

What drives college-age Generation Y consumers?

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Abstract

Generation Y (individuals ages 14–31 in 2008) are in the marketplace with the numbers and the purchasing power to have an unprecedented impact on the economy. Despite the potential of this group as a whole, especially the middle-aged members of this generation (ages 18–22) who are in the highly coveted college-student market, much is unknown about the motivations behind these individuals' consumption behavior and preferences. This study attempts to address this gap in the literature by exploring the antecedents of the consumption behavior of college-aged Generation Y individuals. The findings indicate that issues relating to socialization, uncertainty reduction, reactance, self-discrepancy, and feelings of accomplishment and connectedness drive Y consumers' product purchases and retail patronage. This article discusses these issues as well as their theoretical and managerial implications.

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1. Introduction

Following in the footsteps of their Baby Boomer parents, Generation Y (Gen-Y) members are now highly active in the marketplace. Gen-Y consumers' sheer numbers and spending power transform the market for every life stage they enter (Morton, 2002). This group, born between 1977 and 1994, is revitalizing the American economy (Engebretson, 2004) and currently represents the largest teen population in the history of the United States (Morton, 2002). Generation Y has tremendous spending power already, at \$600 billion a year, in addition to the influence the younger members of this group still exert over parental expenditures (Kennedy, 2001). Additionally, this generation has been reared in a consumption-driven society

and has more money at their disposal than any teen group in history (Morton, 2002).

Gen-Y numbers 76 million strong (Kennedy, 2001) and will comprise 41% of the population by 2009 (Welles, 1999). These consumers currently range from 14 to 31 years old and many are in, or getting ready to enter college (approximately 34% of Gen-Y is currently 18–23; while another 36% is 24–30 years old) (Paul, 2001). Janoff (1999) points out that college-aged individuals are often experiencing the freedom of being on their own for the first time, and thus have specific wants and needs as consumers. Wolburg and Pokrywczynski (2001) discuss the long-held view of the college market as one of the most coveted consumer segments due to the market's size, college students' role as trendsetters, the lifelong brand loyalties acquired during these formative years, their position as early-adopters, their influence over parental purchases, and the probability of a higher standard of living associated with a college degree. Already, college-aged Gen-Y individuals have purchasing power of \$200 billion annually (Gardyn, 2002). Thus, the importance of the college market, coupled with the unprecedented power and attractiveness of this particular generation of college students, make understanding

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Gen-Y's development into consumers of great interest to marketers.

Despite the potential of the Generation Y college market, much is unknown about this group's motivations for consumption and patronage. Most research on Gen-Y focuses on the entire generation and not the college-aged market. Additionally, the majority of authors studying Generation Y as a whole focus more on the demographic and attitudinal characteristics of this generation rather than their consumption behaviors. For example, Wolburg and Pokrywczynski (2001) describe Gen-Y as the best educated and most culturally diverse generation in history, a combination which others believe has made this generation exceedingly tolerant and open-minded toward different lifestyles such as homosexuality, single parent households, etc. (Morton, 2002; Paul, 2001). Additionally, researchers explore Gen-Y's attitudes toward advertising (Beard, 2003), celebrity endorsers (Bush et al., 2004; Stevens et al., 2003), corporate sponsorship (Bennett and Lachowetz, 2004), ethical Internet-related behaviors (Freestone and Mitchell, 2004) and the media (Shearer, 2002). Findings seem to paint a portrait of a generation that is media and technology savvy, and worldly enough to see through many advertising tactics.

Although these accounts of Generation Y are informative, several opportunities exist for a better understanding of this market. First, in 2008 Gen-Y's age range from 14 to 31 years old indicates a heterogeneous group. A 14 year old will surely have different motivations for a purchase than a 31 year old. This wide age range makes generalizing these findings across the entire generation very difficult.

This study explores a narrower group of Generation Y individuals, specifically college-age individuals. College-aged Y consumers represent huge potential for retailers as a market segment (Wolburg and Pokrywczynski, 2001). Martin and Turley (2004) observe that little is known about consumption patterns and marketplace behaviors of older, college-aged members of Generation Y. Additionally, a lack of understanding exists regarding the motivations for consumption patterns of Gen-Y individuals. In fact, Marketing Science Institute's (MSI) research priorities for 2004–2006 include trying to understand and market to special populations (such as teens and college-aged individuals). Given these factors, the current study focuses on the heart of Gen-Y, those who are in the lucrative college market, i.e. individuals between the ages of 18 and 22. As such, the purpose of this study is to gain in-depth knowledge from a sample of college-aged Generation Y individuals. In this endeavor, the values and beliefs regarding the sample's purchase of products and patronage of retailers will allow marketers and academicians initial insight into this profitable and powerful market segment.

2. Methods

Textual data for the present study were generated by means of phenomenological focused interviews (Thompson et al., 1989) with United States college students (18–22 years old). Participants attend public Universities in 4 states: Mississippi, Missouri, Texas and Florida (the participants' home states are

listed in Table 1). Two rounds of data collection were undertaken. The authors and individuals trained by the first author conducted the interviews. Friends, classmates, and work colleagues of the interviewers were asked to participate in a 1-hour long semi-structured interview. College-aged students participated voluntarily and were given no incentive for their cooperation. A quota sampling approach was used to obtain representation of students from all age and gender brackets under investigation. Twenty-two subjects participated in the first round of data collection (45% male and 55% female). Respondents ranged in age from 18 to 22 years old, with a mean of 20 years old. A second round of data collection took place in 3 other states, to examine whether or not themes from the initial round of data collection would hold in other locations. Ten subjects participated in the second round of data collection. Both rounds of interviews were conducted following the same procedures and took place in various locations deemed convenient by the respondent. Table 1 displays participants' names, ages, gender, and home states.

Participants were reminded of the purpose of the study, that is, to understand more about their thoughts and feelings regarding their consumption behaviors. To facilitate a discussion of their behaviors, participants were asked to write down recently purchased products and then to place an asterisk next to items that they considered their "most important" purchases.

Table 1
Informants' demographics.

Name	Age	Gender	Home
Josh	18	Male	Missouri
Taz	18	Male	Mississippi
Thor	18	Male	Mississippi
Tanya	18	Female	Texas
Elizabeth	18	Female	Mississippi
Clansey	18	Female	Mississippi
David	19	Male	Mississippi
Jeremy	19	Male	Arkansas
Brad	19	Male	Nebraska
Alexis	19	Female	Texas
Mary	19	Female	Mississippi
Lindsay	19	Female	South Carolina
Joel	20	Male	Mississippi
Todd	20	Male	Kentucky
Steve	20	Male	Florida
Brenda	20	Female	Colorado
Mary W	20	Female	Mississippi
Haley	20	Female	Mississippi
Jake	21	Male	Ohio
Kevin	21	Male	Tennessee
Bill	21	Male	Florida
Laura	21	Female	Missouri
Jodie	21	Female	Mississippi
Brooke	21	Female	Mississippi
Tiffany	21	Female	Mississippi
Jim	22	Male	Mississippi
John	22	Male	Mississippi
Jeff	22	Male	Colorado
Shawna	22	Female	Nebraska
Ann Marie	22	Female	Mississippi
Melissa	22	Female	Mississippi
Kara	22	Female	Mississippi

Subjects were told that they could define “most important” any way they wished. These products became the focus of the interview. Beyond this initial structure to elicit recent purchases that subjects considered important, the interviews were unscripted. In the course of the interview, the reasons for purchase, both pragmatic and symbolic, were explored. Subjects were probed regarding the significance of products and brands, quality issues, peer pressures, trends, etc. This probing allowed for college-aged Gen-Y’s values, beliefs, sociological influences, and consumption patterns to emerge.

Each interview was audio taped and later transcribed. Two researchers analyzed all the transcripts, utilizing an iterative reading strategy following the general procedures set forth by [Strauss and Corbin \(1990\)](#). The first stage of coding, termed open coding, sought to identify discrete ideas. Data that appeared to pertain to similar ideas were then clustered into categories and subcategories. Connections between categories were identified through axial coding, the second type of coding. Open and axial coding was not conducted in a linear fashion, but instead the researchers moved back and forth between them to refine the categories. The final type of coding, selective coding, was used to identify the story that emerged from the data.

Several steps were taken to ensure confidence in the findings ([Lincoln and Guba, 1985](#)). First, multiple interviewers were used to ensure that one interviewer was not creating their own reality or biasing the results in some way. The interviewers also met after each round of interviews to discuss emerging themes (intra-team communication in Lincoln and Guba’s terms) and to keep all members moving together. Second, after each interview, the interviewers would debrief with the primary investigator. In this session the primary investigator would probe for biases, working hypotheses, and support for such working hypotheses.

[Lincoln and Guba \(1985\)](#) note that negative case analysis is another way to establish credibility. A form of negative case analysis was undertaken in the coding of the transcripts. As

noted above, throughout the coding process, the researchers tried to identify quotes and ideas that did not fit into the emerging framework to ensure that the data were not being forced into this framework. Recognition of a disjuncture often results in changes to the definition of themes and/or how quotes are categorized ([Price and Arnould, 1998](#)).

Finally, interviewers were trained to paraphrase their interpretation of participant responses and clarify with the respondent that they [the interviewer] understood the respondent correctly. This method was an informal way of member checking, which gave the respondent an opportunity to react to the interviewer’s interpretation and to correct him/her if they interpreted the respondent incorrectly. Taken together, the appropriate measures were employed to establish trustworthiness and credibility in the qualitative research. Due to the amount of participants, only illustrative quotes of particular note, which are representative of each final theme, are discussed below. The second round of data collection and analysis provided support for the themes found in the initial round of data collection. While generalizability is not a primary goal of qualitative research, the second round of interviews was conducted to alleviate the concern that the resulting themes could be due to the culture and geography of the University where the interviews were conducted.

3. Findings

Respondents mention many different stores, products and brands in discussing their shopping behaviors. Several key themes emerge from analyzing the transcripts. These themes are organized into the exploratory model presented in [Fig. 1](#). As the model shows, seven categories of variables: freedom, finding yourself, blend in/stand out, brand personality, fashion knowledge, value-seeking and the comfort of brands influence retail patronage and product purchases. Each of these categories is discussed in detail in this section to familiarize the reader with

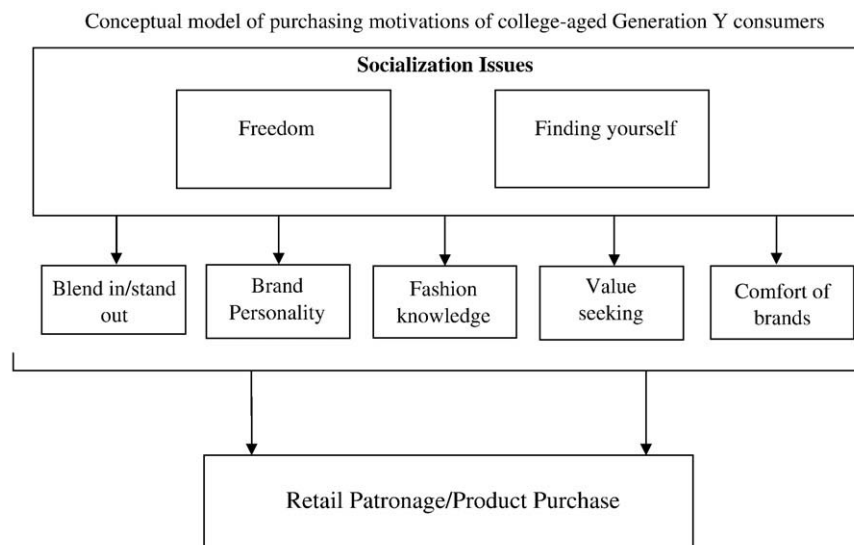


Fig. 1. Conceptual model of purchasing motivations of college-aged Generation Y consumers.

the themes. The theoretical underpinnings of these themes are illustrated after each corresponding theme to highlight what is driving this age group's consumption behaviors.

3.1. Freedom

Participants are aware of their increasing knowledge of all things consumption-related, yet often face struggles in the marketplace in light of their new role as consumer, independent of their parents and friends. They are maturing and finding themselves as adults, backing away from parental influence, determining where friends and reference groups fit in, and making their first key decisions on their own. In light of these developmental processes, the first emerging theme is the idea of gaining freedom through the use of products or specific consumption experiences. Certain products or brands represent an assertion of freedom or independence for these participants, including several participants' discussion of consumption experiences that provide a feeling of breaking free of family influence. Below are examples of the theme of finding freedom in one's purchases:

Um, it's [the ring] important because I went out and I picked it out. And, um, searched and searched and searched, and I picked it out. And it says a lot about me because, um, I'm getting old enough where I'm making some decisions on my own. And, uh, I may have not necessarily paid for it. I mean I may have had mom and dad's help, but uh, you know. I picked it out, so... (Jodie, 21, referring to the purchase of a David Yurman ring).

When I got my first part time job, I was so excited because I had my own money! I could buy whatever I wanted for the first time and I was really into the urban look, with the low rider jeans and my underwear showing. My parents didn't like it, but I bought it myself so they couldn't really say anything (Steve, 20).

3.2. Finding yourself

The "finding yourself" theme involves the use of chosen products and activities to aid in the processes that young adults go through to define who they are. Products and brands are used to help college-aged consumers figure out who they are, what is important to them, and what they value most in life. Examples include talking about how purchasing certain products or brands helps them find out who they are without their parents' involvement (e.g., respondents buying their first car and trying to figure out what features are important to them personally), and others talking about activities they are involved in that are influentially significant in their lives.

I: So what does that [your picture-taking] say about you? My pictures show what's important to me. Like if you see the pictures I have they are of my friends and my family and the pictures kind of show what is important to me... I like

taking pictures of just everyday things with my friends because you know after the moment happens it's gone. I think pictures are something that are always important because that's something you can keep forever. My pictures show me with my friends because my friends are such an important part of my life. They usually show me doing outgoing things because I see myself as pretty outgoing. I guess when I take pictures of something it shows me doing the things that are important to me (Mary Walker, 20, referring to the purchase of film to take pictures with).

Socialization theory informs the first two themes. Socialization theory is the most common ground for understanding how young consumers learn to shop. The accepted definition of consumer socialization is the "processes by which young people acquire skills, knowledge, and attitudes relevant to their functioning as consumers in the marketplace" (Ward, 1974, p. 2). According to Moschis (1981), significant differences exist in attitudes toward advertising, brands, prices, and in levels of consumer affairs knowledge between younger adolescents (under 15) and older adolescents (over 15). This finding indicates that consumer socialization is still occurring through the teen years. Thus, the respondents are included within the critical years of securing their role in the marketplace.

For the respondents, the main struggles they face include striving for independence from their parents and trying to figure out who they (the consumers) are independent of their families and friends. These issues seem to be a lens through which all purchasing decisions are made. The struggles for independence from parents are apparent in the "freedom" theme, while the struggles in trying to mature as both an individual and consumer independent of family and friends are shown in the "finding yourself" theme.

The results appear to be rooted in consumer socialization theory (Moschis 1981) in that they exemplify how these consumers are trying to use the skills, knowledge and attitudes that are learned in the process of becoming consumers in the marketplace, yet also trying to develop their own purchasing styles as they struggle for independence from family and friends. For example, Jeremy (19 year old male), referring to budgeting money to purchase a calculator, "My mother, she always told me 'J', when you go to college, I'm not gonna be there. I'm not gonna be there to help you do this. But now, it's given me a chance to do it on my own. So, that's what I'm talking about in maturing." This quote exemplifies the parental role of teaching children to become consumers and how consumers in this college-age group are now taking what they have been socialized to do and practicing on their own. Taz (18 year old male) also illustrates the role parents' play in teaching their children, but shows the struggle to break free, "Music has always meant a lot to me ever since I was growing up. Everyone in my family likes music, but I think it is important that I have different musical tastes because it shows that I've gone out and explored the different types of music and seen what's out there. And even though I was raised on Eric Clapton and Pink Floyd and things that my mom used to listen

to, I still have my own decisions about the types of music that I enjoy listening to and purchasing.”

3.3. Blend in/stand out

Individuals differing in the extent to which they want to attract attention in their everyday lives characterize this theme. This theme is evident when consumers are trying to balance their individualism vs. their desire to conform to peer groups and societal trends. Brands and products are used either to show a sense of self or to fit into one's peer group. Many of the participants want to avoid attracting attention and would rather blend in with the crowd as the following example shows.

I like to not stand out from the crowd, but I like to look nice. And I don't have a problem with someone saying I look nice, but not staring at you as you walk down the street because they are amazed at what you are wearing or that you would walk out of the house like that...I think the purse says that I like to have fun and be creative, but I don't like to be so flashy and stand out, and I am not trying so hard for attention (Melissa, 22, referring to the purchase of a purse).

Melissa is clear in expressing her thoughts about not standing out from everyone else, yet she still wants to look nice. The opposite of blending in is standing out. Several of the participants describe consumption experiences or specific products that they feel separate them from others their age, as the following examples illustrate:

Well, Dave Matthew's Band (DMB) isn't so much mainstream, say as Britney Spears or Christina Aguilera. And, I think maybe, by buying the DMB I was trying to distance myself from mainstream and everybody else kinda like I do with my image. I don't want to be like all the popular people and all the rich people. So maybe, in my buying the DMB CD I'm trying to further my image of being, uh, a separate individual (Taz, 18, referring to the purchase of a Dave Matthews CD).

I like having my own style and wearing things no one my age is wearing. It's fun that my friends and everyone at school waits to see what I'll be wearing on any given day. When I shop, I look for things that are rare so I don't see myself coming and going (Tanya, 18).

3.3.1. Psychological reactance vs. conforming tendencies

Psychological reactance theory and conforming tendencies can be used to illustrate consumers' struggles in the 'blend in/stand out' theme. Consumers have varying degrees of pressure to conform to acceptable modes of dress. The degree to which each person conforms depends on an "individual predisposition to acquiesce to social norms prescribed by salient reference groups (Goldsmith et al., 2005)". However, the more pressure consumers feel to acquiesce to social norms, the more they may feel their personal freedoms are threatened. In such instances, psychological reactance is likely to occur. The basic premise of psychological reactance theory is that when an individual's freedom to act in a

certain manner is threatened or restricted, he or she then becomes motivated to restore their sense of autonomy (Clee and Wicklund, 1980), possibly through consumption behaviors. Thus, psychological reactance is a motivational state to regain behavioral freedom. The strength of reactance depends on a number of factors, such as the importance the individual places on the threatened behavior, the number of behaviors threatened, etc. (Brehm, 1966). Respondents showed reactance tendencies that could be perceived of as mild. Perhaps younger individuals might show stronger tendencies when pressures to conform are stronger (e.g., high school aged consumers). The following respondent illustrates this mild degree of reactance:

Yes, I feel like even though I fit in with all of my friends I also like to do things because I want to, not just because my friends want to [mild reactance against conforming to friends]. I wear what I want, when I want to. I don't feel I stand out significantly, but enough to be noticeably my own person (Kevin, 21).

Future research should explore gender differences in one's desires to blend in vs. stand out. Self-construal theory, a socialization explanation to gender differences, states that females conceptualize themselves as part of an interdependent group, whereas males conceptualize their self-identities as independent of others (Cross and Madson, 1997). Research in uniqueness seeking has shown that consumers who have a collectivist viewpoint are likely to seek unique products to restore their individuality (Yamaoka, 1995). These two streams of research suggest that females who have self-identities that are construed as interdependent with others are more likely to feel part of a collective and as such, might feel more desires to establish their individuality within this collective through stand out issues. Future research could explore gender differences in this theme.

3.4. Brand personality/my personality

This theme involves a comparison participants make between the personality of the brand they are considering and their own personality, evident in consumers referring to brands or products as having some traits or persona, which is consistent with Aakers' (1997) work. These products are often consumed because they fit with the consumers' image of themselves. In this way, participants are sure to portray the image (either actual or ideal image) they wish by consuming the products they have chosen (Higgins, 1987; Malhotra, 1988; Sirgy, 1982). The examples shown below illustrate the respondents looking for brand personalities that mesh with their own, describing car purchases in terms of personality and brand congruence:

Oh, it (Honda Accord) fits my personality well. Like I said, it's a conservative, uh, conservative car and I feel like I have more or less a conservative, uh, personality. I'm sort of one of those guys out there on the right side (Jim, 22, referring to the purchase of a Honda Accord).

Well, it's a 2003 Mazda 6. It's um, red exterior, black interior,

leather seats, sunroof, um, it's got a Bose stereo system in it. Um, it's got a lot of safety features on it and you know pretty stylish...it's a little flying car. I consider myself to, you know, be a little energetic and stuff and it looks, you know, kinda sportyish...Your car kinda says something about who you are or whatever and you know. Older people buy Lincolns and stuff like that and younger people drive sportier cars and that's what I wanted and that's what this car represents to me because of that reason (Tiffany, 21, referring to the purchase of a Mazda).

Of particular interest is the consumers' focus not only on the attributes of the product, but also the brand name, which builds on research illustrating the importance of the brand name (e.g., Aaker and Keller, 1990; Durgee and Stuart, 1987; Landler et al., 1991; Zinkhan and Martin, 1987). For example, Brooke, referring to the name of a color of O.P.I. nail polish states:

The name is Cha Ching Cherry. The name is just fun and fresh, just like the color. I kinda like it cause of the name honestly, a little cha ching cherry. I think its kinda fun. It's bright and loud looking and it definitely fits with my wild and crazy personality (Brooke, 21).

3.4.1. Self-discrepancy theory

Almost every respondent notes a fit between purchased products' personalities and their own personality. This fit between the product and the brand helps consumers satisfy their image-oriented issues (both actual and ideal image). Self-discrepancy theory is best used for understanding this theme. In this theory a discrepancy between an actual and ideal self leads to emotional vulnerability. Individuals who are motivated to achieve their ideal self may seek behaviors or be motivated to perform behaviors that allow them to succeed, possibly through consumption (Higgins, 1987). Jake (21 year old male, referring to Miller Highlife beer) exemplifies how a product's personality can be used to bridge the gap between his actual and ideal state. He states:

I think of myself as a working man, not afraid to change my own tire or oil or to get dirty working in the yard. I think Miller Highlife suits me and my type of guy... it's a working man's beer. I consider myself a working man even though I don't have a job. I see working men who have the qualities and character that I admire and I try to emulate them by holding a Miller Highlife in my hand (Jake, 21).

3.5. Fashion knowledge

Based upon the findings, college-aged Generation Y consumers appear very cognizant of fashion trends. This is evident when consumers refer to what is in-style or out-of-style. Teens and young adults are known for their fickle nature as consumers and their ability to drive fashion trends and fad products. These consumers often know celebrities who have worn similar products and brands, and use such knowledge in making decisions of which products are most desirable to them.

They also have detailed knowledge and opinions on retailers, products and brands, each of which is discussed below.

3.5.1. Store/retailer

These participants' views of specific retailers are very detailed and opinionated, showing consistency across individuals. They shop at many of the large retailers, such as Rave, Deb, Gap, Abercrombie, Old Navy, Lane Bryant, Express and many others. As shown in the examples below, these participants easily provide an analysis of retailers based upon their differing offerings.

They [Burdines Department Store] have skirts and cute shirts and jeans and jewelry stuff. I really like the shoe department at Burdines. They have really good shoe sales on top brands and they have real trendy stuff and they keep a good supply of the new stuff coming in so one of the first times you see the items is usually there. [At] Express...I like it for the most part, I mean some of their stuff starts to look the same, kind of like Gap used to have when I was in high school. Rampage, on the other hand, is like junior trendy (Brooke, 21, explaining differences in stores where she shops).

Gap and Limited are for older people, Express and Hollister are for me and Wet Seal and Limited Too are for kids... everybody knows that! (Alexis, 19).

3.5.2. Product

When talking about specific products that are "in-style" now and a suitable fit to the consumers' self-image, participants often describe these products using the names of the celebrities that wear them, as the following examples illustrate:

The sunglasses are that type of style of like light weight type sunglasses, not J-lo, but ..yeah how would you describe them; I guess they are like those Britney Spears-esque...uhh sunglasses. You know I like them, I normally will have just a pair or typical black you know sunglasses but I opted for a different change (Brooke, 21, referring to sunglasses).

I really like the Sean Jean stuff, everything fits well together and I think it's a better look than most guys wear, Diddy always looks great as opposed to Eminem and Kid Rock (Todd, 20).

Brand: Participants say quite a bit about many different brands and the reputation, image, and marketing mix variables associated with each, including Taz in the following example. He demonstrates his knowledge of shoe brands and how some brands are associated with a specific activity or specialty. However, he is quick to point out that these differences are mostly due to marketing and not due to any real differences when he says that one brand isn't made differently or any better than any other brand. This seems to be in agreement with much of the past literature on Gen-Y, describing these consumers as a

very savvy generation that is “on” to marketers and their tactics (e.g., Noble and Noble, 2000).

T: We looked at some Vans. That’s a skateboarding brand shoe.

I: What do you mean by skateboarding shoes? How do skateboard shoes, just in essence, differ from flat-soled athletic shoes or anything like that?

T: Skateboarder shoes, like, companies that, that make the shoes, they, they make all of their equipment for skateboarding. And they advertise for their products with skateboarding pictures and people doing stunts on bicycles and things like that. And I think that is the only real difference that the companies display it so that it has an image of being a skateboarder’s shoe. Not so much that it’s made any different or any better. It’s simply the company’s name that does that (Taz, 18).

3.5.3. Social comparison theory

Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) provides more insights into the fashion knowledge theme. Social comparison theory states that people compare themselves to other people to see how they are doing in terms of competence and self-esteem. This comparison satisfies two functions: 1) lets people know how good they are in comparison to peers/similar others; and 2) serves as a self-enhancement function. The respondents seem to compare their own fashion choices/knowledge to others to show that they that are trendy or keeping up with their peers, allowing them to feel stylish. For example, Tiffany states:

This product [pair of black heels] is important because I want to look fashionable. Girls on this campus are very fashionable and I am always trying to keep up with everyone. I thought that these shoes were really fashionable and would fit with the image of the women on this campus (Tiffany, 21).

Others compare their clothing choices not only to peers, but also to celebrities like Britney Spears, Jennifer Lopez, and even deceased celebrities such as Marilyn Monroe (e.g., “it is a flowing strapless dress, something that would have been in-style when Marilyn Monroe was alive, it is very elegant (Jodie, 21 year old female) to illustrate that she and Marilyn Monroe are classy and fashionable individuals.

3.5.4. Fashion-forward vs. market maven

A few respondents express their fashion knowledge as a way to be a leader, either by being fashion-forward or a market maven. For example, Josh (18 year old male) states,

I like it that people look to me for the newest everything-music, great flicks, and clothes. I read GQ, Maxim, FHM, and anything else that covers trends. I want to be at the forefront of my group. You don’t have to live on the coast to be the bomb.

Jodie (21 year old female) expresses a similar attitude by speaking about not just wanting to follow fashion trends, but to

lead them. As such, in addition to social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), ideas relating to fashion-forward individuals provide insights into this theme. Fashion-forward individuals are individuals who are status seeking consumers exhibiting the following traits: (1) tend to conform to group norms, yet (2) maintain a need for uniqueness, (3) are susceptible to normative, but not necessarily informational interpersonal influence, and (4) can be opinion leaders, but not necessarily opinion seekers (Clark et al., 2007). Fashion-forward individuals may or may not be market mavens, as market mavens are defined by their need to be deeply involved in the marketplace and to pass their knowledge on to others. Global innovativeness, status consumption and creative choice counter conformity were found to explain more variance in market mavenism than did demographics (Goldsmith et al., 2006). In analyzing the transcripts, individuals were identified who would be considered fashion-forward (see quotation from Tiffany above) and those considered market mavens (see quotation from Josh above).

3.6. Value-seeking

For the value-seeking theme, consumers’ focus on attempting to find the best price/quality relationship in their purchases, trying to find quality products at good prices. Examples below show how consumers address cost/benefit tradeoffs and investment/built-to-last issues.

3.6.1. Basic cost/benefit

Nearly every participant provides an example of a standard cost/benefit analysis when purchasing products. Some of these analyses involve perceptions of retailers; others products, and still others; brands. For example:

Old Navy and Lane Bryant usually are up-to-date in-style, so I usually like going back to them. The quality of the clothes is good and the price is good..It’s both quality and price. It seems that you get more for the price of these two companies... They seem to use very good material. And they seem to have a good price for the material they use (Ann Marie, 22 referring to Old Navy and Lane Bryant clothes).

3.6.2. Investment/built-to-last

The second type of value-seeking behavior is the tradeoff between the cost and investment value of a product. Several participants’ justified paying more for high-prestige or high-priced products and brands they believe are a good investment or built-to-last. Below, Kara talks about spending the additional money for her pearls because she sees them as an investment and as a piece of jewelry she intends to keep for a long time:

I would rather invest in a piece that I am going to have for awhile than pay half the cost for something that I am only going to have for a few months. To me it is almost like an investment. And, one day I can pass it on to my daughter, my granddaughter, and what not. It can be something that will be there for years..I also like the size. Actually, I wish

they were kind of bigger. But, if I wanted that size it would be like \$200 to get the 7-millimeter. And like for the price and everything the smaller size was just right (Kara, 22, referring to a pearl necklace purchase).

Although value-seeking issues are not new to consumption studies (Bakewell and Mitchell, 2003; Martin and Turley, 2004; Noble and Noble, 2000), the surprising result, given that this generation has been reported to have more money at their disposal than any teen group in history (Morton, 2002), is that this seems to be the most salient theme on the participant's minds (this theme was the most commonly cited theme by respondents). However, a cautious approach to spending money may be attributed to Gen-Y's rearing in single income homes since one in four Gen-Y consumers was raised this way (Coeyman, 1998; Neuborne and Kerwin, 1999).

3.6.3. Accomplishment feelings

"A sense of accomplishment" when finding the best price/benefit combination provides insights into one of the value-seeking themes. The value-seeking respondents appear to spend a lot of time comparison shopping and doing on-going product searches (Bloch et al., 1986) so that when they found a product with the right benefits for the right price, there was a sense of accomplishment. For example, Kevin (21 year old male) notes, "it was hard to get, but I got it" when referring to finding an iPod with all the features he wanted for the price he wanted. He did a lot of comparison shopping to find out what he wanted and the prices available at various stores; thus, he was pleased in finding an iPod with all the desired features. Similarly, Kara (22 year old female) shopped for a pair of shoes for quite some time before she finally found a pair she liked. "Oh my gosh, it made me feel good. It always makes you feel good when you get the last of something. You always know when you got the last of something you got the cheapest price."

According to several researchers, males tend to have this sense of accomplishment in their shopping behaviors. For example, findings by Herrmann (2004, p. 69) state that men are more likely to view getting the lowest price as a "sport to be won" and a "competitive game;" whereas Otnes and McGrath (2001) state that male shoppers view shopping as a competition, in that, they try to defeat retailers who gain exceedingly high profits from their high markups. Implicit in these findings is that males feel a sense of accomplishment when they "win" the game or don't allow the retailer to rip them off. The focus of the respondents, though not on the competition element noted by these authors, is reflected instead on the sense of accomplishment in finding the best price for the product. As such, the findings illustrate that females also have these accomplishment-type feelings. However, future research is necessary to illustrate which gender displays more or less of these tendencies. Gender role theories (e.g., Bem, 1981; Cross and Madson, 1997; Spence, 1984) would suggest that males should show more accomplishment feelings, however the findings are inconclusive in this regard, most likely due to the small sample size.

3.6.4. Connectedness feelings

The second value-seeking sub-theme deals with investment/built-to-last issues. Consumers try to find products that have longevity for the right price. Quotes in this category illustrate a sense of heritage or staying connected with relatives (either past or future). Tiffany (21 year old female) talks about a pearl necklace as an investment because she can pass them down to her kids and grandkids; whereas Mary W. (20 year old female) talks about buying sorority t-shirts, but she is okay with the money she is spending on these shirts because they will keep her connected to her sorority...a sorority her grandmother was in and Mary W. now has many of her grandmother's sorority t-shirts from decades ago. Belk (1990) looks at the importance of using products to stay connected to the past and argues that an individual's sense of self is not defined by the present, but also contains elements of the past as well as the future. In fact, Belk (1990) believes that a person cannot have a sense of self without accounting for one's past. In both of these examples, Tiffany and Mary W. seem to recognize time as an important element of self. Tiffany is forward-thinking in making an investment that will someday give her own descendants a past sense of self, while Mary W. recognizes the importance of feeling connected to her past and her grandmother.

Gender role theories suggest some gender differences with regard to this "connectedness" issue. As noted above, females are socialized to develop their sense of self as interdependent with others, which leads to females developing interpersonal relationships and affiliations to maintain a sense of connectedness with others. In contrast, males are socialized to develop their sense of self, independent of others, thus, are less concerned about these types of connections (Cross and Madson, 1997). As such, females might be more inclined to process and deal with investment/built-to-last issues so that the purchases they make could help them connect with past (and future) generations. Due to the small sample size, conclusions could not be drawn for this hypothesis; therefore, future research is needed to explore this issue.

3.7. Comfort of brands

The final theme emerging from the transcripts involves consumers having a sense of comfort from knowing they are wearing branded clothing. These clothes signify quality, due to the branding, and thus, allow consumers to know they are wearing quality products. This is in addition to looking presentable to their peers. Owning and wearing a quality brand means that the consumer trusts the brand to perform as expected, as the following examples show:

I chose Hallmark versus another brand, because, I mean if you think about oh, what's the first thing that comes in mind brand wise when it comes to cards? You think Hallmark. I do not know where else you would go. I do not know where any other store is just where you can go and buy cards, and stationary, and other stuff. I mean everybody has heard of Hallmark. It is a very reputable company. People know it is not exactly cheap, but you know you can get some good nice quality stuff there (Kara, 22, referring to thank you notes).

This example shows the extent to which these Generation Y consumers trust name brands that they have become comfortable with. In this theme, Generation Y seeks an expensive brand (relative to other brands in the product category), yet believes the brand to be of the quality expected to justify the price. This product is not a conspicuous consumption item. Thank you notes are not obviously Hallmark, as the watermark is on the back of the card. Thus, the comfort that these consumers feel when selecting these brands is inherent in the trust they place in the brands, not in the display.

Consistent with the comfort of brands theme, Noble and Noble's (2000) description of high school Gen-Y consumers is as brand embracing (i.e., they trust and identify with branded products). From the results college-aged Gen-Y consumers are also brand embracing in that they trust brands, have affection for brands that have proven themselves (i.e., don't just rely on advertising hype), and appear willing to establish lifelong relationships with these brands.

3.7.1. Uncertainty reduction theory

The underlying explanation used by these consumers' for the comfort of brands is seen in the following examples is as a guarantee, found by using branded products, resulting in reduced consumer stress. This is exemplified by consumers saying things such as "it was a safe purchase", "I was guaranteed to get what I was expecting", "I know they will hold up well. I don't have to worry about it", and "I know these pants would allow me to be dressed appropriately for the funeral. I didn't have to stress about that". To these consumers, the brand name symbolizes a guarantee of quality, which allows consumers to know what to expect. In other words, if a familiar brand is purchased, uncertainty in what they will receive from the purchase is eliminated, providing them more feelings of confidence in the purchase and reducing stress. As such, uncertainty reduction theory (Berger, 1987) appears to offer insights in this theme.

Uncertainty reduction theory says that high levels of uncertainty characterize the onset of a relationship. Relationship partners communicate/seek information in order to reduce this level of uncertainty. As information acquired about a relationship partner increases, the level of uncertainty for the partner and about the relationship decreases, allowing consumers to make predictions about situations (in this case make predictions about the reliability and trustworthiness of products) (Berger, 1987; Berger and Bradac, 1982; Duncan and Moriarty, 1998; Parks and Adelman, 1983). One piece of information that can help reduce uncertainty is the brand name of the product. Other pieces of information might be guarantees from customer service departments. Consistent with this, numerous respondents mention 24-hour service call centers, in-store customer service representatives, and warranties as elements of products that produce a feeling of trust in the brand (e.g., "The thing that really interested me in Dell was the service element. They said they would be here within 24 h whenever I have a problem (Jim, 22 year old male)"; "They offered a good warranty and since it was a big-name reputable brand I knew that if there were any problems they would be willing to work with me to solve them (Kevin 21 year old male, referring to Apple computers)").

4. Discussion

This study attempts to understand what drives college-aged Generation Y consumers to purchase products and patronize retailers. The majority of research on Gen-Y provides a demographic description of consumers rather than providing a deeper understanding of their consumption behaviors or focusing on their attitudes toward various objects/events (e.g., toward advertising, corporate sponsorship, ethical Internet-related behaviors, the media). Additionally, the majority of research on this generation assumes Gen-Y consumers are all alike, though the generation includes such diverse members as 14 year-olds and 31 year-olds. A need exists to understand narrower segments of Gen-Y's purchasing patterns. One example of the importance of this latter point is apparent in the contradiction of the results here and those cited in Morton's (2002) findings. Morton reports that Generation Y consumers (as a whole) are very brand and fashion conscious but fickle in their brand loyalties. The results here are consistent with Morton's first point, but contradict her second point. Specifically, the results show that respondents in the sample are very brand and fashion conscious, as the fashion knowledge theme exemplifies, yet they did not appear fickle in their brand loyalties. Instead, the informants spoke of developing trust in retailers/brands (notably in the comfort of brands theme) and how this trust not only leads to the purchase of products and retail patronage but to repeat patronage as well.

For retailers and marketers to effectively target and position products for consumers, more information is needed about specific age groups, especially when college-age consumers comprise such a large portion of the total population. The goal was to understand the purchasing patterns of a sample of college-age Gen-Y and the resulting interviews form seven themes.

The findings here inform theory and management practice. From a theoretical perspective this model highlights some potential theoretical underpinnings of college-age Gen-Y's consumption behaviors. Socialization theory (Moschis, 1981), uncertainty reduction theory (Berger, 1987), reactance theory (Brehm, 1966), self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987), social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), feelings of accomplishment (Herrmann, 2004; Otnes and McGrath, 2001) and using possessions to connect to one's past (Belk, 1990) were all presented to explain these participants' consumption behaviors. Additionally, organizing the findings into a conceptual model provides a framework on which future research on the consumption motivations of Gen-Y (and other groups for that matter) can be built. Future researchers can extend this model by investigating whether the themes identified in this research differ based on product (e.g., high- vs. low-involvement products), brand or company. Other work could investigate differences between various demographics of Gen-Y (i.e. older vs. younger members, educational or socioeconomic background), and/or making comparisons across other generational age groups. An analysis of the themes in this research in comparison to the preceding Generation X's consumption behaviors through their formative years was conducted (see Table 2 for a brief discussion of how the themes differ from research regarding Generation X's socialization and emergence as independent consumers). The authors

Table 2
A comparison of Generation Y themes and Generation X.

Generation Y themes	Generation X
<p><i>Assertions of freedom from parents</i> Selecting and consuming products that give participants a sense of independence and freedom from their parents' significant influence on consumption decisions.</p>	<p><i>Feelings of alienation from parents</i> Known as the "latch key" generation and reared in the highest divorce rate in history, Gen X is said to feel alienated from their absentee parents. Thus, Gen X was less likely to feel the need to distance themselves from parents they perceived as uninvolved (Linville, 2005; Swedberg, 2001)</p>
<p><i>Finding yourself</i> Selecting and consuming products that help participants define who they are, what is important to them and what they value in life.</p>	<p><i>Already found</i> Gen X prides itself on being fiercely independent and self-aware from an early age, and did not have the buying power to use products to define themselves in their formative years (Swedberg, 2001)</p>
<p><i>Blend in/stand out</i> Selecting and consuming products that help participants achieve their goals of either blending in with the crowd or asserting their individuality to their peers</p>	<p><i>Stand off</i> When younger, Generation X was seen as rebellious and non-conformist. This generation still does not place emphasis on what others think and isn't concerned with using products to display status or similarity with others (Pruter, 1998; Dias, 2003)</p>
<p><i>Brand personality/my personality</i> Selecting and consuming products with attributes that serve to express some aspect of the participant's own personality or image.</p>	<p><i>No brands reflect my personality</i> Gen Xers have been said to feel alienated and ignored by marketers and as such are unlikely to feel that most companies or brands have an understanding of their needs or personalities (Lager, 2006; Singh, 2001)</p>
<p><i>Fashion knowledge</i> Participants used their considerable knowledge about the latest trends, images, and reputations of retailers, products, and brand names to be considered experts or leaders among peers.</p>	<p><i>Defensive knowledge</i> Gen X is very motivated to search for purchase-related information and is adept at searching. Gen Xers tend to use information not as a point of pride but as assurance that they are not being taken advantage of by marketers and are getting the best deal possible (Pruter, 1998; Lager, 2006)</p>
<p><i>Value-seeking</i> Participants illustrated the desire to make the best decision in regards to not only price and quality but gave consideration to making good investments for the future</p>	<p><i>Immediate gratification</i> Gen X is known for seeking immediate gratification and choosing to satisfy short-term goals without thinking long-term (Pruter, 1998). Gen X is most likely to look for the lowest cost item or discount rather than thinking of the investment value of purchases (Hume, 2005)</p>
<p><i>Comfort of brands</i> Participants found great confidence and trust in the brand names of their choice</p>	<p><i>Skeptical of brands</i> From watching their parents become the first generation not to give or be given lifelong loyalty by their employers, this generation grew up with no desire to be loyal to corporations or brands; skepticism and rebellion against their parent's brands prevailed (Lager, 2006; Shroeder and Zeller, 2005).</p>

believe that these findings begin to paint a picture of a generation unique in their motivations for consumption.

From a managerial standpoint, the results offer implications for marketers and retailers. First, the respondents are very much oriented toward seeking value. Most often value-seeking entailed price/quality, but investment/built-to-last issues tradeoffs also occurred. As such, marketers and retailers targeting this age group should potentially focus their advertising campaigns on illustrating the value of certain products and retailers. For example, one reason for Old Navy's success with this age group is the value the brand offers them with stylish, quality clothes at reasonable prices. To college-age Gen-Y consumers, this brand-retailer epitomizes value. Old Navy's campaign focus on a sense of accomplishment in finding the right product for the right price might resonate even more with this age group.

Trust is also a salient issue noted by the sample. Branded products provide consumers a sense of comfort from knowing they look and feel good in these garments. Advertising targeting these consumers may be more effective by focusing on the

security and uncertainty reduction issue by letting consumers know that they can trust brand X to help them look and feel good in their clothes.

The fit between a brands' personality and the consumers' personality is another salient theme in the informants' discussions. This fit theme suggests that marketers imbue brands targeted at this age group with personality characteristics that these consumers can identify with (i.e., fun, exciting, stylish). Not only should attributes of the brand be used to signify this personality, but also the brand name itself should express a specific personality. Additionally, marketers need to learn how their college-age target market ideally sees themselves with regards to their product so that a brands' personality can demonstrate these traits and help consumers achieve their ideal selves.

In contrast to Dias' (2003) statement that Generation Y consumers do not care about dressing like their favorite movie star or celebrity, the current results paint a different picture. The informants in the present study are very focused on the styles celebrities wear. As Law et al. (2004) illustrate, knowledge of

fashion and brands worn by celebrities helps college-age consumers navigate all the roles they are engaging in (e.g., student, office worker, boyfriend) by learning what is acceptable and unacceptable consumption for these roles. The results here extend these findings to illustrate that this type of comparison allows consumers to feel a sense of self-enhancement and feel stylish in these roles. Marketers targeting this age group might focus on celebrity idols as a marketing method for selling products so that consumers can see what is stylish and have a comparison point (e.g., as New York & Company did with *Grey's Anatomy* stars Ellen Pompeo and Patrick Dempsey). Given that Law et al. (2004) report that fashion icons dominating the Hong Kong fashion market influence 18–24 year old Chinese consumers, retailers focusing on international markets might be able to use a similar strategy (i.e., using celebrities in their ads) when targeting urbanized cultures. College-age consumers from Hong Kong want advertisements to feature their idols and superstars more than older-age groups (Leung and Taylor, 2002).

4.1. Limitations

As with most qualitative research designs, a tradeoff is made between quantity of respondents and richness of results. This research is an exploratory look into the consumption motivations from a subset of Gen-Y consumers, so the quality and depth of information provided by a qualitative design is most appropriate in taking the first steps to discover what underlying theoretical frameworks serve as viable explanatory mechanisms for this groups' consumption behavior. Generalizability of the findings is a limitation, as generalizability cannot be established through any single study. However, the researchers acknowledge that if research is not in some way representative of populations, rather than samples, the findings are of little academic or managerial use (Wells, 1993).

The limited sampling approach does not suggest that the framework developed from this data (see Fig. 1) lacks generalizability (Mook, 1983). The researchers propose that the themes provide a representation of the samples' consumption motivations across many different purchase situations, and as such, should represent a valid framework for how members of this group may go about making purchase decisions (Fournier, 1998). Further assurance of the robustness of the results is illustrated through the collection of additional data from informants in different states and at different sizes and types of Universities.

Nevertheless, as Fournier (1998, p. 361) writes, “transferability of these interpretations to different life..settings remains an empirical, researchable question for consideration in future works.” Thus, the need for future research to learn the range and limits of generalizability for this study (Wells, 1993) temper the findings and implications in the present article. For example, researchers might explore whether or not the framework in the present article extends to different customers, types of retailers (e.g., discount retailers, specialty retailers) and different types of products (high- and low-involvement products). Consumers in the in-depth interviews often speak about different types of retailers and products, but as this was not the focus of this study,

future research is needed to learn the limits of generalizability in terms of retailer or product type. Additionally, while this study hints that gender differences might exist in some themes, future research should explore if these differences materialize with a larger sample.

Second, the method of data collection asking consumers to write down products they had purchased recently and then to discuss products considered most important is subject to recall error, thus, interviewing consumers immediately after a purchase to understand their motivations might yield more detailed findings.

Finally, the findings are cross-sectional in nature. Dias (2003) states that generational motives for buying become standardized once the generation reaches a certain age. According to this line of thought, in 10 years, for example, the mid-Generation Y consumers will have similar motivations for purchases as current Generation X consumers. A longitudinal analysis is needed to learn if Dias (2003) is correct or if Generation Y individuals will have unique motivations for purchases throughout life, influenced by environmental factors, which is consistent with cohort theory (Meredith and Schewe, 1994; Ryder, 1965; Schewe et al., 2000).

5. Conclusions

Despite these limitations, the current study yields several insights into the motivations behind the mid-Generation Y members' purchasing and patronage behavior. The majority of research conducted to date has assumed all Generation Y consumers are similar in their attitudes and behaviors, in addition to focusing mostly on the demographic characteristics of this generation or other topics unrelated to the motivations of consumption behaviors (e.g., Bennett and Lachowetz, 2004; Dembo and Gentile, 2002; Freestone and Mitchell, 2004; Kennedy, 2001; Shearer, 2002). As such, the current study offers insights into a narrow age segment of Generation Y, namely those in college, in addition to detailing their underlying motivations for purchasing products and patronizing retailers. These insights should shed light on one of the most coveted consumer segments in history.

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