

Investigating the Role of Perceived Brand Quality and Normative Influence on Prestige Branded Apparel Purchase Intention of Youths in Malaysia

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Abstract

Luxury or prestige brands have been bought by consumers for various reasons such as to project status or to project an identity. The aim of this study is to investigate the relationship between perceived quality of prestige brands and apparel purchase intention. Additionally, the relationship between normative influence and apparel purchase intention is also investigated. The focus of the study is on the effects of the constructs stated on purchase intention among youths in Malaysia. The study specifically focuses on youths in Malaysia due to the fact that Malaysia is considered a demographically young nation with 60 percent of the population under the age of 30 and having a population where the median age is 28. Questionnaires were distributed using a convenient sampling method to students from a local university. Descriptive analysis was done on the data collected and the stated constructs were tested on reliability and validity. The relationship between the constructs was then tested using structural equation modeling. Findings of the study indicated that the perceived quality of prestige brands and normative influence have a positive relationship with apparel purchase intention behavior among youths in Malaysia. The study provides insights to apparel retailers on the role of perceived quality of prestige brands and normative roles towards apparel purchase intention.

Keywords: *Prestige Brands, Perceived Quality, Apparel Purchase Intention.*

Introduction

Consumption of luxury or prestige goods in the Asia Pacific region accounts for 27% in luxury spending worldwide, and is projected to increase to 33% in 2015 (Singapore Business Review 2012). Branded prestige brands acts as a medium for consumers to symbolize identity, wealth, power and also to gain social approval. The purchase of apparel has evolved from satisfying the basic needs to providing the opportunity for consumers to gain perceived status through ownership.

Branded apparels such as Polo, Calvin Klein, Giorgio Armani and Guess are examples of luxury or prestige brands that are recognized globally for the quality, value, and status appeal those brands represent. High prices are the norm with these prestige brands to project high quality and exclusivity. The attributes such as quality, value, and high status associated with prestige branded apparels enhance the appeal to consumers. Langer (1997) argued that visible consumption of prestige brands essentially defines success and the notion of having “made it” in society.

Individuals are influenced by others on development of attitudes, interests, norms, and purchase behavior and conform or modify their behaviors appropriately (Bearden, Netemeyer & Teel 1989). Informational social influence and normative social influences are two forms of social influence that has been recognized.

Informational social influence is where consumers regards information the views from others as evidence of reality. Informational social influence is based on the want of the consumer to make informed decisions and optimize the choice. The informational influence is greatest when the consumer regards the behavior and the value of reference group members and takes acquired information into further consideration. The normative influence is defined as the degree to which individuals conform to expectations of others to gain rewards or avoid punishments (Kropp, Lavack & Silvera, 2005; Roberts, Manolis & Tanner, 2008). Normative influence is where an individual behaves in search of conformity and position in social groups.

Social approval is of great importance in a collectivist society where individuals tend to be group oriented and the maintenance of relationship is highly emphasized. Research has shown that Malaysia is a collectivist society and consequently, the maintenance of relationship is highly regarded. Brands possess symbolic properties on a group level that can convey social meanings within groups (Workman, 1998; Jevons, Gabbot, & Chernatony, 2005; O'Cass & Frost, 2002;). Purchase of apparels would be affected by consumers' desire to seek conformity in social groups. Prestige branded apparels serves as a base for youth to portray self-image, identity, and status.

Investigating the consumer behavior of youths is specifically relevant in Malaysia since the country is a demographically young nation, where 60 per cent of the population being under the age of 30 years with the median age of the population is approximately 28 years (The World Factbook, 2015). Young-adult consumers have been recognized as a market segment that is one of the most powerful spending groups (Moschis, 1987; Grant & Waite, 2003). Additionally, young consumers are an important group since they shop more frequently than older consumers (Yusniza, Lih & Lee, 2010).

Consumers, especially youths, do not just buy apparels; they are buying an identity, and it is not just merely wearing the clothes, but having the conformity and approval of others (Tungate 2008). The research will attempt to answer questions such as: What is the perceived quality of prestige branded apparels among Malaysian youths? What is the level of normative influence among Malaysia youths on the purchase of prestige branded apparels? Do perceived quality of prestige branded apparels and normative influence affects the purchase intention towards prestige branded apparels among youths in Malaysia?

Consequently, the objectives of the research study are:

1. To examine the perceived quality of prestige branded apparels among youths in Malaysia.
2. To examine the level of normative influence among youths in Malaysia.
3. To examine the relationship between perceived quality of prestige branded apparels and purchase intention towards prestige branded apparels.
4. To examine the relationship between normative influence and purchase intention towards prestige branded apparels.

2.0 Literature Review

A higher priced product is often perceived to have a higher quality, whereas a lower priced product is often associated with a lower perceived quality (Lichtenstein, Ridgway & Netemeyer, 1993). Studies have showed that brand name is used in evaluating a product's worth, ascertaining product reliability in addition to referring to their own past experiences and novelty in making a purchase decision (Keller, 1993; Ambler, 1997; Long & Schiffman 2000). Value has been defined as the consumer's overall assessment of the utility of a product, based on perceptions of what is received and what is given (Zeithaml, 1988). Past studies indicated a positive relationship between consumer perceptions of merchandise quality and perceived value (Baker & Gentry 1996; Dodds, Monroe & Grewal, 1991; Sirohi, Mc Laughlin & Wittink 1998). Perceived value is regarded as the determinant of the consumer choice decision in retailing.

Intrinsic and extrinsic cues usually signal the quality of branded apparel. Intrinsic cues are seen through the physical composition of the product while extrinsic cues can be observed by examining product related items which are not part of the product itself, such as price, brand name, level of advertising and many more. Both intrinsic and extrinsic cues contribute to the perceived brand quality of a particular brand. Perceived Brand

Quality is the consumer's perceived judgment about an entity's overall excellence or superiority (Zeithaml, 1988 & Rowley, 1998). When a consumer decides to purchase branded luxury apparels, perceived brand quality plays a vital role in the purchase decision.

Social status and self identification is measured and determined by the visible branded apparel brands on one's body (Husic & Cicic, 2009). Wearing branded apparel can be used to meet self-expression needs, publicly or privately. It can also be used as a tool for social integration or to connect us to the past, plus acting as a symbol of personal accomplishments, provide self-esteem, and allows one to differentiate oneself from others.

Youths are highly influenced by their peers and often seek opinions that are significant to them for similar brands to wear, to establish psychological association or bonding (Bearden et al; 1989; Mourali, Laroche, & Pons, 2005; Kropp, Lavack & Silvera, 2005). To obtain a sense of security and have approval from peers are the foremost reasons when youth's make decisions on purchasing branded apparel. Conceptually, this means that in order to be accepted in a particular group, one person must use that particular brand or product. The normative component reflects an individual's need to conform to social values in order to gain acceptance in society. It enables consumers to differentiate between acceptable and unacceptable codes of conduct. Normative influence plays a vital role in their purchase decision of branded goods and services.

The normative influence is defined as the degree to which people conform to expectations of others to gain rewards or avoid punishments (Kropp et al., 2005; Roberts et al., 2008). The ability of normative values to alter behavior depends on visibility of the behavior (Bearden et al., 1989; Clark, Zboja & Goldsmith, 2007; Miniard & Cohen, 1983). The more visible the product, the greater the purchase decision and consumption will be in accordance with the social system to reflect social compliance.

Ryan and Bonfield (1975) postulated that normative beliefs reflect "social compliance" and contain information about how other people think consumers ought to behave in social settings (Clark & Goldsmith, 2006; Roberts et al., 2008) and is situation dependent (Joachimsthaler & Lastovicka, 1984). The normative component reflects an individual's need to conform to social values in order to gain acceptance in society. It enables consumers to differentiate between acceptable and unacceptable codes of conduct. Individuals who are sensitive to social comparison are affected by normative group pressures (Bearden & Rose, 1990; Clark & Goldsmith, 2006).

Research suggests that normative beliefs are value expressive and utilitarian in nature (Batra, Homer & Kahle., 2001; Bearden & Etzel, 1982; Bearden et al., 1989; Price, Feick & Higie, 1987). Apparels that are worn communicate not only personal identity, but an individual's social identity. Apparels represent values endorsed by group members and bestow social identity on individuals (Auty & Elliott, 1998; Kleine, Michaelidou & Dibb, 2006). Adopting clothing styles which have symbolic meanings valued by social groups helps in improving social image (McCracken, 1988; Piamphongsant & Mandhachitara, 2008). Individual choices are influenced by the need to improve status and self-identity. It is postulated that normative values affect Malaysian youth behavior in terms of prestige brand purchase and consumption decisions. The assumption was grounded on the belief that the Malaysian society has been largely collectivist and behavior is influenced by group norms.

According to Shao, Baker & Wagner (2004) purchase intent is a consumer's intention to purchase a product, or to patronize a service firm (Shao, Baker and Wagner 2004). Purchase intentions have been proposed by Dodds, Monroe & Grewal (1991) as the willingness to buy. Gruber (1971) suggested that intention provides a link between consumers' reaction to product and their acquisition or use of product. The consumer's intention to purchase branded apparel was used as the dependent variable in this study. The objective of the study is to determine the effects of perceived quality of prestige brands and normative influence on the purchase intention towards branded apparels.

3.0 Methodology

A five point multi-item Likert scale (1= strongly disagree, 5= strongly agree) was used to measure the perceived brand quality, normative influence and purchase intentions. A set of four questions were used to measure perceived brand quality. For normative influence, four questions were used and another five questions were used to

measure purchase intentions towards branded apparels. Socioeconomic questions were also included in the questionnaire.

A convenience sampling method using personal administered interview where possible where a self administered and drop off technique was applied on the research. Samples were taken from students of a university in the Klang Valley over a two week period. A targeted number of 250 respondents were set.

The primary data used for the current study was collected through the survey method by using the structured questionnaire which consisted of two sections: Section A consists of 14 questions or statements related to perceived brand quality, normative influence and purchase intentions. The respondents were asked to rate each statement using the balance Likert scales of 1 to 5 with midpoint (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Section B contains the demographic questions related to gender, age and race of the respondents.

4.0 Data Analysis and Results

A total of 259 questionnaires were found to be satisfactorily answered to be included in the data analysis. The majority of the respondents were from the age group below 23 years old (80%) with the majority of the respondents being males (63%).

Table 1, Table 2 and Table 3 shows the descriptive results on the items measuring perceived brand quality, normative influence and purchase intentions towards branded apparels.

Table 1
 Descriptive score of items measuring perceived brand quality

	Mean	Std. Deviation
<i>I perceived branded apparel has more quality</i>	3.68	0.87
<i>I try to be loyal to certain brands for its assured quality</i>	3.43	0.97
<i>I perceived that branded apparels are more durable than non-branded material</i>	3.10	1.05
<i>I believe it is important to buy well known apparels to ensure its quality</i>	3.00	0.97

1-strongly disagree, 2- disagree, 3- neutral, 4- agree, 5- strongly agree

Table 2
 Descriptive score of items measuring normative influence

	Mean	Std. Deviation
<i>It is important to have acceptance towards the branded apparel I am using</i>	2.46	1.02
<i>I will buy a particular branded apparel to get accepted in my social group</i>	2.22	1.04
<i>I believe by owning brands the same brand as my social group brings a lot of self-identity.</i>	2.07	0.97
<i>I will purchase similar brands in order to fit into my social group</i>	2.00	0.89

1-strongly disagree, 2- disagree, 3- neutral, 4- agree, 5- strongly agree

Table 3
 Descriptive score of items measuring purchased intention

	Mean	Std. Deviation
<i>I plan to purchase branded apparel more often in the future</i>	3.21	1.02
<i>I am always motivated to purchase branded materials</i>	2.84	1.05
<i>I intend to purchase branded apparel frequently</i>	2.74	0.91

1-strongly disagree, 2- disagree, 3- neutral, 4- agree, 5- strongly agree

The respondents seem to only slightly agree that branded items have quality. With regards to normative influence, the scores ranged from 2.00 to 2.46 indicating that they do not seem to agree that it is important to buy apparels to be accepted into their social group. As for purchase intention, the respondents' level of agreement is again very low.

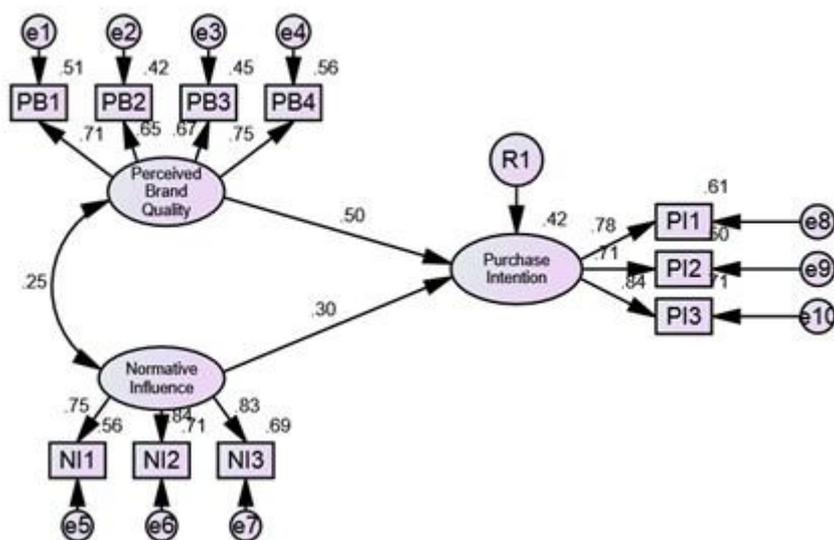
The data in perceived brand quality, normative influence and purchase intention was then analyzed in terms of internal consistency, items to total correlation and factor analysis procedures. The Cronbach Alpha for perceived brand quality, normative influence and purchase intention was 0.79, 0.89 and 0.85 respectively. The estimates exceed the criteria of 0.70 or higher recommended by Nunnally (1978), suggesting strong internal consistency. The inter item correlation of the items were examined to identify items that were not strongly correlated with each other. An item to total correlation was done on for items measuring perceived brand quality, normative influence and purchase intention. The results that the items correlated strongly with each other and the item to total correlation for all items were greater than 0.5.

Further data purification was done on the constructs perceived brand quality, normative influence and purchase intention to determine its reliability and validity. First, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy (MSA) and the Bartlett test of Sphericity were first examined to see the appropriateness of factor analysis. The MSA scores of perceived brand quality, normative influence and purchase intention were 0.76, 0.82 and 0.81 respectively. The Bartlett test of Sphericity for all three constructs were significant deeming the data appropriate for factor analysis.

Exploratory factor analysis was then applied to the items measuring the constructs perceived quality, normative influence and purchase intention. The aim of the factor analysis was twofold, first to assess if the items measuring each particular construct grouped into one distinct unitary factor. The second aim is to assess if the appropriate items loaded substantially on their hypothesized factors. All the items measured load into one single factor with a variance extracted of 59% for perceived brand quality, 75.1% for normative influence and 70.21% for purchase intention suggesting the items for each construct were measuring a single factor indicating unidimensionality.

The relationship between the constructs was then tested using structural equation modeling.

Figure 1: Relationship between perceived brand quality, normative influence and purchase intention



All the standardized factor loadings were greater than 0.5 as suggested by Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson and Tatham (2006). In addition, the values were found to be significant. The results of the model fit for the structural

equation modeling shown which reflected a good fitting model (GFI = 0.96, AGFI = 0.92, NFI = 0.94, TLI = 0.96 and RMSEA = 0.06).

There was positive significant relationship between perceived brand quality and normative influence with purchase intention. Perceived brand quality has a greater influence on purchase intention as compared to normative influence. The study implies that purchase intention for luxury apparel brands are mainly due to the perceived brand quality of people who are more exposed to promotional signage and window display and are more likely to indulge in impulse buying.

Discussion and Conclusion

The consumption of prestige luxury apparel brand as stated in the literature review has been on the uptrend. As previously stated, the study intends to examine the perceived quality of prestige branded apparels among youths in Malaysia. The descriptive results seem to indicate that in general, Malaysian youths only slightly agreed on the perceived quality of prestige luxury brands. In addition, Malaysian youths slightly disagreed that normative influence play an important role in their purchase behavior. There is positive significant relationship between perceived qualities with purchase intention. Similarly, there is also positive significant relationship between normative influences with purchase intention.

The descriptive results seem to imply that prestige luxury brands does not seem to indicate high quality and normative influence have little influence in their purchase behavior. Some of the reasons may be due to the fact that youths today have more opportunity and experience in purchasing apparels and they may conclude that there is only a slight brand quality of prestige luxury apparel brands as compared to ordinary apparel brands. The results also showed the decreasing role of normative influence. Are the roles of social influences decreasing among youths in Malaysia? Reasons for this need to be explored in future researches.

The results of the study showed however, that there is a strong positive relationship between perceived brand quality and normative influence with purchase intention. The strength of relationship is greater with perceived brand quality as compared to normative influence. Prestige luxury brand apparel producers and retailers need to emphasize the perceived quality of their brand among the youths in Malaysia. Undoubtedly, the results of the research cannot be generalized to represent Malaysian youths due to its limitations in sample size and location from where the sample was taken, however the research provides a view on the views of youths in Malaysia on prestige luxury apparel brands.

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