

## AN EVALUATION OF ONLINE BRAND PERCEPTION IN THE UK CLOTHING INDUSTRY

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### ABSTRACT

Online shopping has become the most key action while using web. More than 85% of the population have used internet to make a purchase and almost 45% of population of internet user are regular online shoppers who make online purchase at least once in a month (Nielsen Company, 2008). Online shopping is a future of business so in that regards we attempt to identify different factors which influence consumers towards shopping online.

The research purpose was to examine the online brand perception in the United Kingdom clothing industry. In the purchase of clothes through online channel, there are various factors that influence a customer's decision and choices. Why people go for online shopping and what are their preferences and usage patterns. Therefore, the purpose of our research is to determine consumer's satisfaction level and what are their usage patterns, and who are the actually customers that do prefer online clothes shopping in London.

The rationale of this paper is to getting the knowledge about consumer perception so it's more kind of qualitative research. After defining these methodologies we have chosen inductive and interpretivism for this research project. Research strategy has sorted out according to this research and also different alternative strategies which are relevant but not chosen for this research. We have decided that we get primary data through interviews and questionnaire in data collection method. For analysis of data, we selected thematic analysis only for the interviews and for questionnaire simply used analysis through pictorial form of data. In thematic analysis we developed few themes according to the information which we got from interviews.

The findings from this research project discovered the consumer perception about online shopping especially in clothing industry. They have that perception, brand means quality to them. They do believe in that brand equity build through a long process. And once you have that brand equity in customer mind then customer becomes a brand loyal. Satisfaction and tolerance level is very high for brand loyal customers.

**KEYWORDS:** Online Brand Perception in the UK Clothing Industry, online Shopping, Inductive and Interpretivism

### INTRODUCTION OF RESEARCH PROJECT

#### Overview

The research purpose was to examine the online brand perception in the United Kingdom clothing industry. In the purchase of clothes through online channel, there are various factors that influence a customer's decision and choices. Why people go for online shopping and what are their preferences and usage patterns. Therefore, the purpose of our research is to determine consumer's satisfaction level and what are their usage patterns, and who are the actually customers that do prefer online clothes shopping in London. The enquiry overview summarized the whole research project and gives better

understanding about forth coming material in the shape of summarizing each chapter. The first part of the study will give a detailed introduction to the study. This section guides you into the study by providing the vital background and rationalization of the study

In second chapter of my project defined and trying to find out different aspects of the present research that has been conducted in this field related to the area of focus. The purpose of this chapter is to gathered academic literature and trying to cope up with my research data that collected in this research work.

The chapter number three is all about justification of the chosen data collection methodology of research. As primary data is the focal point of research because our research result based on this. So that if we don't used the correct data collection methodology. It's really hard to get better-off. Further we discussed the research objectives and aims in relation to the research methodology. Research philosophy and research approach defined in this section. We have chosen inductive and interpetivism for this research project. Research strategy has sorted out according to this research and also different alternative strategies which are relevant but not chosen for this research. We have decided that we get primary data through interviews and questionnaire in data collection method. Subsequently we defined pros and cons of these selected data collection methods. At the end we describe the ethical and pilot testing for this research study.

In chapter number four we defined various data analysis method and attempted to chose the appropriate method which compliment to research methodology. Strength and limitation of the data analysis tools also included in this chapter. After deciding the analysis method then we followed the procedure accordingly to the method. Next we included the primary data which we obtained from interviews and questionnaire. Subsequently in questionnaire section we adjoin various charts that complemented and well describe the essence of data.

The last chapter was based on data gathering and analysis for this research study. The chapter number five will be focused on conclusion and recommendations to the particularly online clothing industry. In this chapter concurrently we worked on both recommendation and conclusion part. Conclusion and recommendation are based on that information which we found in our chapter number four. Subsequently the literature review which we discussed before, we tried to integrate in such a way to make some fruitful conclusion and recommendations.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Introduction**

This part of my project will define and trying to find out different aspects of the present research that has been conducted in this field related to the area of focus. The purpose of this chapter is to gathered academic literature and trying to cope up with my research data that will be collected in this research work. Evolution of shopping through online mode becomes most common way of doing shopping. Researchers have been doing research in that area very frequently because people perception and their behaviors are changed very dynamically. So in that regard we are trying to unfold different perception about the online brand and their satisfaction level. This chapter focal point will be on different foremost concepts which we will discuss in this research work. Concept like branding, brand equity, brand loyalty, brand association, brand awareness, brand perception in the way that it relates to the research. Also examine the different aspects of my project which provide holistic picture of this research.

### Conceptual Clarifications

Brand is a name in every consumer's mind (Mooij, 1998) Brand is the image that consumers have in mind (Aaker, 1991). A traditional definition of a brand was: "the name, associated with one or more items in the product line that is used to identify the source of character of the item" (Kotler 2000, p. 396). The American Marketing Association (AMA) definition of a brand is "a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors" (p. 404). Within this view, as Keller (2003a) says, "technically speaking, then, whenever a marketer creates a new name, logo, or symbol for a new product, he or she has created a brand" (p. 3). From the consumers' perspective, brand is a guarantor of reliability and quality in consumer products (Roman et al., 2005). Added to this, consumers would like to buy and use brand-name products with a view to highlight their personality in different situational contexts (Aaker, 1999; Fennis and Pruyn, 2006). Nowadays, consumers have a wide range of choice to choose from when they enter a shopping mall. It is found that consumers' emotions are one of the major determinants which affect their buying behaviour (Berry, 2000). According to a research conducted by Free ride Media LLC (1998) on shopping habits, nearly one-fourth of the respondents are likely to impulse-buy clothes and accessories. When deciding which products to purchase, consumers would have their preferences, which are developed in accordance with their perceptions towards the brand. Successful branding could make consumers aware of the presence of the brand and hence could increase the chance of buying the company's products and services (Doyle, 1999). It is also the unique characteristics that have been developed all the time in order to differentiate actual products from the competitors (Murphy, 1990). In addition, The American Association defines a brand as "a name, term, sign, symbol or design, or a combination of them intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors. "A brand is creating an image in customer mind to differentiate its product or services designed to satisfy the same need. These distinctions may be tangible or intangible related to what brand represents. Brand image should be communicate in a way which customers values, believes and interest are based. Different factors which influence the customer cognition and create brand are brand perception, brand characteristics, brand image and brand equity. Let's start with brand and its relation with perception. (Kwok Keung Tam. 2007).

Brand and brand perception are interrelated with each other so in this literature we identified different concept of our topic. Let us start with concept of brand, Brand is a name which exist in every consumer's mind (Mooij, 1998) and (Aaker, 1991) defined that brand is an image that consumer have in mind. A conventional definition of a brand was the whenever marketer produce or introduce new product line or with a brand new name and image they actually creating a brand because brand actually means to distinguish your brand product with other competitors by (Kotler 2000). The AMA (the American marketing association) defined the concept of brand any name, sign, trade mark or design or mix and match of them to distinguish your product with your direct and indirect competitors (p. 404). If we talk about the other side of brand like what consumer thinks about brand, brand is an image or a sponsor towards reliability and quality in consumer product and further more consumer highlighted their personality in different situation by using these brands (Aaker, 1999; Fennis and Pruyn, 2006). In this global scenario consumer have a wide range of choices when they are even thinking about that product, and it is found that the most affected or dominating factor in consumer buying behaviour is emotions (Berry, 2000). Most of the MNCs (multinational companies) are playing with consumer emotions to increase the face value of the brands. A research is conducted on consumer shopping habits when they go out for shopping they found that almost one-fourth of the respondents are likely to do impulse buying clothes and different fashion accessories by Free ride Media LLC

(1998). That is why Kotler added placement 'P' in its theory of five P. When consumer is deciding to purchase a product, consumer should have their preferences according to different brands, and that preference is correlated with the brand perception. Brand is actually create value in consumer cognition and occupied a space in the mind of consumer and meaningful branding can make consumers aware of the existence of the brand and ultimately that will increase the company sales and brand value. (Doyle, 1999) It is also a stand out characteristics that will differentiate with your competitors. (Murphy, 1990) In addition, The American Association defines a brand as "a name, term, sign, symbol or design, or a combination of them intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors." A brand is creating an image in consumer mind to distinguish the product and services to satisfy the same need. Brand image should be communicating in that ways which consumer values, interest and believes are based. Without communicating these factor you can't established or placed your brand in consumer mind. To allocation of your brand in consumer cognition different factors are available to influence like brand, brand perception, brand characteristics, brand awareness, brand image and brand equity.

Brand perception is an ability of consumer to recognize and identify the brand underneath different circumstances, as imitated by their brand identification or previous experience to evoked (Kotler & Lane, 2006). Brand evoked refer to consumer skill to recall the brand the consumer black box or memory (Keller, 1993). There are number of studies to focus on creating complete frameworks to identify and understand the key components of brand perception including Keller (1993), Aaker (1991) and Plummer (1985). Brand perception is an ability of consumer to identify the brand under different circumstances, as reflected by their brand recognition or evoke performance. Evoke performance refers to consumer ability to recall or retrieve the brand from the past experience or the memory. Brand building has been around for centuries as a means to differentiate your product with competitor's products. In fine art field branding started when artist signed their works to distinguish from one artist to another. In Europe the earliest sign of branding happened when companies put their trademarks on their products to protect their products against the inferior quality products. There are few concepts which come under the brand perception like brand equity, brand awareness brand association and brand loyalty (papu, et al, 2005). Brand awareness was defined by (Rosstier and Percy, 1987) that when consumer or customer recognize your brand without hesitation that is called brand awareness.

Quite a few factors that can change the level of brand awareness like in case of china, geographically location and politics could have a massive effect on the consumer brand awareness level. A research which has been done by DeLong et al (2004), owing to geographically differentiations, research identified that Chinese consumers can't identify the difference between US apparel brands names form the other European countries. Likely wise consumer is sometime really confused to identify the different products of Taiwan and Hong Kong due to their political separation. As Keller (1998) has defined that the brand awareness can be increase through the repetition purchase that particular brand. To increase the brand awareness two main tasks has to be accomplished; brand name identity and brand related it with the product rank.

There are few tools available to increase the brand awareness like advertising and celebrity endorsement. A research found that the brand attitude has great influence from advertisement attitude, affecting on consumer to purchase particular brand product (Mackenzie 1986 & Tsai 2007). From past few years, advertisement is an integral part of marketing and strategies and creating brand perception. Finally consumer become well prepared and well informed to identify that which brand or service can well entertain us (Alvarez and Casielles, 2005). In addition celebrity endorsement can give an authentic stamp and reliability towards consumer and source of attractiveness as well. McGuire (1978) pointed

out that celebrity can distribute the brand message and because consumer has special bonding with these celebrities that will ultimately increase brand awareness. McCracken (1989) defined that the source of attractiveness, successful endorsement with the society of the celebrities with that particular product. This kind of association may raise the consumer awareness towards brand. (Kwok Keung Tam. 2007).

Another concept which created brand perception is brand loyalty and it is one of the important parts of brand equity as well and it has direct relation to brand equity (Atilgan et al., 2005). Brand loyalty has a great impact on consumer perception and cognition while purchasing, consumer don't care about any price cut, greater quality or any other feature owned by their competitor. Brand loyalty can be evaluate by the repeat purchasing of the same brand that is defined by (Keller 1998), but some time you cannot measure brand loyalty through this way because of effective marketing strategies like placement and packaging you are able to retained the customers. Brand loyalty is like an asset and cost cutting for your company like a company with wide range of loyal customers that will decrease your promotion cost (Aaker, 1991). Now a day's companies do believe in that instead of making new customer retained the old ones that can be a competitive edge. Word of mouth is another benefit from brand loyalty customer because most of time brand loyal customers perform high recommendations of your brand product or services to their friends and customers. Eventually it will increase the loyal customer segment and also decrease your expense towards promotion.

As for as word of mouth concept so it is one of most cheapest, fastest and worthwhile in promotion strategies. Especially in the case when customer is looking for thing expensive or high involvement products. (Hewick 1998;, Marney 1995;, Silverman 1997). Consumers are more influenced by the informal way of communication while making purchasing decision rather than formal way (Bansal and Voyer 2000). Aaker (1991) suggest that loyalty can be more productive and effective when continuously improve your product line accordingly to your consumer needs and wants. Through efficient marketing research we could recognize the consumer dynamic needs and wants. That would be very useful to retain the loyal customers and increase its cluster size. Loyalty customers always need sufficient rewards which will make them more loyal. Like Tesco started club card in 1995, to give reward to its loyal customers and Tesco become the market leader when they started giving rewards to their loyal customer. You see that kind of rewards to your loyal customers could bring more customers and also your company on the top in the ranking. (Kwok Keung Tam. 2007).

Brand association is also important concept in the perception game. According to Aaker (1991) defined that its connection between memory and brand. Keller (1993, 1998) further defines the brand association into three basic components which are attributes, benefits and attitudes. Attributes are based on some specific properties or characteristics of any product. Product attribute further divided into two categories, product related attributes and non product related attributes. If we talk about product related attributes that concern with basic ingredients of any product like product features and if we talk about non product related attributes are those like packaging and customer perception about the product comes in this section.

Benefits the second component of brand association further divided into functional, symbolic and experimental. Functional component describe as the main feature of any brand product that communicate with customer needs or wants. Symbolic component belongs to the character of a brand and its association with consumer. Like designer clothing brand tell others about your personality, because every brand has some symbolic message for masses it would be like sophistication or trendiness. Experimental component defined as it relates to the emotional feeling of consumer. At the end the last component of brand association is attitudes, it describe as the on the whole judgment about some specific brand.

What consumer perceived about your brand and how you communicated with them. Brand association has an influence allot when consumer or customer thinking about fulfilling the need or want and brand loyalty is an integral part of brand association (Aaker, 1991). Brand association is actually an asset for any firm and it could be added value in different ways like they are very help to recover the information (Keller, 1998). Brand association always tries that consumer continuously intact with past experience and loyalty towards brand. Sometime consumer inclined to forget the brand so at that time brand association respond in such a way that consumer reminds the brand by heart.

The other major factor which brand association creates for its organization or its brand is positioning into the mind of the customer. Brand positioning is one of the important factors in the process of brand building. Positioning is like a unique selling point for your company and it has a great impact towards consumer cognition while purchasing. It is very hard to redundant your competitor on this ground where you're positioning your brand at the top. Some association can produce positive feeling towards brands like people have their own likes and dislikes. Marketers bring into play to create brand association for example we seen allot of celebrities promoted brand because of masses have their association with these celebrities, for brand association marketers use this strategy. There are so many similar products are available in the market but through brand association your product will be stand out among others and that gives you premium price. So once you get the successfully build your brand association and you continuously follow your consumer dynamic needs and wants, it's very hard for your competitor to compete you as a successful brand.(Kwok Keung Tam. 2007).

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **Introduction**

In chapter number two we investigated existing literature on the topic of research in depth. Major points which we discussed in previous chapter were on conceptual clarification and relevant literature review on this research study. The chapter which we are going to start is all about the justification of the chosen data collection methodology of research. As primary data is the focal point of research because our research result will be based on this. So that if we don't used the correct data collection methodology. It's really hard to get better-off. Further we will discuss the research objectives and aims in relation to the research methodology. Research philosophy and research approach will be defined in this section. In addition we will determine the research approach and research strategy options according to the research methodology because these all things should be synchronies for a productive result. At the end of this session we will identify the strong and weak points for this research methodology and trying to synchronize the whole lot with core research.

### **Research Aims and Objectives**

In the purchase of clothes through online channel, there are various factors that influence a customer's decision and choices. Why people go for online shopping and what are their preferences and usage patterns.

Therefore, the purpose of my research is to determine consumer's satisfaction level and what are their usage patterns, and who are the actually customers that do prefer online clothes shopping in London.

This study will serve as a descriptive research for the analysis of men's and women buying behavior through online shopping.



**Research Approach**

In research there are two main approaches, namely the deductive and inductive approaches. Deductive approach is to work from general to the specific goal. Few authors called that approach is top down approach. We might start with thinking about a theory about our research topic. After getting the theory in mind then we narrow it down into more specific hypotheses that we are looking for test. To address that hypothesis we narrow down this process to observation stage. The last stage would be confirmation which tells us that whether our hypothesis is matched with our proposed theory or not. As for as inductive approach is concern its works the other way stirring from specific to broader generalization and theory. Few authors called that approach is bottom up approach. In inductive approach we begin with observation factor. After observation then we go to general pattern and regularities, prepare hypotheses that we are looking for this research. After that hypotheses then we finally end up developing some general conclusion, rules or theories according to the research topic.

As we understand both approaches, above discussion in mind, inductive approach is more suitable for this research topic. Our research philosophy is more kind of human interpretation, their beliefs, values and experience. This research main purpose is to understand the customer perception regarding online shopping specially in online brand clothing industry. So it’s all about to try reading that black box of customer mind which is still untapped. Every person has its own interpretation of life and experience so we are looking for to identify the common believes and values which can help us to underline the conclusion.

The validity of this research is dependent on the ability to factor in and consider the human element that forms the fundamental basis of this study. Based on the observations made and the data collected in this research, theory and conclusions will be drawn; these will be largely based on human interpretation.

**Research Strategy**

(Unknown, 2007) in research strategy we will find out the way which we will dig out our data. There are few strategies which identified by Galliers (1991) almost fourteen different strategies are listing down. That divided into two parts first seven strategies comes under positivist path and other seven comes under interpretivism path which defined by Galliers (1991). Before going further to chose our methodology for my research, I will summaries the key facts of methodologies in the table, tried to highlight the strength and weakness of few of these strategies. In the following section I will justify the methodology which I will select for this research.

**Table 1**

Positivist	Interpretivism
Experiments	Subjective/Argumentative
Field Experiments	Action Research
Surveys	Reviews
Case studies	Case Study
Theorem proof	Descriptive / interpretive
Forecasting	Futures Research
Simulation	Role/game Playing

<http://www.is.cityu.edu.hk/staff/isrobert/phd/ch3.pdf>.

Survey strategy is usually combined with deductive approach. It is very common and popular strategy in business and management research and most of time it used to answer who, what, where, how much and how many questions. It’s a

very highly economical way of doing survey to gather the large amount of data from a mass population. Survey strategy is very authoritative by people in general and it does very easily understandable. We seen allot of survey happened on the internet or newspaper which defined the certain percentage of population are thinking or behave in a particular way. The survey strategy is used to collect the quantitative data and it can used to suggest possible reasons for particular relationships between different variables. In survey strategy we take sample of whole population which represents the particular population or our research segment at a very low cost. You will need to spend time to ensure that your selected sample is representative and designing your data collection and trying to get good response rate. After getting the primary data you have to analysis with different available techniques or software which is also a time consuming. The data collected by using survey strategy is unlikely to be as wide ranging as those collected by using other research strategies. It's very hard for the participants to recall the information and some time it is very hard tell about the truth. In survey strategy questionnaire is not only data collection method you can collect data with structured observation, structured interviews are mostly used methods.

### **Data Collection Methods**

Different methods are available to collect the primary data but as far as our research concern we are looking for consumer perception on clothes in which their beliefs, opinion and attitudes towards brand image are investigated. In this research we selected a method in a two different ways to get best out of it (questionnaire and structured interview). We will gathered primary data through questionnaire method as (Collis and Hussey1997) defined that questionnaire is a process of gathering primary data through questions which are designed with meaningful way and these questions will be asked to a sample of selected group of respondents (Palesa mahloele, 2011).There are two types of question, first one is open ended and other one is closed ended. In this research we will have selected both open ended and close ended. And for sampling we will used, convenience sampling because of time and financial limitation. Other method for primary would be a structured interview which will not be massive by number and questions. It will be used to just complement and redundant the biasness of our main method.

## **ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter we will define various data analysis method and will try to chose the appropriate method which compliment to research methodology. Strength and limitation of that data analysis tool will also include in this chapter. After deciding the analysis method then we will follow the procedure according to that method. Next we will include the primary data which will get from interviews and questionnaire. Subsequently in questionnaire section we adjoin various charts that complement and well describe the essence of data.

### **Data Analysis Method: Thematic Analysis**

In this research topic for analysis of data, thematic analysis is a suitable method. In qualitative research the most commonly used that method. Researcher identifies different patterns will found in the data and divided into categorizes the data by theme (Aronson, 1994; Gibson, 2006; Tere, 2006). Thematic analysis is used as grounded theory and development of cultural models; require more contribution and interpretation from the researcher. In thematic analysis we identify and describe both implicit and explicit ideas within the data it is not about counting explicit words or phrase. We defined different codes that address to different identified themes and applied to the raw data as summary markers for later



analysis. For this study themes were generated based on the raw data collected from directed responses in the questionnaires conducted.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Evaluation of Findings**

Online markets growing at a rapid pace in all over the world, So many businesses based in UK and Europe are expanding their operations in all over the world through this online channel. In 2011 another successful year for e-commerce business with the surplus of 68£ billion spend by online customers. The one piece of news which will especially please online retailers is the fact that this form of shopping is becoming popular across the world and not just in the western economies. A recent research has been done in Middle East by Euro monitor people really taken to internet shopping. The online customer spent almost 1.1 billion dollars in that year and they claim that it will be doubled in the year of 2016 around 2.2 billion dollars. In the meantime in China the number of online shoppers has hit a staggering 513 million. This surely will be seen as a huge opportunity for online businesses not already trading in this country.

UK online retail industry has been growing and strong and has reported another record growing Christmas period. All experts agree that growth will be continuing over the next twelve months. IMRG is predicting a massive fifteen percent growth in that industry in 2012. With e-commerce businesses getting better at providing their consumers with excellent products and prices as well as improving marketing campaigns, there is no reason why the upward trend should suddenly stop. Even the current tough economic climate affecting many of the western countries should not impact on e-commerce businesses as much as it may have on the more traditional retailers. Mainly due to the fact that it is much easier for online based ventures to capitalize on opportunities in almost any part of the world. With online markets growing at a rapid pace in the countries mentioned above, many businesses based in the UK and Europe are already expanding their operations into those developing areas. With political boundaries no longer stopping the expansion of e-commerce businesses, we can be fairly certain that this industry will not stop growing for some time yet. Interestingly, the view of general public towards shopping online is also increasing day by day. They having few issues while doing shopping online specially in clothes. Most of the consumer had concerns regarding clothes quality but concurrently those who follow any brand did not faced that kind of quality issues. Consumers do have their preference while choosing a brand and also have pre perceptions regarding different brands. Later in this chapter we will discussed the different factors those influence allot while purchasing a branded clothes.

### **Recommendations**

In recommendations the most important part is perception because customer using brand according to their perception. Brands can portrait their perception in customer mind through best services and qualities. It's very easy for customer to forget your brand but it's very hard to remove the bad experience from customer mindset. Create your brand image with your best qualities and people usually have emotional attachments with your brands. Retained your customer rather than making new customers. Once you have loyalty customers after some time you feel that those customers are actually a promotional activist for brand. Word of mouse is much faster than word of mouth so make sure you having good word of mouse. Most of the customer using online media because of convenience options so my recommendation is to make more user friendly websites with less bugs. Allot of customer we lost because of insecure of website and the way we doing the payment. So make sure that you meet all the benchmarks which set my market leaders. Over internet it's very

hard to cope up customer dynamic needs so all you have to do is to keep in touch with your customer and always tried to identify the customer needs and wants. Continuous improvement is also very important in competitive market especially over internet. At the end, customer perception can be made by the way our brand wants. Best quality and continuous improvement in services and products can be a lethal weapon for any company. Especially when we are talking about online purchasing where competition is much high so try to focus on loyal customers rather making new customers by giving them best quality and services.

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