The Perceptions Of Customers Towards Private Label Brands In The Grocery Retail Sector: A Case Of Ethekwini Municipality

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ABSTRACT

The introduction of private label brands in the grocery retail industry has created various opportunities for grocery retailers. It has also afforded them the opportunity to increase their sales and improve profitability margins, while cutting on the cost of production for private label brands. Interestingly, while grocery retailers seize the opportunities brought by their investment on private label brands, they are however faced with perceptions that arise from customers. The main objective of this research was to uncover the perceptions of customers toward private label brands, using eThekwini Municipality as the case study. This present study employed a quantitative research approach, where 389 participants were systematically sampled to participate. Quantitative and qualitative data was analysed using SPSS version 25 and the content analysis respectively. The significant finding of the analysed data shows that customers in the eThekwini Municipality were still skeptical of private label brands. Furthermore, the study found that demographic factors of age and salary of customers have effect on their perceptions toward private label brands. This paper contributes to the scarce literature on private label brands, in the South African context. Further equipping grocery retailers with the understanding of customers' perception concerning their private label brands.

Keywords: Private label brands; Customers; Grocery retailers; Perceptions; Manufacturer brands

INTRODUCTION

Private label brands are defined as products or brands that are manufactured by grocery retailers (Chopra, Dasgupta & Gupta, 2016; De & Singh, 2017). They further opine that private label brands can also be viewed as products that are manufactured by a third party on behalf of grocery retailers. Such products are then sold under the name of the retailer or any name given by the retailer (Chopra, Dasgupta & Gupta, 2016; De & Singh, 2017). In South Africa, multiple grocery retailers have their own ranges of private label brands. These include: No name brand (Pick n Pay), RiteBrand (Shoprite), Spar and SaveMore brands (Spar), Woolies (Woolworths), House brand (Checkers), amongst others (Trade Intelligence, 2017).

The inception of private label brands does not only create an opportunity for big retailers to increase their retail market share in the grocery retail sector in South Africa, it also enables them to compete with other private label brands for a market share. Also, it competes with manufacturer brands in terms of price and quality (Chopra et al., 2016). Furthermore, according to Hudson (2018), some grocery retailers tactically introduced private label brands to reduce competition and build their own brands that enhanced loyalty amongst their customers. These private label brands went on to be low priced products accompanied by questionable quality over the years (De & Singh, 2017). Hence, studying prevalent customer perceptions toward private label brands will assist South African grocery retailers with the necessary course for action. Kazmi (2012) points out the importance of understanding customer perceptions. Kazmi (2012) posits that customer perceptions are key in actively influencing what customers buy and how constantly they purchase a particular brand. Customers in developing countries are perceived to possess little knowledge regarding private label brands, thus leaving private label brands prone to negative perceptions and skepticism (Lin, Dawson & Marshall, 2009; Beneke, 2010; Beneke & Carter, 2015). Sequel to the foregoing, the study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- To investigate the perceptions of customers towards private label brands in the grocery retail sector.
- To examine the demographic effect of customers' perceptions towards private label brands.

LITERATURE REVIEW

History of Private Label Brands

South Africa is a country with various cultures, different backgrounds and lifestyles. According to Fibri & Frost (2019), not all products appeal the same way amongst customers and potential customers. Consequently, it is vital to understand the underlying perceptions of South African customers toward private label brands. Historically, private label brands have come with certain critiqued perceptions. Traditionally, perceptions and beliefs develop over time, thus, consumers tend to have developed historic perceptions around private label brands (McNeill & Wyeth, 2011). These developed historic perceptions may either be positive or negative. Hence, customers develop sceptical perceptions around new brands in the market (McNeill & Wyeth, 2011). These perceptions include lower prices and lower quality products (Rossi et al, 2015). In addition, private label brands historically were welcomed as low-priced products accompanied with low quality levels (De & Singh, 2017). Furthermore, Rossi et al., (2015) in their result found that customers consider a lot of aspects when perceiving private label brands. For instance, customers came to these perceptions in benchmarking private label brands against manufacturer brands (Rossi et al, 2015).

Studies such as (Deloitte, 2015; Euromonitor International, 2014) reveal that perceptions of customers surrounding private label brands have changed. Over the years, private label brands are said to have been developed and emerged to be strong competitors of manufacturer brands (Beneke, Greene, lok & Mallet, 2012). However, the question remains if this is the actual case in South Africa? Thus, this present study seeks to proffer answers to the identified question through its objectives.

Factors influencing customer perceptions

Several factors affect customers' perception for private label brands (Mercer, 2017).This implies that grocery retailers are required to recognize factors that shape customers' perceptions regarding brands: specifically private label brands. Desai (2009) concludes that there are internal and external factors that influence customers' perceptions. Some of the internal factors include customers' lifestyle, personality, attitude, knowledge and affordability (Desai, 2009).

Mourali (2005) in Desai (2009) avers that it is not only internal or personal factors that shape a customer's perception, external factors also. The external factors include: economic, demographic, technological changes, political landscapes and globalisation (Desai, 2009). It is for such that grocery retailers in South Africa should collect enough information about the perceptions of customers toward their private label brands. On the other hand, Desai (2009) also studies the link between the concepts of CRM (Customer Relationship Management) and customer perceptions, with emphasis on how to attract and retain customers by attempting to effectively understand their perceptions. Mercer (2017) further states factors that influence customers' perceptions towards brands. These factors include: Price, quality, service quality, packaging, branding and reputation. Consistent with the listed factors, however, UK Essay (2018) adds promotion as another factor that influence customer perception. The pricing of private label brands or any product often builds certain perceptions about the particular product offered (Boyle & Lathrop, 2013). Less-expensive products are often thought or perceived to be lesser quality (Mercer, 2017). Suffice to state that quality is considered to breed influence for perceptions surrounding private label brands. Moreover, the quality of a private label determines whether customers will be satisfied or disappointed with the product, therefore product quality is vital in the purchase decision of a customer (UK Essays, 2018; Mercer, 2017).

Additionally, Mercer (2017) further highlighted the importance of packaging and branding in building up perceptions amongst customers. It is argued that packaging and branding have a positive influence on the perceptions of customers and purchase intention towards products (Mercer, 2017). Packaging and branding private label brands prove to be essential, more especially since South African customers were said to be sceptical around private label brands (Beneke, 2010; Nielsen, 2014).

Reputation together with promotions is deemed vital also. Customers like associating themselves with stores or retailers with good reputation (Mercer, 2017). They discard shopping for products from less reputable retailers. Therefore, grocery retailers must divulge promotional activities in order to build a reputable brand that customers will perceive positively (UK Essays, 2018).

Effect of pricing and quality on customers' perceptions towards private label brands

In the literature, the pricing and quality of private label brands have certain influence on the perceptions of customers. Boyle and Lathrop (2013) in their conclusions reported that customers usually used price as a perceptual indicator for quality. Sequel to their findings, they opine that customers disregard price as an indicator for quality (Boyle & Lathrop, 2013). Hence, this present study represents the importance for South African grocery retailers to constantly research customer perceptions toward their private label brands. Moreover, majority of the previous studies were centred on the American and European customer perceptions (Diallo & Seck, 2018).

Literature presumes that grocery retailers should engage in the process of offering private label brands that are low in price though of high quality (Olbrich & Jansen, 2014) as supported by the findings of (Beneke, Brito & Garvey, 2014).The findings of Chopra and Dasgupta (2017) endorse for grocery retailers to engage in such practice when seeking to increase the market penetration of private label brands (Nielsen, 2018). He further opines that this such should be regardless of the existing perceptions that private label brands come with low quality products. However, it is not entirely the case in all ranges of private label brands (Nielsen, 2018). For instance, some premium private label brands customers perceive them at par with manufacturer brands in terms of quality (Nielsen, 2018). Desai (2009) opines that pricing and quality are also important in attracting and retaining customers. Grocery retailers can thus pay attention in both aspects. The finding of the study promotes for the investigation of the perceptions of customers regarding private label brands in the grocery retail sector in South Africa. Since the studies (Chopra & Dasgupta, 2017; De & Singh, 2017) were conducted in India, the perceptions are of Indian customers and may not represent those in the South African context. Moreover, both studies focused on the Clothing, Grocery and mostly Apparel industries (Chopra & Dasgupta, 2017; De & Singh, 2017). However, the study of Chopra & Dasgupta (2017) only focused on practitioners, whilst the present study focuses on customers. The findings of such study have proven to be successful in obtaining data especially since it is within a mall setting where the researcher used systematic sampling to identify individual shopping customers within grocery retailers.

Demographic influence on perceptions for private label brands

Pratap (2018) states that demographic factors play pivotal role on customers' perception towards private label brands. According to Pratap (2018), certain demographic factors conceal certain customer behaviours that may be otherwise. However, this study focused on the following demographic characteristics and their effect towards customer perception of private label brands; Age, gender, level of income and level of education.

Age

Age has various effects on customers' decision on brands (Pratap, 2019). In congruence, In & Ahmad (2018) had earlier stated that young individuals are less likely to be complex when making a brand choice compared to older people who are said to be more difficult when making brand choices and buying decisions (In & Ahmad, 2018; Pratap, 2018). However, young people especially, those below the ages of 25 years still look for alternatives in their brand decisions (Puska et al., 2018). In support of this, Mehra (2016) had earlier stated that younger customers are said to be more eager in trying out new brand products.

Gender

Literature maintains that both males and females are indifferent in the aspect of choosing and perceiving different brands (Patrap, 2018; In & Ahmad, 2018). Moreover, both male and females have different taste with regards to brands. Therefore, research provides that in most households, females have the utmost power in choosing products and brands to purchase (Patrap, 2018). The conclusions of the work of Puska et al., (2018) confirmed that females are more responsible for purchase decisions at home than males. Females spend much time looking and perceiving different brands before making a purchase (Puska et al., 2018). The study shows that these perceptions regarding the demographic factors are prevalent in the Slovakian and Pakistani respectively. Therefore, this study also examines gender as a demographic factor which may possibly influence customers' perceptions toward private label brands.

Level of income

The level of income is said to be relatively important when customers make decisions regarding their groceries (Patrap, 2018). Without income, customers will not be able to purchase any product, including private label brands. Hence, income levels are likely to affect the perceptions of customers toward private label bands (Berges-Sennou, Hassan, Monier-Dilhan & Raynal, 2007). These perceptions are said to be likely from the medium income classes (Cole & Sethuraman, 1999 in Berges-Sennou et al., 2007). Therefore, middle class to low income earners are prospective consumers to purchase private label brands for convenience compared to high income earners who actively purchase manufacturer brands due to their high quality product ranges (Dimitrieska, Koneska, Kozareva & Teofilovska, 2017). Moreover, they have the desired income to afford the high prices

Level of education

Previous studies argue that individuals who are formally educated are more knowledgeable about products and various brands (Koshy, 2008; In & Ahmad, 2018). According to Glynn and Chen (2009) as well as In and Ahmad (2018), the level of education of people make them consider a lot of brand information, benefits and associated risks before making decision following their preference. Patrap (2018), state that the level of education of people make them evaluate their brand options on the information at hand. Meanwhile, Koshy (2008) following the conclusion of his study had earlier suggested that retailers provide additional informative reminders about their private label brands. On the other hand, the work of Puska et al., (2018) revealed that private label brands are prominent amongst the middle-aged women (40 years) with secondary education. This finding is generalizable to Norway or maybe in European countries. Hence, this present study investigates the subject matter considering the South African perspective with focus on eThekwini Municipality, in the Kwazulu-Natal province.

RESEARCH METHODS

Sampling Procedure and Size

The targeted population for this study were customers who purchased groceries from grocery retail stores within the four regions of eThekwini Municipality (North, West, South and Central). The researcher initially sampled 400 customers, while targeting 100 customers per region. This was done using the Krejcir and Morgan sampling table which shows that for a population above 1 million, the acceptable sample size of respondents should equal 384 or more (Krejcir & Morgan, 1970 cited in Sekaran & Bougie, 2013). Data was collected from customers within stand-alone grocery retail stores from the four identified regions of the eThekwini Municipality, using the probability technique of systematic sampling method. Furthermore, the researcher was directly involved in the data collection process after obtaining an ethical clearance certificate from the University of Zululand.

Of the total 400 questionnaires distributed and collected, 389 were in working order for the data analysis, representing a 97% response rate. Moreover, this is in accordance with the acceptable sampling units as recommended by Krejcir and Morgan (1970) sampling table.

Measures

Questionnaire was adopted as the data collection instrument for this study. The questionnaire adopted a five-point Likert scale where 1= strongly agree and 5= strongly disagree. The researcher constructed five items measuring customer perception towards private label brands. The data collection instrument was first piloted with twenty customers before the actual data collection process. This was to test the reliability of the items in the questionnaire. The Cronbach alpha was used in testing the reliability. This is in accordance with the work of Sekaran and Bougie (2013). An alpha of 0.798 was found in the pilot study, this enabled the researcher to ascertain the reliability of the items on the scale.

ANALYSES AND RESULTS

Data analyses firstly focused on the distribution of the demographic characteristics of the customers in this study. The analysed data showed that more females (51%) participated in the study than males (49%). This suggests that females frequently visit grocery retail stores than males or that females were more willing to take part in this study than male customers. In terms of education level, 55% of the participants had a tertiary education, 44% had a secondary education and almost 0.5% had a primary education.

Customers also had to provide their household sizes. Majority of the customers (41%) provided that they were from a household size of 6-10 members, up to 35% were from household sizes of 1-5 members and 23.5% of participants were from households who had 10 members and more. In terms of the employment status of customers, majority (31.8%) were unemployed, 26.7% were employed while 23.7% had other means of employment or generating income. This finding underlines the unemployment problem currently facing South Africa, especially amongst the youth, where the unemployment rate between the youth aged 15 – 34 years is at 64, 4% (StatsSA, 2019).

Furthermore, in terms of monthly salary scales of customers, 32.1% earned between R0 to R1, 583, majority (35.2%) earned between R1, 584 to R7, 167, while 26.5% earned between R7, 1689 to R16, 417. Additionally, 5.1% customers earned between R16, 418 to R33, 333 and 1.0% earned between R33, 334 to R57, 333. Customers in this study, mostly earned between the second lowest income classifications of R1, 584 to R7, 167 (Business Tech, 2016). From this study, majority (32.9%) of the customers were from the age group of 23 – 29, whereas, 29% were from the age group of 18 – 23, 20.5% were from the age group of 30 – 33, 9.7% were from the age group of 34 – 39, 5.3% were from the age group of 40 – 44, 2% belonged to the age group of 45 – 49 and 0.26% was from the age group of 50 - 65. This finding suggests that majority of the participants who took part in this study were between the ages of 23 – 29 (32.9%). Moreover, younger customers are said to frequently visit malls and shopping centres, as they are eager to try out new brand products, this coincides with the work of Mehra (2016).

TABLE 1:
CUSTOMER PERCEPTIONS OF PRIVATE LABEL BRANDS

Item	Statement	Low (%)	Neutral (%)	High (%)	Mean (M)	Standard deviation (SD)
1	The quality of private label brands is low	31	18	51	3.45	1.559
2	Manufacturer brands are more superior in taste than private label brands	21	14	65	3.84	1.463
3	I only purchase private label brands during tough economic conditions	36	8	56	3.41	1.757
4	manufacturer brands are better than private label brands	20	9	71	4.02	1.441
5	I feel that grocery retailers have improved their private label brands	37	24	39	2.98	1.523

Five items were measured in a Likert scale in order to obtain the perceptions of customers toward private label brands, therefore, the researcher made use of a grading table in order to grade customers' perceptions towards private label brands: whether they had positive, neutral or negative perceptions. Statements with a mean score of 3.6 and above indicated positive perceptions, whereas, a mean score of 2.6 – 3.5 meant customers were neutral while 2.5 and below indicated that customers had negative perceptions.

Responses were summed to give the mean scores and standard deviations of each response. The statement "The quality of private label brands is low" obtained a mean score of 3.45, suggesting that participants were neutral towards the quality of private label brands. This indicates that they are indifferent in terms of their perceptions of the quality of private label brands. The statement "Manufacturer brands are more superior in taste than private label brands" had a mean score of 3.85, indicating that participants were positive to the statement, advocating for the superiority of manufacturer brands in terms of their taste. Furthermore, the statement "I only purchase private label brands during tough economic conditions" had a mean score of 3.41. This implied that customers were neutral in terms of purchasing of only purchasing during difficult economic periods of purchasing private label brands. This means that economic conditions do not have much of an impact on whether consumers purchase private label brands, which could be a sign of brand loyalty.

The statement "manufacturer brands are better than private label brands" had a mean score of 4.02, suggesting that a greater proportion of participants felt manufacturer brands are superior to private label brands. Lastly, the statement "I feel that grocery retailers have improved their private label brands" had a mean score of 2.98, indicating that they were negative in their perceptions, a shared feeling among participants that grocery retailers have not improved their private label brands.

Furthermore, an open-ended question was asked whether customers have any other existing perceptions towards private label brands. Customers' responses, showed that some participants claimed to have no existing perceptions about private label brands. However, some customers felt that private label brands from other grocery retailers are more superior in quality compared to other grocery retailers private label brands. For instance, a customer reports saying: "I feel that private label brands of Shoprite particularly RiteBrand have the lowest quality, while the No Name brand of Pick n Pay is high in quality and matches that of manufacturer brands". Meanwhile, other participants feel that other private label brands from Spar (SaveMor) and Checkers (House brand) are somewhat "Ok". Suffice to state that customers had mixed perception of private label brands.

Table 2 illustrates the effect of demographic factor on the perceptions of customers towards private label brands in the eThekwini Municipality, using One-way Anova and the Spearman correlation test. Table 2 was assigned the level of significance of □□≤ 0.05. The findings depicted that there was a positive (rho=0.052) and a significant difference (0.001) between customer perceptions of private label brands and age groups. Additionally, there was a significant correlation (0.005) between customer perceptions of private label brands and the age groups of customers. These findings suggest that the more customers' age, they are more likely to have positive perceptions about private label

TABLE 2:
CORRELATION OF DEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS WITH PERCEPTIONS OF PRIVATE LABEL BRAND

						(F)	Correlation	
Demographic factors	**Categories**	**Mean**	**Median**	**Mode**	**S.D**	**Sig.**	**Rho**	**Sig.**
Family size	1 - 5 members	2.40	3.00	3.00	0.747	0.598	-0.023	0.655
	6 - 9 members	2.45	3.00	3.00	0.741			
	10 and above	2.33	3.00	3.00	0.769			
Age group	18 – 23	2.47	3.00	3.00	0.757	0.001***	0.052	0.005***
	24 – 29	2.49	3.00	3.00	0.699			
	30 – 34	2.41	3.00	3.00	0.706			
	35 – 39	2.24	2.00	3.00	0.786			
	40 – 44	2.19	2.00	1.00	0.873			
	45 – 49	1.5	1.00	1.00	0.756			
	50 – 65	2.00	2.00	2.00	0.001			
Level of education	Primary	3.00	3.00	3.00	0.001	0.657	-0.012	0.813
	Secondary	2.41	3.00	3.00	0.735			
	Tertiary	2.40	3.00	3.00	0.764			
Employment status	Employed	2.35	2.00	3.00	0.721	0.236	-0.038	0.453
	Unemployed	2.53	3.00	3.00	0.737			
	Partly employed	2.51	3.00	3.00	0.678			
	Other	2.23	2.00	3.00	0.813			
Salary scale	R0 - R 1583	2.53	3.00	3.00	0.747	0.001***	-0.143	0.005***
	R1584 - R7167	2.39	3.00	3.00	0.710			
	R7168 - R16417	2.44	3.00	3.00	0.709			
	R1418 - R33333	1.85	2.00	1.00	0.875			
	R33334 - R57333	1.25	1.00	1.00	0.500			
Gender	Male	2.38	3.00	3.00	0.728	0.500	0.052	0.302
	Female	2.43	3.00	3.00	0.770			

α 0.05= significance level;
**** = Correlation significance level*

brands. Furthermore, a negative (rho= -0.143) and a significant difference (0.001) was also found between customer perceptions of private label brands and monthly salary scales of customers. A significant correlation (0.005) was found between the monthly salary scales of customers against their perceptions of private label brands, depicting that as the salary scales of customers increase, their perceptions about private label brands become more negative.

DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Previous studies conducted in various parts of the world have continuously studied the perceptions of customers towards private label brands (Beneke, 2010; Ramakrishan & Ravindran, 2012; Jaafar et al. 2013; Sarkar et al. 2016; Valaskova et al. 2018). However, Sethuraman (2014) as well as Sarkar, Sharma and Kalro (2015) in their studies opine that more research is needed in furthering literature on customers' perceptions of private label brands. This present study studied customers' perceptions towards private label brands in the grocery retail sector, eThekwini Municipality as the case. The findings from this study indicated that customers have various perceptions of private label brands, these perceptions emanate from their experiences and contrasts with manufacturer brands as per the literature of Rossi et. al (2015). Furthermore, the findings of this study contrast those of Wang et. al (2019) who in their study concluded that customers' perceptions toward private label brands have improved over the years, in the process customers trusting provisioning of private label brands. Whereas, this present study found customers to be quite sceptical and neutral in their perceptions of private label brands.

Considering other findings from this study, customers had sceptical perceptions in terms of the quality of private label brand products, although they trust certain private label brands from other grocery retail stores. Additionally, whilst sceptical of other grocery retail stores private label products, it was found that customers vouch for private label brands of Pick n Pay and Checkers store while slamming the quality of Shoprite RiteBrand private label products. This is consistent with the findings of De & Singh (2017) who state that customers often build perceptions around private label brands based on comparison with manufacturer brands. This implies that grocery retailers need to take into consideration of manufacturer brands when producing private label brands in order to obtain favourable perception from customers.

In terms of the demographic effect on customers' perceptions towards private label brands, this study found that certain demographic factors have a correlation with how customers perceive private label brands. The age and salary scale of customers were found to have association with customers' perceptions. The age of customers was found to have a positive correlation with perceptions towards private label brands, implying that as customers get older, they are more likely to have positive perceptions towards private label brands. On the other hand, findings indicate that the salary scale of customers has a negative correlation with customers' perceptions of private label brands. This finding implies that as customers' salary rises, they negatively perceive private label brands in favour of manufacturer brands and those earning between middle and low-income are likely to resort to private label brands as found by Dimitrieska et al. (2017) in their study. Moreover, findings of demographic correlations with customer perceptions towards private label brands contrasts that of Valaskova, Kliestikova & Krizanova (2018) a Slovak study that found that demographic factors have no correlation with customers' perceptions towards private label brands. Suffice to state that perceptions of customers towards private label brands might differ from country to country.

LIMITATIONS AND AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study made contribution to the literature of private label brands in South Africa, particularly in studying customers' perceptions towards private label brands in the grocery retail sector. The study was limited in different ways. The first limitation of the study was on the geographic choice: eThekwini Municipality an urban area. Hence, the findings of this study cannot be fully generalizable to other geography areas such as semi-urban and rural areas. This is because the perceptions of semi-urban and rural based customers might differ. Future research, can undertake a comparative study of customers' perceptions towards private label brands from the three geographical types: urban, semi-urban and rural areas.

Furthermore, a second limitation in this study was the selection of a quantitative research approach. The use of a structured questionnaire provided the researcher with the limitation of customers having limited options in their responses. Hence, future research can study customers' perceptions by undertaking a mixed method research approach. Furthermore, historically, private label brands were largely prominent during tough economic conditions (Beneke, 2010). An exploratory study could be undertaken to study the perceptions of customers towards private label brands during tough economic conditions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic where people are either working from home, laid off or their firms are temporarily closed.

CONCLUSION

Literature posit that there are various historic perceptions surrounding private label brands (Mercer, 2017), as they were first produced as low-priced quality alternates of manufacturer brands (De & Singh, 2017; Rossi et al. 2015). In the process, customers developed their perceptions of private label brands by comparing them with manufacturer brands, as the current study verifies that customers' perceptions toward private label brands emanates from comparison with manufacturer brands. In addition, the present study found demographic factors to have effect on customers' perceptions of private label brands where the age and monthly salary scale were said to have an effect on customers' perceptions toward private label brands in the grocery retail sector.

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