

Determination of the Priorities of Customer Requirements and Quality in Apparel Retail Industry

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore and evaluate the priorities of customer requirements and importance of quality in apparel retailing industry within the consumer perspective and to show the usability of Analytical Hierarchy Process (AHP) in ranking of the requirements. The requirements of the final customers from the apparel retail companies are determined in a hierarchical manner consisting of two levels. The first level of requirements includes, quality referring to 'Performance and durability', 'Price', 'Timeliness or flexibility', 'Fashion, design and variety', and 'Service' referring the customer requirements regarding the store activity, whereas the second of level criteria includes the specific requirements of the customer within each requirements in the first level. The data for analysis is obtained from the focus group of consumers. Analytical Hierarchy Process (AHP) is employed for making pair-wise comparison in order to provide a quantitative ranking of the requirements and generate the priorities. The quality and their components are positioned at the top among the other prior requirements of the consumers. Determination of relative importance of the quality and other requirements helps the companies to establish the specifications and price configuration of their product range in convenience with the expectations of the consumers.

Key Words: Quality, Analytical Hierarchy Process, Apparel, Retail, Customer requirements

1. Introduction

Customer tastes change dynamically in the apparel industry (Marufuzzaman & Ahsan, 2009) which is characterized by short product life cycle, high volatility, large variance in demand and high number of stock keeping unit (Soni & Kodali, 2010). Besides, the market trends have evolved from mass fashion based on mass production and sales into the segment fashion that has required targeting small customer groups in a 40 year period beginning with 1960's (Sekozawa et. al., 2011). The results reached by focusing on the right consumer requirements lead to the improvement of the performance of the company. The target customers should be served well considering their favourite requirements and their priorities (Sekozawa et. al., 2011) .

The expectations of the customers are various. The retailer companies are expected to conform the requirements of the customer on both product and service level. For instance, fast fashion has increased its share in the apparel market as customers expect greater variety and frequent design changes (Chan & Chan, 2010). On the other hand, the retail store attributes having the critical role in creating brand image has an influence on customer satisfaction (Shubhapriya & Byoungcho, 2012). Moreover, the service quality level is drawn attention by Rayman et al (2011) as one of major parameters for the customer satisfaction. Although the expectation of consumer can be named under two parts as product and service quality within these titles, there are specific requirements that clearly diverges from the other ones in apparel market such as style, variety, durability and performance and so on. The ideal condition is that, all the expectations of the consumers are met in order to reach success. It is not always the case, however.

A slight change in one attribute can create more customer satisfaction than the other. Therefore, the customer expectations from the apparel products should be identified and prior issues should be carried out and be strategically focused on by the retailers.

On this regard, the purpose of this study is to explore and evaluate the importance of quality and other requirements of the customers from the apparel retailers with an application established in conjunction with an apparel retailer. Related with this purpose, the other objective of the study is to achieve a quantitative ranking among the requirements from the retailers and to show the usefulness of Analytical Hierarchy Process (AHP) within this perspective. The customer requirements are identified based on the literature and experiences of the apparel retail company and then subjected to prioritization using AHP. This enables the retailers to determine the relative importance of quality and the other prior issues and to establish the specifications and the price configurations for their product range in convenience with expectations and to implement relevant market strategies.

2. Literature review

2.1. Analytical Hierarchy Process

AHP is a decision tool proposed by Saaty in 1980 that is used to solve unstructured problems and complicated situations in economics, social and management sciences (Marufuzzaman & Ahsan, 2009). AHP usage provides twofold benefits. Firstly, it allows to make judgements about the relative importance of each criteria by assigning weights to a set of predetermined elements and in this way, it prioritizes the elements in order to define the key elements (Chan & Chan, 2010). Secondly, it allows to make a preference for decision alternatives in terms of each criterion (Okur et. al., 2009).

AHP is identified as a technique to rank a finite number of alternatives based on a finite number of criteria (Okur et. al., 2009). Sekozawa et al (2011) identify AHP as a method of quantifying human perception and taste. AHP structures a complex problem in a simpler hierarchical form and evaluates the quantitative and qualitative factors in the more systematic manner under multiple criteris environment in confliction (Marufuzzaman & Ahsan, 2009). Chan & Chan (2010) imitate the hierarchical structure of the structure of AHP to the figure of the tree where the objectives refers to the root, the alternatives are the leaves.

The name of AHP explains its application logic (Silva et. al., 2009):

Analytic: It assists in the measurement and synthesization of a series of factors involved in complex decisions.

Hierarchy: Hierarchy is the adaptable way of finite intelligence to assume a complex situation.

Process: A process is a series of actions, alterations or functions that leads to an end or result.

Uncu (2003) summarizes the methodology of solving problem using AHP in five steps which are problem decomposition, comparative analysis, synthesis of priorities, consistency determination and aggregation respectively. In problem decomposition step, interrelated decision elements are listed in a hierarchical manner. In comparative analysis, each criterion is assessed considering their contribution on the achievement of the overall objective using a rating scale in making pairwise comparison. The priorities are synthesized using either weightings of the factors mathematically or eigenvalue method in which the weights of elements are calculated using eigenvector or least square analysis. The judgemental consistency of the decision makers are evaluated with the consistency ratio statistics in the fourth steps. And finally, the relative weight of decision elements are aggregated in order to rate among the alternatives (Uncu, 2003). Nonetheless, the procedure given here is for the application of AHP in making selection among alternatives. It is also possible to just determine the priorities of the alternative criterias.

According to Silva et al (2009), the advantage of AHP method is consideration of the perceptions, experiences, intuitions and uncertainties in a rational way of generating levels of priorities or weights. With the usage of AHP, the importance of each criterion or item is evaluated in relation to the considered context rationally and precisely (Silva et. al., 2009). Chan and Chan (2010) draws attention to the fact that AHP was beneficial also when the criteria were qualitative.

Uncu (2003) enumerates the advantage of using hierarchy as; providing a general outlook of complex relationships; preserving the homogeneity in comparisons; seeking input about the factors and sub factors within the hierarchy from different levels and finally incorporating the hierarchical structure into an interactive solution leading the active participation of managers involved. The wide applicability and appreciation of AHP is claimed to be related to its applicability due to its simplicity, ease of use and great flexibility (Chiang & Li, 2010) .

The disadvantage or limitation of the Analytical Hierarchy Process is possible inconsistency of the decision makers that can arise because of the difficulty in reaching consensus when especially there is high number of levels (Uncu,2003).

AHP can be applied in a wide variety of situations with problems of multiple criteria, including priority definition, cost-benefit allocation, benchmarking, marketing evaluation, supplier-selection decisions, facility-location decisions, forecasting, risks and opportunities modeling, choice of technology, plan and product design (Silva et. al., 2009; Chan & Chan, 2010) in more than 30 areas, including marketing, management, information, finance, education, public policy, medicine, and sports (Chiang & Li, 2010). For instance, Chiang and Li (2010) assess the factors influencing the consumers' channel attitudes for the products like book/CDs, electronics and fashion products using AHP. Min and Min (1996) utilizes AHP and competitive gap analyses to make competitive benchmarking in order to identify the position of Korean hotels in terms of service performance.

Specifically in the textile industry, AHP and ANP are proposed as a decision making tool for supplier selection (Yilmaz et al, 2011), SWOT and AHP are used together for making competitive analysis, AHP is used with balanced score card in order to decide for an alliance (Chan & Chan, 2010). Sekozawa et al (2011), create a system for a shopping site that analyzes the customer preferences by the AHP technique forming a cluster by correlations of clothes and analyzing the market basket in order to make fashion advising on the internet.

Beside these applications, AHP is mostly used in conjunction with QFD method which is a systematic tool that uses the customers' requirements in the design, production, marketing and support stages (Okur et. al., 2009). Many researchers use AHP in their QFD process in order to determine the priorities of the customers' needs such as Halicioglu (2005).

Considering the characteristics and applications of AHP, the technique is found convenient in to determine the priorities of the customers expectations from the apparel retailers. Its structure of having the ability of making pairwise comparisons best suits for the customer requirements to be allocated in an hierarchical manner.

2.2. The Quality and Customer Expectations

Quality is defined as 'fitness for use' and described with five dimensions which has been the quality of design, quality of conformance, availability, safety and field use (Kuei & Lu, 1997) . Citing the previous studies, Christiansen (2011) identifies quality as conformance to requirements whereas he gives the dimensions of quality as performance features, reliability, conformance, durability, servicability, aesthetics and perceived quality. Quality has a multidimensional, multivariate and continuously changing concept. Thus, it is not an easy task to make universalistic propositions for describing the relationship between various variables and quality (Christiansen, 2011).

Considering the apparel products specifically, the product quality is defined as the judgements of the consumers about the performance of the product (Rayman et. al., 2011). Rayman et al (2011) state that, 7 factors of the apparel were retained which were performance, components, garment care, appearance, construction or workmanship, style or fashion, and fit respectively. On the other hand, Forsythe (1991) claims that, consumers evaluated the apparel products and formed impression of quality and value through the use of extrinsic cues such as brand name, price, package and store image and through intrinsic cues including the design, style, fabric type, fiber content and construction details. Nonetheless, Forsythe et al (1996) described three dimension of perceived quality as sturdiness/durability involving garment seams, stitching, fabric construction, style and aesthetic like garment design, styling and overall performance and finally lasting/care like garment life and care required.

Skgkao (1994) states that, the apparel attributes were workmanship in sewing, physiological comfort, usefulness, physical and chemical properties, suitability to individual preference and fashionability or brand. Abraham-Murali and Littrell (1995) encounter fabric and garment construction, care, value, style and service among the important attributes of apparel. Saricam et al (2012), on the other hand, imply that the apparel quality attributes were performance and durability, style and fit, fashion or trendiness, brand name or image and price.

Nonetheless, for the apparel retailers which act as the intermediate business unit between the manufacturers and the end users should consider more than the product attributes or product quality if they care about increasing the level of satisfaction.

Because, in a market with fierce competition and rapid changes of customer orientation, corporate profit and competitiveness can be enhanced by the effective delivery of service quality (Kabir & Hasin, 2011). In the fast changing fashion market, being flexible and adaptive is proposed to be a key for survival (Chan & Chan, 2010). Chiang and Li (2010) claims that when a consumer had to decide which channel to buy from, it had to consider a number of criteria such as product information accessibility, immediate possession of products, helpfulness of sales people, brand selection and variety, post purchase service and exchange refund policy for returns.

Considering these points stated in the literature the apparel retailers that sell a special type of product with its own differentiated expectations by the customers, should consider both the product and service quality. The apparel product attributes such as performance and durability, brand name or image, fashion or trendiness, style and fit come forward in terms of apparel product quality. The customer requirements from the apparel retailers such as the flexibility, timeliness, the availability of products and post purchase activities are highlighted in terms of service quality. Besides, the price can be encountered into the assessments of priorities of the customers.

Within this study, the product and service quality requirements are specified under 5 main categories which are quality referring the 'Performance and durability', 'Price', 'Timeliness or flexibility', 'Fashion, design and variety' and 'Service quality' referring the customers' requirement from the store activities. Nonetheless, all these categories are detailed and classified considering if they relate to the service or product quality.

3. Method used

This study is established working in cooperation with a large apparel retailer that serves the market with 210 stores and 5100 workers.

The first step of the study is to define the model for AHP with respect to apparel retailing industry for determining the expectations in the customer perspective. The customer requirements are determined based on the literature gathered from various journals and related publications and the interviews with the experienced company specialists.

21 requirements are identified under 5 categories in order to construct a systematic hierarchical structure consisting of subcriteria and criteria. An inquiry composed of the pairwise comparisons are performed systematically to include all the combinations of criteria and sub criteria relationships. The inquiries are conducted among the focus group of customers including 50 people. The respondents assess the relative importance of criteria and subcriteria with respect to each other using a 5 point scale. Finally, alternatives are assigned numerical values or priorities by making mathematical calculations.

4. Results and Discussion

The company which is worked in conjunction with, has initiated its business in childrens wear than expanded its product line with the womenswear and menswear. Although it also manufactures the apparel products, the top level of the company is specialized on the procurement, planning and marketing activities. Based on the interviews with the marketing department staff considering the related literature, the customer requirements are organized in a way that, two level of hierarchy is constructed with 21 requirements or subcriteria under 5 category or criteria. Moreover, subcriteria are also assessed about their relevancy with the product and service quality. A list of the requirements with their explanations are established as seen in Table I, that has a classification and hierarchy of criterias. The subcriteria are listed under the first level criteria to which it is belonged.

'Durability', 'Colour fastness', 'Print and accessorizes' quality', 'Conformance to child safety' and 'Conformance to the ecological requirements' are encountered as the customer requirements under the 'Performance and durability' criteria. 'Quality-price balance', 'Price attractiveness', 'Appropriateness of discount price intervals' and 'Qualification of the promotional activities' are grouped under 'Price' criteria. 'Shipment to the store on demand', 'Availability of the brand new products at the beginning of the season' are considered under the 'Timeliness or flexibility' criteria.

The criteria 'Fashion, design and variety' has the highest number of sub criterias which are 'Fitness of patterns', 'Fitness of pattern size', 'Style options variety', 'Color options variety', 'Harmony with fashion and trends' and 'Annual divergences in collection'. Finally, the customer requirement such as 'Accessibility to catalog products at store', 'Credibility of catalog infos', 'Correct settlement of products and accurate combines' and 'Return and exchange policies after sales' are encountered under the 'Service' criteria.

These requirements are then translated into questions for the inquiry in order to build a structure in convenient to make a pairwise comparison. In each question, the respondent is required to determine its preferences or the relative importance of specified criteria or subcriteria with respect to the other criteria or subcriteria using the scale shown in Table II. After getting all the responses from the focus group, the matrices are formed in each group on the hierarchy. Priorities are synthesized using weighing of the factors and, the following numerical values for the priorities are obtained for each customer requirement as shown in Table III.

According to the results, the 'Performance and durability' of the products are given the highest priority with a numerical value of 0,1508 by the customers. 'Price' gets the closest rank with the performance requirement getting 0,1502. Next, comes the 'Service' requirement with the value of 0,2844 leaving behind the criterias 'Timeliness or flexibility' and 'Fashion, design and variety'.

Within the performance and requirements, 'Print and accessorizes' durability' gets the highest priority followed by 'Colourfastness' and 'Durability'. In 'Price' criteria, 'Qualification of promotional activities' gets the highest priority followed by 'Appropriateness of discount price interval' whereas 'Quality price balance' becomes least favored requirement. Regarding 'Timeliness or flexibility' issue, 'Availability of brandnew products at the beginning of the season' is favored more than 'Shipment to store on demand'. In the criteria of 'Fashion, design and variety', 'Style options variety' followed by 'Color options variety' and 'Harmony with fashion and trends' become the prior issues. Finally, within 'Service' criteria, 'Correct settlement of products and accuracy of combines' becomes the prior issue followed by 'Credibility of catalog infos'.

When the categories are evaluated with each other, it is seen that the prior issues are 'Availability of the brandnew products at the beginning of the season', 'Correct settlement of products and accurate combines' and 'Credibility of catalog infos'.

Regarding the classification of the variables in terms of service and apparel quality, both of which that have same number of relevant subcriterias, 7 variables from the product quality category and 5 variables from the service quality are encountered in the prior issues.

At the end of the study, it is found that, product quality was more favored than the service quality. Nonetheless, the most prior issues are selected among the service quality components.

Specifically, the criterias in the order of 'Durability and performance', 'Price', 'Service', 'Timelines or flexibility' and 'Fashion, design and variety' are taken as the prior issues by the customers.

As stated in the literature, there is not any study that determines the relative importance of customer requirements or in none of the studies, the requirement of the customers from the retailers are included considering the marketing perspective of the product in this extent. Thus, it is not possible to make one to one correspondence with the literature. There are some similarities and intersections with the previous studies however. For instance, Abraham Murali and Littrell (1995) include the fabric and garment construction, care, value, style and service into the most important attributes, and adds the effect of price depending on the level of other variables.

Oktay (2000) claims that tangible factors such as seam quality, durability, material quality and smartness came forward than the other customer requirements. The result is parallel with the findings in which the durability and performance issues comes forward. Saricam et al (2012) carry out that most important apparel product attributes was performance and durability followed by fit and price. The results in this study, point the importance of durability and performance too.

The rank of style and fit parameter differs from the previous studies, this point can be explained with the influence of the company. The product range of the company usually includes the basic products instead of fashionable and stylistic ones.

Although the focus group is warned about the expression of their general opinions, they may be mistaken by focusing on the company's product range. Besides, some variables such as 'Correct settlement of products and accurate combines', is assessed under the category of service. Although, 'Service' criteria becomes one of the three priorities of the customers, it does not contribute to the significance of the category of 'Fashion, design and variety'.

According to the results of the study, the third item is 'Service' category. That category has not been involved in previous studies as previous studies have focused mainly on product attributes. Nonetheless, the purpose of this study is about the classification and rating of customer requirements from a retailer company and therefore service category is one of the distinguishing properties. Besides, 'Timeliness or flexibility' criteria is also related with the service provided by the retailer company, but it is much more oriented with the characteristics of flexibility and fast fashion. The category of 'Timeliness or flexibility' even gets higher significance than the one 'Fashion, design and variety' although the ratings of these criteria are quite close to each other. As the companies in the fashion market focus on the time and speed in order to improve their competitiveness (Chan and Chan, 2010), the result obtained is not indifference.

5. Conclusions

In this study, the customer requirements in terms of product and service quality from the apparel retailer is evaluated using the Analytical Hierarchy Process. The application of AHP allows the customers to express his or her preferential judgements reaching a quantitative result in the end.

The focus group has determined the rankings of the prior issues by highlighting the product quality issues more than the service quality issues. Nonetheless, the top three subcriteria given highest rankings have been among the ones related with the service quality.

The selection of the requirements and categories in the first and second level can be changed depending on the capability and service provided by the company. And the other limitation is about population which is limited with Turkish customers.

Nonetheless, the findings can be used by the apparel companies or interested parties in order to determine the specification and price configurations of the product ranges. Moreover, the study can be expanded to cover a more homogenous population of customers.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to sincerely express their highest appreciations and gratitudes to the retailer company LCWaikiki for their great support and precious comments during the preparation process of this research. Also, the authors would like to sincerely acknowledge to the respondents of the survey.

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Table I : The classifications of criterias and subcriterias in customer requirements

Criteria /Subcriteria	Level	Relevancy with the product or service quality
Performance and durability	1. Level	
Durability (Strength and long useful life of product)	2. Level	Product Quality
Colour fastness (Resistance to fading of colors)	2. Level	Product Quality
Print and accessorizes' durability (Long useful life of the print and accessorizes)	2. Level	Product Quality
Conformance to child safety (The material and process selection convenient with the safety standarts)	2. Level	Product and Service Quality
Conformance to ecological requirements (The material and process selection convenient with the safety standarts)	2. Level	Product and Service Quality
Price	1. Level	
Quality-price balance (Paying in accord with the quality of product)	2. Level	Product and Service Quality
Price attractiveness (Paying less for the product with respective to identical products)	2. Level	Service Quality
Discount price interval appropriateness (The suitability of the gap between season price and discount price)	2. Level	Service Quality
Promotional activities qualification (buy 2 pay 1,etc)	2. Level	Service Quality
Timeliness or flexibility	1. Level	
Shipment to store on demand (The availability of the retailer to call the ordered product into the store)	2. Level	Service Quality
Availability of brandnew product at the beginning of the seasons	2. Level	Product and Service Quality
Fashion, design and variety	1. Level	
Fitness of patterns (The convenience of the styles to body porportions)	2. Level	Product Quality
Fitness of patterns sizes (The fitness of the cloth to different sized people)	2. Level	Product Quality
Style options variety (Availability of various styles)	2. Level	Product Quality
Color options variety (Availability of various colors)	2. Level	Product Quality
Harmony with fashion and trends (The convenience of the collection concept with the trends of season)	2. Level	Product Quality
Annual divergences in collection (Identification of new concepts for each season)	2. Level	Product and Service Quality
Service provided by the store	1. Level	
Accessibility to catalog producs at store (The availability of whole product range in all stores)	2. Level	Service Quality
Credibility of catalog infos (Accessability of each product with the price specified in the catalog)	2. Level	Service Quality
Correct settlement of products and accurate combines (Presenting alternatives to the customers in terms of creating combines)	2. Level	Service Quality
Return or changeover after sales (The ease of the changeovers and providing guarantees.	2. Level	Service Quality

Table II The scale used in the inquiry for pairwise comparison

Expression	Numerical Value
Specified requirement A is strongly preferred than the requirement B	5
Specified requirement A need is moderately preferred than the requirement B	3
Specified requirement A and the requirement B are equally preferred	1
The requirement B is moderately preferred than the specified requirement A	1/3
The requirement B - is strongly preferred than the specified requirement A	1/5

Table III The numerical values of priorities of customer requirements

			Durability	0,1960
	High Level of Customer Satisfaction	Performance and durability 0,1508	Colour fastness	0,2065
			Print and accessorizes' durability	0,2823
			Conformance to child safety	0,1384
			Conformance to ecological requirements	0,1768
		Price 0,1502	Quality-price balance	0,1345
			Price attractiveness	0,2161
			Discount price interval appropriateness	0,2607
			Promotional activities qualification (buy 2 pay 1,etc)	0,3887
		Timeliness or flexibility 0,2108	Shipment to store on demand	0,3961
			Availability of brandnew product at the beginning of the seasons	0,6039
		Fashion design variety 0,2038	Fitness of patterns	0,1443
			Fitness of patterns sizes	0,1544
			Style options variety	0,2009
			Color options variety	0,1786
			Harmony with fashion and trends	0,1620
	Service 0,2844	Annual divergences in collection	0,1597	
		Accessibility to catalog producs at store	0,1934	
		Credibility of catalog infos	0,2554	
		Correct settlement of products and accurate combines	0,3603	
		Return or changeover after sales	0,1910	