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Investigating the determinants impacting fashion brand loyalty among Generation Y students in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: In the increasingly competitive fashion industry, it is essential for fashion brands and marketers to establish and enhance their customers' loyalty toward their brand as an effective means of survival and success. To achieve this, it is essential to understand the factors that impact their target market's brand loyalty. Although several studies have investigated brand loyalty in relation to various factors, limited research has focused on the interrelationships between the brand equity dimensions, while no such research exists within the South African fashion industry context, particularly from a Generation Y student perspective. Fashion remains significant to Generation Y individuals in particular, and therefore, this study determined the relationship between Generation Y students' fashion brand loyalty, awareness, association and perceived quality.

Design/methodology/approach: Following a quantitative research approach, the necessary data was collected from a convenience sample of 750 students registered at a South African higher education institution, using a self-administered questionnaire. The data analysis performed in this study included exploratory factor analysis, reliability analysis, correlation analysis and structural equation modelling (SEM).

Findings: The findings imply that Generation Y students' loyalty towards fashion brands is directly and indirectly influenced by their awareness of and their associations with the fashion brand. In addition, it was found that the perceived quality of the brand has a direct influence on their loyalty towards the fashion brand.

Recommendations/value: To increase fashion brand loyalty among Generation Y consumers, their fashion brand awareness should first be increased, which could lead to stronger brand associations, improved quality perceptions, and ultimately, a stronger commitment towards the brand.

Managerial implications: Fashion brand managers and marketers should consider the interrelationships between fashion brand loyalty, awareness, association and perceived quality when aiming to enhance fashion brand loyalty among consumers.

Keywords

Brand association; Brand awareness; Brand loyalty; Fashion brands; Generation Y; Perceived quality,

JEL Classification: M30

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1. INTRODUCTION

Post the global Covid-19 pandemic, most countries and industries have shown signs of recovery. This includes the fashion industry in South Africa, whose revenue is on the rise and is expected to increase by approximately 20% by 2025 (Statista, 2022). While sales are expected to increase, consumers have become cautious about what they spend their money on, and clothing stores that offer cheaper products have benefited from this (Rachael, 2021; Businesswire, 2022). Consequently, this increases the already tense competition among fashion retailers and brands, locally and internationally (IBISWorld, 2022), and to survive and stay abreast of the competition, fashion retailers and brands attempt to establish and maintain loyalty among their customers (Khoa, 2020). This is because loyal customers hold several benefits to a business, such as higher retention rates that translate to higher revenue, competitive advantage and word-of-mouth (Little, 2022). However, a comprehensive understanding of the factors that play a role in consumers' fashion brand loyalty is paramount to successfully establish brand loyalty among customers.

Branding involves the creation of a specific logo or name and, subsequently, associating it with a product (Das, 2011). The additional value that the brand adds to the product is known as brand equity (Elliot *et al*., 2012). A brand is not only an effective way to differentiate a product from competing products (Sinha *et al*., 2011), but brand equity also offers an organisation a sustainable competitive advantage (Neal & Strauss, 2008) due to its influence on consumers' decision-making (Creutz & Senning, 2006). It is for this reason that consumers usually respond differently to branded products than to unbranded products (Maher, 2014). Therefore, a strong brand is associated with positive brand equity, which implies that the brand is of more value (Healey, 2008) and therefore, incites loyalty among consumers (Funk & Levis, 2009). Although brands are considered valuable assets to organisations, building brand equity is not a simple and quick task and involves a series of steps (Aaker, 1991).

In accordance with Aaker's brand equity theory, consumers' loyalty toward a brand is dependent on their awareness and quality perceptions of the brand, as well as their association with the brand (Tasci, 2020). While these brand equity dimensions have been tested within various different contexts and product categories, such as athletic shoes, camera film and TV (Yoo *et al*., 2000), potato chip-barbeque sauce, paper towels and antibacterial ingredients (Washburn & Plank, 2002), car brands (Pappu *et al*., 2005), Indian fast-moving consumer goods (Mohan & Sequeira, 2012) and Polish beer brands (Schivinski & Lukasik, 2015), little research has been conducted within the context of the fashion industry. Moreover, most of the studies in the literature mainly investigated some of the brand equity dimensions,

the impact of the brand equity dimensions on overall brand equity (Dewi, 2018; Ilias *et al*., 2020; Appiah-Nimo *et al*., 2023), or investigated the brand equity dimensions in relation to variables external to Aaker's model such as purchase intention (Shafi & Madhavaiah, 2013; Lee *et al*., 2019), switching intention (Abdelreheem *et al*., 2021), purchase decisions (Widjaja, 2019), customer satisfaction (Mudanganyi *et al*., 2019) and brand trust (Ledikwe, 2020) among others. As such, limited research has been done to explore the relationships between all four brand equity dimensions and the direction of these relationships (Purwoko & Sihombing, 2018; Azzari & Pelissari, 2021; Oo *et al*., 2021), while no research has been conducted on these interrelationships within the context of the fashion industry, especially in South Africa, nor from a Generation Y student perspective. In light of this, it is unclear how the brand equity dimensions build on one another to ultimately build brand loyalty, especially within the South African fashion industry context. Insight into this would enable fashion brands and marketers to alter their business strategies and align their marketing efforts to purposefully influence the brand equity dimensions that serve as building blocks for the other dimensions, thereby achieving their goal of enhancing loyalty among their customers. Without considering the interrelationships between the brand equity dimensions, fashion brands and marketers might invest their resources inefficiently and, consequently, yield minimal results.

In accordance with these considerations, this study aims to determine the relationship between Generation Y students' awareness, association, perceived quality and loyalty toward fashion brands. Generation Y individuals, also referred to as the millennials or the Net generation, comprise individuals who were born between the years 1986 and 2005 (Markert, 2004; Bibby *et al*., 2019). This generation is known to be fashion-conscious (Chui *et al*., 2017) and therefore are frequently seen as fashion trendsetters (Smith, 2017) who have the power to influence fashion brands and retailers' success (Tangsupwattana & Liu, 2017). As such, fashion is one of their main expenditures (Student Village, 2019; Ruha, 2022). While Generation Y consumers are flexible in their fashion preferences (Kul, 2018), they are brand-conscious, and as a result, their brand knowledge is high (Noble *et al*., 2009). However, this generation's loyalty towards a brand is unpredictable (Reisenwitz & Iyer, 2009), given that they are not as brand loyal as the previous generation (Noble *et al*., 2009). Then again, those individuals who are brand loyal will likely stay loyal to the brands that they purchase currently (Schawbel, 2015). To date, Generation Y has been considered the largest generation (Richardson, 2018). In South Africa, approximately 20 580 583 people represent this generation, which is approximately 34% of the population (Stats SA, 2022). The student portion, which typically includes individuals between the ages of 18 and 24 years (Tan *et al*., 2013), is considered an attractive market to target. That is because of their future earnings

potential and associated spending (Bevan-Dye *et al*., 2009; Meyer & Bevan-Dye, 2014; Bevan-Dye, 2015). According to Tolani *et al*. (2020), Generation Y individuals have more income than previous generations and, consequently, more money to spend.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Aaker (1991), the process of building or enhancing brand equity involves four dimensions, namely brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality and brand loyalty. In this theory, the building of brand equity starts with establishing and increasing brand awareness. This is because consumers first have to be aware of a brand before they can form brand associations and quality perceptions and ultimately become loyal to the brand. In this study, Generation Y consumers' fashion brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality and brand loyalty are investigated from the perspective of this brand equity theory.

2.1 Brand loyalty

Brand loyalty can be explained as an individual's attachment to a brand (Kuşçu & Özçam, 2014). This attachment is evident when an individual is committed to purchasing the same brand repeatedly (Lee *et al*., 2010) and, as a result, does not consider purchasing another brand within the particular product category (Aaker & McLoughlin, 2010). Building and maintaining brand loyalty is a key objective of an organisation and the motivation behind brand management (Zhao *et al*., 2022). Brand loyalty holds several benefits for a brand, such as increased revenue and profits, reduced costs to attract new customers (Khamitov *et al*., 2019), price premium, a barrier to entry for competitors (Zhang *et al*., 2020) and word-of-mouth referrals, among others (Aaker, 1996). Although brand loyalty is regarded as a valuable asset (Aaker & McLoughlin, 2010), it is challenging to build and maintain loyalty among customers (Dibb *et al*., 2012). This highlights the significance of understanding what drives brand loyalty and how it is created. Previously published studies reported that brand loyalty is driven by consumers' awareness of and association with the brand as well as the perceived quality of the brand (Yoo *et al*., 2000; Tong & Hawley, 2009; Jindal, 2019; Hamzah & Basri, 2021). These dimensions and their interrelationships, as identified in the literature, will be discussed in the following sections.

2.2 Brand awareness

Brand awareness represents an individual's ability to access the brand from their memory (Peter *et al*., 2018) and to remember that it belongs within a specific product category (Aaker, 1991; Lars & Charles, 2022). More specifically, brand awareness exists when an individual is able to recognise or recall a brand (Aaker, 1991; Alhaddad, 2015). Brand recall represents an

individual's ability to recall the brand name when given a product category, while brand recognition refers to an individual's ability to identify a brand when a cue is given, such as a brand sign (Cheung *et al*., 2019). Brand awareness plays a role in consumers' decision-making as consumers are less likely to purchase an unknown brand (Rantung *et al.*, 2014) because it assists with comparing competing brands and ultimately selecting a brand (Valavi, 2014). As such, brand awareness plays a considerable role in building the image of the brand in the consumers' minds (Alkhawaldeh *et al*., 2017). In fact, a consumer will not be able to build an association with the brand if the consumer is unaware of the brand (Bae *et al*., 2020). This proves that brand awareness is a requirement for associations to be formed.

The connection between brand awareness and brand associations has been validated in several studies. In a study conducted on Suzuki, Kia and Hyundai motor vehicles in Iran, it was reported that the owners' awareness of the Hyundai brand had a significant positive effect on their associations with that brand (Satvati *et al*., 2016). Similarly, Nayebzadeh and Farmani (2018) reported that hotel guests' awareness of Mehr chain hotels in Yazd had a significant influence on the associations formed with those hotels. Bae *et al*. (2020) reported similar results in that the brand awareness of souvenirs in galleries with mixed reality content have a positive effect on brand association. As such, the following hypothesis was developed for this study:

H1: Generation Y students' fashion brand awareness will have a positive direct influence on their associations with the fashion brand.

Consumers' awareness of a brand would likely influence their quality perception of the brand (Buil *et al*., 2013). In the study conducted by Hermaren and Achyar (2018), who investigated the impact of firm-created content and user-generated content on customer-based brand equity, it was reported that brand awareness, combined with brand association, had a positive impact on perceived quality. Correspondingly, Astawa and Rahanatha (2021) found that consumers' awareness of the Nivea cosmetics brand in Denpasar City had a positive and significant impact on their perceived quality of that brand. Purwoko and Sihombing (2018), who investigated Nike-branded product purchases among students, reported similar results. The connection between brand awareness and perceived quality was also supported in the studies conducted by Tammubua (2021) on Indonesian higher education institutions, Nayebzadeh and Farmani (2018) on Mehr chain hotels, and Satvati *et al*. (2016). Based on the findings of these studies, the following was hypothesised:

H2: Generation Y students' fashion brand awareness will have a positive direct influence on their quality perceptions of the fashion brand.

In the literature, there is evidence of the relationship between brand awareness and brand loyalty. Vazifehdoost and Negahdari (2018), who conducted a study on fashion brands in Iran, reported that brand awareness has a positive influence on brand loyalty. In their study that focused on the cosmetic industry, Zhao *et al*. (2022) also discovered that brand awareness has a significant impact on brand loyalty. Pranata and Permana (2021) reported similar results, stating that brand awareness has a significant influence on brand loyalty among Indosat Ooredoo consumers. Rahim *et al*. (2020), in their study on Malaysian budget hotels, reported similar results among tourists. In line with the findings of this study, the following hypothesis was formulated:

H3: Generation Y students' fashion brand awareness will have a positive direct influence on their loyalty towards the fashion brand.

2.3 Brand association

Brand association refers to the meaning of the brand to a consumer (Aaker, 1991), which is based on the thoughts, perceptions, experiences and images that are shaped in the consumer's mind (Kilei *et al*., 2016). These thoughts and perceptions are formed from everything that the consumer directly or indirectly links to the brand (Irwanti, 2016), including the perceived value, brand personality and organisational associations (Aaker, 1996). Brand personality refers to the human traits that are associated with the brand, while organisational associations include all the organisational aspects such as the values, people and programmes. Jooste *et al*. (2012) opine that the target market of the brand would also influence the brand associations that are formed. Brand associations are valuable in that they assist consumers in retrieving, processing, and organising information prior to decision-making (Aaker, 1991). According to Kumar *et al*. (2013), customers' associations with a brand can affect their perceptions regarding the superiority or inferiority of the brand, which influences their quality perceptions of the brand. As such, the stronger the brand associations, the higher the perceived quality (Falahat *et al*., 2018).

Previously published studies have confirmed the connection between brand association and perceived quality. In the study conducted by Mensah *et al*. (2021), a significant and direct relationship between brand association and perceived quality was reported. Falahat *et al*. (2018), who conducted a study on hardware retailers in Malaysia, reported that brand association has a significant positive influence on perceived quality. Furthermore, in the study conducted by Kalhor *et al*. (2021), it was also found that the brand associations of patients in public hospitals have a significant effect on their perceived quality. Kim *et al*. (2016) and

Haxhialushi and Panajoti (2018) reported similar results. Therefore, the following hypothesis was formulated for this study:

H4: Generation Y students' fashion brand associations will have a positive direct influence on their perceived quality of the fashion brand.

Given that brand associations are linked to the benefits that consumers seek, it provides a reason for making a purchase (Aaker, 1991). Falahat *et al*. (2018) concur by stating that brand associations add to the value perception of brands, which motivates consumers to purchase the brand. Therefore, when a consumer has strong brand associations, it will increase the consumer's attachment to the particular brand (Susilowati & Sari, 2020) and influence the consumer's inclination to purchase the brand again in the future (Alkhawaldeh *et al*., 2017). As such, brand association can be regarded as a predictor of brand loyalty. Satvati *et al*. (2016) found that the associations linked to Suzuki, Kia and Hyundai motor vehicles influence the owners' loyalty to these brands. Similarly, Pranata and Permana (2021) reported a significant relationship between brand association and brand loyalty. In the studies conducted on the over-the-counter health market (Mensah *et al*., 2021) and souvenirs in a gallery with mixed reality content (Bae *et al*., 2020), it was found that brand association has a significant direct relationship with brand loyalty. Rahim *et al*. (2020) and Nayebzadeh and Farmani (2018) reported similar results in a study on tourists in Malaysian budget hotels and Mehr chain hotels in Yazd, respectively. In line with the findings of these studies, the following was hypothesised:

H5: Generation Y students' fashion brand associations will have a positive direct influence on their loyalty towards the fashion brand.

2.4 Perceived quality

Perceived quality refers to an individual's quality perceptions of a brand, product or service (Sumarwan, 2009). In other words, it refers to an individual's subjective judgement of the overall excellence or superiority of the product or service (Zeithaml, 1988). The perceived quality of a brand or product differs from its actual quality in that consumers' quality perceptions depend on their interpretation of cues (Aaker & McLoughlin, 2010). The consumer's judgement is derived from extrinsic and intrinsic cues, where intrinsic cues relate to the physical product characteristics such as the size, colour and material, while extrinsic cues refer to the price, brand image, warranties and advertising, among others (Aaker 1991; Konuk, 2019). As such, the perceived quality is not limited to the overall quality of the product itself (Sivaram *et al*., 2019) but also takes into account the benefits that the brand promises (Zeithaml, 1988). Brands that are perceived to be of good quality will stand out from competing

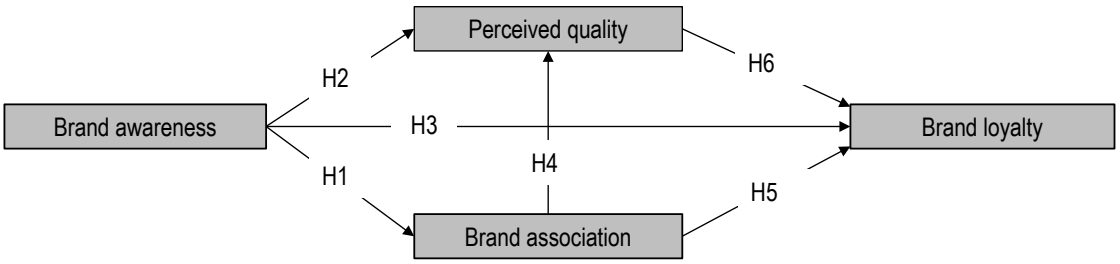
brands (Yoo *et al*., 2000; Bao *et al*., 2011) and will positively affect consumers' attitudes, preferences (Richardson *et al*., 1994) and commitment towards the brand (Aurier & Gilles, 2012). Buil *et al*. (2013) concur and state that good perceived quality would lead to increased loyalty.

Several studies, such as the study of Vazifehdoost and Negahdari (2018) on fashion brands in Iran, have found that perceived quality has a positive impact on customers' loyalty towards the brand. Likewise, in a study on the cosmetic industry, Zhao *et al*. (2022) discovered that perceived quality has a significant influence on brand loyalty. Correspondingly, Khan *et al*., 2019) reported that the perceived quality of brands that are endorsed by celebrities influences customers' loyalty toward the brand. Similar findings were also reported by Rahim *et al*. (2020) regarding Malaysian budget hotels, Nayebzadeh and Farmani (2018) on Mehr chain hotels in Yazd, and Andik and Rachma (2022), who investigated customers' loyalty toward the new Yobrow brand. Furthermore, various other studies have found evidence of the significant direct influence of perceived quality on brand loyalty (Falahat *et al*., 2018; Mensah *et al*., 2021; Tammubua, 2021). In keeping with the findings of these studies, the following hypothesis was formulated:

H6: The perceived quality of fashion brands will have a positive direct influence on Generation Y students' loyalty towards the fashion brand.

The proposed model in which the hypothesised relationships are depicted is presented in Figure 1 below. As per the hypotheses that were formulated, this model proposes that brand awareness has a positive direct influence on brand association, perceived quality and loyalty. In addition, brand association has a direct positive influence on brand loyalty and perceived quality, which, in turn, also influences brand loyalty directly.

Figure 1: Proposed model



Source: Author's own compilation

3. METHODOLOGY

The research design followed in this study was a quantitative, descriptive research design, using a single cross-sectional sample. This study included a convenience sample of 750 male and female Generation Y students that were between 18 and 24 years of age and who were registered at one of three public South African higher education institutions from whom the required permission was obtained. The three higher education institutions that were included in the study were selected using the judgement sampling technique. As such, one traditional university, one university of technology and one comprehensive university in the Gauteng Province were selected. The Gauteng Province was selected as it is the most populated province (Stats SA, 2022) and houses the largest number of higher education institutions (Universities South Africa, 2023). A sample size of 750 students was considered appropriate as it is in line with the sample sizes of similar studies, such as the study of Azzari and Pelissari (2021) (sample size of 622) and Tong and Hawley (2009) (sample size of 660). A self-administered questionnaire was distributed to the students at the participating campuses using the mall-intercept method. The students were invited to take part in the study. Those who accepted the invitation to participate were given a questionnaire to complete, which they could withdraw at any point. All the responses were confidential as the questionnaire did not request any personal information such as names, addresses, or cell phone numbers that could reveal the participants' identity. The questionnaire gathered the participants' demographic information (Section A), and a six-point Likert-type scale was used to measure the participants' perceptions regarding their loyalty, awareness, association and perceived quality of their preferred fashion brand (Section B). The items used to measure these four factors were adapted from previously published scales (Yoo *et al*., 2000; Gil *et al*., 2007; Chen & Green, 2009; Tong & Hawley, 2009). The data analysis conducted for this study included exploratory factor analysis using the principal components method with varimax rotation. In addition, Cronbach's alpha values were computed to determine internal-consistency reliability; correlation analysis was conducted; and structural equation modelling (SEM) was used to conduct confirmatory factor analysis and path analysis.

4. RESULTS

From the 750 questionnaires that were distributed, a total of 625 questionnaires were completed in full and deemed usable as they met the sample requirement in terms of participants' age. From the sample included in the study, as presented in Table 1, the majority indicated being 20 years of age, followed by those being 21 years. In terms of gender, slightly

more females than males participated in the study. In terms of province of origin, the most represented province was Gauteng, followed by Limpopo and then the Free State Province.

Table 1: Sample description

	Frequency	Percent (%)		Frequency	Percent (%)
Age			**Province**		
18	104	16.6	Eastern Cape	32	5.1
19	107	17.1	Free State	60	9.6
20	154	24.6	Gauteng	360	57.8
21	126	20.2	KwaZulu-Natal	28	4.5
22	69	11	Limpopo	61	9.8
23	48	7.7	Mpumalanga	42	6.7
24	17	2.7	Northern Cape	3	0.5
Gender			North West	34	5.5
Male	292	46.7	Western Cape	3	0.5
Female	333	53.5	Missing	2	0.3

Source: Author's own compilation

The exploratory factor analysis was conducted to identify any items that loaded poorly, cross-loaded, or had a low communality value. The results returned a Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) value of 0.865 and a significant Bartlett's test of sphericity (chi-square = 3631.553, df = 91, p = 0.000), indicating sampling adequacy and the factorability of the data (Field, 2009). Table 2 presents the rotated component matrix, communalities, eigenvalues, variance extracted and Cronbach alpha values for the extracted factors.

Table 2: Exploratory factor analysis

Items	Factors				Communalities
	1	2	3	4	
1				0.822	0.720
2				0.826	0.769
3				0.642	0.512
4	0.843				0.780
5	0.628				0.524
6	0.863				0.773
7	0.831				0.753
8			0.755		0.655
9			0.796		0.724

10			0.788		0.699
11		0.686			0.561
12		0.737			0.591
13		0.863			0.781
14		0.796			0.687
Eigenvalues	5.272	1.747	1.347	1.161	
Percentage variance	37.660	12.482	9.620	8.295	
Cronbach alphas	0.857	0.818	0.775	0.737	

Source: Author's own compilation

As evident in Table 2, four factors were extracted, which is consistent with the literature. These four factors combined explained 68.06% of the variance. The factor loadings of all the items exceeded 0.50 (Malhotra, 2020). Given that all the communalities, which range from 0.512 to 0.781, surpassed 0.40, it provides evidence that each item corresponds with its respective factor (Pallant, 2020). The Cronbach's alpha values of each construct exceeded the recommended 0.70, suggesting internal-consistency reliability (Pallant, 2020). To establish the relationship between the four factors, Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficients were calculated and presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Correlation matrix

	Brand awareness	Perceived quality	Brand association
Brand awareness	1		
Perceived quality	0.407*	1	
Brand association	0.426*	0.432*	1
Brand loyalty	0.385*	0.368*	0.417*
*Significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)			

Source: Author's own compilation

The findings presented in Table 3 revealed that a statistically significant ($p \leq 0.01$) positive relationship exists between all four factors, which suggests nomological validity of the measurement theory. The strongest relationship was found between brand association and perceived quality ($r = 0.432$), followed by the relationship between brand association and brand awareness ($r = 0.426$). This infers that Generation Y students' loyalty towards fashion brands is associated with their awareness of and association with the brand, as well as their perceived quality of the brand. Given that all the correlation coefficients fell below 0.90, no obvious multicollinearity issues were identified (Hair *et al*., 2014). In addition, the collinearity diagnostics were assessed and returned tolerance values that ranged between 0.694 and

0.751 and an average variance inflation factor (VIF) of 1.38. Since the tolerance values were above 0.10 and the VIF below 10 (Pallant, 2020), there was no indication of multicollinearity concerns. Subsequently, a measurement model was initiated.

Confirmatory factor analysis was performed on the four-factor measurement model that comprised brand awareness (three indicators), perceived quality (four indicators), brand association (three indicators) and brand loyalty (four indicators). The initial loading of each latent factor was fixed at 1.0. This led to the estimation of 119 distinct sample moments and 48 distinct parameters, equalling 71 degrees of freedom (df) and a chi-square value of 203.859 with a probability level of 0.000.

The measurement model was evaluated to identify standardised factor loadings that exceeded 1.0 or fell below -1.0 as well as any negative error variances (Hair *et al*., 2014). Additionally, composite reliability (CR) was assessed as well as construct validity, by calculating the average variance extracted (AVE) and performing an HTMT analysis. The standardised factor loadings, error variances, composite reliability, AVE and HTMT analysis results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Measurement model estimates

Latent factors	Standardised loading estimates	Error variance estimates	CR	AVE	HTMT analysis		
					F1	F2	F3
Brand awareness (F1)	0.717	0.514	0.757	0.516			
	0.841	0.707					
	0.572	0.328					
Perceived quality (F2)	0.840	0.706	0.861	0.610	0.518		
	0.634	0.402					
	0.805	0.648					
	0.828	0.685					
Brand association (F3)	0.689	0.475	0.777	0.538	0.566	0.532	
	0.772	0.596					
	0.738	0.544					
Brand loyalty (F4)	0.660	0.436	0.826	0.545	0.496	0.442	0.524
	0.669	0.448					

	0.848	0.720					
	0.759	0.577					
Correlations	F1↔F2: 0.454		F1↔F3: 0.535		F1↔F4: 0.448		
	F2↔F3: 0.503		F2↔F4: 0.391		F3↔F4: 0.503		

Source: Author's own compilation

As evident in Table 4, no evidence of problematic estimates was found in the measurement model. The CR values of the latent factors ranged between 0.757 and 0.861, surpassing the recommended value of 0.70, thereby implying composite reliability (Malhotra, 2020). The measurement model provides evidence of convergent validity since all the standardised loading estimates and the AVE values exceed 0.50 (Hair *et al*., 2014). In addition, all the HTMT values were below 0.85, which indicates discriminant validity (Henseler *et al*., 2015). Given that convergent, discriminant and nomological validity was established, construct validity is implied (Malhotra, 2020).

The statistical measures that were examined to assess the model fit of the measurement model included the standardised root mean residual (SRMR), the root mean square of approximation (RMSEA), the comparative fit index (CFI), incremental fit index (IFI), Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), normed fit index (NFI) and the chi-square statistic. If a model returns a non-significant chi-square value, an SRMR value smaller than 0.1 (Hair *et al*., 2014), an RMSEA value of 0.08 or smaller and CFI, IFI, TLI and NFI values that exceed 0.9 (Malhotra, 2020), the model fit is deemed acceptable. The model yielded a significant chi-square value of 203.859 with 71 degrees of freedom (df). However, since the chi-square value is vulnerable to large sample sizes (Byrne, 2016), other fit indices were assessed and indicated acceptable model fit such as SRMR=0.0487, RMSEA=0.055, CFI=0.963, IFI=0.963, TLI=0.952 and NFI=0.944. As such, the findings suggest that Generation Y students' fashion band loyalty is a four-factor measurement model.

Based on the measurement model, a structural model was tested that hypothesised that the brand awareness (F1) of fashion brands has a direct positive influence on the perceived quality of (F2), association with (F3), and loyalty (F4) towards fashion brands. In addition, brand association (F3) has a direct positive relationship on perceived quality (F2) and brand loyalty (F4). Lastly, the perceived quality (F2) of a fashion brand has a direct positive effect on loyalty (F4) towards the brand. The standardised and unstandardised regression coefficients (β), standard errors (SE), p-values and results are presented in Table 5.

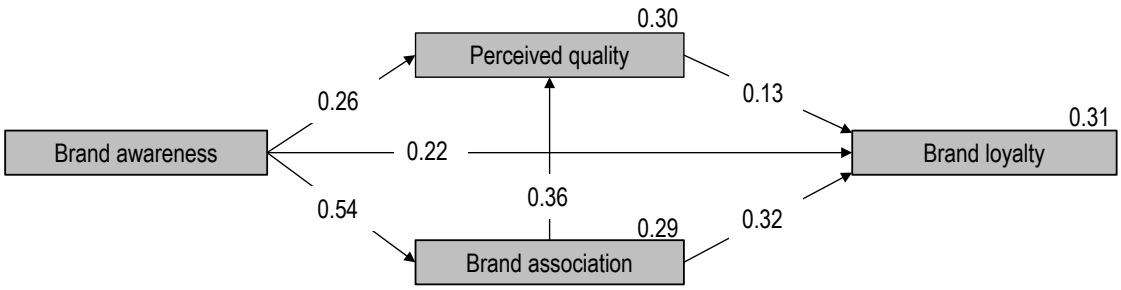
Table 5: Structural model

Paths	β	Unstandardised β	SE	p-value	Result
H1: Brand awareness → Brand association	0.54	0.48	0.051	0.00	Sig.
H2: Brand awareness → Perceived quality	0.26	0.31	0.067	0.00	Sig.
H3: Brand awareness → Brand loyalty	0.22	0.23	0.063	0.00	Sig.
H4: Brand association → Perceived quality	0.36	0.48	0.077	0.00	Sig.
H5: Brand association → Brand loyalty	0.32	0.39	0.077	0.00	Sig.
H6: Perceived quality → Brand loyalty	0.13	0.12	0.047	0.01	Sig.
p: two-tailed statistical significance					

Source: Author's own compilation

From the results provided in Table 5, it is evident that every path tested in the model were positively and statistically significant (p≤0.01). Brand awareness has a statistically significant positive influence on brand association (β=0.54, p≤0.01), perceived quality (β=0.26, p≤0.01) and brand loyalty (β=0.22, p≤0.01). Furthermore, brand association has a statistically significant positive influence on perceived quality (β=0.36, p≤0.01) and brand loyalty (β=0.32, p≤0.01), and perceived quality, in turn, has a statistically significant influence on Generation Y students' fashion brand loyalty (β=0.13, p≤0.01). In terms of the squared multiple correlation (SMC) coefficients, the tested model describes 29% of the variance in Generation Y students' fashion brand association, 30% of the variance in the perceived quality of fashion brands and 31% of the variance in Generation Y students' loyalty towards fashion brands. The structural model accompanied by the standardised regression coefficients and SMC coefficients is displayed in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Structural model



Source: Author's own compilation

The structural model returned a significant chi-square statistic [203.859 (df=71, p<0.000)]; however, produced acceptable model fit indices of SRMR=0.0487, RMSEA=0.055, CFI=0.963, IFI=0.963, TLI=0.952 and NFI= 0.944.

5. DISCUSSION

The objective of the study was to explore the relationship between Generation Y students' fashion brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality and brand loyalty. The findings of the correlation analysis revealed that Generation Y students' awareness and perceived quality of and their association with fashion brands are related to their loyalty towards fashion brands. To test the hypotheses formulated in the study, SEM was conducted. The results of the confirmatory factor analysis confirmed that the fashion brand loyalty model is a four-factor structure that consists of brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality and brand loyalty. Since the measurement model exhibited acceptable model fit and internal-consistency reliability, composite reliability and construct validity were implied, and path analysis was performed. In H1, it was hypothesised that the fashion brand awareness of Generation Y students would influence their associations with the brand. Based on the findings of the study, this hypothesis was accepted. This finding is consistent with several previous studies that reported that brand awareness has a significant influence on brand associations (Satvati *et al*., 2016; Nayebzadeh & Farmani, 2018; Bae *et al*., 2020). The finding relating to H2 was in support of the hypothesis as it shows that Generation Y students' brand awareness significantly influences their quality perceptions of the brand. This result is in line with previous studies that also found a direct relationship between brand awareness and perceived quality (Satvati *et al*., 2016; Hermaren & Achyar, 2018; Nayebzadeh & Farmani, 2018; Purwoko & Sihombing, 2018; Astawa & Rahanatha, 2021; Tammubua, 2021). Fashion brand awareness's direct influence on Generation Y students' brand loyalty was tested in H3. The result of the study confirmed the hypothesis and is in line with previously published studies (Vazifehdoost & Negahdari, 2018; Rahim *et al*., 2020; Pranata & Permana, 2021; Zhao *et al*., 2022). Again, in line with the outcomes of other studies (Kim *et al*., 2016; Falahat *et al*., 2018; Haxhialushi & Panajoti, 2018; Mensah *et al*., 2021), the findings of this study suggest that Generation Y students' fashion brand association has a significant direct influence on perceived quality and as a result, H4 was accepted. In H5, it was hypothesised that brand association directly influences Generation Y students' loyalty toward fashion brands. The finding of the study was in support of this hypothesis and also concurred with the outcome of past studies such as the studies conducted by Satvati *et al*. (2016), Nayebzadeh and Farmani (2018), Bae *et al*. (2020), Rahim *et al*. (2020), Mensah *et al*. (2021) and Pranata and Permana

(2021). The last hypothesis of the study, H6, theorised that the perceived quality of a fashion brand would influence Generation Y students' loyalty towards that brand. This hypothesis was supported by the findings of the study, which is also in line with previously published studies (Nayebzadeh & Farmani, 2018; Khan *et al*., 2019; Rahim *et al*., 2020; Andik & Rachma, 2022; Zhao *et al*., 2022). The findings of the study are in line with Aaker's model in that brand awareness serves as the basis for brand associations to be formed, perceived quality to be improved and ultimately, loyalty to be formed. As such, the findings suggest that once Generation Y students become more aware of a fashion brand, their associations with the brand will become stronger. In addition, their quality perceptions would improve, which, together with higher brand awareness and stronger associations, could cause the consumer to be more committed to the brand and consequently result in higher brand loyalty.

6. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

This study provides valuable insight to fashion brand managers who seek to enhance loyalty among their customers and require an understanding of the interrelationships between fashion brand loyalty, awareness, association and perceived quality. Based on the findings of the study, consumers' fashion brand awareness lays the foundation for their quality perceptions to be formed, associations to be strengthened and ultimately, loyalty to be enhanced. As such, to increase brand loyalty among Generation Y consumers, brand managers and marketers should aim to increase consumers' brand awareness, which will also strengthen their brand associations and enhance their quality perceptions. It is therefore recommended that the first step is to increase brand awareness among consumers. This can be achieved by increasing consumers' brand exposure so that the consumers can become more familiar with the brand. To increase brand exposure, fashion brand managers and marketers are required to adjust their marketing strategies and, more specifically, their promotion element. While both traditional and digital media can be used to market the fashion brand, Generation Y consumers grew up in a digital era where social media is part of their daily lives, and their friends' opinions are important (Tolani *et al*., 2020). Therefore, it is recommended that fashion brands and retailers have a social media presence on popular social media sites. On these sites, fashion brands and retailers should post content that invites engagement from their followers. This will not only increase awareness but will also assist with strengthening the associations with the brand. To gain maximum exposure, fashion brand managers and marketers should ensure that the content can be shared by their followers. Given that Generation Y consumers react positively towards fashion brands that relate to their self-identity (Valaei & Nikhashemi, 2017), in the advertisements and engagements, fashion brand managers and marketers should aim

to highlight the aspects of the brands that these consumers would be able to relate to. This will strengthen the associations with the brand. In addition, fashion brands and retailers could make use of an endorser or even sponsor events that will display the values of the brand and thereby strengthen consumers' associations with the brand. Subsequently, the perceived quality of the brand could also be influenced positively. Another means of improving the perceived quality of the brand is to highlight the quality cues of the brand, such as product quality cues, namely the style and material, as well as other quality cues such as the price and image of the brand. By focusing on increasing consumers' awareness of fashion brands, strengthening their associations with the brand and increasing their quality perceptions of the brand, their loyalty towards fashion brands will likely increase, which ensures repeat business for fashion brands.

7. CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on many industries globally, including the fashion industry. While there was tense competition among fashion brands and retailers pre-COVID, this was intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the changes in consumers' decision-making processes. To remain competitive and survive, consumers' fashion brand loyalty has become increasingly important. Generation Y consumers are fashion and brand-conscious and have a significant influence on the success of fashion brands and retailers. Therefore, this study sought to determine the relationship between the drivers of Generation Y students' brand loyalty within the South African fashion industry. By following a descriptive research design, the required data was collected from 625 Generation Y students using a self-administered questionnaire. The findings of the study suggest that brand awareness influences brand loyalty directly and indirectly through brand association and perceived quality. In addition, it was found that brand association directly influences brand loyalty and perceived quality, which then also influences brand loyalty directly. By increasing Generation Y consumers' awareness of fashion brands, fashion brand managers and marketers would be able to strengthen their associations with the brand, increase the perceived quality of the brand and as a result, would likely increase consumers' loyalty toward the brand.

This study was not without its limitations. A convenience sample of 625 Generation Y students was included in the study, and therefore, caution should be taken when generalising the findings to a larger population. Given that only 29% of the variance in brand association, 30% of the variance in perceived quality and 31% of the variance in brand loyalty were explained by the factors investigated in this study, it implies that there are other factors that would have an influence and therefore, provides an opportunity for future research. In addition, further

research is required to determine the factors that contribute to Generation Y students' brand awareness so that marketers are able to establish and increase brand awareness more effectively with the aim of ultimately increasing consumers' loyalty towards the brands.

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