

# Consuming For Recognition: South African Youth Consumption Of Status Clothing

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## ABSTRACT

*Buying expensive and fashionable brands to portray social status is increasing rapidly among South African township youth. The South African youth mainly spend their income on status-depicting clothing in order to conform to social settings and groups and to be noticed by their community. This study investigates the factors influencing the need to consume status-depicting clothing items among South African township youth. A self-completing survey questionnaire was administered to 400 youth consumers from three township malls in the Sedibeng district, Gauteng region of South Africa. Regression analysis was employed to analyse the data. The results suggest that materialism, fashion clothing involvement and group identity are key factors predicting status consumption among South African township youth consumers (aged 18-24 years). Marketers interested in targeting status conscious township youth consumers are advised to devise their advertisements in such a way that they emphasise the brand or product's ability to indicate status.*

**Keywords:** Status Consumption; Group Identity; Materialism; Clothing Involvement

## INTRODUCTION

Buying expensive and fashionable brands to portray social status is not new among many societies (Lertwannawit & Mandhanchitara, 2012). O'Cass, Lee and Siahtiri (2013) believe that, in some instances, certain consumers are preoccupied with what they wear and how others perceive them. As a result, those who have a notion that their purchase offers a sense of status, tend to require affirmation from others (O'Cass & Frost, 2002). Schiffman and Kanuk (2010) refer to status as the ranking of individuals in each social class using factors such as power, wealth and prestige.

There is a perception that individuals who display status are wealthy and prestigious (Grotts & Johnson, 2012), superior (Eastman & Liu, 2012), and may even be perceived as occupying a higher position in the community (Brezinova & Vijayakumar, 2012). That is why certain other people will go to great lengths to buy products or services not only to obtain value in the use of a product (Oliveira-Castro, Foxall & Schrezenmaier, 2005), but also to see how others react to their purchase (Mason, 1992) as well as to seek recognition and appreciation (O'Cass & Frost, 2002). This situation is more profound in developing countries (Van Kempen, 2009). In these countries, a significant number of people want others to know what they have purchased. Van Kempen (2009:35) noted with concern that consumption in these countries is "understood in the light of a psychology of self-esteem and social prestige" rather than satisfying physical needs. This led Mason (1993:2) to conclude that in developing countries, buying of products and services with social status connotation is not measured in rational terms but rather by "social advantage such purchases secure". Such consumption patterns have been observed among South African youth as well. According to Bevan-Dye, Garnett and De Klerk (2012) the South African youth mainly spend their income on status-depicting clothing in order to be noticed by their community. Parker, Hermans and Schaefer (2004) concur and also believe that such spending conveys one's standing in their communities. Sometimes the youth purchase status related products and services in order to belong and conform to social settings and groups (Aghaei, Karbasi, Falahati, Hamayoun Aghapour, Songtarashami & Koulak, 2014). Therefore, status buying has become so prevalent that it is used to signal an individual's socio-economic position within one's group and to gain recognition from others (Kaus, 2013).

Research on status consumption show how certain factors, namely, materialism, group identity, clothing involvement, need for uniqueness, self-monitoring, gender and interpersonal influence predispose consumers to buy status related

products. This study differs from that of previous ones in that it adds to it by focusing exclusively on township youth consumption behaviours. In doing so, it is responding to Freeman's (1993) call on research for an understanding of the behaviour and dynamics of township youth. Second, this study focused mainly on three specific factors of status consumption, rather than assessing a larger set of variables. These factors are deemed important for the present study as South African media have described township youth's consumption behaviour as driven mainly by the purchase of high-end designer clothing and accessories based on the desire to be socially accepted by peers and surrounding communities. Media reports further claim that the South African township youth consumer take clothing as a means of self-expression and for this consumer group, possessing expensive designer clothing items have come to serve as a symbol of status (Vocativ, 2014). Therefore, this study will allow us to move beyond global assumption of determinants of status consumption and allow us to determine how selected factors driving South African township youth's purchase of high-end designer clothing might contribute to status consumption literature. Therefore, there is a gap in literature where only these factors are studied in the context of township youth of a developing country. Most studies conducted on status consumption in developing countries focus on spending patterns on status goods (Bevan-Dye, Garnett & De Klerk, 2012) and also on welfare consequences of status consumption (Brown, Bulte & Zhang, 2011). Therefore, this study focuses on what influences consumption patterns of expensive designer clothing among the South African township youth between the ages of 18 and 24 years. Markert (2004) defines youth as those individuals between the ages of 10 and 29.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT**

O'Cass and Frost (2002) are concerned, rightly so, that some people in many societies buy products and services not to satisfy their physiological needs, but rather, consumption is driven by symbolic, hedonic, social conformity and the motivation that creates a need for uniqueness. Veblen (1899:210) defines symbolic consumption as the "process when consumers consume status products as symbols to communicate meaning about themselves to their reference groups". Symbolic products are products that are mainly sensitive to social influence and are visible (Nueno & Quelch, 1998). Eastman, Iyer, and Thomas (2013) point out that symbolic products include luxury clothing, accessories, automobiles, and furniture. Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) note that fun, fantasy and playfulness are among the reasons why certain individuals buy these products. But more interesting and of concern is that people purchase products due to interpersonal influence, so that a specific social group can accept them (Mason, 1993). Such individuals desire to conform to the group.

### **Definition of Status Consumption**

Eastman, Goldsmith and Flynn (1999:42) define status consumption as "the motivational process by which individuals strive to improve their social standing through the conspicuous consumption of consumer products that confer and symbolize status, both for the individual and surrounding significant others". Drawing upon various definitions and conceptualisation of status consumption, Mason (2001) concluded that the visible consumption of expensive products and services offers the consumer fulfilment gained from others' responses to the apparent wealth, rather than from the worth of the product itself. Deriving from the above definitions, this paper views status consumption as buying or possessing products to enhance one's image and to demonstrate wealth through display of certain products to significant others, and to one's social group, irrespective of one's actual socio-economic background.

### **Determinants of Status Consumption**

Many factors have been studied in relation to status consumption. In this paper we identified three factors believed to influence status consumption among South African youth, namely, materialism, fashion clothing, and group identity. Therefore, the following section portrays an overview of these antecedents.

### **Materialism**

Belk (1984) describes materialism as the importance a consumer attaches to worldly possessions. Douglas and Isherwood (1979) noted that an excessive portion of people's time and efforts is dedicated to attaining and thinking about material possessions. In such instances individuals are of the opinion that their well-being could be enhanced by a relationship with objects (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002) and their achievement in life would be judged by the

material possessions they have acquired (Belk, 1984; Richins, 1994). Thus, possessions have come to serve as an important symbol for one's happiness. The desire to purchase products for material reasons may generate status consumption (Ferre & Chan, 2013). Often, Mason (2001) explains, individuals are not consuming the product because of its worth, but rather for fulfilment derived from others' responses to the wealth shown. Against this background, the following hypothesis is formulated:

**H1:** There is a direct relationship between materialism and status consumption.

### **Fashion Clothing Involvement**

O'Cass and McEwen (2004) define fashion clothing involvement as the degree to which a purchaser views the related fashion clothing activities as a fundamental part of their lives. People tend to pay more attention to specific clothing items (Kim, 2008) and attach significance to such items based on needs, desires and values (Zaichkowsky, 1985). Thus, the way people consume clothing items is an indication that their behaviour is influenced in part by a desire to enhance one's social image (Khare, 2014). This will especially be the case with clothing items where consumer's involvement, which refers to a link between an individual and an object (O'Cass, 2004), is highly related to the symbolic nature of the product, as consumers take clothing as a means of self-expression (Michaelidou & Dibb, 2006). In such instances, clothing fulfils a number of functions beyond mere functional performance (Hourigan & Bougoure, 2012). To a certain extent, Piamphangsant and Mandhachitara (2008) noticed that clothing may show how important a person is, tells others how much status a person has and what the person is like. Therefore, we offer the following hypothesis:

**H2:** Fashion clothing involvement has a positive influence on status consumption.

### **Group Identity**

Certain people's consumption patterns are shaped by surrounding forces and circumstances (Sanne, 2002). Social groups are notable for influencing one's status consumption. Ledgerwood, Liviatan and Carnevale (2007) suggest that belonging to a group is associated with an extension of one's self and desire to be around other individuals who share similar characteristics. Generally, people tend to do what is socially desirable and are influenced by other's behaviours. This is often observed during consumption. Consumers tend to analyse their purchase decisions with respect to their personal and social identities and prefer products that reinforce their group identity (Khare, Mishra & Parveen, 2012). Many of the consumers are of the opinion that to minimise purchase risk, they should seek information from other consumers (Christopher, John & Sudhahar, 2014) with whom they identify (Chen & Xin-Li, 2009). It is not uncommon to see a person who identifies himself or herself as an affiliate of a particular social group, to regularly conform to core characteristics of that specific social group and taking the group's interest to heart, including their buying behaviour (Reed, Forehand, Puntoni & Warlop, 2012). As O'Cass and Frost (2002) noticed, consumers who are prone to group influence are also very conscious of status. As a result, O'Cass and McEwen (2004) are of the opinion that status consumption "cannot be achieved without the presence of others". Therefore, group identity is described as an individual's sense of self, derived from perceived belonging in social groups (Reza & Valeecha, 2013). The above arguments led to the following hypothesis:

**H3:** Group identity has a significant positive influence on status consumption.

### **Measuring Instrument**

Items of this study's constructs were adapted from previous studies. This ensured content validity. A scale developed by Eastman et al. (1999) was used to measure status consumption. Clothing involvement was measured by using Mittal and Lee's measurement scale (1989). To measure materialism, Richins and Dawson's (1992) measurement scale was used. The Cameron (2004) scale measured the group identity. Modifications were made to the scales to fit the context and purpose of the study. All variables were measured using five-point Likert scales with anchors, strongly agree=1 and strongly disagree=5.

## Sample

Hypotheses of this study were tested by administering a survey questionnaire to a convenience sample of 400 youth consumers from three township malls in the Sedibeng district, Gauteng region of South Africa. The questionnaire consisted of a filtering question asking respondents whether they had bought either of the following branded clothing most popular among South African youth: Adidas, Billabong, Daniel Hechter, Diesel, DKNY, Carvela or Gucci. Out of the 400 questionnaires handed out, 37 respondents refused to participate in the survey, resulting in 363 respondents who completed the questionnaires. However, 18 questionnaires were either incomplete or the respondents indicated that they did not buy branded clothing. These questionnaires were removed from the survey, resulting in 345 usable questionnaires, thus leading to a response rate of 86 percent. Table 1 presents a profile of respondents.

**Table 1.** Demographic characteristics of the respondents

|                    |                              | Frequency | Percentage |
|--------------------|------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Gender             | Male                         | 160       | 46         |
|                    | Female                       | 185       | 54         |
| Total              |                              | 345       | 100        |
| Age                | 18                           | 46        | 13         |
|                    | 19                           | 103       | 31         |
|                    | 20                           | 69        | 20         |
|                    | 21                           | 49        | 14         |
|                    | 22                           | 51        | 15         |
|                    | 23                           | 12        | 4          |
|                    | 24                           | 9         | 3          |
| Total              |                              | 345       | 100        |
| Level of education | Postgraduate Degree          | 10        | 3          |
|                    | Undergraduate Diploma/Degree | 143       | 41         |
|                    | FET Diploma                  | 137       | 40         |
|                    | Matric                       | 52        | 15         |
|                    | Primary School qualification | 3         | 1          |
| Total              |                              | 345       | 100        |
| Monthly income     | Less than R500               | 21        | 6          |
|                    | R500-R1000                   | 40        | 12         |
|                    | R1001-1500                   | 57        | 17         |
|                    | R1501-R2000                  | 98        | 28         |
|                    | R2001-R2500                  | 81        | 24         |
|                    | R2501-R3000                  | 22        | 5          |
|                    | R3001-R3500                  | 7         | 2          |
|                    | R3501-R4000                  | 3         | 1          |
|                    | R4001-R4500                  | 7         | 2          |
|                    | R4501-R5000                  | 6         | 2          |
|                    | R5001-R5500                  | 2         | 1          |
| Total              |                              |           | 100        |

Table 1 shows that 54 percent of the respondents were female and 46 percent male. Of these respondents the majority (31 percent) were 19 years of age. The majority (41 percent) of the respondents held undergraduate tertiary qualifications. Of the 345 respondents, 28 percent received monthly income.

## DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

We used Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 24.0 to compute descriptive statistics, correlation and regression analysis. Before testing the hypothesised relationships among constructs, the first step was to conduct descriptive analysis of the variables used in the study. The means and standard deviations for the sample of 345 respondents are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics and scale reliability

| Construct                    | Valid N | Mean | Standard Deviation | Cronbach alpha |
|------------------------------|---------|------|--------------------|----------------|
| Status consumption           | 345     | 3.89 | 0.85               | 0.822          |
| Materialism                  | 345     | 3.80 | 0.51               | 0.659          |
| Group identity               | 345     | 3.89 | 1.03               | 0.890          |
| Fashion clothing involvement | 345     | 4.17 | 0.79               | 0.865          |

Table 2 indicates the measures of central tendency and dispersion for the dimensions of status consumption. The lowest mean recorded of 3.80 was on materialism. This indicates that the respondents of this study neither agree nor disagree that materialism has an effect on status consumption. The mean score for fashion involvement was higher, with the value of 4.17. This suggests that the respondents of this study agreed that fashion clothing involvement is one of the important dimensions in status consumption. For group identity, the mean score of 3.89 suggests that the respondents of this study slightly agree that group identity affects status consumption.

The highest standard deviation in all the scales computed was on group identity scale (1.03), followed by status consumption scale with 0.85, then fashion clothing involvement scale with 0.79, while materialism (0.51) had the lowest standard deviation. These values indicate that the sample is moderately homogeneous and the mean gives satisfactory indication of the responses.

### Reliability Analysis

Reliability analysis was performed by assessing Cronbach alpha. As measured by Cronbach alpha, the internal consistency of the status consumption, materialism, group identity and fashion clothing involvement scales were 0.822, 0.659, 0.890 and 0.865 respectively and were of acceptable levels. The last column of Table 2 above represents Cronbach alphas of the scales.

### Correlation Analysis and Validity

Pearson correlation was performed to measure the degree of association between different variables and also validity. Table 3 presents a correlation matrix of the variables of the study.

**Table 3.** Correlation matrix

| Construct                    | Status consumption | Materialism | Group identity | Fashion clothing involvement |
|------------------------------|--------------------|-------------|----------------|------------------------------|
| Status consumption           | 1                  | 0.581**     | 0.783**        | 0.735**                      |
| Materialism                  |                    | 1           | 0.648**        | 0.514**                      |
| Group identity               |                    |             | 1              | 0.712**                      |
| Fashion clothing involvement |                    |             |                | 1                            |

Significant at (\*p<0.05); \*\*p<0.01

Table 3 indicates a strong significant positive relationship between fashion clothing involvement and status consumption ( $r=0.735$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), a positive significant relationship between fashion clothing involvement and group identity ( $r=0.712$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), status consumption and group identity ( $r=0.783$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) and a positive significant relationship between materialism and group identity ( $r=0.648$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). Although the relationship between fashion clothing involvement and materialism ( $r=0.514$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) is significant and positive and the relationship between status consumption and materialism ( $r=0.581$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) is also positive and significant, they are slightly lower than correlations of other constructs in the study. However, this is not a concern since lower correlations values are at times an indication that the constructs of the study would not have multicollinearity issues.

The correlation values presented in Table 3 are further used to determine validity. As can be seen from the table above, all correlations are statistically significant with substantially higher values suggesting a high degree of convergence among the constructs of status consumption. This, therefore, confirms existence of convergent validity.

## Regression Analysis

The hypothesised relationships among the constructs of this study were tested using regression analysis. Table 4 presents the results of regression analysis.

**Table 4.** Determinants of status consumption (betas and significance levels)

| Construct                    | Standardised Coefficients | T values | Significance level |
|------------------------------|---------------------------|----------|--------------------|
| Status consumption           | 0.124                     | 2.694    | 0.007              |
| Materialism                  | 0.459                     | 9.140    | 0.000              |
| Fashion clothing involvement | 0.328                     | 7.302    | 0.000              |

Significant at  $p < 0.05$  level

Table 4 shows that fashion clothing involvement ( $\beta = 0.328$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) significantly and positively predicted status consumption of township youth consumers. Therefore, the results indicate that fashion-involved consumers are more likely to engage in status consumption. There was a direct relationship between materialism ( $\beta = 0.124$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and status consumption. Group identity ( $\beta = 0.459$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) had a significant positive influence on status consumption. Therefore, the hypotheses that there is a direct relationship among the predictors of status consumption, namely fashion clothing involvement, materialism and group identity, were supported.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study investigated the factors influencing the need to consume status-depicting clothing items among South African township youth. The findings indicate that of the three factors, fashion clothing involvement with its high mean value, has more explanatory power in determining status consumption among the South African township youth consumers. Clothing, according to Piamphangsant and Mandhachitara (2008), says how important a person is and demonstrates to others how much status an individual has and as such, people attach more status on clothing (Jordaan & Simpson, 2006).

This study's results point to a direct and positive relationship between materialism and status consumption. This suggests that even though society frowns upon materialistic behaviours, saying these behaviours erode the social fibre of the communities in so many ways, however, numerous people still believe that possessions are a necessary, pleasing form of commodity to reach desirable states, including happiness (Richins & Dawson, 1992). However, contrary to this belief, Burroughs and Rindfleisch (2002:349) are of the view that "highly materialistic individuals are less happy and more unsatisfied with their lives and face a greater risk of psychological disorders compared to less materialistic individuals", thereby defeating the objective of acquiring material objects. Given the widespread prevalence of attaching importance to material possessions, Ferle and Chan (2013) noted with concern that materialistic individuals tend to be active in status consumption.

Consistent with previous studies, this study showed a link between group identity and status consumption. This therefore suggests that, indeed, a person who identifies himself or herself as an affiliate of a particular social group will regularly conform to core characteristics of that specific social group. Such core characteristics invite the individual to take the group's interests to heart, including their buying behaviour (Reed et al., 2012), resulting in them becoming prone to status consumption (O'Cass & Frost, 2002).

## MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The present study was conducted in South African townships in the Gauteng province. Although South African townships are generally populated by low to middle class families, as the findings of the present study revealed, this does not deter township youth consumers from spending on high-end branded products. The findings of the present study suggest that the South African township youth consumers have embraced the notion that for a product to be of high status, it should be "pricey", stylish and of high quality. Therefore, marketers should attract these consumers by offering brands that carry connotations of style, price and quality. It is the very status connotation attached to these brands that actually has made them popular among the township youth. Also, marketers should increase engagement

with this segment in order to build stronger relationships. One of the ways to engage with this segment will be through social media. Lately, there has been an observed general surge of social media use in South Africa, particularly among the youth (UNICEF, 2016). This presents an opportunity for marketers to interact with this segment. In fact, marketers might start by creating brand fan pages specifically for those brands popular among township youth consumers. With such pages, the township youth consumers might be able to connect with those individuals with similar brand values and behaviours. Who knows, perhaps such interactions may ultimately lead to the formation of brand communities which are known to foster brand loyalty (Andersen, 2005) resulting in repeat purchases (Hur, Ahn & Kim, 2011). As it happens, there is a South African group of young township consumers with exactly similar characteristics as that of a brand community. This group is referred to as “Izikhothane”. Although from impoverished backgrounds, members of this community wear expensive designer brands to flaunt their “pricey” possessions (TVSA, 2012). This has important implications to marketers. When it comes to these communities, parents or guardians willingly buy these high-end products even when it is known they cannot afford them. Therefore, marketers should jealously guard this and other promising youth segments through consistent interactions and also by designing promotions aimed at such segments of South African township youth consumers.

### LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Although this study makes a contribution to status consumption literature, considering the fact that studies on status consumption in developing countries, especially in township markets, are limited and those that are conducted on spending patterns on status goods (Bevan-Dye, Garnett & De Klerk, 2012) and also on welfare consequences of status consumption (Brown, Bulte & Zhang, 2011), the study is fraught with limitations. One such limitation is the use of respondents between the ages of 18 and 24 years. Some of these respondents have not yet left home and begun to earn money. For instance, 80 percent of the respondents of this study are students receiving an allowance from their parents. Therefore, parents will have more control on how much allowance to give and what goods and services to buy. Therefore, future research could focus on the income earning segment of the population. Furthermore, future studies could explore several connections between the variables and constructs used in this study and perhaps examine a larger set of variables that are not explored in this study which may shed light to the consumption behaviour of township youth.

### AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

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## NOTES