

# A Qualitative Inquiry Of Generation Y Consumers' Selection Attributes In The Case Of Organic Products

Asphat Muposhi, Ph.D., Vaal University of Technology, South Africa  
Manilall Dhurup, Ph.D., Vaal University of Technology, South Africa

## ABSTRACT

*The primary objective of the study was to explore which attributes of organic products inform Generation Y consumers' purchase decisions. The study, which was grounded in qualitative research design, utilised data generated from sixteen in-depth interviews carried out in 2014 with Generation Y consumers in Southern Gauteng, South Africa. Thematic content analysis was employed to analyse the collected data. The study identified price, quality, convenience, availability, trust and performance as the main selection attributes that influence Generation Y consumers' choice of organic products. The findings of the study are important for marketing managers intending to formulate effective green marketing mix strategies and future initiatives focused on stimulating sustainable consumption.*

**Keywords:** Green Purchase Behaviour; Selection Attributes; Organic Products; Generation Y

## INTRODUCTION

At the epicentre of the environmental sustainability debate are concerted efforts to promote the adoption of sustainable consumption lifestyles (Koenig-Lewis, Palmer, Dermody, & Urbye, 2014, p. 94). To achieve this, many corporates are adopting green manufacturing technologies and rolling out green products (Haws, Winterich, & Naylor, 2013, p. 6; Majid & Russell, 2015, p. 996), with organic food gaining popularity among consumers concerned about health and the environment (Paul & Rana, 2012, p. 412). Together with the growth in demand for organic products, green purchase behaviour emerged, spearheaded by the Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability (LOHAS) and Shades of Green consumer segments (Saleki & Seyedsaleki, 2012, p. 98).

Conceptually, organic food is a collective term that encompasses products that are environmentally safe and whose production processes are deemed to be environmentally sound (Paul & Rana, 2012, p. 413). Organic food is distinguished from conventional products by its packaging, which contains selling propositions such as “natural”, “organic”, “environmentally friendly” and “biodegradable” (Saleki & Seyedsaleki, 2012, p. 99). In this study, terms such as “organic products”, “green products” and “environmentally friendly” products are therefore used interchangeably to refer to products that are not harmful to the environment.

The entry of green products into the mainstream market has been accompanied, however, by consumer cynicism (Luchs, Naylor, Irwin, & Raghunathan, 2010, p. 18; Polonsky, Vocino, Grau, Garma, & Ferdous, 2012, p. 238; Husted, Russo, Meza, & Tilleman, 2013, p. 2). Consumer cynicism stems from the perceived lower quality, higher prices and unsubstantiated environmental benefits associated with green products (Chen & Chang, 2012, p. 503; Lin & Chang, 2012, p. 125). To date, attempts to reduce the scepticism towards green products have been focused on regulatory frameworks to curb greenwashing claims and the promotion of the use of eco-labels certified by a third party (Brecard, Hlaimi, Lucas, Perraudeau & Salladarre, 2009, p. 122). However, in spite of increased marketing efforts to enhance the market appeal of green products, consumers' reluctance to buy green products still persists (Peatie & Crane, 2005, p. 358; Ritter, Borchardt, Vaccaro, Pereira, & Almeida, 2014, p. 1).

In what has been dubbed the “green paradox” (Longoni, Gollwitzer, & Oettingen, 2014, p. 158), empirical evidence suggests that the demand for green products is inconsistent with the reported increase in environmental concern among consumers (Van-Doorn & Verhoef, 2011, p. 167; Tseng & Hung, 2013, p. 181). The indifferent reception of green products suggests the existence of barriers to green consumption (Gleim, Smith, Andrew & Cronin, 2013, p. 44). Accordingly, Husted et al. (2013, p. 2) singled out the delineation of green product attributes that are considered important by consumers as the most critical challenge confronting marketers. Understanding green product choice behaviour is also complicated, in part, by marked variations in levels of green product adoption and diffusion in diverse markets (Belk, Devinney, & Eckhardt, 2005, p. 279). The Theory of Consumption Values provided the theoretical lens to delineate the selection attributes perceived important by Generation Y consumers when buying organic products.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows: First, the purpose and objectives of the study are provided. Thereafter, literature related to selection attributes of organic products is discussed. This is followed by the research methodology and measures employed to enhance trustworthiness of the study. Findings of the study are then presented and discussed. The last section offers the implications, limitations and conclusion.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This article aims to explore Generation Y consumers’ selection attributes when purchasing organic products. The attainment of this purpose is aimed at filling the gap in literature and offer insights into organic products purchasing behaviour.

### **Objectives of the Study**

In a market place wherein consumers’ environmental concern does not translate in sustainable consumption, the objectives of the study were to:

- To explore factors that influence organic product choice behaviour,
- To understand consumers' experience when consuming organic products, and
- To assess the willingness of consumers to continue buying organic products.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

The Theory of Consumption Values (TCV) is a well-established theoretical framework that explains consumer choice behaviour (Lin & Huang, 2012, p. 11; Biswas & Roy, 2015, p. 464). The TCV identifies functional, social, emotional, conditional and epistemic values as antecedents of choice behaviour (Sheth, Newman, & Gross, 1991, p. 159). In the context of green purchase behaviour, Haws et al. (2013, p. 2) employed the term “green consumption values” to refer to the propensity of consumers to express the principles of environmental protection through their consumption behaviour. Green consumption values are considered influential in driving consumers towards the adoption of sustainable consumption patterns (Lu, Bock, & Joseph, 2013, p. 3). Based on the TCV, this study proposes green consumption values, namely green functional value, green social value, green emotional value, green conditional value and green epistemic values, as the main selection attributes that may influence Generation Y consumers’ green purchase behaviour.

### **Green Functional Value**

Functional value measures consumer perceptions about the quality, performance, price and reliability of a product (Biswas & Roy, 2015, p. 464). With regard to green products, functional value is considered instrumental in stimulating purchase intentions (Chen & Chang, 2012, p. 516). Functional value is particularly important to Generation Y consumers as they are characterised as utility maximisers who cognitively seek brands that provide authentic value propositions (Yarrow & O’Donnell, 2009, p. 28; Colucci & Scarpi, 2013, p. 2). According to Chen and Chang (2012, p. 506), the purchase of green products is prompted by a set of cognitive factors such as green perceived value, green trust, green satisfaction and green perceived risk.

Although functional value is positioned as a potent factor in promoting the purchase of green products, there are inherent challenges associated with the concept. For instance, the altruistic nature of sustainable consumption limits the uptake of green products because individual consumers perceive it as unjustifiable for them to bear the high cost of buying green products when everyone benefits from a sustainable environment, including free riders (Hanss & Bohm, 2013, p. 54). Additionally, the functional value concept assumes that consumers act rationally and make purchase decisions based on perfect information about the benefits and costs of their decisions (Welsch & Kuhling, 2010, p. 405). This is hardly the case as consumers experience challenges in differentiating between green and non-green products at the point of purchase and tend to rely on credence values to evaluate green products (Rousseau & Vranken, 2013, p. 33).

### **Green Social Value**

The purchase of environmentally friendly products is regarded as a socially acceptable gesture with a high social value attachment (Webb, Mohr, & Harris, 2008, p. 93). Conceptually, social value entails the quest for identification with a significant social group and the extent to which an individual complies with the expectations of peers through the purchase and consumption of products or services (Bearden, Netemeyer, & Teel, 1989, p. 473). Sustainable consumption is regarded as a form of pro-social behaviour which emanates from an individual's awareness of the consequences of consumption behaviour on the natural environment, leading the individual to assume responsibility for addressing behavioural outcomes (Stern, Dietz, Guagnano, & Kalof, 1999, p. 85).

Social value is particularly important to Generation Y consumers as this cohort is characterised by the need for peer acceptance, conformity and affiliation (Williams & Page, 2011, p. 44). In an endeavour to connect with peers, Generation Y consumers perceive purchase decisions as a creation of social identities (Oliver & Lee, 2010, p. 99). In environmentalism discourse, the environmentally-conscious segment is perceived as an inspirational group that Generation Y consumers are keen to associate themselves with (Smith, 2010, p. 437). In buying green products, Generation Y consumers gain a sense of belongingness and social approval from their peers (Arvola, Vassallo, Dean, Lampila, Saba, Lahteenmaki, & Shepherd, 2008, p. 452).

In spite of Generation Y's attachment to products that enhance social value, they are inherently prone to continual brand switching (Dev, Buschman, & Bowen, 2010, p. 466). For example, Vazifehdoust, Taleghani, Esmaeilpour, Nazari, and Khadang (2013, p. 2493) noted that the purchase and consumption of green products presents consumers with a social dilemma, in which they strive to balance personal and social goals. With this in mind, Fernandez (2009, p. 79) intimated that it remains a challenge to capture Generation Y consumers' loyalty.

### **Green Emotional Value**

Apart from functional and social values, consumers' purchase decisions are also driven by intrinsic feelings of doing something good for their own well-being and for society (Lin & Huang, 2012, p. 16; Koenig-Lewis et al., 2014, p. 96). The introduction of green products to the market stimulated favourable emotions because consumers perceived sustainable consumption as a possible solution to environmental problems (Koenig-Lewis et al., 2014, p. 97). For instance, Matthes et al. (2013, p. 2) observed that the use of environmental stimuli in green marketing messages has the potential to act as a heuristic cue that triggers the formation of positive environmental attitudes.

Emotional factors that are presumed to have a strong influence on the purchase of green products include consumers' feelings of guilt, fear and morality (Young, Hwang, McDonald, & Oates, 2010, p. 29). Guilt and fear appeals are considered effective in prompting remorse among consumers by alerting them to the negative effects of their consumption behaviour on the environment (Belz & Peattie, 2009, p. 187). However, because emotion-laden messages have been criticised as having a tendency to confuse and mislead consumers, there have been calls for more rationality in promoting green products (Koenig-Lewis et al., 2014, p. 94).

### **Green Conditional Value**

Consumption behaviour is also construed as situationally primed and largely dependent on contextual factors known as "conditional value" (Lin & Huang, 2012, p. 11). Conditional value is defined as the satisfaction derived by

consumers from purchase decisions that are triggered by a set of situational factors in the marketplace (Sheth et al., 1991, p. 162). Based on the concept of conditional value, contextual cues that are salient at a given point are presumed to be influential in driving purchase behaviour (Wood & Neal, 2009, p. 589; Hur, Yoo, & Chung, 2012, p. 692).

In the context of green purchase behaviour, Ellen, Wiener and Cobb-Walgren (1991, p. 103) coined the term “perceived effectiveness of environmental behaviour” to refer to “a domain-specific belief that the efforts of an individual can make a difference in the solution to a problem”. When consumers perceive that their actions have the potential to make a noticeable difference, they are more likely to engage in pro-environmental behaviour (Wahid, Rahbar & Tan, 2011, p. 40). The concept of perceived effectiveness of environmental behaviour is based on the premise that consumers’ attitudes and responses to environmental appeals depend on whether they believe that their efforts can positively address such problems (Awad, 2011, p. 61).

Consumers’ perceptions of the value, affordability and availability of green products are listed as the key factors that influence green purchase behaviour (Young et al., 2010, p. 28). In addition, Pickett-Baker and Ozaki (2008, p. 289) note that a significant number of consumers experience challenges in identifying green products, an indication of the inadequacy of green marketing communications. To foster self-efficacy among consumers, Roberts (1996, p. 218) stresses the need for environmental messages that reinforce the mind-set that individuals have the ability to avert environmental problems.

### **Green Epistemic Values**

Beyond functional, social, conditional and emotional values, Xiao (2005, p. 23) suggests that product choice behaviour is also influenced by epistemic values. Epistemic values refer to “the perceived utility acquired from an alternative’s capacity to arouse curiosity, provide novelty and satisfy a desire for knowledge” (Sheth et al., 1991, p. 162). It follows that, to enhance green purchase behaviour, there is a need to increase the environmental knowledge of consumers (Cherian & Jacob, 2012, p. 123). This is important because consumer information about green products is still rather limited (Hill & Lynchehaun, 2002, p. 538). Given the dearth of reliable information on green products, Smith and Paladino (2010, p. 101) caution that not all consumers are prepared to exert extra effort in information search and are more likely to depend on subjective knowledge, which, since it may be inaccurate, could jeopardise the purchase of green products.

In terms of market appeal, organic products such as natural chocolates, organic milk and eggs, green coffee, and fish certified by the Fair-trade and Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) are proving to be more popular among young consumers in South Africa (Woolworths Holdings Ltd, 2012, p. 55). Additionally, an increasing number of young people are participating in green initiatives such as recycling and ecosystem-management projects (RSA, 2008, p. 12). Given this background of pro-environmental behaviour, it is worth exploring whether Generation Y people in South Africa engage in green purchasing behaviour and what motivating factors influence such behaviour. Using the context of organic products, the Theory of Consumption Values (TVC) proposed by Sheth et al. (1991) provided the theoretical background for the study.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Approach and Sample**

The data were generated from sixteen semi-structured in-depth interviews. This research mode was selected as it allowed participants to narrate their “lived experiences” (Silverman, 1993, p. 6), and provided the added advantage of a lower inference rate (Voils, Sandelowski, Barroso, & Hasselblad, 2008, p. 5). The sample was conveniently drawn from Generation Y consumers enrolled at a public university of technology in Southern Gauteng, South Africa. The interviews were conducted in June and July 2014. The Generation Y consumers were selected because this cohort is regarded as future consumers, with the ability to influence long-term consumption patterns (Atkinson & Rosenthal, 2014, p. 42). Of the sixteen participants, nine (56 %) were female and four (44 %) were male. Respondents ranged in age from 22 to 35 years, with a mean age of 25 years.

## **Instrumentation and Procedures**

An interview guide was developed following a comprehensive literature review. As recommended by Surujlal (2011, p. 121), a pre-test was conducted with three participants to assess the appropriateness of the interview questions and their sequence, as well as to assess the suitability of the interview protocol. Based on the findings of the pre-test, minor changes were made to the interview guide. The interview guide comprised questions on factors that influence organic product choice behaviour, consumers' experience of organic products, sources of organic product information and whether consumers will continue to buy organic products.

As part of the interview protocol, the interview commenced with a general question to introduce the topic under study. With the permission of participants, interviews were recorded on audiotape; notes were also taken. Following the example of Hjelmars (2011, p. 337), the interviews were flexible and reasonably free-flowing in order to allow participants to describe in detail the attributes they consider important when buying green products. Probing techniques, coupled with open-ended questions, clarification, tracking and reflective summary, were used to enhance the quality of data collection.

The audio tapes and interview notes for each interview were labelled appropriately with pseudonyms and the date of the interview and included the gender of the participants. All the interviews, each lasting between 60 and 120 minutes, were conducted by the researcher. The key ethical considerations observed during interviews included informed consent, respect, honesty, confidentiality and anonymity (Allmark, Boote, Chambers, Clarke, McDonnell, Thompson, & Tod, 2009, p. 48-51). The purpose of the interview and the procedures to be followed were explained to participants. In line with the concept of informed consent, an invitation letter was sent to all participants prior to interviews. The letter briefly explained the purpose of the interview and the interview procedures. The participating institution gave ethical clearance to conduct the study.

The concept of “response saturation” was employed as an indicator of sample size adequacy. Response saturation is defined as the point at which no new evidence emerges in subsequent interviews (Castro, Kellison, Boyd, & Kopak, 2010, p. 345). In the present study, response saturation, also known as theoretical saturation (Morrow, 2007:217) or data saturation (O'Reilly & Parker, 2012, p. 191), was attained by the sixteenth interview.

## **Data Analysis**

The analysis of data was conducted inductively in line with the process of thematic content analysis. After the verbatim transcription of the interviews, the researcher and two academics analysed all the transcripts of in-depth interviews by employing the process suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1998). These authors suggested the use of the following techniques in the data analysis and conceptualisation:

- **Open coding:** The researcher commenced data analysis by reading through the transcribed notes and listening to the interviews recorded on tape to familiarise himself with the data. This was done in order to capture all the key aspects raised in the interview and to ascertain the depth and credibility of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 86). After sifting through the data, the researcher grouped into categories and sub-categories any transcripts that appeared to pertain to similar ideas (Glesne, 2011, p. 187; Lawrence & Tar, 2013, p. 32).
- **Axial coding:** The process of axial coding involved a second reading of interview transcripts with the aim of identifying relationships between themes and sub-themes (Chen, Chang, & Wu, 2012, p. 374). Firstly, the themes and sub-themes were reviewed to verify whether they were supported by interview transcripts. Secondly, the themes were re-analysed to check for relationships with sub-themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 91). In instances where the themes and sub-themes were related, they were further collapsed to form one dominant theme (Chen et al., 2012, p. 374).
- **Integration:** During this stage, perceptual mapping was conducted in order to analyse the themes emanating from the data. The mapping process took the form of naming and defining precisely the themes identified in the analysis of the data. The aim of this step was to identify the essence of each theme and to determine the aspects of the data captured by each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 92).



Iterative and recursive processes were used to ensure that all information relating to the study was appropriately captured (Creswell, 2009, p. 189). The identified themes were then related to the research question and conclusions were drawn, based on the generated themes.

### **CREDIBILITY AND TRUSTWORTHINESS**

The reliability and validity of the present study was enhanced through situated methodology, reflexivity, prolonged engagement, member checks and inter-rater reliability. Using the concept of situated methodology (Kielhofner, 1982, p. 75), reliability and validity were enhanced by ensuring compatibility between the research method and data analysis procedures. This was achieved through the use of a purposive sampling method that enhanced the richness of collected data. Employing the principle of reflexivity (Fitzpatrick & Olson, 2015, p. 49), the researcher was able to remain emotionally neutral during interviews and to approach the interviewing process with an open mind by bracketing all his inherent preconceptions about the subject under investigation.

As recommended by Kirk and Miller (1986, p. 30-31), the researcher also employed the concept of “prolonged engagement” with respondents through comprehensive interviews. This was done in order to generate a complete data set as well as to enhance the “thickness” of data, with the sole objective of revealing the full picture of the phenomenon under study. In accordance with Guba and Lincoln’s (1989, p. 239) affirmation that member checks are “the single most critical technique for establishing credibility”, participants were given a full transcript of the coded interviews, with a summary of the emerging categories, in order to determine whether the codes and categories appropriately explained their experiences. The analysed data were shown to five respondents who were readily available and they agreed that the interpretations represented a true reflection of their views.

In addition to participant validation, peer checking was conducted by two experts in qualitative research; this check took the form of an “audit of the decision trail”, whereby all stages in the data collection and analysis were scrutinised in order to determine their adequacy (Kielhofner, 1982, p. 73). The use of independent experts to assess recorded interview transcripts and interview notes was a form of re-test reliability (Morrissey, 1974, p. 214-215) and corroborating themes (Crabtree & Miller, 1999, p. 170). A table indicating the sub-categories, categories and themes was developed for inter-rater reliability, as suggested by Vagharseyyedin, Vanaki and Mohammadi (2011, p. 70). Based on the evidence from the interview documents, there was consensus between the researcher and the two experts on the validity of the themes that emerged from in-depth interviews.

### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

In order to reduce duplication and enhance coherence, the results and discussion sections in this study are integrated, as suggested by Gustafsson, Hassmen, Kentta, and Johansson (2008, p. 805). In the following discussion, the selection attributes that emerged from the analysis of the sixteen in-depth interviews with Generation Y consumers are provided. Relevant citations from interview transcripts are used to explain the emergent themes.

#### ***Price***

The perception that green products are expensive repeatedly emerged during interviews as one of the factors that reduce the purchase of green products. The following excerpt encapsulates this view:

*“I regard myself as a price-sensitive consumer: price plays a big role in my purchase decisions. Honestly, I am not prepared to pay the higher price, which in some cases is double that of non-green products. I believe it’s too much – for example, the green coffee is twice (as) expensive (as) the non-green one.”*  
[Melissa]

The view that green products are expensive resonates with the views of Michaelidou and Hassan (2010, p. 137) and Barrera and Sanchez (2010, p. 267), who contend that the high price of green products is the immediate deterrent to the purchase of green products, especially repeat purchase (Marian, Chrysochou, Krystallis, & Thøgersen, 2014, p. 57). Inherent in the foregoing excerpt by Melissa is the unwillingness to pay the premium price of green products. This view is prevalent in green buyer behaviour, where consumers tend to vary in their willingness to pay the

premium price (De-Pelsmacker, Driesen, & Rayp, 2005, p. 381). For instance, research by Radman (2005, p. 269) suggests that 70 percent of consumers would buy green products if the price were reduced. Similarly, Kollmuss and Agyeman (2002, p. 249) noted that the traditional emphasis on savings and frugality still impedes the purchase of green products. In the present study, a plausible reason for price sensitiveness could be that most students depend on money from their parents; hence they tend to be more price-sensitive. Taking into account this perception that green products are expensive, Carrete, Castano, Felix, Centeno, and Gonzalez (2012, p. 478) suggest that marketers need to investigate whether a low-cost pricing strategy has the potential to enhance actual purchase behaviour.

### **Health**

Apart from the expensive tag attached to green products, health concerns were mentioned as one of the key drivers of the purchase of green products. The following excerpt confirms health considerations as a significant factor influencing the purchase of green products:

*“In terms of price, green products are relatively expensive but I believe the green products are good for my health so I am prepared to pay the price.” [Lauren]*

Ozguven (2012, p. 665) echoes this view in noting that health is a key driver of green product purchase intentions. Health consciousness refers to the extent to which health concerns influence consumers’ consumption behaviour (Jayanti & Burns, 1998, p. 10). This finding, however, is in contrast with that of Michaelidou and Hassan (2010, p. 136), who refute health consciousness as a key driver in shaping attitude towards green products. In a similar study, Lockie, Lyons, Lawrence, and Grice (2004, p. 145) noted that perceptions of the healthiness of green products do not influence purchase intentions. A plausible reason for these mixed views could be that green products are laden with credence qualities that make it difficult for consumers to make an effective evaluation of the benefits of green products.

### **Quality Perceptions**

The current study also found that respondents are influenced not only by health considerations but also by quality. In terms of quality, there are mixed views, as captured in the following excerpts:

*“In terms of performance, the truth is that I do not really know. I remember my first experience with green coffee: the taste was not good. Together with my friends, (I) decided to stop. I don’t know whether I will try it again.” [Pandy]*

*“I like the natural taste of these products the most. For those products I regularly buy, such as green coffee, organic milk and free-range chicken, I don’t have any complaints regarding the quality. I don’t mind paying the extra rand.” [Prime]*

The mixed views on the quality of green products are mirrored in the literature. For instance, Tobler, Visschers, and Siegrist (2011, p. 680) regard green products as of poor quality, while, in contrast, Wier, O’Doherty, Morch and Millock (2008, p. 406) regard green products as being of high quality. Kihlberg and Risvik (2007, p. 471) also acknowledged the superior taste of green products. Given the prevalence of mixed views on the quality of green products, Ness, Ness, Brennan, Oughton, Riston, and Ruto (2010, p. 108) and Hjelmar (2011, p. 341) are of the opinion that marketers need to emphasise the benefits of green products over non-green products as unique selling propositions when framing green marketing communications.

Another perspective on the quality of green products relates to the consumer’s first encounter with the product. For example, Prime’s first experience with a green product resulted in dissonance. In line with Prime’s comment, Phipps, Ozanne, Luchs, Subrahmanyam, Kapitan, Catlin, Gau, Naylor, Rose, Simpson and Weaver (2013, p. 1229) suggest that past behaviour affects future behavioural intentions. For instance, researchers have observed a “licensing effect”, whereby negative outcomes of pro-environmental behaviours tend to lead to the activation of anti-environmental behaviours (Mazar & Zhong, 2010, p. 498). Similarly, a study by Longoni et al. (2014, p. 163) revealed that negative feedback affects the performance of subsequent behaviour. It is noteworthy that the onset of

anti-environmental behaviours has the potential to evolve into entrenched behaviour, possibly negating any efforts to promote the adoption of pro-environmental behaviour (Jansson, Marell & Nordlund 2010, p. 365).

### ***Availability***

Apart from lack of information as to how to differentiate green products, many respondents underlined that the lack of green products in conventional outlets dilutes their purchase intentions. The dissatisfaction expressed by respondents on the unavailability of green products is encapsulated in the following excerpt:

*“I regularly buy green products provided they are available at the right price. As a young lady, I want to watch my weight and lifestyle. The challenge is availability: green products are mainly found in upmarket outlets and sometimes people are not prepared to make an extra effort to find them. I end up buying what is available.”*

Based on the preceding excerpt, the unavailability of green products prompts respondents to purchase products that are readily available. The importance of availability is confirmed in a study by Nath, Kumar, Agrawal, Gautam, and Sharma (2014, p. 515), which found that the demand for organic food has the potential to boom if such food is conveniently located in retail outlets. Theoretically, this finding is supported by the Motivation-Ability-Opportunity framework, which implies that the unavailability of green products in conventional retail outlets impedes the purchase of green products (Grunert, Hieke, & Wills, 2014, p. 188). Similarly, the literature emphasises that the low availability of green products exerts a negative impact on consumers’ green purchase behaviour (Bonini & Oppenheim, 2008, p. 56; Bravo, Cordts, Schulze, & Spiller, 2013, p. 67). Thus, given that the purchase of green products that are part of the fast-moving consumer goods category tends to be routinised behaviour (Wood & Neal, 2009, p. 579), green products need to be readily available at the point of need in order to enhance habitual purchase behaviour (Hjelmar, 2011, p. 340). It is possible that improved availability of green products may enhance green purchase behaviour.

### ***Trust***

The views of respondents also suggest that environmental claims are confusing and, at times, outright misleading. Specifically, respondents were sceptical about the environmental benefits of green products and the reasons why companies are going green. The following excerpts emanating from the interviews epitomise the sentiment of scepticism associated with green products and green marketing communications:

*“To me, the benefits of these products to the environment remain(s) a myth. It appears it’s a marketing gimmick; I regard it as a ploy to charge higher prices – just like the recent meat-labelling scandal. Without sound checks on those claims, you can’t be sure.” [Ruth]*

*“It seems companies just slap a green label onto their products. I think the government needs to do more to protect consumers. Honestly I don’t trust the so-called green products.” [Neil]*

It can be inferred from the foregoing excerpts that respondents demand green marketing messages that are cogently expressed. Notably, there is an undertone suggesting that the respondents suspect marketers of a deliberate attempt to mislead. This finding reinforces the importance of justifying the environmental claims of green products and enhancing the integrity of environmental labels. This finding also dominates green marketing literature and scepticism is considered the major challenge faced by marketers in promoting the adoption of green products (Albayrak, Aksoy & Caber, 2013, p. 36). For instance, emotionally laden environmental messages have been criticised for misleading consumers on the magnitude of environmental problems, resulting in consumers being vulnerable to greenwashing (Koenig-Lewis et al., 2014, p. 102). This finding implies that marketers need to invest in considerable marketing effort to change negative perceptions associated with green products. Without confidence in green products, consumers tend to be reluctant to buy them.

To ease scepticism and regain consumer trust, Bravo et al. (2013, p. 67) opine that marketers need to communicate accurate information about the environmental benefits of the consumption of green products. Given the surge in



unsubstantiated green claims, Peattie (2001, p. 198) advocated the need to “return to rationality”, that is, to refocus on green marketing messages that are premised on honesty in order to restore consumer confidence in green products. Thus, fact-based communication of the environmental performance of green products has the potential to enhance trust in the green marketplace and, ultimately, to lead to purchase behaviour.

### **LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

Although the findings offer valuable insights into the green product attributes valued by Generation Y consumers, the study is prone to limitations that offer avenues for future research. Firstly, the present study utilised a qualitative research design in the form of in-depth interviews that employed a small sample size of sixteen participants. This limits the generalisability of the research findings. Future research may therefore seek to enhance external validity through the use of a quantitative research design that employs a large sample size.

Secondly, the results of the study are limited to the Generation Y consumers that were enrolled at a public university of technology in the Gauteng Province in South Africa. For this reason, the findings of the study may not adequately capture the selection attributes of all Generation Y consumers and other cohorts. It would be enlightening to explore the selection attributes of green products using a broader, more heterogeneous sample frame in order to enhance the generalisability of the findings. It is hoped that such a study will result in empirical work that promotes mainstream green purchase behaviour.

Lastly, the present study was focused on low-involvement green products in the fast-moving consumer goods category. As a result, the findings of this study may not be generalised to green products in the high-involvement category. Thus, future research efforts may be devoted to understanding the selection attributes of Generation Y consumers in the context of high-involvement goods.

Notwithstanding the outlined limitations, the findings of the study offer marketers the capacity to understand the attributes valued by Generation Y consumers when making a green product purchase decision.

### **CONCLUSION**

The aim of the study was to explore the selection attributes of Generation Y consumers in the context of green products. The study revealed that price, quality, performance and availability influenced the purchase of green products among Generation Y consumers. Based on the results of the study, it is recommended that green marketing strategy be focused on setting competitive prices and enhancing the quality and availability of organic products relative to non-organic products. There is also an urgent need to integrate traditional product attributes, such as price, quality and availability, with the green marketing mix to stimulate the demand for green products.

The findings of the study also revealed that the credibility of green marketing messages is central to the purchase of organic products. For instance, the majority of the respondents considered green product advertising as confusing and misleading, resulting in post-purchase dissonance. Based on this result, it is recommended that marketers formulate accurate communication messages relating to the benefits of organic products. It is also recommended that green marketing messages be structured around the actual benefits of products designated as green, the manufacturing process, and how such products compare with conventional products.

### **AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES**

**Asphat Muposhi** is a Ph.D. student at Vaal University of Technology, South Africa. His research interests centre on green marketing, environmental sustainability and consumer behaviour. E-mail: [asphatm@vut.ac.za](mailto:asphatm@vut.ac.za) (corresponding author).

**Manilall Dhurup, Ph.D.**, is Executive Dean in the Faculty of Management Sciences at Vaal University of Technology, South Africa. His research interests include marketing and sport marketing, consumer behaviour and human resources. He has published widely in academic journals and supervised numerous students at master's and

doctoral level. In addition, he sits on various research and innovation committees and runs the postgraduate induction programme for master's degree and doctoral students. Email: royd@vut.ac.za

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**NOTES**