

THE MEAN END CHAIN THEORY FOR PRIVATE LABEL BRAND (PLB)

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Abstract: For Malaysians, save money and health benefits are identified as views that motivate consumers purchase of private label brand (PLB). The purpose of this paper is to investigate how consumers from a developing country background such as in Malaysia decide to purchase a Private Label Brand (PLB) product. Although this paper is a conceptual paper in order to investigate the scenario of PLB consumer acceptance in Malaysia but the literature discussed in this paper is using the Scopus database and high citation (restricted from 2011 to 2021) which help in generalizing the study. The use of the means-end chain (MEC) approach is discussed as a measure of attributes, consequences and values of locally produced products. It is better to comprehend the MEC element in consumer decision making so that it can be used as guidance in PLB. The usefulness of MEC studies in the framework of a consumer-oriented food product design is evaluated and future research trends in this area are discussed and this study identifies the consumers' motivations in buying local foods and examines the motivation differences between rural and urban locations. The findings are hoped can give insights for the government and individual businesses.

Keywords: Consumer Decision Process, Means-End Chain, Perceived Quality, Perceived Risk, Perceived Value, Price

1. Introduction

Consumer-oriented food product design is a market-based innovation concept that emphasizes on consumers' present and future demands, as well as the factors that influence them, to create new and/or enhanced food items with added value (Grunert et al., 1995). The means-end chain theory (MEC) has been proposed as a viable approach to implement consumer-focused food product design in academic literature (Gutman, 1982, Olson & Reynolds, 2003). By illustrating how specific product qualities, MEC is supposed to help people grasp the reasons why they might consume food. The main aim of this paper is to discuss the element of Mean End Chain elements, such as price, perceived quality, perceived value and perceived risk toward consumer decision of private label brand.

Although the term Private Label Brand or Store Brand has recently gained popularity in several nations, like the United States and Europe, there has not been much discussion of it in the Malaysian market, especially in terms of consumers. Store brands and private label brands are important competitors in many international markets. It is having a remarkable amount of success in European nations, particularly since dollar share rates of penetration normally run from 30 percent to 40 percent. Even though Private Label Brand is generally less expensive than National brands, Malaysian consumers have yet to accept them. In order for consumers to conserve their money and use it to buy more essential items for their needs, it is critical to raise consumer knowledge of and interest in Private Label Brand products.

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DOSM, (2021) claims that over time, the retail industry has traditionally risen rapidly and continually. With sales worth RM 133.9 billion in 2022, the retail business grew by 15.2 percent. This amount has been broken down into three categories: motor vehicles (RM 15.7 billion), retail trade (RM58.3 billion), and wholesale trade (RM59.9 billion). The fact that international hypermarkets dominate the Malaysian retail sector indicates that other people are the actual proprietors. However, the penetration rate is barely 2 percent in Malaysia. Private Label Brand products are a part of the retail sector's component industry that offers goods and even services to the community while continuously enhancing those offerings.

Private (store brands, retailer brands, and own brands) Label were the brands primarily sold by retailers and distributors in retail chains. In the 1960s, national (producer) brands dominated the market, which was a remnant of the previous century. These are manufactured by a third party but branded, labeled and sold by another retailer. Private Label Product are often CPG (consumer packaged goods) or FMGC (fast-moving consumer goods) – these can include staple food items such as milk and canned vegetables as well as beauty products, paper products, soft drinks and many more that consumers will add to their weekly shop.

According to Quelch and Harding, (1996) and Silverstein and Hirschohn, (1994), the popularity of Private Label Brand is strongly correlated with how consumers perceive the items. When consumers believe that a product's quality is higher, they are more inclined to buy it and stick with the brand (Cunha et, al., 2011). Private Label Brand development can be divided into four major phases: (Blazeska, 2013); Private Label Brand products that were inexpensive and of inferior quality characterized the initial stage. They shared a name with a store or chain of stores. They lacked brand identification components like packaging, colour, slogans, logos, jingles, and design. Private Label Brand acquired several components of brand identification during the second stage, including their own name, symbol, colour, design, and occasionally slogan. At this point, products had a certain level of quality with a still-competitively low price. Private Label Brand with enhanced quality and fair prices that are nonetheless less expensive than those of the national brands define the third stage. The primary factor that lures and keeps the clients is still the pricing. The last, undefined stage of evolution will be characterized by the dominance of private brands in specific product categories or by close collaboration between national and private brands.

In 2000, the Modern Private Label Brand products have evolved from their origins 40 years ago and developed into strategy-focused, differentiated, data-driven and consumer obsessed brands. The largest market for private-label products is primarily the more mature European retail market. Comparatively, Private Label still has much room for growth. However, Private Label Brand will also constitute a competitive challenge for manufacturer brands in regions of the world where Private Label Brand are currently underdeveloped. For example, market shares of Private label brand are relatively low in Latin America such Argentina (4.5 percent), Brazil (0.9 percent), Chile (5.2 percent), and Mexico (1.7 percent), Russia (.8 percent), Turkey (7.7percent), Serbia (2.4percent), and Ukraine (0.3 percent), and Asia such as China (.3 percent), South Korea (5.5percent), Malaysia only (2.6 percent) (Euro panel, 2009). Malaysia's retail industry has over the years contributed to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the nation, with its wholesale and retail trade sales totaling RM112.8 billion (DOSM, 2021). The private label brand is one of these, and it contributes to this total (GDP). Malaysian customers are still uncertain about private label goods and services, nevertheless Geyskens, Keller, Dekimpe, and Jong, (2018), stated that Private Label Brand offer comparable items or services at prices that are typically 15 percent to 30 percent less than those of other brands while maintaining acceptable quality. People can use this private label brand instead of sticking with their favourite national brands and save money when purchasing items from these stores. This has been supported by Nielson, (2014) study which revealed that 35 percent of Malaysians concur that Private Label Brand are good alternatives to National Brands. Private Label Brands are growing and increasing market share in a variety of product categories, including consumer goods, textiles, home appliances, and electronic gadgets, as well as in financial and insurance services, according to Miquel-Romero et al., (2014). However, PLB Product sold both food and non-food items in Malaysia under their brand name, including mineral water, biscuits, beauty products, pampers, hardware tools, and so on.

2.0 Mean End Theory and decision making

The book "Understanding Consumer Decision Making: The Means-End Approach to Marketing and Advertising Strategy," written by Olson and Reynolds (2003), provided the essential understanding of the MEC. Since then, the MEC has been successfully verified by empirical investigations and applied in a variety of academic and managerial disciplines, although no comprehensive literature review has been published about it. By critically analyzing the scholarly publications and articles, this study lays the path for the status quo of the MEC theory. As MEC is widely used in many sectors, such as advertising, brand equity analysis, consumer participation, and consumer behaviour, this contribution is not only academic but also has a practical use (Borgardt, 2018). This paper summarizes the scientific literature published between 2001 and 2021, describes the research concerns, and provides a methodological overview of those issues. The report also summarizes the research's key areas of study and highlights its findings. Finally, the report highlights potential areas for further investigation. The theoretical framework is based on a comprehensive review of journal articles and academic papers in the Scopus database, and after applying inclusion and exclusion criteria, only 49 documents relating to the topic were located. The investigation's findings suggest that there are chances for elevating MEC to a motivational view and taking a dynamic approach to it.

The study of consumer behaviour is a huge, intricate, and dynamic field. A crucial factor that can lead to a particular action is intention. Actual behaviour can be predicted by intention (Ajzen, 1991). In contrast, a purchase intention denotes "the likelihood that customers will intend to buy or be willing to buy a specific good or service in the future" (Wu et al., 2011). Purchase intention is defined by Ajzen (1988), as a person's perceived likelihood of engaging in a particular behaviour and is a predictor of an actual behaviour. The perceived likelihood that a person will carry out a certain behaviour is referred to as behavioural intention (Ajzen, 1988). Compared to other cognitions such as attitudes, norms, and perceived behavioural control, the purpose is a better predictor of behaviour (McEachan, Conner, Taylor & Lawton, 2011).

The outcome of PLB's intent Natalya, Cho and Lee, (2020), conducted research on private label brands in Korea and found that price and quality have an impact on consumers' purchase intentions. According to a study by Jung and Jessie, (2018), perceived value accounts for 85 percent of the variation in the purchase intentions of clothing, showing that it is a reliable predictor of those intentions. The results showed that price and perceived quality have a positive association with perceived value (for clothing) only indirectly.

The consumer decision-making process is the way in which customers become aware of and identify their needs, get knowledge about the best ways to address those needs, assess various available options, decide what to buy, and then assess their purchase. The conventional approach to consumer decision-making is when consumers go through five steps in the "five-stage model of the consumer buying process" while making a purchase of a good or service for PLB product. To effectively drive the consumer toward purchase, a marketer must be aware of these phases. The product, effectively engage customers, and complete the deal (Kotler and Keller, 2012). This is described in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Consumer Decision making process



For examples; in the first stage consumer decision making process are need recognition occurs when a consumer exactly determines their needs of PLB product. Consumers may feel like they are missing out something and needs to address this issue so as to fill in the gap. Then, the consumer will search the information for PLB. In the stage, the information search stage in the buyer decision process tends to change continually as consumers require obtaining more and more information about products which can satisfy their needs considering the attributes based on MEC. Third decision making process; this step involves evaluating different alternatives that are available in the market. Once consumer has determined their need, they will start seeking out the best option available. Next step is decision making process; When all the above stages have passed, the customer has now finally decided to make a purchase of PLB product. Fifth decision making process; the purchase of the product is followed by post-purchase evaluation which refers to analyzing as to whether the product was favorable or not and informs other toward PLB product experience.

However, Solomon, Bamossy, Askegaard and Hogg (2006) criticized the traditional model by saying that it is a rational perspective, but people may behave irrationally "such a process is not an accurate portrayal of many of our purchase decisions". Solomon et. al. (2006) characterized the decision-making process as the amount of effort that goes into the decision each time it must be made. They found it convenient to think concerning a continuum, which starts with habitual decision-making and ends with extended problem solving. Extended problem-solving phase is similar to tradition decision-making process. Limited problem-solving is usually more straightforward and simpler. People instead use simple decision rules to choose among alternatives. Habitual decision-making refers to decisions that are made with little or no conscious effort – to make choices characterized by automatically with minimal effort and without conscious control. However, Schiffman and Kanuk (2004) revealed that until now there is no one right answer, but it is possible to follow the tendencies and shed light on some processes.

Other than that, according to research by Cunha, Spers and Zylbersztajn, (2011) and Song (2012), consumers base their purchasing decisions on factors such as brand name, price, outward appearance, perceived quality, value, and concern for environmental impact. Customers have favored these manufacturing brands because of their high standards of performance, quality, and emotional resonance with events, feelings, and memories. However, the results confirm the previous research that food choice is primarily considered in terms of price and health benefits (Vickers, 1993), particularly when respondents have a lower family income (Ostrom, 2006). Happy feeling is strongly valued for consumers to achieve as the end goal for this situation.

3.0 Price

One of the components of the Mean End Chain theory is the price. The price, as defined by Kotler (2000) and Kotler and Keller, (2012), is the sum of money charged for a good or service. Albari

and Safitri, (2018) defined price as one of the most important market cues in consumer decision-making, in contrast to Lai, (2017) who defined price as a probability to pay and customer decision.

Scitovszky and Tibor, (1945) observed that the use of price as an indicator of product quality is not irrational however it represents a belief that price in the marketplace is determined by the interplay of the forces of competitive supply and demand. Such forces would lead to a "natural" ordering of competing products on a price scale, resulting in a strong actual positive relationship between price and product quality. Thus, given the belief that price and quality are positively related, it is natural that consumers would use price as an indicator of quality. Subsequently, other economic and marketing theorists expanded the argument to include other signals of product quality such as brand and store names and advertising expenditures. In price perception according to Monroe and Krishnan, (1985), using Monroe's conceptualization of perceived value, provided a model relating price, perceived quality, perceived sacrifice, perceived value, and willingness to buy. Price has both objective external properties and subjective internal representations that are derived from the perceptions of price, thus resulting in some meaning to consumers (Jacoby & Jerry, 1977).

Higher prices lead to higher perceived quality and consequently to a greater willingness to buy. At the same time, the higher price represents a monetary measure of what must be sacrificed to purchase the good, leading to a reduced willingness to buy. The cognitive trade-off between perceptions of quality and sacrifice results in perceptions of value. Buyers generally have a set of prices that are acceptable to pay for a considered purchase, rather than a single price (Monroe & Susan, 1981). According to Rao and Monroe (1989), discovered price and quality inference for consumer products, has a positive relationship. Consumers who feel higher quality brands are in general higher priced (who believe in you get what you pay for) will be more likely to pay greater premiums.

However, Rainer, Hans and Michael (2017) discover many consumers in German perceive high prices as signals of high quality, yet researchers tend to find only low average correlations between price and objective quality for food private label has a negative correlation coefficient. A German consumer panel with more than 30,000 households reveals market shares and paid prices. However, Ruiz et. al., (2018), discover study in Spain (1400 respondent), the price is not the only determining factor in a consumer's decision-making process, which is also affected by those such as convenience and good value for money.

Chandon, Morwitz and Reinartz (2004) found that price promotions were more effective when the benefits of the promotions were congruent with the type of products (i.e., hedonic vs. utilitarian products). Utilitarian benefits of a specific choice alternative are given more weight when consumers make a utilitarian purchase decision and that hedonic benefits are given more weight when consumers make a true for a hedonic product. However, Stany, Tan and Yeo (2015) found that price for private labels are found to be ineffective in enhancing the purchase decision of consumers in Malaysia.

4.0 Perceived Quality

The second component of the Mean End Chain Theory is perceived quality. Retailers do not have as much control over the production process and the level of product quality because they purchase Private Label Brand products from third-party producers. Perceived quality is defined as the consumer's assessment regarding a product's overall excellence or superiority (Zeithaml, 1988). According to a study by Rao and Monroe, (1989), there is a strong correlation between consumer product quality and price.

However, Batra and Sinha, (2000), revealed that the association between (high) price and quality must be reinforced; consumers must be clearly able to see the value-added. It means that if the Private Label Brand does not add value into their product consumer tend to purchase other brands. Meanwhile, in other study by Jung and Jessie, (2018), discovered the trade-of between perceived quality (sought or gain) and perceived sacrifice (aversion or losses occurred) and resulting in perceived value by consumer product. Study by Raj and Catherine, (1999), found perceived quality differential of store brand will be

accepted by consumers (willingness to pay for higher premium for a national brand) if consumer perceived that a store brand is lower in quality than a national brand. However, Jayakrishnan et al., (2016), revealed that the product familiarity has a significant influence on perceived quality of private labels. Unlike prices, product quality is difficult to change and cannot be adjusted quickly. Product quality also has the critical task of justifying any price premium and ensuring a competitive advantage (Jan-Benedict et al., 2010). Despite the progress in Private Label Brand product quality offered, there is still considerably more uncertainty rather than National Brand.

5.0 Perceived value

Third elements of Mean End chain Theory is perceived value. According to Rini and Andradea, (2012) define perceived value as a customer's evaluation of all the benefits and the cost of an offering. Meanwhile Holbrook, (1999) describes value as a "trade-off" between benefits and sacrifice. The perception of value in turn directly influences willingness to buy. Monroe and Krishnan, (1985) suggested such a relationship when hypothesizing that value for the money would have a stronger relationship to perceived likelihood of purchase than would perceive quality. Perceived value is a central determinant for consumers in pre-purchase and post-purchase product evaluations. Perceived value refers to consumer's overall assessment of the utility of a product based on perceptions of what is received and what is given (Zeithaml, 1988). The perceptions of value would increase as price increases from below the buyers' lower acceptable price limit to some acceptable price within their acceptable price range.

The argument of perceived value of Private Label Brand study by Demirgüne, (2015), revealed that perceived value is anticipated to pioneer perceived willingness to pay for the product. Study by Anselmsson, Burt and Tunca, (2017), reported that consumers are more concerned with the value of private labels than with quality. Study by Ruiz-Real et. al., (2018), in Spain discovered not all brands have the same value for consumers, with the existence of the concept of high and low value of Private Label Brand product.

6.0 Perceived Risk

The other extended element of Means End Chain theory is Perceived risk. Perceived risk relates to the likely negative outcome resulting from a purchase, in case the products or services actual performance does not meet expectations (Lin, 2008). Private Label Brand buying has been greatly affected by a number of consumer factors such as perceived risk and attitude (Batra & Sinha, 2000).

The resulting argument of perceived risk by Kakkos, Trivellas and Sdrolias (2015) revealed that the lower perceived risk exhibits a significant, positive relationship with intentions to purchase Private Label Brand product, Mostafa and Elseidi, (2018) found that retail managers should focus on the enhancement of both store image and familiarity with PLB to leverage consumers' perceptions with respect to PLB quality and risk to achieve differentiation and to increase sales and the familiarity with PLB directly affects consumers' perceived quality and perceived risk, while it indirectly influences consumers' willingness to buy Private Label Brand product. Fathony and Primidya (2018), stated that perceived risk can influence attitude to buy private labels When the consumers are not sure with private label have perception of big risks, it can reduce someone's intention to buy private labels. However, making a poor purchasing decision is a significant risk factor, as customers perceive Private Label Brand products to be inferior to national brands in terms of reliability, prestige, and quality features.

7.0 Conclusion and recommendations

This major objective of this paper is to analyze the key theoretical ideas, methodological frameworks, and research issues through a systematic assessment of the literature (49 articles) found in the Scopus databases that were published in English from 2001 to 2021 by utilizing the Mean End Chain Theory in relation to this investigation.

Hopefully, this study could help to provide an integrated and synthesized review of the present state of knowledge in the MEC field and show that this field of study is developing and becoming more significant in both academia and management. It also looks at the frameworks that are now in place, any gaps that exist, and potential future research orientations. All scientists working on MEC-related projects can benefit from this material. The study identifies prospects for the MEC element to be used in a dynamic perspective and for the MEC's epistemological standing to be extended to one of motivation.

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