

Branded Versus Non-Branded: Differences in Consumer Preferences

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Abstract

Although brands can signal reputation and serve as proxies for trust, consumer preferences for attributes may differ for branded and non-branded products. The authors of this paper test this hypothesis using data from a particular experiment conducted with Italian jeans' consumers. The results indicate that consumers appear uncertain when there is an absence of a brand; non-brand-oriented consumers ascribe greater importance to the attributes of a product, with emphasis on those that relate to the product model (fit, comfort, design). Price is important for both types of consumers. Factor and cluster analyses permit identification of elements for the positioning strategies of brand and non-branded products. For marketing managers, it is important to know the consumer's perception of the product's characteristics and, accordingly, adopt specific communication and positioning strategies.

Keywords: brand, consumer behaviour, purchase drivers, jeans

1. Introduction

Branding is a tool used by producers to increase consumer awareness and loyalty. The goal of such marketing strategies is to convince consumers that the brand name is a substitute, or proxy, for expected benefits. Raggio and Leone (2007) argue that brand equity, as the perception that the brand, meets a promise of providing benefits to consumers. Also, consumers may have an orientation hypothesis for satisfaction regarding consumption of a product, to contact the same producer or brand in order to avoid the risk of a wrong choice. This phenomenon is also referred as an "inertia value" of the brand (Keller & Lehmann, 2006). Therefore, branding may represent a mechanism to address this risk-averse behaviour by providing a guarantee that the product consumed today will be essentially identical to the one the consumer sampled on a previous occasion. Furthermore, a positive experience with a brand may reduce the expected payoff of updating information about substitutes and competition, thereby creating persistence in purchase.

In the process that leads to the purchase of a product, the consumer, guided by the reasons for which he or she has decided to make the purchase (motivation), seeks information that will be useful in making the best choice, minimising the associated risks (Erdem & Swait, 1998). The literature refers mainly to consumer behaviours founded on rational principles (Kotler, 2012). Indeed, the product is understood to be the sum of a number of attributes that enables it to meet the needs that prompted the purchase in the first place. Depending on the weight accorded to each attribute (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), different market segments are generated, reflecting different consumer behaviours. It, therefore, becomes indispensable for companies to understand how each potential consumer evaluates a product's attributes and what role is played in this regard by the brand.

Although the behaviour of consumers cannot easily be schematised, given the specific characteristics of each individual, it can be argued that the process of choosing a product depends on the consumer's preference for either branded or unbranded goods (Ubilava et al., 2011; Hasan et al., 2012; Mohtar & Abbas, 2014; Spinelli et al., 2015). The expectations developed by the consumer with respect to a brand, with the awareness of the characteristics that it is able to provide, can modify the perception of the attributes and, thus, the preferences that arise from the evaluation process. Although the literature contains examples of hostility towards brands (Klein, 2010) and "unmarketing" (Stratten, 2010), it confirms the existence of a positive relationship between the brand and the perception of quality that can increase trust in it (Krishnan et al., 1989). Interestingly, after brand awareness is established, consumers tend not to explore the additional informational attributes and purchase the

known brand, even if it is lower in quality (Hoyer & Brown, 1990). This is likely because the search cost associated with updating product information across a set of competitors is greater than the benefit that the consumer expects to receive as a result (Ubilava et al., 2011).

For this reason, the objective of this study is to understand the factors that determine the purchase of a product by two categories of consumer, i.e. brand-devoted and non-brand-devoted, verifying the importance of the features of the product (attributes) and the benefits associated with it, as well as the values that the consumer seeks to achieve through their consumption behaviour. Recent research has addressed the issue with reference to the food sector (Ubilava et al., 2011; Spinelli et al., 2015), or when purchasing green products (Schuitema & De Groot, 2015).

This study aimed to: (i) verify how preference for a product attribute changes in the presence or absence of a brand, and (ii) identify clusters of consumers on attributes of purchase to verify how preference for a product attribute changes in the presence or absence of a brand.

Investigating the emotions elicited by a product considering only its intrinsic characteristics or both its intrinsic characteristics and branding, can give a deeper insight into product perception and can help companies in the design and optimisation of products that meet consumers' expectations. This was conducted with reference to the jeans sector, given both its intrinsic characteristics (variety of production, orientation to differentiation, growth in consumption) and the frequent and specific attention paid to it by the managerial literature dealing with consumer purchasing processes (Delong et al., 2002; Vrontis & Vronti, 2004; Wu & Delong, 2006; Jin et al., 2010).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Purchase Decisions

Theories of consumer behaviour (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Ajzen, 1991) place great emphasis on the role of the product's characteristics, tangible and otherwise, in order to understand the motives for the consumers' choices. A number of recent studies have examined the possibility of better explaining the loyalty structure of brands based on various product attributes or variants (Trinh et al., 2009). Seen from this perspective, any product category comprises subcategories formed around product attributes, and that each of these subcategories performs differently in terms of loyalty, obtaining its own attribute-based loyalty level (Krystallis & Chrysochou, 2010). In this respect, managing customer loyalty involves working with a bundle of attributes, with the brand name being only one of them (Jarvis et al., 2007). Some studies have tried to explain the relationship of consumption based on the attributes of the product (Ubilava et al., 2011; Jegethesan et al., 2012; Krystallis, 2013; Hahnel et al., 2014; Schuitema & De Groot, 2015).

The appreciation manifested by the consumer is not exclusively linked to the product's characteristics (tangible and intangible attributes) and expected benefits. Some authors (Maslow, 1987; Roakeach, 1973; Kahle, 1983) have placed particular emphasis on the importance of values in individuals' behaviours, i.e. the deeper needs which such characteristics can help to meet. The model most frequently used (Kotler, 2012) for analysing consumers' reasons for purchase is the so-called "means-end chain", which represents the logical sequence of motivations undertaken by the consumer. The sequence entails the consideration of the concrete aspects (the product's attributes) associated with the expected benefits (the consequences of its use), and the values that guide the behaviour of the individual (Gutman, 1982; Reynolds & Gutman, 1988). A mental association between the individual and the product is also assumed by self-image congruence models (Kressmann et al., 2006; Sung et al., 2012). The basic assumption of self-image congruence models is that consumers use products to express their self-images. Self-congruity refers to the matching between consumers' self-images (i.e., actual, ideal, social, and ideal social self-images) and value-expressive attributes of the product.

Exploring the consumer's decision-making process is useful because the thoughts arising from one's most personal and private values are often sub-conscious and consumers are rarely able to identify and reveal them. For marketing managers, it is important to know the consumer's perception of the product's characteristics and, accordingly, adopt specific communication and positioning strategies. The theoretical background of this research is based on the approach that supposes that the properties or characteristics of the goods are the sources of consumer utility. Therefore, the consumer, with specific preferences for each of the product characteristics and a budget constraint, will choose the bundle of attributes (product in total) that maximises his/her utility.

2.2 Brand Image

Brand is the incorporation of all impressions received by consumers which will lead to a distinctive position in their mind based on perceived emotional and functional benefits (Raj & Jyothi, 2011). In particular, an image is

the mental construct developed by the consumer on the basis of a few selected impressions (Reynolds, 1988). Keller (1993) argued that the value of the brand should be attributed to the “differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand”. In other words, brand equity is the difference between the marketing effects accruing to branded and non-branded products (Farquhar, 1989; Aaker, 1996; Ailawadi et al., 2003). In some circumstances, the “inertia value” of the brand (Keller & Lehmann, 2006), i.e. aversion to the risk of changing brand on the part of the consumer, can also affect the perception of a product’s or brand’s attributes, which generates trust and thus repeat purchases of the brand. Keller (1993) and Aaker (1991) considered brand image as a set of perceptions or associations that are activated in the memory of the consumer thinking about a brand. Biel (1992), however, defined brand image as “a cluster of attributes and associations that consumers connect to the brand name”.

Hsieh, Pan & Setiono (2004) argue that “a successful brand image enables consumers to identify the needs that the brand satisfies and to differentiate the brand from its competitors, and consequently increases the likelihood that consumers will purchase the brand”.

Indeed, the presence of a brand affects the reputation of a company and its products, becoming a proxy for trust. For this reason, the varying degrees of credibility accrued by a brand can determine different perceptions among consumers of the information obtained, leading them to make distinctions both between one branded product and another, *and* between branded and unbranded products. What distinguishes a branded product from an unbranded product—and gives it value—is the overall perception developed by consumers regarding its characteristics, the name it bears, and its meaning, as well as the company associated with that brand (Achenbaum, 1993).

It is seen that the consumer’s perception of a product’s attributes when assessing the alternatives can be modified depending on the consumer’s propensity to purchase branded or unbranded products (Hasan et al., 2012; Mohtar & Abbas, 2014). The expectations from a brand, with the awareness of the characteristics that it is able to “guarantee”, can modify the perception of the product’s attributes and the consequent purchasing preferences. For example, some authors (Krishnan et al., 1989; Ubilava et al., 2011) have verified the existence of positive relations between a brand and the perception of quality that can increase confidence in it.

In consumer psychology, understanding of how consumers respond to a brand (positive, favourable perception, and willing to commit to positive word-of-mouth) begins with attitudes (Franzen & Bouwman, 2001). The most common approach adopted in consumer brand research was the three component model (Zanna & Rempel, 1988; Shiffman & Kanuk, 2007): cognitive, affective, and conative. In line with this, the current study approaches corporate brand image as an overall attitude judgment of an object (jeans or corporate brand), and this overall attitude judgment is based/formed through dual attitudinal components (cognitive and affective brand attributes). In this paper, cognitive brand attribute is defined based on the functional characteristics of product, related to tangibles, such as product or service offered. The definition of affective brand attribute is based on intangible and emotional criteria, such as the personality attributes/traits of a corporation (Keller & Richey, 2006).

For unbranded products, the absence of a brand makes it necessary for the consumer to pay attention to the characteristics of the same, as well as the benefits that they can generate. Several studies have investigated the emotions that are elicited by unbranded products (especially food products) within a product category, showing that products elicit emotions for their specific sensory characteristics in absence of any other information (Porcherot et al., 2013; Spinelli et al., 2014; Thomson & Crocker, 2014). The literature includes some studies of the role of product attributes in the assessment of the alternatives when purchasing jeans (Jegethesan et al., 2012, Son et al., 2013).

3. Methodology and Composition of the Sample

This study aimed to: (i) verify how preference for a product attribute changes in the presence or absence of a brand, and (ii) identify clusters of consumers on attributes of purchase and to verify how preference for a product attribute changes in the presence or absence of a brand.

The above-mentioned objectives were pursued in accordance with a mixed-method research approach, divided into the following steps (Figure 1): a) an on-desk survey of the managerial literature on the sector in question, and an in-depth qualitative investigation (by means of the so-called “laddering” interview technique), both aimed at identifying information about the product, i.e. attributes, benefits, and the value of the product making it possible to pursue which, in turn, determine the consumer’s choice; b) compilation of a questionnaire (with a pilot test conducted on 20 consumers) by 500 consumers (Note 1) (non-probabilistic sample) who regularly buy jeans. The data was processed by descriptive and multivariate statistical techniques (using SPSS software) in order to assess the role of the various purchase attributes with reference to the two types of consumer identified.

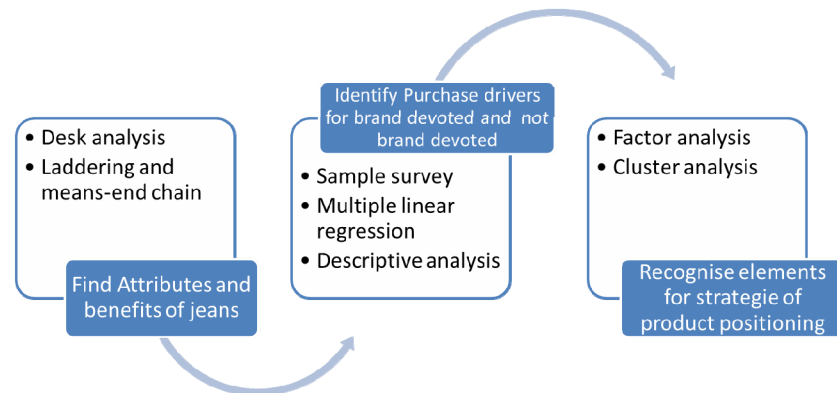


Figure 1. Methodology

After having classified the motives for purchasing, based on an analysis of the literature, an in-depth, qualitative investigation was conducted (Philips & Reynolds, 2009; Orsingher et al., 2011). It entailed 40 interviews (20 for each of the two consumer categories, brand-devoted and non-brand-devoted; the number being useful for the goals to pursue as indicated by Reynolds et al., 2001), designed to confirm, or rather complement, the information obtained from the above-mentioned review of the literature. For the objectives of this study, the so-called “laddering” interview technique was used, which makes it possible to identify both the items that constitute the above-mentioned variables and the causal relationship between them. Specifically, the “hard laddering” technique (Botschen & Hemetsberger, 1998) was used, which guides the respondent towards increasingly higher levels of abstraction. The “paper-and-pencil” method was applied, which made it possible to minimise the respondents’ conditioning, allowing them to follow their own cognitive route (Grunert & Grunert 1995). The interpretation of the information acquired by these methods made it possible to observe and understand the deep and personal motives that determine the choice of the jeans product (see, among others, Orsingher et al., 2011; Fu & Wu, 2013) and, thus, to gain a more direct and effective understanding of the consumer’s behaviour.

Starting from the results of the on-desk qualitative investigation, the sample-based investigation was performed by means of a questionnaire completed by 500 consumers who regularly purchase jeans (for brand-devoted, top of the list were Diesel, Levis, and Meltin’Pot), with the aim of measuring the impact of each item identified in the purchasing intentions. The sample was mostly composed of young people (78% were between 18 and 35 years old) and two thirds were women. The interviewees purchased 1 to 4 pairs of jeans per year. Specifically, 23% of the sample purchased the product once every 2-3 months, while a further 32% purchased twice a year. With regard to the objectives of the present work, the sample is divided into two equal parts (brand-devoted and non-brand-devoted).

The questionnaire used for data collection consisted of two sections. The first section investigated participants’ behaviours regarding jeans. The second section asked participants about the importance they assign to the product variants under consideration (branded or unbranded). This entailed measurement of the importance of the analysis variables (the motives for purchase and, thus, the attributes, benefits, and values) in the purchase of the product, using a normal assessment scale (1 = not at all important; 5 = very important). Specifically, SPSS software (version 20.0) was used to perform a multiple linear regression analysis on the data obtained, in order to verify any relationships of dependency between purchasing intention (a dependent variable) on the choice dimensions (attributes, benefits, and values). A descriptive analysis was then conducted and the variables that showed a link with purchasing intention (attributes and benefits) in order to assess their importance to the consumer’s choice. Lastly, factor analysis was conducted in order to reduce the variables, grouping them in macro-factors depending on the degree of correlation between them, followed by a cluster analysis, which grouped the consumers in relation to the classification of the same macro-factors.

4. Data Analysis

4.1 On-Desk Analysis

The on-desk analysis made it possible to identify the content of the information requested and assessed by the consumer before purchasing the product in question, which was subdivided into the two above-mentioned

conceptual categories, i.e. attributes and benefits. The analysis also identified the values that the consumer pursues by means of the product.

The attributes affecting the choice of the product in question are: *comfort, fit (how flattering it is for the consumer's physique), fabric quality, colour, type of wash/treatment (stonewashed, etc.), trim, design/model, originality of the model, how fashionable the model is, versatility of use, brand, price, and originality of wash/treatment*. The choice to include the brand and its values among the attributes of the product serves the purpose to receive confirmation of the irrelevance of brand in the purchase of unbranded products.

The benefits expected by the consumer were subdivided into functional (tangible effects) and psycho-social. For the former, the items identified were: *practicality/ease of use* and *duration over time*. The psycho-social consequences were linked to perceptive and emotional processes resulting from feeling: *suitable for all contexts ("feeling global"), fitting in with the crowd, non-conformist, easy-chic, sexy, physically attractive, independent, fashionable, part of a group, gratification, close to the image of a celebrity who wears it, brand values*. To these may be added *expressing a spirit of adventure* and *creativity*. For a brand product, affective brand attribute corresponds to intangible and emotional criteria that can be found in the above expected benefits from the consumption of jeans.

The values were identified by reviewing studies of "consumer values" and measurement hypotheses. Particularly relevant in this case was the literature based on the "Rokeach value survey" (Rokeach, 1973) and the "List of Values" (Kahle, 1983). They were: *social admiration, confidence, affirmation of one's identity, reliability, personal affirmation, tranquillity, social well-being, self-gratification* and *being a point of reference in matters of style*.

4.2 Qualitative Analysis

The description of the phenomenon, i.e. identification of the purchasing motives of *brand-devoted* and *non-brand-devoted* consumers, required qualitative research, which is useful for confirming or complementing the results of the on-desk analysis. The model adopted is the so-called "means-end chain", which is used to investigate the cognitive links between a product's characteristics and the individual consumer's sphere of values. The mental associations (*memory networks*) between the product's attributes and the individual sphere were verified by means of the "laddering" technique, prompting interviewees to: 1) list the attributes/criteria that they use to assess/differentiate a product; 2) associate them with the advantages that they expect to obtain and with the values to which they aspire; 3) make explicit the links that generate their cognitive networks.

The processing of the data required, first of all, content analysis in order to link similar responses to a common set of meanings and, thus, to standard concepts that express the three categories being studied (Note 2). The next step was the analysis of the cognitive connections between the concepts, i.e. the implications, the sequence of which determines the cognitive map. An implication is defined as the perception of a causal or instrumental relationship between the due concepts.

The results are represented in the "Hierarchical Value Map" (HVM), drawn for both brand-devoted and non-brand-devoted consumers (each group is made up of 20 interviewees), which shows graphically the content of the thoughts, concepts and relative links provided by the interviewees. The variables for each level were selected by considering those that were indicated by at least a third of the respondents (the threshold value).

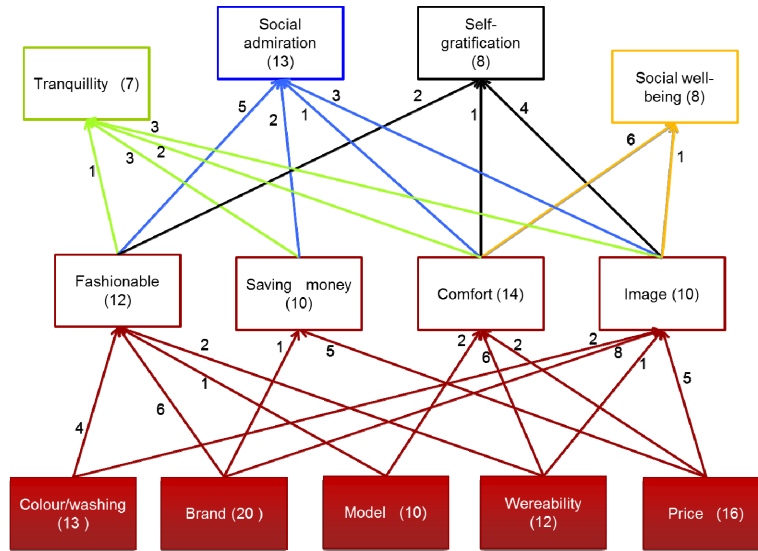


Figure 2. Hierarchical value map for “brand-devoted” consumers

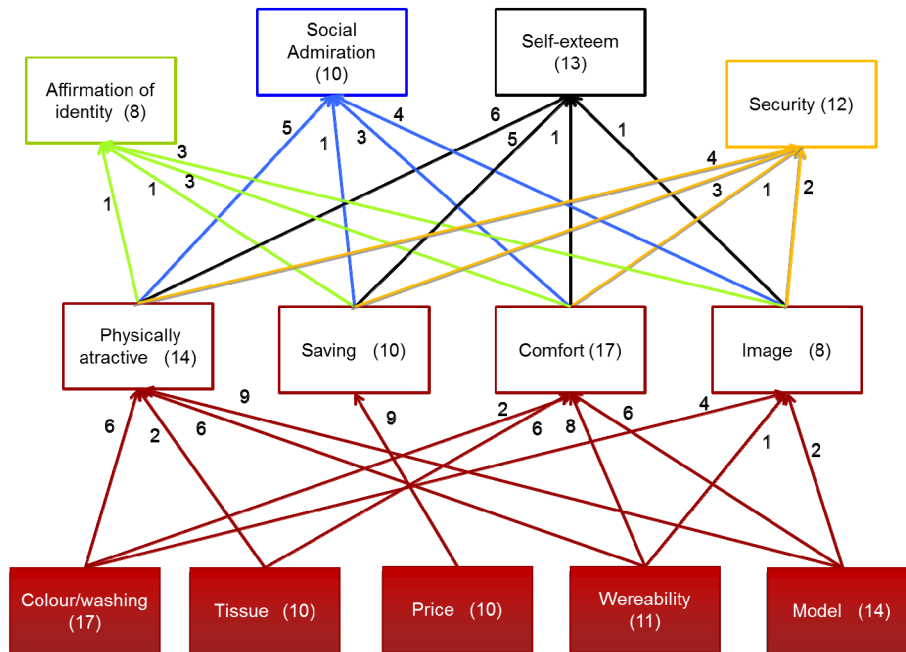


Figure 3. Hierarchical value map for “non-brand-devoted” consumers

The reconstruction of the HVM for the two categories of consumer made it possible, as expected, to identify certain conceptual categories that are useful for establishing the determinants of consumers’ purchasing choices, substantially confirming what emerged from the on-desk analysis. In addition, this analysis provided some initial insight into consumers’ different attitudes to buying branded or unbranded products. Indeed, the results highlighted that purchasing motives linked to the pursuance of the same values, albeit by different routes.

The qualitative analysis enabled two extra benefits (“saving money” and “image”) and two extra values (“self-esteem” and “individualism”) to be added. Although the first three value objectives for both consumer sets are the same, the route by which they pursue them is different, as is the frequency of responses given. In the case of brand-devoted consumers, the first objective is “social admiration”, pursued via the brand, although “price”

and “wash/treatment/colour” are also considered. In the case of non-brand-devoted consumers, “self-esteem” is the main objective, pursued mainly by the “model”, “fit” and “price” attributes. The analysis conducted highlights a different attitude in the path adopted to achieve the objective, dictated in the first case essentially by a precise tendency to purchase branded products, and in the second case, by the search for attributes that make it possible to improve one’s image while limiting the costs. In fact, the analysis showed that brand-devoted consumers also seek to lower costs, since price is the second purchasing attribute in terms of frequency of responses.

4.3 Quantitative Analysis

The first step in the quantitative processing of the data focused on the analysis of multiple linear regression between the purchasing intention (dependent variable) and the macro-categories identified, i.e. attributes, benefits, and values (independent variables), which can be considered potential “predictors” of the purchase of a product by the two categories of consumer being studied. It should be pointed out that the analysis was conducted on the average values of the three independent variables considered as a whole. The first step was to verify the goodness of fit of the model used by calculating the linear coefficient of determination R^2 (which represents the portion of the variance of the dependent variable that is explained by the independent variables). R^2 was found to be >0.9 for all interviewees and for each of the two groups, confirming that the model is useful for explaining the relationships being observed. Fisher’s test and the analysis of residuals (i.e. the difference between the real and estimated values of the dependent variable) also confirmed the adequacy of the regression model used and, thus, the presence of a linear link between the dependent variable and the individual independent variables.

The results of the analysis (Table 1) show that it is the attributes and benefits that determine the purchasing intention regarding the product in question ($p < 0.01$ for both of them).

Table 1. Regression indicators

		Non-standardised coefficients		Standardised coefficient	t	p	
		B	Standard Error	Beta			
Brand-devoted	Attributes	0.196	0.011	0.665	17.531	0.000	Supported
	Benefits	0.112	0.015	0.328	7.273	0.000	Supported
	Values	-0.001	0.010	-0.002	-0.070	0.944	Not supported
Non-brand-devoted	Attributes	0.206	0.014	0.694	14.329	0.000	Supported
	Benefits	0.110	0.022	0.323	5.104	0.000	Supported
	Values	-0.008	0.015	-0.025	-0.546	0.585	Not supported

This is valid for both consumers sets (the standardised coefficient provides a measure of the capacity of a variable to determine the purchase of the product). The standardised coefficient column also highlights the greater importance of the attributes variable compared to the benefits for both categories of consumer. On the basis of the results shown above, the next step was a descriptive analysis of the importance assigned by the respondents to the various determinants of purchasing choices. This entailed calculating, for each variable, both the average value and the standard deviation, the latter being useful for understanding the level of dispersion of the responses with respect to the average value. Table 2 highlights the results for the variables pertaining to the attributes category.

Table 2. Attributes and benefits characterising the choice of product by brand-devoted and non-brand-devoted consumers

	Brand-devoted		Non-brand-devoted			Brand-devoted		Non-brand-devoted	
	Average	st. dev.	Average	st. dev.		Average	st. dev.	Average	st. dev.
Comfort	3,89	1,19	4,21	1,10	Feeling global	2,51	1,234	2,44	1,302
Fit	3,95	1,16	4,22	1,10	Fitting in with the crowd	3,87	1,172	4,04	1,198
Quality	3,61	1,11	3,65	1,07	Not conformist	2,28	1,201	2,12	1,227
Colour	3,55	1,15	3,76	1,14	Easy-chic	2,51	1,274	2,37	1,300
Wash/treatment	3,21	1,20	3,19	1,23	Sexy	2,49	1,259	2,38	1,334
Trim	3,31	1,13	3,29	1,20	Independent	2,60	1,271	2,44	1,317
Design/ model	3,83	1,10	4,00	1,15	Fashionable	2,84	1,235	2,88	1,344
Originality of model	2,99	1,22	2,92	1,18	Part of a group	2,23	1,276	1,95	1,154
Fashionable	3,15	1,23	3,15	1,29	Spirit of adventure	2,37	1,278	2,17	1,197
Versatility	3,49	1,15	3,72	1,15	Expressing creativity	2,63	1,303	2,59	1,228
Brand	2,51	1,20	2,04	1,20	Physically attractive	3,62	1,284	3,73	1,253
Price	3,64	1,18	3,98	1,15	Celebrity image	2,02	1,229	1,71	1,101
Originality of wash/ treatment	2,73	1,26	2,50	1,24	Duration	3,73	1,151	3,96	1,238
					Practicality	3,99	1,158	4,23	1,211
					Gratification	3,24	1,325	3,31	1,422
					Brand values	2,73	1,19	2,34	1,27

The results highlight the greater average importance assigned to the attributes by the non-brand-devoted consumers. The determinant attributes for this category of consumer are fit, comfort, design, and price. Brand-devoted consumers also assign importance to the above-mentioned product characteristics, albeit to a lesser degree. It should also be considered that the presence of a famous brand does not appear to be important for either of the categories, meaning that for brand-devoted consumers, the presence of the brand they habitually purchase plays a key role, regardless of its fame and the values it represents. Two further attributes had importance levels below 3 (and therefore fell within the area of non-importance) for all consumers: the originality of wash/treatment, and originality of the model.

Similar conclusions can be drawn for the benefits variable. Greater average importance is assigned by non-brand-devoted consumers, especially to those benefits that play a major role in the choice process, which for both sets of consumers are: practicality, fitting in with the crowd, duration over time, and feeling physically attractive.

4.4 Factor and Cluster Analysis

Factor analysis was conducted in order to identify factors that could express groups of product attributes that were correlated with each other and, therefore, linked. It was decided to focus the analysis on the attributes alone because they represent the characteristics of the product itself. Thus, they constitute the first information on which the consumer's assessment of whether to purchase is based, although this assessment is linked to other objectives in terms of benefits and values, as the qualitative investigation showed. Bartlett's sphericity test made it possible to verify the existence of any correlation between the variables, while the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test made it possible to compare the observed correlations with the partial correlations. Both these tests confirmed the value of the factor analysis. The extraction was performed by "Varimax" rotation, an orthogonal rotation method that minimises the number of variables that exert a strong weight on each factor.

The analysis identified the following 4 factors (shown below), the composition of which is the same for both sets of consumers.

Thus, the four factors identified by the factor analysis were treated as four new macro-variables to which the multivariate technique of *cluster analysis* (a non-hierarchical K-means method) was applied (Figure 4). This

technique was used to identify groups of respondents who manifest similar behaviours with respect to the factors considered in their choices. The Anova results (the F test) highlight significant differences among groups, as expected, given that cluster analysis is designed to identify groups of subjects with similar behaviours within each group and different behaviours between one group and another. The statistical significance (p) was below 0.01 for all F values, meaning that they can be considered reliable.

Regarding brand-devoted consumers, Cluster 1 is associated with expert (or “*detail-oriented*”) consumers, for whom attention to detail plays a key role in the choice of product. Table 3, which shows the average importance of each attribute for each cluster, and for the total, provides further information on the characterisation of the clusters. For the cluster in question, it shows higher average values for the comfort, fit, fabric quality, and model attributes.

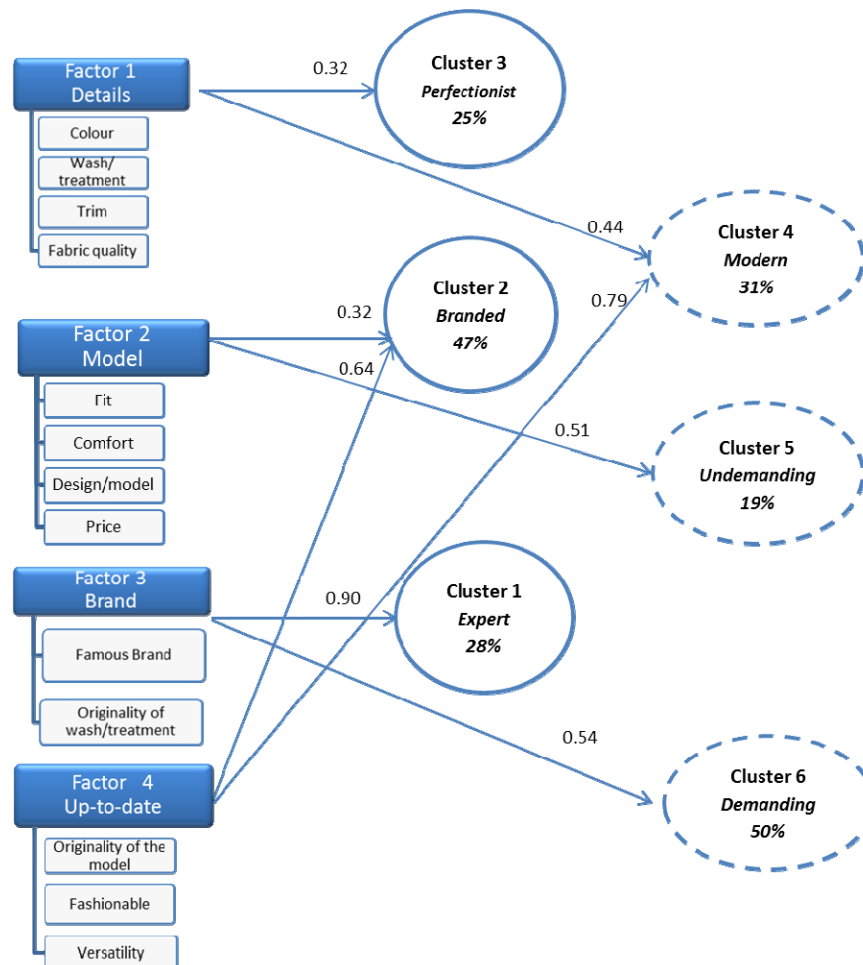




Figure 4. Factor and cluster analysis

Note.  Cluster of brand-devoted;  Cluster of not brand-devoted. The weight of each cluster is indicated as a percentage of the total.

Cluster 2, associated with “*branded*” (or “*fashionable*”) consumers, is characterised by attention to the fame of the product. Specifically, leaving aside the importance assigned to design (4.01; see Table 3), the remaining attributes for this cluster have modest average values, confirming the role played in this case by the brand, which is the key element determining the choice of the product.

Cluster 3, associated with “*Perfectionist*” (or “*Wearability-oriented*”) consumers, shows greater attention to fit and comfort, not neglecting the role of price as a factor determining purchase.

The clusters associated with non-brand-oriented consumers show a somewhat different composition with respect to the four factors. Cluster 4 highlights greater attention to the model and the connection to the present. This

cluster is associated with “*Modern*” consumers, who pay attention to fit, design and comfort, as well as price and versatility.

The “*undemanding*” consumers (Cluster 5) are those who do not assign great importance to the indicated attributes. Although the cluster is characterised by the greater importance of the brand, Table 3 shows the low importance of the attributes in purchasing decisions.

The “*demanding*” consumers (Cluster 6) are those who show a higher total average level of importance of the attributes. Indeed, a high level of importance is seen in six attributes, including comfort and fit, which are practically indispensable. The price, as with Cluster 4, is the key distinguishing element with respect to the first three clusters, for which the value assigned is not very high.

The cluster analysis showed that in the choice processes of Cluster 1, a relatively minor role is played by the brand (understood as an element that facilitates relationships with the consumer by developing trust over time).

Indeed, for expert consumers, there are numerous important attributes, regardless of the specific role of the brand. Regarding non-brand-devoted consumers, there is a propensity to assign importance in the choice process to various attributes, except for the “*undemanding*” cluster, whose consumers do not see any element as important.

5. Results

First and foremost, the research conducted confirmed the utility of the “means-end chain” model by identifying the deeper motives for purchasing a product. It is only by means of this model that the values can be identified, since they were not detected by quantitative analysis alone. Indeed, linear regression analysis highlighted the dependence of the purchasing intention only on attributes and benefits.

As well as serving to identify the purchasing motives of jeans’ consumers, the reconstruction of the Hierarchical Value Map highlighted some tendencies in the choice processes of the two consumer categories being studied. Indeed, the main ladders for brand-devoted and non-brand-devoted consumers were identified, as shown in Figures 2 and 3.

The two groups of consumers seek similar values. The difference between them is the way in which they pursue these values. It should be pointed out that price is an important attribute for all consumers. In addition, Figures 2 and 3 show that the values indicated by the most frequent responses are shared by the two groups of consumers; what varies is the route by which each group seeks these values, depending on their sensitivity or otherwise towards the brand.

Findings 1: how preference for product attribute changes in the presence or absence of a brand.

The quantitative analysis, as already noted, shows that there is no link between the purchase intention and the values sought. Regression analysis highlights that brand-devoted and non-brand-devoted consumers choose the product considering both attributes and benefits. Both types of consumer attach greater importance to the attributes than the benefits (factor *t* of the regression analysis and average of the descriptive analysis).

The descriptive analysis shows that non-brand-devoted consumers seem more insecure and put greater importance on the observed variables. Brand-devoted consumers do not attach importance to famous brands or to the values associated with the brand. This can be explained through reference to the observation that the strength of the brand lies in the consumer’s previous consumption experience (Keller, 2003), which simplifies the choice process as the consumer is guided by the trust which has built up over time.

The factor analysis confirms the important role exercised by the attributes “fit”, “design model”, “comfort”, and “price”, falling under the factor “model” to which both consumer sets pay more attention. This dimension represents the attributes of the product, representing the need for a trial.

The findings suggest that between brand-devoted and non-brand-devoted consumers, there is no change in the preferences of attributes but more the importance attached to them. Moreover, it appears that consumers do not merely use specific product cues to judge the concrete/functional aspects of a product (e.g., comfort, design), but also link various cues to higher or abstract values, such as psychological and social values, sensory pleasure, and symbolic meaning.

Findings 2: how characteristics of a cluster change in the presence or absence of a brand.

The foregoing observations are confirmed by the cluster analysis. Indeed, the difference between the groups of consumer lies in the lesser importance assigned to the attributes in the purchasing choices. For the non-brand-devoted group, since there is no previous “structured” relationship with a brand, there is greater

attention paid to certain features of the product. This emerges for both the “modern” and the “demanding” consumers.

The most consistent cluster of brand-devoted is “branded”, which is characterised by the importance assigned to brand components and up-to-date components, being originality, style and versatility. The second is that of “experts”, for which there are several attributes showing a high importance in the process of choice. For non-brand-devoted consumers, the largest cluster is “demanding”, representing the consumers who consider various attributes are important. The absence of a brand makes the choice of jeans more complex; there is a preliminary understanding of the product that one buys (in terms of expectations) and, therefore, there are more variables that are evaluated. The element of the product that is viewed with great importance concerns the model; comfort, fit, design/model, and versatility attributes are considered very important, in particular by the not brand-devoted consumers. In addition, price is an important variable for both consumers (Table 3).

Table 3. Average importance of each item for the total and for each cluster

	Brand-devoted consumers				Non-Brand-devoted consumers			
	<i>Average</i>	<i>Clusters</i>			<i>Average</i>	<i>Clusters</i>		
		<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>		<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>
Comfort	3.89	4.47	3.47	4.06	4.21	4.44	2.79	4.64
Fit	3.95	4.41	3.74	3.87	4.22	4.58	2.63	4.65
Fabric quality	3.61	4.26	3.49	3.13	3.65	3.31	2.74	4.19
Colour	3.55	4.21	3.46	2.98	3.76	3.56	2.74	4.27
Wash/treatment	3.21	3.99	3.27	2.20	3.19	2.25	2.92	3.80
Trim	3.31	3.97	3.47	2.26	3.29	2.96	2.87	3.62
Design/model	3.83	4.22	4.01	3.01	4.00	4.46	2.74	4.24
Originality of the model	2.99	2.45	3.80	2.04	2.92	3.35	3.05	2.63
Fashionable	3.15	2.63	3.78	2.48	3.15	3.90	3.13	2.76
Versatility	3.49	3.53	3.61	3.19	3.72	4.12	2.82	3.86
Famous brand	2.51	1.99	3.01	2.11	2.04	1.85	2.74	1.87
Price	3.64	3.83	3.38	3.92	3.98	4.27	2.87	4.27
Originality of wash/treatment	2.73	2.57	3.07	2.25	2.50	1.94	2.92	2.62

The findings indicate that there is a different characterisation (result of the different importance of the factors) of the cluster between the two types of consumers. Only Clusters 1 and 6 appear to be similar, as confirmed by the description (Table 3).

6. Conclusions and Managerial Implications

The study has allowed the following:

- Find the variables that characterise the choice of jeans, in the absence or in the presence of a brand;
- Identify the different impacts of the aforementioned attributes in the process of the choice of brand-devoted and non-brand-devoted;
- Recognise possible factor clustering for business strategies for differentiation and positioning.

Brand-devoted consumers appear reassured by brand presence during the process of choosing, while non-brand-devoted appear more exigent. Specifically, the analysis highlighted the existence of distinct factors behind the choice of product. Companies need to construct an offer “concept” that can respond to the significant variety seen in the choice factors.

The managerial contribution of the paper concerns the definition of the strategies in relation to positioning for companies operating in the jeans sector. Achieving competitive positions by companies in the jeans sector is increasingly tied to the concepts of fit and comfort, not forgetting the role of prices.

The positioning of a brand of a jeans’ manufacturer should increasingly bind the characteristics of the model, which then can generate the special cognition/emotions likely to generate affective components. The success of a brand in the sector appears to be more related to cognitive attributes and less affective. In order to increase their competitive capacity, brands in this sector need to strengthen, by means of communication, the visibility of those product features that are perceived by consumers as the most attractive and distinctive, thereby developing loyalty.

For non-branded companies, it is indispensable to channel information that will facilitate the perception of the attributes of the product, thereby favouring the purchasing choice. For these companies, it is the store and particularly the sales staff, who play the key role in determining the purchaser's choice. It is in this context that the non-brand-devoted consumer, noting the attributes of the product and the benefits that can be obtained, arrives at the choice of product having considered his or her expectations regarding the attributes and the "desired final state" (values) that he or she wishes to pursue.

The study was conducted in Italy. The limitations of this paper lie mainly in the type of sampling used for the compilation of the questionnaire and the impossibility of linking the sample to a universe of reference.

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Notes

Note 1. The absence of sector reports and the consequent lack of information on the characteristics of the population of reference prevent the construction of a sample that is statistically representative or in line with the characteristics of the universe of reference. Therefore, the sample was predominantly female (67%), given the greater sensitivity traditionally shown by women when purchasing clothing products (Auty & Elliot, 1998).

Note 2. The content analysis sought to link the interviewees' idiosyncratic responses to a common set of meanings: each interviewee's thought or response was attributed to a category code, eliminating the personal variations of basically similar thoughts and identifying a set of standard concepts that express all the attributes, consequences and values mentioned in the responses given during the interviews. The concepts transformed into codes thus became the nodes of a hypothetical associative network.

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