

Quantum leap in social attitudes

A new sense of individualism is emerging, writes Mike Holmes

CONSUMER attitudes in SA are changing dynamically and a new sense of individualism is emerging, according to an international marketing brand development research project.

Researchers report that many South Africans are now genuinely interested in exploring and appreciating each others' cultures. They see increased mixing at public places, with shopping being a "national leisure experience that unites the middle class".

Despite its social and economic problems, SA has seen the rise of consumerism and general wealth, leaving more people with more money, more goods, more stress and ultimately less time.

The assessment comes from the Added Value Group, located in 15 countries.

In SA the group compiled wide-ranging research that identified nine major trends that it says characterise changing consumer behaviour. Team leaders were specialist qualitative insight director Sue-Ellen Hoffman, board director Georgie Dagnall and semiotics specialist Dr Inka Crosswhite, who compiled the trends analysis.

The Added Value team says two of the major trends are experiential, with consumers wanting to be "in the know" about the products they consume and the services they use. This signifies a need for discovery, sophistication and recognition.

Consumers are hungry to acquire the skills they need to make the most of their purchases because they feel this gives them status. This need to know more about purchases is illustrated by the popularity of lifestyle magazines and TV cooking shows and articles featuring food and wine.

Some consumers are trading up and spending a disproportionate share of their income on luxury.

"South Africans are starting to value experiences over material possessions," say the researchers.

With time at a premium, a short escape for relaxation has become the new currency. The new consumers seek out and savour small indulgences, which they see as instant rewards for a busy and demanding lifestyle. Hence a fast-food treat or a bite of sushi, the rise of the coffee society, the spread of day spas to Soweto.

People are seeking "sense-periences" for stimulation.

"It is about deep immersion of the senses and having a story to tell, creating lifelong memories," says the report.

Catering to this trend, some retailers are selling more than a product, they are selling a lifestyle.

Examples are Nike Concept Stores and shops within shops, such as the coffee shops in Exclusive Books stores.

Interest is growing in outdoor activities, including extreme sports and leisure travel, more specifically African weekend experiences and adventure holidays.

The report says South Africans



Graphic: KAREN MOOLMAN

are "self-indulgent and hedonistic and don't abstain today, despite consequences tomorrow".

Society shows a new openness about sex and sexuality, with high tolerance for diverse sexual conduct and high awareness of HIV/AIDS. Yet unsafe "partnerships" abound, it says.

The Added Value insights identify no fewer than three major trends that reflect a new spirit of individualism and self-reliance. Many South Africans now want to be seen as unique and not as part of the herd.

There is a growing resistance to homogeneous culture, a growing feeling that individuals can make it on their own and don't need to rely on traditional structures.

More people are showing themselves to be pioneering and entrepreneurial. They are recognising that success is born out of hard work, not handouts and political assistance. They are go-getters, taking every opportunity to better themselves. And they are inspired by "zero to hero" success stories, such as Zola, Jabu Stone, Oprah.

The report says South Africans are expressing their feelings about one another more openly.

There are plenty of references

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to where people have come from, for example U-Carmen and There is a Tsotsi in the Boardroom.

Being an affirmative action case has become a negative label.

Networking and virtual networking are on the rise as more men and women strive to contact others who can help them achieve their goals.

According to the research, people are seeking a greater balance between work and home, between body, mind and soul. They are looking for more natural ways to achieve good health. Sports participation is up. So is the number of township gyms. Some fast-food providers now offer health foods.

There's a new emphasis on understanding how the body works and how to use tailor-made solutions, such as nutrition and supplements to prevent illness, cope with life's demands and live longer. Some medical aid schemes now reward healthy lifestyles.

As life becomes more hectic and traditional structures break down, individuals become more defined by interests and attitudes. With a renewed freedom of expression they take on different roles and personas for different occasions.

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transformed from something we are given into something we invent and construct."

South African women no longer feel they have to prove they can succeed in a man's world and men realise (slowly) that they no longer have to be the stereotypical breadwinner.

"It's no longer about being male or female, but about making choices based on what is wanted from life."

Signifiers are changing roles in families, with CEO moms and stay-at-home dads.

Metrosexuality is rising, with men pampering themselves and also becoming more fashion-conscious.

Women are following traditionally male pursuits. For example, young South African women are drinking more beer.

A Female Nation Survey by women24.com last year found that a superwoman culture is thriving in SA. Women are more likely to be self-employed, empowered, working in the community, functioning as primary caregivers and bringing home the bacon.

Rapid technological advances, coupled with hard work and long hours, has left many people isolated and deprived of human contact and comfort.

Many are moving from townships into suburbs and looking for social connections in their new neighbourhoods.

THE final four major trends are categorised as communal and reflect a growing interest by South Africans in one another's cultural backgrounds. "Many are starting to interact more over shared interests, values, beliefs and goals," say Added Value's SA researchers.

Bonding is taking place as new groups explore different norms and behaviours and share knowledge and activities.

At the same time more people view time as the ultimate indulgence. They have a real urge to find a balance that gives "time to chill out". There is a heightened appreciation of pursuits that take time, like arts and crafts. Signifiers are Soweto pamper clubs and birth-day clubs.

Another major trend is a renewal of South African consciousness, with people taking pride in South African culture, achievements, companies and products. In their dual global and local world this manifests itself in South African styles in food, fashion and home decor. They are rediscovering pride in their neighbourhoods and traditions.

Township life is getting a new buzz and colour. The phenomenon of "Soweto rising" is characterised by new trees and new places to play, by upmarket estate agencies and Sandton-style malls.

In this new environment people are better informed, which gives them more control.

Increasingly, they are alert to the stories behind brands and policies and are losing trust in institutions, corporations and those in positions of power. They want truth and transparency and for the authorities to stand for something. This fresh outlook is reflected in the growth of consumer forums and watchdogs.

The message they are sending out loud and clear is - "I want to make a difference."