"Cause-and-effect relationship among apparel buying"

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NUMBER OF REFERENCES	NUMBER OF FIGURES	NUMBER OF TABLES
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Abstract

The apparel and clothing industry being positioned at first place and also the spending on apparel and clothing among the customers increasing with each passing day; it becomes imperative to study the changing behavior of consumers. The purpose of this study is to expand the knowledge of apparel buying behavior of Indian consumers and in a practical sense understanding the factors which influence their purchase intentions. The current study examines causal linkages among Promotional factors, reference groups, Store Attributes, Product attributes and Consumer characteristics in apparel buying behavior. It empirically investigates the cause-and-effect relationship among the dimensions of consumer buying behavior towards branded apparels and develops a model through Structural Equation Modelling.

Introduction

Consumer market for branded apparel has become varied by store preferences, product preferences, personalization, Reference Groups and promotional factors in the global market place. Today's consumption in young consumers has no confines and is a free spending generation. Proliferation of brand names has led to brand awareness and brand preference amongst the youth at an early age. Right since the early years of childhood, a child develops brand preferences driven by various stimulants such as media exposure, social interactions, and influence of family and friends, information and communication technology.

The attitudinal shift of Indian consumers towards brands makes it important to know how youth forms attachment to brands. Past studies have highlighted that changing lifestyle of Indian consumers and resulting changes in consumption patterns triggers changes in behavioral patterns of consumers towards shopping and factors that drive people to stores and influence their purchase behavior.

This study developed apparel buying behavior model on the basis of 5 dimensions namely Store attributes, Product attributes, Reference Groups, Promotional factors and Consumer characteristics. These dimensions have been identified from previous literature on consumer behavior. Key questions related to each dimension are as follows:

1) Store attributes: What are the various store characteristics that a consumer looks for while visiting a store which influence the consumer preferences regarding apparel purchase behavior? In the dynamic fashion world of today, it is extremely important that marketers know which store attributes are important to which shoppers so that the appropriate retail strategies can be developed. In this study, this dimension is measured by the indicators viz. physical facilities, variety, membership facilities, post transaction services and services by staff.

2) Product attributes: What are the various product features like style, fit, comfort, design etc. which are important to customers and which customers value while making apparel purchase decision? This information will be extremely useful for marketers for segmenting markets and formulating effective marketing strategies. In this study this dimension is measured by the indicators viz. durability, quality, style, fit and price.

3) Reference groups: Which external factors such as TV, magazines, and social media etc. influence the apparel buying decisions of consumers? Marketers must understand the impact of this attribute on the buying process in order to increase sales, gain competitive advantage and build a successful brand. In this study this dimension is measured by the indicators viz. Influence of Family and friends, Celebrity influence, Past Experience, TV/ magazines and Internet.

4) Consumer characteristics: Do various consumer attributes like preference to wear and try before purchase, Impulse buying behavior, Fashion-ableness, Brand Loyalty etc. which differs from consumer to consumer, has any effect on apparel purchase behavior? In this study this dimension is measured by the indicators viz. Fashion Consciousness, Preference to wear and try apparel before purchase, Impulse buying behavior, and Store Image and Brand loyalty.

5) Promotional factors: Do the various promotional techniques adopted by the Retail store such as discount schemes, visual displays, and In-store promotions etc. influence the buying behavior of consumers? The idea is to understand if promotional strategies have a strong hold in triggering arousal and purchase intentions among consumers. This dimension is measured by the indicators viz. Social Media, Celebrity endorsements, in-store promotions, visual displays, pricing techniques.

It is extremely risky to develop retail strategies incorporating the above five dimensions, without a thorough understanding of the same retailers will lose their customer base and competitive advantage.

The core of the Consumer buying behavior is linking together the variables of the five dimensions in a causal chain, i.e. developing the strategy map. There are linkages among store attributes, product attributes, Reference groups, Promotional factors and Consumer characteristics. The cause and effect relationship of these dimensions is important as this helps the marketer in translating this into optimum marketing policies which facilitates in increasing market share, profitability and strengthening the Brand Loyalty.

1. Review of empirical studies

Purchase intention is defined as the intention to purchase a particular brand because of its features, quality or emotional benefits (McConnell, 1968). The purchase intention have been measured by variables namely I intend to buy this brand frequently (Yoo et al., 2000) and I plan to buy this brand often (Yu and Dean, 2001). Outshoppers literally go extra miles to outshop for better quality and assortment of merchandise, higher quality of personal service, more pleasant shopping atmospherics, and more competitive prices (Guo and Wang, 2009).

Noesjirwan and Crawford (1982, p. 155) are of the opinion that clothing is likely to form an integral part in the enactment of social encounters and it is also seen as a very important channel of non-verbal communication. Clothing is therefore used as a code, which allows messages to be created and understood selectively (Auty & Elliott, 1998, p. 109). They state further that perceptions of brand users have been found to differ for identical brands within a product category.

Brand management holds the key in the contemporary markets, particularly in Indian markets because Indians are very conventional. Due to the globalization process, Indians are getting fascinated to convenient dresses, particularly Multinational brands. The increase of readymade garments wear business in India was very slow till the early 1980's. The main reason for this was that Indian consumers were used to buying cloth and getting their garments customized mainly through local tailoring shops from the unorganized segment.

As suggested by Maslow's hierarchy of needs, all humans have a need for clothing, whether to satisfy a physiological need, for both privacy and protective reasons, or in order to meet needs related to esteem and belongingness (Hawkins, Mothersbaugh and Best, 2007, p. 365). Thus, some money will be spent throughout their lifetime on the purchase of various garments to satisfy these needs (Hawkins et al., 2007, p. 365). It is, therefore, useful to investigate the capital and people-intensive, substantial clothing industry of India, particularly in terms of the branded apparel buying behavior of young Indian consumers in the age group of 18-25 years. The need for this research is due to the multifaceted and complex nature of the shopping habits with regards to these consumers, especially within a multicultural society such as India.

The retail market in developed countries of the world was at the mature stage (Berner et al., 2001). Intense competition and sluggish population growth was motivating leading apparel brands of the world to enter in new markets and attract new customers (Steenkamp and Hofstede, 2002). The emergence of economies particularly India with strong middle class was impelling these apparel firms to ensure their presence in such economies (Dickson et al., 2004).

2. Research methodology

This study examines the cause and effect relationship between various perspectives of consumer behavior towards branded apparels. The statistical technique Confirmatory Factor Analysis, Structural Equation Modelling has been used in the present study. This model is executed with the help of SPSS AMOS 21 software in this study.

The present study is based on a sample frame of 500 respondents consisting of students and working professionals of Delhi/NCR, Bangalore and Chandigarh area in the age group of 18-25 years. The study uses a questionnaire to examine the cause-and-effect relationship among the buying behavior dimensions. The questionnaire was self-administered in colleges and was also sent through emails and social networking sites like Facebook and linked in. Five hundred and fifty questionnaires were distributed but five hundred questionnaires were elucidated and used for the final analysis after eliminating those that were partially completed.

The final questionnaire comprised of 2 parts with a total of 29 questions. Section I of the questionnaire contained 4 questions on demographic factors of the respondents including gender, age, education and occupation. Section II of the questionnaire contained 25 questions relating to 25 traits corresponding to 5 apparel buying behavior dimensions viz., Store Attributes (Services by staff, Membership facilities, Physical facilities, Post transaction services, Variety), Product Attributes (Fit, Durability, Style, Price, Quality), Reference Groups (Influence of family and friends, celebrity influence, Past Experience, TV/ magazines, Internet), Consumer characteristics (Fashion consciousness, Preference to wear and try before purchase, Impulse buying behavior, Store image, brand loyalty) and Promotional factors (Social media, In-store promotions, pricing techniques, visual displays, Celebrity endorsements). All these questions were measured with a 5 point Likert Scale that ranged from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

3. Data analysis and results

3.1. Demographic descriptive. Table 1 below shows that 64% of respondents were females, 36% were in the age group of 21-24 years, 44% were under graduates and 64% were students.

Table 1. Demographic descriptive

Demographics		Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative percentage
Gender				
	Male	178	36	36
	Female	322	64	100
	Total	500	100	
Age				
	18-21	321	64	64
	21-25	179	36	100
	Total	500	100	
Education				
	UG	221	44	44
	PG	170	34	78
	Above PG	109	22	100
	Total	500	100	
Occupation				
	Student	318	64	64
	Employee	112	22	86
	Self employed	70	14	100
	Total	500	100	

3.2. Reliability analysis. Reliability and Equivalence of Various Items in Apparel Buying Behavior Dimensions was determined and Cronbach's alpha values were observed.

Table 2. Reliability analysis

Dimensions	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha based on standardized items	Hotelling's T-squared test	F value	Df	p-value
Store attributes	5	.879	.882	191.60	47.61	4,496	.000
Product attributes	5	.928	.929	425.21	31.11	4,496	.000
Reference groups	5	.875	.826	79.46	19.74	4,496	.000
Consumer characteristics	5	.925	.925	380.69	44.90	4,496	.000
Promotional factors	5	.827	.830	793.86	48.18	4,496	.000

From the above Table 2, all the five dimensions of buying behavior i.e. store attributes, product attributes, reference groups, consumer characteristics and promotional factors achieved a high Cronbach's alpha coefficient, suggesting high reliability (greater than 0.6 recommended by Nunally and Bernstein) and internal consistency. The results of Hotelling's T-squared test confirmed that the mean of different apparel buying behavior items under the five dimensions was significantly different from each other at 1 percent level. This shows that there is no equivalence between all the 25 items and that they are different.
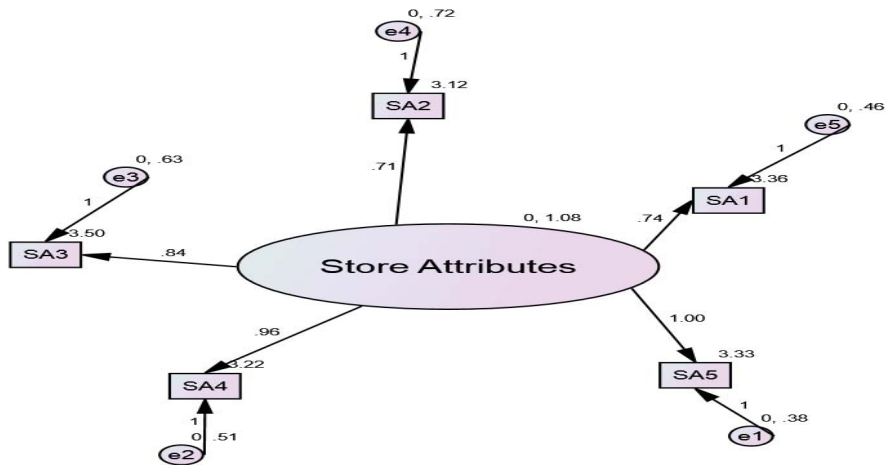
Note: SA1 – Services by staff, SA2 – Membership facility, SA3 – Physical facility, SA4 – Post transaction services, SA5 – Variety.

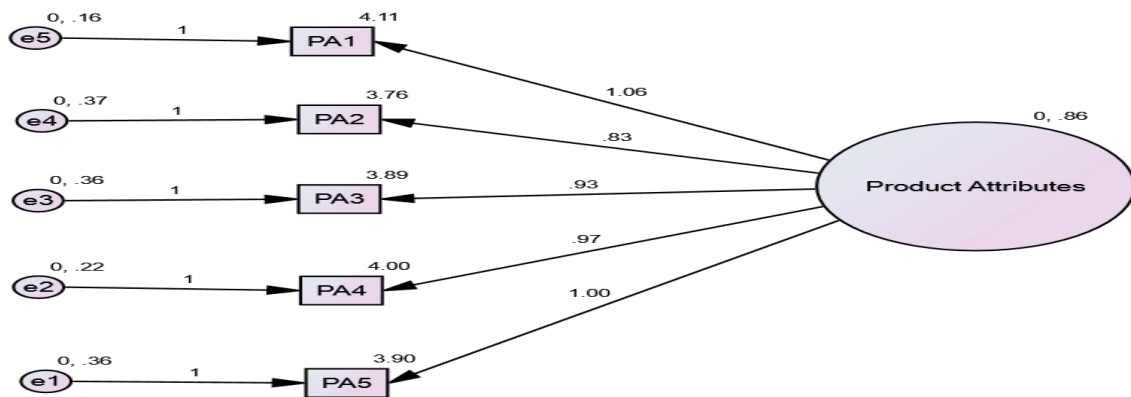**Fig. 1. Optimized measurement model of store attributes**

Table 3. Regression weights (store attributes)

Name of the variable		Estimate	Standardized regression weight	Squared multiple correlation	S.E.	C.R.	*p*-value
Services by staff	Store attributes	.740	.750	.562	.039	18.8	***
Membership facility		.714	.658	.433	.045	15.8	***
Physical facility		.840	.740	.548	.045	18.5	***
Post transaction services		.955	.811	.658	.046	20.9	***
Variety		1.000	.860	.740			

Note: *** shows the significant *p*-values.

The results in Table 3 indicate that *Variety* is the most influencing variable in Store attributes construct. The squared multiple correlation of variety indicates that 74% of the variance of variety can be explained with the help of store attributes construct. The next variable is *Post transaction services*. Merchandise should be easy to return, refund or adequate credit facilities should be available. The apparel store must provide free alteration facility to the customers as this will facilitate in paving a long-term association with them. This is followed by services by staff, physical facilities and membership facilities.

Note: PA1 – Fit, PA2 – Durability, PA3 – Style, PA4 – Price, PA5 – Quality.

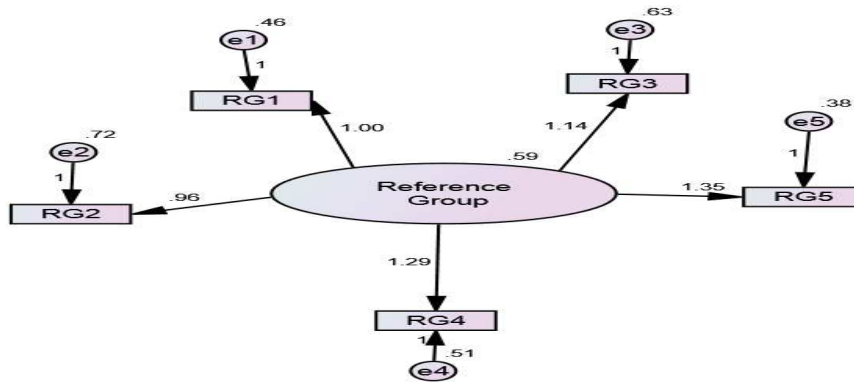**Fig. 2. Optimized measurement model of product attributes**

Table 4. Regression weights (product attributes)

Name of the variable		Estimate	Standardized regression weight	Squared multiple correlation	S.E.	C.R.	*p*-value
Fit	Product attributes	1.060	.925	.855	.039	27.35	***
Durability		.826	.782	.612	.040	20.87	***
Style		.932	.821	.674	.041	22.48	***
Price		.970	.885	.783	.038	25.43	***
Quality		1.000	.839	.703			

Note: *** shows the significant *p*-values.

The most important variable influenced by the construct is Fit with Squared Multiple Correlation indicating that 85% variation in this variable is explained by the Product Attribute construct. Another significant measure found in the study is Price. Affordability is an important criterion as many young college students depend on their parents for their monthly allowance. Youngsters often associate branded clothing with quality assurance. Young consumers appear to be more concerned with getting value for their money and thus prefer prices that are reasonable for what they are receiving in return (Moore and Carpenter, 2008; and Martin and Turley, 2004). Durability is found to be another momentous measure. It is considered as another pivotal determinant of shopping behavior.

Note: RG1 – Influence of family and friends, RG2 – Celebrity Influence, RG3 – Past experience, RG4 – TV/magazines, RG5 – Internet.

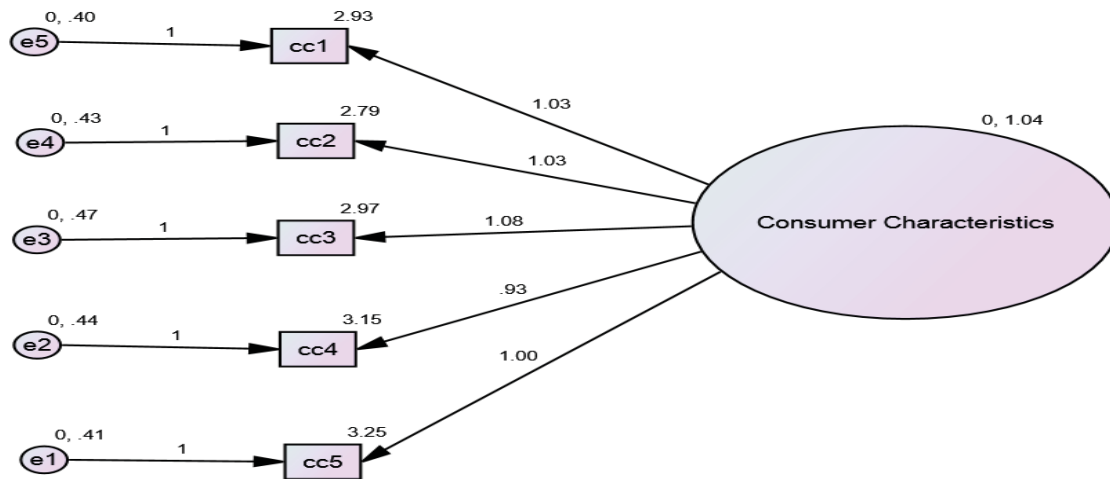**Fig 3. Optimized measurement model of reference group**

Table 5. Regression weights (reference groups)

Name of the variable		Estimate	Standardized regression weight	Squared multiple correlation	S.E.	C.R.	p-value
Influence of family and friends	Reference groups	.819	.796	.634	.044	18.55	***
Celebrity influence		.868	.771	.602	.048	18.00	***
Past experience		.800	.789	.622	.044	18.34	***
TV/Magazines		.869	.716	.513	.053	16.40	***
Internet		1.000	.792	.627			

Note: *** shows the significant p-values.

The most influencing variable in this construct is *Influencing of family and friends*. The squared multiple correlation indicates that 63% of the variance in this variable can be explained with the help of Reference Group Construct. Consumers develop preferences towards fashion apparel not only on the basis of their own perceptions, but also on family and friends responses. Today's youth seeks acceptance from their family members and peers to boast their confidence and to blend with their social surrounding. This is followed by Internet, Celebrity Influence, past experience and TV/ Magazines.

Note: CC1 – Fashion consciousness, CC2 – Preference to wear and try before purchase, CC3 – Impulse buying behavior, CC4 – Store image, CC5 – Brand loyalty.

Fig. 4. Optimized measurement model of consumer characteristics construct

Table 6. Regression weights (consumer characteristics)

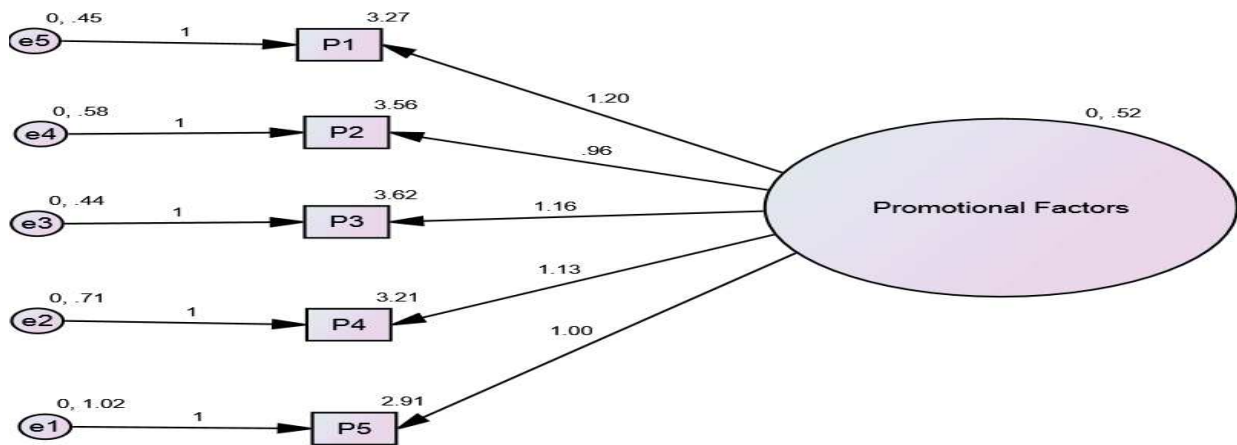| Name of the variable		Estimate	Standardized regression weight	Squared multiple correlation	S.E	C.R.	p-value
Fashion consciousness	Consumer characteristics	1.028	.856	.732	.043	23.99	***
Preference to wear and try before purchase		1.033	.850	.722	.044	23.71	***

Table 6 (cont.). Regression weights (consumer characteristics)

Name of the variable		Estimate	Standardized regression weight	Squared multiple correlation	S.E	C.R.	p-value
Impulse buying behavior	Consumer characteristics	1.082	.849	.721	.046	23.69	***
Store image		.930	.820	.672	.042	22.38	***
Brand loyalty		1.000	.846	.716			

Note: *** shows the significant p-values.

The most influencing variable affecting Consumer Characteristics is Fashion Consciousness. Fashion consciousness: can be used to evaluate a person's level of fashionability. The Indian consumers seem to be obsessed about their looks and appearance and usually prefer to wear and try apparel before purchasing it. Youngsters today end up spending less time planning for shopping because of which impulse buying behavior is prevalent. Teen consumers need changes continuously because of which their buying behavior is shifting from compulsive shopping to impulsive shopping. This is followed by Brand loyalty and Store image.

Note: P1 – Social media, P2 – In-store promotions, P3 – Pricing techniques, P4 – Visual display, P5 – Celebrity endorsements.

Fig. 5. Optimized measurement model under promotional factors

Table 7. Regression weights (promotional factors)

Name of the variable		Estimate	Standardized regression weight	Squared multiple correlation	S.E.	C.R.	p-value
Social media	Promotional factors	1.19	.788	.621	.097	12.37	***
In-store promotions		.96	.675	.455	.085	11.30	***
Pricing techniques		1.16	.785	.617	.094	12.35	***
Visual display		1.12	.693	.481	.098	11.50	***
Celebrity endorsements		1.000	.581	.338			

Note: *** shows the significant p-values.

With the world becoming digital, spreading information, recommendations and opinions are just a click away with youngsters all the time glued on to their social networking sites like Facebook, twitter etc. Every now and then, one finds a status on the wall or them joining communities to highlight their likes and dislikes pertaining to a store or merchandise. Mobile phones having apps like whats app, we chat, messengers etc. have acted as a catalyst to make social media a platform for collaborative and community building relationship. The squared multiple correlation indicates that 62% of variance in Social Media can be explained by Promotional factors construct. Pricing techniques, Visual displays, In-store promotions and Celebrity Endorsements are also factors influencing the purchase intentions of consumers.

Structural model

Based on the related theory and research, the following hypotheses are developed. These hypotheses are testable given the development of appropriate lagging (outcome) measures and leading measures.

H1: The Promotional factors affect positively the Reference groups.

H2: The Reference groups affect positively the Store Attributes.

H3: The Promotional factors affect positively the Store Attributes.

H4: The Store attributes affect positively the Product Attractiveness.

H5: The Product attractiveness affects positively the Consumer characteristics and hence the buying behavior towards branded Apparels.

The above hypotheses are tested through structural model using the software AMOS: 21. This model specifies the multiple dependence relationships between an endogenous construct and another exogenous or endogenous construct. The proposed structural model is shown in the following Figure 6.
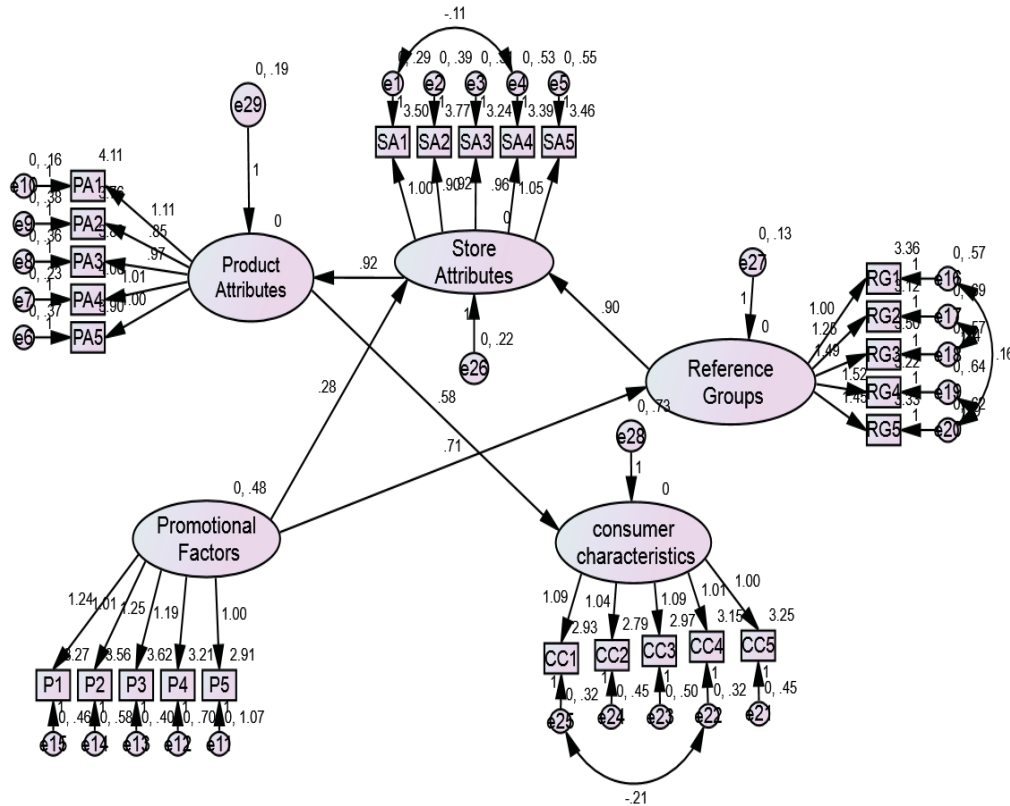
Notes: P1 – Social media, P2 – In-store promotions, P3 – Pricing techniques, P4 – Visual display, P5 – Celebrity endorsements; RG1 – Influence of family and friends, RG2 – Celebrity influence, RG3 – Past experience, RG4 – TV/magazines, RG5 – Internet; SA1 – Services by staff, SA2 – Membership facility, SA3 – Physical facility, SA4 – Post transaction services, SA5 – Variety; PA1 – Fit, PA2 – Durability, PA3 – Style, PA4 – Price, PA5 – Quality; CC1 – Fashion consciousness, CC2 – Preference to wear and try before purchase, CC3 – Impulse buying behavior, CC4 – Store image, CC5 – Brand loyalty.

Fig. 6. Structural model

The Figure 6 shows the graphical representation of structural model that is based on measurement model. It indicates that there is a dependence relationship among the latent constructs (dimensions), shown with one-headed straight arrows in a path diagram. These relationships are examined by estimating the structural parameters.

The Figure 6 shows that Promotional factors dimension is the exogenous or independent variable. This dimension is measured by using In-Store Promotions, Social Media, Pricing techniques, visual displays and celebrity endorsements. Meanwhile, the endogenous or dependent variables are the Store attributes, Reference groups, Product attributes and Consumer characteristics. The Store attributes

dimension is measured based on the services by staff, Membership facilities, physical facilities, post-transaction services and variety. Furthermore, the reference group perspective is based on Influence of family and friends, Celebrity influence, past experience, TV/magazines and Internet. Product attributes dimension is measured by Fit, Durability, Style, Price and Quality. Consumer characteristics dimension is based on Fashion consciousness, Preference to wear and try before purchase, Impulse buying behavior, store image and brand loyalty. The degree of freedom is 267 and probability level is less than 0.05.

The standardized Regression weights of structural model are shown in the following table.

Table 8. Regression weights (structural model)

Endogenous variable	Exogenous variable	Unstandardized regression weight	Standardized regression weight	S.E.	C.R.	p-value
Reference groups	Promotional factors	.706	.803	.071	9.902	***
Store attributes	Reference groups	.895	.641	.040	22.57	***

Table 8 (cont.). Regression weights (structural model)

Endogenous variable	Exogenous variable	Unstandardized regression weight	Standardized regression weight	S.E.	C.R.	p-value
Store attributes	Promotional factors	.675	.624	.071	3.87	***
Product attributes	Store attributes	.920	.872	.036	25.88	***
Consumer characteristics	Product attributes	.577	.515	.051	11.37	***

Note: *** shows the significant p-values.

The table shows results for the association between variables. It is found that the path from Promotional factors dimension to Reference group dimension is positive and significant as coefficient estimate (β) = 0.80 and p = 0.005. Therefore, H1 is supported i.e., Promotional factors dimension affects positively Reference group dimension. The reason is that In-store promotions, pricing techniques, Social media etc. Measures of promotional factors which act as powerful market stimulants lead to word of mouth communication and referrals which is a measure of Reference groups dimension. The results also indicate that Reference group dimension has a significant impact on Store attributes dimension (β) = 0.64.

H2 is supported i.e. the Reference group dimension affects positively the Store attributes dimension. This is due to the fact that young consumers' buying intentions for branded apparel is strongly driven by social interactions. Consumers develop preferences for store and brand not only on the basis of their own experience, but also on peers' responses. The results also support that Promotional factors dimension has a significant influence on store attributes dimension. (β = 0.62).

Therefore, H3 stating that Promotional factors positively affect store attributes is supported. Promotional factors like discounts, visual displays, celebrity endorsements etc. play an important role in motivating the consumer towards a particular store. These factors make the consumers search for such stores and attract their attention by acting as a strong pull factor. The above results suggest Reference group, Store attributes and Product attributes are mediator variables between Promotional factors and Consumer characteristics. It is found that the path from Store attributes to Product attributes dimension is positive and significant (β = 0.87).

Therefore, H4 is supported i.e., the Store attributes perspective affects positively the product attributes perspective. It is observed that a factor such as Variety, physical facilities, garment adjustment etc. further influences the attitude of the consumer towards the store and consequently product and brand choice. Store attributes matched to consumer's motives influences the Product attributes dimension. Finally a significant, positive result has been found for the association between the Product attributes and consumer characteristics dimension, with the critical ratio and significant coefficient estimate. The path is positive and significant (β = 0.51).

Thus H5 is accepted i.e. Product attributes dimension affects positively Consumer characteristics dimension. Merchandise mix in terms of various features such as Price, Durability, Style, fit etc. strongly influences the Consumers preferences. Apparel products are composed of several physical characteristics which are perceived differently by various consumers. Their preferences differ depending on their shopping orientations.

Discussions and implications

1. Marketers need to put more emphasis on the variables associated with the five apparel buying behavior dimensions as they have a strong influence on the consumers' purchase decision. This strategic linkage process is the essence of the Consumer apparel buying behavior.

2. Under the store attributes dimension, a marketer must keep wide assortment of stocks suiting to the requirements of young consumers. It should provide free alteration services and must have trained and courteous staff. All these factors will lead to positive attitude of the consumer towards the store and consequently lead to store patronage.

3. Under the Product attributes dimension, marketer must provide the consumer with best fit garments that are affordable and at the same time fits into the budget of these youngsters. It should provide value for money with quality assurance.

4. The study shows that in the reference group dimensions, family influence, friends favoring purchase and preference of parents are more relevant for reference groups. The marketer should consider all these factors while planning their strategies and promotional programs. The stores can also come up with reward programs for the customers who refer and recommend their friends to the store. The marketer may sponsor a reality show or any other programs of that kind in a TV channel or endorse a familiar celebrity for their stores. Internet too has a strong influence in motivating the youngsters and influences their purchase decision. Managers can take advantage of the positive linkage between web site design features and

product search behavior by tracking the online consumers' expectation.

5. Under the consumer characteristics dimension, marketers should develop strategies to be abreast with the changing trends in fashion and consumer tastes and keep wide assortment of stocks that display the latest fashion styles and trends. There should be adequate facilities available for the customer to wear and try the product before purchase. Youngsters want to be doubly sure about its fit and if the apparel requires any alterations or customizations as per their desire or requirements. Marketers should build an emotional attachment with consumers on perceptions of quality and value to retain brand loyalty as this is crucial to marketers.

6. They should seek feedback from the customers. In the promotion dimension, it is inferred that all the items social media, pricing and visual displays are relevant. So the apparel store should do promotions aggressively, appropriately and attractively which appeal very much to the customers. Marketers should even increase their visibility on social networking sites as this is the favorite pastime of youngsters who are hyper-active in the digital world. They should ensure deeper market penetration by offering maximum discounts, attractive deals and freebies to customers as one finds a flurry of customers and mad rush during the sales season thereby corroborating the finding that consumers prefer purchasing apparels at reasonable prices.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

The study is only limited to Delhi/ NCR, Bangalore and Chandigarh region and hence findings cannot be generalized universally. The study proposes a buying behavior model for the apparel segment only. Future studies may examine buying behavior in other retail segments. The present study has focused on only 25 variables under the five dimensions. However there could be other variables too that have a significant impact on the various dimensions of apparel buying behavior. Also, the current study focuses on apparel buying behavior in a retail store. Future studies can examine online apparel buying behavior or buying through other retail formats. The present study is based on the consumer buying behavior of branded apparels of only 500 respondents. Hence the sample may not be the true pointer of the entire universe and a larger sample size may be considered for future research.

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