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The Role of Brands in South African Black Middle Class Society

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Abstract

This paper presents a study conducted on the role of brands in Black middle class society in South Africa. The study was inspired by the phenomenal growth of Black household consumption observed in recent years in South Africa. Popular media have publicised views that Black middle class consumption of brands is fuelled by a desire to acquire and affirm status, often sparking debate amongst politicians, businessmen and the general public. This research investigated the factors fuelling consumption of branded goods in this social group and the factors considered in choosing a brand. The study was exploratory in nature and interviewed ten South African Black individuals broadly classified as middle class. The finding of the study largely confirmed reviewed theory, suggesting that the consumption patterns of South African Black middle class society is neither unique nor strange, but an age-old phenomenon supported by the theories of consumer behaviour, sociology and economics.

Due to the qualitative nature of the study, no generalisable conclusions could be reached. It is recommended that further research into South African consumption behaviour be conducted, in particular the price elasticity of demand for brands.

Declaration

I declare that this research project is my own work. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Business Administration at the Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other University.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Definition of Problem

This research will attempt to understand the role of brands in South Africa's emerging and emerged Black middle class society. The study will also investigate whether Black middle class are status-seeking in their consumption behaviour; and the impact of social approval and social membership on brand choice and brand consumption patterns.

1.2 Historical Background

The emergence of the Black middle class is a phenomenon widely appreciated and accepted in post apartheid South Africa. The ANC government, which led the liberation movement against apartheid and has been in ruling power since 1994, has implemented policies and passed legislation that force accelerated upward migration of the Black race into middle class society. Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE), introduced in 2003 to establish a legislative framework for the broader promotion of black economic empowerment. It has been the primary agent employed by government to equitably redistribute economic resources amongst ordinary South Africans, somewhat normalising economic and social discrepancies created by apartheid policies.

In the last few years, South Africa has enjoyed unsurpassed economic success in its history (Figure 1), with GDP growth reaching 5% in 2005 and forecasts

estimating 4.2% growth for 2007. A strong currency, low interest rates, improved employment and greater access to credit are some of the factors that have boosted business and consumer confidence levels, thereby fuelling consumer demand (Isa, 2007).

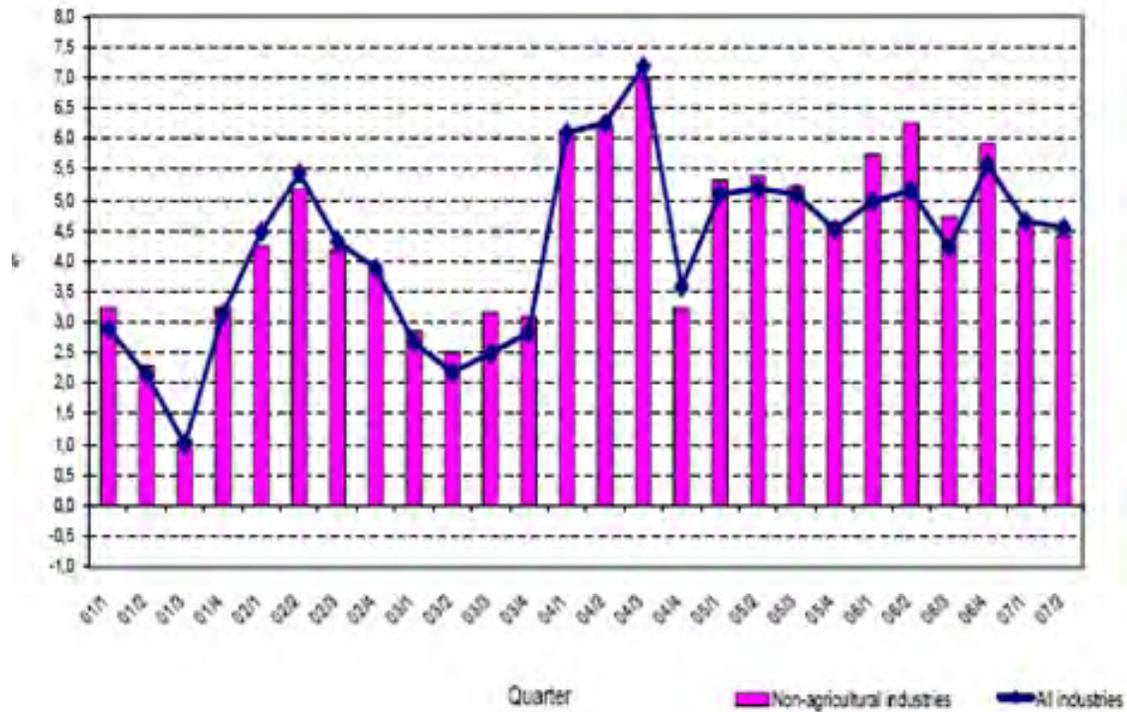


Figure 1: Annualised Growth rate in the seasonally adjusted real value added at basic prices. (Source: Statistics South Africa)

1.3 Black Middle Class

In 1996, only one in seven of the top 10% of income earners in South Africa was Blacks. This ratio had risen to one in three by 2006 (Makgetla, 2007). The results of a South African study conducted by TNS Research Surveys and the UCT Institute of Strategic Marketing (2006) have been debated in the public domain, with many parties expressing concern about their validity. Most recently, an article by a member of the South African presidency challenged the concept of a “Black Diamond” – a term coined by the above-mentioned study to describe an individual belonging to South Africa’s “growing Black Middle Class”. The concerns levelled against the study relate to the economic connotation in “Black Diamond” – which suggests a class of affluent, wealthy people. Research by the government’s Labour Force Survey (LFS) revealed figures contradictory to the Black Diamond report. Makgetla (2007) writes:

“The UCT study contends that 940000 “black diamonds” are what it calls “established”, spending an average of almost R8000 a month. The 2006 LFS, however, found only 1,4-million people altogether earned that much, and only 440000 Africans — rather less than half the “black diamond” finding. The UCT study also finds 470000 young people aged 18 to 23 are “black diamonds”. Virtually all are students living with their parents. Yet only 380000 African students are enrolled in technikon or university. And most do not live a life of luxury. “

Literature suggests that there are other factors that determine socioeconomic class other than income, even though income has for long been the overriding determinant of class in South Africa. As explained by research innovation executive Higgs (2007), other countries have included factors such as occupation, education and neighbourhood circumstances when trying to understand socioeconomic class. Consensus on the criteria for evaluating social class in South Africa remains vague. Complexity over socioeconomic stratification is compounded by economic and social disparities created by racial segregation executed under apartheid rule in South Africa. In the last fifteen years, however, multi-racial socialisation in schools, neighbourhoods and work environments has fostered social, economic and cultural integration, unifying urban South Africans' grading of social class to a degree.

1.4 Status

In an online media article titled *Buppies Go for Status* (2005), South African marketers are warned to build status trade marks in their offering if they wish to appeal to black upwardly mobile professionals. The article quotes a study on Black middle class by research company Research Surveys, stating that “buppies will not spare any money or effort to increase their status”.

In another online article on Black middle class, the writer states that a two-pronged approach is applied with regard to branding in this market. There are status brands and then there are the everyday, tried-and-tested brands (www.iol.co.za, 2005). Status brands, according to the article, are more expensive than everyday brands

and may include goods such as cars, designer clothing, property, cell phones and other gadgets.

1.5 Research Motivation

BBBEE, through skills development and affirmative action in the workplace, has achieved better success at distributing economic power amongst ordinary Black South Africans than BEE. The total purchasing power of Black people, as a proportion of total personal disposable income in the economy, had doubled since the 1960's from 23 percent to 46 percent in 2005, whilst that of White people had dropped from 69 percent to 41 percent in the same period (Addison, 2003). Furthermore, between 1998 and 2004, the percentage of Black households in the low and low-middle income groups fell from 75% to 64% while the percentage in the middle and high income groups increased from 25% to 36% (Mhango, 2005).

According to the Black Diamonds 2007 survey, South Africa's fast-growing, affluent African middle class has expanded by 30% over the past year, injecting an extra R60-billion into the economy over the same period (Naidoo, 2007). The same study reports that although this middle-class accounts for only 12% of Black consumers, they have 54% of Black buying power.

This study is important because it will offer insight into the psyche of the black middle class consumer, specifically with regard to status brands. It has the

potential to provide businesses perspective to assist in crafting growth strategies into the growing black middle class; and marketers in positioning their brands for black middle class consumption, and in identifying brand associations and brand attributes that appeal to or repel emerging black middle class society. Companies with an appreciation of the role of status in black middle class society can also leverage this insight to forge lasting brand relationships with this social group.

1.6 Research Problem

The aim of this research is to improve the understanding of the perception and use of brands by the Black Middle class society in South Africa. The study investigates opinions and attitudes of the Black middle class with regard to brands. It interrogates brand consumption patterns and decisions to elucidate common, critical brand attributes in this social group.

Chapter 2:

Theory and Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

There is to date substantial research in the fields of psychology, economics and marketing probing into the behaviour exhibited by consumers with regard to their consumption patterns and preference for some goods over others. As early as the 19th century through the widely recognised work of John Rae (1843) and Thorstein Veblen (1899) on conspicuous consumption, the need displayed by consumers to differentiate themselves through the goods and services they purchased and consumed, has been an area of great academic interest. This chapter presents a summary and review of past research in brands, sociology, as well as consumer psychology and behaviour. The theory provides a solid base for the subject being explored as well as the interpretation of consumer behaviour observed today.

2.2 Brands

Brands allow functionally identical goods and services to be differentiated in the mind of the consumer. In explaining the difference between a brand and a product, Seetharaman, Nadzir and Gunalan (2001) describe a brand as an entity with personality and characteristics that possess certain associations. They define a brand as a name or symbol that embodies tangible and emotional attributes, visually differentiating a good or service from those of competitors in the market.

The company perspective

From a company's point of view, differences at the brand level are the most important and most relevant. It is at this level that firms are offering and differentiating their products to attract consumers and gain competitive advantage (Gronhaug and Trapp, 1989). Gronhaug et al. (1989) support the measurement of social class associations in relation to branded goods because it may be useful in:

Positioning a new product

Designing marketing communication strategies: selecting media and designing communication messages

Choice of distribution since research indicates that consumers associate stores with specific social classes.

The consumer perspective

In many instances, the decision of consumers to purchase a good cannot be adequately explained by the inherent, functional utility derived from consuming it. Rather its motivation may be found in what the purchase of the good symbolizes to others (Corneo and Jeanne, 1997). According to Belk (1988), a product's functional characteristics give the user the ability for doing things. Functional criteria involve evaluating the concrete features and attributes that facilitate delivery on utilitarian needs (Fournier, 1991). The concrete properties evaluated as functional criteria are more intrinsic to the product, rather than the consumer. A product is what is

manufactured in a factory and can be copied by a competitor of comparable resources. A brand is what is bought by the consumer and is unique (Seetharaman *et al.*, 2001).

According to Del RoAo, VaAquez and Iglesias (2001), in creating a brand, the firm intends communicating a certain brand image in such a way that all the firm's target groups link such a brand with a set of associations. Brand image, defined by Del RoAo *et al.* (2001) as "perceptions about a brand as reflected by the cluster of associations that consumers connect to the brand name in memory", is key in determining the willingness of a consumer to be associated with the brand. This is because brands possess symbolic properties which are used by individuals to convey meaning (O'Cass and Frost, 2002).

2.3 The Meaning of Brands

Appraisal of expressive characteristics of a product is determined by the perceived fit between self-concept and product (Holman), where the use of the product contributes to our sense of self (Belk, 1988). Fournier (1991) suggests that these expressive criteria may stem from concern for the opinion of others, particularly in conspicuous consumption settings. Henry (2002) concludes that expressive criteria apply to more than conspicuous consumption, but instead extend into all areas where aspects of self-concept invoke self-consistency motives.

The functions of a brand

From the consumer's perspective, meaning in a brand is drawn from a rich assortment of brand experiences that are dependent on diverse backgrounds and contexts (Jevons, Gabbott and de Chernatony, 2005). In their paper on the value of the brand as perceived by consumers, Del RoAo *et al.* (2001) identify four categories of brand functions: guarantee, personal identification, social identification and status. The guarantee function is based on the appraisal of the reliability of the brand, as well as its ability to meet generated expectations (Ambler, 1997). The ability of consumers to identify themselves with a brand and develop feelings of affinity towards it represents the personal identification function (Del RoAo *et al.*, 2001). For this reason, the greater the congruency between the brand image and the consumer's self-image the better the consumer's appraisal of

the brand and the greater their intention to purchase it (Graeff, 1996; Hogg, Cox and Keeling, 2000).

Del RoAo *et al.* (2001) emphasise that the purchase and consumption of goods is increasingly considered as non-verbal communication to convey specific impressions to their social environment. Social identification relates to the brand's ability to act as a communication tool, allowing the consumer to be integrated or, on the contrary, to dissociate herself from the groups of individuals that make up her closest social environment (Del RoAo *et al.*, 2001). Consumers interested in this function will positively value those brands that enjoy a good reputation among the groups with which they belong to or aspire to form part of (Long and Shiffman, 2000).

Characteristics of status in brand function

Brands serve a range of purposes for the consumer including communicating impressions about the consumer to their social environment (O'Cass *et al.*, 2002). As noted before, in certain instances brands may be used specifically to communicate status (Del RoAo *et al.*, 2001). Vigneron and Johnson (1999) list five characteristics of a brand that inform its status function:

- Reflection of social approval
- Exclusivity

- Symbol of the individual's power and social status
- Technical superiority
- Contribution of emotional experiences

These attributes, according to Vigneron *et al.* (1991), are the basis on which a brand serves a status function for the consumer. Batson (1994) adds that in all instances, consumers make an emotional investment in the brand and receive a social benefit from in return.

2.4 Social Class and Conspicuous Consumption

Social stratification

In every society, individuals can be grouped into classes ranked in a hierarchical order based on any number of generally observed and relevant attributes in that society. Warner and Lunt (1942, p. 82) define class as “two or more orders of people who are believed to be, and are accordingly ranked by members of the community, in socially superior and inferior positions”. Berelson and Steiner (1964) simply describe social class as a “stratum of people with roughly similar ranking in the particular community or society”. In a more recent study on the significance of social class to marketing, Sivadas, Matthew and Curry (1997, pg 463) add to our understanding of social class, explaining that “...members of a given social class are approximately equal in community esteem, share behavioural expectations and regularly socialise among themselves in both formal and informal ways”.

The stratification of class remains a subjective process in many societies, even after extensive research on social class. It appears that factors determining social class still remain inconsistent and subjective. In their paper on consumer socialisation, Gronhaug and Venkatesh (unknown) state economic resources, education and specific values as factors that are associated with social class. Their paper states that middle class societies, compared to the lower class, have higher expectations with regard to school performance, greater belief in the achievement of success, and more likely to actively pursue avenues that may lead to success. An American paper by Williams and Qualls (1989) includes factors such as occupation, lifestyle and standard of living as additional attributes that aid social class stratification.

The Impact of social class on brand choice

There is a considerable amount of research that has reported findings to emphasize that people across the various social classes display differentiated consumer behavioural patterns. In their research on the perceived social class appeals of branded goods and services, authors Gronhaug *et al.* (1989) find that consumers associate brands of products and services with specific social classes. They further find that social class belongingness has been found to influence consumption and purchase behaviour. Persons in different social classes are likely to attach predictably different degrees of importance to various evaluative criteria

(Williams, 2002). For example, Kanwar and Pagiavlas (1992) found that higher social class consumers attach different importance to evaluative criteria such as brand name, reliability and durability. Perceptions of social class relevance may thus influence acceptance and purchase of a brand (Gronhaug *et al.* 1989). Coleman (1983) proposes that while the upper class displayed the strongest desire for prestige goods, middle class were more concerned about buying what is popular – thereby reflecting an expressive orientation driven by concern for what others will think of them.

Sheth (1977) argues that socio-demographics such as age, income, gender, and education, although relatively easily accessible and quantifiable, are not supposed to be useful predictors of consumption at the brand level. In support of Sheth, Schanninger (1981) adds that social class possesses higher power in explaining and predicting purchase of convenience goods at the brand level than does socio-demographics. In his paper on the significance of social class to marketing, Coleman (1983) emphasises that social class is important to marketing particularly because classes are both motivational groupings and status categories that shape consumer behaviour. Each class group displays a range of similar psycho-social characteristics in which shared life experiences result in a common perceptual lens (Henry, 2002)

The theory of consumption

Thorstein Veblen's Theory of the Leisure Class (1994) develops and introduces the theory of conspicuous consumption as an act involving expenditures made for purposes of inflating the ego. He suggests that individuals engage in ostentatious consumption of goods and services in order to signal wealth and social standing. Veblen's theory warns that this behaviour is exhibited by not only the rich, but all social classes. According to Veblen's theory, each social class emulates the consumption patterns of the class above it, to such an extent that even the poorest people are subject to pressure to engage in conspicuous consumption (Trigg, 2001).

Leibenstein (1950) describes two effects in relation to conspicuous consumption: the snob effect and the bandwagon effect. The snob effect is evidenced on two occasions: firstly when status-seeking consumers reject a product when it is seen to be consumed by the general population and, secondly when status-seeking consumers are first to adopt usage of a newly launched prestige product, taking advantage of the limited availability to the general masses (Mason, 1981). In his review of Veblen's paper, Trigg (2001) describes this search for status as "never ending", pointing out that what once signalled wealth and status may later be acquired by all and confer no social superiority, fuelling the consumption of new status goods.

The bandwagon effect relates to people's desire to own prestige brands as a symbolic marker of group membership (Vigneron *et al.*, 1999). Vigneron *et al.* (1999) argue that bandwagon effect influences a prestige-seeking consumer to comply with prestige groups and/or to be distinguished from non-prestige reference groups. According to O'Cass *et al.* (2002), brands may be positioned to maintain exclusivity, thereby communicating the prestige, status and role of the brand user. The purchase and consumption of status brands by a consumer, therefore, could be seen as a means to differentiate the consumer from specific classes of society, or indeed a means to identify with a certain class of people.

Status consumption

Status derives from the judgements that other members of society make of an individual's position in society (Trigg, 2001). Byrne (1999) highlights the perception that the acquisition of material goods is one of the strongest measures of social success and status. For the consumer, status is translated as the concept of possessions defining success, and the notion of "having made it" in society (Langer, 1997).

Status consumption, which is a dimension of conspicuous consumption according to Marcoux (1997), is the process of gaining status or social prestige from the acquisition and consumption of goods that the individual and significant others perceive to be in high status (O'Cass *et al.*, 1999). Eastman, Goldsmith and Flynn,

(1999, p. 310) describe status consumption as “the process by which individuals strive to improve their social standing through conspicuous consumption of consumer goods that confer or symbolise status for both the individual and surrounding others.” In their literature on prestige-seeking consumer behaviour, Vigneron *et al.* (1999) highlight self-consciousness to represent a consumer’s response to social influence. They distinguish between two types of self-conscious people: publicly self-conscious individuals, who are particularly concerned about how they appear to others, and privately self-conscious individuals, who are more internally focused. However, Ross (1971) notes that for brands to convey meaning, they must not only be symbolic in character but must also be conspicuously consumed.

Consumers’ decision to consume one brand over another is informed by a number of factors, including economic factors. The theory on social class and consumption states that consumers sometimes use brands with the intention to influence their social standing. The theory also acknowledges that some consumption decisions may be driven more by internal consistency than external approval. Finally, all brands that are purchased with the intention to elevate status must be consumed publicly or conspicuously to achieve their intended purpose.

2.5 The Impact of Reference Groups

In describing the impact of reference groups, Kotler (2003, p. 187) explains that “reference groups expose an individual to new behaviours and lifestyles, and influence attitudes and self-concepts; they create pressures for conformity that may affect actual product and brand choices”. He divides reference groups into membership groups: primary and secondary groups, aspiration groups - to which a person hopes to belong; and dissociate groups whose association an individual rejects.

According to Festinger (1954), research has demonstrated that people tend to comply with the dominant opinion of their membership groups when forming their own attitudes. Multiple reference groups acknowledge the pressures and demands of one's own membership group, and attraction by the standard dictated by another reference group (Hyman 1942; Holt 1995).

Vigneron *et al.* (1999) emphasize that the conspicuousness of a product is positively related to its susceptibility to reference-group influence. The consumption of prestige brands appears to have a strong social function, and therefore, reference groups may be significantly influencing the tendency to purchase or consume such brands (Vigneron *et al.*, 1999).

2.6 Conclusion

Literature and past research reviews substantiate the premise that consumers associate brands with class, and that brand choice and consumption are not random but rather a conscious decision to communicate to one's environment their desired or attained social status. The theory reviewed confirms that brands have become partners in social and personal identification.

Chapter 3: Research Questions

3.1 Purpose of the research

This research explored the attitudes of South African Black middle class society towards brands and the relationship between brands and social status. The research is motivated by a prevalent view or bias that consumption of goods, in particular brands, in South African Black middle class society is considerably influenced by a strong desire to achieve, communicate and maintain social status.

3.2 Research Questions

This study will ask the following questions with regard to the consumption choices of South African Black middle class consumers:

- What function do brands serve?
- How do brands convey meaning?
- How does social class influence brand consumption?
- How important are reference groups in brand choice?

Chapter 4:

Research Methodology

4.1 Introduction

The study was of an exploratory nature and required a methodology that supported the objective of learning and discovery, versus one supporting conclusive, generalisable findings. As Byrne (2001) explained, qualitative methods seek to provide contextual knowledge of the phenomenon being explored. The stories, opinions, attitudes and behaviours of individuals participating in the study were therefore more important than general statements that may be formulated about the Black middle class.

4.2 Methodology

A phenomenological qualitative research approach was used in this study. Zikmund (2003) explains that exploratory research is most appropriate in situations where the researcher has little knowledge about a research issue. Although a substantial amount of literature on the topic of consumption exists, the phenomenon of the expanding Black middle class is a new occurrence in the history of South Africa.

Creswell (2003) points out that the fundamental objective of exploratory research is to seek understanding. However, a description offered by Moustakas (2003) of a particular type of exploratory research better captures the central purpose of this study. He describes it phenomenology as “identifying the ‘essence’ of human experiences concerning a phenomenon, as described by participants in a

study...the procedure involves studying a small number of subjects through extensive and prolonged engagement to develop patterns and relationships of meaning” (Moustakas in Creswell, 2003, p. 15). The central purpose of this study was concerned with the individual stories, attitudes, perceptions and experiences of a phenomenon very much part of South Africa in the early years of the twenty first century.

4.3 Population and sampling

The Black Diamond study by Unilever/UCT affirmed that middle class status is not determined purely by wealth. In the study, Black middle class consumers - referred to as Black Diamonds - are identified as those Black individuals who are:

- Wealthy or salaried in ‘suitable’ occupations (minimum of R4000 monthly income)
- Well educated
- Owning/acquiring homes, cars, household goods
- Credit-worthy
- Aspirational and ambitious, confident about the future

However, senior research executive Muyambo (2005) acknowledges a class range or gradient within the Black middle class (Smith, 2005). In her Black middle class stratification she positions the “buppies” – black upwardly mobile professionals

(Williams and Qualls, 1989) at the top of the gradient, followed by entrepreneurs, small business owners and young employees at the bottom (www.iol.co.za).

Muyambo () adds that in the South African context, buppies are:

- Salaried at a minimum of R8000 per month
- 'Degreed'
- Young (25 to 35 years of age)
- Owns a house and car
- Professional in white collar position

In contrast, the young employee black middle class is “not well educated, stays at home with parents, works as apprentice or sales assistant, is studying part-time and wants to prove that a rags-to-riches story can come true”

It is therefore apparent that definitions of the black middle class vary depending on the criteria used. The population for this study will be, Black middle class individuals belonging to the top stratum of the class and will exclude the bottom layers of the Black middle class gradient. The population will comprise male and female Black South Africans living or working in major metropolitan areas in Gauteng between August and September 2007, are between 24 and 35 years of age, and have benefited significantly from post-apartheid political and socio-economic changes as evidenced by their:

- Education: in possession of at least one post-matric diploma or degree
- Cosmopolitan, urban lifestyle
- Creditworthiness, as indicated by home/car ownership
- Employment in a white collar position
- Attitude and outlook: upwardly mobile and positive about future earning/career potential

In this study, the term Black refers only to Africans, and excludes individuals of the Indian and Coloured race.

Byrne (2001) explains that the qualitative researcher's responsibility includes providing enough description about the context of the sample so that others may adequately judge whether the findings apply to their own situations. In sampling from the population described above, the study considers sampling strategies recommended by Creswell (1998) and Weiss (1994).

Creswell (1998) outlines a typology of different sampling strategies for qualitative research, depending on the scope of the study, the amount of time and other resources available for data collection. He describes convenience sampling as appropriate for studies that save time, money and effort but compromise quality and credibility. Weiss (1994) on the other hand argues that convenience sampling is a valuable technique in qualitative inquiry.

A sample of 10 individuals from this population, using a combination of non-probability convenience and snowball sampling, will be drawn. This is supported by Creswell (1998) who recommends long interviews with up to 10 people to conduct a phenomenological study. Existing social and professional networks will be used to find the first 3 participants, who will then be requested to recommend a few suitable candidates for screening. All participants will be unknown to the interviewer.

The units of analysis for this research are the attitudes and opinions of Black Middle Class individuals that participate in the study.

4.4 Data collection

Data was collected using face-to-face, semi-structured in-depth interviews. Maintaining control of the interview, as guided by the interview guide (Appendix A) was used to avoid irrelevant data overload, a major risk with in-depth interviews. However, this was balanced with openness to learning the unknown or discovering the unexpected (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 56) also stress the data collection process should not avoid overload at the expense of sketchiness. The authors warn that interventions to prevent tunnel vision, bias and self-delusion are necessary to achieve this balance. They further state that each data collection episode must be concluded with a period of iterative reflection, thereby initiating the coding process to assist in analysis.

It is recommended that the data collection procedures state the setting, participants, events and the process (Miles and Huberman in Creswell, 2003). For this study, the setting of all data collection was in an environment and setting preferred by the research participants and convenient for both the researcher and the participant. Meetings were scheduled to suit the participant – a time and public place that was convenient – to avoid negative prejudice against the study. Weiss (1994) believes that a setting that relaxes the interviewee improves the tone of the interview, encouraging the interviewee to share valuable personal information. A work office or boardroom proved most ideal because it offered a familiar

environment for the participant, while avoiding the persistent interruptions that may be experienced at a restaurant or other such public places.

Interviews took place in reasonably familiar and comfortable settings chosen by the research participants. The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. The face-to-face interviews were not without limitations, but provided the best practical means of gaining insights into people's lives, especially considering the time and cost constraints of this particular study. The process of engagement included the following:

- Introducing the researcher;
- Introducing the topic and giving a broad overview of the purpose of the research;
- Assuring confidentiality of the interview, stressing that data collected would only be used for the purposes of the study at hand;
- Obtaining permission to audiotape the interview (due to the study not being of a sensitive nature, there were no objections to this intervention);
- Documenting detailed notes of observations – subtle verbal and non-verbal cues – as well as key words, repeated phrases or brands and themes that emerge from the participant's answers

4.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis involved analysing statements, non-verbal responses, meanings, themes and general descriptions (Creswell, 1998). As interviews were recorded and transcribed, analysis of data was performed by applying coding techniques. Patterns in the data that spoke to common themes were identified and categorised accordingly. Although qualitative data analysis could have been performed using software packages, the size of the sample and data did not necessitate that intervention. Manual analysis was therefore used as it was thought to be more pragmatic.

The analysis of data in this paper avoided extreme or unnecessary coding as advised by Miles and Huberman (1994). He discouraged against excessive coding, warning that it diverted focus from the substance of the data to the numerical or quantitative interpretations thereof.

Validity of the findings was verified by performing member checks – presenting findings to three research participants. All three participants agreed that the results portrayed a fair picture of South African black middle class in their respective social environments. However, one participant emphasised that Black people were not a homogeneous group, and expressed disappointment at research that “perpetuates the notion that Blacks have no individuality or independent thought”.

4.6 Research limitations

The success of the data collection, and therefore the research itself, is highly dependent on the skills of the interviewer to probe participants and encourage disclosure without influencing the direction of the conversation (Zikmund, 2003). Interviews, as opposed to non-participant observations, impose a limitation on the data collection since the researcher is collecting filtered information through the views of interviewees (Creswell, 2003 p. 186). Creswell (2003) warns that the presence of the researcher may bias the interviewees' response. He also acknowledges the fact that people may not be equally articulate, which means that extracting data may prove to be challenging – depending on the interviewee's eloquence. However, the resource constraints inherent in this research make interviews the most practical data collection method.

All interviews were conducted by the researcher, who was not a skilled interviewer at the time. However, interviewing guidelines and coaching were sought in time to minimise the risk of collecting poor data. Although interviews were intended to be uninterrupted, in an office setting or a respondent's home, many interviews were conducted in public restaurants and coffee shops. This was a recognised limitation, however it also aided in providing a relaxed environment for the respondents; as a result the interviews were adopted the tone of casual chats. As with all qualitative research, interpretation of the data collected suffered from subjectivity, and therefore the findings may not be regarded as authoritative.

Chapter 5: Results

Introduction

This chapter is a collation of the themes and meanings extracted out of each interview. Although all interviews were guided, each conversation was unique as each respondent told their own story with varying openness, trust and depth.

Ten interviews were secured for the study. Half the respondents were female and all were professionals in their respective industries with at least three years in full-time employment. Only three of the ten respondents were older than thirty years; the rest were in their mid to late twenties. All ten respondents proved to be brand-aware and most indicated that in all categories of consumer goods – including apparel, home appliances, cars, and shoes - their purchase decisions were often dependent on or influenced by the brand.

Presentation of Results

In many of the interviews, respondents volunteered opinions and stories that validated the theory covered in the literature review in Chapter 2. As a result, most of the themes extracted from the interviews are consistent with themes found in the literature. In the process of extracting themes, four broad categories corroborating brand function and consumption theory were identified. Table 1 below lists these categories and their respective supporting themes.

Table 1: Interview themes, categories and associated frequencies

Category	Theme	Frequency	Respondents
Brand Function	Social Identification	31	10
	Personal Identification	27	9
	Guarantees on performance	30	10
		<u>88</u>	
Brand Meaning	Aspiration	24	7
	Exclusivity/Uniqueness	27	7
	Social acceptance	11	3
	Power	9	6
	<u>71</u>		
Social Class	Conspicuous consumption	19	6
	Social superiority/Snobbishness	20	8
	Belongingness	7	3
	Status consumption	39	10
	Self-consciousness	32	10
	<u>117</u>		
Reference Groups	Family	28	10
	Aspiration groups	14	5
	Dissociate groups	9	3
	<u>51</u>		

The themes most referenced in the interviews are highlighted in bold in Table 1.

Interview answers and commentary substantiate the categories and themes presented above as shown in the Tables 2 to 5 below. The presentation of these results remains in alignment with the three research questions.

Category 1: Brand Function

The brand function category of themes was one of the most frequently referenced in terms of unique respondent recall. The social identification aspect of a brand's function was well-recognised by respondents as all of them deliberately consumed a brand in order to convey a message to their respective environments.

Table 2: Brand Function themes and corresponding respondent quotes

Theme	Substantiating respondent quote
<p>Social Identification – this theme refers to the brand's ability to communicate to the environment a message that integrates or dissociates the consumer from their environment. The need for uniqueness was very strongly represented in all the interviews, and brands were regarded as imperative in communicating this identity to one's social environment</p>	<p>“Labels are like drinking and smoking; they are a ticket being a part of the in-crowd”</p> <p>“When you have worked very hard for something, you want to show people in your environment that things are working out for you. I am the same... My stuff does that for me. It lets everyone know that I am successful.”</p> <p>“I am older now and my brands reflect that. My car and home appliances must</p>



	<p>reflect that I have matured”</p> <p>“Excellence and achievement are important to me. Brands are more attractive if they communicate these things”</p> <p>“My car says the “I am grown up, but I can still play”” – 24 year-old male about Audi A3</p> <p>“Brands must make a lasting statement...without shouting”</p>
<p>Personal Identification – this theme was referenced in statements where a respondent expressed personal attachment or affinity towards a brand</p>	<p>“I love LG for the kitchen! LG really has the idea when it comes to kitchen appliances”</p> <p>“Adidas knows my feet; their shoes are made for me. Adidas is a subtle design but makes a strong statement”</p>
<p>Guarantee on performance – this theme was represented by statements which made reference to quality,</p>	<p>“My aunt has an LG fridge and it has never broken once. The ice and water machine in front still works.”</p>



<p>reliability, and the ability to deliver the brand promise</p>	<p>“My mother still drives her nineties Jetta. So many people want to buy that car from her because it’s still ok.”</p> <p>“I like sports brands because I am a sportsman. Nike is my favourite sports brand...Quality is implicit in these brands”</p>
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Category 2: Brand Meaning

Aspiration and Exclusivity were the two themes most frequently recalled in the brand meaning category.

Table 3: Brand meaning themes and corresponding respondent quotes

Theme	Substantiating respondent quote
<p>Aspiration – this theme captures respondents’ desires to belong to a social class above them, indicated by their desire for and consumption of brands not easily accessible due to economic constraints. In two</p>	<p>“My house will always be in line with my earning potential, but my car will consistently be ahead of my earning potential”</p>



<p>conversations, respondents' aspirations were specifically for Power. In certain instances, the aspiration was for exclusivity – the financial muscle to afford brands not accessible to others.</p>	<p>“When people (family) see me in this car, they think “She’s done well, the future looks bright for her. At the age of 25 she’s driving such a nice car, one can only imagine what car she will drive at 30””</p> <p>“I love the Nissan Navara or Hardbody. It’s such a sexy, empowering car. I think a woman in a Navara is both intimidating and envied”</p> <p>“If I had no financial constraints, my first choice of car would be a Bentley Continental. It costs about two million rand and insurance alone will set you back ten grand. If someone drives that car, you know he is important and powerful”</p> <p>“For a lasting, classic look – Mercedes, Jaguar and VW Touareg”</p>



<p>Exclusivity – this theme relates to an expressed need to “be the only one” known in a social environment to consume or own a particular brand.</p>	<p>“My clothes have to be unique therefore I shop at boutiques and not department stores”</p> <p>“The label itself is not important; as long as it promises exclusivity”</p> <p>“I haggled and negotiated to afford my Audi A3 instalments. I like Audi because not everyone goes for it – they go for Golf or BMW”</p> <p>“I waited for this phone until it was available in South Africa. It’s expensive...even on contract, not everyone can afford it”</p> <p>“I like my car, especially when it’s clean, because not everyone drives a Ford Fiesta. It’s comfortable and its mine”</p>
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Category 3: Social Class

The Social Class category is the highest scoring category in terms of total sum of theme frequency. The themes Status Consumption and Self-consciousness were referenced by all respondents. Eight of the ten respondents indicated a need for social superiority or snobbish behaviour in their brand choices and consumption behaviour.

Table 4: Social class themes and corresponding respondent quotes

Theme	Substantiating respondent quote
<p>Status Consumption is consumption primarily driven by an intention to gain or maintain social status</p>	<p>“I am cool in that car! I am a Black diamond in my 1-series!”</p> <p>“A reflection of where I am in my life, especially in my family...such things do matter. I don’t want to talk about my success. I want them to see it.”</p> <p>“I do look at status in a brand, but if a pair of jeans costs me R2000.00...I know I can’t buy them. Most people live</p>



	<p>false lives because of how certain brands are perceived. People chase those brands”</p> <p>“People judge you based on the things you have, the things they can see”</p>
<p>Self-consciousness is greatly concerned about appearance of self to others in the environment</p>	<p>“My things make me look good. People think I make a lot of money because of the car I drive, the way I dress and how I look. Every morning I make a point of looking good and that also determines how I feel about myself”</p> <p>“I wish I had waited for the new Merc. I hate BMW... every one who can barely afford one drives one. I can afford a better car than that.”</p>
<p>Social superiority or Snobbishness is a behaviour exhibited by consumers who reject a good or brand because it is consumed by too many people</p>	<p>“I don’t like Nike, Nokia and BMW – everyone buys a BMW and I don’t know what the fuss is. I compare BMW and Nike to bubblegum. The first time you</p>



	<p>chew its sweet; after some time its grey with no sugar”</p> <p>“I shop at boutiques and unpopular malls. I am part of a big youth congregation in my church – between 500 and 600 people. If I shop where everyone shops...no, I don’t want my clothes to be a uniform”</p>
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Category 4: Reference Groups

Family emerged as a very strong influence amongst all the respondents. In all the interviews, respondents began by introducing themselves and giving a brief background of their lives. Nine of all ten participants made spontaneous mention of their families in the first few moments of the interview. Many of them also made unequivocal assertions of the importance of their families’ perceptions of them, the importance of being “accepted” and being someone the family can be proud of.

The choice of brands, therefore, appeared to be highly influenced by the impression such brand choice would have on the family. In some instances, brands were chosen or rejected as a result of family values instilled in childhood. The

tabulation of responses below supports the selection of family influence as a key theme in brand consumption amongst South African Black middle class society.

Table 5: Reference groups theme and corresponding respondent quotes

Theme	Supporting respondent quote
<p>Family – this theme relates to the influence a consumer’s primary and closest membership group has on their choice of brands.</p>	<p>“I like Sony for the lounge because it’s a brand I trust, a brand I’ve known since I was a child”</p> <p>“My family values success and achievement. All my siblings are professionals and drive good mature cars like Audi and Mercedes. I have decided to buy something different”</p> <p>“I love VW. My mother still drives a ‘90’s Jetta...and it still works”</p> <p>“My father taught me financial planning, that’s why I only buy what I can afford. I hate debt. I bought all my furniture cash”</p>



	<p>“For the first few years of my working life I was the sole bread winner at home. My parents work now, and my sister too. So now I buy nice things for myself...to make up for the time when I couldn't have them”</p>
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Conclusion

The results chapter identified prevailing themes in the ten interviews conducted. These results form a basis for the discussion which follows in chapter 7 and subsequently the conclusion together with the recommendations for future research in this or related fields.

Chapter 6: Discussion of Results

Introduction

The objective of the study was to investigate the role of brands as perceived by South African Black middle class society. Dominant themes emerging from the literature review were clustered into four categories namely brand function, brand meaning, social class and reference groups. All four categories were believed to have a degree of influence on how brands were perceived, understood and consumed by the Black middle class. The categories map directly onto the four research questions that guided this exploration. The discussion of the results will therefore also be directed by the main research questions.

Question 1: What function do brands serve in BMC?

Corneo et al. (1997) explain that the motivation for consumers to buy a brand is not just in the functional utility derived from consuming the brand, but that brands are purchased and consumed because of what they symbolise. This is evident in the results, where quoted examples highlight the symbolic properties brands are consumed for. One of the respondents goes on to say that she should not have to verbalise her success, but that her possessions and brands must do that for her. She maintains that some of the brands she consumes must reflect not only her current place in society, but her future status as well. So brands in Black middle class society may also be used to signal future performance or future status.

Perceptions about a brand also determine the willingness of consumers to be associated with the brand (Del RoAo et al., 2001). One of the respondents' statements supports this view. The respondent explains her choice of car over two other equally prominent brands thus:

“Those two brands are more mature and more serious. BMW is a brand I can identify with because it's more cool”

Del RoAo et al. (2001) explain social identification as the ability of a brand to communicate to the consumer's social environment, thereby integrating or dissociating them from the environment. This understanding was also present amongst the individuals interviewed. All of them used brands for social identification to communicate membership to the group of to communicate membership to another group of higher status. One respondent recognised the “voice” of a brand, her strong preference that “a brand must make a lasting statement without shouting”.

The personal identification function of a brand was witnessed amongst the people interviewed. Nine respondents expressed emotion for their brands that signified personal identification such as “I love”. Del RoAo (2001) states that the ability of a consumer to identify so strongly with a brand that they express feelings of affinity and attachment is indicative of the brand's personal identification function.

Literature points out that even the intention to buy a brand is enhanced by the personal identification function that the consumer observes in the brand (Hogg et al., 2000). It explains that consumers appraise the brand in light of the congruency between their self-image and the brand image. As one respondent rationalised his purchase of a car, he explained that the brand was mature but playful – just like him. Another participant concurred with this assessment, saying that her car had to be fun and young because that was who she was.

The guarantee function of a brand proved important and considered in purchase and consumption decisions by all ten participants. The promise of quality, longevity and reliability were some of the elements of guarantee expressed in the interviews. As Ambler (1997) explains, the guarantee function appraises the ability of the brand to deliver on its promise thereby meeting generated expectations. A competitive sportsman commented about his favourite sports brand: “Nike is my favourite sports brand. Quality is implicit in these brands”.

Question 2: How do brands convey meaning?

In chapter 2, O’Cass et al. (2002) argue that the meaning of a brand is derived from what the brand symbolises. The literature reviewed also emphasised that for a brand to have meaning it must be consumed conspicuously (Fournier, 1991; Del RoAo et al., 2001; Henry, 2002). Meaning in a brand is therefore drawn from what the brand symbolises to the consumer and their social environment. Many

respondents expressed a deep desire for achievement, excellence and success – these sentiments were captured under the Aspiration theme. Brands that symbolise accomplishment and distinction, conspicuously, were therefore appraised to have inspirational meaning. One respondent hoped to one day own an Aston Martin and explained his association of the brand with James Bond:

“I know it’s just a movie and it’s not real. But everything he does is so effortless. I like that”

Another respondent indicated that aspiration can be interpreted even in the brands that are already being consumed. She mentioned that her brand of car was a reflection of how successful she would be in the future.

Seven of the ten expressed great concern at owning or consuming a ubiquitous brand. These respondents felt that a brand must represent their individuality and not identify them as part of a social group. Brands were chosen to deliberately avoid uniformity with other members of the social environment by totally rejecting popular brands. This behaviour runs contrary to the view of Long and Shiffman (2000) documented in chapter 2, which suggested that consumers will positively value brands that are popular in their immediate social environment or aspirational social groups. The interviews revealed that sometimes Black middle class consumers deliberately shunned a brand that was generally perceived to be a “Black diamond” brand because they didn’t want that association. These

concerned were clustered under the theme Exclusivity. One respondent commented that “the brand is not important; as long as it promises exclusivity”. Vigneron et al. (1999) listed exclusivity as a characteristic of status in a brand. It may be concluded therefore that the behaviour to reject popular brands in search of exclusivity is an indication that these consumers are status-seeking in their behaviour.

Question 3: How does social class influence brand consumption?

Veblen’s theory on conspicuous consumption, although dated, proves surprisingly relevant in the consumption patterns observed in the twenty first century. Veblen (1889) proposed that each social class emulates the consumption patterns of the class above it, therefore resulting in a cycle of conspicuous consumption – even among the poorest members of society. The results of the research revealed that status consumption, self-consciousness and snobbishness were the most dominant themes in the social class cluster.

Status consumption is a form of conspicuous consumption, specifically undertaken to emphasise or establish one’s status in a social setting (Trigg, 2001). Status consumption may also be used by consumers to elevate their status or to gain access to a class above their current status. The respondents confirmed the theory

that possessions define success and are used as affirmation to “having made it” in society (Langer, 1997). One respondent paraphrased Langer, reminding me that

“People judge you on the things you have; the things they can see”

All respondents confirmed their consideration of status in a brand. However, it was not the overriding determinant of consumption. A few respondents noted that their budget, the promise of exclusivity and uniqueness were key factors in their decisions to purchase a branded good. To these individuals, the more common or popular a brand, the lesser its status and the less attractive it becomes.

Vigneron et al. (1999) suggest that self-consciousness, especially externally focused self-consciousness, and represents a consumer’s response to social influence. All the respondents exhibited traits of self-consciousness in the stories they told and the behaviours they described. Some respondents were self-conscious of the brands they used and the message those brands communicated to their environment about them. Others were particularly self-conscious of how they did not want to be perceived, and therefore which brands to avoid. One of the respondents had recently bought a luxury German sedan and felt deep regret and extreme self-consciousness being seen in that car. She complained that the brand was for “wanna-be’s” and resented the association with the brand. Vigneron et al. (1999) categorise this as public self-consciousness – concern about how one appears to others.

Snobbishness is a phenomenon characterised by a rejection of common goods or brands in a quest to maintain exclusivity and therefore superior, more distinguished status. The majority of respondents exhibited this trait – constantly emphasising that their brands must not be everyone’s brands. Leibenstein (1950) claimed that the snob-effect could also be recognised by a consumer’s early adoption of a good in order to take advantage of its limited availability to the general population.

Question 4: How important are reference groups in brand choice?

The theory review in chapter 2 makes reference to Kotler (2003). He divides reference groups into membership groups: Primary and secondary groups (comprising family and friends), aspiration groups and dissociate groups. In chapter 2, Vigneron et al. advise that the “conspicuousness of a brand is positively related to its susceptibility to reference group influence”.

In all the conversations recorded for this research, the theme of family was very strong across the entire sample, confirming the significance of family in brand choice and consumption. In many instances, the influence of family was positively related to the choice of brand. In such cases, the family’s view of what achievement or excellence is becomes the reference for the consumer. One of the respondents expressed such pride to be a member of her family, noting that success was very important where she came from and it was evident in the

conspicuous things one consumed. She acknowledged all her siblings, their qualifications, their spouses and their qualifications and the cars each one drove.

In a different interview, a respondent recounted the struggles of his family – unemployment, poverty, and humility. This reference, however, affected him in a similar manner to the respondent mentioned above. He too felt a need to conspicuously consume brands that improved his status, to enjoy the feeling of status.

Conclusion

The results of the study were largely in agreement with the literature and theory reviewed. Some of the respondents' answers contradicted popular views regarding the consumption patterns and psyche of Black middle class South Africans. The results prove the task of marketing to the Black middle class a hugely complex and challenging exercise because they reject the notion that this social group is homogenous and pursue status at any cost as evangelised in popular media.

Chapter 7:

Conclusion and Recommendations

7.1 Main Findings

The study found brands to have multiple roles in South African Black middle class society. The role of identification to society was a role unanimously acknowledged by all participants, as was the role of a brand to guarantee performance and deliver on its promise. Personal identification also emerged as a key role to be performed by a brand as perceived by this social group, with the majority of participants emphasising the value of uniqueness, individuality and exclusivity. These participants expressed frustration at the lack of availability of brands that deliver uniqueness and individuality as everyone chases the same limited brands. Only a few participants found value in the brand's ability to establish belongingness; most sought to be dissociated from the middle class masses, even though their profiles matched what is commonly regarded as Black middle class in South Africa.

The pursuit of success, achievement and recognition was also pervasive in most of the conversations, informing the theme of Aspiration. The recognition of possibilities and positivity about the future supported these aspirations. All the respondents were educated professionals and had positive expectations of their social and economic development. Brands that affirmed this belief were favoured by many. This theme of aspiration is one most connected to a brand's role to deliver meaning to the consumer and to their social surroundings.

All respondents explicitly admitted to the conspicuous consumption of brands for elevation and maintenance of status. A corresponding admission of self-consciousness was also observed. Only two participants displayed a need for belongingness in their consumption behaviour while the rest pursued social superiority and clear distinction from members in their social environment.

Finally, the influence of family on brand choice and status-seeking behaviour was apparent in all the interviews. In some cases, a history of family success and status informed the choice of brand – to conform and to ensure belongingness to the reference group. In a few instances, a history of poverty and lack influenced the conspicuous consumption of brands to communicate a newly attained status, to proclaim freedom from the shackles of poverty.

Recommendations

The desire for exclusivity expressed by the respondents is a challenge to marketers. It appears as though the market has only catered a limited range of brands that may be perceived as status-associated brands to this social group. The growth of the Black middle class in South Africa has fuelled a demand for status goods never witnessed before in this economy. Although there has been introduction of new brands into the South African market as a result of globalisation and the liberation of trade, it would seem that the growth of status brands available

in the economy has not corresponded to the growth new money facilitated by BBEE.

Marketers have a challenge to create compelling competition to established status brands in South African Black middle class society. Many of these brands have a history and heritage close and sentimental to this social group. In the automotive industry, VW, BMW, Audi are examples of brands that continue to enjoy favour amongst those seeking belongingness, but suffer rejection among those seeking exclusivity. Herein are opportunities for manufacturers and marketers to close the gap. In this industry, brands such as Dodge and Renault are capturing some of the consumers seeking social superiority. However, the perception of superior quality inherent in favoured brands remains a significant challenge to overcome. These principles can be applied in any industry where the goods sold and marketed are conspicuously consumed.

Future Research

Some participants, however, admitted to consuming status brands to the detriment of their financial health, while others demonstrated an appreciation for financial management, and considered affordability in evaluating brand options. This pragmatism was not emphasised in the literature reviewed and could be explored further.

A quantitative study on the elasticity of demanded for status brands amongst South African consumers would also provide interesting insight into the relative value of brand versus functional utility.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Introduction

Respondent

Name:

Surname (optional):

Age:

Employer:

Occupation:

Consent

I hereby agree to partake in a MBA study on the South African Black middle class society. I understand that this study is a requirement for completion of an academic degree and therefore have no expectation to be paid, financially or otherwise, for my participation.

Signed.....Date.....

Confidentiality

The purpose of this interview is to explore a phenomenon and to learn. All interviews will be recorded and analysed strictly for this purpose. Your name, information, opinions and any other data collected in this research will not be used for any financial gain.

Appendix B: Rough Interview Guide

Tell me about yourself

What makes you happy?

Tell me about your social network – friends, colleagues

What do you like about your friends?

When was the last time you spoiled yourself?

How did you spoil yourself?

Do you have a favourite designer label?

Do you own something expensive? Tell me about it.

If your best friend had to spoil you, what gift would you like from them?

What car do you drive? How did you make that choice?

If you had no financial constraints, what car would you buy? Why?

Do you know anyone who drives that car? What do you think of that person?

Would people think of you any differently if you drove that car?

Appendix B: List of Respondents

Nhlanhla Nkabinde, Sales Manager, 33, Male

Zimbini Madikiza, Brand Manager, 25, Female

Mangaliso Jamani, IT specialist, 24, Male

Athi, Business Analyst, 24, Male

Ngoana, IT Implementation Consultant, 24, Female

Juliana Shongwe, Sales Manager, 34, Female

Nonhlanhla Dlamini, Business analyst, 25, Female

Sebo Diphoko, Sales Representative, 27, Female

Kabelo Diseko, Market Development, 28, Male

Moeketsi Nchoba, Marketing Manager, 34, Male