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Consumers' preferences for private and national brand food products

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Abstract

Consumers' choice of private brands reflects distinct differences in terms of product categories, and indications are that demographic and psychographic factors are also influential in terms of the sales of private vs. national brand foods. This study investigated the relationship between selected demographic and psychographic variables and consumers' brand preferences for selected food products in a South African context. A mall intercept, interviewer-administered questionnaire was used to collect data ($n = 620$) in an urban area at prominent supermarkets. Findings revealed that consumers' choice of private brands is probably associated with the product category. Although the present study could not expose significant relationships with psychographics for different grocery products, certain demographic factors seem noteworthy. Home language and education level seemed to be more significant indicators of brand preference, which suggests that consumers' ability to interpret label information may be influential. This study concluded that brand preference depends on specific demographics for each product, and that psychographic factors were not significant in terms of product choice. Brand preference research therefore seems to be product and region specific and related to specific demographic variables.

Introduction and conceptual background

An increase in the competition between private and national brands in different food product categories in recent years (Cheng *et al*., 2007) was probably fuelled by an ongoing interest in brands and branding over time (Veloutsou *et al*., 2004; Zielke and Dobbelstein, 2007). While *national brands* are supported by the identity of manufacturers that aid to secure the trust and loyalty of consumers (Ostrow and Smith, 1988, p. 140), *private brands* unfortunately do not have the same support. Private brands that include store brands, private labels, distributor's brands, reseller brands, middleman brands, own brands, dealer brands (Ostrow and Smith, 1988, p. 188; Sampson, 2006) and even the so-called *generic products* are brand-free, no-name, house brands and unbranded products (Sampson, 2006). Consumers' preference for certain brands is generally based on prior experience (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2010, p. 481), which enables a selection of specific brands over others even though they may seem highly similar (Hornby, 2005). Consumers' brand preferences may however reflect their perceptions rather than a rational consideration of actual product characteristics (Bronnenberg *et al*., 2007). Due to limitations in research design, evidence that consumers' perceptions and preference for private brand products differ across different product categories and retail environments can unfortunately not be generalized across all food categories (Hansen *et al*., 2006; Mieres *et al*., 2006; Baltas and Argouslidis, 2007; Cheng *et al*., 2007).

Although private brand products are meant to be at least 10% cheaper than market leaders, they may be up to 28% cheaper than competitors on the shelves in supermarkets (ACNielsen, 2005). This is possible because additional expenses associated with research, development and the marketing of these products are minimal compared with what is spent on national brand products (Davies and Brito, 2004). In emerging markets, the price difference between private and national brands could be as high as 40% (ACNielsen, 2005). Despite their relative affordability, lower-income consumers do not necessarily buy private brand products. It is therefore not surprising that researchers have come to the conclusion that household income alone does not provide a clear indication to manufacturers and retail of consumers' interest in and preference for private and national brands (Baltas and Argouslidis, 2007). Once consumers have tried private brand products – irrespective of the product category – their risk perception of such

products is, however, reduced (Mieres *et al*., 2006). Consumers who usually purchase national brands are apparently more likely to switch to another national brand rather than to consider private brands if their product of choice is not available or when prices escalate (Baltas *et al*., 1997). Not surprisingly then, better-educated consumers and consumers with higher incomes are more likely to purchase private brand products than their counterparts (Baltas and Argouslidis, 2007) as they are better equipped to interpret label information, to compare different brands and to rationally distinguish cheaper private brands as good value for money (Richardson *et al*., 1996).

Cultural differences may explain differences in the success of private brands in different parts of the world (Richardson *et al*., 1996). Consumers' expectations of private brand products and their subsequent willingness to purchase private brands may also differ vastly (Omar *et al*., 2004; Veloutsou *et al*., 2004). Contrary to retailers' success with private brands in some European countries, it is not necessarily popular elsewhere (Uusitalo, 2001). South African manufacturers and retailers can therefore not assume the success of a new product based on sales in Europe and the US. The ACNielsen private brand report, which reflected on the sales of private brand products across the world, ranked South Africa in the eighth position of the top 10 fastest-growing private brand markets based on sales during 2003 when a growth of 28%, compared with a 7% growth in national brands was reported. Although no consumer data exist to explicate this surge in terms of who actually purchased the products, retailers' sales data can specify which products were sold and where they were sold.

Although ample evidence exists of consumers' brand preferences (Baltas and Argouslidis, 2007), research that specifically reflect on consumers' buying and choice behaviour in an emerging economy such as South Africa is lacking. Researchers that have specifically focused on demographic and socio-economic characteristics of consumers, to date, could not provide clear indications of consumers' brand choices in this context. Some researchers hence recommended that consumers' psychographic characteristics could be included in future research, which attempt to explicate why products are chosen (Ailawadi *et al*., 2001; Whelan and Davies, 2006; Solomon, 2011, p. 263).

Research aim and objectives

The aim of this study was to explore and describe consumers' preference for different private vs. national brand food products in a South African context and to determine and describe a possible relationship between consumers' psychographic and demographic characteristics and their preferences for private and national brand food products.

Research methodology

Measuring instrument

A structured questionnaire was used to conduct an interviewer-administered supermarket intercept survey in Potchefstroom in the North-West province in South Africa in 2008. Interviewer-administered surveys were chosen to prevent illiterate consumers, who are not able to read and write, from being excluded from the sample (Rousseau, 2007, p. 29). With supermarket intercept surveys, it is not possible to recruit a representative sample of the total population of the area, since each supermarket has its own target market characteristics (Zikmund and Babin, 2010, p. 213). However, research conducted in supermarkets is viewed as representative of the demographics of its immediate location (Aaker *et al*., 2007, p. 396) because the stores generally draw customers from their immediate surroundings. The aim of the study was to explore and describe responses representative of grocery purchasers of the specific supermarkets rather than the population of Potchefstroom in general. Exit interviews ensured that respondents were customers of the specific chosen retail outlet (Whelan and Davies, 2006).

The questionnaire was adapted from questionnaires designed by Coe (1971) and Ailawadi *et al*. (2001). Coe's preference questionnaire was designed to determine brand preferences for specific products, while Ailawadi's psychographic questionnaire measures psychographics related to brands in general. It was pre-tested (Jin and Suh, 2005) to determine the appropriateness of the wording in the South African context, use of concepts and time required for completion since the questionnaire has not yet been used in South Africa. The questionnaires were also not used in combination before. Ethical guidelines were followed, i.e. respondents were not forced or harassed and their participation was voluntary, anonymous and confidential (Zikmund and Babin, 2010, pp. 88–92). The questionnaire was translated to Afrikaans and Setswana, and then back-translated to English, to make it available in the three main languages of the area. Changes that were made to the original scales were kept minimal, for example, the word 'crisps' was replaced with 'chips', which is more familiar to South African consumers.

The questionnaire comprised of three questions. Question 1 was based on the brand preference questionnaire of Coe (1971), but products were changed to incorporate 25 products that were listed by ACNielsen (2003) as having a high market share in the private brand market in South Africa. The types of products were also available as national brands. Respondents indicated which of the listed products they had actually purchased before, also indicating which brand they preferred (Coe, 1971). Question 2 involved psychographic statements related to brands (Ailawadi *et al*., 2001) that required responses to a five-point Likert-type *Agreement* scale. The demographic questions used by Ailawadi *et al*. were replaced by Question 3, which requested demographic characteristics in accordance with a validated format compiled by Hardy (2008) for South Africa. Variables included age, gender, education level, employment status, marital and family status, home language as well as living standard measure (LSM). The latter is a widely used marketing research tool in South Africa that does not distinguish between races but enables a classification of people into specific groups based on degree of urbanization and their ownership of major household appliances [SAARF (South African Advertising Research Foundation), 2009]. Respondents therefore had to indicate which of the listed items they owned and were then classified into LSM category accordingly.

Study environment and population

Four established supermarkets that are found across the country were identified within a radius of 2 km in Potchefstroom. Supermarkets were chosen to minimize sample response bias as the

specific supermarket typologies represent different socio-economic strata (Veloutsou *et al*., 2004). Their proximity nevertheless allowed access to any supermarket they preferred or if they wished to obtain specific private brand products. One supermarket targets all income groups (LSM 1–10); another targets consumers in upper-income groups (LSM 7–10), while the other two target consumers in the middle- to high-income groups (LSM 4–10) and lower- to middle-income groups (LSM 4–7) respectively. Permission to collect data at the various supermarkets was obtained from the management of the supermarkets.

The researcher and 12 trained fieldworkers used a store intercept method to recruit customers. In South Africa, which is a multicultural country, respondents might experience language problems, such as comprehension difficulties when answering questions in a second language (Rousseau, 2007, p. 29). Therefore, fieldworkers were fluent in at least two of the three local home languages, i.e. Afrikaans, English and/or Setswana (Statistics South Africa, 2006) to enhance communication. Three fieldworkers were placed at each retail outlet every second day at different times over a 3-week period according to a roster to ensure that a wide variety of respondents were included in the sample.

A screening question was used to identify respondents who were familiar with food purchasing (Ailawadi *et al*., 2001). Respondents were approached, irrespective of age, gender and racial group as long as they were at the lawful age of 18 years (South Africa, 2006). Respondents received no remuneration for participation. It took approximately 20 min to complete an interviewer-administered questionnaire. After a questionnaire was completed, the fieldworker approached the next consumer exiting the supermarket. The sample size of similar studies varied between 180 (Ailawadi *et al*., 2001; Veloutsou *et al*., 2004) and 2800 (Dick *et al*., 1995) respondents with an average of 600–900 respondents (Whelan and Davies, 2006). A quota of 150 questionnaires for each of the four supermarkets was predetermined by Statistical Consultation Services of the North-West University.

Data analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to determine the demographical and preference characteristics of the sample. Cross-tabulations were then done to determine the relationship between demographic variables and brand preferences. Exploratory factor analysis was used to determine the latent variables pertaining to psychographic characteristics. The factors extracted through exploratory factor analysis were then used in stepwise logistic regression to determine the relationship between brand preferences, demographic and psychographic factors. Stepwise logistic regression was used to determine which factors best predicted private brand preference. The logistic regression produced odds ratios, which is important in interpreting logistic regression (Field, 2009, p. 270). Odds ratios smaller than 1 are generally transformed to the reciprocal odds ratio, which reverses the interpretation (Field, 2009, p. 155).

Validity and reliability issues

To ensure content validity, the preliminary questionnaire was evaluated by experts in the field before it was pre tested (Zikmund and Babin, 2010, p. 334). Factor analysis was used for data reduction and summation of data (Malhotra and Birks, 2007, p. 646) and to establish construct validity (Zikmund and Babin, 2010, p. 334) in terms of the psychographic questions. The percentage of variance explained was used to indicate convergent validity for each factor. In the logistic regression, predictive validity (criterion validity) (Zikmund and Babin, 2010, p. 251) was firstly determined with the R^2 of Nagelkerke as a measure of the goodness of fit of the logistic regression model. Secondly, the percentage correct classification gives an indication of how correct brand preference is predicted by the logistic regression model.

Reliability was attended to by calculating Cronbach alpha values (Malhotra and Birks, 2007, p. 358) during factor analysis of psychographic attributes to determine the internal consistency of responses (Ailawadi *et al*., 2001). Fieldworkers were also well trained before data collection commenced (Babbie, 2007, p. 146).

Results and discussion

Demographic characteristics of the sample

The larger representation of females ($n = 429$/69.2%; males: $n = 191$, 30.8%) in the sample ($n = 620$) was coincidental but can probably be explained in terms of the finding of Jin and Suh (2005), namely that food and grocery shopping is still mainly done by females (Lybeck *et al*., 2006; Cheng *et al*., 2007). The majority of respondents (56.3%) in the sample was between 30 and 59 years of age, while 24.0% ($n = 149$) were younger and 19.7% ($n = 122$) were older. A sizeable 21.7% ($n = 135$) only had 7 years or less of formal education; 34.1% ($n = 212$) had completed between 8 and 12 years of schooling; and 41.2% ($n = 256$) had completed some qualification on the tertiary level (missing data: $n = 18$/2.9%). The proportion of respondents that were either Afrikaans or English speaking (49.2%/$n = 305$) and those that spoke one of the native languages (50.4%/313) were well balanced. The latter may have implications for consumers' ability to interpret label information or relevant promotional materials that are predominantly done in English or Afrikaans. Marital status, which indicates household size, showed that more than half of the sample (52.9%/328) were living with a spouse or partner, while 36.8%/228 were single and 9.8%/61 were either divorced or widowed. Only 17.1% ($n = 106$) were students or unemployed; the rest worked full- (47.3%/$n = 294$) or part-time (36.3%/$n = 231$). According to LSM discriminators, 60.2% ($n = 374$) of the sample represented the higher socio-economic categories 7–10, while the characteristics of 27.9% ($n = 173$) were typical of the less affluent part of the population, i.e. LSM 4–6 and LSM 1–3 (7.1% /$n = 44$).

Respondents' brand preferences

From a list of 25 products, of which all were available as both private and national brands, respondents had to indicate their brand preferences in terms of products that they actually purchased from time to time. Table 1 presents the findings in descending order for private brand preference.

Some of the listed products such as savoury crackers, butter, frozen seafood and sweet biscuits were purchased by less than 50% of the respondents (Table 1), probably because they are not basic foods that are needed on a regular basis and because they are

Table 1 Respondents' preferences for different private and national brand food products

	Total		Private brand		National brand	
Products	N	% of N	n^1	%	n^2	%
Cooking oil	436	70.3	242	55.5	91	20.9
Dry pasta	413	66.6	157	38.0	190	46.0
Jam	404	65.2	111	27.5	250	61.9
Ice cream	362	58.4	82	22.7	220	60.8
Rice	564	91.0	103	18.3	441	78.2
Fruit juice	443	71.5	81	18.3	293	66.1
Soup	448	72.3	81	18.1	299	66.7
Frozen poultry	337	54.4	61	18.1	218	64.7
Tea	514	82.9	90	17.5	388	75.5
Mayonnaise	523	84.4	86	16.4	381	72.8
Savoury crackers	146	23.5	23	15.8	97	66.4
Butter	172	27.7	27	15.7	114	66.3
Frozen vegetables	374	60.3	58	15.5	262	70.1
Sweet biscuits	258	41.6	38	14.7	188	72.9
Canned vegetables	400	64.5	54	13.5	316	79.0
Milk	570	91.9	75	13.2	447	78.4
Cheese	447	72.1	59	13.2	315	70.5
Frozen seafood	197	31.8	25	12.7	142	72.1
Tomato sauce	533	86.0	62	11.6	451	84.6
Coffee	539	86.9	53	9.8	469	87.0
Margarine	524	84.5	50	9.5	434	82.8
Yogurt	463	74.7	37	8.0	362	78.2
Breakfast cereals	479	77.3	34	7.1	426	88.9
Chips	408	65.8	25	6.1	349	85.5
Carbonated beverages	328	52.9	20	6.1	294	89.6

n^1, the total for private brand; n^2, the total for national brand.

more luxurious and would therefore not end up in a trolley of low-income and price-sensitive consumers (Akbay and Jones, 2005).

The only type of product listed in terms of which the majority (55.5%/$n = 242$) favoured private brands over national brands was cooking oil. Only 20.9% ($n = 91$) preferred buying some national brand, while 23.6% ($n = 103$) did not mind the brand at all. Pasta buyers favoured national brands (46%/$n = 190$) slightly more so than private brands (38%/$n = 157$), while 16% ($n = 66$) were indecisive. These two products seemed to be the strongest contenders on the list in terms of private brands.

Between 61.9% and 89.6% of the respondents indicated that they preferred national brands when buying any of the remaining 23 products listed. Less than 10% of the sample preferred private brand coffee, margarine, yoghurt, breakfast cereals, chips and carbonated beverages. In a previous South African study (Erasmus, 1992), it was found that consumers are more particular about a product that is consumed on its own and where the taste would be distinct, or when a product is not necessarily kept in its original packaging so that the brand would not be obvious for others to see. This may explain consumers' lack of preference for the latter group of products offered with a private label and consumers' more favourable approach to private label oil and pasta. Pertinent differences in brand preference for different types of products confirm that it would not be valid to generalize about consumers' preference and satisfaction with private brands. Products should rather be investigated in terms of product categories, e.g. canned vegetables, frozen vegetables and toiletries. Follow-up panel discussions may be useful to reveal underlying reasons for consumers' brand choices.

This study concludes that apart from cooking oil and pasta, the chance that a consumer would purchase a private brand product in a supermarket seems to be less than 30% and even lower than 10% if the type of product represents a category where the brand would be recognizable during use or when the product's physical characteristics such as taste and texture would be distinguishable because the product is eaten on its own, for example cheese, mayonnaise and tomato sauce. Extant research indicates that consumers would be more willing to purchase private brands if they were better informed about the product characteristics (Miquel *et al*., 2002). Consumers who have been satisfied after purchasing a product before are also more likely to repeat such a purchase (Batra and Sinha, 2000). The challenge, therefore, seems to inform consumers and to encourage them to at least try out private brands.

Demographic characteristics and brand preferences

Phi coefficients were calculated to indicate a possible relationship between demographic characteristics and brand preferences. Gender, household size, employment status, LSM and marital status showed no or a small effect (phi ≈ 0.10) in terms of respondents' brand preferences for most of the products that were listed. This concurs with extant literature that proposes that family size, full-time employment and age do not significantly indicate private brand proneness (Baltas, 2003; Hansen *et al*., 2006). Medium effect (phi ≈ 0.30) sizes were found for a few products (dry pasta, savoury crackers and cheese) in terms of employment status and LSM, while marital status showed medium effect sizes for cheese only. Findings pertaining to small effect sizes for LSM (and subsequently social status) challenges previous research that associate higher social status with a preference for private brands (Veloutsou *et al*., 2004; Lybeck *et al*., 2006). This discrepancy merits further investigation through panel discussions.

The two demographic characteristics that revealed stronger effect sizes (phi ≈ 0.50) for a larger range of products were *home language* and *education level*. Home language inevitably involves cultural issues such as language (and failure to interpret product information and/or promotions as well as differences in eating patterns and product use). Relationships between language and brand preference have been confirmed in previous literature, specifically proclaiming cultural (Richardson *et al*., 1996), regional (Veloutsou *et al*., 2004) as well as ethnic group differences (Omar *et al*., 2004) in terms of brand preferences. The effect of home language on respondents' preference for soup powder is noteworthy as is further demonstrated in the bi-plot (Fig. 1). If a demographic factor is clustered close to a product brand preference, a stronger association exists between them and the closer together the symbols are, the stronger the relationship (Bartholomew *et al*., 2002, p. 91). Findings suggest that Sotho-speaking respondents preferred national brands (their ability to interpret label information and promotional materials may be limited), while the Afrikaans-speaking respondents are generally bilingual and may therefore be better informed, which may explain why they did not

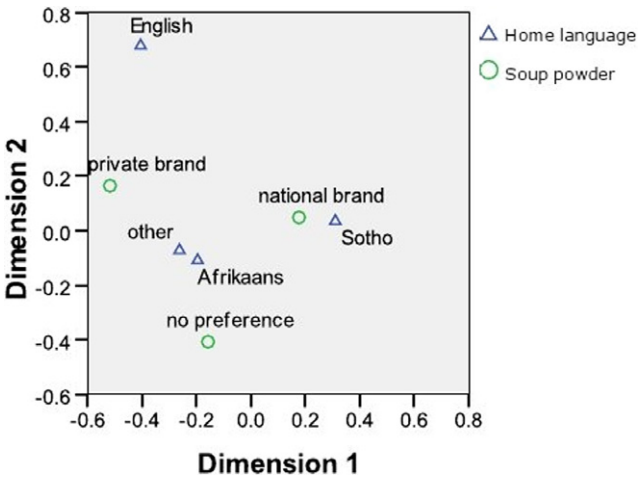

Figure 1 Bi-plot that displays the relationship between home language and soup powder brand preference.

show a brand preference. They are probably in a better position to make informed buying decisions and to use other product information apart from the brand name to conclude a purchase decision. Education level, on the other hand, gives a better indication of a consumer's cognitive ability to interpret information, to make an informed decision (whether it is to purchase a brand or not) and may even consider private brands as good value for money (Sethuraman, 2003). Literature suggests that higher levels of education are associated with a tendency to be less price sensitive and more private brand prone (Baltas, 2003). Consumers may, however, be inclined to purchase the more expensive national brands to reduce risk perception when they experience time pressure (Sethuraman and Cole, 1999).

Psychographic characteristics and brand preferences

The psychographic characteristics of the sample were investigated by subjecting their responses to 40 statements to exploratory factor analysis, and principal components with a Varimax rotation. Eight factors were distinguished during which five of the original psychographic statements were eliminated due to low correlation with the total, a negative effect on the total percentage of variance as well as their effect on the internal consistency (Cronbach's alphas). The factors were labelled in accordance with their content. The factor loadings varied between 0.284 and 0.772 across the eight factors, which concurred with the recommendation of a factor loading >0.21 for a sample size >600 (Stevens, 2009, p. 378). The percentage of total variance explained (51.07%) suggests convergent validity, i.e. good internal consistency, which is required for a valid measuring instrument. Means for the factors are visually presented and compared in Fig. 2.

The majority of respondents in this study were female (69.2%) and more than 70% of the respondents possessed a secondary or tertiary education, which might explain concurrence of the findings with that of Ailawadi *et al*. (2001), namely that females tend to be store loyal and that consumers with higher education levels tend to be quality conscious. The sample agreed (means ≥3.5 to <4) that they were *Price conscious planners* (Factor 3), *Quality conscious, Store and brand loyal* (Factor 1) and *Variety seeking* (Factor 7). To a lesser degree, they showed concern about *Storage space* (Factor 4), which would inevitably have influenced their trips to supermarkets and the amount of shopping done per trip to the store. They also seemed to be inclined to be *Conformists* (Factor 2) (means >3.0 to <3.5), which may influence efforts to change their buying behaviour and product choice. In terms of *Mavenism* (Factor 6), they seemed hesitant, i.e. they were not necessarily eagerly sharing views and experiences about shopping encounters with others.

Brand preference in terms of respondents' psychographic and demographic characteristics

Stepwise logistic regression was used to determine the relationship between consumers' private brand preference (dependant variable) and their psychographics and demographic characteristics. Demographics and psychographic factors were distinguished through exploratory factor analysis. Logistic regression was used to generate models from which it could be predicted whether respondents would be likely to prefer a private brand for a specific food product. To determine the predictive validity of the logistic regression models, respondents were back classified using the models. Low Nagelkerke R^2 values indicated that the logistic regression models did not fit the data very well (Field, 2009, p. 269), although the percentage of correct classifications for all the products that were used in the logistic regression were high. The logistic regression model was therefore considered useful to predict the likelihood of particular brand purchases.

Odds ratios were used to interpret the change in odds resulting from a unit change in the predictor: a ratio >1 indicated that for that specific demographic or psychographic factor, the odds were X times more likely that a respondent would prefer the private brand of that specific product. Odds ratios <1 were transformed to the reciprocal odds ratio, which reversed the interpretation. A reciprocal value >1 indicated that for that specific demographic or psychographic factor, the odds were Y times more likely that a respondent would not prefer the private brand of that product.

Examples of this are as follows: 92% of respondents' coffee brand preference (which was the highest of all products) was predicted correctly by the model where education and psychographic factor 1 (i.e. 'quality conscious, store and brand loyal' respondents) had odds ratios and reciprocal odds ratios >1, and may be useful in predicting coffee brand preference. Respondents with a secondary education seemed 12.5 times more likely (highly practically significant) to prefer a national brand rather than a private brand coffee, while respondents with tertiary education would 1.5 (not practically significant) times more likely not to prefer private brand coffee. Respondents who reacted positively to statements related to factor 1 (i.e. 'quality conscious, store and brand loyalty' shoppers) are 2.1 times more likely (not practically significant) to prefer private brands compared with respondents with lower factor 1 scores. Secondary education could therefore be used to predict a consumer's coffee brand

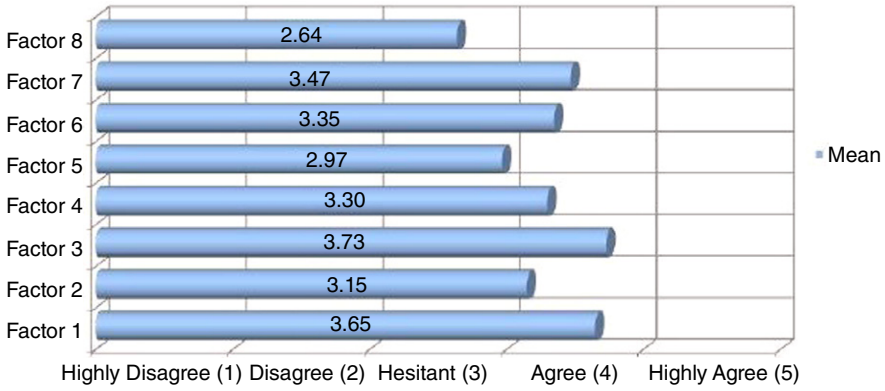

Figure 2 A comparison of means across the various factors. Factor 1: quality conscious, store and brand loyal; Factor 2: conformist; Factor 3: price-conscious planner; Factor 4: storage space; Factor 5: time and financial constraints; Factor 6: mavenism; Factor: 7: variety seeking; Factor 8: miscellaneous.

preference. The literature which suggests that education level influences private brand preference (Baltas and Argouslidis, 2007) is therefore confirmed.

Although literature suggests that a combination of demographic factors and psychographic factors could be useful to determine brand preference, home language and education level were identified as the most important influencing characteristics in this study. A logistic regression of demographic characteristics, psychographics and products suggested that gender, education level, home language and employment status were significant in terms of brand preference. Except for gender, this concurred with extant literature (Uusitalo, 2001; Baltas and Argouslidis, 2007). Findings that need to be investigated in supplementary research suggest an intricate association of individual demographic factors with specific private brand products as well as a stronger correlation of home language and qualification level with brand preference.

When investigating the influence of psychographic factors on brand preference, odds ratios >1 were found for six of the eight psychographic factors, but none were significant in terms of any of the products listed. In the context of this research, no evidence could therefore be found that psychographic factors significantly influence brand preference.

Conclusion

The research was performed in a specific geographic area in South Africa where consumers from various socio-economic levels could be recruited at prominent supermarkets. The setting was such that consumers could patronize any one of the outlets that were located within close proximity without much effort. Although the findings cannot be generalized to the entire South African population, the sample size ($n = 620$) and inclusion of consumers across all socio-economic levels warrant the use of findings as useful evidence in terms of better positioning of private brands. Ideally, vulnerable consumer groups should be encouraged to try these products to benefit from pertinent benefits associated with private brand food products, namely affordability and value for money.

This study confirmed that brand preference research should be product specific and that demographic questions should be included to acknowledge the complex interrelation of variables that may affect consumers' food preferences. Findings suggest that the type of private brand products that are offered in the marketplace need to be revised as all products do not seem equally viable. Some of the private brand products that were listed in this investigation were purchased by less than 10% of the respondents, while the majority were purchased by less than 30% of the respondents. Basic food products seem to be more viable carrying private brands. More expensive products and luxuries such as seafood and sweet biscuits were not very popular in the private brand category, probably because national brands are trusted and, hence, have a better chance of standing up to consumers' expectations. The investigation of the relevance of psychographic factors in terms of private brand preference revealed that, in the context of this research, food shoppers not only seemed price conscious, they were also quality conscious. That probably contributed to their self-declared brand loyalty. Switching brands when they were satisfied with products would therefore not only be hard to do, but would also be time consuming and risky. Respondents did not reveal typical mavenist behaviour in terms of food purchases. When they were satisfied with private brand products, they not necessarily shared their brand satisfaction through word of mouth. In addition, buying a cheaper private brand may not necessarily reflect positive on consumers' self-images.

The promotion of private brands is further complicated if (as was the case in this research) consumers are unable to interpret the language used in promotional material and on labelling. Because private brands are not advertised extensively, a communication gap exists. The benefits reaped by the marketing strategies associated with private brands (for example minimal advertising) may therefore be to the detriment of these brands irrespective of the fact that the store image is supposed to stand in for brand image. Consumers are probably not well informed about private brand products in general, and due to an inclination to associate cheaper products with lower quality, the image of private brand products may be put at risk.

Despite indications of a significant increase in sales figures for private brands in recent years in South Africa, this study suggests that national brands are predominantly preferred over private brands for the majority of products irrespective of demographic and psychographic factors. Supermarkets were chosen to include respondents from different LSM groups. Contrary to expectations, even consumers from lower LSM groups who could benefit financially when buying private brands did not favour these products.

Demographic factors, such as LSM, therefore do not seem to provide guidelines in terms of viable markets for private brand products, although language and education level that may affect consumers' ability to interpret label information in the absence of other communication may seem influential.

Recommendations for future research

It is recommended that retailers and manufacturers determine the demographic and psychographic profile of their target market for a specific product when producing or marketing private brand food products. A more extensive investigation that includes a broader range of products is therefore proposed.

A study among a representative sample would provide generalizable findings for the population. The inclusion of qualitative methods would be valuable to gain an understanding of reasons for consumers' brand preferences.

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