"Customer Perception of Important Apparel Store Attributes"
(An Indian Perspective)

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Abstract

Customer perception about retail store attributes has widely been recognized as an important determinant of store choice and store patronage. Most of these studies have found a direct relationship between them. Although, a number of studies have been conducted on customer perceptions in the past but majority of these studies have been conducted in the markets of developed countries of West and Europe. And to apply those findings in Indian context without testing them would be a great folly.

In this study, customer perceptions have been captured across new retail formats and different demographic characteristics of Indian customers. In total, 150 Customers visiting 11 stores belonging to formats in Dehradun region were administered a structured questionnaire through store intercept method to measure store attribute importance.

The present study on store Attribute perceptions in Indian context is very much timely and of great relevance to apparel retailers in specific and to academicians in general.

INTRODUCTION

Customer perception about retail stores attributes has widely been recognized as an important determinant of store choice and store patronage (Hansen and Deutscher, 1977-1978; Berry, 1986; Zemke and Schaaf, 1989; Leszczyc and Timmermans, 2001). Most of these studies have found a direct relationship between them. Not only store perception affects the customers' store selection and patronage but also makes customers loyal eventually resulting into long term profitability for the retailer.

Although, a number of studies have been conducted on customer perceptions in the past but majority of these studies have been conducted in the markets of developed countries. Therefore it would be a great folly to apply the findings of those research in India

where organized retailing at the moment is only at evolutionary stage accounting for merely 3 % of overall retail trade. The fact that there are virtually no studies on store perception in Indian context renders this timely study a great relevance.

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Despite overall low share of organized retail, Indian apparel retail business accounted for 36% of organized retail trade in 2005 primarily because of the fact that apparel retailing got organized long time back. Apparels in the past have been sold in exclusive branded stores, speciality stores, discount stores & lifestyle stores where the customers had a freedom to feel, touch and if possible then try an apparel item such as Jeans, t-shirt, shirt, trouser etc. before purchasing. They could search through the items themselves and were given the assistance by store employees regarding information on Price, size, color etc. whenever it was needed. However, the retail formats like hypermarket, supermarkets etc. are new to apparel sector in India. In this study, customer perceptions have been captured across different retail formats and different demographic characteristics of customers of Dehradun region.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Customer's Store choice and customers demographic characteristics (Such as age, income level, education, and location of residence) have been found to have a relationship in various studies conducted by Moore and Mason, 1969, Robarts, 1969 and Bawa et al., 1989. A study conducted by Bearden (1977) identified friendliness of sales people, store atmosphere, location and parking facilities as factors affecting store choice. Bellenger et al. (1977) in his research found that consumer's motivation to shop from a particular store may vary and hence can be categorized as those who are economically motivated and those who are recreational shoppers. In their study, Shim and Kotsiopulos (1992) found that the importance of store attributes to store preference varies by store type.

A study by Forsythe and Bailey (1996) found that customer's characteristics such as age, gender, marital status, occupational status, and customer shopping enjoyment determine the amount of time spent by a customer for shopping. The more customer ensure shopping enjoyment, the more time is spent on shopping. A negative association was found between age and time spent shopping for females. Further, income was not identified as significant variable, consumers with professional careers spent less time shopping than non-professional consumers. A study conducted by Lee and Johnson (1997) found that customers expectations of store attributes also

differ according to store type. They observed that customers did not expect much customer service at discount stores while they expected extensive service from specialty stores. In a study by Van Kenhove et al. (1999), concluded that situational conditions such as gift buying versus personal shopping, context of the shopping occasion (vacation, routine purchase, special event, etc.) and time constraints affect the store attributes effect on store choice & store selection.

Consumers generally preferred to shop at specialty stores and were found to select a store for its neatness, Low prices, low parking costs and wider assortments. (Leszczyc & Timmermans 2001)

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The main objectives of the study are as follow:

1. To identify key store attributes that influence customer store choice for purchasing apparels.
2. To find out the extent to which consumer perceptions of store attributes vary by some selected demographic characteristics such as Customers' Gender, Age and Income
3. To find out the extent to which customers perception varies by some selected store formats such as Hypermarkets, Discount Stores and Others

HYPOTHESIS FORMULATED FOR THE STUDY

H1: The perception regarding important store attributes of male and female do not vary significantly
H2: The perception regarding important store attributes of customers of different age groups do not vary significantly
H3: The perception regarding important store attributes of customers of different income groups do not vary significantly
H4: The perception regarding important store attributes of customers do not vary significantly across different apparel store formats.

METHODOLOGY

Descriptive research design has been adopted in this study as the research objective is to describe the

nature of variables under study. The population for the study consists of consumers of all Apparel Stores of Dehradun city. The Random sampling has been used to select sample stores and then customers have been chosen by Convenience sampling through Mall intercept method at the exit doors of the retail outlets. 150 respondents from the selected apparel shops of Dehradun city were administered a structured questionnaire based on importance rating scale and differential scale. However, only 100 respondents filled questionnaire correctly and were considered appropriate for further analysis.

Finally selected 100 appropriate questionnaires were filled up by 18 customers of VISHAL MEGA MART, 15 of AMARTEX, 10 of KOUTONS, 8 of PRILKNIT, 8 of SBJ, 7 of WRANGLER, 8 of JOHN PLAYERS, 10 of LEVIS, 6 of PETER ENGLAND, 5 of BLACK BERRY and 5 of MADAME apparel store.

Vishal Mega Mart and Amartex have been taken as mini-hypermarket as both of these stores operate with an approach to provide customers all items under one roof. Koutons and Priknit are taken as Discount stores for their discount based pricing approach almost

throughout the year. Rest all stores with branded apparel items and lifestyle items have categorized as "others".

To collect primary data a structured questionnaire comprising of 2 sections (Section A & Section B) was developed. Section A consisted of statements to collect the demographic data of respondent while section B with 22 stores attributes, extracted from previous researches and through discussion with retailers, had five point importance rating scale with equated intervals.The data collected was entered into SPSS 14.0 and results were analyzed and interpreted through various statistical tools such as Simple Averages, Two-sample mean differencethrough Z-test and ANOVA

TABULATION AND INTERPRETATION

All the tabulation and data analysis has been divided into two sections namely Section A covering Demographic details of respondents, Section B covering customer responses in relation to store attribute perceptions and Section C covering hypothesis testing.

Section A : Respondents' Demographic Profile
Table: 1 (Demographic profile of respondents)

S. No.	Respondent Demographics	Frequency	Percent
1	**Gender**		
	Male	72	72
	Female	28	28
2	**Age**		
	Below 25	33	33
	26 to 35	44	44
	36 to 45	18	18
	Above 45	5	5
3	**Educational Qualification**		
	Graduation	41	41
	P.G.	57	57
	Other	2	2
4	**Occupation**		
	Service person	51	51
	Business Person	20	20
	Student	27	27
	Other	2	2
5	**Household Monthly Income (In Rs.)**		
	Below 10,000	2	2
	10,000-20,000	14	14
	20,000-30,000	39	39
	30,000-40,000	27	27
	Above 40000	18	18

Source: through SPSS 14.0

The data in above table represents demographic profile of 100 respondents whose questionnaires were appropriately filled. As is visible from the table, majority of respondents were males i.e 72 %. Females constituted only 28 % of customers who were intercepted at exit doors.44% of them were in the age groups of 26-35 years, 33 % in less than 25 years and rest belonged to more than 35 years of age group. A large proportion of respondents was well educated with 57 % of them falling in the category of those who had done their Post-graduation. More Than 50 % of them were employed in private or public services. Only 16 % had their monthly household income less than 20000 Rs.Rest all had a monthly income more than 20000.

Section B: Respondents Perceptions about store attribute importance

Table:2 (Store Attribute Importance Average Ratings)

S. No.	Store Attribute	Mean Rating	Standard Deviation
1	Good Quality of cloths	4.48	0.7
2	Brand name of cloths	4.34	0.79
3	Large Variety of Cloths	4.25	0.58
4	Helping Nature of Employees	4.18	0.7
5	Adequate parking	4.17	0.79
6	Fashionable Cloths	4.1	0.85
7	Prompt service	4.03	0.73
8	Courteous employees	4.02	0.6
9	Knowledgeable employees	4	0.72
10	Good return policy	3.95	0.76
11	Large Depth (Sizes) of cloths	3.92	0.97
12	Pleasant try rooms	3.88	0.71
13	Pleasing store atmosphere	3.83	0.6
14	Reasonable Price	3.78	0.69
15	Good store appearance	3.75	0.74
16	Good store layout	3.72	0.91
17	Convenient store hours	3.71	0.76
18	In store Display help	3.58	0.91
19	Location of store	3.44	0.81
20	Discount	3.33	0.93
21	Adequate rest rooms	3.14	0.93
22	Less distance from home	2.85	1.05

Source: through SPSS 14.0

The above table exhibits mean ratings for various store attributes on the basis of importance of these attributes. The maximum and minimum possible average importance ratings for purchasing apparels are 5 and 1 respectively.

Quality, variety and trendiness of apparels available in the store, brand carried by store, employees' helping nature, their promptness, courtesy, knowledge about apparels are the key store attributes which have been rated as highly important by customers.

Surprisingly, distance from home, location of the store and discounts offered by the store have not been given so much importance by customers while deciding to make a purchase an apparel item from a store.

Section C: Hypothesis Testing

a) **H01: Perceptions of Males and Females regarding store attribute importance do not vary significantly**

Table : 3 (Gender wise Mean values of Store attributes importance ratings)

Gender	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Male	3.83	72	0.32
Female	3.85	28	0.22
Total	3.84	100	0.29

Z score Calculated is .3563   *Source: through SPSS 14.0*

The above hypothesis was tested by using Z-test for two sample mean differences and the calculated Z score is +/- .3563. At 5% significance level the table value is for Z score is 1.96 which larger than the calculated Z-score of -.3563.

Therefore, the null hypothesis is accepted to conclude that there is no significant difference in the perceptions of males and females regarding store attribute importance.

b) **H02: Perceptions of respondents of different age groups regarding store attribute importance do not vary significantly**

Table: 4 (Age Group wise Mean values of Store attribute importance ratings)

Age	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Below 25	3.78	33	0.31
26 to 35	3.85	44	0.3
36 to 45	3.91	18	0.27
Above 45	3.88	5	0.2
Total	3.84	100	0.29

Source : through SPSS 14.0

Table: 5 (ANOVA Table for calculating difference in Store attribute importance ratings of different age groups)

ANOVA Table

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	0.201	3	0.067	0.782	0.507
Within Groups	8.218	96	0.086		
Total	**8.419**	**99**			

Source: through SPSS 14.0

Since the significance value in the table is .507 which is greater than the minimum acceptable significance value of .05 for a null hypothesis to be true. Therefore, it can be concluded that customers with different age groups have similar perceptions about importance ratings of store attributes.

c)   *H03: Perceptions of respondents of different income groups regarding store attribute importance do not vary significantly*

Table: 6 (Income Group wise Mean values of Store attribute importance ratings)

House hold income	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Below 10000	3.36	2	0.13
10000 To 20000	3.76	14	0.27
20000 To 30000	3.82	39	0.27
30000 To 40000	3.96	27	0.26
Above 40000	3.83	18	0.35
Total	**3.84**	**100**	**0.29**

Source: through SPSS 14.0

Table: 7 (ANOVA Table for calculating difference in Store attribute importance ratings of different Income groups)

ANOVA Table						
		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Mean value * house	**Between Groups**	0.941	4	0.235	2.99	0.023
hold incom	**Within Groups**	7.478	95	0.079		
	Total	**8.419**	**99**			

Source: through SPSS 14.0

The significance value here is .023 which is less than .05 indicating that null hypothesis is rejected to conclude that there is a significance difference in the perceptions of people with different income group regarding the store attribute importance.

c) **H04: Perceptions of customers regarding Store attribute importance of do not vary significantly across different retail formats.**

Table: 8(Mean values of Store attribute importance ratings respondents perception across different retail formats)(Tables and Analysis Generated through SPSS)

Mean value Store Formate	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Hyper Market	3.79	33	0.31
Discount Store	3.83	18	0.26
Other Formate	3.87	49	0.29
Total	**3.84**	**100**	**0.29**

Source: through SPSS 14.0

Table: 9 (ANOVA Table for calculating difference in Store attribute importance ratings across different retail formats)

ANOVA Table		Sum of Squares	df	Mean	F	Sig.
	Between Groups	0.116	2	0.058	0.678	0.51
	Within Groups	8.303	97	0.086		
	Total	**8.419**	**99**			

Source: through SPSS 14.0

The null hypothesis stands accepted as the calculated significance value here is .51 which is more than minimum acceptable limit of .05. Therefore, we conclude that customers perptions regarding store attribute importance are similar across different retail formats.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The primary purpose of this paper was to find out the key store attributes which Indian consumers perceive as important while deciding to make a purchase of an apparel item from a specific store. The whole idea was to find out factors which significantly influence customer's decision to go for a retail store.

When it comes to purchasing clothing items, Customers have preferred to choose a store that

offers quality, variety and fashionable apparels items, including brand carried by it. Employees' helping nature, their promptness, courtesy, knowledge about apparels are some of other factors that have been found important to Indian consumers. Surprisingly, distance from home, location of the store and discounts offered by the store have not been found so much significant in store choice decisions.

All these perceptions regarding importance of store attributes have been found similar across males, females, customers of different age groups and different retail formats. However, customers with different income groups have been found to vary significantly in their perceptions regarding store attributes importance.

One finding of this study has not confirmed to a previous research conducted by Lee and Johnson (1997) where they had found that customer's expectations of store attributes differ according to store type. In our research, importance of store attributes has been found similar across different stores. The explanation of this may lie in the fact that Indian market is still evolving and customers as well as retailers are in experimental mode at the moment. This study was limited to apparel purchase only and leaves a great scope for similar future studies which may be extended to other product categories & other markets of India before generalizing findings and using them for devising successful retail strategies.

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