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A Study of Brand-Focused Buying Behaviour of Young Indian Consumers in Apparel and Footwear Segments

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Abstract:
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the prevailing brand-preferences mainly depicting young Indian consumers' focus on brands and the nature of such focus while buying in general and in specific apparel and footwear segments. The paper has three main objectives; firstly, to explore the nature of present brand-focus in apparel and footwear product segments; secondly, to compare the nature of brand-preferences between students and working professionals; thirdly, to investigate their future brand-inclinations in apparel and footwear category.
Methodology – In this study, qualitative techniques were applied using a sample size of 200, out of which 100 students and 100 young working professionals were selected. The instrument used for measurement in this study is a self-structured, three-layered questionnaire designed to collect data corresponding with the objectives. The data was analysed and results were reported by using descriptive frequencies.
Findings – The paper provides empirical insights about brand-engaged buying behaviour of young Indian consumers and their preference behaviour in branded apparel and branded footwear segments, its present nature, and future inclinations. The results suggest that in-general, consumers prefer middle-ranged brands, the brand-title symbolises 'quality' perceptions for the majority of respondents in-general as well as for apparel & footwear segment in-particular. Both students and working population prefer 'national brands' for both apparel and footwear segments, with more number of students preferring 'international brands' than working professionals presently.
Research limitations – The sample was taken from North Indian cities only considering a mix of educated, aware and growing classes which may not be the exact representation of the entire young Indian population.
Practical implications – Paper provides useful implications for the brand managers and marketers by suggesting (i) young Indian consumer's nature of brand-engaged buying behaviour, and (ii) their buying guide that determines basis of their decision-making while choosing between brands both in apparel and footwear segments. From these clues, the marketers can develop and adopt desired brand-attributes and price levels as acceptable to this segment of consumers (students and young professionals).
Originality/value – This paper explains the nature of consumer's brand-engaged behaviour and tendencies while analysing the immediate brand-attached buying inclinations. This descriptive study and evaluation of brand-preferences is separate from the studies which explore the underlying brand-related motives or factors affecting brand-preferences in relation to which there exist evidences in the marketing literature already.

Keywords: *Brand preferences, brand focus, buying behaviour, quality, brand perception, brand-levels, brand categories*

1. Introduction

Indian consumer market has undergone transformation at a faster pace since the past one decade and captivated global attention in all almost all consumer product segments. Numerous factors are responsible for this dramatic change. A report by India Brand Equity Foundation on Indian consumer market suggests that India's market is consumer driven, with spending anticipated to more than double by 2025. Global corporations view India as a vital market for the future. India has a young demographic and a middle class with rising disposable income. The key growth drivers for Indian consumer market are consistent GDP growth, increasing consumer income, high private consumption, rising urbanization, increasing discretionary income; growth of modern retail, low labour cost; favourable changes in government policies, and infrastructure development (Sanaganeria, 2012). With the growth in the economy, increased incomes of young consumer population, a growing economy, expansion in the availability of products and services and easy availability of credit, there is a rise in new consumer segments: 'kids', the 'youth' (including young working singles) and the 'urban

Indian women'. These segments have shown a tremendous increase in influencing and driving purchase decisions and hence are huge drivers of change in the Indian consumer market (Spencer Stuart, Report on Indian Consumer Market, 2008).

Presently, Indian consumers are highly exposed to the influence of global brands and global marketing strategies. The face of brand awareness in India is changing and there is a brand-aware of the brand culture prevalent in the country (Rajput & Khanna, 2014). Brands play an integral part in marketing strategy these days for capturing consumer attention because they are now important marketing component for the manufacturer and information source for the consumer (Tatt, 2010). BBDO Worldwide (1988) conducted a study revealing consumers belief that there were greater differences between brands in product categories that emphasized image in comparison to product categories where physical attributes were emphasized.

It implies that consumers today are not only engaged in product-specific decisions but in brand-comparison and brand-choice decisions as well. In case of Indian consumer, brand focus is high for the traditional and well known product segments such as apparel, footwear, cosmetics and personal care, automobiles, mobile phones, and many electronic appliances. Categories such as luxurious product domains, may be automobiles, hospitality services, education services, fashion accessories, health foods, health drinks are relatively new for Indian market. As a matter of fact, these categories too have received gigantic response from Indian consumer which is why many global brands are ready to tap in this high potential market. The Indian consumer market, which is primarily dominated by the young generation, is becoming increasingly sophisticated and brand-conscious, and is beginning to look beyond the utility aspect of a product to seek intangibles such as brand and lifestyle statements associated with the product (Sanaganeria, 2012). Neilson Company (2007) conducted a study on luxury market and found that India has been ranked third after Greece and Hong-Kong in the list of most-brand conscious countries in the world. More than 35% of Indian respondents said they spent money on luxury brands. There is a growing domination of global brands, from foreign retailers and also local brands among the Indian retailers (Gopal and Srinivasan, 2006). Not just international brands, this shift has given a boost to many national brands to enter newly created or potential market segments offering them innovative deals.

Several studies in relation to brand consciousness, brand-perception/brand affect, brand equity, and their underlying motives are conducted with primary objective of consumers' brand-buying motives, brand-impact in the market or to reveal several market-induced variables that affect consumer's desire towards alternative brands. The brand-engaged behaviour and interests of an Indian consumer although not new but are evolving in many product segments owing to increased awareness and increased purchasing power of Indians specially the youth and the rising middle-class who are presently the favourite market for many global and local brands. This segment is growing in-terms of its brand-conscious purchase behaviour since the past one decade. Considering the present dynamic nature of young Indian consumer market evolving in terms of its brand-engagement, there is a need for empirical insights into the fundamental and general brand-choice behaviour comparative preferences for brand-categories and the basis of these preferences. The present study explores Indian consumer's general view of brands, and buying trends and purchase intentions towards brand-categories in apparel ad footwear product categories.

2. Review of Literature

2.1. Brand-Focused Buying and Purchase Behaviour in Apparel & Footwear Segments

Bearden and Etzel (1982) in their study on consumer perceptions of reference group influence on product and brand decisions separately for publically and privately consumed goods suggested that when respondents were faced with a single decision type like product v/s brand, the decision factor was only significant for informational group influence. This suggested a greater role for appeals based on reference groups in simulating selective demand i.e. selection of brands.

Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) tested a construct called 'brand love' to assess differences in satisfied consumers' passionate emotional attachment to particular brands. Results of their study indicated that the construct of 'brand love' proved useful for considering differences in satisfied consumers' emotional responses to brands and more hedonic products and/or self-expressive brands tend to be more loved (as compared with utilitarian) and for brands that offer more in terms of symbolic benefits. 'Brand love' was also linked to higher levels of brand loyalty and positive word-of-mouth.

Strizhakova et al (2008) examined the effects of 'belief in brands' as a passport to global citizenship'on the importance consumers assign to branded products. The authors focused on the global youth market and explained that a majority (85.8%) of young college-educated sample in developed and developing countries expressed strong preferences for global brands; and only 6% of participants expressed strong preferences for local brands. The results also indicated that young U.S. (compared with developing country) consumers had a stronger belief in global citizenship because they were likely to have greater exposure to global media, internet, and trade. The consumers who had stronger belief in global citizenship, '*branded*' products provided them vital consumption cues, and the branding discourse was an important part of their consumption scripts.

Ostrovskaya and Sanchez (2013) in their study defined a concept 'tendency to use the brand name' as consumer's propensity to evaluate, choose and purchase (or not) a product mainly according to his or her overall perception of the brand name and the attributes that this evokes. They found that materialism was one of the determinants of 'tendency to use brand name' and people high in using brand names were found to be high in materialism both in general and when distinguished by countries.

Holman (1981) discussed several attributes of how apparel serves as communicational signs. He explained that clothing and apparel serves five primary functions: parasomatic, utilitarian, aesthetic, 'mnemonic' and 'illustrators' functions. Parasomatic refers to anything that modifies or is auxiliary to the body and body's appearance is temporarily changed through the use of apparel. Utilitarian function includes, for example, coats, gloves, scarves, and hats protecting the skin from cold, wet air. Further, decisions about such things as colour, fabric style, and ensemble configuration are made on the basis of 'personal taste', the aesthetic dimension.

Mnemonic function is the one when apparel can serve as a reminder of some activity previously experienced by the user. Finally, ‘illustrators’ function is the one when apparel is conceptualized as primarily nonverbal by acting as emblems or verbal conveying messages through brand names printed on clothing, words on T-shirts, etc.

According to Belk (2003), shoes are seen by most of his respondents as revealing age, sex, and personality and as creating moods and capturing memories. Shoes appear as a key vehicle through which adolescents and young adults work out issues of identity, individualism, conformity, lifestyle, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and personality. Shoe styles, colour, condition, and match with clothing are seen as telling cues for making inferences about others.

Matzler et al (2011) examined the relationship between individual customer and brand and the relationship between the customers to the brand community. The results of this study revealed that individual differences in personality traits (extraversion) influenced the brand community member’s identification with the community, which itself is considered an important variable that influences loyalty intentions towards the brand.

2.2. Brand Focused Buying of Indian Consumers

Maheswaran, Mackie and Chaiken (1992) conducted a study on ‘brand-name’ utilization in consumer’s decision or judgement tried to examine whether ‘brand-name valence’ was congruent or incongruent with attribute importance. Their results suggested that ‘brand-name’ utilization in judgement was moderated by ‘consumers’ level of motivation’ and the extent to which brand-name based expectations were confirmed by subsequent processing of ‘attribute information’.

Rajagopal (2008) in his conceptual study discussed the issues concerning brand strength, brand identity and cognitive relationship between consumer personality attributes and brand-perceptions. He pointed that personality traits of consumers on owning a brand, influence their opinion of the desirability of the brand as a relationship partner. The author concluded by mentioning brand-consumer associations as having more personal nature, where they acted as extensions of personality.

Khare et al (2009) conducted a primary study to examine and comprehend the brand meanings from the perspective of the Indian youth, aged between 18 to 30 years. They found that Indian youth preferred brands which symbolize status; this is because Indian markets are still dominated by unbranded products from unorganized market and wearing branded products was considered to be luxury in India as exposure to using branded products was very low in the country. She indicated that before the 1990s, the use of branded goods was restricted to the upper classes and therefore they were viewed as status symbol. Brands in India now symbolize a lifestyle and youth’s purchase is largely driven by the psychographic element that it expresses. Brands that are high priced within a product class hinted better quality and value. These are perceived by consumers as having greater status symbol and are able to position themselves as proud possessions contributing to a positive brand connotation (brand significance).

Khare and Handa (2009) studied the extent to which congruence between self-concept and brand personality influences brand evaluation and purchase inclination. The results indicated that there is a relationship between self-concept and brand personality with regard to the attention-seeking brand version amongst the youth. Their finding indicated marketers that brands aimed at the youth must identify and relate to the traits and personality dimensions relevant to the segment and brand communications must be designed accordingly.

Vikkraman and Sumathi (2012) in their study conducted on Indian apparel market revealed that Indian consumers’ perceived emotional value and clothing interest are the significant positive antecedents of purchase intentions toward global and local brands. The significant influence of self-concept on need for uniqueness indicates that the Indian consumers with high self-concept neither wish to be different from others nor wish to fit in with others and also that Indian consumers may consider their self-concept and need to be unique to express their ‘individuality’. Significant impact of clothing interest on perceived quality and emotional value of global brands revealed Indian consumers’ preference for global brands because of the status symbols and strong perception of foreign brands which was not found in local brands.

Rajput et al (2012) examined the relationship between consumers’ decision-making styles and the choice between domestic and imported clothing brands of Indian consumers. They found that there had been a shift from unbranded to the branded segment which was the result of changing patterns of consumer buying as they become increasingly demanding, more aware and more affluent. The results of their study revealed that Indian people have become highly brand conscious presently. ‘Brand image’ is a not a significant factor in choosing the product or brand to buy. There are other aspects like, quality, comfort, expectations and demographic characteristics which also influence the purchasing decision of males and females. Also, ‘age’ and ‘income’ was not found significant as consumers preferred brands or outfits irrespective of that. Two factors were found during measuring attitude of consumers towards branded apparels, ‘intrinsic pleasure’and ‘prestige & status’.

According to Chitra (2014), the consumer’s decision to buy a particular brand is affected by different factors. Aside from functional benefits, he/she may choose a particular brand to express his/her personality, social status, affiliation or to fulfil his/her desire for newness (Kim et al., 2008). The results of her empirical study indicate that normative influence, consumer confidence, brand consciousness, perceived quality and emotional value are antecedents of customers purchase intention towards branded apparels.

3. Measurement Construct

3.1. Brand Focused Buying

There are generally two aspects of any purchase, firstly, decision-making and buying the ‘core value’ of the product, while considering both the functionality aspect, and hedonic values; secondly, decision-making and choosing one ‘brand-name’ for the core product-category. ‘*Brand focused buying*’ is considered as ‘the brand-engaged buying behaviour’ which relates primarily to the

above-mentioned 'second-aspect' of buying. Brand-focused buying means developing affinity and setting norms for the individual brand-choice. It is evident that a wide variety of brands are available in the market and consumers possess varying degree of inclinations towards them. Brand-preferences can be studied from numerous dimensions but to realize the 'brand-inclined behaviour' it is suggestive to examine preferred brand-category/categories, consumer's guiding tool for such category preferences, degree of inclination towards these brand-categories in-general and specifically within two selected product segments i.e. apparel and footwear. These product categories are selected keeping in view young consumers' lifestyles, interests and activities.
'Brand focused buying' construct can be examined by keeping in view three major sub-constructs; firstly, 'general brand-choice behaviour' i.e. affinity, meaning, sources and basis of selecting brands in general; secondly, 'brand-preferences' revealed by consumers specifically in apparel and footwear segments in terms of different brand-categories presently and their such future inclinations; and thirdly, brand-title perceptions within these product segments. These sub-constructs can be explained as:

3.1.1. General Brand-Choice Behaviour

This construct describes what values young consumers seek from brands-names (or brand titles) in general, nature of their brand-perception, sources of influence in brand-preferences. It is measured using few multiple-choice questions and two statements with a 10-point scale to seek their responses in varying degrees of opinion on brand-name preference and perceived degree of self-brand image congruence in chosen brands.

3.1.2. Brand-Category Present and Future Preferences in Apparel and Footwear

The currentbrand-preferences of consumers in 'apparel' and 'footwear' segments are reflected in terms of categories i.e. international, national, local/retailer brands; and brand-ranges, i.e. premium-brands, middle-range brands, and low-priced brands. International brands is that category of brands which are of non-Indian origin, manufactured and marketed by foreign companies.

Some examples of the *International brand-category* are Levi's, Calvein Klein, DKNY, Puma, Nike, Tommy Hilfiger, UCB, Arrow, Lee Cooper, Woodland, Sketchers, Converse and so on. *National brands* refer here to the one manufactured and marketed by Indian companies solely, or in collaboration with a foreign player, e.g. Mote Carlo, Octave, Raymond-Park Avenue, Mufti, FabIndia, Madame, Louis Philippe, Liberty, Metro shoes, Paragon footwear, Bata India, Reliance Footprints, Action shoes and so on. *Local/retailer brands* refer here to brands available in selected markets, may be in selected stores, can and cannot be their own brands, but not nationwide, e.g. Stop, Westside, Vishal, Sheenaz, Srishti and so on. Now, besides these brand categories, companies also introducesub-brandsbased on 'brand-ranges', e.g. Madura fashion & lifestyle division of Aditya Birla Nuvo Ltd are offering brand 'Peter England' launched in the mid-price shirt segment in 1997, and now it is also offering a complete range of *sub-premium* formals through its sub-brand 'Peter England Elite', 'Van Heusen' which they projected as a premium lifestyle brand for men, women and youth., and Louis Philippe with focus on luxury, exquisite craftsmanship and attention to detail, meant for 'The Upper Crest'.

Although no structured list of brands is actually made available to the sample respondents, they were given sufficient clues and names of brands they can easily identify, to recall and distinguish their preferences as per the designated categories. The future inclinations of consumers are also sought towards brand-categories and brand-ranges.

3.1.3. Brand-Title Perceptions

Consumers perceive the symbolic-meaning conveyed by a brand-name differently and derive different symbolic values from them. Thus, for investigating the brand-focused buying behaviour, it becomes imperative to study the nature and reasons of brand-name perceptions in general and brand-perception for brands relevant to 'apparel' and 'footwear' categories.

4. Objectives of the Study

The current study is descriptive in nature aiming to provide a new direction of thought to generate several marketing implications. The brand-focused buying behaviour has to be reported within the above mentioned three sub-constructs.
The main objective of the study is to examine the Indian consumer's brand-focused buying behaviour. Specifically, the study is carried out with following three objectives:

i. To examine the nature and trends of young Indian consumers' present brand-preferences in apparel and footwear product segments,
ii. To investigate consumer's future brand-inclinations in apparel and footwear category, and
iii. To compare the brand-focused buying behaviour of 'students' and 'working professionals' sample.

5. Methodology

5.1. Sample

Incidental sampling technique was used to select a sample representing young Indian consumer segment from selected cities of North India, i.e., Delhi-NCR, Chandigarh, Amritsar, Jalandhar and Patiala. The incidental sampling technique was adopted with a view to select respondents who could thoroughly understand statements, have exposure to social discussion and independent shopping experiences, and who have some past experience with brand-related decision-making in the market. Sample size selected was 200 out of which 100 was student sample and 100 young working professionals/ entrepreneur sample. The respondents fall in the age group of 19-25 years for student sample and 22-35 years for young working professionals and entrepreneurs.

5.2. Procedure

The data required for the study was collected from respondents using three structured questionnaires system filled manually by the respondents. There was no specific pre-existing scale to measure brand-focused buying behaviour of consumers, so a 33-item inventory was constructed to measure the same. It is divided into three parts; part 1 has 6 statements which deal with overall mindset and attitude toward buying with brand-name focus, part 2 has 12 items in which respondents are required to answer each item giving actual buying of various product categories on a 10-point scale, and part 3 consists of 15 items conveying brand choices amongst local, national and international brands for all the four product categories (one sub-category of first product segment i.e. footwear) with one preferred price range and value (meaning) respondent seeks from brand-title within each category. The administration of this scale is qualitative in nature with section-I and section-II of the instrument measures the first construct, and section-III measures both the second and the third constructs defined in the above section.

5.3. Data Administration

The raw data was processed in terms of qualitatively using the following:

- Descriptive statistics: Frequency distribution, means, and percentage methods have been used to analyse and generate the desired answers from the data.

6. Results

6.1. General Brand-Choice Behaviour

6.1.1. Overall Brand Preferences

To indicate the general inclination of Indian consumers towards brands, with no specific product category, it was required to firstly present a general categorization of brands that respondents could easily relate to their own routinely pronounced and perceived categories of brands i.e. high-end, middle-range and common/retailer brands.

The results of the current study suggests that in general, 59.5 % of young consumers in the sample prefer middle-range brands, followed by non-branded/unpopular brands and only 10% prefer high-end brands wherein working professionals are more inclined towards buying middle range brands (65%) than students (53%) who also prefer non-branded/unpopular brands more than professionals.

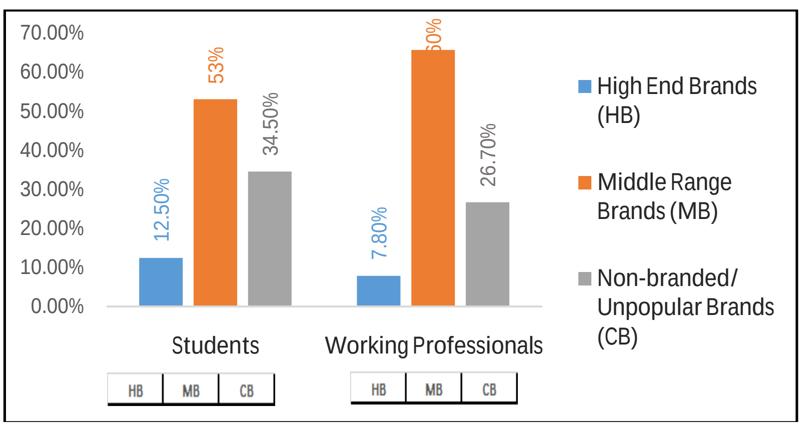

Figure 1: Overall Brand Preferences of students and working professionals

6.1.2. Brand Preferences for Utility Items

Products generate combination of 'values' for consumers who seek them i.e. values of *utility (functionality),physical appearance, emotional association, uniqueness, reflection of status etc.* By 'utility items', we refer here to the articles which are perceived and purchased with the prime motive of 'utility/functionality' and lesser focus on other 'values'. While discussing 'general brand-choices' of consumers, it is important to extract their opinion on their frequency in buying brands for utility articles and whether it is different from that of general.

In case of utility-products, very few respondents reported buying branded-goods 'very less often to never' i.e. 10.8 % and good number of respondents prefer branded-utility items 'always' or 'often' i.e. 89.2%. More proportion of professionals (44%) preferred them 'always' than students (40%).

6.1.3. Brand Title Perception

Consumers perceive meanings and symbolic values communicated by brands differently at their end. Thus, to explore their possible perceptions about brands they buy, they were offered three 'perception attribute brackets', *quality, trend,* and *status.*

In general, maximum respondents (73%) consider symbolic meaning of brand-names as 'quality', followed by status (14%) and trend (13%) and more number of professionals (79%) prefer 'quality' perception of brand-names than students (67%).

6.1.4. Inclination on Spending more for Brands

Consumers might have varying opinions on whether they are willing to spend extra amount of money for buying famous brands or brands of their choice rather than buying others which they like less comparatively.

Maximum number of respondents reported they were 'willing' (37.5%) and a similar percentage was 'undecided/neutral' (32.5%) and 'unwilling' to spend (30%). Willingness to spend ore' is slightly higher in working professionals (39%) than students (36%).

6.1.5. Basis of Brand-Preferences

Consumers choose among various brands available in the market on the 'basis' of some personal criteria individual to them or their families. To explore which is their most acceptable basis for making a decision while choosing between brands, they were given three-bracket options of *utility/quality, trend, and distinction* to select their top-most option.

Maximum number of respondents in the sample (67%) consider '*utility/quality*' values promised by a brand as top-most criteria while making decision, followed by the 24% who consider '*trend*' value and only 9% consider '*distinction*' value they seek from brands as their top-most criteria to take decision. Working professionals (72%) considers 'utility/quality' as their favourite attribute as compared to other attributes in higher numbers in comparison to student population (62%) for whom the other two basis i.e. '*trend*' and '*distinction*' value criterion form the opinion of 38% students.

6.1.6. Income's Influence on Brand Consciousness

Income influences one's capacity to purchase products and so is the inclination to explore brands available in different categories and ranges. To confirm whether 'increase in income' influences consumer's brand consciousness, respondents have been asked to answer this from their own experience.

Majority of respondents 'agreed' (73.5%) that increase in their income has led to more brand-consciousness in them, with students and professionals 'agreed' to a greater extent almost in the same proportion (75% & 72% respectively).

6.1.7. Sources Influencing Brand Selection

Brand-selection decision of an individual can be influenced by several sources varying from one consumer to another depending upon their lifestyles, cultures, personalities, and the society they live-in and so on. The respondents were asked to report the most influential source that prompts them to be inclined towards selected brands over others. They were asked to choose one out of the three sources of *family/friends*, *media*, or *experience*.

They reported 'personal/past experience' as most influencing factor (opinion of 56.5% respondents), followed by 'family/friends' (28%) and 'media' (15.5%) at last. Also, more professionals (59%) than students (54%) favoured 'experience' as influencing source and more students than professionals favoured 'family/friends' as one of their influencing source.

6.1.8. Self-Personality-Brand Congruence

Consumers have their own individual reasons why they prefer one brand over another like quality, trend or distinction, etc. Apart from this, there may be a conscious or sub-conscious preference of brands that best suits/reflects their own personality. The justification comes from the very essence of brands which are symbols of quality, or trend, or uniqueness etc. The aim was to explore how frequently consumers prefer and buy brands that best suit/reflect their personality.

Majority of respondents reported they purchased such brands on 'less-often to never' (45%) frequency whereas less number (18%) preferred such brands 'always'.

There is a variation between majority preference between professionals and students as majority of working professionals (47%) preferred such brands only which 'reflected their own personality' as 'sometimes' as compared to student numbers (27%) who reported preference as 'sometimes'. Also, there is a segment in student sample who prefer to buy brands that reflect their personality 'always' and that comprises 23% of total student sample whereas only 13% of total professionals 'always' like to buy such brands

6.2. Brand-Category Present Preferences and Future Intentions

6.2.1. Present Brand-Preferences in Apparel & Footwear Category

The objectives of the study desired to reveal respondents' brand preferences, only one from the three categories of brands i.e. international, national, or local/retailer brands for apparel and footwear product segment.

Both in case of apparel and footwear, maximum respondents preferred 'national brands' (64% & 62% respectively) and least respondents preferred 'international brands'.

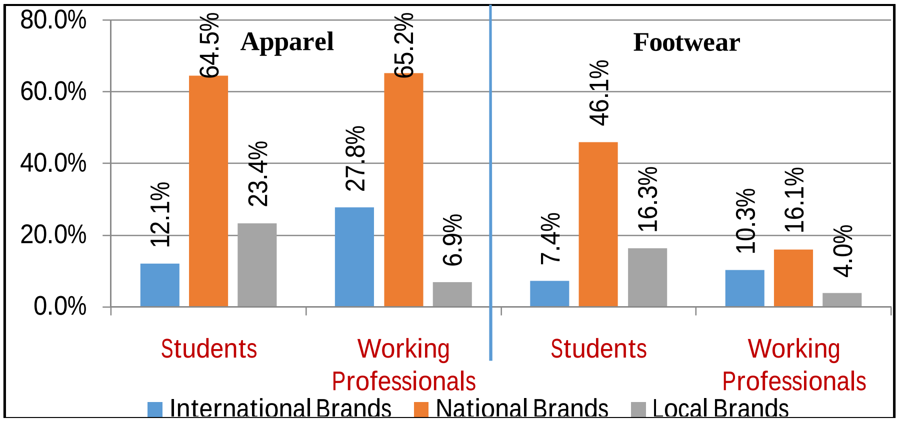

Figure 2: Present Brand-Preferences of students and professionals' sample in apparel and footwear

<u>6.2.2. Future Brand-Buying Intentions in Apparel and Footwear Category</u>

Consumers' future brand-inclinations may vary from their present brand-purchase due to their expected increase in income or awareness. For this purpose, they have been asked to reveal their future expected brand-preferences in case of their increased income in near future.

It is gathered from the study that in case of both 'apparel and footwear', maximum respondents from the total sample would like to buy '*international brands*' in future (55% and 57% respectively), while still many would prefer to buy '*national brands*' (40.5% and 38.5%) and only a few report that they will still buy '*local/retailer brands*' (4.5% in both product segments) in case of their increased buying capacities.

Further, there is not much difference in future brand-category preference towards '*international and national brands*' by both students and professionals, while in case of '*local/retailer brands*' students (7%) have slightly more preference than working professionals (2%). In case of 'footwear' however, working professionals have higher preference towards '*international brands*' whereas more students than professionals prefer '*national and local/retailer brands*'.

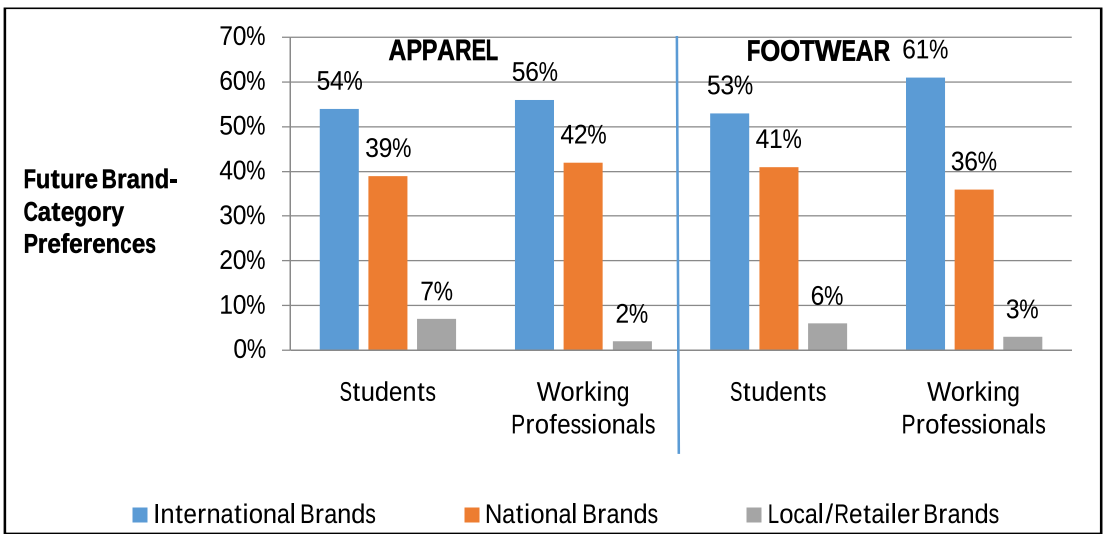

Figure 3: Future Brand-buying intentions of students and professionals' sample in apparel and footwear

6.3. Brand-Title Perceptions within Categories

Consumers perceive symbolic meanings from the brand names within same product category differently. These symbolic meanings may be the result of their experience from product utility, its attributes, etc. but they tend to associate these experiential benefits with the brand-names and hence try to distinguish and rank several brands in a given product-category based on this. These perceived meanings could be; associating 'high quality' with brand-names, brands considered as 'reflection of status', brands symbolizing 'standard product' i.e. having comparable quality and attributes in all markets, brands as 'trend' symbols or brands given priority due to their 'trust' factor.

Quite often, consumers consider one or more of the perceived meanings for a single purchase situation to make their final brand-choice decision, but with fierce and cut-throat competition in markets and with the markets flooded with numerous brands, there is a possibility that they have to prioritize one of the mentioned attributes to select their favourite brands. Thus, the respondents have been asked to select only 'one' of the brand-associated meanings they follow mostly to suggest them their choice of brand within a specific product-category i.e. 'apparel' and 'footwear'.

As per the responses, it was found that the most favoured meaning of a brand title both in case of apparel and footwear is 'high quality' (33.5% & 40%), followed by 'standard product' (23.5% both segments), followed by trust' (15.5% & 16%) and least preferred is 'trend' (13.5%) in case of apparel and 'reflection of status ' (8%) in case of footwear.

For apparel, although for both student and professionals perception of 'high quality' representation of brands of their choice is highest (35% & 32%), most contrasting dimension is 'reflection of status' which is favourite for a higher segment of students (18%) than working professionals (10%), whereas higher percentage of professionals consider/ perceive brand-names as 'standard product' and 'trust' symbols more than students.

In case of footwear, there is a heavy contrast of perception between students and working professionals for 'high quality' attribute wherein more number of professionals (48%) than students (32%) have belief and in case of 'reflection of status' attribute wherein 11% students have affinity and only 5% working professionals perceive brands signalling 'status'.

On the whole 'high quality' as a symbolic meaning derived from a brand-name is perceived by both samples relatively more than other attributes in both apparel and footwear segments, followed by 'standard product', 'trend', 'trust' and preferred by least number of respondents in both segment is 'reflection of status' symbol.

Considering the specific segments who always perceive 'high quality' meaning of a brand name in both student and professionals sample, percentage of working professionals is higher and percentage of students is higher in case of segments preferring 'reflection of status' attribute for apparel and footwear both.

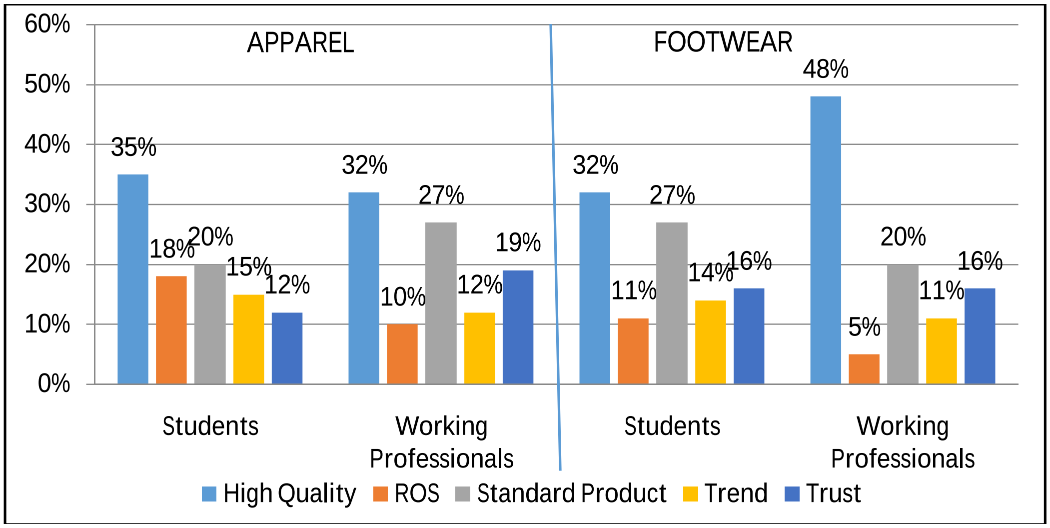

Figure 4: Brand-title perceptions in apparel and footwear segments

7. Discussion

It can be concluded from the results of brand-preferences in three constructs above, that in general (with no specific product category), the young Indian consumers in the context in the studied sample have more inclination towards middle-range brands (than high-end or non-branded/unpopular brands), and frequency of buying branded-utility products is 'often', followed by proportion of respondents buying 'always'. They perceive the symbolic meaning of brands more as 'quality' than 'status' or 'trend'. However, in the study of Carroll and Ahuvia (2006), the satisfied consumers in their study tend to love brands which were more 'self-expressive' and offering more 'symbolic benefits' unlike in our study.

The results of this study implanted some addition to Khare et al (2009) study which revealed that Indian youth preferred brands which symbolize status because Indian markets were dominated by unbranded products from unorganized market. This study comprehends the previous discussion by ranking the most-perceived dimension as 'quality', 'status' and 'trend' indication of brands in-general for Indian youth.

While many consumers responded in the study that they don't mind paying extra premium to buy a branded good (or brand of their choice) than buying an unknown (or unbranded) product, but an equal number of respondents were 'undecided' about what they would do in such a situation. Thus, it was a mixed opinion.

The respondents in this study considered 'quality/utility' aspect as their favourite 'basis' to take decision for a brand-selection, followed by 'trend' and then 'distinction' basis. This result is in line with Rajput et al (2012) who found in their study that aspects of quality, comfort, expectations and demographic characteristics influence the purchasing decision.

There is a clear indication that majority of respondents consider brand-consciousness as one of the outcomes of 'increase in their income' which is an addition to Rajput et al (2012) who found 'age' and 'income' as non-significant and they said that consumers preferred brands or outfits irrespective of that.

The most favoured sources influencing brand-selection decision of sample consumer population is 'past experience' source than 'reference groups' or 'media'. The results support Maheswaran, Mackie and Chaiken (1992) study, one part of which revealed that the extent to which brand-name based expectations were confirmed by subsequent processing of 'attribute information' moderates the 'brand-name utilization' for consumer judgement. The Bearden and Etzel (1982) 'reference group appeal' on brand-selection is also reflected in this study because the second highest number of respondents favour 'reference group i.e. friends and family' as their most influencing source in brand-selection.

While Khare and Handa (2009) through their study indicated a relationship between self-concept and brand personality with regard to the attention-seeking brand version amongst the youth. In the present study, however, talking in terms of proportion of such young consumers who consider buying brands reflecting their personality, majority of respondents reported they buy such brands 'very-less often' or 'never' and only a few consciously buy brands that match their personality.

Results also indicate that presently in Indian market for both apparel as well as footwear segments, maximum respondents preferred 'national brands', followed by 'local brands' and least of all 'international brands'.Also, the respondents indicated that in case of their increased buying capacities in future, maximum number will prefer to buy 'international brands', followed by a good number of respondents who would still prefer 'national brands' and very few would prefer 'local brands' both in case of apparel and footwear categories.

The future preferences for 'international brands', a deviation from 'national brands' preference is in line with the results of the study of Strizhakova et al (2008) which indicated that a majority (85.8%) of young college-educated sample in developed and developing countries expressed strong preferences for global brands, and out of them those who had stronger belief in global citizenship, '*branded*' products provided them vital consumption cues, and the branding discourse was an important part of their consumption scripts.

The results pertaining to brand-title perceptions of respondents in specific product categories of 'apparel and footwear' indicate that majority preferred 'high quality' and 'standard product' as most preferred meanings /indications out of the five 'perception attributes' they could relate to with the brands they buy within apparel and footwear category. This seemingly becomes an extension and addition to the results of Chitra (2014) in which it was revealed that normative influence, consumer confidence, brand consciousness, perceived quality and emotional value are antecedents of customers purchase intention towards branded apparels since the current study suggests the preferred order by young Indian consumers in terms of their numbers supporting a given perception attribute. Further, the results combine and validate the results suggested by Vikkraman and Sumathi (2012) which revealed Indian consumers' preference for global brands because of the status symbols and strong perception of foreign brands which was not found in local brands.

When compared between students & working population, it was found that majority of both prefer middle-range brands but working professionals prefer them more, and more number of professionals in our sample preferred branded utility-items 'always' than students. Also, more number of professionals perceive brand-names as 'quality' attributes than students who also perceive other meanings from brands-in general. A little more proportion of young professionals are 'willing in spending extra premium for 'brands of choice' than students who are 'undecided' or carry a mixed opinion in more numbers than professionals. Similarly, more professionals consider 'utility/quality' as their favourite basis for making brand-choice decision than students who also consider utility/quality' as favourite attribute but many of them consider 'trend' and distinction' attributes as the favoured basis more than working professionals Also, majority of both the sub-groups of the sample 'agreed' in almost equal numbers that increase in income increases their brand-consciousness. As regards the sources of influence in taking brand-choice decisions, both the sub-groups preferred 'past/ personal experience' in majority but more working professionals than students favour this source and as regards the second most favoured source/ i.e. 'family/friends (reference groups)', more students than professionals considered to be their most influencing source.

Although majority of both students' and working professionals' group reported they 'very less often to never' consciously purchased 'brands that reflect their personalities' but when compared some of those who 'agreed' they bought such brands 'consciously', there were more students than working professionals in the total sample whereas more professionals than students bought such brands 'sometimes'.

In case of apparel as well as footwear specifically, majority of both sub-groups preferred national brands but out of those who preferred 'international brands', more number was of students than professionals. However, reporting their future inclinations both the young consumer segment revealed more preference for international brands wherein more number of working professionals gave their preference than students.

8. Suggestions and Recommendations

The current study highlights and emphasizes the fact that Indian consumer has become brand-conscious and the brand-preferences of young consumers are changing rapidly. It thus becomes imperative that their present as well as future brand-related inclinations need to be studied in-depth. The results of the current study provides some valuable suggestions, firstly, there is a huge potential for national brands for both apparel as well as footwear segments in Indian market. Some consumers segments in future and majority of them have present preference towards national (Indian) brands over the international brands and local brands. The reason for majority of them is the 'quality' and 'utility' aspect and the consideration of a 'standard product' they can rely. They still believe that the Indian brands provide them greater quality, comfort, availability as per their requirement than international/foreign brands. Marketers and brand managers must strike a balance between present reasons of popularity of these national brands and try to retain them and provide improved image of their brands matching global standards of 'popularity and 'uniqueness' as well as 'status' dimensions.

Secondly, although there has been a huge push towards brand-consciousness of Indian consumer, majority of the young consumers, both students and working professionals prefer middle-ranged brands. At the same time, it is also noteworthy that many of them are willing to pay an extra premium for 'brands of their choice' than an unbranded/ unpopular brand. This suggests that brand managers must position their brands in the right price segment, with a clear and good indication of 'quality/utility' aspect to be the 'brand of

choice' for young Indian consumers. Moreover, they can also design strategies to include the segment of this young population which are presently 'undecided' or carries mixed opinion on 'whether to spend extra for a brand of their preference.
Thirdly, maximum young consumers give weight age to 'past experience' from brands, due to their use in public or private as most important source influencing the current decision, the marketers and brand managers need to focus and create 'experience' element justified with the present image of their brands and improve it to beat 'brand-experience' competition in the global market.

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