

Chasing Gen Y: Unlocking the Reasons for Buying Branded Clothes

Prasana Rosaline Fernandez ¹⁺, Mei Li Lean ²

¹ Taylor's College Petaling Jaya, Malaysia

² University of Malaya Malaysia

Abstract. This study focuses on the impact of branding on Gen Y's choice of clothing as it is hypothesized that they are brand conscious. The research looks at college students aged between 18 and 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. In-depth personal interviews were conducted on twenty interviewees for qualitative analysis. The findings suggest that Gen Y are brand conscious; peer influence plays a crucial role in their choice of brands; advertising is an important variable in conferring brand values and establishing an image for the brand; and celebrity endorsements have a huge impact as they promote certain attributes like image, quality and status. The researchers recommend 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.

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

1. Introduction

Marketers view Gen Y (those born between 1977 and 1994) as very market savvy when it comes to brands. They are viewed "as a generation with very high buying power" as they have annual incomes totalling \$211 billion and spend \$39 billion per year.^[1] Gen Y who are children of Baby Boomers spend family money, and have the pester power to influence the spending habits of their parents. According to Taylor & Cosenza,^[2] Gen Y are "future consumers" who are "vital to the continuing health of marketing" as they "establish their brand preferences between the ages of 15 and 25" and "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 and 24 years old as the majority of college going students in Malaysia fall under this age group. It is hypothesized that Gen Y are brand conscious. Therefore, this study aims to find out if it is true that 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

Gen Y individuals were raised in a more nurturing environment during economic prosperity. As such, the Gen Y segment has an influence on their parents' spending habits. This is supported by Grant & Stephen^[3] 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

⁺ Corresponding author. Tel.: +6012 6538921; fax: +603 7873 5801.
 E-mail address: rosalinef24@yahoo.com/prfernandez.p@taylors.edu.my.

emphasized further that with increasing divorce levels and rising number of households where parents hold full time jobs, the guilt factor drive parents to indulge their children with designer clothes.

Gen Y's choice in clothing is 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.^[4] As suggested by Eadie *et al.*^[4] "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.^[5]

The youth of today generally seek acceptance from their peers to boost their self confidence and to blend with their social surrounding. As such, Lawrence^[3] affirms that for the young "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. Spero and Stone^[6] highlight, that the young are aspirational and strongly influenced by peer pressure. Wang^[7] further confirms that group or social factor is an important element of this segment and their interaction with brands and consumerism. Additionally, Bakewell *et al.*^[8] 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.

The brand concept which refers to the image of a particular brand plays a crucial part in the decision making process. According to Liu,^[9] 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^[9] adds that brand concepts have an impact on how consumers evaluate the product as these concepts facilitate the formation of associations with brands. Therefore, the Gen Y segment is crucial to marketers as it is important to capture this market and establish brand loyalty.

Advertisements of branded clothing have made the young equate owning certain products with personal attainments and marks of distinction. There are two thoughts to this view as McLaughlin^[10] claims that Gen Y "are skeptical of advertising because they have been inundated with it". 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.^[11] Advertisements of fashion goods convey meanings to the young as it is an object of human behavior that is derived from social interaction and communication. As such, brands act as a social tool for communication. Zollo^[12] 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". Park *et al.*^[13] add that these positive emotions increase fashion-oriented impulse buying. In addition, Dotson and Hyatt^[14] 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 also claim 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 as these celebrity endorsements make the products socially conspicuous and therefore it becomes an affirmation of Gen Y's individuality, in order to make a statement.

3. Research Method and Data Collection

This study used personal interviews, a qualitative research method. Personal interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis to obtain unrestricted comments or opinions and to better understand the reasons for the choice of branded clothing, the individual decision making behavior, and how brands are perceived based on the emotional aspects of the consumers' lives.

This study drew a sample that is representative of college going Gen Y aged between 18 and 24 years. The study was conducted in five colleges located in the Subang Jaya, Sunway and Petaling Jaya areas. Twenty respondents were chosen for the personal interview using quota sampling, a non-probability sampling method to ensure an equal number of male and female respondents. The responses from the interview were recorded and transcribed manually to look for common themes.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Frequency

The analysis highlights that 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 five interviewees shopped once to four times a week while the other five 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 female interviewees spend RM100.00 to RM1000.00 per shopping trip compared to the male interviewees who spend between RM100 and RM500 on each shopping trip.

4.2. Branded Clothing

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 students 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 was 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”.

4.3. Spending Habits

Eighteen out of the twenty 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 sixteen interviewees. Only two male interviewees work during college vacation to earn extra money. Nevertheless, they get a monthly allowance of RM500.00 from their parents. This upholds Grant & Stephen’s^[3] finding that changing social trends such as an increasing number of households having dual income, parents having established careers or simply the guilt factor drive parents to pamper their children with money and material things which makes them hedonistic.

4.4. Peer Pressure

All twenty 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 that peer pressure plays an important role in Gen Y’s choice of branded clothing. Branded clothing creates a camaraderie and sense of belonging among the group and aids social interaction.

4.5. Advertising

All interviewees also agreed that advertising, especially 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 the notion 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 that reflect personal attainments and marks of distinction.

4.6. Celebrity Endorsement

Seventeen out of the twenty interviewees thought that celebrity endorsement sold branded clothing while three respondents 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 towards brands as this consumer group wants to imitate celebrities to forge an image and identity.

4.7. Brand Association

All the interviewees associate brands with quality, image and status and as expensive products. One respondent stated that brands give an experience. This is supported by the interviewees' comments that "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 the belief 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. 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. Positive emotional connections with a brand will increase word-of-mouth communication encouraging others to patronize the brand.

Advertising is an important marketing variable when reaching out to Gen Y as it plays a significant role in conferring brand values and establishing an image for the product. 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. Celebrities provide Gen Y with something to aspire to be as celebrities endorsing the product are viewed as leaders of fashion.

6. Conclusion

The distinctive buying habits that this segment displays are likely to follow them as they enter the high-spending years of adulthood. Marketers should therefore continue to reach out to these power spenders by hawking their wares through advertisements using celebrity endorsement and viral marketing by creating a "buzz". In addition, Gen Y has a natural inclination to spend and embrace products that promote a lifestyle that they can associate with their peers. They use branded clothing to communicate something about themselves to the groups that they belong to or aspire to belong. They are at a stage where they are breaking away from the norms of their childhood and in the process of establishing their own identity. Therefore, clothing brands targeting Gen Y need to understand them, and entertain and connect with them. 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.

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