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Product Attributes and Retail Format Choice among U.S. Apparel Purchasers

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ABSTRACT

Due to the wide variety of retail formats in which apparel is sold, apparel retailers in the U.S. face unprecedented competitive pressure. The purpose of this study is to identify the linkage between product attributes sought by apparel purchasers and their ultimate choice of retail format. Binary logistic regression is used to analyze the importance of five categories of product attributes including price attributes, physical attributes, usage attributes, brand attributes and fashion attributes among apparel shoppers within seven distinct retail formats (N = 2,875). Results indicate distinctive linkages between product attributes related to price, physical product attributes, brand attributes, usage attributes, and fashion attributes and the ultimate retail format choice for apparel. Unique groups of predictors emerge as drivers of format choice, which provides distinct profiles of each store format in terms of attributes sought by purchasers.

Keywords: U.S. retail industry, apparel marketing, product attributes, retail format

Introduction

Apparel products are sold in a wide variety of retail formats in the U.S., creating intense competitive pressure for retailers from both intra-type and inter-type competitors. While the competitive intensity in the sector provides unprecedented variety and convenience for apparel shoppers, it creates a major challenge for retailers in terms of understanding the drivers of format choice under current competitive conditions. Considering the range of retail formats in which apparel is sold, apparel retailers may struggle to find the correct positioning and create differentiation between their product offerings and those of competitors.

Due to the number and variety of competitors, apparel may be one of the most challenging sectors in which a U.S. retailer can operate. At the low end of the market, discounters such as Wal-Mart and Target offer everyday low prices on a wide range of apparel products as part of a broader one-stop shopping concept that includes a variety of unrelated product categories (e.g., food, general merchandise). Value department stores such as Kohl's also offer low prices, frequent promotions, and familiar brands with which apparel shoppers are comfortable. Value specialty stores (e.g., Old Navy, Fashion Bug) offer trendy/popular merchandise at very low prices. Likewise, off-price stores such as TJ Maxx and Marshalls offer everyday low prices on familiar, popular brands.

Rising toward the middle market, mainstream department stores such as JC Penney and Macy's offer familiar and popular brands, but usually provide a slightly higher level of quality and a slightly deeper assortment. Lifestyle specialty retailers (e.g., Gap, Banana Republic) operate somewhere between the middle and upper market, offering high quality, trendy apparel, usually at higher prices than value and department stores. At the high end of the market, upscale department stores such as Nordstrom and Neiman-Marcus offer high quality, designer brands associated with exclusivity and premium prices.

Previous research examines retail format choice based on desired store level attributes such as pricing policies, product assortment, customer service (Arnold, 1997; Grewal, Levy, Mehrotra, & Sharma, 1999; Seiders & Tigert, 2000; Hansen & Solgaard, 2004; Fox, Montgomery & Lodish, 2004). The importance of product level attributes is also investigated in several studies (e.g., Kahle, 1986; Shim & Kotsiopulos, 1992; Shim & Bickle, 1994; Baker, Parasuraman, Grewal, & Voss, 2002; Kim & Chen-Yu, 2005; Moore & Carpenter, 2006). However, few of these product level studies attempt to link product attributes to shoppers' ultimate choice of retail format. Only Shim and Kotsiopulos (1992), Shim and Bickle (1994) and Moore and Carpenter (2006) examine the effect of product attributes across multiple retail formats. Further, none of these studies includes the full range of retail formats in which apparel is currently sold. Therefore, updated information on the effect of product attributes across a broad range of retail formats is needed to further our understanding of retail format choice for apparel under current competitive conditions.

This exploratory research investigates the linkage between five categories of product attributes sought by apparel purchasers (price attributes, brand attributes, physical attributes, usage attributes, and fashion attributes) and their ultimate choice of retail format among seven distinct retail formats (discounters, value department stores, mainstream department stores, upscale department stores, value specialty stores, lifestyle specialty stores, and off-price stores). A unique pattern of predictors (product attributes) is uncovered for each of the seven retail formats, providing timely and useful information to inform the marketing strategies of apparel retailers.

Review of the Literature

Store level attributes that influence the consumer's choice of retail format receive considerable attention in the literature. A number of studies specifically highlight the importance of product assortment, pricing, and customer service in the process of selecting a retail format (Arnold, 1997; Grewal *et al.*, 1999; Seiders & Tigert, 2000; Hansen & Solgaard, 2004). Other researchers note the importance of store environment and atmosphere (Donovan, Rossiter, Marcoolyn, & Nesdale, 1994; Turley & Milliman, 2000). A more recent study by Fox, Montgomery & Lodish (2004) reports that product assortment, promotion, and to a lesser degree, price, are important criteria in the choice of retail format.

In contrast to store attributes, the effect of product attributes on retail format choice receives less attention in the literature. A number of studies examine product attributes sought, in general, without linking the product attributes to retail format choice. For example, Cassill and Drake (1987) identify several product attributes evaluated when selecting apparel products including brand, quality of construction, fiber content, price, good buy, good fit, durability, fabric type and quality, ease-of-care, beautiful/attractive, fashionable, color, and prestige. Based on previous research, Eckman, Damhorst and Kadolph (1990) investigate the importance of product attributes such as price, brand, coordination with wardrobe, product composition, style, color/pattern, fit, fabric, fiber content, care, durability, quality, construction and fabric. Findings indicate that styling is the most important criteria to consumers, followed by color/pattern, fit, fabric, appearance, and price. Other researchers report that shoppers place importance on products that provide a good value, fashionable items, and low prices when choosing a retail store (Kahle, 1986; Baker *et al.*, 2002). However, these studies do not link product attributes to choice of retail format.

Although not a recent study, Shim and Kotsiopulos (1992) examine a broad and comprehensive list of both store and product attributes in relation to retail format choice. The study includes four retail formats (discount stores, specialty stores, department stores, and catalogs) and seven categories of attributes (sales personnel, customer services, visual image of the store, price/return policies, easy access, brand/fashion, and quality/variety). The findings indicate that shoppers of discount stores place importance on price, while quality and variety of style are not of concern (Shim & Kotsiopulos, 1992). In contrast, specialty store shoppers place importance on quality, variety of style, and brand, while price is not of concern. Interestingly, the study reports that no attributes are significant predictors of department store patronage.

Shim & Bickle (1994) examine product attributes as a part of benefit segmentation in relation to choice of retail format. The research indentifies symbolic/instrumental users of clothing who are concerned with social status, fashionability and prestige, noting that these shoppers tend to shop at upscale/better department stores and specialty stores. A practical/conservative group is also identified, concerned with environmental, functional, and comfort aspects of clothing rather than fashionability. This group tends to shop at regular department stores. Lastly, a group of apathetic users of clothing is identified, with these shoppers being the least concerned with fashionability and shopping primarily at discount stores.

A more recent study by Kim & Chen-Yu (2005) is narrower in scope, examining influential store attributes among apparel shoppers in discount stores across South Korean and U.S. consumers. The findings indicate that compared to South Korean respondents, U.S. respondents consider product attributes to be more important when choosing a retail format. The study identified economy-conscious participants and brand-conscious participants, finding that discount shoppers in the economy-conscious segment place greater importance on low prices and product variety as compared to those in the brand-conscious segment.

Research by Moore and Carpenter (2006) examines the effect of price cues on retail format choice among apparel shoppers using the established price cue framework of Lichtenstein, Netemeyer & Burton (1990), reporting that price conscious consumers frequently patronize value department stores, off-price retailers, and mass merchants. However, the researchers also note that price conscious consumers show no aversion to shopping in higher price formats (e.g., upscale department stores). Sale proneness is also related to shopping in low price formats, while prestige sensitivity has a positive effect on patronage of upscale department stores but not specialty stores. Further, consumers who are prestige sensitive do not patronize value department stores and mass merchants.

Methods

Data for the study are drawn from Retail Forward's ShopperScape database (www.retailforward.com). Retail Forward collects shopping data from an online panel of consumers each month, focusing on shopping behavior in a variety of retail formats and product categories. The panel includes nearly one million households and nearly three million individuals in the U.S. Consumers are recruited for participation through more than twenty recruiting partners including large web portals, specialized web communities, web aggregators, and Internet advertising firms subject to regular recruiting and purging cycles. Survey respondents are the self-designated primary shopper in their household and earn points for participation which can be exchanged for cash, prizes, or charity donations as incentives. The average monthly response rate for the survey is approximately 46%. No panelist is permitted to participate in more than two surveys per month.

Measurement

A key objective of the current study is to examine groups of apparel shoppers based on primary choice of shopping format. The ShopperScape database classifies respondents based on the retail format where they purchase the majority of apparel for themselves. In order to insure that respondents understand the difference between each retail format, respondents are provided with examples of specific retailers from each format: discounters (e.g., Wal-Mart, Target, K-Mart), value department stores (e.g., Kohl's), mainstream department stores (e.g., JC Penney, Macy's, Dillard's, Belk), upscale department stores (e.g., Nordstrom, Neiman-Marcus, Saks 5th Ave.), value specialty stores (e.g., Old Navy, Dress Barn, Fashion Bug), lifestyle specialty stores (e.g., Gap, Chico's, Ann Taylor, Banana Republic, Limited), and off-price stores (e.g., TJ Maxx, Marshalls, Ross Stores, Stein Mart). Respondents are asked to select the one retail format where they purchase the majority of their apparel by answering "yes" for that format and "no" for all other formats. According to the database (N = 2,875), a total of 1308 respondents (45.5%) report purchasing the majority of their apparel from discounters, 387 respondents (13.5%) from value department stores, 532 respondents (18.5%) from mainstream department stores, 37 respondents (1.3%) from upscale department stores, 120 respondents (4.2%) from value specialty stores, 258 respondents (9.0%) from lifestyle specialty stores, and 233 respondents (8.1%) from off-price stores.

After selecting the retail format where they purchase the majority of apparel for themselves, respondents are asked to indicate whether particular product attributes are important in selecting the apparel they purchase (yes or no). A comprehensive group of product attributes are examined including: price attributes ('low price even though not on sale', 'on sale or at a discounted price'); brand attributes ('brand you have purchased before', 'brand popular right now', 'designer/high-end brand'); physical attributes ('high quality of construction and fabric', 'appealing clothing details and finishing', 'all natural fabric'); usage attributes ('easy care fabric', 'fabric weight that can be worn multiple seasons'); and, fashion attributes ('timeless look that won't quickly go out of style', 'look that is popular right now', 'look that can be dressed up or down for work, social, or casual wear', 'basic color like black, brown, navy blue or khaki', 'currently popular color or non-basic color', 'can buy coordinating clothing', 'can buy coordinating shoes or accessories'). Demographic information is also collected (e.g., gender, age, highest level of education, income).

Analysis

Binary logistic regression is used to model the effect of product attributes on the binary dependent variable for store choice (yes/no). This statistical approach is appropriate for estimating the impact of categorical predictors (attributes) on a categorical response variable (store choice). The predictor variables, represented by 17 unique product attributes, are examined within seven distinct retail format choice scenarios resulting in seven separate predictive models based upon retail format. The predictors are entered using a forward stepwise method that employs a Wald statistic for significance testing. Entry alpha is designated at the .05 level and removal alpha is designated at the .10 level.

Results

Sample Characteristics

Approximately 79% of the sample is female. The average age of the respondents is 49.99 years (18 minimum – 82 maximum). In terms of educational attainment, most respondents indicate high school as being their highest level of education (51%), followed by respondents who hold a 2- or 4-year college degree (33%), respondents who hold a graduate/professional degree (13%), and respondents who did not disclose their education information (3%). The majority of respondents report incomes less than $25,000 per year (26%), those between $25,000 and $49,999 per year (25%), those between $50,000 and $99,999 per year (22%), those with incomes of $100,000 or more (19%), and those who did not disclose their income information (8%).

Effect of Attributes on Store Choice

Logistic regression models for all seven retail formats indicate various groupings of significant predictors ($\alpha<.05$) (Table 1). Analyses detect both positive and negative effects on the dependent variables for format choice across all types of product attributes: price, physical, usage, brand and fashion. The results are presented in terms of each format choice.

Table 1. Binary Logistic Regression Models for Effect of Product Attributes on Format Choice

Format	Predictor/ Product Attribute	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.
Discounter						
	Low price even though not on sale	.807	.089	82.311	1	.000***
	On sale or at a discounted price	-.192	.088	4.733	1	.029*
	High quality of construction and fabric	-1.037	.103	100.98	1	.000***
	Appealing clothing details and finishing	-.729	.127	33.213	1	.000***
	Timeless look that won't quickly go out of style	-.556	.104	28.667	1	.000***
	Look that is popular right now	-.560	.170	10.831	1	.001***
	Look that can be dressed up or down	-.323	.107	9.065	1	.003**
	Brand you purchased before	-.428	.110	15.129	1	.000***
	Brand that is popular right now	-.847	.289	8.621	1	.003**
	Designer or high-end brand	-1.844	.368	25.054	1	.000***
	Can buy coordinating clothing	-.518	.145	12.834	1	.000***
Value Department Store						
	Low price even though not on sale	-.379	.120	9.987	1	.002**
	On sale or at a discounted price	.292	.111	6.946	1	.008**
	Brand you purchased before	.323	.134	5.843	1	.016*
Mainstream Department Store						
	Low price even though not on sale	-.873	.125	48.636	1	.000***
	High quality of construction and fabric	.756	.107	50.049	1	.000***
	Appealing clothing details and finishing	.366	.137	7.206	1	.007**
	Timeless look that won't quickly go out of style	.429	.117	13.544	1	.000***
	Brand you have purchased before	.530	.124	18.344	1	.000***
	Brand that is popular right now	.854	.272	9.870	1	.002**
	Can buy coordinating clothing	.329	.166	3.912	1	.048*
Upscale Department Store						
	Low price even though not on sale	-1.895	.608	9.702	1	.002**
	On sale or at a discounted price	-1.113	.391	8.115	1	.004**
	Easy care fabric	-1.151	.430	7.174	1	.007**
	Designer or high-end brand	1.647	.433	14.450	1	.000***
Value Specialty Store						
	Low price even though not on sale	.444	.188	5.563	1	.018*
	Look that is popular right now	1.079	.263	16.771	1	.000***
Lifestyle Specialty Store						
	Low price even though not on sale	-.869	.172	25.438	1	.000***
	On sale or at a discounted price	-.489	.145	11.313	1	.001**
	Easy care fabric	-.373	.145	6.625	1	.010*
	High quality of construction and fabric	.473	.149	10.132	1	.001***
	Appealing clothing details and finishing	.602	.165	13.265	1	.000***
	Look that can be dressed up or down	.389	.161	5.858	1	.016*
	Can buy coordinating clothing	.407	.207	3.881	1	.049*

Off-Price Store						
	On sale or at a discounted price	.602	.144	17.449	1	.000***
	All natural fabric	.573	.247	5.409	1	.020*
	Timeless look that won't quickly go out of style	.590	.155	14.523	1	.000***
	Brand that is popular right now	1.331	.307	18.744	1	.000***
	Designer or high-end brand	1.647	.271	36.941	1	.000***

*p.<.05, **p.<.01, ***p.<.001

Discount Stores

The model for discount apparel purchasers indicates 11 significant predictors that represent all five product attribute categories: low price even though not on sale (β= .807, *p,.000*), on sale or at a discounted price (β= -.192, *p*<.029), high quality of construction and fabric (β= -1.037, *p*,.000); appealing clothing details and finishing (β= -.729, *p*,.000), timeless look that won't quickly go out of style (β= -.556, *p*,.000), look that is popular right now (β= -.560, *p*<.001), look that can be dressed up or down (β= -.323, *p*<.003), brand you purchased before (β= -.428, *p*,.000), brand that is popular right now (β= -.847, *p*<.003), designer or high-end brand (β= -.1.844, *p*,.000), and can buy coordinating clothing (β= -.518, *p*,.000). Only one of the eleven significant predictors, low price even though not on sale, indicated a positive impact on the discounter choice for apparel purchases (β= .807, *p*,.000).

Value Department Stores

The model for value department store choice yielded three significant predictors: low price even though not on sale (β= -.379, *p*<.002), on sale or at a discounted price (β= .292, *p*<.008), and brand you have purchased before (β= .323, *p*<.016). One of the significant predictors indicates a negative impact on value department store choice (low price even though not on sale), while the remaining two predictors indicate a positive impact on value department store choice (on sale or at a discounted price, brand you have purchased before). No other significant predictors were yielded.

Mainstream Department Stores

The model for mainstream department store choice indicates a more extensive range of significant attributes including: low price even though not on sale (β= -.873, *p*,.000), high quality of construction and fabric (β= .756, *p*, .000), appealing clothing details and finishing (β= .366, p<.007), timeless look that won't quickly go out of style (β= .429, *p*, .000), brand you have purchased before (β= .530, *p*, .000), brand that is popular right now (β= .854, *p*<.002), and can buy coordinating clothing (β= .329, *p*, .048).

Upscale Department Stores

Four significant predictors emerge from the model for upscale department store choice. Among the four significant predictors, three were negatively related including: low price even though not on sale (β= -1.895, *p*<.002), on sale or at a discounted price (β= -1.113, *p*<.004) and easy care fabric (β= -1.151, *p*<.007). Designer or high-end brand (β= 1.647, *p*, .000) was the single positive predictor for upscale department store choice for apparel.

Value Specialty Stores

The model for value specialty stores indicates two significant predictors of store choice including: low price even though not on sale (β= .444, *p*<.018), and look that is popular right now (β= 1.079, *p*, .000). Both predictors indicated a positive impact on the value specialty store choice. No other significant predictors emerged.

Lifestyle Specialty Stores

Eight significant predictors are indicated by the model for lifestyle specialty store choice. Four of the effects indicate positive relationship between the product attributes and lifestyle specialty store choice: high quality of construction and fabric (β= .473, *p*<.001), appealing clothing details and finishing (β= .602, *p*., .000), look that can be dressed up or down (β= .389, *p*<.016), and can buy coordinating clothing (β= .407, *p*<.049). The remaining three significant predictors indicate negative relationships between the predictors and lifestyle specialty choice: low price even though not on sale (β= -.869, *p*., .000), on sale or at a discounted price (β= -.489, *p*<.001), and easy care fabric (β= -.373, *p*<.010).

Off-Price Stores

Five significant predictors indicate a positive relationship with choice of off-price stores for apparel: on sale or at a discounted price (β= .602, *p*., .000), all natural fabric (β= .573, *p*<.020), timeless look that won't quickly go out of style (β= .590, *p*, .000), brand that is popular right now (β= 1.331, *p*., .000), and designer or high-end brand (β= 1.647, *p*., .000). No predictors indicate a significant negative relationship with choice of off-price stores.

Table 2. Summary of Effects of Product Attributes on Retail Format Choice

Product Attribute[1]	**Effects on Format Choice[2]**						
	Discounter	**Value Department**	**Mainstream Department**	**Upscale Department**	**Value Specialty**	**Lifestyle Specialty**	**Off-price**
Price							
Low price	+	–	–	–	+	–	+
On sale	–	+		–		–	
Brand							
Brand purchased before	–	+	+				
Brand popular now	–		+				+
Designer brand	–			+			+
Physical							
High quality	–		+			+	
Appealing details	–		+			+	
All natural fabric							+
Usage							
Look dress up/down	–					+	
Easy care fabric				–		–	
Fashion							
Timeless look	–		+				
Look popular now	–				+		
Can buy coordinates	–		+			+	

[1]Product attribute names are abbreviated in table.
[2]Significant positive effects are indicated by (+), negative effects are indicated by (–).

Discussion

The pursuit of everyday low prices ('low price even though not on sale') demonstrates the broadest impact on retail format choice among our sample, significantly impacting each of the seven formats examined in the study. Specifically, everyday low prices appear to operate as a deterrent among many respondents in terms of their format choice. The results suggest that respondents who indicate high importance of low prices appear to reject any retail format that is not strategically positioned to offer everyday low prices (i.e., value department stores such as Kohl's, mainstream department stores such as JC Penney, upscale department stores such as Nordstrom, and lifestyle specialty stores such as Gap). Instead, respondents who seek everyday low prices are more likely to frequent discounters (e.g., Wal-Mart), value specialty stores (e.g., Old Navy) and off-price retailers (e.g., TJ Maxx) for apparel. Interestingly, the sale prone respondent indicates a positive response to value department stores (e.g., Kohl's), while the everyday low price seeker indicates a negative response to this format.

Brand positively impacts format choice among frequent purchasers of several formats including mainstream department stores, lifestyle specialty stores and off-price stores. In contrast, respondents who seek brand related attributes are significantly less likely to shop in the discount format as compared to all other formats. Respondents who indicated mainstream and value department stores as their primary format choice were also more likely to seek brands they have purchased before. Results suggest that respondents who seek familiar and/or popular brands tend to select mainstream department stores or off-price retailers over other formats.

Physical product attributes appear impact respondents' format choice for several formats including discounters, mainstream department stores, lifestyle specialty stores, and off-price stores. Respondents who seek high quality and detail in their garments favor mainstream department stores and lifestyle specialty retailers, while avoiding discounters. Likewise, all natural fabrics tend to appeal to respondents who frequent off-price retailers.

Among usage attributes, offering a look that can be dressed up or down negatively impacts format choice among respondents who frequent discount stores. In contrast, this attribute demonstrates a positive effect on format choice among lifestyle specialty store respondents. The results suggest that easy care fabrics are a deterrent to respondents who frequent upscale department stores and lifestyle specialty stores for apparel.

Fashion oriented attributes tend to negatively impact format choice among respondents who frequent discounters. In contrast, 'timeless look that won't quickly go out of style' and 'can buy coordinating clothing' demonstrate a positive impact on format choice for mainstream department stores. The results also suggest that respondents who seek a 'popular look right now' tend to favor the value specialty store format. Respondents who frequent lifestyle specialty stores deem the ability to buy coordinating clothing as being important.

Overall, respondents who frequently purchase from mainstream department stores and lifestyle specialty stores report seeking similar product attributes, indicating competition between these two formats for apparel purchasers driven more by quality and less by price sensitivity. To a lesser degree, respondents selecting discounters and value specialty stores also seek similar attributes such as everyday low prices and trendy/popular looks. Respondents who frequent value department stores, upscale department stores and off-price retailers indicate more unique patterns of attributes sought, which suggests that in terms of brand and product perceptions these retail formats offer a unique merchandise mix.

Conclusions and Implications

The results confirm that many positioning strategies among retailers operate in accordance with the retailer's intentions. For example, consumers who seek low prices tend to favor discounters for their apparel purchases, while those who seek high quality and reliability (e.g., 'brand you have purchased before', 'timeless look that won't quickly go out of style') tend to favor mainstream department stores. Further, those who consider high-end designer brands as a major influence when purchasing apparel tend to choose the upscale department store format. While not surprising, these findings indicate that consumers who shop in these formats seek different attributes in their products/brands. While a number of discounters have put forth a great deal of effort to position their apparel products on fashion related attributes (Ackermann, 2007; Van Riper, 2006), the most important driver among frequent shoppers of discounters is price. Discount retailers should take note of this finding and balance their efforts position based on fashion with their core customer's desire for low prices.

Interestingly, the results suggest that price sensitive apparel shoppers tend to stay away from mainstream department stores while shoppers driven by brand and physical attributes gravitate towards mainstream department stores. This finding suggests that mainstream department stores should continue to position themselves based on the desires of their core customer. Brand and physical attributes must be emphasized for the core department store customer.

Department stores suffered great losses from gross-margin erosion over the last decade (e.g., Shepherd, 2008); *Business Week*, 2006). Our results suggest that shoppers of department stores are more likely to seek brands/quality in this format, which indicates that department stores should be more aggressive in terms of brand/quality offerings and control markdowns. Ultimately they should offer differentiation related to their products and brands that are valued above and beyond those offered by their competitors. Merchants and product developers should also reconsider the role of quality in garment production and temper their response to be a low cost operator.

The results also suggest several findings that are not consistent with popular thought regarding typical consumer motivators for selecting a retail format. Respondents who select value department stores for apparel indicate that they are seeking sales rather than everyday low prices. Further, these consumers tend to seek familiar brands ('brand you have purchased before'). Given this result, it is likely that value department store shoppers are more deal prone and value seeking, as opposed to solely searching for low price or solely searching for high quality/differentiated brands. Therefore, value department stores should take care to control pricing through promotions rather than using everyday low prices. In combination with promotional pricing, value department stores should offer familiar brands to balance the value proposition for their core customers.

Respondents who select upscale department stores indicate they are primarily seeking designer or high-end brands, while value specialty store shoppers are seeking low prices and looks that are popular right now. For upscale department stores, this finding emphasizes the importance of offering a wide selection of exclusive brands as the main component of the merchandise mix. Likewise, value specialty stores should take care to be trend-right while maintaining everyday low prices. Respondents who select lifestyle specialty stores place importance on physical attributes including high quality of construction and fabric as well as appealing clothing details and finishing. In addition, they seek looks that can be dressed up or down and they value the opportunity to purchase coordinating clothing. Taken together, this suggests that lifestyle specialty stores should work to offer high quality, versatile apparel that can be coordinated to produce a range of different looks for work as well as casual situations. Respondents who favor off-price stores for apparel indicate they are looking for everyday low prices on popular/designer brands, as well as all natural fabrics. Therefore, off-price stores should continue to secure familiar brands which can be offered at competitive prices.

Limitations and Future Research

The research design captured price attributes, brand attributes, physical attributes, usage attributes and fashion attributes that shoppers rely upon when making routine apparel purchases, rather than situation specific purchases. The impact of these attributes on retail format choice could be different according to the buying situation (e.g., special occasion, gift buying). Therefore, the extrapolation of these results to apparel purchasing should be applied to routine purchases only. Future research could examine the effect of an exhaustive list of product attributes across a wide variety of retail formats (as in the current study), but could add an additional layer by examining situation specific purchases. Another limitation of the study is that it only considers apparel purchases in store-based retail formats. Future research could include non-store retailers such as catalogs, television home shopping networks and Internet retailers.

Other limitations of the study are related to the demographic characteristics of the respondents. Female respondents comprise seventy-nine percent of the sample. While women are traditionally thought to be the primary decision maker for household clothing purchases, under-representation of males in the sample should be noted when interpreting the results. In addition, the majority of respondents report incomes of less than $50,000 per year (51%). The low-income nature of our sample is further supported by the low percentage who report shopping in upscale department stores (1.3%). The under-representation of high-income respondents should be noted when interpreting the results. Future research could involve follow-up studies with stratified samples based gender and income.

Although our study includes an exhaustive list of product attributes across five product categories, there may be additional product attributes that are important to apparel purchasers which are not covered in this study. Exploratory research to identify additional product attributes may be warranted. Lastly, generalizations of the findings of this study to markets outside the United States are limited due to the differences in consumers and retail formats available in various countries. Future research could compare the effect of product attributes on retail format choice across international markets.

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