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APPAREL QUALITY ASSESSMENT BY CUSTOMERS IN 'VALUE' AND 'LIFESTYLE' RETAIL.

Dr. Himanshu Misra [a]
Dr. Shalini Singh [b]

[a] Assistant Professor, Marketing
Jaipuria Institute of Management, Vineet Khand, Gomti Nagar, Lucknow – 226010

[b] Assistant Professor,
Jaipuria Institute of Management, Vineet Khand, Gomti Nagar, Lucknow – 226010

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ABSTRACT

Perceived quality happens to be an important variable affecting consumer choice and satisfaction. The perception of quality is very individualistic in nature and may vary from individual to individual and may change as the product category changes. There may be some product categories where quality assessment is easier than other. Lot of research has been done to understand the dynamics of quality perception in reference to apparels as well.

Researches have indicated that the quality assessment of apparel is an important factor affecting purchase behavior (Fiore and Damhorst, 1992). Previous researches indicate that quality assessment is a multidimensional approach. With an objective to study the perceived apparel quality assessment by customers in 'value' and 'lifestyle' retail, a questionnaire was developed after thorough review of related literature. The notion of apparel quality was measures with questionnaire containing items focused on extrinsic criteria, product composition, product performance and psychological factors.

T-test for equality of means was conducted on collected data and the result clearly indicate that the customer approach in terms of brand, price, co-ordination with existing clothes, salesperson suggestions, shape of fabric etc. is different in value and Lifestyle retailing.

Introduction:

The term quality has always attracted a lot of attention of marketers, academician and customers.

The importance and relevance of quality is consumer decision making and satisfaction is also well established. Quality is often used as an important variable by marketers to differentiate their offering from that of competitors. Despite lot of work been done on quality perception it still remains an ambiguous concept.

Retailers suspect that today's consumers are increasingly using perceived quality to discriminate among product alternatives. (Morgan and Pollack, 1984; Rabin, 1983). According to Starr (1972), quality is a quantitative adjustment which the consumer incorporates as an adjustment for the value and cost in respect to projected end use for the product. Monroe and Krishnan (1985) defined perceived quality as estimated ability of a product to provide satisfaction relative to other alternatives. Consumer judgment about a product's overall excellence or superiority was a focus emphasized by Zeithmal (1988). Lot of effort and research has been done to better understand the notion of apparel quality, these studies ranged from focusing on unidimensional scales to multidimensional scales. On one hand the results of these studies have been mixed. Researches like O'Neal, 1988; Lennon and Fairhust, 1994; Hines and O'Neal, 1995 concluded that customers used variety of cues to evaluate quality.

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Lot of researches has been done to decipher the quality assessment of apparels by customers A consumer based approach to quality is more subjective and not easily verified, as a result a marketer might think he has created a quality product while the customer might think something else. By better understanding the factors used by customers to evaluate the quality of product, may help the marketers in creating a differentiated offering which will be difficult to replicate. So how consumers perceive quality and how those perceptions affect the purchasing behavior of customers remains important yet ambiguous questions.

From the theory and research relating to decision making about apparel quality by consumers it is clear it is an important step in deciding to purchase (Fiore and Damhorst, 1992). Apparel products not only elicit sensory reactions from consumers, but also emotional and cognitive, which according to Fiore and Kimle (1997) usually result from the formal qualities of the item.

Review of related literature:

Since, the previous researchers are of the opinion that multidimensional approach is more appropriate for measuring apparel quality. The perceived apparel quality may be affected by extrinsic and intrinsic factors. Wherein extrinsic factors will cover factors which are product related but not a part of physical product like brand of apparel, price of apparel etc. The intrinsic factors are inherent to the product and may include type of fabric, construction of fabric etc. These together will lead to desired benefits and customers try to evaluate and compare them with different offering available as alternatives. (Davis, 1985, Hatch and Roberts, 1985, Eckman et al.,1990, Hawkins et al., 1995, Forney et al., 1999). The studies on clothing quality are focused on various factors like, extrinsic quality, product composition, product performance and psychological factors etc

Extrinsic cues such as brand label or store where purchased are related to the product, but are not a physical part of it. Intrinsic cues such as fabric or construction techniques are inherent in the product and cannot be changed without changing the product (Olson and Jacoby, 1972). Extrinsic cues have received more

attention as compared to intrinsic cues in researches. Holbrook and Corfman (1985, p:34) stated that "skillful effort, sound materials, and painstaking method' are three elements of a product that can be evaluated in perceived quality. The effect of concrete attributes such as fabric, fibre content, construction (Davis, 1985, 1987; Forsythe, 1991), brand or designer labels (Davis, 1987; Behling and Wilch, 1988; Baugh and Davis, 1989; Forsythe, 1991), country of origin (Dickerson, 1982; Sternquist and Davis, 1986; Wall and Heslop, 1986), and store image (Sternquist and Davis, 1986; Heisey, 1990) on consumers' perceptions of quality have been inconsistent. Some studies have reported an effect of the concrete attributes on consumers' perception of clothing quality and others have not. For example, in studies by Dickerson (1982) and Wall and Heslop (1986), a strong relationship between country of origin and perceived clothing quality was reported, while Sternquist and Davis (1986) found no such relationship.

Some researchers have attempted to understand consumers' perceptions of clothing quality by conducting focus group studies or individual interviews. In O'Neal's (1988) qualitative study, consumers discussed quality based not only on concrete attributes, but also on abstract cues such as performance expectations, psychological expectations and aesthetic appeal. Lennon and Fairhurst (1994) found similar results in their research. Respondents described quality using aesthetic, usefulness, performance and extrinsic criteria.

Eckman, Damhorst and Kadolph (1990) examined various criteria used by customers to evaluate apparel quality and found aesthetics to be an important criterion in evaluation of garments during actual point of purchase situations. Researches by Shim and Bickle, 1994, Fiore and Kimle, 1997 concluded that consumers differ as to role of aesthetics in their apparel selection behavior. Consumers are not even aware of the role aesthetics play in their apparel behavior and many a times were unaware about how the quality of apparel items should be assessed. In a nutshell various variables like extrinsic, intrinsic, psychological, aesthetics, product performance related etc have been used by the researchers to understand the consumers' perception of quality.

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The results of various studies have been inconsistent as well with reference to various markets, gender, age, country of origin etc. So still a better understanding of consumer assessment of quality apparel is required.

Value and Lifestyle Retail:

The Indian retail industry though predominantly fragmented through the owner -run " Mom and Pop outlets" has been witnessing the emergence of a few medium sized Indian Retail chains, namely Pantaloon Retail, RPG Retail, Shoppers Stop, Westside (Tata Group) and Lifestyle International to name a few.

Given the attractiveness of the Indian retail sector, foreign retailers like Wal-Mart, Carrefour SA, Europe's largest retailer and Tesco Plc, the UK's largest retailer, have either entered or are keen to enter this growing market, despite the Indian retail sector being closed to foreign direct investment (FDI). The attitudinal shift of the Indian consumer in terms of "Choice Preference", "Value for Money" and the emergence of organized retail formats have transformed the face of Retailing in India.

The sector can be broadly divided into two segments:

a)   Value retailing, which is typically a low margin-high volume business (primarily food and groceries) and Lifestyle retailing, a high margin-low volume business (primarily apparel, footwear, etc). In other words while value retailing is a mega-savings-large-format stores concept, where the cheapest branded products and accessories under the best deals are made available to customers.

b)   Lifestyle stands for more affluent, convenience driven, savvy and willing to pay price premium customer segment.

Value retail formats such as Big Bazaar, Food Bazaar, More etc tried to cushion the impact of recent inflationary trends on demand, by stepping up bargains and discount offers across product categories that have been hit hard by spiraling prices. On the Lifestyle retailing front, stable economic conditions and a pick-up in consumer confidence have resulted in consumers opening up their wallets for purchasing lifestyle goods.

Indian Apparel Retail industry:

The apparel retail industry consists of the sale of all menswear, womenswear and infants wear. The menswear sector includes all garments made for men and boys. It includes both outer and undergarments. The womenswear sector consists of the retail sale of all women's and girl's garments including dresses, suits, coats, jackets, tops, shirts, skirts, blouses, sweatshirts, sweaters, underwear etc. The infants wear sector comprises of garments for children between the ages of 0-2 years.

Indian apparel retail industry is witnessing a paradigm shift from strictly "made- to order" to a "ready-to wear clothes". The affluent middle class, increasing women workforce are contributing to the growth of this trend. Trade liberalization measures have opened Indian firms to the rest of the world. Foreign companies are keen to cash in on India's economic boom and are flooding the country with retail outlets.

Purpose of the Research:

Considering the promising growth of organized retail and India and growth of both value and retail apparels formats in India, a need was felt to conduct a study on how Indian customers assess the quality of apparels, vis a vis 'Value' and 'Lifestyle' retail store. The apparel quality assessment by customers for 'value' and 'lifestyle' retail has never been studied and analyzed thus making this study unique and more relevant to India. This research is a first step to better understand the quality assessment of customers in such retail outlets.

Methodology:

A questionnaire was developed after thorough review of related literature. The questionnaire covers various aspects of apparel quality, studied by various researchers like extrinsic criteria, product composition, product performance and psychological factors.

a)   Extrinsic factors includes items (total 6 items) like brand, price of apparel, co-ordination with existing wardrobe collection, approval of others, suggestions of salesperson and warranty provided on apparel

b)   Product composition was measured with 4 items which focused on the style, color and design, fabric, attractiveness of the apparel.

c)   Product performance was measured with the help of 9 items which included perception based on washing requirements, durability, wrinkle, holding its shape, fitness, comfort, colorfastness etc.

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d) Psychological factors (total 4 in number) included items covering feel good factor, positive feel, more acceptance in society, feeling of more successful.

Total 23 items were used in the study, in all the items five point Likert scale was used in which the respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement from 1-5, indicating strong disagreement to strong agreement.

The questionnaire was administered during April 2015-July 2016 to 200 customers of Big Bazaar (representing Value Retailer) and 200 customers of Shoppers Stop (representing Lifestyle Retailer (Shoppers Stop) through mall intercept survey method in city of Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India.

Demographic profile of the sample:

Total 400 respondents participated in the survey; selected demographic characteristics of the sample including age, gender, and profession are presented in Table 1 as follows:

Variables		Percentage of respondents
Age	<20	24
	20-30	52
	31-40	18
	41-50	4
	51 60	2
Gender	Male	45
	Female	55
Marital Status	Single	60
	Married	40
Profession	Student	25
	Private Sector	30
	Government Sector	28
	Self Employed	17
Monthly Income	<25,000	30
	25,000-40,000	25
	40,001-55,000	17
	55.001- 70,000	18
	>70,000	10
Family size	1-2	4
	2-4	32
	4-6	45
	More than 6	19

Table No: 1: Demographic Profile of Sample Respondents

The sample had 45% Males and 55% females respondents, 24% of respondents were less than 20 years of age, while 52% of the respondents were in the age group of 20-30. 40% of the respondents were married while rest of the respondents was single. Around 70% of the respondents had a monthly income greater than 25,000 INR/ month. This was the individual income of the respondent and his family income could be more than the stated figure.

Data Analysis, Results and Discussions:

The data was collected from 400 respondents and Mean values of all the items were calculated. T test for equality of means was used to find significance in the mean values of items for Big Bazaar and Shoppers Stop. The mean values and the value of T Test are presented in following Table:

Items taken in Study covering extrinsic factors, product composition, product performance and psychological factors.. Mean Values   T   test   for equality of means

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Items taken in Study covering extrinsic factors, product composition, product performance and psychological factors..	Mean Values		T test for equality of means
	Big Bazaar	Shoppers Stop	Sig. 2 tailed
I consider the Brand of apparel.	3.54	3.94	.000**
I consider the price of the apparel.	4.06	3.31	.000**
I consider the co-ordination of apparel with my existing wardrobe collection.	3.41	3.7	.003**
I consider salesperson's suggestions	2.54	2.79	.016**
I consider approval of others	3.22	3.31	.414#
I consider the warranty provided on the apparel.	3.66	3.43	.042**
I consider that the apparel is stylish and fashionable.	4.12	4.23	.241#
I consider that the apparel is colorful and well designed.	4.22	4.11	.173#
I consider that the apparel is attractive.	4.3	4.22	.292#
I consider the fabric of the apparel.	3.87	4.13	.009**
I consider the washing requirements for the apparel	3.91	3.23	.000**
I consider how long the apparel will last.	3.74	3.45	.007**
I consider whether the apparel will wrinkle.	3.64	3.43	.061#
I consider whether the apparel will pill.	3.65	3.24	.000**
I consider whether the apparel will hold its shape.	3.81	4.01	.010**
I consider whether the apparel provides comfort.	4.16	4.54	.000**
I consider whether the style of apparel is good for my figure.	4.24	4.6	.000**
I consider whether the apparel provides a perfect fit.	4.42	4.55	.050#
I consider the colourfastness of the apparel.	3.98	3.82	.115#
I consider that the apparel makes me feel good about myself.	4.23	4.22	.913#
I consider that the apparel makes me feel more positive.	4.1	4.23	.144#
I consider that the apparel makes me feel more accepted in society.	3.91	3.82	.369#
I consider that the apparel makes me feel more successful.	3.89	3.93	.668#

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Table No: 2 Mean Values of various Items taken in Study and result of T-Test for equality of Means

While analyzing the collected data, related sample two mean testing procedure (paired t test) was used, and in 12 items (out of total 23 items) the difference in mean values was found to be significant.

Amongst the various items representing extrinsic factors brand, price, co-ordination with existing wardrobe collection and salesperson suggestions the mean value difference was found to be significant thus indicating that for customers of Big Bazaar and Shoppers Stop these items play a different role and it also maybe concluded that the customers of Shoppers Stop are more brand conscious but less price conscious as compared to Big Bazaar which is also in conformance with the notion of Value and Lifestyle retail formats. Interestingly as indicated by the mean value it is also evident that customers of Big Bazaar were more cautious about the warranty provided by Big Bazaar on apparels.

In various items representing Product Composition significant mean difference was found in fabric of apparel thus indicating that the customers makes an attempt to evaluate the fabric of apparel while finalizing his decision.

Within items related to Product Performance, washing requirements, durability, pill resistant, hold its shape, comfort and good for figure exhibited visible mean value significance. It may be inferred from the same that the customers of Big Bazaar and Shopper Stop approach differently on these items when they are purchasing apparels from these outlets. The customers of Shoppers Stop are highly concerned about the shape conformance of apparel, comfort from apparels and its suitability as per the figure of customers. The maintenance of apparels and warranty of performance is also looked upon by the customers and also adds to the notion of quality.

None of the mean value of various items taken to measure psychological factors was found to be significant in the study.

In a nut-shell consumers are more concerned about the brand when making purchases from Shoppers Stop, while price plays an important role while making purchases from Big Bazaar. Salesperson suggestions, co-ordination with existing apparels play an important role in influencing the quality perception of apparels. Consumer expects a warranty from apparels purchased from Big Bazaar. Fabric of apparel plays an important role while making purchases from Shoppers Stop while washing requirements are looked for while purchasing from Big Bazaar.

The consumer looks for a long lasting, pill free apparel from Big Bazaar, while comfort, good for figure, and tendency of apparel to hold its original shape is much desired while making purchases from Shoppers Stop.

Further from the study it may also be concluded that extrinsic and product performance show more significant differences in quality perception of apparels while executing their purchased from Value and Lifestyle retail formats.

The significantly different items and their mean values are presented in following Figure:
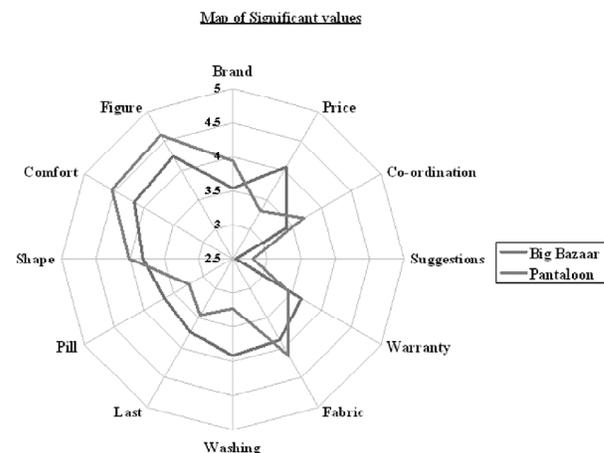

Figure No: 1 Map representing Mean Values of items with Significant Mean Difference.

The figure presents the difference amongst significant mean values. Although customer is very price conscious while making purchases from Big Bazaar, and expects the best possible quality product at minimum possible price still he expects warranty, is bothered about the life span of apparel and wants a pill free apparel, the expectations may be a result of his apprehensions as he is aware that he is putting little money in purchases, but still wants to derive maximum value out of purchase made. The customer while making purchase from Shoppers Stop is not only more Brand conscious, but is more bothered about the fabric of apparel, comfort

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provided and the congruent style as per the figure of the customer.

Managerial Implications:

Perceived quality being an important factor which not only influences the choice of apparels but also has an affects the satisfaction of the customers as well. The research not only identifies various factors which helps customers in evaluating quality but also empirically establishes how the approach of customers is different in Value and Lifestyle Retail.

The above findings may be used by retailers/ manufacturers to fine tune their offerings as per the expectations of their target segment. The study establishes that the role of brand, price, fabric, comfort, fit to body shape, durability etc. contribute to the quality assessment of apparels and goes beyond to establish which items are more important with reference value and lifestyle retailers.

The findings of the research may be used to communicate with the target audiences and it can also be used to decide the training requirements of the salesperson in the retail outlets.

Research implications and the road ahead:

The paper offers tremendous research implications; it helps in identifying the variables on which the customers evaluate the quality of apparels, the result clearly imply that these variables are different in 'value' and 'lifestyle' retail.

Further, researches may be concluded to establish the role of quality in customer choice and satisfaction. Efforts should be made to empirically establish the relationship of quality in arriving at a choice and satisfaction as well.

Researches may also be conducted to study the influence of factors which are not covered in this study but studied by other researches.

It was also observed during data collection that the perception of quality may vary with gender as well, efforts should be made to better understand the notion of quality and its constituents amongst male and female customers.

Originality/value:

Lot of research has been done on apparel quality covering various dimensions of apparel quality. Olson and Jacoby, (1972) studied the role of extrinsic and intrinsic variables, fabric, fibre, construction etc were studied by Davis, (1985, 1987) Forsythe (1991), brand or

designer labels were studied by Davis (1987), Behling and Wilch (1988), Baugh and Davis (1989), Forsythe (1991), Similarly role country of origin was studied by Dickerson (1982), Sternquist and Davis (1986), Wall and Heslop (1986), store image was studied by Sternquist and Davis, (1986) and Heisey (1990). But largely the perceptions of quality have been inconsistent.

The apparel quality assessment for 'value' and 'lifestyle' retail has never been studied and analyzed hence the research works adds to similar work done in this domain and not only adds to existing pool of knowledge but also opens avenues for future research as well.

Research limitation:

The research was limited to Lucknow only and the respondents were limited to only one representative retailer each in value (Big Bazaar) and lifestyle (Shoppers Stop) category. So the findings of the research may not generalizable. Efforts should be made to conduct similar studies amongst a pool of retailers and in different cities/ countries.

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