

## Extrinsic quality cues affecting office ladies' perceptions on quality of female apparels

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### Abstract

The apparel industry in Malaysia has taken a turn from worse to globally competitive in recent decades. However, it is still lacking when compared to globally renowned brands. Previous researches have indicated that for the Malaysian apparel industry to be equally competitive, perceived product quality among consumers needs to be enhanced. Past researches have also indicated that the main determinant of perceived product quality was found to be extrinsic quality cues, i.e. price, brand reputation, etc. and since it was recently found that office ladies' purchasing power has been on the rise due to the fact that these ladies have been moving up the organization ladder, this paper seeks to investigate how extrinsic quality cues, namely price, brand reputation, store atmosphere, country of origin and market share of women's clothing affect office ladies' perceptions on the quality of female apparels. With that, a total of 233 survey questionnaires had been distributed and collected from office ladies in the 3 most highly populated cities that is, Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh and Johor Bahru in Malaysia. The findings of the study revealed that there is a significant relationship between extrinsic quality cues and perceived quality.

**Keywords:** price, brand reputation, store atmosphere, country of origin, market share, perceived quality

### Introduction

Due to the competitive business environment today, Malaysia's apparel industries are being induced to look into the importance of perceived product quality in consumers' mind (Brucks, Zeithaml, & Naylor, 2000) <sup>[7]</sup>. Besides affecting buying behavior, perceived product quality also affects the profitability, market share, and brand equity. According to Stobart (1994) <sup>[45]</sup>, in order to obtain the best possible products, customers usually rely on perceived brand quality. Meanwhile, receiving enormous profit is the reward for delivering high quality product. Workman and Lee (2011) <sup>[54]</sup> proposed that women compared to men, indicate greater interest in clothing and they pay more attention to physical appearance. In general, women today have been moving up the career ladder of organizations and have been characterized as being more sophisticated than in previous years (Bosak & Sczesny, 2011) <sup>[6]</sup>. This indicates that women today are more willing to spend on apparels to gain self-satisfaction and confidence and thus, the perceived quality of the product plays an important role in shaping buyer behaviour (Birtwistle & Tsim, 2005) <sup>[5]</sup>.

According to the Malaysian Investment Development Authority (2016) the textile and apparel industry in Malaysia has grown tremendously. In 2015, this industry was the tenth largest export earner with RM13.2 billion, contributing approximately 1.7 percent of Malaysia's total exports of manufactured goods. About Malaysia's top five export destinations, they were USA, Japan, People's Republic of China, Singapore and Turkey. Taking 18.3 percent of the industry's total exports, USA remained the leading export market for Malaysian textiles products. Therefore it would be crucial for the Malaysian apparel industry to focus on better understanding the consumers' minds in order to create global brands that are attractive assets to the corporations in Malaysia (Strizhakova, Coulter, & Price, 2008) <sup>[44]</sup>.

### Reviews on prior empirical studies

#### Perceived Quality

May, Yoon, and Kim (2011) defined perceived quality as consumer's assessment of a product or brand that meet an individual's expectation. In other words, it is user-oriented quality which contributes to subjective quality perception from an end user point of view and thus this perception will be different among users for the same product. Furthermore, quality perception is multidimensional whereby quality is perceived by integrating a number of quality dimensions or product attributes (Brunso, Fjord, & Grunert, 2002). Fiore and Damhorst (1992) also further defined perceived quality as consumers' preliminary estimations of the goods' performance properties at the time of purchase. According to Aekar and Joachimsthaler (2000) perceived quality affects brand associations. Choudhry (2007) stated the perceived quality is important to maintain brand loyalty as customers generalize their positive experiences with products that demonstrate consistent and high quality. According to Tsotsou (2005) perceived quality is one of the most significant constructs in marketing. Therefore, it is strongly believe that high perceived quality could lead to customers' repeated purchases of a particular product. Furthermore, superior quality perception enables business to charge higher prices and this premium could be transformed into profit or reinvest into research and development (Saxena, 2009).

#### Price

Price is the amount of money or the exchange values to acquire product or service (Hanif, Hafeez, & Riaz, 2010; Kotler & Armstrong, 2010). Consumers will treat price as a sacrifice of monetary resource to acquire a particular product or service (Lee, 2012) <sup>[30]</sup>. Price has a positive role as a tangible cue from which consumers form expectation to concrete the quality of a product (Toncar, Alon, & Misati,

2010)<sup>[50]</sup>. Ye, Li, and Wang (2012)<sup>[56]</sup> conducted 43,726 online reviews of 774 star-rated hotels using regression model and discovered that price has a positive impact on customers' perceived quality on higher star hotels. Tsao, Pitt and Caruana (2005) conducted a research on 189 respondents in Taiwan on cell phones and notebooks categories through path analysis, and discovered that higher price can be an effective signal for a product. Besides, Volckner and Hofmann (2007) performed meta-analysis on 23 research publications from 1989 to 2006 to examine the price-perceived quality relationship and indicated that consumers utilize price as a vital signal of quality. Sumaedi, Bakti and Metasari (2011)<sup>[46]</sup> conducted a questionnaire survey with 155 college students which come from two Indonesia public universities through multiple regression analysis. One of their findings is that perceived price of tuition fee, cost of books and teaching materials has a positive impact on student satisfaction from the education institutions. Thus,

**H1:** There is a significant relationship between price and the perceived quality of apparels among office ladies.

### Brand Reputation

Brand reputation refers to the attitude of consumers that the brand is good and reliable which can be judged from consumer opinion, comments, estimations and beliefs (Afzal, Khan, Rehman, Ali, & Wajahat, 2010)<sup>[2]</sup>. Brand can be developed through advertising and public relations, and it enhances its quality. From brand owner's perspective, Zhang (2009)<sup>[58]</sup> proposed that building of favorable reputation is an effective way for attracting potential customers, saving the time consumed to improve business relationship with customers, reduce transaction cost and create premium revenue. From consumers' perspective, O'Cass and Grace (2003) suggested that a good brand name can reduce the perceived cost and risk of consumers' product choice decision. It delivers quality reassurance to consumers and adding value to product or service (Gurbuz, 2008)<sup>[22]</sup>.

Gurbuz (2008)<sup>[22]</sup> conducted a questionnaire survey on 490 customers of three furniture stores in Nigde, Turkey using structural equation modeling. The result indicated that brand name has a positive relationship with perceived quality and customer satisfaction. Furthermore, Vranesevic and Stancec (2003)<sup>[52]</sup> obtained information from domestic and foreign professional magazines, as well as 128 questionnaires and found out that brand truly affects the perception of food product quality through descriptive statistics frequency analysis. However, based on questionnaire survey of 119 business students in Germany by multiple regression and t test, Helm, Garnefeld, and Tolsdorf (2009)<sup>[28]</sup> discovered that German consumers did not experience a higher level of satisfaction even though the product was produced by reputable producer compared to those products with favourable previous experiences. Afzal, Khan, Rehman, Ali and Wajahat (2010)<sup>[2]</sup> analyzed the questionnaire results from 328 consumers in Pakistan through correlation and regression analysis and indicated that brand reputation, brand competence and brand predictability have a positive impact on customers' trust since these attributes could lead to positive expectation which able to satisfy customers' need. Thus,

**H2:** There is a significant relationship between brand reputation and the perceived quality of apparels among office ladies.

### Country of Origin

Country of origin is expressed and communicated to customers using the phrase "made in" which reflects a consumer's general perception on products quality (Amine, 2008). Godey *et al.* (2011) explained that country of origin influences consumer perceptions and behaviours through the image of the product's country of origin.

Hamzaoui and Merunka (2006) concluded that country of design and country of manufacture image have a strong impact on perceived quality for automobiles based on questionnaire survey conducted from 389 youngsters in Tunisian market through regression analysis. Yeh, Chen, and Sher (2010) conducted a questionnaire survey on 200 respondents in Taiwan using ANOVA and pairwise t-test, and discovered that higher country image evaluations will result in greater consumption of imported foods. On the other hand, Tigli, Pirtini, and Erdem (2010) conducted questionnaire survey on 500 Turkish students and found out that consumers' buying decision depends on countries product specialization though paired t-test. A questionnaire survey of 800 consumers in Chile was analyzed by Schnettler, Ruiz, Sepulveda, and Sepulveda (2008) through conjoint analysis and indicated that country of origin has a positive influence on consumption of imported foods due to the factor of good price or quality ratio. Dekhili and d'Hauteville (2009)<sup>[16]</sup> conducted a control group study with the sample of 251 consumers from Tunisia and France. The results which analyzed through ANCOVA analysis confirm that the image of the olive oil's region of origin influences perceived overall quality since consumers have sufficient trust on the products. Thus,

**H3:** There is a significant relationship between country of origin of product and the perceived quality of apparels among office ladies.

### Store Atmosphere

Massara (2003)<sup>[34]</sup> defined store atmosphere as the overall shopping experience which include building structure, store's interior and employees' attitude. Oh, Fiorito, Cho, and Hofacker (2008)<sup>[39]</sup> suggested retailers to create store identity and encourage consumers' shopping activities by utilizing store design factors and background conditions such as music and lighting.

In the study of Oh, *et al.* (2008)<sup>[39]</sup>, on 307 college students in United State, with ANOVA and regression analysis, they concluded that the design factors of store atmosphere were positively associated to store image. With a sample of 270 undergraduate students, Champion, Hunt, and Hunt (2010)<sup>[11]</sup> investigated the impact of retail store image of national, regional and local outlets and it has a direct association consumer perception of product quality and willingness to buy through moderated regression analysis. Additionally, Seock (2009)<sup>[42]</sup> conducted a research towards 400 Hispanic consumers in United State found that consumers there is a positive relationship between store atmosphere and shopping behaviour through multiple regression analysis and MANOVA. Furthermore, a questionnaire survey consists of 360 customers from drugstores in Taiwan was conducted by Wu, Yeh and Hsiao (2011)<sup>[55]</sup> by adopting structural equation modeling for data analysis. One of their findings is that store image has a direct and positive effect on the purchase intention of private label brands since better store image reduces the perceived risk of the product. Thus,

**H4:** There is a significant relationship between store atmosphere and the perceived quality of apparels among office ladies.

### Market Share

Market share is the proportion of actual sales within a market. It is used to measure satisfying customers and company performance (McDonald, 2008; Cannon, Perreault, & McCarthy, 2008) <sup>[10]</sup>. According to Cannon *et al.* (2008) <sup>[10]</sup> companies with large market share enjoy better economies of scale in the global intensive competition. Besides, Lurth (2011) defined market share as a firm's share of the total potential in a market, which is all firms' annual sales plus potential customers that have yet to purchase.

Erdem, Zhao, and Valenzuela (2004) <sup>[17]</sup> made use of scanner-panel data on laundry detergent for 370 stores and 695 households across three countries through model estimation. They found that a lower market share of store brand lead to a higher uncertainty about quality which truly affected consumer brand choices. Charterjee and Chaudhuri (2010) <sup>[12]</sup> also discovered that large market share will motivate the customers to choose a particular telecommunication service provider in Kolkata based on questionnaire data from 350 youngsters in United State through ANOVA and Rank Score Analysis. Yet, based on data from Total Research Corporation with 245 observations, the results from Hellofs and Jacobson (1999) found that there is a negative relationship between market share and perceived quality through switching regression model. It is because higher market share reduces the product's image of exclusivity and consumers' prestige. Chu, Chen and Wang (2009) <sup>[14]</sup> conducted a research by collecting data which consists of the sample of 91 securities firms with 546 observations for 3 years from the online database maintained by the Taiwan Financial Supervisory Commission. By adopting one-way ANOVA and multiple regression analysis, market share is positively associated with firm profitability since market share is a signal for brand quality which commands a higher price. Data of 440 simulation companies in 96 industries in Canada were collected by Faria and Wellington (2004) <sup>[18]</sup> and they concluded that market share and profitability are significantly and positively correlated through Pearson's correlation. Thus,

**H5:** There is a significant relationship between market share of product and the perceived quality of apparels among office ladies.

### Methodology

#### Research Instrument

This paper focuses on the extrinsic quality cues (IV) including price (P), brand reputation (BR), store atmosphere (SA), country of origin (CO) and market share of product (MS), and how they influence the perception (PQ) of office ladies towards the quality of apparels (DV). Five items will be developed for each dimension under IVs while DV comprises of 7 items. So a total of 32 items will be involved in questionnaire. The questionnaire for this study was adapted

based on the studies of Koschate-Fischer, Diamantopoulos & Oldenkotte (2012), Kwan, Yeung & Au (2004), Vahie & Paswan (2006) <sup>[51]</sup>, Seouk (2009), Raty (2009), Hellofs & Jacobson (1999) <sup>[27]</sup> and He & Li (2011) for the topic of this study.

The questionnaire is divided into three sections which are Sections A, B, and C. Questions under Section A are designed using nominal scale and ordinal scale to collect demographic information about target respondents' profile such as gender, age, occupation and etc. Sections B and C are questions on the independent and dependent variables using five-point Likert (interval) scale.

#### Sampling Technique

Due to no sampling frame, this indicates the need to use non-probability sampling techniques and so, quota sampling was chosen for the research. This is because it is less costly, can be set up quickly and most importantly, it suits this research without sampling frame (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009). The quota sampling was conducted based on areas which are 60% in Kuala Lumpur, 20% in Ipoh and 20% in Johor Bahru based on the apportionment method on the total population.

#### Sampling Size

Creswell's study (2005) showed that a bigger sampling size is better in accuracy compared to smaller sampling size to reduce sampling error. Moreover, Green's (1991) research determined that the sample size,  $n = 50 + 8(m)$ ,  $m$  = number of independent variables. There are five independent variables in the research, so  $m = 5$ . Therefore  $n = 50 + 8(5) = 90$ , which means researchers should get a minimum of 90 samples. 260 questionnaires were distributed to reduce the sampling error. However, only 250 questionnaires were collected back. After excluding the missing and out of range data, 233 questionnaires were selected for further analysis.

### Results and Discussions

#### Demographic Analysis

The demographic profiles of 233 respondents show that female holds 100%. Most of the respondents are between 21 to 30 years old (42.49%) while the lowest number of respondents is from 51 to 58 years old (4.29%). Furthermore, most of the respondents (36.91%) are Bachelor's Degree holder. On the other hand, an extremely low percentage of respondents (1.29%) have completed the highest education of primary school.

Besides, the highest proportion of years employed at the organizations belongs to the range of 1 to 5 years (36.91%). However, both categories of 16 to 20 years and greater than 20 years become the least proportion of years employed which are 3.86% respectively. Moreover, most of the respondents' monthly income is more than RM4, 000 yet, the lowest number records less than RM1, 000 (13.73%). Finally, majority of the respondents (71.24%) buy clothes once a month while the lowest number of respondents buys more than twice a month (2.15%).

**Reliability Analysis**

**Table 1:** Reliability Coefficient

S. No.	Variables	Cronbach's	Number of items
1	Price	0.7894	5
2	Brand Reputation	0.7729	5
3	Store Atmosphere	0.7769	5
4	Country of Origin	0.8497	5
5	Market Share	0.8283	5
6	Perceived Quantity	0.8107	7

Cronbach's Alpha reliability analysis is used to test on reliability of the five constructs. According to Sekaran (2003) reliability analysis is used to measure the consistency and stability of the data. It was indicated that adequate level of reliability should have a minimum of 0.7. From the table

shown, the Cronbach's Alpha value of each construct is more than 0.7. This concludes that all items of each construct show stable and consistent results. Details of the results are shown in Table 1.

**Inferential Analysis**

**Table 2:** Partial Correlation Matrix

Variables	Price	Brand Reputation	Store Atmosphere	Country of Origin	Market Share	Perceived Quality
Price	1 -					
Brand Reputation	.3458 <.0001	1 -				
Store Atmosphere	.1425 0.0297	.2708 <.0001	1 -			
Country of Origin	.1546 .0182	.4238 <.0001	.2133 .0011	1 -		
Market Share	.2421 .0002	.3836 <.0001	.2092 .0013	.4365 <.0001	1 -	
Perceived Quality	.3135 <.0001	.5041 <.0001	.5881 <.0001	.4398 <.0001	.4106 <.0001	1 -

Pearson correlation is conducted on the independent variables to test on the presence of multicollinearity problem between the variables. According to Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham's (2010) study, the correlation coefficient value of 0.90 is the rule of thumb to identify the presence of multicollinearity problem. As the entire coefficient values shown are less than 0.90, which is below the cut-off point, this

shows that the correlations between the independent variables are not too strong. Therefore, multicollinearity problem does not exist under this study. At the same time, the result also shows that these five independent variables are significant towards dependent variable as p-value shown is less than 0.05. Details of the results are shown in Table 2.

**Regression Analysis**

**Table 3:** Model Summary

R Square	Adjusted R Square	Root MSE	Dependent Mean	Coefficient Variance
0.5404	0.5303	0.3977	3.6291	10.9590

According to Hair *et al.* (2003) R Square is used as an indicator for the strength of relationship between independent variables to dependent variable. R Square for this research model is 0.5404, which indicates that 54.04% of changes in

dependent variable are able to be explained by the predictors. In other words, 45.96% of variation in perceived quality can be explained by other factors. Details of the results are shown in Table 3.

**Table 4:** ANOVA

Model	Sum Squares	DF	Mean Square	F Value	Sig.
Regression	42.2187	5	8.4437	53.38	.000
Residual	35.9053	227	0.1582		
Total	78.1240	232			



Result from the table 4 shows that F value is 53.38, with a p-value of less than 0.0001, which is less than 0.05. This means that the overall regression model for the five predictors has

worked well to model Perceived Quality; the model is fit in other words.

**Table 5: Coefficient**

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients Beta	Standard Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	0.1991	0.2209		0.90	0.3684
Price	0.0978	0.0409	0.8638	2.39	0.0176
Brand Reputation	0.2068	0.0512	0.6933	4.04	0.0001
Store Atmosphere	0.4316	0.0456	0.9063	9.47	0.0001
Country of Origin	0.137	0.0406	0.7268	3.38	0.0009
Market Share	0.1032	0.0423	0.7436	2.44	0.0154

$$PQ = 0.1991 + 0.0978 P + 0.2068 BR + 0.4316 SA + 0.1370 CO + 0.1033 MS + e$$

It is found that H1 is supported because its p-value is less than 0.05, so price has a significant relationship with perceived quality. Its lowest beta coefficient of 0.10 indicates that price has the lowest impact towards the perceived quality. This result is in line with the past studies of Ye, Li, and Wang (2012) <sup>[56]</sup> and Volckner and Hofmann (2007) which indicated that there is a positive correlation between price and perceived quality which results in increased customer satisfaction. However, the result is contradicted by the past study of Hanif, Hafeez, and Riaz (2010) <sup>[25]</sup> where price does not necessarily enhance brand loyalty and customer satisfaction.

H2 is supported as well with p-value of less than 0.05. With the beta coefficient of 0.2068, it shows that there is a significant association between brand reputation and perceived quality. According to Afzal, Khan, Rehman, Ali, and Wajahat (2010) <sup>[2]</sup> as discussed previously, reputable brand will increase customers' trust and this leads to higher expectations of satisfaction. In addition, the result is consistent with the study of Gurbuz (2008) <sup>[22]</sup> and Vranesevic and Stancec (2003) <sup>[52]</sup>. Yet, this result differs from the study of Helm, Garnefeld, and Tolsdorf (2009) <sup>[28]</sup>, where consumers did not experience a higher level of satisfaction even though the product was produced by a reputable producer.

The table above also shows that the beta coefficient of H3 is 0.4316 which means that store atmosphere have the strongest correlation with perceived quality compared to the independent variables. With a p-value of less than 0.05, H3 is supported where there is a significant relationship between store atmosphere and perceived quality. Customers will feel more comfortable with a nice store atmosphere and stay longer in the store, and then willing to spend more because they perceived that the products sold are with higher quality (Oakes, 2003) <sup>[37]</sup>. The result shown is equivalent to the prior study by Oh, *et al.* (2008) and Seock (2009) <sup>[42]</sup>.

Following that, H4 is supported as its p-value is less than 0.05, and its beta coefficient is 0.1370. This shows that the country of origin has a significant effect on perceived quality. The effect of country of origin on the buying behavior is relatively small and consumers do not consider it as important product information. Instead, consumers would rather use it as a searching tool, representing their knowledge about the product from different countries, and then saving time from making extensive evaluation (Agrawal & Kamakura, 1999) <sup>[3]</sup>. However, it is still in line with previous studies by Hamzaoui and Merunka (2006) <sup>[26]</sup> and Dekhili and d'Hauteville (2009) <sup>[16]</sup> whereby they also said that image of the country that manufactures the product has a great impact on the perceived quality.

Same goes to H5, it is supported because the p-value is less than 0.05 with a beta coefficient of 0.1033. This indicates that market share of product has a significant relationship with perceived quality. This result is similar to the previous studies by Erdem, Zhao, and Valenzuela (2004) <sup>[17]</sup>, as well as Charterjee and Chaudhuri (2010) <sup>[12]</sup>, whereby higher market shares will reduce the uncertainty of consumers towards the products which increases the willingness to purchase. However, the study from Hellofs and Jacobson (1999) <sup>[27]</sup> states that there is a negative relationship between market share and perceived quality since higher market share reduces consumers' prestige.

### Recommendations for future research

It is recommended to cover a wider geographical area for future research. If financial resource is not much of a concern, it is encouraged to have the survey to be conducted in East Malaysia as well. The research can cover Malaysia in her entirety so that better findings can be developed. Future researchers may extend the study to other industries or other target populations too.

Besides that, other variables should be taken into account such as the needs of customers, the materials of the apparels and so on. Different research models are also encouraged to be added in the research so that the relationship can be viewed from various perspectives. By broadening the study area, the results would have covered other contemporary perspectives resulting in the broadening of knowledge regarding perceived quality although it might become more complicated.

Referring to the R2 of the study, 54.04% of variations in the dependent variable can be explained by our current predictor variables. However, other independent variables can still be added for future research such as brand extension, customer service etc. to improve the model fit.

Lastly, to overcome the problem of having biased result from collecting data via survey questionnaire, it is suggested to have interview sessions to capture respondents' thoughts and opinions.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, this research study has fulfilled all its research objectives. The data analysis has proven that there is a significant relationship between price, brand reputation, store atmosphere, country of origin, and market share of apparels and the perceived apparels quality among office ladies. Based on the results generated, recommendations are suggested regarding the treatment of each independent variable to

increase the Malaysian apparels industry performance to compete better with foreign apparel companies.

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