 & Question 7 in Table 9 indicates that 44% of female respondents purchase branded clothing 'always' compared to 32% of the male respondents. However, 64 % of the male respondents and 56% of the female respondents buy branded clothing 'sometimes'. Only 4 % or 2 respondents out of the 100 respondents surveyed who are male respondents 'never' buy branded clothing. This again reinforces gender differences in buying behaviour. This could be the result of female Gen Y viewing clothes as a symbolic value for gaining approval and acceptance among peers and therefore seek more 'prestige-oriented' brands. Clothing advertisements too focus more on appearance issues among females rather than males as males are generally apprehensive of being thought of as 'feminine'. The results reinforce that male Gen Y has a 'function-oriented' approach towards clothing and brands and relate to fashion simplistically.

Table 10 shows that peer influence followed by popular brands are possible reasons why this consumer group purchase branded clothing. Stylish design, advertisements and celebrity endorsement have also scored highly for this question. This confirms that this consumer group relies heavily on peer influence and popular brands to develop self-esteem and gain acceptance by their friends. In addition, popular brands present two functions, namely familiarity and marketing stimuli. This supports the literature that "conspicuous brands can perform a vital social function for young people seeking acceptance" (Eadie *et al.*, 1999: 105)

Table 9: Gender *Do you purchase branded clothing? Cross-tabulation (Q. 1 & Q. 7)

Gender		Do you purchase branded clothing?			Total
		Always	No	Sometimes	
Male	Count	16	2	32	50
	% within Gender	32.0%	4.0%	64.0%	100.0%
	% within Do you purchase branded clothing	42.1%	100.0%	53.3%	50.0%
	% of Total	16.0%	2.0%	32.0%	50.0%
Female	Count	22	0	28	50
	% within Gender	44.0%	.0%	56.0%	100.0%
	% within Do you purchase branded clothing	57.9%	.0%	46.7%	50.0%
	% of Total	22.0%	.0%	28.0%	50.0%
Total	Count	38	2	60	100
	% within Gender	38.0%	2.0%	60.0%	100.0%
	% within Do you purchase branded clothing	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
	% of Total	38.0%	2.0%	60.0%	100.0%

Table 10. Q.8 :Why do you think 18-24 year olds buy branded clothing?

Reason	Yes	No	Frequency	Percent
Quality assurance	47	53	47	47
Value for money	26	74	26	26
Peer influence	81	19	81	81
Advertisements	60	40	60	60
Celebrity endorsement	53	47	53	53
Better service	17	84	17	17
Better packaging	24	76	24	24
Stylish design	72	28	72	72
Brand is popular	80	20	80	80
Other reasons	-	-	-	-

The results indicate that stylish design is an important attribute as it helps them express their individuality and become part of the 'trendy' and 'cool' crowd. Advertising had a high score as it plays an important role in making brands popular. The results show that advertisements using celebrity endorsements have a huge impact on brands as they promote and subconsciously reinforce certain attributes like image, quality and status.

Table 11. Q. 9 : When you buy branded clothing you look for _____?

Reason	Yes	No	Frequency	Percent
Comfort	80	20	80	80
Style & design	94	6	94	94
Affordability	54	46	54	54
Latest design	38	62	38	38
Clothes that helps you fit in with your friends	7	93	7	7
Exclusive design that helps you stand out from the crowd	29	71	29	29
Expensive clothing as it lasts longer	11	89	11	11
Other reasons	-	-	-	-

Attributes to augment the brand-like quality assurance, value for money, better packaging and service did not matter that greatly to this segment. It could be because this consumer group has reduced perceived risk when purchasing branded clothing. Information search and evaluation of alternatives are not part of their decision making process indicating that purchases are made on impulse based on popularity of the brand. There is an obsession among this consumer group for social acceptance, social affiliation and being seen as 'cool' by being associated with the 'right' brand choice in clothing.

The results in Table 11 once again indicate that style and design are important factors to Gen Y when purchasing branded clothing. This could be attributed to the fact that self-expression is an important criteria for Gen Y's choice of clothing. Style and design are a form of self-expression and this helps them cope with social situations. With the right style and design, trendiness is portrayed which helps in social acceptance among peers. Style and design therefore provides them with acceptance and an identity. This supports the literature that Gen Y's claim for individuality is ironic as they are highly conformist. This is reflected by the low score of 7% for "clothes that help you fit with your friend". The results also indicate that the Gen Y is market savvy as comfort scored highly as one of the criteria in purchasing branded clothing. Affordability scored 54% as most Asian Gen Y college students depend on their parents for their monthly allowance.

4.2 Qualitative Analysis

The qualitative analysis supported the findings from the quantitative survey. The analysis from the personal interview highlights the following:

4.2.1 Purchase Behaviour

The response towards frequency in shopping ranged from "three to four times a week" to "only when I need clothes ...like twice a year". The female interviewees shopped more frequently as two interviewees shopped once to four times a week while the other two shopped between once or twice in a month to once in three months. In comparison, only

one male interviewee shopped three times a month while the rest shopped once a month or when there is a need for clothes or during festive seasons. The findings support the quantitative survey where females are more avid shoppers. The female interviewees spend RM100.00 to RM1000.00 per shopping trip compared to the male interviewees who spend between RM100 to RM500 on each shopping trip.

All interviewees indicated that they buy branded clothing. Their response varied from "Yes, of course I do. I enjoy wearing branded clothing", "most of the time I buy branded clothing", "Yes, sometimes" to "Depends, if there is a sale or discount, why not"? This supports the literature that the "brand is king" to this consumer group and that they are brand conscious. However, affordability plays a crucial role in their purchase decision as they are college-going with limited income when compared to working adults as one interviewee remarked "...wish I had more money to spend on branded clothing". This is supported by the fact that all the interviewees indicated that they would buy branded clothing if it were on sale. Their response included, "Yes, it's a luxury", "...I want something that reflects my status ...", "... I want to own more branded clothing" to "No I won't buy branded clothing ..., but sometimes it's unavoidable". The findings on Gen Y's shopping habits maintain that males are 'self-oriented' whereas females are 'other-oriented'; nevertheless both groups are brand conscious.

Seven out of the eight interviewees' spending habits are supported by their parents. One student remarked "I spend about RM100 – RM1000 per trip depending on what I buy. I get the money from my parents" while another said, "I would fork out between RM300.00 – RM500.00 on each outing and my mother gives me the money to spend". Similar remarks were made by the remaining six interviewees. Only one male interviewee works during college vacation to earn extra money. Nevertheless, he gets a monthly allowance of RM500.00 from his parents. This upholds Grant and Stephen's (2005) finding that changing social trends such as an increasing number of households having dual income, parents having established careers or simply the guilt factor drives parents to pamper their children with money and material things which makes them hedonistic.

4.2.2 Motivation Factors

All eight interviewees cited peer pressure as the reason why Gen Y buy branded clothing. Some of their reasons were "as we want to be in the group", "when my friends use something ...I'd go out and buy it", "it's peer pressure, I feel more comfortable wearing branded stuff ...among friends" and "Pressure will kick in when you see everyone having it and you don't have it". This supports the literature and survey findings that peer pressure plays an important role in Gen Y's choice of branded clothing. Branded clothing creates camaraderie and a sense of belonging among the group and aids social interaction.

All interviewees also agreed that advertising mainly in magazines plays an important role in motivating them to purchase branded clothing. One interviewee remarked that "...ads play a huge part ...I won't buy something that I'm not familiar with. Pull factor is strongest in ads", while another said advertisements make her search for the clothing as "...I must have it" and another remarked that advertisements "really attract their audience". This holds that advertisements have a strong influence in motivating Gen Y to purchase branded

clothing as it cultivates materialistic values. Advertisements are therefore successful in promoting branded clothing as symbols to reflect personal attainments and serve as marks of distinction.

Seven out of the eight interviewees thought that celebrity endorsement sold branded clothing while one respondent remained neutral. Some interesting comments made by the interviewees pertaining celebrity endorsements are that "...the models are so beautiful, so perfect, so right so what they are doing or using is right", "...they look so good in it and maybe I could wear it also ...", "...people who are really caught up by fashion they really want to be in the crowd and so I guess the crowd are celebrities and famous people and that's the fashion", and "The chances of me buying something that's advertised by someone famous is higher because it's more exciting as it's associated with someone famous, it's associated with success, something bigger than me." This reinforces that celebrity endorsements have a huge impact on brands as this consumer group wants to imitate celebrities to forge an image and identity.

4.2.3 Brand Association

The interviewees associated brands with quality, image and status and expensive products. One respondent stated that brands give an experience. This is supported by the interviewees' comments that the "branded clothing has better quality, design ...", brands are "classy", "rugged", "smart", makes one look "rich", gives "self-confidence", "you feel cool wearing something that's branded". This confirms that branded clothing creates an identity for the Gen Y. They are seeking brands that are "visible" and that are associated with "success" which supports that the Gen Y are materialistic, hedonistic and are trying to create an identity and image for themselves through branded clothing. Brands are tapping into the minds of Gen Y, influencing them to interpret brands as a way to define themselves, their lifestyles, their personalities and values.

5. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The focus of this research is on college students in a specific geographic location due to convenience of accessibility for data collection. Therefore, the study is limited in scope as the exclusion of other segments of Gen Y will make it difficult to generalise the findings as Martin and Turley (2004) have indicated that the 8 to 25 year olds fall under this generation. Additionally, the cross-sectional survey technique does not follow the individuals over time to see how brand choices change. The respondents in this study may also have exhibited different reactions towards brands if compared with those with less formal education or who live in different parts of the country.

6. RECOMMENDATION

The findings support the hypothesis that Gen Y is brand conscious. As such, clothing marketers need to build an emotional attachment with Gen Y on perceptions of quality and value to retain brand loyalty as this is crucial to businesses everywhere. Additionally, emotional connections make the brand special, help differentiate a brand and bring lasting competitive advantage.

Gen Y is aspirational and strongly influenced by peer pressure. Besides, they are looking for cues that express individuality, status, an image of being “cool”, trendy and classy to assist them in their socialisation process and be included as part of the “group”. Therefore, positive emotional connections with a brand will increase word-of-mouth communication encouraging others to patronise the brand.

Advertising is an important marketing variable when marketing to Gen Y as it plays a significant role in conferring brand values and establishing an image for the product. Therefore, an advertising campaign is not only about creating brand awareness but its effectiveness also includes its ability to influence brand image and preference. As such, advertisements should entertain Gen Y, make them talk about the advertisement and stir up their inner desires. The visual language of communication in advertising as a result plays an enormous role in reaching out to Gen Y. Therefore, creating a ‘buzz’ through celebrity endorsements and viral marketing should be an integral part of a communication strategy in reaching out to this consumer group. Celebrities provide Gen Y with something to aspire to, as celebrities are successful and are therefore viewed as leaders of fashion.

7. CONCLUSION

Gen Y consumers are growing up in a more media fragmented and brand conscious world than their parents. The distinctive buying habits that this segment displays today will likely follow them as they enter the high-spending years of adulthood. Marketers should continue to reach out to these power spenders by hawking their wares through advertisements using celebrity endorsement and viral marketing with a peer-to-peer grassroots approach. This form of promotion will help in creating an attractive group identity for the Gen Y consumers who are looking for a meaningful and emotional connection.

Gen Y has a natural inclination to spend and embrace products that promote a lifestyle that they can associate with their peers. This segment uses branded clothing to communicate something about themselves to the groups that they belong to or aspire to belong. Membership is forged through selection of branded clothing as these brands are successful in creating images such as being trendy, cool or classy and are therefore regarded as a symbol of success.

Finally, Gen Y consumers aged between 18–24 years are at a stage where they are breaking away from the norms of their childhood and are in the process of establishing their own identity. Branding plays a key role in creating an optimistic outlook that portrays high expectations and success. Clothing brands targeting Gen Y need to understand them, and entertain and connect with them to generate a positive buzz. Brands influence Gen Y's choice of clothing and targeting this consumer group is rewarding as marketers with careful promotions can create a pool of brand loyal customers for the future. However, young people do not like being manipulated by marketers, have short attention spans and are media-savvy in choosing what messages they wish to receive. Therefore, marketers of branded clothing need to act ethically as brands should hold up a window, not a mirror, and let youth understand the brand and decide for themselves.

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