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SHOPPER'S PERCEPTION TOWARDS STORE BRANDS WITHIN RETAIL STORES: A CASE OF NELLORE CITY OF ANDHRA PRADESH

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the present study is to focus on shopper's perception towards the store brands and their emotions associated with the purchase of store brands with special reference to Nellore, one of the fast-emerging tier-2 cities of Andhra Pradesh. This paper aims at discovering current shopper's perceptions on, and attitudes towards, store brands in the FMCG sector. In doing so, the research will find out the impact of different demographic factors (with particular reference to gender and income) on purchase of private labels. Moreover, it aims at throwing lights on the effect that factors like pricing, accessibility, packaging, retail communications, shelf-positioning and in-store advertising have on shopping behavior with reference to purchase of store brands. A self administered questionnaire was used to collect data from respondents. A non-probability, convenience sampling technique was used to administer a consumer survey. Products of FMCG category sold at retail stores are considered for the present study. The results of the study point out that the store brands can be positioned as products of premium quality with price levels ranging from slightly lower to the prices of the brands promoted by leading manufacturers from the product category considered. Conversely, retailers can position their brands on the basis of their sheer value-for-money. This equates to average quality products at very affordable prices. Sadly, more often than not retailers consider store brand packaging to be unimportant and hence are packed unattractive and are failed to convey a sense of high product quality. However, a key drawback of the study is the sampling frame. Future studies should work on this study in different perspectives and with different target groups. The knowledge gained through this study should ideally facilitate the process of advancing store brand research in an academic milieu and improving positioning of store brands, increasing their market share and optimizing profits achieved from store brands in a managerial context.

KEYWORDS

Organized retail, own label, Shopper's perception, store brand and supermarket.

INTRODUCTION

Store brands or private label brands are brands owned, controlled, and sold exclusively by a retailer¹. Store brands are existing in a wide variety of industries from groceries to cosmetics to web hosting. They are mostly positioned as low-priced alternatives to regional, national or international brands, even if lately some store brands have been positioned as premium brands to fight with existing name brands. Growth of store brands in India is also attributed to growth of organized retail in India. The nation's economy has registered an average growth rate of nearly 7% since the year 1994, placing purchasing power in the hands of customer. Though, the initial growth of store brands in India has been limited to certain categories like food and clothing, it is gradually expanding into other product lines as well. Indian retail is the 5th largest retail destination globally and has been considered the most attractive emerging market for investment². Overall the Indian retail market is growing at 30% annually, with the organized segment, which currently accounts for around 9% of the Indian retail market, registering above average growth of 30%³. Thus, with growth of organized retail in India, store brands are also expected to grow. Store brands matter for quite a lot of factors, the most important of which is their higher margins. The introduction of a store labels also gives the retailer greater leverage with manufacturer margins and an increased ability to ride out trade phases, because the retailer has more breathing space in pricing, promotion strategies and long term business planning. With the growth of store brands, name brands are slowly getting down to these retailers who are not only low priced but are also on par with quality standards and for the retailers themselves who are able to get anywhere from 25 to 45% margin, while manufacturer brands pay only 10-25% margin for the sale. The next reason being the local effect of cultural preferences of customers in a country like India wherein retailer have been found to be having 30% products having local taste and preference and 70% which is found in an all India basis to cater the regional needs and wants⁴. Effect of private label brands on national brands was best exemplified during the tussle between Frito Lays and Future Group and later on Frito Lay's brand like Lays got off-shelf and Tasty Treat private label brand of Future Group took over and now is amongst the highest seller in the Future Group retail outlets and have a considerable amount of market share in fried chips market. Day by day many of the giant retailers are heading towards private brands. Largely Future Group is fueling the growth in private brands while others have yet to crack the private label space. Reliance Retail and Aditya Birla's More Retail have said they will slow down and consolidate their portfolios⁵.

The credit to the growth story of private label brands does not include only the retail outlets but also the manufacturer brands. The former tactics of name brands have themselves now eaten into their own market. In the beginning of the previous decade MNCs such as HUL, P&G, Britannia and others opted to outsource their product manufacturing to third-parties. These companies shared their trade formulae and knowhow updates with their third-parties to manufacture products which were on par with the quality of products manufactured by the MNC's themselves only to keep them away from the manufacturing and human resource problems and give more attention towards the research and development of new products and expanding the product lines⁶. While the third party manufacturers parted ways with MNC's and as they already had the technology ready to produce such quality products which not only helped the third party companies to get their own brand into the market but also helped new entrants like ITC (Sunfeast Biscuits, Vivel Soaps, and Bingo Chips) and retail biggies like Future Group to get into the market who need not invest in the manufacturing or into human resource and were able to get their products faster in the market and had to only invest in research and development capability. Consumers base judgment of brand quality on direct and indirect factors. Direct attributes include ingredients, taste and texture, whilst indirect factors are represented by price and brand name. Direct factors are usually difficult for consumers to test without consuming the product, or completing various tests. Therefore, basing on indirect quality indicators like brand name and price are heavily relied upon. The author thus suggest that a thorough understanding of how these indirect cues impact different consumer groups in their purchasing decisions may help retailers to improve success of private label brands. Through further investigation, they identified brand, package and advertising as indirect factors which impact consumer perceptions and hence influence purchasing decisions⁷. Consumers become brand loyal when they perceive some unique value in the brand that no alternative can satisfy. This uniqueness may be derived from a greater trust in the reliability of a brand or from a more favorable experience when a customer uses the brand⁸. There are at least four tiers of private label brands. These include low quality generics; medium quality private labels; somewhat less expensive but comparable quality products; and premium quality private labels that are priced in excess of competitor manufacturer brands. Whilst the nature of a store's brand(s) should be first guided by its target customers, the author suggests that successful retailers will adopt more than one tier of private label brand if they are to achieve wide scale market coverage⁹. Half of private label brands are copycat brands. These brands essentially attempt to imitate the packaging and content of first tier manufacturer brands. Retailers analyze the contents of leading brands, and then re-create the product, through a process known as reverse engineering. Thus, since there are minimal research and development costs, and the retailers have already recognized that there is a potentially lucrative market available, these products are more often than not successful¹⁰. The success of private label brands is dependent on factors such as

the country's retail structure, the level of retailer concentration, the advertising rate of manufacturer brands, economies of scale, management, and even imagination¹¹.

METHODOLOGY

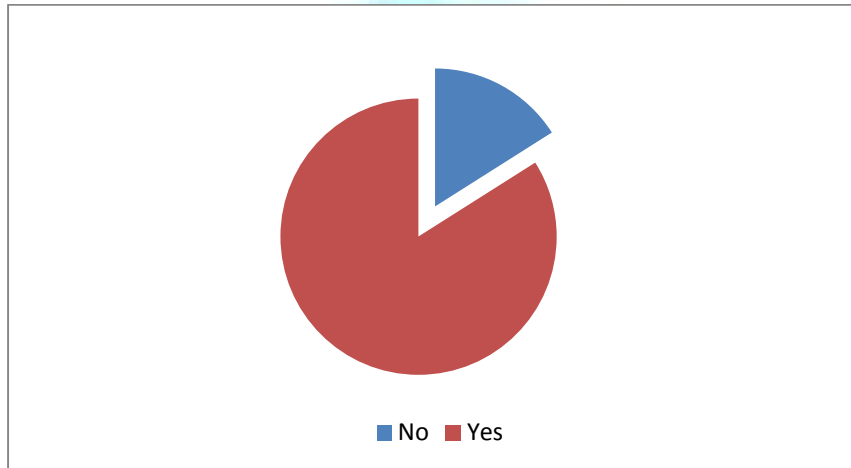
A non-probability, convenience sampling technique was used to administer a consumer survey. Although predefined quotas were not firmly set, the examiner attempted to pick a sample which was fairly representative of supermarket shoppers in Nellore. 340 questionnaires were deployed using the self-administered, mall-intercept method at local shopping markets which comprises of Reliance Mart, Nanda's Orbit mall, More, & Magna Super Mart. This approach was adopted so as to facilitate measure questionnaire completion. A preliminary check was done, to find out any discrepancies, omissions or errors with the questionnaire. The data from self-administered questionnaires was then captured, cleaned, coded and examined. Lastly, the data was tested for normality and this was confirmed to be in order.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

STORE BRANDS AND QUALITY PERCEPTION

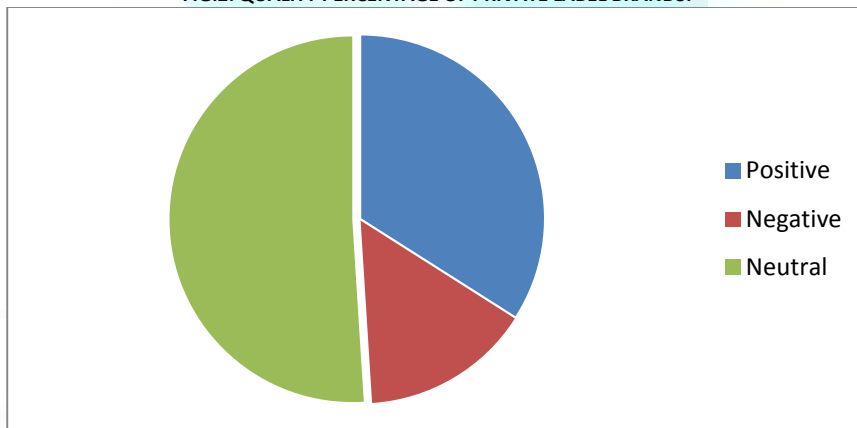
As shown in Figure 2 proportion of private label brand purchasers in the sample is notably high with 84% of respondents confirming that they have purchased these brands earlier. This may say that there is a considerable amount of potential market for private label brands in the Indian Market. Furthermore, this serves to authenticate the perceptions and attitudes revealed in the survey as the majority of respondents have experience in this respect.

FIG. 1: CUSTOMER OPINION REGARDING PRIOR PURCHASE OF STORE BRANDS



According to the survey findings, the majority of consumers (66%) were either relatively neutral or negative in their attitude towards private label brand quality levels. Only one in three respondents expressed a positive view concerning their perceptions of private label brands. This is depicted in Figure 2. It is clear that respondents are still somewhat skeptical about the quality of private label brands which may partially explain why penetration of private label brands in the organized retail sector is relatively less.

FIG.2: QUALITY PERCENTAGE OF PRIVATE LABEL BRANDS.



FACTORS AFFECTING PURCHASE DECISION OF STORE BRANDS & TEST OF NORMALITY

T-test was conducted to ascertain whether purchasers of private brands tend to perceive these brands differently to non-purchasers. The results are included in Table 1.

TABLE 1: DIFFERENCE IN PERCEPTIONS BETWEEN STORE BRAND PURCHASERS AND NON-PURCHASERS

Parameters	T-value	DF	p
Quality	-6.18379	339	0.0000
Price	1.96362	339	0.0072
Reliability	-3.34567	339	0.0009
Attractive packaging	-0.45877	339	0.7948
Location	-1.48371	339	0.2421

Perceptions around quality, price and reliability differed remarkably between purchasers and non-purchasers. These attributes were all highlighted at the 1% significance level, revealing a very high degree of significance. Store location and product packaging weren't spotted as differentiating factors between purchasers and non-purchasers. The former is unlikely to be a differentiating factor as the major supermarket chains have achieved ubiquitous coverage in Nellore city. All supermarket retailers included in this study stocked at least store brand, therefore making these easily accessible. As explained later in this discussion, packaging was found to be substandard, across the board, therefore reducing its impact as a differentiating factor between purchasers and non-purchasers of store brands. The most important criteria in the purchasing of store brands were probed. Here, respondents were asked to indicate the most

important aspect in the decision process. The ranked results are displayed in Table 2 along with the percentage of respondents who indicated that to be the case. Perceived quality of the product was considered to be of the utmost importance, followed by accessibility of the product, trust in the brand and, thereafter, the price tag. This illustrates that consumers are not completely fixated with the price charged and therefore point of differentiation do exist beyond this single criterion.

TABLE 2: KEY FACTORS IN THE PRIVATE LABEL BRAND DECISION PROCESS

Rank	Factor	% of respondents
1	Perceived quality	36
2	Accessibility of products	22
3	Trust in brand	18
4	Price charged	21
5	Others	03

In terms of gender, a marginally greater degree of brand loyalty was observed in females (Table 3).

TABLE 3: LEVELS OF BRAND LOYALTY WITH RESPECT TO GENDER

	Male %	Female %
Yes	73.04	81.21
No	26.96	18.79
Total	100	100

A trend was evident when considering brand loyalty based on income levels. Here, less affluent consumers (earning below Rs 5000 per month) recorded the highest levels of brand loyalty. A decrease in loyalty was evident as monthly income increased. The highest earners (above Rs 20000 per month) were also the least loyal to manufacturer brands (Table 4).

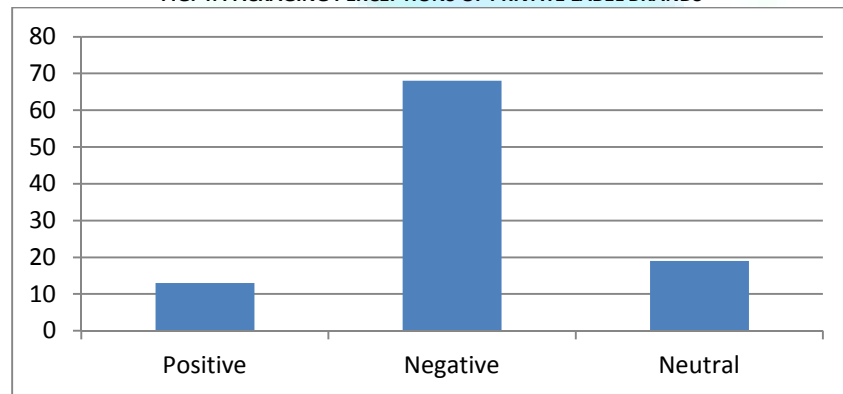
TABLE 4: LEVELS OF BRAND LOYALTY (IN PERCENTAGE) WITH RESPECT TO INCOME

	< 5000	5000-7500	7501-10000	10001-12500	12501-15000	15501-17500	17501-20000	> 20000
Yes	80.88	73.82	63.22	69.41	72.91	64.11	61.17	61.76
No	19.12	26.18	36.78	30.59	27.09	35.89	38.83	38.24
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

PRODUCT PACKAGING

Product packaging was highlighted in the literature as an important component of conveying a signal of quality to consumers. Figure 4 illustrates that perceptions of private label brand packaging are most often negative. Almost two thirds of respondents (68%) felt that packaging was unattractive and a mere 13% responded positively with regard to this product characteristic. Furthermore, it would appear that the majority of private label brand packages do not visually display the actual product contents.

FIG. 4: PACKAGING PERCEPTIONS OF PRIVATE LABEL BRANDS



EXTERNAL INFLUENCES AFFECTING PURCHASING DECISION

Purchasing of groceries in a supermarket is influenced by a number of extrinsic cues. Figure 5 depicts that most of purchase decision is influenced by advertising and past experience. Respondents indicated that television, newspapers and pamphlets can be the most effective means of communicating the benefits of private label brands to grocery shoppers.

FIG. 5: PURCHASE INFLUENCERS OF PRIVATE LABEL BRANDS.

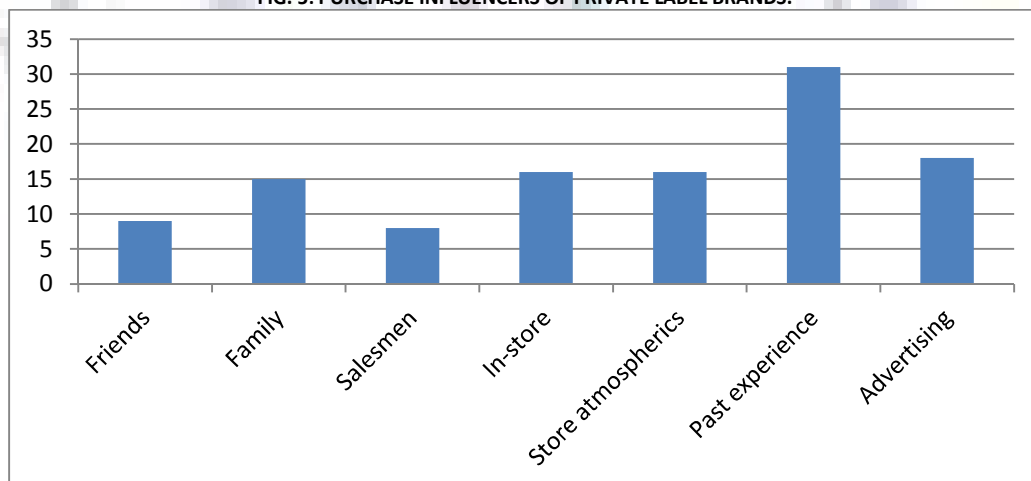
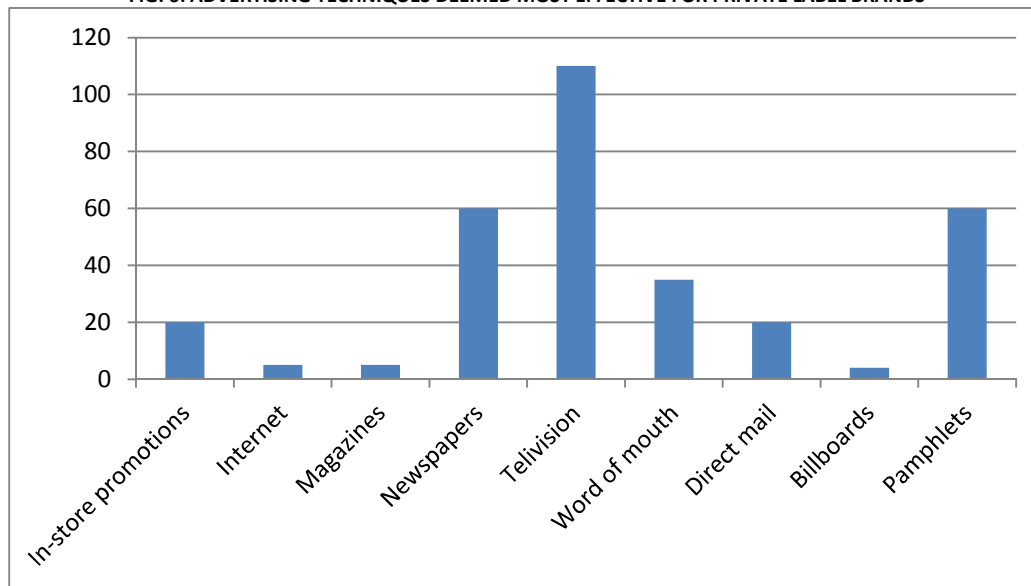


Figure 6 illustrates that the majority of respondents consistently feel that television can be the most effective way of communicating the advantages offered by these brands. The media perceived to be least effective at conveying private label brand benefits were billboards, magazines and internet/online methods. Thus it supports Justin Beneke's studies that the media consumed within the home, the same environment in which grocery products are consumed, work best¹².

FIG. 6: ADVERTISING TECHNIQUES DEEMED MOST EFFECTIVE FOR PRIVATE LABEL BRANDS



CONCLUSIONS

Consumers seem hesitant to embrace private label brands to the full. There appears to be skepticism surrounding the quality of the entire spectrum of such brands, with significant heterogeneity between specific private label brands. Private label brand communication strategies have yet to reach large proportion of the Indian market. However, overall effectiveness in terms of influencing perceptions appears to be unsuccessful and the direct impact on volume share appears negligible. Home-based media, wherein retailers are known to advertise their wares, were found to be the most effective in relaying the message to consumers. Demographic variables were largely ineffective in determining an individual's propensity.

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