# PROFESSIONAL WOMEN'S EVALUATION OF THE QUALITY OF CAREER WEAR

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### OPSOMMING

Die aantal vroue wat die formele arbeidsmag betree, neem steeds toe oor die hele wêreld, nie net in die eerstewêreld-lande nie, maar ook in opkomende eko-nomieë, waar meer en meer vroue kies om 'n professionele loopbaan te volg. Professionele vroue is gedefinieer as gegradueerde, professionele persone wat beskik oor ten minste 'n vierjaar-graad of die e-kwivalent daarvan, en wat praktiseer in die gebied van hulle studieterrein. In 'n opkomende ekonomie soos Suid-Afrika sou hulle, volgens die lewenstan-daarde-meting (LSM) in die hoër 7-10 groepe val, wat gesamentlik 67,5% van die totale inkomste in die land verdien en wat 21% van die totale volwasse bevolking in die land uitmaak. Ongeveer 50% van die bevolking is vroulik. Aangesien professionele vroue 'n aansienlike bedrag geld kan bestee op klere, kwalifi-seer hulle as 'n verbruikersmark wat in die meeste lande oorweeg moet word as 'n lewensvatbare tei-kensegment.

Evaluering van kwaliteit vind plaas in twee fases ty-dens die verbruiker se besluitnemingsproses. Eer-stens word die kwaliteit geëvalueer in die winkel ty-dens die besluitnemingstadium, en tweedens tydens die gebruik van die produk. Die gehalte-aanwysers wat professionele vroue gebruik tydens die twee fa-ses is nie noodwendig dieselfde nie. In hierdie studie is 'n verkenning gedoen na die tasbare funksionele, sensoriese) en nie-tasbare (emosionele, kognitiewe, belangrikheid van die self, belangrikheid van ander) gehalte-aanwysers wat professionele vroue gebruik om werksklere se kwaliteit te evalueer, soos wat dit beïnvloed word deur die intrinsieke en ekstrinsieke produk-kenmerke onderskeidelik. Elkeen van hierdie gehalte-aanwysers is gemeet volgens die belangrik-heid daarvan vir die respondente tydens die besluit-nemingstadium en tydens produkgebruik, en daarna vergelyk, aangesien die belangrikheid van gehalte-aanwysers kan verskil tussen die twee fases.

Die respondente was voltyds-aangestelde professio-nele vroue in die regs-, finansiële, ingenieurs- en mediese bedrywe, aangesien hierdie vroue beskik oor die geskikte kwalifikasie en geregistreer moet wees by die toepaslike professionele liggaam. 'n Sneeubaltegniek is gebruik om deelnemers / respon-dente te werf vir beide die kwalitatiewe fase (fokusgroep), en vir die kwantitatiewe data-insamelingsfase (vraelys). Die fokusgroep is gebruik om insig te verkry in die presiese gehalte-aanwysers en spesifieke terminologie wat die teikenbevolking gebruik in die evaluering van die kwaliteit van werks-klere tydens die aankoop-besluitnemingstadium en tydens die produkgebruik. Die vraelys is opgestel teen die teoretiese agtergrond en die inligting wat uit die fokusgroep verkry is. Data-insameling het tydens 2008 geskied.

Deur die gebruik van T-toetse en die Pearson se korrelasiekoëffisiënt is daar bevind dat soortgelyke gehalte-aanwysers gebruik word deur respondente om werksklere se kwaliteit te evalueer tydens die besluitnemingsproses en tydens produkgebruik. Tas-bare gehalte-aanwysers is gesien as beduidend be-langriker vir respondente dan die nie-tasbare gehalte-aanwysers, tydens beide stadiums van gehalte-evaluering. Toepaslike en voldoende inligting ten opsigte van tasbare gehalte-aanwysers moet dus beskikbaar gestel word deur kleinhandelaars aan professionele vroue by die punt van die aankoop. Dit kan verbruikerstevredenheid verseker tydens die gebruik van die produk en terugkeerverkope vir die handelaar fasiliteer.

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## INTRODUCTION

The number of women entering the formal workforce is still increasing worldwide, not only in first-world countries, but also in emerging economies, where more and more women choose to pursue a professional career. For example, in the United States of America (USA), 56% of the accountants hired from 2003 to 2005 were female (Siebenmark, 2005), while 61,8% of all accountants and auditors in the USA were women (Siebenmark, 2005). Likewise about a quarter of America's lawyers and 44% law students are female (USLaw.com, 2010), while in 2010, women in the USA comprised approximately 40% of all managers (US Government Report, 2010). In South Africa (RSA), gender equality in the workplace has formed part of legislative discourse during the past 10 years and women now have a 41% representation in the workplace (Lewis-Enright et al, 2009).

Professional women can be defined as graduate professionals who hold at least a four-year degree or the equivalent thereof and who are practising in the field of their study (Roberts, 2005). In an emerging economy, such as RSA, they would, according to the Living Standards Measurement (LSM) fall into the higher 7-10 groups, who collectively earn 67,5% of the total earnings and who make up 21% of the total adult population in the country. Approximately 50% of this population group is female. Women in this population group thus have significant purchasing ability, especially with regard to clothing (apparel and shoes), which is collectively the third largest household expenditure (Du Plessis & Rousseau, 2005:157) and which consumers identified as the third "most status" product (Van der Merwe, 2005). Since professional women may spend a significant amount of money on apparel, they qualify as a consumer market that should in most countries be considered as a viable target segment.

In many countries, such as the USA, United Kingdom (UK) and RSA, many major fashion retailers offer specially branded (and in many cases more expensive) merchandise for this consumer group, and develop brand positioning strategies to attract this particular target market, who has higher disposable incomes than many other consumer groups. Consumers today have an enormous range of choices. They are increasingly experimenting, becoming less predictable, and display less brand loyalty (Van der Merwe, 2005), which calls for a strong focus on consumer behaviour in market segmentation. Although most retailers acknowledge that when it comes to choosing which brand to buy, the balance of power has shifted away from the manufacturer to the consumer, very little if any research has been conducted into this target segment's apparel purchase decision-making or into the quality indicators that are important to them when making apparel purchasing choices, thereby leaving retailers in the dark as to what exactly to offer for this target market.

The purpose of this study was therefore to explore, describe and compare the importance of quality indi-cators used by professional women to evaluate the quality of career wear during the purchase decision-making process and again during product use. Although several authors (Abraham-Murali & Littrell, 1995; Hines & Swinker, 2001; Aqueveque, 2006; Swinker & Hines, 2006; De Klerk & Tselepis, 2007) have previously researched the quality indicators used by consumers when evaluating the quality of apparel at the point of purchase, no research has concentrated on post-purchase quality evaluation, and certainly not on professional female consumers. Results could direct marketers and retailers to the important quality indicators that this consumer segment prefer for career wear specifically branded for them. As consumers make decisions in the marketplace against the background of a probable value system, this research may also shed some light on the value systems that direct the apparel choices of this viable target segment.

## LITERATURE

During the past two decades, a proliferation of books on how one should dress to be successful at work, have seen the light (Bixler & Nix-Rice, 1997; Morem, 1997; Sabath, 2000; Seitz, 2000), while various researchers investigated the beliefs, attitudes and practices regarding dress and appearance management in the workplace (Freitas et al, 1997; Galin & Benoliel, 1990; Jenkins & Atkins, 1990; Peluchette et al, 2006). While many companies today have specific dress codes for their professional employees, others are less strict. Various researchers have focussed on the employee's point of view on the importance of self-monitoring (the extent to which individuals attempt to exercise control over the way they present themselves to others) in the choice of career wear (Day et al, 2002; Miller & Cardy, 2003; Peluchette et al, 2006), while others have concentrated on the importance of impression management (actively manipulating the image that is portrayed to others) in the workplace (Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Rafaeli & Pratt, 1993; Freitas et al, 1997; Peluchetti et al, 2006). The fact is that, when making purchasing decisions and career wear choices, both the personal and the company's standards will consciously or unconsciously play a role in the consumer's quality evaluation of the apparel item. Unfortunately, very little if any research has been conducted regarding the purchasing behaviour, and specifically the quality indicators that professional women use for their career wear.

### The concept of quality

Several authors have researched the quality indicators used by consumers when evaluating apparel quality at the point of purchase (Abraham-Murali & Littrell, 1995; Hines & Swinker, 2001; Aqueveque, 2006; Swinker & Hines, 2006; De Klerk & Tselepis, 2007). The International Standards Organization defines quality as "the totality of characteristics of a whole that has the capacity to satisfy the explicit and implied needs of consumers" (Brown & Rice, 1998:38). Broadly speaking, quality may be defined as the pre-eminence or excellence of a product, while

observed quality can be taken to be the consumer's evaluation of the total of a product's pre-eminence or excellence (Fiore & Damhorst, 1992; Zeithaml, 1998). Gersak (2002) and North et al (2003) noted that apparel consumers infer that this estimated capability to provide satisfaction, is derived from the intrinsic characteristics of the product itself, and also from extrinsic variables.

Apparel products are therefore evaluated by consumers against intrinsic and extrinsic product features. Intrinsic product features are those inherent to the product, such as colour and style, which when altered, will alter the product itself. Extrinsic product features, such as brand name or price, when altered, do not alter the product itself (Abraham-Murali & Littrell, 1995; Brown & Rice, 1998:38-39; Aqueveque, 2006). The physical or intrinsic component of the apparel product includes the design, materials, construction and finishes of the apparel product. The behavioural or performance component includes what the apparel product can do for the consumer and is determined by the physical or intrinsic features of the apparel product. Consumers may thus purchase apparel products with certain intrinsic features (e.g. a wool suit), as they expect the product to function in a certain manner (e.g. lasts longer). Unfortunately, consumers in many cases do not have the knowledge and experience to predict functional performance of apparel products (such as ease of care, comfortability, durability, serviceability, and others) from intrinsic qualities, and tend to use extrinsic features (such as brand name, price, store image, and others) as indicators of the quality of the product (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2010:178).

Apparel products, however, do not only have functional performance characteristics (such as being comfortable or easy to care for), but also sensory-aesthetic performance characteristics (such as the style or colour being beautiful to look at or the touch of the textile pleasing the consumer (Morganoski & Postlewait, 1989; DeLong, 1998:318). A sensory-aesthetic experience is about the pleasure experienced from, amongst others, a sensory experience. Fiore and Kimle (1997:6) point to the fact that, to achieve a total sensory-aesthetic experience from an apparel product, it is important that all the senses of the consumer are addressed and satisfied. A consumer may therefore choose a specific apparel product not only because of its functional performance characteristics, but also because of its sensory-aesthetic performance characteristics. Both the functional and the sensory-aesthetic performance characteristics therefore play a role in the professional woman's evaluation of the quality (what the product do or can do for me) of her career wear. Functional and sensory-aesthetic performance characteristics of an apparel product can be used as tangible quality indicators during the quality evaluation of apparel products.

Expectations about an apparel product's performance and the evaluation of the actual performance, however, not only relate to functional and sensory-

aesthetic performance, but also relate to the symbolic and affective performance dimensions (Fiore & Kimle, 1997:42-45; DeLong,1998:254; Hawkins et al, 2001:641; Hekkert, 2006; Desmet & Hekkert, 2007). A product's symbolic performance relates to what the product symbolises to the consumer – something that does not pertain to the direct physical properties of the product, but is derived from the consumer's response to the product (Solomon, 1983; Hawkins et al, 2001:641; Vazquez et al, 2002). The professional woman may, for example, expect her career wear to symbolise her status in the company, or her personal financial status.

Expressiveness in objects can be inherent to the object or can be due to previously learnt behaviour (Fiore & Kimle, 1997:6). For example, the colour red is energising and the wearer of red appears more dominant in the corporate environment, while blue on the other hand is generally associated with trustworthiness and stability. The professional woman may therefore expect her career wear to also satisfy her on an emotional level, for example, the price making her feel that she is wearing something special, or the brand name making her feel more confident.

Although these cognitions and feelings may be the result of some of the product's intrinsic characteristics, such as the colour or style, it is most often primarily the result of extrinsic product features, such as the brand name, price, fashionability or place where the career wear was bought (Gersak, 2002; North et al, 2003; Birtwistle & Tsim, 2005; Vahie & Pashwan, 2006). Symbolic and affective qualities of an apparel product can be seen as non-tangible quality indicators that the professional woman may use when she evaluates the quality of her career wear, both during the pre-purchase and the post-purchase stages.

In addition to the above, there is consensus in the literature that apparel communicates strong and powerful messages about the wearer, both to the wearer herself as well as to important others (Forsythe et al, 1990; Kaiser, 1998:30; Damhorst, 2005:403). There is also empirical support that individuals use apparel as part of how they construct their image in the workplace, and that colleagues at work may become so important to an individual, that the person will go to great lengths to impress those important others (Trice & Beyer, 1993:pppp??; Hymowitz, 2005:237; Peluchette et al, 2006). The literature further indicates that, specifically in self-monitors, self-image may become so important to a person that it plays an important role in the person's choice of career wear (Miller-Spilman, 2005:217; Peluchette et al, 2006). The professional woman may, for example, expect her career wear to align with her perception of her own abilities or with her perception of appropriate career wear. The importance of others in the workplace and the importance of a positive self-image may therefore, in addition to the symbolic and affective qualities of an apparel product, be used as non-tangible quality indicators (what this apparel product should do for me), when the professional woman evaluates the quality of her career wear during the pre- and post-purchase
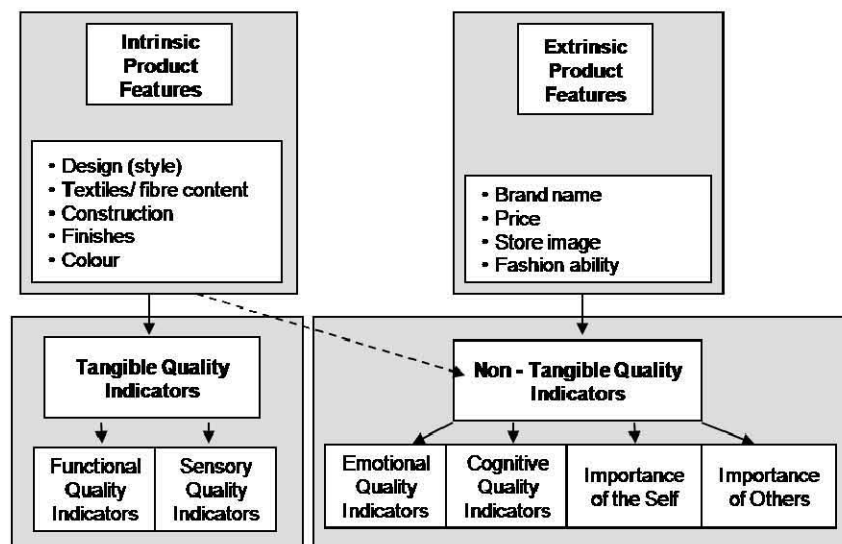
**FIGURE 1: QUALITY FRAMEWORK**

stages.

Against the above background discussion on the concept of quality, the following schematic quality framework served as backbone for the compilation of the questionnaire:

As can be seen from Figure 1, both intrinsic and extrinsic product features play a role in the consumer's quality evaluation. The intrinsic product features primarily influence the tangible quality indicators (which are viewed in terms of functional and sensory indicators), although they may also, to a lesser extent, influence the non-tangible indicators. Extrinsic product features, such as brand name, price, store image and the fashionability or "hanger appeal" of the garment directly influence the non-tangible quality indicators, namely emotional quality indicators, cognitive quality indicators and the importance of the self and others.

**The role of values in quality evaluation**

Consumers make decisions within the marketplace against a value system (Bagozzi *et al*, 2007:98; Banerjee, 2008; Evans *et al*, 2009:24). A value system serves to evaluate both the self and others (Kaiser, 1998:289), reflects the intricate social environment within which the consumer functions (Kim *et al*, 2002), and aids in comprehension of consumption behaviour of consumers (Beatty *et al*, 1985; Solomon & Rabolt, 2004:136; Schiffman & Kanuk, 2010:394). The value system in turn influences the needs structure of a consumer (Kim *et al*, 2002), and need recognition is the first step within most decision-making models used. Consumer needs directly influence consumption behaviour and satisfaction. Thus, consumers evaluate all product symbolism and perceptions of experiences against the backdrop of a value system (Sontag & Slater, 1995).

According to Allport, Vernon and Lindzey (in Kaiser, 1998:300), the measures of basic values which are based on Spranger's typology (in Kaiser, 1998:300)

can be grouped into six categories. Most people consider all these values during apparel purchases and use them, but do not regard all of them as equally important in apparel quality. The six categories are theoretical, economic, aesthetic, social, political and religious values.

Theoretical values function as a way for consumers to order knowledge and experiences from several sources (Kaiser, 1998:300). Theoretical values are not closely related to a strong interest in apparel in general. They are more related to the functionality of apparel (such as the comfortability and ease of care) than to what the apparel product can do for the person on an emotional or cognitive level, or in interaction with other people.

Economic values are concerned with efficiency, practicality and usefulness of apparel. Consumers' using this value will probably not spend money on frivolous, high-fashion items. Consumers who rate this value as important see the importance of apparel in direct relation to possible expenditure on such clothes (Kaiser, 1998:300).

Aesthetic values are concerned with the enjoyment and pleasure derived from apparel more than its utilitarian function. Individuals who rate the aesthetic function highly are enthusiastic, individualistic and want to enhance their personal appearance (Kaiser, 1998:301). They will probably consider the non-tangible quality indicators of more importance than the functionality of the apparel product.

Social values are concerned with acceptance and approval of significant others within the consumers' various roles. Consumers who rate this value highly will typically seek security from their apparel and lean toward conformity of dress (Goldsmith & Stith, 1992; Kaiser, 1998:301).

Political values are concerned with personal power and success. Dress as a status symbol is more im-

portant to consumers who rate this value of more importance than apparel comfort, conformity or economy (Kaiser, 1998:300). Fashionability and dressing for success are also important to these consumers.

Religious values are associated with the search for unity among life experiences and are generally not related to an interest in personal appearance (Kaiser, 1998: 301).

Information on which quality indicators professional career women deem important in the quality evaluation of their career wear during the purchase decision-making stage and again when the product is used, may therefore also shed light on the values that drive this target segment's specific needs.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research design

The goal of this study was both exploratory and descriptive. According to Babbie and Mouton (2001:79), an exploratory study serves to provide basic knowledge or further understanding into a certain area within a field of study. In this regard the goal of this study was to gain a better insight into the importance of the various quality indicators that career women use during the two phases of quality evaluation of her career apparel. A descriptive study has the goal of observing certain phenomena and subsequently describing these observations (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:80). During the description phase of this study, the following elements were described and subsequently compared: (1) the importance of tangible and non-tangible quality indicators used to evaluate apparel during the in-store decision-making process, (2) the tangible and non-tangible quality indicators used to evaluate apparel quality during product use. A phenomenological approach was taken in this study. According to Delport and Fouché (2005:264), this approach studies perceptions and knowledge of individuals within a certain context. The result is often a description of how these individuals relate their own experiences.

A mixed-method design was adopted. Qualitative techniques were, however, applied prior to the quantitative phase to ensure validity of the quantitative tool. The qualitative techniques were used to gain more specific information about the factors used during the quality evaluation process by the target population, as in the study by Birtwistle and Tsim (2005).

### Sample

The unit of analysis was full-time employed professional women in the legal, financial, engineering and medical fields, with an acceptable tertiary qualification. They lived in a capital city in the RSA and fell into the higher LSM groups 7-10, and thus had the income to spend on apparel. They were from both large and smaller companies and were all registered with the appropriate professional bodies. A non-probability purposive sample was used for the focus

group as well as for the survey. Eight professional women between the ages of 27 and 58 years from the legal and financial fields attended the focus group. Four hundred and twelve (412) questionnaires were sent out of which 110 usable questionnaires were returned. Participation in the research was completely voluntary and questionnaires were completed anonymously in order to keep all information confidential. During the focus group discussions, participants remained anonymous. Respondents were informed at all times about the nature of the study and could withdraw at any stage. Cultural differences were not seen as relevant to the study.

Most of the 110 respondents (83%) bought their career wear on a seasonal basis from apparel chain stores, and indicated that their career dressing style was either business casual with no strict dress code (50%), or business formal with a strict dress code (30,6%). The median age was 32 years. The median for the amount of money that they were willing to spend monthly on their career wear was R800 ($125).

### Data collection

#### Phase 1: Focus group

For this study, the information from the focus group was used to gain insight into the exact quality indicators and specific terminology the target population use when evaluating apparel quality during the purchase decision-making stage and during product use. The focus group served to explore the research goals in order to ensure that a relevant questionnaire could be compiled from the results (Sudman & Blair, 1998:189; Banister & Hogg, 2004).

The focus group met in a private home to ensure a comfortable and relaxed environment. A comfortable environment encourages participants to share their opinions more freely and therefore enhances reliability of the data. Each participant received writing materials and a small gift to thank them for their participation. No name tags were used, to ensure anonymity. The entire session was recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. The researcher was the moderator of the focus group. A trained assistant was present during the entire session. The assistant made notes as a backup to the tape recordings and to ensure that all the topics were covered according to the conceptual framework of the study as this would enhance the validity of the study.

The participants were subjected to various projective techniques during the course of the focus group session, as illustrated in Table 1. During discussion 1, participants were asked to write a slogan for an advertising campaign. This served both to set the tone for discussions to follow and to determine what type of advertising respondents thought they would react to. The stimuli for the projective techniques were chosen in accordance with the study objectives. During discussion 2, respondents were asked to choose items from the rail provided. This simulated a shopping environment. Participants were observed and

TABLE 1:    FOCUS GROUP STRUCTURE

| DISCUSSION | PROJECTIVE TECHNIQUES |
|---|---|
| Discussion 1 | Participants were asked to write an advertising slogan for a company who sells corporate wear to her and her peers. |
| Discussion 2 | Participants were placed in a simulated shopping environment, where they had to choose an outfit for an important work situation. Suitable outfits were placed on the rail, complete with swing tags indicating price and brand name. Participants were advised to keep in mind that full size ranges were available. |
| Discussion 3 | Participants volunteered their favourite outfits brought from home, and indicated why the outfit was her favourite and deemed suitable for important work-related occasions. |

their comments and questions noted. Participants were subsequently asked to discuss the reasons for their choices. During discussion 3, participants were asked to discuss the career wear outfit that they had to bring along. The various quality indicators were addressed during both the simulated purchase decision and during the use of an outfit owned by each participant. The projective techniques were designed to place the respondent in either the purchase situation, or in the product use situation, in order to elicit the appropriate responses.

The results from the focus group were incorporated into the development of the questionnaire (Mazzocchi, 2008:124) by using the appropriate language for the target population, and ensuring that all relevant issues were included in the questionnaire. The focus group thus provided information on how the target population views the topic under investigation, as used in the study by Birtwistle and Tsim (2005).

The data was analysed using content analysis. Content analysis can further be divided into conceptual analysis and relational analysis. During conceptual analysis, codes were given to the relevant items of the study. Each occurrence of each item was noted. Information not relevant to product quality was discarded for the purpose of this study. The segments were reorganised into the relevant familiar indices. Subsequently the text was studied to ensure the inclusion of any additional concepts (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:492).

After completion of the conceptual analysis, a relational analysis was conducted. All the information regarding decision-making and in-use evaluation was grouped together (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:493). Table 2 shows examples of the method by which the focus group analysis was conducted.

From the analysis of the focus group verbatim transcriptions, field notes and notes made by participants, it was evident that the proposed framework for the study was indeed comprehensive, and all the quality indicators that respondents regarded as important were already incorporated from the theory. The language and specific terms used by participants were used in the questionnaire to ensure validity to the target population.

**Phase two: Structured questionnaire**

A structured questionnaire was used to gather data regarding the professional women's apparel quality evaluation during the pre-purchase stage as well as during use. The questionnaire was pilot-tested for clarity amongst 30 career women. The questionnaire was divided into three sections. Section 1 gathered demographic information, section 2 contained a scale that measured the use of quality indicators at the purchase decision-making stage, while section 3 contained a scale that measured the use of quality indicators during product use. A four-point Likert scale was used to measure the importance of the various tangible and non-tangible quality indicators during pre-

TABLE 2:    EXAMPLE OF FOCUS GROUP ANALYSIS

| INDICATOR | STATEMENT BY PARTICIPANT |
|---|---|
| **TANGIBLE FACTORS** | |
| Functionality | ...because, (only) about twice a week I have clothes that are right for me that morning. |
| | ...actually everyone does mix-and-match, it is a basic principle, so that your wardrobe items can be used again and again. |
| | ...actually you want three blouses that go with the same suit. |
| | ...that you can wear one jacket with another pair of pants so that you don't look the same everyday. |
| | I think that there are many things that you think will work (with your existing wardrobe) and then don't. |
| | ...you have a wardrobe filled with clothes and nothing to wear. |
| **NON-TANGIBLE FACTORS** | |
| Cognitive | There is no individualism, you want to look professional without necessarily being placed in a box and that everyone looks exactly the same. |
| | ...you must dress for the position you have, not the one you want. |
| | ...I don't want to look as old as I am. |
| | ...(we) just need something (career wear) that's still professional and not too fashionable. |
| | ...that if they walk in, everyone's head turns (due to manner of dress) |
| | What I like about this outfit is that it is feminine yet formal. |

*Professional women's evaluation of the quality of career wear*

TABLE 3: OPERATIONALISATION FOR QUALITY INDICATORS DURING DECISION-MAKING AND USE )

| STATEMENT IN QUESTIONNAIRE | TANGIBLE / NON-TANGIBLE | | | | | |
| | TANGIBLE PRODUCT CUES | | NON-TANGIBLE PRODUCT CUES | | | |
| | FUNCTIONAL | SENSORY | EMOTIONAL | COGNITIVE | SELF | OTHERS |
|---|:---:|:---:|:---:|:---:|:---:|:---:|
| I like the colour | | x | | | | |
| So that my colleagues working at the same level as me could believe that I am competent | | | | | | x |
| That I am dressed in line with the company dress code | | | | | x | |
| That I feel fashionably dressed | | | | x | | |
| That my superior at work could believe that I am professional | | | | | | x |
| That the outfit makes me feel successful at work | | | | x | | |
| The brand name is a symbol of good style | | | | x | | |
| The colour tunes in well with my existing wardrobe | x | | | | | |
| The construction of the outfit is durable | x | | | | | |
| The design is beautiful | | x | | | | |
| The fabric has a pleasant touch | | x | | | | |
| The finishes add to the professional look | | x | | | | |
| The finishes make care easier | x | | | | | |
| The fit flatters my figure | | x | | | | |
| The outfit does not crease during wear | x | | | | | |
| The outfit is affordable to me | x | | | | | |
| The outfit provides me with pure aesthetic pleasure | | | x | | | |
| The price makes me feel that I am wearing something special | | | x | | | |
| The price symbolizes quality | | | | x | | |
| The store image aligns with my perception of my own abilities | | | | | x | |
| The store image gives me peace of mind | | | x | | | |
| The style fits me comfortably | x | | | | | |
| The style is fashionable | | x | | | | |
| When I wear the brand name I feel more confident | | | x | | | |

purchase and post-purchase evaluation of the quality of the same apparel product that the respondents had purchased during the previous 12 months (where 1 indicated not important and 4 indicated very important). It should be noted that the tangible quality indicators were measured in terms of the intrinsic product features that primarily influence them, namely design/style, textiles, construction, finishes and colour, while the non-tangible quality indicators were measured in terms of the extrinsic product features that primarily influence them, namely brand name, price, store image and fashionability/hanger appeal (also refer to Figure 1).

The statements for both stages were randomised to eliminate the possibility of respondents losing interest. The operationalisation of the study was conducted in terms of the quality indicators used during apparel quality evaluation (Figure 1). During the development of the questionnaire, it was decided to compose 12 statements for the tangible quality indicators (six for functional and six for sensory quality indicators), and 12 for the non-tangible quality indicators (four for emotional, four for cognitive, two for importance of the

self, and two for importance of others). The reasoning was to facilitate comparison between the tangible and non-tangible factors, both during the decision-making process as well as during use. See Table 3 for the operationalisation of the scale.

## Data analysis of the questionnaire

Factor analyses and item analyses were performed to establish the validity and reliability of the instrument. Thereafter, composite scores of the tangible and non-tangible indicators during the purchase decision-making stage and during the in-use stage were computed. Pearson's correlation coefficients were calculated to quantify the measure of association between these indicators. Paired T-tests were conducted to determine whether there were differences between the importance of the combined tangible and non-tangible indicators during the purchase decision-making stage and during the in-use stage. The statistical packages SAS and SPSS version 17.0 were used.

As a measure of internal reliability, Cronbach's alpha

TABLE 4:    CRONBACH'S ALPHA

| Dimensional | Cronbach a Purchase stage | Cronbach a In use |
|---|---|---|
| Tangible quality indicators | 0,69 | 0,76 |
| Non-tangible quality indicators | 0,81 | 0,84 |

TABLE 5:    IMPORTANCE OF QUALITY INDICATORS

| Quality indicator | Very important | Important | Less important | Not important | Mean |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Functional-purchase | 46,52% | 43,67% | 7,22% | 2,59% | 3,36 |
| Functional-in use | 38,22% | 40,72% | 12,53% | 8,53% | 3,22 |
| Sensory-purchase | 44,42% | 45,75% | 8,44% | 1,39% | 3,33 |
| Sensory-in use | 38,01% | 51,90% | 10,09% | - | 3,28 |
| Cognitive-purchase | 13,01% | 43,65% | 31,46% | 11,88% | 2,58 |
| Cognitive-in use | 12,75% | 39,69% | 38,63% | 8,93% | 2,67 |
| Self-purchase | 21,98% | 38,29% | 28,70% | 11,03% | 2,70 |
| Self-in use | 15,60% | 42,20% | 28,44% | 13,76% | 2,60 |
| Others-purchase | 19,83% | 31,80% | 32,71% | 15,66% | 2,55 |
| Others-in use | 15,73% | 37,48% | 31,51% | 15,28% | 2,53 |
| Emotional-purchase | 8,25% | 29,67% | 38,89% | 23,19% | 2,34 |
| Emotional-in use | 9,70% | 31,40% | 40,96% | 17,94% | 2,33 |

tests were first performed. A result for alpha of ≥ 0,7 was taken as a cut-off point of acceptability of internal reliability. Confirmatory factor analysis was done to further test for internal reliability.

Cronbach's Alpha values of 0,69 and 0,76 for the tangible quality indicators during the purchase decision-making stage and the in-use stages respectively are acceptable, as the conventional accepted minimum for Cronbach's alpha is 0,7. For the non-tangible quality indicators constructs, the values are a = 0,81 and 0,84, hence establishing the internal reliability of the instrument (Table 4).

The method of principal factor analysis, followed by an oblique rotation, was used to gauge the validity of the instrument. The two-factor solutions correspond to the tangible and intangible quality indicators described above for both stages (purchase decision-making and in-use), explaining 55% and 62% of the variability in the data.

## RESULTS

### Importance of tangible and non-tangible quality indicators

Table 5 below illustrates that the professional women saw the tangible quality indicators of functionality and sensory pleasure as more important than the non-tangible quality indicators during both the purchasing and the in-use stages.

Almost all the respondents (90,19%) rated the functional indicators as very important or important when the purchasing decision is being made (mean = 3,36), although fewer respondents (78,94%) indicated functionality as very important or important during the in-

use stage (mean = 3,22). The importance of functional indicators was in both cases measured in terms of the colour that tunes in well with the existing wardrobe, the construction that makes the outfit durable, the finishes that make care easier, the style that fits comfortably, the outfit that does not crease during wear and the outfit that is affordable (refer also to Tables 3 and 6).

As is the case with the functional indicators, the majority of the respondents indicated that sensory indicators are very important or important during the purchase stage of the garment (90,17%, mean = 3,33), and also when the garment is worn (89,91%, mean = 3,28). The importance of sensory indicators were in both cases measured in terms of the colour that the respondent likes, the design that is beautiful, the fabric that has a pleasant touch, the finishes that add to a professional look, the fit that flatters her figure and the style that is beautiful (refer to Table 3 for operationalisation).

It is further clear from Table 5 that professional women deem the non-tangible quality indicators as less important than the tangible indicators, during both the purchasing and the in-use stages. Only 54,8% (mean = 2,58) respondents indicated that cognitive indicators were important to them during the purchase decision-making stage, and again during the in-use stage (56,66%, mean = 2,67). As in the case of the cognitive indicators, professional career women in this study considered indicators that relate to the self or others as less important than the tangible indicators of functionality and sensory aspects.

Most of the respondents deemed emotional quality indicators as of the least importance when evaluating the quality of career wear during both the purchasing

(63,08%, mean = 2,34) and the in-use (58,9%, mean = 2,33) stages. All non-tangible quality indicators were measured in terms of the extrinsic product features (refer also to Table 3).

**The role of intrinsic and extrinsic product features in quality evaluation**

It should be noted that the tangible quality indicators were measured in terms of the intrinsic product features that primarily influence them, namely design/ style, textiles, construction, finishes and colour. Non-tangible quality indicators were measured in terms of the extrinsic product features, namely brand name, price, store image and fashionability / hanger appeal. Table 6 shows the contribution of the various intrinsic and extrinsic product features that influence the importance of tangible and non-tangible quality indicators.

It is interesting to note that 100% of the respondents indicated that a style that fits comfortably was seen as the most important functional indicator during the purchasing of the garment, while 98,07% . indicated it as

a very important or important indicator during the in-use stage (Table 7). Secondly, durability due to good construction, was also seen as very important or important both in the purchase decision-making stage (95,41%) and during the in-use stage (90,83%). All other indicators were scored almost the same on importance. As was the case with the functional indicators, the importance of fit again stood out as a sensory quality indicator, where 99,07% of the respondents indicated a fit that flatters the figure (and therefore plays a role as a sensory quality indicator) as a very important or important quality indicator when the garment is purchased, and even more so when they wear the garment (99,61%). This is in line with the viewpoint of Rasband (1994:20) and the work of De Klerk and Tselepis (2007).

With regard to the role of brand name and price, these seem to be the least important extrinsic product features that affect non-tangible cognitive quality indicators when professional women evaluate the quality of their career wear during the purchasing as well as the in-use stage. Only 28,19% and 44,95% of the respondents felt that price played a role as a very

**TABLE 6:    ROLE OF INTRINSIC AND EXTRINSIC PRODUCT FEATURES DURING PURCHASING STAGE**

| Statement in questionnaire | Very important | Important | Less important | Not important | Missing |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Functional** | | | | | |
| The colour tunes in well with my existing wardrobe (V19) | 34,86% | 52,29% | 9,17% | 3,67% | 0,91% (1) |
| The construction of the outfit is durable (V13) | 48,62% | 46,79% | 4,59% | - | 0,91% (1) |
| The finishes make care easier (V16) | 41,82% | 49,09% | 8,18% | 0,91% | - |
| The outfit does not crease during wear (V25) | 33,33% | 41,67% | 22,22% | 2,78% | 1,82% (2) |
| The outfit is affordable to me (V14) | 50,46% | 42,20% | 7,34% | - | 0,91% (1) |
| The style fits me comfortably (V15) | 70% | 30% | - | - | - |
| **Sensory** | | | | | |
| I like the colour (V24) | 53,21% | 43,12% | 2,75% | 0,92% | 0,91% (1) |
| The design is beautiful (V31) | 47,71% | 51,38% | 0,92% | - | 0,91% (1) |
| The fabric has a pleasant touch (V30) | 21,50% | 59,81% | 16,82% | 1,87% | 2,73% (3) |
| The finishes add to the professional look (V20) | 46,30% | 44,44% | 7,41% | 1,85% | 1,82% (2) |
| The fit flatters my figure (V26) | 81,48% | 17,59% | 0,93% | - | 1,82% (2) |
| The style is fashionable (V18) | 16,36% | 58,18% | 22,73% | 2,73% | - |
| **Emotional** | | | | | |
| The outfit provides me with pure aesthetic pleasure (V11) | 30,28% | 54,13% | 11,93% | 3,67% | 0,91% (1) |
| The price makes me feel that I am wearing something special (V8) | 2,73% | 20,00% | 56,36% | 20,91% | - |
| The store image gives me peace of mind (V9) | 10,00% | 32,73% | 37,27% | 20,00% | - |
| When I wear the brand name I feel more confident (V29) | 5,45% | 11,82% | 50,00% | 32,73% | - |
| **Cognitive** | | | | | |
| That I feel fashionably dressed (V23) | 14,68% | 65,14% | 15,60% | 4,59% | 0,91% (1) |
| That the outfit makes me feel successful at work (V28) | 22,02% | 41,28% | 26,61% | 10,09% | 0,91% (1) |
| The brand name is a symbol of good style (V22) | 4,55% | 23,64% | 50,91% | 20,91% | - |
| The price symbolizes quality (V17) | 10,91% | 44,55% | 32,73% | 11,82% | - |
| **Importance of self** | | | | | |
| That I am dressed in line with the company dress code (V12) | 34,86% | 46,79% | 12,84% | 5,50% | 0,91% (1) |
| The store image aligns with my perception of my own abilities (V21) | 9,09% | 29,09% | 44,55% | 17,27% | - |
| **Importance of others** | | | | | |
| So that my colleagues working at the same level as me could be believe that I am professional (V27) | 17,43% | 31,19% | 33,94% | 17,43% | 0,91% (1) |
| That my superior at work could believe that I am competent (V10) | 22,22% | 32,41% | 31,48% | 13,89% | 1,82% (2) |

n = 110

TABLE 7: ROLE OF INTRINSIC AND EXTRINSIC PRODUCT FEATURES DURING IN-USE STAGE

| Statement in questionnaire | Very important | Important | Less important | Not important | Missing |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **FUNCTIONAL** | | | | | |
| The colour tunes in well with my existing wardrobe (V52) | 38.32% | 49.53% | 8.41% | 3.74% | 2.73% (3) |
| The construction of the outfit is durable (V39) | 40.37% | 50.46% | 9.17% | - | 0.91% (1) |
| The finishes make care easier (V38) | 25.93% | 54.63% | 17.59% | 1.85% | 1.82% (2) |
| The outfit does not crease during wear (V55) | 32.73% | 45.45% | 20.91% | 0.91% | - |
| The outfit is affordable to me (V49) | 30.91% | 50.00% | 18.18% | 0.91% | - |
| The style fits me comfortably (V53) | 61.11% | 37.96% | 0.93% | - | 1.82% (2) |
| **SENSORY** | | | | | |
| I like the colour (V36) | 49.54% | 45.87% | 4.59% | - | 0.91% (1) |
| The design is beautiful (V51) | 36.36% | 55.45% | 8.18% | - | - |
| The fabric has a pleasant touch (V35) | 29.36% | 56.88% | 13.76% | - | 0.91% (1) |
| The finishes add to the professional look (V47) | 30.00% | 58.18% | 11.82% | - | - |
| The fit flatters my figure (V33) | 61.47% | 37.61% | 0.92% | - | 0.91% (1) |
| The style is fashionable (V56) | 21.30% | 57.41% | 21.30% | - | 1.82% (2) |
| **EMOTIONAL** | | | | | |
| The outfit provides me with pure aesthetic pleasure (V41) | 23.15% | 59.26% | 15.74% | 1.85% | 1.82% (2) |
| The price makes me feel that I am wearing something special (V42) | 6.42% | 22.02% | 52.29% | 19.27% | 0.91% (1) |
| The store image gives me peace of mind (V54) | 5.56% | 28.70% | 46.30% | 19.44% | 1.82% (2) |
| When I wear the brand name I feel more confident (V50) | 3.67% | 15.60% | 49.54% | 31.19% | 0.91% (1) |
| **COGNITIVE** | | | | | |
| That I feel fashionably dressed (V46) | 20.00% | 59.09% | 20.00% | 0.91% | - |
| That the outfit makes me feel successful at work (V48) | 20.91% | 37.27% | 36.36% | 5.45% | - |
| The brand name is a symbol of good style (V40) | 3.67% | 23.85% | 51.38% | 21.10% | 0.91% (1) |
| The price symbolizes quality (V37) | 6.42% | 38.53% | 46.79% | 8.26% | 0.91% (1) |
| **IMPORTANCE OF SELF** | | | | | |
| That I am dressed in line with the company dress code (V34) | 25.69% | 56.88% | 11.93% | 5.50% | 0.91% (1) |
| The store image aligns with my perception of my own abilities (V44) | 5.50% | 27.52% | 44.95% | 22.02% | 0.91% (1) |
| **IMPORTANCE OF OTHERS** | | | | | |
| That I am dressed in line with the company dress code (V34) | 25.69% | 56.88% | 11.93% | 5.50% | 0.91% (1) |
| The store image aligns with my perception of my own abilities (V44) | 5.50% | 27.52% | 44.95% | 22.02% | 0.91% (1) |

TABLE 8: CORRELATION BETWEEN USE OF INDICATORS DURING PURCHASING AND IN-USE STAGES

| Variable | r |
|---|---|
| **Tangible Quality Indicators (purchase decision)** **Tangible Quality Indicators (during use)** | **0,81292** |
| Functional Quality Indicators (purchase decision) Functional Quality Indicators (during use) | 0,78804 |
| Sensory Quality Indicators (purchase decision) Sensory Quality Indicators (during use) | 0,71721 |
| **Non-tangible Quality Indicators (purchase decision)** **Non-tangible Quality Indicators (during use)** | **0,86753** |
| Emotional Quality Indicators (purchase decision) Emotional Quality Indicators (during use) | 0,71637 |
| Cognitive Quality Indicators (purchase decision) Cognitive Quality Indicators (during use) | 0,77101 |
| Importance of the Self quality Indicators (purchase decision) Importance of the Self Quality Indicators (during use) | 0,80207 |
| Importance of Others Quality Indicators (purchase decision) Importance of Others Quality Indicators (during use) | 0,84174 |

TABLE 9: DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE IMPORTANCE OF COMBINED TANGIBLE AND NON-TANGIBLE INDICATORS DURING THE TWO STAGES

| | t value | DF | Pr > |t| |
|---|---|---|---|
| Tangible (Purchase decision) – Non-tangible (Purchase decision) | 18,13 | 109 | < ,0001 |
| Tangible (During use ) – Non-tangible (During use) | 15,5 | 109 | < ,0001 |
| Tangible (Purchase decision) – Tangible (During use ) | 4,75 | 10 | < ,0001 |
| Non-tangible (Purchase decision) – Non-tangible (During use) | 1,04 | 109 | 0,2999 |

p-value: Significant at p< 0.01

important or important cognitive quality indicator during the purchase and in-use stages respectively, and only 28,19% and 27,52% felt that brand name was a very important or important cognitive quality indicator of the quality evaluation during the two stages respectively. It is clear that as far as all the non-tangible quality indicators are concerned, the knowledge that they are fashionably dressed and in line with the company's dress code, as well as the pure pleasure that the outfit can give them, were of greater importance to the respondents than the contribution that price and brand name could make as extrinsic product features playing a role in possible non-tangible quality indicators.

## Correlation between use of indicators during purchase and in-use stages

Strong positive correlations exist between the various tangible and non-tangible indicators used during the purchase decision-making and the in-use stages of quality evaluation, as can be seen from Table 8..

It can therefore be stated that, when respondents regard the various tangible and non-tangible indicators as important during the purchase decision, they would regard the same indicators as equally important during use.

In addition to the Pearson's Correlation Coefficient, paired T-tests were conducted to determine whether professional women rated the importance of the combined tangible and non-tangible quality indicators during the purchase decision-making stage and the in-use stage differently (Table 9).

Significant differences (p < 0,01) exist in all cases except between the importance of non-tangible quality indicators during the purchase decision-making stage and the in-use stage (p = 0,2999). From the means it is clear that the respondents considered the tangible quality indicators as significantly more important than the non-tangible quality indicators during both the purchase decision-making stage and the in-use stage. Tangible quality indicators were also considered significantly more important during the purchase decision-making stage than during the in-use stage.

## DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

The professional career women in this study differentiated between tangible quality indicators (functional and sensory) and non-tangible quality indicators (cognitive, emotional, importance of the self and importance of others) when evaluating the quality of their career wear during the purchase decision-making stage and again during the in-use stage. This is in line with the work of previous researchers (Hines & O'Neal, 1995; De Klerk & Lubbe, 2008) as well as with the theoretical viewpoint that it is not only functional and sensory aesthetic behavioural qualities (what the apparel item can do for me) that play a role during the quality evaluation of apparel, but also the emotional and symbolic characteristics of the item, as well as the contribution that it can make to the person's self-image and during interaction with others.

In contrast with previous research (Chen-Yu et al, 2001) and also in contrast with what was expected, the professional career women in this study considered the same quality indicators important during the in-use stage as well as during the purchase decision-making stage. During both stages, tangible quality indicators were considered as significantly more important than non-tangible quality indicators. The professional career women in this study also considered tangible quality indicators even more important during the purchase decision-making stage than during the in-use stage.

It was clear that fit, as an intrinsic apparel product feature, plays an important role in comfortability, which was considered an important tangible quality indicator by the respondents. Fit also plays an important role in the sensory pleasure derived from a well-fitted appearance (Rasband, 1994:3; DeLong, 1998:30). A fit that flatters the body was considered an important sensory indicator by the respondents.

Non-tangible indicators were significantly less important than the tangible indicators during both the evaluation stages. It also seems that especially brand name as extrinsic product feature did not contribute to the importance of non-tangible symbolic and emotional quality indicators, but rather the knowledge that the outfit would provide them with pure aesthetic pleasure as well as that they were dressed in line with the company's dress code.

These results can be interpreted against the background of a probable value system of the respondents, as consumers make decisions within the marketplace and cannot be separated from value systems, social structure or the cultural environment (Banerjee, 2008). Against the value categories of

Allport *et al* (in Kaiser, 1998:300) that relate to clothing interest and needs, the results can be interpreted as follows.

The results indicated that the functional quality indicators were rated as the most important during both the quality evaluation stages. The theoretical values that relate to the functionality of career wear are most probably important to respondents during decision-making and product use when they evaluate the quality of their career wear (Morganoski, 1987).

From the demographic results it is evident that these respondents were not willing to spend much on career wear, and one may deduce that career wear may not be very important to the respondents other than its practicality. This correlates with the results that especially the cognitive indicators were not that important during both the evaluation stages. The statements measuring the cognitive quality indicators were concerned with aspects such as fashionability and personal image. As the respondents rated these features as less important for career wear quality, both during the decision-making stage and during product use, it can be assumed that the economic value is important to the respondents when evaluating career wear quality.

Aesthetic values are concerned with enjoyment and pleasure. People who score high on aesthetic values are usually concerned about their personal appearance. Sensory quality indicators, and specifically a fit that flatters the figure, was an important quality indicator when the respondents purchased the career wear and again when they wore it.

Results further indicate that the respondents did not see the opinion of others or the emotional connotation to apparel as important in apparel quality evaluation, and therefore most probably do not deem social values as highly significant within their various roles (Goldsmith & Stith, 1992): Kaiser, 1998:301).

From the results it is evident that political values did not play an important role in this sample of respondents' evaluation of the quality of their career wear. This is in contrast to the expected results that professional women would be very concerned about their professional appearance and advancement in their careers. It should, however, be noted that all the respondents were highly qualified, occupied professional positions in their company and were registered with a professional body. This could have contributed more to these women's self-esteem and advancement in a career than a specific appearance that symbolises something about the wearer.

## CONCLUSIONS AND APPLICATIONS

It can be concluded that a) functional and aesthetic behavioural qualities, b) emotional and symbolic characteristics of the career wear, and c) the contribution it could make to a person's self-image and interaction with others, all play a role when professional career women in this study evaluated the quality of their ca-

reer wear during the purchase decision-making stage and again during the in-use stage. It can further be concluded that these professional career women know what they are looking for in their career wear, and would probably not change their minds when wearing the item. Tangible quality indicators, such as the functionality of the item and the sensory pleasure derived from wearing the item, are of significantly more importance to them than non-tangible quality indicators, such as the symbolic or emotional characteristics of the item. This could indicate possible strong theoretical and economic values driving these professional career women's career wear purchasing behaviour.

All functional quality indicators, such as comfortability, durability and care were considered as very important when respondents evaluated the quality of their career wear during both the purchase decision-making and the in-use stages. The importance of fit was highlighted. It was very important for the respondents that the styles of their career wear fit comfortably and that the fit flatters their bodies. Fashionable, well-fitting career wear could further provide pure aesthetic pleasure to the wearer, and could assist the wearer in aligning her appearance with the company's dress code – both of which are important non-tangible quality indicators for these professional career women. It can finally be concluded that extrinsic quality features (e.g. brand name) do not contribute significantly to these professional career women's confidence, while price does not symbolise quality to them.

The above conclusions have definite implications for retailers and manufacturers of career wear. Respondents from this study were willing to spend a substantial amount of money on their career wear, but they wanted value for their money and expected the intrinsic features of their career wear, such as the style, construction, materials and finishes to be of a high standard, so as to contribute specifically to the functional qualities, which they deemed as very important in their career wear. These professional women were further consistent in their evaluations of the quality of their career wear. Well-constructed career wear that fits well and therefore contributes to comfortability, the pure aesthetic pleasure derived from wearing the item and the knowledge that they are dressed in line with the company's dress code, would therefore probably motivate them more towards brand loyalty than price and brand name only. This indicates strong functional, economic and aesthetic values.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

There were some limitations within the study. The first was that the questionnaire measured the importance of each quality indicator in hindsight. The respondents thus had to recall a purchase event and evaluate their emotions during such event. Another possible limitation of the study was the relatively small sample size. The target population was hard to reach, as databases of professional women are not readily available to the public or to researchers in the RSA. The study may, however, be repeated with an alternative (wider)

target population of working or career women, who may be easier to reach.

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