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RESEARCH ARTICLE

CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS OF RETAILING ETHIOPIAN BRANDED APPAREL
A CONSUMERS' ATTITUDE VIEW POINT

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ABSTRACT

This study tries to determine the potential challenges and prospects of retailing Ethiopian branded apparel through examining consumer attitudes toward some twelve attributes. A total of 134 college students from a variety of majors have taken part in this study. After determining the importance of each of the apparel attributes, a cross tabulation is used to assess how Ethiopian apparel is perceived against those deemed to be most important. This study found that comfort; quality; good fit; attractiveness; choice of style; and good price successively are the most important attributes consumers consider during an apparel purchase. Moreover, it is revealed that Ethiopian made apparel is perceived to be inferior to a foreign counter part in attributes like comfort, quality, attractiveness and choice of style.

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INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary globalized economy, consumers in many countries have access to select among several domestic and foreign brands. Countries have continued to leave their economies open and this obviously has resulted in the prevalence of fierce competition between marketers trying to address similar customer needs and wants. Given a scenario of increased globalization, and consumer recognition and accessibility to information, no business is invulnerable or protected from these trends of which the Ethiopian apparel industry is not an exception. Netemeyer *et al.* (1991) explained that as international trade activity has become an integral part of the world economy, it is indispensable not optional to estimate attitudes of consumers toward domestic and foreign made products. The concept of brand equity, in today's competitive retail environment, is deemed to be an important source of strategic intelligence for marketers. This is reflected by how much consumers are familiar with a certain brand and hold favorable attitude in their mind (Kamakura and Russell, 1991). Global images are being created by promoting brands worldwide and companies are operating with a view of treating the world as one large market.

According to Levitt (1983), clothing was identified as one of the main items that consumers across the globe increasingly share similar tastes. Like in many countries, Ethiopian consumers are increasingly presented with apparel brands imported from abroad. Retailers prior to making decisions on stocking, therefore, must understand why consumers make their choice between foreign and domestic brands.

Various researchers have indicated that Ethiopian consumers are characterized by exhibiting unfavorable attitude toward domestically made products like clothing. Sharma *et al.* (1994) and Shimp and Sharma (1987) have shown that purchasing imported products harms domestic economy and has an adverse impact on domestic employment as can potentially result in loss of local jobs. In light of this research, the apparel industry is a labor intensive one and could easily understand the role it plays in the economic prosperity of the country through creating vast number of employment opportunities to Ethiopian citizens.

The success of Ethiopian apparel brands, however, largely depends on how these brands are perceived and used by Ethiopian consumers. From this point of view, this research has tried to determine the factors that affect Ethiopian consumers' purchase intentions toward domestic brand apparels and foreign ones available in the Ethiopian market.

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Literature Review

Factors affecting attitudes toward domestic and foreign products

Giving keen attention to the understanding of consumer preferences for domestic and foreign products and their linkage to price and quality attributes can help achieve effective product positioning, efficient crafting of strategy, and multifaceted knowledge of the dynamics of international markets (Gary, 1999). Marilyn (2004) found that the determination of loyalty and repeated purchase is largely associated with the quality the product has got. In markets where people are highly price conscious, it is important for the marketer to convince such customers a product possessing the required quality is provided at a price they believe is a fair one. On the other hand, consumers are only willing to pay a price premium for imported products provided that they perceive such items are significantly superior in quality compared to similar domestic products (Gary, 1999). Several researchers have contributed to the existing vast body of knowledge with respect to the attitudes manifested in the purchase of clothing. Good number of these researchers have explored that consumers prefer foreign clothes to domestic ones especially if they are more expensive and fashionable brands (Mohammed as cite in Leng, 2009; Beaudoin *et al.*, 1998; O'Cass and Lim, 2002). Similarly, a study conducted in China found that consumers prefer foreign products that are popular at times they aim at high end apparel brands (Marilyn, 2004). Still similar claim was made by Kwan *et al.* (2003) and Lee (2002) that most consumers preferred imported apparel brands to those produced domestically for reasons associated with guaranteed quality.

There are also studies that tried to examine the possible relationship between consumer ethnocentrism and evaluations of foreign products. Consumer ethnocentrism represents the responsibility and morality of purchasing imported products and the loyalty that consumers show to the products manufactured in their own country (Shimp and Sharma, 1987). When consumers happen to be ethnocentric, they tend to overestimate the attributes of domestic products while underestimating those imported from foreign countries (Watson, 2000). Accordingly, Lantz and Loeb (1996) came up with a finding that highly ethnocentric consumers have more favorable attitude toward products manufactured in countries with similar culture. On the contrary, a study conducted in India found that many Indian consumers select global over local brand products. According to Batra *et al.* (2000), these consumers perceive global brands as important ways to enhance their status. Similarly, Schwartz (1992) identified individual values as key constructs capable of guiding brand preference. A study conducted in Thailand and Turkey revealed that local brands were perceived as "old", "traditional", "not classy", "reasonably priced", and "outdated" whereas global brands were perceived to be "modern", "trendy", "hip", "active", "cool", "forward-looking", and in most cases, "overpriced" (Kivilcim and Patriya, 2011). Price, brand name, and warranties together with taste and design were also identified as cues that affect consumers' buying decision process and the corresponding behavior

(Bilkey and Nes, 1982). Peterson and Jolibert as cited in Neelam (2006) indicated that the likes of "technological superiority", "product quality", "design", "value for money", "status and esteem", and "credibility of country-of-origin" are among product attributes that dictate consumers' attitudes toward different products. Referring to a study conducted by Kivilcim and Patriya (2011), however, consumers' preference for products is not entirely dependent on functional reasons like the ones mentioned above; symbolic reasons have a lot to do with discrepancies in consumer preferences. A consumer also considers whether a particular brand satisfies his/her emotional value in addition to its quality aspects (Stauss and Neuhaus, 1997).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

To achieve the objective of this study, a survey on consumers' attitude was conducted. Data were collected from a convenience sample of different college students enrolled at government and private institutions in Mekelle, Ethiopia. According to Beckett (2007) and Moore and Ascione (2005), college students are considered as appropriate target groups for research studies of this kind. This is because of the reason that college students represent consumer group for casual apparel products. Besides, they are more homogeneous than the general adult consumers as the effects of demographic factors like age and education are minimized (Peterson, 2001). In light of this, a total of 150 questionnaires were distributed among which 16 were not complete and hence 134 representing over 89 percent response rate were used for the study.

After a thorough explanation on each of the apparel attributes was given, Students from a variety of majors were requested to complete a self-administered questionnaire. Other than including brand as one of the apparel attribute, the questionnaire was developed in such a way to determine attitudes about foreign and domestic apparel in general. Attitude toward specific brands was not included to avoid potential bias that could emanate as a result of brand equity differences. The questionnaire was developed around 12 apparel attributes ("good fit", "durability", "ease of care", "good price", "comfort", "quality", "choice of color", "attractiveness", "fashionableness", "brand name", "appropriateness for occasion", and "choice of style") identified by Beaudoin *et al.* (1998). These attributes were believed to be areas of concern by consumers in choosing among various apparel products and hence were adopted in this study.

Prior to determining how the participants rate Ethiopian made apparel against the 12 attributes, it was necessary to understand how important these attributes are when purchasing apparel. With this view in mind, respondents were asked to indicate "unimportant", "moderately important", and "most important" on each of the attributes. To this end, they were presented with questions on how they rate Ethiopian brand apparel compared to foreign ones. Finally, an attempt was made to compute the attributes deemed to be important by the participants and the corresponding state of Ethiopian apparels through cross tabulation and other statistical tools.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

An investigation was made to determine how important the attributes are when purchasing apparel. It was found that comfort; quality; good fit; attractiveness; choice of style; and good price successively were considered to be most important by majority of the participants. Especially, comfort and quality attributes of apparel products, as shown in Figure 1, were perceived to be greatly important by more than 82 percent of the consumers.

On the other hand, choices of color followed by brand name were regarded as unimportant attributes by some 30 and 24 consumers respectively. The present study is not interested in finding out the attitudes of consumers toward various apparel brand products. Yet, brand name was one of the 12 attributes. The reason why brand name of apparel products was considered as least important by the above mentioned number of consumers could be attributed to the focus they put on the country of origin of the product rather than looking deep into brand specifics.

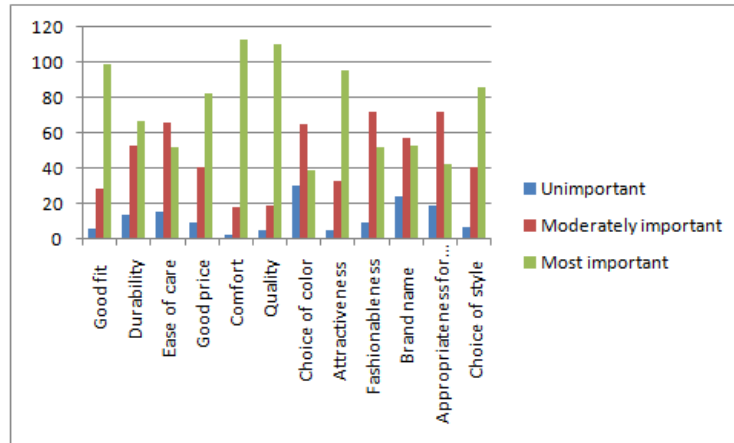


Figure 1. Degree of Importance of each attribute in purchasing apparel

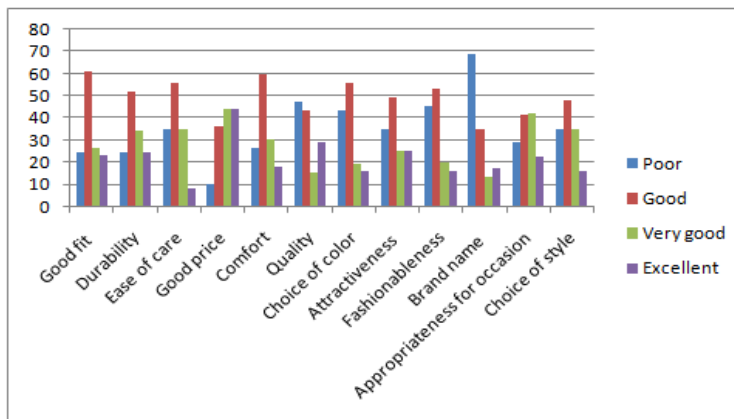


Figure 2. Rank of Ethiopian against foreign apparel

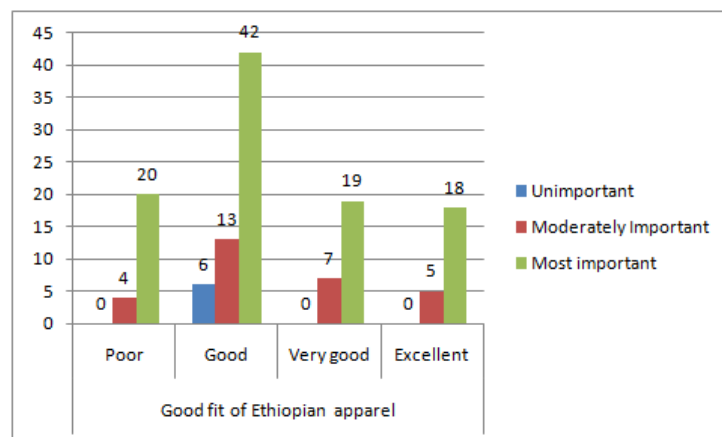


Figure 3(a). Cross tabulation of Ethiopian apparel against good fit

This can be further testified by the demand that Chinese, Pakistani, and Bangladesh apparel, irrespective of their specific brand equity, are enjoying in the Ethiopian market. As depicted in Figure 2, the consumers are far from believing that Ethiopian made apparels possess a better position in terms of almost all the attributes used in the study. The attribute-good price was the relatively highly ranked attribute. The same figure shows that only 32.8 percent of the total respondents have acknowledged that Ethiopian brand apparel measured in terms of this particular attribute is excellent compared to a foreign one. One, therefore, can learn that price alone is not a factor as other product attributes have a role to play in directing a consumer towards a certain product. Questions were designed to examine the desirable attributes missing from Ethiopian apparel. It was revealed that domestic made apparel's brand name, quality, and fashionableness followed by choice of color were deemed poor and lagging behind foreign made similar products.

most important by larger number of the respondents. Respondents were then asked to rank Ethiopian made versus imported apparels against these six attributes with a view of determining the pros and cons of retailing domestic products. Figure3(a) depicts how the participants ranked Ethiopian made apparel against good fit. 20 of the participants who reported "good fit" as the most important attribute have said domestic apparel measured against it is poor. 42 participants had to give a good rank and another 19 and 18 of them perceived Ethiopian apparel to have a very good and excellent rank respectively. This finding reveals that Ethiopian made apparels do not have major problem in terms of this particular attribute. Similarly, price was another attribute against which domestic apparels were cross tabulated. As shown in Figure 3(b), from the participants who considered "price" as most important attribute, Ethiopian apparel was perceived to be poor by some 7 of them, while 20, 24 and 32 other participants gave good, very good, and an excellent rank respectively.

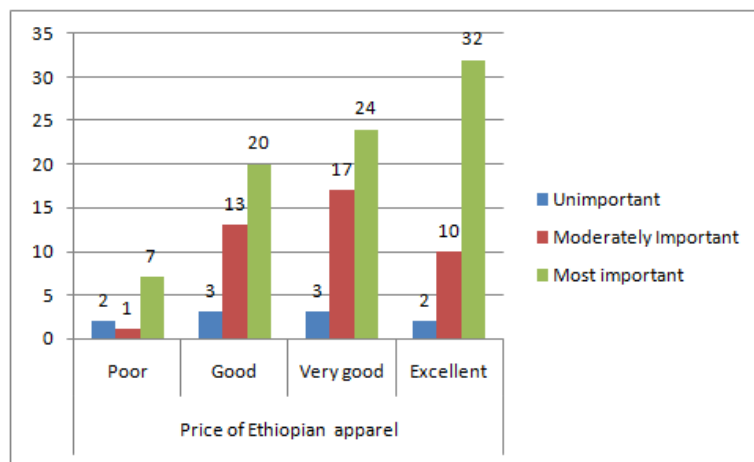


Figure 3(b). Cross tabulation of Ethiopian apparel against price

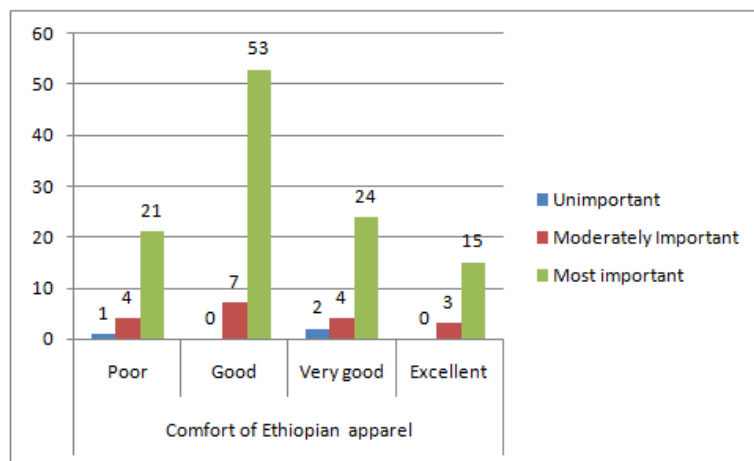


Figure 3(c). Cross tabulation of Ethiopian apparel against comfort

Another major interest of the current study was to assess the participants' perception of Ethiopian made apparel in relation to the attributes they identified are greatly important during the course of apparel purchase. Following this, comfort; quality; good fit; attractiveness; choice of style; and price were consecutively the apparel attributes to have been rated as the

Here also, a price tagged on Ethiopian apparel products is understood to be fair by good number of the consumers. Figure 3(c) depicts the cross tabulated result of "comfort". Accordingly, 21 respondents had to say Ethiopian apparel's comfort is poor. 53 of the contacted consumers reported it is good.

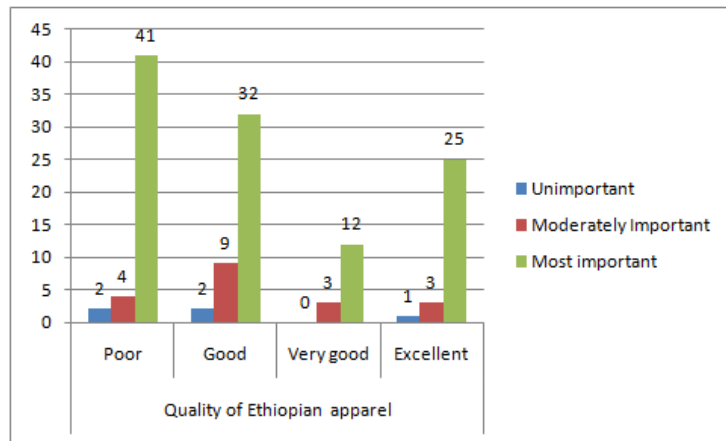


Figure 3(d). Cross tabulation of Ethiopian apparel against quality

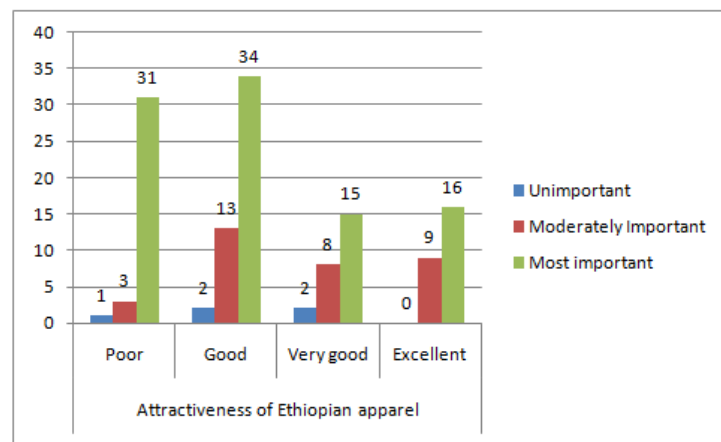


Figure 3(e). Cross tabulation of Ethiopian apparel against attractiveness

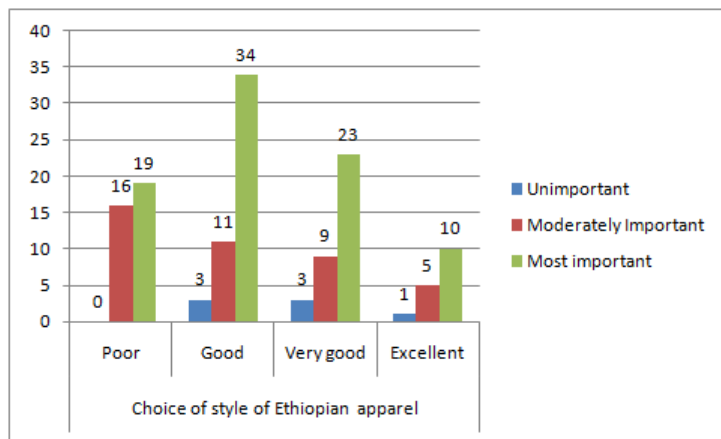


Figure 3(f). Cross tabulation of Ethiopian apparel against choice of style

Another 37 participants have cherished Ethiopian made apparel a very good and excellent rank. According to the survey result, “Quality” was another attribute majority of the consumers took as one of the most important considerations during apparel purchase. As presented in Figure 3 (d), over 37 percent of these participants have deemed that quality of Ethiopian apparel is poor.

Other 29, 10.9 and 22.7 percent have rated the product as good, very good, and excellent respectively. From this, we can learn that the consumers’ reservation is there when it comes to the quality aspect of the apparel. Figure 3(e) presents the prevailing attitude toward the “attractiveness” of Ethiopian apparel. When we look at the cross tabulated result, more than 32 percent of the participants have a poor perception while

over 35 percent of them reported it was good. Attractiveness wise, Ethiopian apparel had only been ranked as very good and excellent by 15.6 and 16.7 percent of the participants respectively. According to Dale and Wayne (1989), only the physical product encompassing both its functional and aesthetic features together with the extended product (the whole set of service features) do not count for successful sale. A generic product that is the psychological benefits consumers seek like looking attractive also matters a lot. Based on the survey result, it was found that the attractiveness of Ethiopian made apparel is below similar foreign products.

Finally, cross tabulation of Ethiopian apparel against choice of style is depicted in Figure 3(f). From a total 86 participants who reported "choice of style" is most important apparel attribute, Ethiopian apparel was found to be perceived as poor by 22.1 percent. Another 39.5 percent have reported the apparel is good. The rest 26.7 and 11.6 percent of the respondents gave a rank of very good and excellent respectively. One can see that Ethiopian brand apparel measured in terms of choice of style is not good enough as over 61 percent of the consumers associated it with the first two lower ranks.

Conclusion

This study has tried to find out the factors consumers consider in purchasing apparel products. On top of this, an attempt is made to identify the apparel attributes deemed to be greatly important and the corresponding state of Ethiopian branded apparel compared to foreign ones. From the 12 attributes this considered, it was found that comfort; quality; good fit; attractiveness; choice of style; and price were consequently the most important attributes consumers give keen attention while purchasing apparel. This implies that retailers among other things can make profit by stocking Ethiopian made apparels provided that consumers perceive the products are good enough in terms fulfilling the desirable attributes mentioned above. According to the survey result, it is necessary that comfort and quality be given due consideration as these are the attributes attested by large number of the consumers for their utmost importance. Although brand name and fashionableness of the apparel did not make into the list of the significantly important attributes, consumers did report that brand name and fashionableness of foreign made apparels are by far better than Ethiopia's. Good fit as one of the six most important attributes is perceived be good at Ethiopian apparel. Moreover, Price of Ethiopian apparel was evaluated favorably compared to a foreign one. Nevertheless, retailers should note that lower price may not compensate an inferior quality especially for consumers who are not price conscious. Comfort of Ethiopian made apparels was not highly appreciated. Considering as one of the two top important attributes, retailers need to make good evaluation of the comfort aspect of the apparel. This study found that the participants tended to believe that Ethiopian made apparels are of lower quality than similar imported products. As income of individuals continues to improve, it is obvious that quality products appear to be more appropriate and hence this attribute calls for action on both the consumer's perception and on the product itself. Attractiveness is another attribute found to be missing from Ethiopian brand apparels.

No matter how good a product could be at all the attributes, the consumer is less likely to be psychologically satisfied as he/she does not feel attractive. In the eye of the consumers, the choice of style of foreign made apparel was perceived to be superior to the domestic one. With diversified needs and preferences of consumers, therefore, retailers should learn that providing customers with sufficient alternative styles is indispensable.

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