

Evaluative criteria applied by South African female fashion consumers when purchasing casual daywear

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Abstract

Criteria used by fashion consumers to assess the quality of apparel products during the decision-making process are a good indication of what considerations marketers and retailers should keep in mind for customer satisfaction. Evaluative criteria used to a great extent by apparel customers when judging garment quality are intrinsic attributes, embracing physical features such as design/style, materials and construction as well as performance features such as aesthetic and functional aspects of clothing. The broad research aim of this exploratory study was to determine which intrinsic criteria were used by female fashion consumers in the Vaal Region to evaluate apparel quality when purchasing casual daywear. A self-administered, structured questionnaire was used to collect the data. Section 1 measured the importance of intrinsic clothing evaluative criteria, while section 2 gathered demographic information of the respondents. A representative sample was chosen from the academic personnel of all seven tertiary institutions in the Vaal Region in South Africa. The majority of the lecturers (38%) was between the ages of 31 and 40, which was relatively young. The predominant population group was white (65.7%), while 25% of the respondents were black. They all had a tertiary qualification, indicating a relatively high educational level, and an average income, based on research by Stellenbosch Bureau for Economic Research. Regarding the application of evaluative criteria for quality assessment, these respondents used intrinsic apparel attributes extensively. Three functional performance aspects namely durability, comfort and fit were rated equal and most important for judging quality. Three clusters of respondents could be distinguished, each with a specific disposition towards the evaluative criteria.

Introduction

Marketers are increasingly more concerned about consumers' perceptions of product features (Du Plessis and Rousseau, 2007). Success in the retail environment depends on the ability to predict and subsequently meet the demands of consumers, which can be achieved by assessing consumers' perceptions of the product characteristics that may influence their purchase decisions (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2007; Hoyer and MacInnis, 2010). Consumers' perception of garments which they consider to purchase encompasses garment analysis and the application of specific evaluative criteria in order to assess garment quality (Kadolph, 1998). Physical apparel attributes such as style, fabric, construction, colour and general appearance as well as performance attributes such as care, fit, durability and comfort are all intrinsic criteria that may influence consumers' buying decisions to a variable degree (Brown and Rice, 2001; Retief and De Klerk, 2003). This study will focus on intrinsic criteria.

The motivation for this study embraces diverse facets of apparel procurement, from both consumers' and retailers' perspective. Various studies have attempted to identify criteria which apparel consumers apply to assess the quality of clothing (Eckman *et al.*, 1990; Forsythe *et al.*, 1996; Retief and De Klerk, 2003), an aspect entailing crucial marketing implications. If marketers have insufficient knowledge about the dimensions of fashion and technological quality which apparel consumers apply to make their decisions, they may mistakenly focus their attention on product attributes that are not important to consumers. In order to maintain a competitive advantage, manufacturers and retailers must make sure that they develop and implement a product-specific customer-oriented strategy (Hoyer and MacInnis, 2010). Worldwide consumers are becoming concerned about the quality of textile products, and the industry and the customer do not always have the same view about the ways in which the quality of apparel products should be assessed (Kadolph, 1998).

A better understanding of the quality dimensions which are considered by apparel consumers, especially South African consumers, in making judgments of clothing quality is needed (Du Preez and Visser, 2003). One problem that arises with reference to this study is that consumers differ in their perception of product quality at different search stages (Hoyer and MacInnis, 2010) and in the case of clothing, this perception differs for various clothing categories (Glock and Kunz, 2005). Another problem is that it is unknown exactly which critical characteristics female apparel consumers investigate to assess apparel quality and to which extent (North *et al.*, 2003) and, lastly, that very few studies on South African female apparel consumers' application of comprehensive criteria to assess clothing quality could be located. There is therefore an urgent need to investigate the South African consumer regarding criteria applied when evaluating apparel with the purpose of purchasing clothing. These findings can subsequently be utilized to advise apparel marketers regarding an apparel-specific customer-oriented strategy.

For the purpose of this study, the following questions were formulated to direct the research: Which intrinsic criteria are applied by South African female consumers at the point of purchase to assess the quality of apparel? Can these consumers be clustered into segments in accordance with the criteria they apply to judge the quality of apparel during the pre-purchase stage in order to assist marketers to distinguish viable market segments?

Specific objectives for this study were to investigate selected demographic characteristics of the sample and to determine whether and to what extent specific intrinsic apparel attributes were used to evaluate apparel quality during the pre-purchase stage in terms of casual daywear. Relationships between the assessment of apparel quality and selected demographic characteristics were envisaged to cluster the respondents, based on the intrinsic criteria applied when judging apparel quality.

The conceptual framework

The conceptual framework (Fig. 1) illustrates the theoretical point of departure for this study and was based on existing models used for assessment of the quality of clothing products by Eckman *et al.* (1990), Brown and Rice (2001), Zhang *et al.* (2002) and Retief and De Klerk (2003).

Literature review

The literature review embraces a brief discussion of the conceptual framework.

Perspectives on apparel quality

Garment quality implies a wide range of characteristics, which may indicate superiority, excellence or a perceived level of value. No one is sure exactly what it means (Solomon and Rabolt, 2009). According to Kadolph (1998), quality is a multidimensional concept which cannot be addressed by a single definition in terms of all the dimensions, areas of impact and concerns related to apparel quality. Various authors differ in opinion regarding the selection of criteria applied by consumers for the final clothing choice. Some regard colour as very important in attracting customers (Mueller and Smiley, 1995), others mention style as the

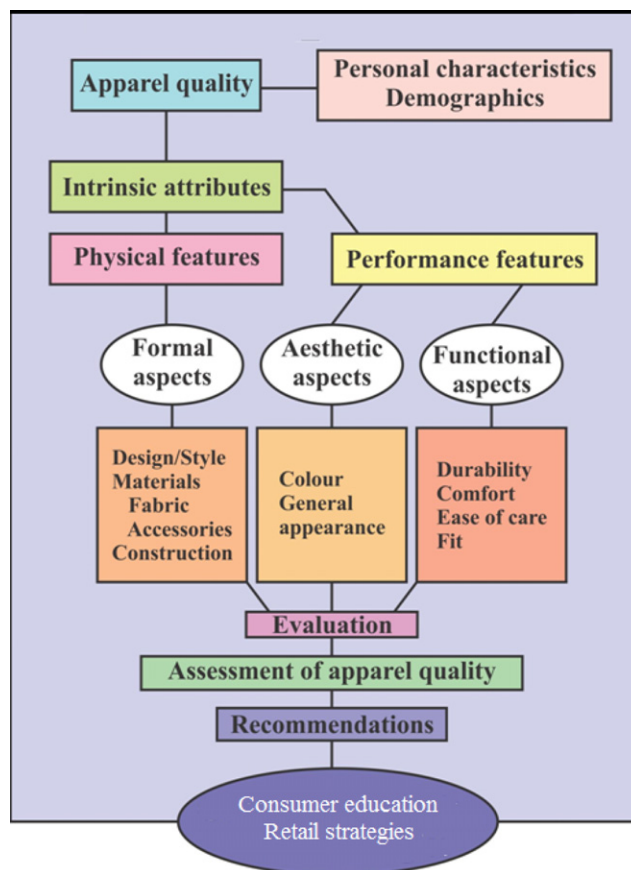


Figure 1 Conceptual framework.

most important indicator for garment choice (North *et al.*, 2003) while still others (Fiore and Damhorst, 1992; Hines and O'Neal, 1995) argue that the majority of apparel shoppers choose fabric as the most important attribute. Fiore and Damhorst (1992) regard aesthetic aspects in general as the most important decisive factor when purchasing clothing. For the purpose of this study, quality can be defined as the ability of a product to meet consumers' needs and satisfy their demands, or as the total set of attributes that contribute to the consumer's expectations.

When considering the different perspectives on quality assessment, the viewpoint of the consumer as well as the viewpoint of the manufacturer is relevant (Abraham-Murali and Littrell, 1995a; Rosenau and Wilson, 2006). Quality concerns of manufacturers and merchandisers should focus mainly on how to meet the consumer's needs and expectations of quality, which implies that the merchandiser has to analyse and understand the quality demands of the customer that determine consumer satisfaction (Rosenau and Wilson, 2006; Hawkins *et al.*, 2007).

Intrinsic product attributes

Although both intrinsic and extrinsic attributes seem to be used by consumers to assess textile product quality, Eckman *et al.* (1990), in their review of 21 studies, found that intrinsic attributes were used more often. This was confirmed by Newcomb (2010), who

also found that intrinsic attributes were considered more important and determinant than extrinsic attributes. Intrinsic cues are inherent to the product, are created during manufacturing and cannot be changed without changing the physical characteristics of the garment, such as the design/style, fabric, accessories and construction (Brown and Rice, 2001). Figure 1 categorizes intrinsic attributes as physical and performance features, which is in correspondence with the conceptual framework proposed by Retief and De Klerk (2003).

Physical features

Physical features are intrinsic attributes which comprise a garment's tangible form and composition, including *formal* aspects such as design, materials and construction (Brown and Rice, 2001). Formal aspects can be seen as representative of the physical features of garment quality (Retief and De Klerk, 2003). *Style* can be defined as the lines that distinguish one form or shape from another (Marshall *et al.*, 2004). Examples of style are shirt-waist, empire, A-line, princess and tubular styles. Hayes and McLoughlin (2006) define design/style as the grouping of lines, form, shape, space, colour and texture in a logical way. The terms *style* and *design* are often used interchangeably (Tselepis and De Klerk, 2004). For the purpose of this study, the term *style* will further be used. Various researchers (Eckman *et al.*, 1990; North *et al.*, 2003) have found that style is the most important indication of quality for consumers when purchasing apparel. *Materials* include necessities such as fabrics, accessories and other items needed to construct the garment (Brown and Rice, 2001). *Fabric* is the predominant component of any garment and makes the greatest single contribution to its cost and quality (Brown and Rice, 2001; Marshall *et al.*, 2004). Hines and O'Neal (1995) as well as Fiore and Damhorst (1992) found that in their studies the majority of the apparel shoppers chose fabric as the most important attribute contributing to apparel quality. *Accessories* include findings, notions or sundries, therefore all materials other than fabric required to produce a garment, for example the thread, trims, closures and labels (Glock and Kunz, 2005). In an investigation into consumer use of criteria for evaluating women's apparel, Abraham-Murali and Littrell (1995b) found that less than 4% of female apparel consumers pay attention to accessories such as trims, zippers and buttons. According to Fowler and Clodfelter (2001), garment *construction* entails the methods used to assemble the garment. Construction methods include seams, hems, darts, collars, sleeves and cuffs. Guidelines for construction should include details such as stitch choice, seam type and seam allowance (Kadolph, 1998). Construction techniques, *inter alia*, determine the price of a garment, and therefore simple construction methods will be used by industry to bring down the cost of fashion outfits (Glock and Kunz, 2005).

Performance features

Performance features of fashion products can be defined as a garment's aesthetic and functional features and the standards these meet in order to benefit the consumer (Brown and Rice, 2001).

Aesthetic aspects

Aesthetic aspects can be seen as one of the most important decisive factors when a garment is assessed during apparel purchasing

(Fiore and Damhorst, 1992). Recent research by De Klerk and Lubbe (2008) revealed that sensory, emotional and cognitive dimensions of the aesthetic experience play a major role in consumers' evaluation of apparel quality. According to DeLong (1998), the fashion outfit consists of parts that should complement each other in such a way that the whole is aesthetically pleasing to the fashion consumer and adds that the visual appearance of the apparel-body whole can be linked to *Gestalt* psychologists' premise that the whole is more than the sum of its parts. Criteria for the assessment of aesthetics incorporate colour and general appearance (DeLong, 1998). Frings (2008) as well as De Klerk and Lubbe (2008) contend that the pleasant appearance of *colour* attracts the consumer to a garment and therefore plays a major role in selecting a fashion outfit. Certain colours are usually considered more suitable for certain times of the year and different climates. Colours as well as its attractiveness are determined by fashion, individuality, surroundings and the understanding of design fundamentals and values (Tate, 2004). According to Tate (2004), *appearance* reflects a total impression created by the physical characteristics and emotional statement of clothing, and it reveals a great deal about a person and elicits immediate reaction before a word is spoken. An analysis and evaluation of one's lifestyle and work style are the important steps towards one's ideal appearance. Aesthetic features such as lustre, drape, texture and hand can alter the visual aspects of a design and can have a substantial impact on general appearance (Kadolph and Langford, 2002; Brannon, 2005).

Functional utility aspects

Utility attributes mentioned by Brown and Rice (2001) are durability, comfort, ease of care and fit. *Durability* is defined as the way in which the textile product withstands use, implying the length of time the product remains suitable for the use for which it was purchased (Rosenau and Wilson, 2006). Consumers may ask themselves how well the product will wear, how strong it is and how long it will remain attractive (Kadolph, 2007). Durability of clothing items is determined by the construction techniques, e.g. sturdy seam and stitch types, hems and fusing techniques (Kadolph, 1998; Rosenau and Wilson, 2006), as well as durability properties of textile fabrics, including strength/tenacity, abrasion resistance, cohesiveness or spinning quality, elongation, elastic recovery, flexibility/pliability and dimensional stability (Collier and Tortora, 2001; Kadolph, 2007). *Comfort* is multifaceted and includes physical, physiological and psychological factors, which involves several dimensions, such as comfort in styles which are not restricting, sufficient moving ease in garments, comfort of textiles and construction techniques that prevent irritation (Kadolph and Langford, 2002; Glock and Kunz, 2005; Kadolph, 2007; Kaplan, 2008). Physiological comfort is strongly related to textile comfort and the way in which the body interacts with a textile product, as well as its ability to protect the body from harm (Metje *et al.*, 2008). Textile comfort properties include absorbency, hydrophobic, hydrophilic and hydroscopic properties, wicking, electric conductivity, allergenic potential, heat or thermal conductivity, heat or thermal retention, elongation, which is obtained in stretch fabrics and knits, and density/specific gravity (Collier and Tortora, 2001; Kadolph, 2007; Frings, 2008). Psychological comfort refers to the emotional, aesthetic and cognitive

dimensions by which the wearer's psychosocial needs are satisfied (Yoo, 2003). *Care of textile products* entails the treatment needed to maintain the original appearance (new or nearly new look) and cleanliness of a garment during use (Kadolph, 2007). The ease with which fabrics can be laundered and soil removed, the drying time required, the wrinkle resistance and the amount of ironing needed are of crucial importance to the apparel consumer (Zhang *et al.*, 2002). Appropriate care of fashion garments that require special treatment and therefore daily or periodic care such as dry cleaning will help to extend the life span of the fashion item, but these garments are not favoured by the fashion consumer owing to the fact that caring for them is time consuming and expensive (Marshall *et al.*, 2004). Therefore, the fashion textile industry frequently manufactures fabrics with no-iron finishes and wash-and-fold cotton fabrics (Frings, 2008). According to Brown and Rice (2001), *good fit* of a garment implies that it conforms to the three-dimensional human body. Good fit is one of the most important attributes of a garment that contributes to the comfort and looks good on the wearer (Alexander *et al.*, 2005). Abraham-Murali and Littrell (1995b) found that poor fit was the chief reason for the returning of fashion garments. Howarton and Lee (2010) found that female boomers are also dissatisfied with the way in which the apparel industry caters for their fit needs. The ease required for a comfortable fit of casual daywear should allow a person free movement when walking, sitting, bending and climbing stairs. Alexander *et al.* (2005) conclude that understanding of the preferences of female apparel shoppers with regard to fit could help apparel companies to meet the demands for comfortable and well-fitting clothes.

Research methodology

The study can be described as quantitative, descriptive and exploratory in nature. The quantitative research method was chosen because it is an economical and practical way of assessing group opinions by means of a structured questionnaire. For this study, questionnaires were delivered by hand, which saved much time and produced high response rates because of the personal contact and the fact that respondents could fill in the questionnaire at their own convenience (Delpont and Roestenburg, 2011).

A literature study was first undertaken to gather information to secure a relevant, well-defined conceptual framework. A structured questionnaire was then compiled as suggested by Murphy and Davidshofer (2005) and pilot-tested. The questionnaire consisted of two sections that were designed in accordance with the study objectives. The criteria used for assessing quality of clothing were selected from those identified as most important by previous researchers such as Stamper *et al.* (1991), Brown and Rice (2001), Hines and Swinker (2001), Zhang *et al.* (2002) and North *et al.* (2003). The questionnaire statements referred to five selected casual daywear articles, namely a top, jacket, pants, blouse and skirt; sketches of which were illustrated in the questionnaire. Section 1 consisted of questions or statements measuring the importance of intrinsic evaluative criteria used by female apparel consumers. The constructs were operationalized following guidelines of Babbie (2008), and five-point Likert-type scales were used, varying from 5 (very important) to 1 (not important at all). Demographic information namely age, popula-

tion group, highest level of formal qualification, expenditure on clothing per month and income group were requested in section 2.

Study population and sample selection

A representative, random sample was chosen from the female, full-time academic personnel of all seven tertiary institutions in the Vaal Region, South Africa, namely Damelin College (5), Flavius College (6), North-West University Vaal Triangle Campus (14), Sedibeng College Vanderbijlpark Campus (3), Sedibeng College Vereeniging Campus (11) and Vaal University of Technology (56). A complete name list of all the full-time female lecturers employed by the above-mentioned institutions was obtained from each institution, and a number was assigned to each person on the list. Every third person on the list was chosen for the random sample.

Questionnaire administration and data gathering

The questionnaires were distributed among the participants and collected after completion with the help of the secretaries of the various departments where the respondents worked; of the 150 that were distributed, 105 were returned (response rate: 70%).

Psychometrical properties of the measuring instrument

The validity of this instrument was investigated by means of construct and content validity, while reliability was investigated by computing alpha coefficients.

Validity

Validity is a psychometric property of the measuring instrument, which determines whether a test measures what it is supposed to measure and determines whether that test can be used in making accurate decisions (Murphy and Davidshofer, 2005). *Construct validity* for this study was assessed by means of confirmatory factor analysis, as described by Van Aardt and Steyn (1991). Each of the subscales (apparel quality assessment criteria) was subjected to a factor analysis, using principal components for factor extraction, using the FACTOR procedure of SAS Institute Inc. (2005). According to Smith *et al.* (1988), a scale displays good construct validity when one factor (the ideal) is extracted or when only a few factors, which together explain a substantial proportion of the variance, are extracted and when high communalities are obtained for each statement. The number of factors extracted, the percentage of total variance explained by these extracted factors and the range of communalities on the statements for each attribute subscale are given in Table 1.

Although the ideal is to extract only one factor, this is seldom achieved in practice. The extracted sub-factors in Table 1 together explained a substantial proportion of the total variance for each of the subscales. The Mineigen criterion was used to determine how many factors were extracted. The communality on each statement comprised more than half of the total variance for most of the

Table 1 Factors extracted, total variance explained and range of communalities on the statements for each quality assessment factor

Quality assessment factor	Sub-factors extracted	Total variance explained by extracted sub-factors (%)	Range of communalities
Design/style	1	43.85	0.16–0.63
Materials	1	50.10	0.43–0.61
Construction	1	72.18	0.42–0.76
Colour	2	70.77	0.58–0.90
General appearance	1	45.27	0.21–0.63
Durability	1	85.23	0.83–0.89
Comfort	1	71.67	0.67–0.76
Ease of care	2	57.73	0.46–0.72
Fit	1	53.37	0.42–0.60

statements. Only 6 of the 67 items yielded communalities of less than 0.5. As the factor analysis for this instrument complies with the requirements for good construct validity to a large extent, the researcher is of the opinion that the measuring instrument has satisfactory construct validity. *Content validity* is demonstrated when all test items seem to measure a specific construct and when all the test items fall within the defined boundaries of the content domain (Murphy and Davidshofer, 2005). All items in this instrument corresponded with those in other measuring instruments which measured similar constructs and which were investigated for validity (Fiore and Damhorst, 1992; Abraham-Murali and Littrell, 1995b; Hsu and Burns, 2002; North *et al.*, 2003; Retief and De Klerk, 2003). Also, the total set of behaviours in this section was appropriate for measuring the characteristic apparel purchasing behaviour of the specific respondents in this study (Murphy and Davidshofer, 2005). The content validity could consequently be deemed satisfactory.

Reliability

Cronbach's alpha coefficient is the most widely used measure to indicate internal consistency (Murphy and Davidshofer, 2005) and is suitable for multiple-scored items (Anastasi and Urbina, 1997). The Cronbach alpha coefficients for most of the various apparel attribute subscales were between 0.7 and 0.9, indicating satisfactory to very good reliability, except for three factors, namely design/style, colour and general appearance, which yielded alpha coefficients lower than 0.6, which was unsatisfactory (Malhotra and Birks, 2007). Consequently, these three factors should be attended to for future use of the instrument.

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations comprised treating the respondents with respect, dignity and courtesy. The researcher conformed to ethically correct procedures during the study (Huysamen, 1994; Strydom, 2011). Voluntary participation, informed consent, absence of deception, confidentiality and anonymity were maintained.

Data processing and statistical analysis

Statistical analyses were carried out by the Department of Statistical Services of the North-West University, South Africa,

with the use of the SAS statistical package (SAS Institute Inc., 2005).

Results and discussion

Demographic characteristics of the sample

The majority of the lecturers (38%) was between the ages of 31 and 40, which was relatively young and represented Generation X (Codrington and Grant-Marshall, 2004). Various authors (Zhang *et al.*, 2002; North *et al.*, 2003; Yoo, 2003) point out that age has a significant influence on the perception of the preference formation of various apparel features, such as fit, comfort, style, colour and fibre content. The predominant population group was white (65.7%), and 25.7% was black. Du Plessis and Rousseau (2007) point out that the black consumer market is growing fast and has different needs in terms of clothing preferences. All the respondents in this study possessed a tertiary qualification, indicating a relatively high educational level, and an average income (Armstrong, 2009; Van der Berg and Burger, 2010). They indicated that they spent only R100–R300 per month on clothing.

Intrinsic apparel attributes

Physical features: style, materials and construction

The results pertaining to physical features are given in Table 2.

The importance of *style* as an evaluative criterion when shopping for clothes seemed fairly high. The most important aspect of style seemed to be that it should complement the figure (mean: 4.7); and 95.2% of the respondents indicated that this aspect was very important or quite important. Highly fashionable styles did not seem to be as important (mean: 3.3). Various studies have found style to be the most important attribute when garments are evaluated by females (Eckman *et al.*, 1990; Fiore and Damhorst, 1992; North *et al.*, 2003), while some studies found style to be at least amongst the first four most important attributes considered when assessing a fashion product (Herbst and Burger, 2002; Hsu and Burns, 2002; Taylor and Cosenza, 2002).

Materials include fabric, trims, closures and other products required for producing garments (Glock and Kunz, 2005). Respondents in this study rated the importance of materials quite highly when judging garments before purchase. Overall

Table 2 Importance of design/style, materials and construction

	N	Very important	Quite important	Not sure	Of little importance	Not important at all	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Mean score	SD	Ranking order
		n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n			
		%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%			
Design/style												
Currently highly fashionable	103	16	32	31	19	5	48	31.00	24	3.3	1.1	3
		15.53	31.07	30.10	18.45	4.85	46.6	30.10	23			
Design/style is unique and creative	104	34	37	22	9	2	71	22.00	11	3.9	1.0	2
		32.69	35.58	21.15	8.65	1.92	68.3	21.15	11			
Design/style complements my figure	105	81	19	5	0	0	100	5.00	0	4.7	0.5	1
		77.14	18.10	4.76	0.00	0.00	95.2	4.76	0			
Materials: fabrics and accessories												
Pleasingness of fabric	105	56	36	8	5	0	92	8.00	5	4.4	0.8	1
		53.33	34.29	7.62	4.76	0.00	87.6	7.62	4.8			
Fibre content	105	18	30	28	21	8	48	28.00	29	3.3	1.2	4
		17.14	28.57	26.67	20.00	7.62	45.7	26.67	28			
Quality of fasteners	105	43	30	19	10	3	73	19.00	13	4.0	1.1	2
		40.95	28.57	18.10	9.52	2.86	69.5	18.10	12			
Quality and attractiveness of trims	102	30	42	19	6	5	72	19.00	11	3.8	1.1	3
		29.41	41.18	18.63	5.88	4.90	70.6	18.63	11			
Construction												
Workmanship	103	49	34	14	5	1	83	14	6	4.2	0.9	2
		47.5	33.01	13.59	4.85	0.97	80.58	13.59	5.83			

SD, standard deviation.

attractiveness of the fabric was rated the most important (mean: 4.4), followed by quality of fasteners, quality and attractiveness of trims and lastly, and least important, fibre content of the fabric. It is notable that fabric is a very important attribute when evaluating clothing quality (Eckman *et al.*, 1990, p. 18; Fiore and Damhorst, 1992, pp. 174–176; Hines and O'Neal, 1995, p. 231; Forsythe *et al.*, 1996, p. 302; Hsu and Burns, 2002). Both Glock and Kunz (2005) and Brown and Rice (2001) confirm the importance of construction accessories such as support materials, closures and trims as indicators of quality in clothing.

Construction entails workmanship details such as seams, hems, darts, collars, necklines, cuffs, pockets, sleeves, fasteners, facings and waistlines. Respondents regarded the importance of construction quite highly (mean: 4.2); 80.5% indicated that construction is very important or quite important. According to Eckman *et al.* (1990), consumers refer to workmanship as an evaluative criterion more often when evaluating garments in general than when evaluating a specific attribute.

Performance features

The *performance characteristics* of apparel establish the standards it meets and delineate the benefits of the garment for the consumer. Performance features entail the garment's *aesthetic* as well as *functional performance* (Brown and Rice, 2001). Results regarding respondents' evaluation of the importance of *aesthetic* aspects namely colour and general appearance in evaluating garment quality are presented in Table 3.

Aesthetic aspects

To the respondents, the most important requirement was that *colour* should complement their personal features (mean: 4.7); 96.1% of the respondents were of the opinion that this aspect is very important or quite important, although they did apparently not necessarily consider fashionable colour an important requirement (mean: 3.5); only 54% felt that it was very important or quite important while other researchers found colour to be a very important criterion. Yoo (2003) for example found that design elements impact significantly on aesthetic evaluation of apparel and recommended that studies with colour as a variable should be undertaken in the future. Tate (2004) reported that colour in relation to personal features is generally an important evaluative criterion for fashion consumers. Colour was also one of the five attributes that first came to consumers' minds in a study done by Zhang *et al.* (2002), which investigated consumers' behaviour with respect to buying casual wear.

Two particular *general appearance* aspects were regarded as important evaluative criteria (Table 3). Firstly, the requirements that the outfit must have an *attractive appearance* (mean: 4.7); 98.1% of the respondents were convinced that this aspect is very important or quite important. Secondly, the item should be *compatible with other items in their wardrobes* (mean: 4.4); 89.5% regarded this aspect very or quite important. This confirms a study of Tate (2004) that contends that a garment that conceals figure problems and flatters the face and body will elicit compliments. Eckman *et al.* (1990) also suggested appearance to be

Table 3 Importance of colour and general appearance

	N	Very important	Quite important	Not sure	Of little importance	Not important at all	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Mean score	SD	Ranking order
		5	4	3	2	1	4 + 5	3	1 + 2			
		<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>			
		%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%			
Colour												
The colour should be fashionable	104	24	30	31	16	3	54	31.00	19	3.5	1.1	3
		23.08	28.85	29.81	15.38	2.88	51.92	29.81	18.3			
Colour must compliment features	103	78	21	4	0	0	99	4.00	0	4.7	0.5	1
		75.73	20.39	3.88	0.00	0.00	96.12	3.88	0			
Colour must not fade	104	64	27	9	4	0	91	9.00	4	4.5	0.8	2
		61.54	25.96	8.65	3.85	0.00	87.5	8.65	3.85			
General appearance												
Attractive appearance/ visual appeal	103	79	22	2	0	0	101	2.00	0	4.7	0.6	1
		76.70	21.36	1.94	0.00	0.00	98.06	1.94	0			
Outfit must elicit compliments	102	48	28	17	6	3	76	17.00	9	4.1	1.1	3
		47.06	27.45	16.67	5.88	2.94	74.51	16.67	8.82			
Outfit compatible with items in wardrobe	105	63	31	8	1	2	94	8.00	3	4.4	0.8	2
		60.00	29.52	7.62	0.95	1.90	89.52	7.62	2.86			

SD, standard deviation.

one of the most frequently mentioned criteria for evaluating fashion apparel in their study on criteria used for evaluating women’s apparel.

Functional aspects

Functional performance of apparel involves the durability, comfort, ease of care as well as the fit of garments (Brown and Rice, 2001). The opinion of respondents regarding the importance of this characteristic is depicted in Table 4.

Respondents regarded the *retention of shape and appearance* of garments as the most important *durability* requirement (mean: 4.7); 98.1% of the respondents were of the opinion that this aspect is very important or quite important. *Sturdy fasteners* were also considered very important (mean: 4.6) while *strong construction* was considered highly important (mean: 4.5). Brown and Rice (2001) confirm that a garment of good quality must retain its shape and appearance during wear while various studies (Stamper *et al.*, 1991; Brown and Rice, 2001; Tate, 2004) emphasize that buttons must be strong and durable and must not be damaged during normal maintenance and care. The findings suggest that all the aspects listed were considered highly important durability factors, and durability seemed to be an important criterion when assessing apparel quality – surprisingly more so than aspects such as design/style and aesthetic properties such as colour.

All the aspects pertaining to the *comfort* of garments seemed very important (mean: 4.5 to 4.7) of which the ease in the garment style seemed the most important consideration for 97.1% of the respondents. These findings confirm that of Stamper *et al.* (1991), Glock and Kunz (2005) as well as Kaplan (2008) who agreed that garment style must have enough ease to be comfortable, especially

if the garment is in the casual daywear range. Kadolph (1998) adds that fabric hand forms an important part of comfort, and that fabric that is in contact with the skin (for example a blouse and trousers) must have a softer hand than fabric that is not in contact with the skin (for example a skirt).

In terms of *ease of care*, the most important requirement was the dimensional stability of a garment (mean: 4.6). Two other aspects which were regarded highly were that garments should be machine washable and that the cost and time involved in the care of the garment should be limited (mean: 4.4 and 4.1 respectively). The importance of ease of care reflected in these findings is consistent with Griffin and O’Neal’s (1992) findings. Kadolph (2007) confirms the importance of garment dimensional stability as a property of casual daywear. That apparel should be dry-cleanable did not seem very appealing to these respondents, probably because it involves additional costs and effort to have it done. Contradictory findings are reported in other studies: Forsythe *et al.* (1996) for example found that the care of garments was not significant for predicting apparel quality. Abraham-Murali and Littrell (1995a), however, tested the impact of various composite factors on evaluation of apparel quality and found that the factors containing care items emerged as important dimensions of quality at various evaluation stages. Similarly, Zhang *et al.* (2002) found that females placed significant emphasis on ease of care when evaluating casual wear before making the final purchase decision.

All the criteria pertaining to *good fit* were considered important, and respondents indicated that overall fit is the most important requirement of all (mean: 4.8). They also indicated that the fit should be as anticipated and that no gaping at the neck or armhole should occur (mean: 4.7). The same applied for fit of a garment at the shoulder line and that the label size should

Table 4 Importance of durability, comfort, ease of care and fit

	N	Very important	Quite important	Not sure	Of little importance	Not important at all	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Mean score	SD	Ranking order
		5	4	3	2	1	4 + 5	3	1 + 2			
		<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>			
		%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%			
Durability												
Garment must retain shape and appearance	105	72	31	2	0	0	103	2.00	0	4.7	0.5	1
		68.57	29.52	1.90	0.00	0.00	98.1	1.90	0			
Construction must be strong	104	62	34	6	2	0	96	6.00	2	4.5	0.7	3
		59.62	32.69	5.77	1.92	0.00	92.31	5.77	1.92			
Fasteners must not break in use	104	72	24	7	1	0	96	7.00	1	4.6	0.7	2
		69.23	23.08	6.73	0.96	0.00	92.31	6.73	0.96			
Comfort												
Garment style is comfortable (ease)	104	75	26	2	1	0	101	2.00	1	4.7	0.6	1
		72.12	25.00	1.92	0.96	0.00	97.12	1.92	0.96			
Fabric is comfortable for the season	104	64	33	4	3	0	97	4.00	3	4.5	0.7	3
		61.54	31.73	3.85	2.88	0.00	93.27	3.85	2.88			
Fabric must not irritate the skin	104	77	18	4	5	0	95	4.00	5	4.6	0.8	2
		74.04	17.31	3.85	4.81	0.00	91.35	3.85	4.81			
Ease of care												
Machine washable	105	62	27	10	6	0	89	10.00	6	4.4	0.9	2
		59.05	25.71	9.52	5.71	0.00	84.76	9.52	5.71			
Cost/time involved in care	104	39	39	20	5	1	78	20.00	6	4.1	0.9	3
		37.50	37.50	19.23	4.81	0.96	75	19.23	5.77			
Dry-cleanable	103	11	21	23	28	20	32	23.00	48	2.8	1.3	5
		10.68	20.39	22.33	27.18	19.42	31.07	22.33	46.6			
Not only dry-cleanable	104	45	30	15	6	8	75	15.00	14	3.9	1.2	4
		43.27	28.85	14.42	5.77	7.69	72.12	14.42	13.5			
Fit												
Good overall fit	104	88	14	1	1	0	102	1.00	1	4.8	0.5	1
		84.62	13.46	0.96	0.96	0.00	98.08	0.96	0.96			
Size of figure corresponds with label size	104	67	22	10	4	1	89	10.00	5	4.4	0.9	3
		64.42	21.15	9.62	3.85	0.96	85.58	9.62	4.81			
Shoulder line in correct position	104	58	31	11	3	1	89	11.00	4	4.4	0.9	3
		55.77	29.81	10.58	2.88	0.96	85.58	10.58	3.85			
No gaping at neck or armhole	103	75	23	5	0	0	98	5.00	0	4.7	0.6	2
		72.82	22.33	4.85	0.00	0.00	95.15	4.85	0			
The fit is what you anticipated	103	77	19	7	0	0	96	7.00	0	4.7	0.6	2
		74.76	18.45	6.80	0.00	0.00	93.2	6.80	0			

SD, standard deviation.

correspond with the figure size (mean: 4.4). A study by Anderson *et al.* (1998) indicated that the fit of fashion apparel does not meet the demands of fashion consumers and that fit is consistently listed as a major problem that results in dissatisfaction with garment purchases. Respondents in a study by Howerton and Lee (2010) also expressed their frustration with the fact that the apparel industry did not attend to their apparel fit needs. Eckman *et al.* (1990) found that fit, styling, colour and appearance were the most frequently mentioned criteria for the evaluation of fashion apparel, which confirms the report of Taylor and Cosenza (2002) and Roach's (1994) statement that fit is of utmost importance.

A correlation of evaluative criteria and personal characteristics

Pearson's correlation coefficients were computed for evaluative criteria and how they correlated with selected personal characteristics to investigate possible relationships ($P \leq 0.05$). Correlation coefficients are displayed in Table 5. Shaded areas indicate statistical significance ($P \leq 0.05$).

Significant relationships were found between *age* and *colour* ($r = -0.2$) and general appearance ($r = -0.2$), implying that the older the respondents were, the less important the colour of garments and general appearance were. Statistically significant

Table 5 Correlations between evaluative criteria and demographic characteristics

Demographic characteristic	Evaluative criteria								
	Design/style	Materials	Construction	Colour	General appearance	Durability	Comfort	Ease of care	Fit
Age	-0.17	0.11	0.11	-0.20	-0.23	-0.04	0.05	0.01	0.09
	0.83	0.26	0.26	0.04	0.02	0.67	0.64	0.93	0.38
Qualification	-0.19	-0.17	-0.07	-0.08	0.04	0.08	-0.05	0.12	0.20
	0.05	0.83	0.50	0.41	0.67	0.38	0.65	0.25	0.05
Spending	0.46	-0.03	-0.08	0.14	0.03	0.00	-0.03	-0.03	-0.03
	0.00	0.80	0.42	0.89	0.80	0.96	0.80	0.75	0.75
Frequently buying	-0.13	0.02	-0.04	-0.13	-0.23	-0.20	-0.10	-0.04	-0.03
	0.19	0.88	0.72	0.19	0.02	0.05	0.31	0.67	0.78
Income	-0.14	0.10	-0.10	0.17	0.02	0.73	0.20	0.08	0.06
	0.15	0.31	0.85	0.10	0.85	0.47	0.05	0.42	0.53

Table 6 Cluster scores with reference to intrinsic evaluative criteria

Evaluative criteria	Clusters					
	Mean cluster scores					
	Cluster 1 (n = 10)		Cluster 2 (n = 42)		Cluster 3 (n = 53)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Design/style	3.97	0.60	3.87	0.64	4.11	0.53
Materials	2.44	0.48	4.05	0.57	3.97	0.62
Construction	3.19	0.64	4.43	0.46	4.19	0.49
Colour	3.72	0.57	4.17	0.44	4.38	0.50
General appearance	4.13	0.53	4.44	0.56	4.48	0.54
Durability	3.47	0.59	4.77	0.36	4.67	0.48
Comfort	3.57	0.83	4.71	0.39	4.71	0.45
Ease of care	3.44	0.58	4.01	0.56	4.02	0.62
Fit	4.25	0.52	4.65	0.44	4.66	0.50

SD, standard deviation.

relationships were found between level of qualification and style of garments ($r = -0.2$) as well as fit ($r = -0.2$), which suggest that the higher the respondents' level of education, the less important they considered style and fit of garments.

With reference to *amount spent* on casual daywear per month, statistically significant relationships were found between amount spent and *style* ($r = 0.5$), i.e. those that spent more on casual daywear per month, considered style more important. Statistically significant relationships were found between *colour of garment* ($r = -0.2$) as well as *general appearance* ($r = -0.2$) and age, implying that the older the respondents were, the less important they deemed these variables. The same tendency was found regarding the correlation between *frequent buying* and *general appearance* as well as *durability* ($r = -0.2$), so the older the respondents were, the less frequently they bought casual daywear reflecting on general appearance and durability. A statistically significant relationship was found between *income* and *comfort* ($r = 0.2$), implying that the higher the income of respondents, the more important they regarded the comfort in casual daywear.

Cluster analysis of product characteristics and shopper characteristics

Cluster analysis was used to investigate whether respondents could be clustered into coherent groups (Kirkwood and Sterne, 2003). Table 6 presents the mean cluster scores and standard deviations for intrinsic evaluative criteria, while the cluster analysis is graphically depicted in Fig. 2.

Three clusters of shoppers could be distinguished from the characteristics of the sample, each with a specific disposition towards the evaluative criteria listed in the questionnaire, namely *unconcerned shoppers* ($n = 10$), which clearly differed from *non-status-conscious shoppers* ($n = 42$), and *intensive evaluating shoppers* ($n = 52$), who displayed similar characteristics.

The so-called *unconcerned shoppers* formed the smallest cluster ($n = 10$). They evaluated all the listed attributes of lower importance than the other two groups. They were for example not very concerned about the *materials* of garments (mean: 2.7), although they highly regarded the good overall *fit* (mean: 4.3).

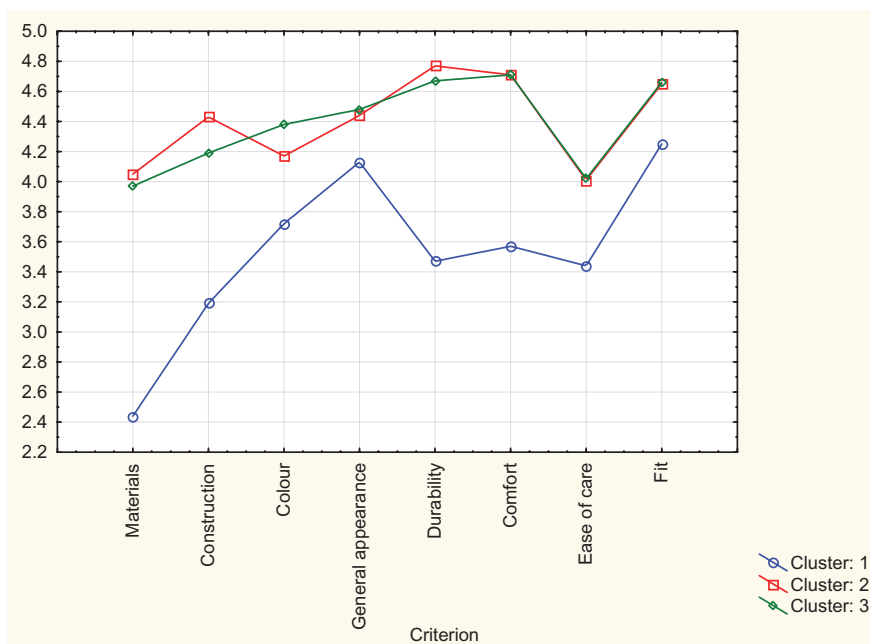


Figure 2 Cluster analysis for evaluative criteria factors.

General appearance seemed an important evaluative criterion (mean: 4.1), while they found visual appearance as important when assessing the quality of fashion apparel. *Durability*, *comfort* and *ease of care* were nearly equally important to them.

Non-status-conscious shoppers formed the second biggest cluster ($n = 42$). They considered several of the attributes as important, namely *material*, *construction*, *colour*, *general appearance*, *durability*, *comfort* and *fit* (mean: 4.1 to 4.7). For them, practicality seemed an important factor in choosing casual daywear.

Intensive evaluating shoppers indicated similar requisites in terms of intrinsic evaluative criteria as the *non-status-conscious shoppers*. For them, *comfort* and *fit* were of almost equal importance (mean: 4.6–4.7).

To summarize, three different market segments were distinguished, which could be investigated further in a follow-up research project.

Conclusions and implications

The majority of the respondents that participated in this research project belonged to Generation X, which according to Frings (2008) have become career- and family-oriented – a tendency which is reflected in their spending patterns, which are focused on housing, home goods, transportation and education. The predominant population group was white (Mabotja, 2000; Badenhorst, 2001). In order to maintain a competitive advantage, retailers will need to carefully consider the needs and preferences of black consumers with regard to their requisites in terms of apparel quality because this target market is growing in South Africa.

Regarding the application of evaluative criteria for quality assessment of *apparel*, respondents seemed to regard intrinsic apparel attributes as important: three functional performance aspects, namely *durability*, *comfort* and *fit* were regarded most

important in judging quality – more so than aesthetic attributes such as colour. *Durability* was probably important to assure that the garments retain their original form, appearance and attractiveness, which would command students' respect. *General appearance*, an attribute which might contribute to the aesthetic image, was the second most important criterion followed by *colour*, which would also influence aesthetic qualities. *Construction*, which serves as an indication of quality, was third in terms of the importance of evaluative criteria.

Three clusters of shoppers could be distinguished, each with a specific disposition towards the evaluative criteria listed in the questionnaire. The so-called *unconcerned shoppers* were in the minority and probably less important to retailers in terms of market segmentation.

Implications for clothing manufacturers, retailers and consumer education

Empirical evidence of apparel consumers' preferences could help retailers to plan their merchandise mix more efficiently while consumer satisfaction could be enhanced. Retailers should also train their sales personnel to highlight specific apparel attributes when giving sales assistance. Information on preferences of different apparel consumer groups obtained by the clustering technique could be used by marketers and retailers to identify niche markets and to develop targeting strategies while frustration among shoppers could be prevented. It is possible that some product criteria (e.g. colour and design) are overemphasized while criteria that are more important are neglected.

Concluding remarks

The South African economy is growing at a satisfactory rate, income levels are rising, population growth is steady and the

future prospects for apparel retailing recently seem promising (Du Plessis and Rousseau, 2007). Demographic realities are consequently of great importance to manufacturers and retailers. The changing role of women who have become increasingly career positions orientated creates new opportunities for clothing retailers, and it is important to take note of consumers' requisites and needs which influence their buying behaviour (Hoyer and MacInnis, 2010). The understanding of consumers' preferences and needs in casual wear and of the criteria used for assessing the quality of casual wear is consequently a very relevant concern which has been addressed in this study and which should receive more attention in future research, in order to inform and advise manufacturers, retailers and consumer educators regarding clothing consumers' authentic needs.

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