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# Effect of Private, Designer, and National Brand Names on Shoppers' Perception of Apparel Quality and Price

Sandra M. Forsythe

## Abstract

*The present study examined (a) the effect of product characteristics and brand name on shoppers' evaluations of apparel quality and price and (b) the effect of consumer decision-making style on evaluations. One hundred sixty-four mall shoppers evaluated the quality and price of one of three experimental shirts which were identical except for brand labels. Brand labels had been manipulated so that each shirt contained a private, national, or designer label. Brand name did influence shoppers' perceptions of price but not of quality. Consumers' decision-making style was found to influence perception of price.*

Unfavorable economic conditions coupled with intensifying competition and increasingly sophisticated and value-conscious consumers have forced many apparel retailers to reevaluate their merchandising strategies. One strategic factor receiving considerable attention is that of private brands — goods that are produced exclusively for one retailer and carry “only the name of the store that sells it or a brand name that is owned by the store” (Jarnow, Guerreiro, & Judelle, 1987, p. 401). The tremendous growth of private brands in recent years is illustrated by the following:

Macy's has boosted its private-label sales from 6% of volume in 1980 to more than 20% in 1986....In some categories, private-label merchandise represents as much as 50% of sales. The Limited, one of the fastest growing fashion specialty chains, has made private-label merchandise a cornerstone of its strategy....[Private-labels] represent 70% of its sales. (Salmon & Cmar, 1987, p. 99)

Private brands have enabled retailers to gain greater control over the pricing, the name, and the distribution of goods. They have been an avenue for reducing price competition, increasing return on investment, and achieving greater differentiation from competitor's assortments

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(Salmon & Cmar, 1987). Given the present trend of growing private brand programs and the retailer's goal of increasing market share in their markets, it is essential that apparel retailers have a clear understanding of how consumers perceive their private brand relative to designer and national brands. The purpose of this study is to examine consumers' evaluations of private, designer, and national brand apparel products with respect to quality and price.

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## Review of Literature

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Merchandise evaluative cues can be (a) intrinsic — that is, the cues cannot be changed without also changing the physical characteristics of the product itself or (b) extrinsic — product related but not a part of the physical product (e.g., Olson & Jacoby, 1972). Consumers appear to use both intrinsic and extrinsic cues to differentiate among products and to form impressions of such variables as quality and value. For example, consumers may evaluate products through the use of extrinsic cues (brand name, price, and store image) as well as through intrinsic cues (design, style, and other product characteristics) (Hatch & Roberts, 1985; Wheatley & Chiu, 1977; Wheatley, Chiu, & Goldman, 1981).

For most consumers, brand name stands for some indication of product features and is useful in positioning the brand in a product attribute space. Consumers' perceptions of product quality may be affected by the brand name associated with the product (Mazursky & Jacoby, 1983; Nevid, 1981; Wheatley, Walton, & Chiu, 1977). Information on brand names also may be a substitute for a much larger set of indicators of merchandise quality (Jacoby,

Chestnut, Hoyer, & Donahue, 1978; Jacoby, Olson, & Haddock, 1971). However, the influence of brand name on consumers' perception of *garment* quality is not clear. Davis (1985) found only partial support for the hypothesis that perceptions of garment quality would vary as a function of brand name. Holstius and Paltschik (1983) found that perception of garment quality was influenced by brand name among fashion minded consumers, but not among consumers in general. On the other hand, Baugh and Davis (1989) found a difference in ratings of status characteristics but no difference in quality ratings of designer and private brand shirts. Therefore, it is not clear that consumers make distinctions between private, designer, and national brands in evaluating apparel products.

It has been proposed that decisions made by the consumer are influenced by the consumer's decision-making style (Sproles & Kendall, 1986); however, the mediating effect of consumer decision-making style on product evaluation has not been investigated. Two of the decision-making styles identified by Sproles and Kendall (1986) are the "quality conscious" consumer and the "brand conscious" consumer (p. 271). The quality conscious consumer searches for the very best quality in products and shops carefully, systematically, or by comparison. The brand conscious consumer is oriented toward buying expensive, well-known national brands in the belief that higher price means better quality (Sproles & Kendall, 1986). The salience of intrinsic and/or extrinsic cues on product evaluation would appear to be related to the consumer's decision-making style with the expectation that brand conscious consumers would make extensive use of the brand name in evaluating product quality and price, whereas quality conscious consumers would use garment characteristics for evaluative purposes.

The question of how brand name influences product perceptions and purchase decisions should and has been extensively examined in terms of both a quality and a price dimension. Woodside (1974) provided support for earlier hypotheses that perception of quality is related to the price when consumers lack information about the product. However, many of the studies in the price/quality cue literature are plagued by methodological and conceptual problems that often make interpretation ambiguous and generalization of the results uncertain. Furthermore, earlier studies often relied on an implied price/quality relationship. Norum and Clark (1989) noted that consumers expected the price of brand name merchandise to be greater than similar private brand merchandise. Do apparel consumers use brand names as an indicator of product quality and, if so, do they choose higher priced brand names because they perceive higher quality? Is the impact of brand name, if any, the same for all consumers or is it mediated by the decision-making style of the consumer? To address these questions, it is important to examine the effect of brand name on perceptions of apparel price and quality.

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## Conceptual Framework

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Congruity theory provides a useful framework for examining the impact of brand name on consumers' evalu-

ations of product quality and price. Congruity theory, which stems from an earlier social psychological theory of perceptual consistency, predicts that individuals will evaluate an object to be consistent or congruent with an existing frame of reference (e.g., Osgood & Tannenbaum, 1955). As applied to the present study, congruity theory would suggest that consumers' evaluations (of both quality and price) of a particular product brand will be consistent with their image of that brand. The objectives of the present study were (a) to examine the effect of *one* extrinsic cue (brand name) and intrinsic cues (actual product characteristics) on evaluations of the quality and price of private, designer, and national brand products and (b) to examine the mediating effect of consumer decision-making style on evaluations of quality and price for private, designer, and national brand products.

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## Hypotheses

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Three hypotheses were tested. Hypothesis 1 proposed that perceptions of apparel quality will not vary as a function of brand name when evaluating the actual product. Although brand name has been found to influence quality perceptions for some products when consumers lack product information, apparel consumers are familiar with apparel items, and considerable product information is generally available when making actual apparel selections (cf. Holstius & Paltschik, 1983). Furthermore, there is limited empirical evidence to suggest that brand name is salient as an indicator of merchandise quality among apparel shoppers. Hypothesis 2 proposed that perceptions of apparel price will vary as a function of brand name when evaluating the actual product with the designer brand perceived as most expensive, followed by national and private brands. Private brand programs have traditionally followed a pricing strategy below that of national or designer brands whereas designer brands are typically priced higher than national brands. Consumers appear to be familiar with these pricing strategies and often are willing to pay these higher prices for designer items (e.g., Holstius & Paltschik, 1983). Hypothesis 3 proposed that perceptions of quality and price will be mediated by the consumer's decision-making style. Brand conscious shoppers are oriented toward buying more expensive, well-known national brands. Therefore, it is logical to predict that brand name will be more salient as an indicator of apparel quality and price among brand conscious shoppers.

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## Method

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A field experiment was used to examine the influence of brand name on consumers' perceptions of apparel quality and price. Men's shirts were selected as the stimulus product as a product category with which most consumers are familiar and because both brand name and actual product characteristics could be used by consumers in evaluating shirts (cf. Jacoby, Olson, & Haddock, 1971). In the case of men's shirts, as with many other fashion products, the intrinsic differences between products are often negligible, and brand is

used to achieve product differentiation. If different shirts — identical except for brand label — are rated dissimilarly, then differences would reflect dominant use of the extrinsic cue, brand name, in evaluating the shirt. On the other hand, if the shirts are rated similarly, then intrinsic cues (the characteristics of the product itself) would be the predominant cues used in evaluating the shirt.

Three identical shirts were selected for use in this study. They were men's moderately priced (\$15.00) blue, button-down Oxford cloth shirts. All labels (i.e., brand name, fiber content, care instructions, country of origin) were removed and replaced with either a national, private, or designer label. The only label information remaining on the experimental shirts was brand name.

National, private, and designer brands which had high name recognition among consumers were chosen for this study in order to maximize the usefulness of the findings. Two factors contributed to the choice of Arrow as the national brand to use in this study. First, informal interviews with sales associates from stores in the area showed that Arrow was the best selling brand of men's shirts. Second, a national survey showed that Arrow was the largest seller of men's shirts with a 28% share of the market (Hancox, 1987).

A study by Davis (1985) found that Calvin Klein was the most often recognized designer name; therefore, Calvin Klein was chosen as the designer brand to include in the study. The choice of a private brand was based on its familiarity to consumers in the shopping area. Lazarus is a well-known department store in the area where the research was conducted, and the mall where the study was conducted was anchored by a Lazarus department store (data were collected in early 1988 before merger discussions). Therefore, the Lazarus store brand was chosen as the private brand to include in the study. Because name recognition is a key factor in choosing a brand, it was thought that the private label should carry the store name. Each subject was asked to examine only one of the three shirts and to rate the shirt examined on five 5-point items of a bipolar scale measuring perceptions of fabric quality, quality of notions, construction quality, design quality, and overall quality. Each scale item had endpoints labeled *high* and *low*. Perceived quality was the mean score for four items — quality of fabric, quality of notions, construction quality, and design quality. Subjects completed a questionnaire to collect information on expected price of shirt, brand recognition, shopping behavior, and demographics.

Data were collected from 164 shoppers (70 men and 94 women) in a large urban mall. Following the sampling procedures suggested by Blair (1983), shoppers were contacted during a weekday (Friday) and a weekend (Saturday), and data were collected during afternoons and evenings. The researcher was stationed in a central mall location near a major anchor store. A completely randomized design assigned shoppers randomly to one of the three levels of brand (national, private, and designer). The sampling was kept as random as possible by approaching the next available shopper as soon as the previous shopper finished the questionnaire.<sup>1</sup> The shoppers' ages ranged from 14 to 74 with a mean age of 35. Most of the shoppers were well educated and had moderate incomes.

Most of the shoppers surveyed (90%) had purchased a men's shirt within the past two years. The national brand used in this study (Arrow) was the most frequently purchased or worn brand (80% of the sample). The private brand used in this study (Lazarus) was among the two most frequently purchased or worn private brands (45%), and Calvin Klein was the most frequently purchased or worn designer brand (35%). Overall, the shoppers were more likely to have purchased or worn a national brand such as Arrow or Levi than either a designer or private brand shirt. Most of the shoppers surveyed were familiar with the product category (men's shirts) and with all the brands included in the study.

Consumer decision-making style was identified through a two-step process using the Consumer Styles Inventory measure developed by Sproles and Kendall (1986).<sup>2</sup> First, principal components factor analysis isolated independent measures of key decision-making constructs from the statements regarding shopping attitudes used by Sproles and Kendall. Two factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 were extracted — quality consciousness and brand consciousness. This was consistent with the factors identified by Sproles and Kendall and indicates the validity of this instrument with adult shoppers as well as with high school students used in the original study. Second, cluster analysis was used to group the shoppers into either brand or quality conscious groups based on their brand conscious and quality conscious scores. The majority of the shoppers (131) fell into the quality conscious group while 32 shoppers fell into the brand conscious group.

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## Results

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Results of the ANOVA showed that brand name (the independent variable) did not affect perception of garment quality (the dependent variable) at the .05 level. The finding of no significant differences in perceived quality among the three brands supports the first hypothesis that perception of apparel quality will not vary as a function of brand name when evaluating the actual product. Therefore, consumers appear to rely primarily on intrinsic cues (actual garment characteristics) rather than brand name when evaluating the quality of apparel items. These findings show that actual garment characteristics are more important than brand name in evaluating garment quality and suggest that the assumption that consumers associate quality in apparel with brand name may be erroneous.

The second hypothesis, that perceptions of apparel price will vary as a function of brand name when evaluating the

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<sup>1</sup>Blair recommended the "catch-as-catch-can" basis because in mall surveys the rejection rate is high and because trying to stratify a sample of mall shoppers would be time consuming. Blair recommended that interviewers spend their time approaching every possible candidate.

<sup>2</sup>Construct and content validity were assessed using factor analysis to test the proposed model. Reliabilities were also computed using Cronbach's alpha. See Sproles and Kendall (1986) for further explanation of instrument development and the validity and reliability measures used.



actual product, with the designer brand perceived as most expensive followed by national and private brands, was partially supported. ANOVA was used to examine the effect of brand name (the independent variable) on perception of price (the dependent variable). Brand name did influence shoppers' perception of price [ $F(2,158) = 13.99, p < .001$ ] and accounted for 15% of the variance in price. The LSD test for comparisons of the group means showed the designer brand was perceived to be significantly more expensive than national and private brands; however, price perceptions for national and private brands did not differ at the .05 level (Table 1).

**Table 1. Price means for brand by decision-making style.**

Decision-making style	Price means for brand			
	Arrow	Lazarus	Calvin Klein	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	
Brand conscious shoppers	18.77 n=9	24.38 n=8	26.78 n=14	23.83 n=31
	(4)	(5)	(6)	
Quality conscious shoppers	19.50 n=46	18.02 n=46	23.75 n=36	20.16 n=128
	19.38 n=55	18.96 n=54	24.6 n=50	

**Identification of cell numbers**

- (1) Brand conscious / Arrow
- (2) Brand conscious / Lazarus
- (3) Brand conscious / Calvin Klein
- (4) Quality conscious / Arrow
- (5) Quality conscious / Lazarus
- (6) Quality conscious / Calvin Klein

Brand and quality conscious shoppers differed with respect to the price attributed to the shirts [ $F(1,158)=8.36, p < .005$ ] but not the quality. Overall, brand conscious shoppers attributed significantly higher prices to the shirts than did quality conscious shoppers (see Table 1). Further examination of the data showed that brand conscious shoppers attributed higher prices to the private brand shirt than did quality conscious shoppers ( $p < .001$ ), suggesting that brand conscious shoppers perceive private brand merchandise differently than quality conscious shoppers do.

The next step was to investigate whether or not an interaction existed between decision-making style and brand of shirt. Examination of the price means for the three shirts (Table 1) indicates that the impact of decision-making style on price attributed to the private brand is different from the impact of decision-making style on price attributed to the designer brand, suggesting an interaction effect. A significant interaction would show that the influence of brand on

perception of price is mediated by consumer decision-making style.

ANOVA was used to test for the main effects of decision-making style and brand and the interaction effect of decision-making style x brand on perception of price. The main effect of decision-making style and brand was significant [ $F(5,158)=8.03, p < .0001$ ] and accounted for 21% of the variance in price. However, the classic 2 x 3 factorial design with unbalanced cell sizes did not show a significant interaction at the .05 level. Nevertheless, cell means (see Table 1) suggested the two groups (brand and quality conscious shoppers) did attribute prices differently to the private brand shirt. Thus, the lack of a significant interaction effect may have been due to the small size of the brand conscious group.

Consumer decision-making style was then combined with shirt brand, resulting in six treatment groups (2 decision-making styles by 3 brands). One-way ANOVA, with price as the dependent variable, was used to determine whether or not there were significant differences in the means of the six groups and to determine which means were significantly different from each other. The analysis showed that group means were significantly different [ $F(5,158)=8.03, p < .001$ ]. The Duncan grouping resulted in two significantly different groups based on a combination of decision-making styles and shirt brand. Group A included the brand conscious consumers who evaluated Calvin Klein and Lazarus and the quality conscious consumers who evaluated Calvin Klein. Group B included the quality conscious shoppers who evaluated Arrow and Lazarus and the brand conscious shoppers who evaluated Arrow (Table 2).

**Table 2. Duncan groups for decision-making style and brand combinations.**

Decision-making style/brand	Mean	*Duncan grouping
Brand conscious / Calvin Klein	26.79	A
Brand conscious / Lazarus	24.38	A
Quality conscious / Calvin Klein	23.75	A
Quality conscious / Arrow	19.50	B
Brand conscious / Arrow	18.78	B
Quality conscious / Lazarus	18.02	B

\*Items in the same Duncan group are not statistically different at the .05 level.

These results confirmed that brand conscious shoppers perceived private brand shirts similar to designer brand shirts whereas quality conscious shoppers perceived private brand shirts to be more like the national brand with respect to price. Brand conscious shoppers priced the private brand similar to the mean price for designer brands whereas quality conscious shoppers priced the private brand similar to the mean price for national brands. Thus, consumer decision-making style does appear to be a mediating factor in the perception of apparel price, but not quality, when both brand name and the actual product are available for evaluation. These findings support the third hypothesis with respect to price,

but not quality, since only perceptions of price were mediated by the consumer's decision-making style.

Brand and quality conscious shoppers did not differ (at the .05 level) with respect to gender, shopping frequency, education, marital status, income level, type of store shopped, or purchase of a men's shirt within the past two years. Thus, the two groups seemed to be relatively homogeneous with respect to both demographics and shopping patterns. Also, brand conscious shoppers in this study were no more likely than quality conscious shoppers to indicate that brand was an important criterion in selecting apparel. This suggests that brand conscious shoppers may be unaware of the importance of brand name in clothing purchase decisions or that they may be reluctant to admit the role of brand name in their purchase decisions during direct questioning. Quality conscious shoppers, on the other hand, rated construction quality as more important than did brand conscious shoppers [ $F(1,162)=8.90, p<.005$ ], which supports the notion that quality conscious shoppers are more concerned than brand conscious shoppers with intrinsic cues such as actual garment characteristics.

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## Discussion

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The absence of a significant relationship between brand name and perception of quality among shoppers in the present study shows that consumers rely primarily on actual garment characteristics, rather than brand name, as an indicator of garment quality. This seems to be true regardless of decision-making style of the shoppers. Thus, it appears that shoppers who choose designer brands do so for reasons other than assurance of quality.

Results of this study indicate that shopper evaluation of apparel quality is an objective construct which may not be readily subject to emotional appeals. If this is indeed the case, then factual rather than evaluative appeals would be appropriate in attempts by apparel marketers to develop a quality image (e.g., Holbrook, 1978). (Although a discussion of quality is beyond the scope of this study, the present findings suggest that the cognitive structure of quality may be simpler than previously thought and imply a need to reexamine current theoretical models on quality.)

At the aggregate level, shoppers did expect to pay a higher price for the designer brand than for national or private brands. Brand conscious shoppers expected prices to be higher than did quality conscious shoppers, particularly for the private brand. Therefore, perception of apparel price (especially among brand conscious shoppers) may be influenced by extrinsic cues, such as brand name, which are independent of the intrinsic quality of the product. Also, shoppers expected national and private brands to be similar in price. This finding raises questions regarding the success of current private brand programs in establishing a price image lower than that of national brands.

With respect to congruity theory, the significant relationship between brand name and perception of apparel price suggests that for brand conscious shoppers in particular, the perceived value of an apparel item is largely influenced by characteristics external to the product (e.g., pres-

tige, enhanced self-concept). Therefore, a higher price for brand names than for private brands (even though quality perceptions may be equal) would be entirely consistent with the shoppers' existing frame of reference because brand name contributes to the perceived value of the product via intangible, subjective product characteristics. Although consumers may not perceive a high priced brand as possessing better quality than a lower priced brand, many of them expect to pay the higher price for reasons other than improved quality. This lends support to the notion that consumers buy apparel for personal and social reasons in addition to their utilitarian functions and that these non-tangible product characteristics constitute a large portion of the perceived value of an apparel item.

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## Implications

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These findings have implications for retailers and for further research. While brand name and designer products are still an important part of the retailing mix, the growing emphasis on private brands underscores the need for retailers to understand consumers' perceptions of private brands and factors influencing brand choice. In particular, apparel retailers would do well to examine the social and personal reasons underlying apparel purchase decisions.

Price and quality have often been equated in marketing and economics literature. However, the present findings suggest that price and quality are two distinct constructs and that price may not be a salient indicator of product quality. Further research is needed to investigate the effect of these cues in combination with other cues on consumers' perceptions of quality and price. The present research investigated only one private brand; therefore, generalizations may not be made to all private brands. Also, this research included only one product category — men's dress shirts. Although some research has shown that subjects use intrinsic and extrinsic cues similarly when evaluating different apparel items (Hatch & Roberts, 1985), cue utilization for other apparel products (e.g., high fashion items) may be different. Additional research with a number of widely distributed private brands and different apparel products is needed.

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