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Exploring the Perceptions of Grocery Retail Managers on Private Label Brands in South Africa

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Abstract

The phenomenon of private label brands has been widely studied from various contexts, with South Africa as no exception. The pervading economic climate across the globe, as a consequence of the Covid 19 pandemic, has brought the study of private label brands to the fore. Private label brands (PLBs) are considered a cheaper alternative with comparable levels of quality to manufacturer products, which creates a value proposition for consumers (Cuneo et al., 2019). Notwithstanding the plethora of research in this field, these studies are pointed towards customer perceptions and purchase behaviours for private label brand products rather than the perceptions of grocery store retailers. This paper explored the perceptions of grocery retail managers concerning private label brands (PLBs) by delving into the views of these managers concerning the reasoning behind consumer purchase behaviour when it comes to these private label products. The study's main finding was that grocery retail managers believe that customers primarily purchase private label brands due to the trust that they display towards a grocery retailer rather than the emphasis placed on the pricing or quality of these products. Moreover, the confidence exhibited by customers extends towards repeat purchases of private label brands as the products match or exceed expectations, which further encourages the faith they have in these brands. These findings indicate that grocery retailers opine that customers' view private label brands positively. We recommend that grocery retailers invest more in the awareness of private label brands (PLBs), thereby creating more knowledge of private label products. Customers are more educated in this respect and can draw better conclusions between the cost/quality dichotomy that has always plagued the adoption rate of these products within a South African and African context.

Keywords: *Private label brands; grocery retail managers; customers; grocery retailers*

1. Introduction

Private label brands (PLBs) have been a widely studied phenomenon, with various scholars (Beneke, 2010; Boon et al., 2018; Macharia, 2015; Mostafa & Elseidi, 2018; Ndlovu & Heeralal, 2021; Singh et al., 2018; Wyma et al., 2014) empirically uncovering different findings from different geographic regions of the world. This is attributed to the rising wave of the private label brands phenomenon within the grocery retail space around the globe (Nielsen, 2018). In the process, appearing as a challenge to national bands. As they both fight for retail shelf space, market share, and winning the same customers (Cuneo et al., 2019; Islam et al., 2021), the introduction of private label brands by grocery retailers has indeed shifted the competitive realm in the grocery retail industry. Therefore, large debates surround the private label brands phenomenon among academics and economies around the globe (Cuneo et al., 2019). Therefore, more strategic directions are necessary (Cuneo et al., 2019; Gielens et al., 2021).

Furthermore, these debated trends surrounding private label brands allow us to question and explore grocery retail managers' perceptions in line with customers' perceived thoughts of PLBs. In support, Gangwani et al. (2020), posit the necessity for grocery retail managers to create private label brand value for customers, in the process establishing brand attachment. Since the grocery retail industry is constantly dealing with a dynamic environment, where constant changes are imminent (Czeczotko et al., 2020), this reinforces the need for this present topic, towards understanding grocery retail managers' views of the underlying customer perceptions of private label brands. In addition, such studies stand to position grocery retail managers to be in line with their private label strategies (Islam et al., 2021), where, they ensure that their perceptions are in line with those of customers.

Various studies have over the years explored customers' perceptions and purchase behaviours surrounding private label brands. In early 2001, DelVecchio (2001) uncovered that customers perceived private label brands differently, according to product categories. Where, in some product categories, customers believe that PLBs are of similar quality and provide similar value for their purchases as national brands (De Wulf et al., 2005). In contrast, Aldousari et al. (2017); Cheng et al. (2007) affirmed that customers are of the view that national brands were superior to private label brands. Furthermore, customers were doubtful of the quality of private label brands (Beneke, 2010). However, customers' perceptions surrounding private label brands were not only grounded on quality perceptions, but were also affected by other perceptual factors such as risk, social value, trust, and value for money (Kakkos et al., 2015; Konuk, 2018). In addition, customers argue their concerns on the private label brands' product line limitations (Aldousari et al., 2017). In this way, perceiving national brands to be reliable, as they are present in all product lines. Consequently, grocery retailers can revisit and build marketing strategies through the successful enhancement of customers' perception of private label brands (Calvo-Porral & Lévy-Mangin, 2017).

In understanding the perceptions surrounding PLBs, at the same time, it is worthy for grocery retail managers to understand the actual reasons for private label brands' purchases. In uncovering purchase reasons, customers decide on private label brands due to price consciousness (Aldousari et al., 2017; Chikhalkar & Chaudhuri, 2016; Thanasuta, 2015). In support, Mostafa and Elseidi (2018) affirm that lower pricing plays a significant role in the purchase of PLBs. Accordingly, grocery retailers have used pricing strategies that attract the price conscious customer, and in the process, appealing to customers. Since pricing is suggested to be a critical aiding factor when making private label purchase decisions (Singh & Singhal, 2020; Thanasuta, 2015; Thanasuta & Chiaravutthi, 2018), grocery retailers have been urged to respond with more shelf space and strategy to accommodate the demand triggered by the lower pricing of private label products (Chikhalkar & Chaudhuri, 2016). In addition to pricing as a purchase intent for private label brands, brand image has an effect on the purchase of private label products (Fong et al., 2015). As favourable PLBs product image, customers will likely find a reason for their purchase (Singh & Singhal, 2020). Interestingly, store image also mediates the purchase of private label products. Because store image, built over the years, provides a positive stimulus in the purchase of PLBs (Boon et al., 2018; Singh & Singhal, 2020), it is evident that numerous studies have uncovered customers' private label brand perceptions, purchase intentions, pricing, and quality and other areas, due to the insurgence of private label branded product within the grocery retail industry (Gielens et al., 2021).

Considering the above, this study aims to explore the perceptions of grocery retail managers towards private label brands within the South African context. To do so, this study was guided by the following key objectives: (1) understanding grocery retail managers' perceptions of customers towards private label brands; (2) exploring the purchase reasons for private label brands, thereby contributing to the collective understanding of customers' perceptions and their reason for their purchase of PLBs.

2. Data/Methods

The data for this study was sourced from interviews with grocery retail managers. These interviews were conducted within a metropolitan city of KwaZulu-Natal, in Durban, South Africa. The grocery retail managers were recruited by employing purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique. As result of not having evidential information of the actual number of grocery retail managers for all grocery retail stores, purposive sampling made it possible to approach and judgementally recruit grocery retail managers to partake in this study, as they had the required data to assist in chieving the objectives of this study (Kumar, 2014). In search of data, an interview schedule was used, which encompassed questions around the following topics: profiling opinions of how grocery retail managers understand customers' perceptions of private label brands; understanding customers' purchase reasons of private label brands. The researchers identified grocery retail stores from various regions of the Durban metropolitan city, four regions in total. Grocery retail managers were approached and asked for permission to participate in this study. Where permission was granted, the researchers then scheduled an interview day and time as and when the grocery retail managers were available. A total of 10 semi-structured interviews were conducted with grocery retail managers, which comprised our study sample.

In collecting the data, the researchers then honoured the interview times and dates. The interviews were carried out in the retail store where the managers worked, making use of their offices. The interviews went on for a duration of 20 to 30 minutes. Most importantly, the participating grocery retail managers were made aware of the purpose of this study, confidentiality, benefits that will accrue when the objectives are met, and chiefly made aware that their participation was completely voluntary. Should they wish to withdraw their participation, they were more than free to do so. Coincidentally, none of the participating grocery retail managers withdrew from the study. Furthermore, these semi-structured interviews were recorded and transcribed. In analysing the collected qualitative data from grocery retail managers, the researchers made use of content analysis. Shava et al. (2021, p. 554) identified qualitative content analysis as "a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns." In classifying codes and identifying themes, and patterns, it allowed the researchers to accurately deal with large textual evidence obtained from the grocery retail managers (Aacharya, 2022). To achieve this, the researchers followed an inductive content analysis approach, where the data analysis was broken up into three steps: (1) preparing the obtained data; (2) organising the raw data; and (3) grouping the data and interpreting the findings (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). This allowed for a broader understanding and exploration of the findings, presented, and discussed in the following section.

The following questions were asked from the participating grocery retail managers in analysing the findings. Firstly, a few demographic questions were asked; however, specific demographic questions were not asked to conceal the actual identities of the grocery retail managers and their retail occupations for confidentiality concerns; therefore, they (grocery retail managers) are numbered (**see Table 1**). Secondly, grocery retail managers were further asked what they understood as perceptions of customers towards private label brands. A sub-question was asked to probe whether demographic factors do affect the perception of customers towards PLBs. Thirdly, they were asked what the perceived reasons for private label purchases are.

Table 1: Grocery retail managers observed characteristics

Participant	Region	Gender
Grocery retail manager 1	Northern	Male
Grocery retail manager 2	Northern	Male
Grocery retail manager 3	South	Female
Grocery retail manager 4	South	Male
Grocery retail manager 5	Western	Male
Grocery retail manager 6	Western	Female
Grocery retail manager 7	Western	Female
Grocery retail manager 8	Durban central	Male
Grocery retail manager 9	Durban central	Male
Grocery retail manager 10	Durban central	Female
N= 10		

Source: Authors' construct

In understanding the observed grocery retail managers' characteristics, (**see Table 1**), it was observed that most of the grocery retail managers that participated were male (6), in contrast to fewer females (4). Moreover, it features more managers from the Western and Durban central regions. Following the consideration of the grocery managers' characteristics, recorded interview data was then analysed and transcribed by breaking larger themes into smaller, more manageable, and understandable themes below.

3. Findings and Discussions

After analysing the 10 semi-structured interviews conducted, the following themes were discovered in line with the asked questions:

3.1 Quality of private label brands products

Grocery retail managers from the various regions and retail chains were of varying opinions considering customers' perception of private label brands. They confidently asserted that customers have over the years warmly received private label product offerings, since they witness stock volume replenishments of their retail chain private label products. With the belief that customers now equally view private label products with the same quality lens as national brands, in the modern day, customers are no longer attracted to only lower priced alternates, but also good quality private label products (Singh & Singhal, 2020). In support, a standard shift has been noted, where customers have shifted from perceiving PLBs as low-priced and low-quality products to low-priced products with comparable quality to national brands (Boyle et al., 2018; Gielens et al., 2021; Singh & Singla, 2018). One grocery retail manager stated:

> *"Customers prefer our store branded products, because customers want fresh and quality products which our grocery retailer provides for them and at reasonable costs".*

In support of the above assertions, another prominent response among grocery retail managers was that:

> *"Our private label products were perceived by customers as on par with manufacturer brands. To a point*

that they see them in the same manner when they make product comparisons. As a result, our products satisfy customers to an extent that they choose our store products over the top brands".

Over the years, numerous studies have continuously reported customers' dissatisfaction with private label brand products; with South Africa included, where customers were often found to be hesitant of PLB product quality. However, Beneke and Carter (2015) acknowledge the change in customers' perceptions of private label brands. In addition, Yrjölä et al. (2020) provided that customers are from time to time shocked with the good quality experience they receive when using private label products. Therefore, in line with the grocery retail managers' proclamations of customers favouring private label brands. This further highlight that private label pricing no longer feeds negative perceptual attitudes among customers since they now trust their retailers' private label product offerings. The found expressions confirm the findings of Singh and Singla (2018), who found that price had no association to being a private label product quality indicator.

3.2 *Private label brands are affordable*

When further asked of perceptions regarding private label brands, another emergent theme was that of price, which the grocery retail managers expressed as having a massive effect on customers' perceived thought of their retail chains' private label products. Pricing has served as a pull factor for PLBs over the years (Aw & Chong, 2019). Since private label brands' inception, they have been targeted by price conscious customers (Aldousari et al., 2017; Keller et al., 2022). To confirm this, one grocery retail manager stated:

"Customers continue to purchase our products, because they are affordable."

Considering the above, another interesting proclamation by one grocery retail manager was that:

"…because our products are cheaper in prices, customers will have mixed perceptions about cheaper products even though they are of good quality."

This view raises contradictable distinctions from the trust that grocery retail managers asserted customers to have, resonating with Olbrich et al. (2017), who confirmed that as private label brands' prices hike, the more favourable customers' perceptions of private label brands will be. The opposite is true regarding when PLBs are low priced – customers associate private label products with low quality. Therefore, Odongo and Motari (2020) insisted that grocery retailers shall continuously provide good quality private label products, accompanied by reasonable pricing, as price is a critical tool in the success of private labels, often used as a perceptual quality indicator (Abril & Rodriguez-Cánovas, 2016). Customers also use pricing as a comparison factor between private label brands and national brands.

3.3 *Reasons for private label brands purchase*

When the grocery retail managers were asked what they thought were the main reasons for private label brands' purchases. The following stimulating assertions were posited by the grocery retail managers, under the following prevalent themes:

3.4 *Product functionality*

It was widely apparent among grocery retail managers that customers often opt for the purchase of private label brands due to their functionality. This was resultant from the belief that private label products perform the same functions as national branded products. It is only that their retail chains' private label products are always priced below national branded products. To suffice the above assertions, one grocery retail manager stated:

> *"Our satisfied customers are not sceptical of our products, which helps us in advocating and ensuring the potential customers that our private label brands are consumable and are made of quality products".*

Importantly, grocery retail managers from their daily experience within their retail chains stores, note that customer are consistently satisfied with PLBs. This is supported by the repeated purchases customers make. Furthermore, grocery retail managers offer that it is also seen by customers choosing private label brands even in normal economic conditions. One grocery retail manager offered that:

> *"Customers buy our products because they are cheaper than other brands, but our products satisfy our customers as they last longer and don't expire early"*

This confirms Cuneo et al. (2019), who acknowledge the strides by grocery retailers and grocery retail managers in creating tangible private label functional value. However, Al-Monawer et al. (2021) refute the functionality similarity, touting national brands to having superior functionality levels, as national brands remain superior in offering quality product offerings. To counter, Cuneo et al. (2019) provide that grocery retailers should shift their focus from tangible functional value, towards intangible functional value within customers' mindsets, in the process improving perceptual attitudes of customers and improving private label brands' success. In addition, this can also be achieved by not only enhancing functional aspects and product quality, but also through other avenues such as aggressive promotions and improving quality of inputs used in the manufacturing process (Mathur & Gangwani, 2021), thereby improving customers' confidence for private label brand products.

3.5 Value offering

Respondents, in further sharing their observed reasons of customers' PLBs purchases, confidently established that grocery retailers constantly undergo great lengths in ensuring their private label lines are trialled to adhere to acceptable product standards. To provide customers with value creating products, however, it is important to note other assertions by grocery retail managers. Customers are gradually noticing the potential value of private label brands, from being sceptical, to realising their value after consumption. Since perceived value also has a major impact on customers' purchase reasons (Mathur & Gangwani, 2021), grocery retail managers state that customers now acknowledge value for money. More importantly, Oosthuizen et al. (2015) highlight the significance of creating value propositions in private label brands, as it necessitates a mediator between PLBs' price and quality scepticism that might still exist among customers.

4. Conclusions

The findings presented in this paper provide evidence that grocery retail managers are confident of their private label branded product offerings. It is evident that over the years, private label brands have been affordable alternative product choices for South African customers, and in the process forgoing national brands. Moreover, grocery retail managers were of the perception that while providing affordable alternatives to national brands, their retailers also ensure they offer value creating products, in addition, complemented by quality private label products. This allows us to conclude that there is a shift from past negative perceptions of PLBs and their quality standards.

With regards to purchase reasons, it is worth noting that grocery retail managers were found to be perceptive that customers largely purchase private label products due to their affordability. Since literature widely posits that the affordable pricing of private label brands has over the years allowed customers to subscribe to and encourage their purchase, grocery retailers have used pricing to attract customers in consuming PLB products and forgoing national brands. In addition, recently it was found that customers no longer use pricing as a quality indicator for consumed private label products (Boyle et al., 2018). However, grocery retailers are cautioned of continuously pricing their private label products below those of national brands, as customers may misjudge their true product value (Ndlovu & Heeralal, 2022). As literature widely posits lower pricing strategies by retailers over the years, they have exposed private label products to being prone to association with poor value and quality. Nonetheless, grocery retailers still engage in this pricing strategy. This needs revisitation to determine its effects and impact on customers' perceptions on grocery retailers private label branded items.

Our analysis further found that grocery retail managers perceived customers to be satisfied with the functionality of the private label items. It can be concluded that grocery retail managers view repeated retail store visits and purchase of PLBs by customers as an indication of their satisfaction with grocery retailers' private label product items. Furthermore, we observe this finding being consistent with some literature. In contrast, we also notice the dissonance with other past literature. This, therefore, represents a gap in the debate regarding private label purchase frequency as an indicator of satisfaction with product functionality. As a result, grocery retail managers and their retailers should be innovative in eliminating the product functionality risk that may be associated with private label brands and improve on strategies that are already in place (Mathur & Gangwani, 2021). In addition, the grocery retail managers see their retailer's PLBs to be value offering, making them indifferent from the provision of national branded products.

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