

Purchase Decision Behavior for and Satisfaction with Apparel among U.S. Retail Buyers and Consumers of Ethnic Apparel

Molly Eckman

Dept. of Design and Merchandising, Colorado State University

Abstract

Purchase decision behavior for and satisfaction with apparel among retail buyers and consumers were compared. Kunz's behavioral theory of the apparel firm was the conceptual framework; Oliver's disconfirmation model guided measurement of satisfaction. Buyers and consumers indicated their perceptions about shopping orientations, variables that influenced apparel purchasing decisions, the importance of aspects of customer service and attributes that they expected to find and found when shopping. Surveys were mailed to retailers and consumers identified by random sampling of company lists. Respondents were 66 buyers and 344 consumers. MANOVA revealed differences in retailers' and consumers' shopping orientations, the influence of variables on purchase decisions, and perceptions of the importance of customer service. Paired sample t tests indicated dissatisfaction for buyers on 10 apparel/shopping attributes and consumers on nine items. Results support the need for vertically integrated manufacturers to redesign strategies that are more appealing to both retail buyers and consumers.

1. Introduction

Apparel manufacturing firms, which once tended to be production oriented, have become market driven to remain competitive in the U.S. market(Kunz, 1995). This trans-

formation is reflected by modifications in the supply chain for apparel. The traditional supply chain reflects that retailers were the middlemen between apparel manufacturers and consumers. Traditionally, manufacturers were responsible for designing and producing apparel for presentation to retailers who then selected a mix of merchandise to meet the wants and needs of their firm's target market. More current supply chains indicate, however, that manufacturers are increasingly vertically integrated, including operating their own retail stores(Dickerson, 1999). As such, greater numbers of apparel manufacturers strive to directly meet the needs of two groups of constituents-retailers and consumers. Thus, these manufacturers benefit from understanding not only the elements that influence retail buyers' purchases for firms but also those that affect consumers' shopping decisions. This is complicated by the fact that new categories of retailers(e.g., nonprofits) and consumers(e.g., socially conscious) are emerging in an increasingly competitive marketplace. Reflective of these changes is an emerging market of consumers who seek ethnically-inspired apparel and an increasing number of retailers(e.g., Marketplace, Nature Conservancy, Anthropologie) who target these consumers. It has been suggested that consumers consider ethnic apparel to be appealing for a variety of reasons, including their interest in travel, curiosity of and appreciation for cultural diversity, and desire to support developing economies through the purchase of merchandise reflecting cultural traditions. There

is, however, no estimate of the size of the ethnic apparel market nor is there much research to guide retail buyers' decisions concerning product selection for this category of merchandise. Arbuthnot and Slama(1993) state that the merchandising-buying function is critical to any retail operation. In addition, the authors note that while consumer-buying behavior and industrial buying have been widely examined, research on retail-buying behavior has emerged relatively recently. Furthermore, few studies have compared retail buyers' and consumers' purchase decisions behavior for and satisfaction with apparel. This study evolved in collaboration with the design and production manager for a wholesale clothing line. The U.S.-based firm sources apparel from India and Indonesia for distribution to U.S. retailers and catalog firms featuring clothing with a global/ethnic emphasis and for sale in the company's own retail store.

2. Purpose

Retail store/catalog buyers' and consumers' perceptions of factors that influence their purchase decisions for apparel were compared. The study was designed to enable the investigation of two trends in the marketplace. The first trend examined was changes in the traditional supply chain for apparel, which reflects that manufacturers are increasingly serving the needs of both retail buyers and consumers in a direct capacity. Second, the research examined an emerging type of consumer, one who purchases ethnic apparel and makes socially conscious purchase decisions.

To better satisfy retail buyers, the design and production manager of the cooperating firm identified the need for information on the business practices(e.g., store type, net sales) of retail and catalog firms that include ethnic apparel in their merchandise mix and demographic characteristics of consumers who shop for ethnic apparel. In addition, the design and production manager recognized the need for information on buyers' and consumers' shopping opinions and purchasing criteria for apparel. Because customer service has become an important competitive strategy among both manufacturers and retailers, the design and production manager also requested this area of inquiry.

Finally, the level of satisfaction among retail buyers with aspects of purchasing apparel for their firms was measured as well as consumers' level of satisfaction when shopping for apparel for themselves. An anticipated outcome of the study was to better understand the factors that influence decisions concerning and level of satisfaction with aspects of the supply chain for apparel. The expectation was that the results guide the redesign of business strategies to manage the collaborative firm's resources effectively to better satisfy retail buyers and consumers, in addition to meeting company goals. The results may also contribute to revised models of decision-making for consumers and retail buyers that better reflect emerging trends in the marketplace.

3. Conceptual Framework

Kunz's(1995) behavioral theory of the apparel firm was the foundation of the research. This theory is based on the marketing concept, which states that a firm's success in reaching its goals depends on satisfying the needs and wants of its external coalitions, including retail buyers and, in particular, the target market(Houston, 1986; Kunz, 1995). The variables included in the research were derived from the production manager's concerns and goals as well as models and theories of apparel evaluation and consumer behavior(e.g., Dickson & Littrell, 1997; Eckman, Damhorst, & Kadolph, 1990; Engel, Blackwell, & Miniard, 1995; Monroe & Gultinan, 1975). These models and theories propose that purchase decisions are influenced factors, including shopping orientations and purchasing considerations. Oliver's(1980) disconfirmation model guided measurement of consumers and buyers' satisfaction.

4. Review of Literature

Purchasing behavior is of strategic importance to manufacturers and distributors of products(Arbuthnot & Slama, 1993; Dickson & Littrell, 1997). Retail buyers and managers believe that their most important job competencies are the ability to understand consumers' needs, judge salability of products, and making sound decisions(Fiorito

& Fairhurst, 1989; Kotsiopoulos, Oliver, & Shim, 1993). However, Dickson and Littrell(1998) state that manufacturers and retailers of ethnic apparel have been relatively uninformed about their consumer markets.

1) Shopping orientations

Much shopping opinion literature concerning apparel has traditionally focused on predicting product usage and segmentation by type of shopper(e.g., Choi & Koh, 1998; Darden & Reynolds, 1972; Gutman & Mills, 1982). However, increased international sourcing of merchandise and rising popularity of “ethnically friendly” retailers indicate that further research is warranted on a wider range of shopping opinions, such as the interplay between consumers’ concern for the economic development of the manufacturing country and their purchasing decisions. Interest in shopping opinions is also heightened by the increasing number of consumers whose purchase decisions are influenced by concerns about social and environmental concerns and thus are referred to as socially conscious consumers(Kim, Littrell, & Paff Ogle, 1999). In response to these trends, there has been an increase in mainstream and nonprofit businesses sourcing and selling apparel under the umbrella of the “social responsibility movement”. While mainstream businesses focus on meeting customers’ needs, nonprofits emphasize meeting the needs of producers(Littrell & Dickson, 1998). Increased competition between mainstream and nonprofit retailers for socially conscious consumers might dictate that orientations of both these types of retailers be blended. To accomplish this, more research is warranted concerning the impact of social responsibility on product selection. This is consistent with Dickson & Littrell’s(1998) suggestion that the marketing concept and purchase behavior models be updated and interpreted more broadly to include those who consider how purchases impact society.

The emerging body of literature on socially conscious apparel consumers suggests that while some are willing to make an extra effort to shop with socially responsible businesses, they do so only with those whose products and services meet their needs(Dickson, 1999; Dickson & Littrell 1997; Littrell & Dickson, 1998). For example, in their

study of customers of an alternative trade catalog, Kim, Littrell, and Paff Ogle(1999) found that consumers’ desire for individuality exerted the greatest influence on consumers’ intention to purchase apparel; attitudes concerning social responsibility were second in importance. In addition, consumers who make purchase decisions to benefit society, such as buying from Alternative Trade Organizations, may also use societally oriented criteria(Dickson, 1999; Dickson & Littrell, 1997). For example, research on textile craft consumers suggests that quality, workmanship and connections to traditional crafts and artists influence these consumers’ purchase decisions(Littrell, 1990). One challenge in marketing traditional textile products, however, is that while handmade features are often appealing, a product that appears to be homemade may be viewed as inferior in quality.

Shopping attitudes and behaviors develop, in part, through consumer socialization, whereby young consumers acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to function in the marketplace(Francis & Burns, 1992). For example, consumers may become loyal to a socially or environmentally responsible business if they learn to associate personal meaning with products made by artisans and craftspeople. Or, if they believe that they are in partnership in aiding the economic development of artisans, rather than exploiting them.

This relatively recent focus on socially responsibility by apparel manufacturers and retailers may be linked to media coverage of issues such as human rights violations in factories producing consumer goods. Businesses are also increasingly using a socially responsible orientation to appeal to the growing number of socially conscious consumers. Thus competition has increased dramatically among such retailers in a variety of formats, including specialty mail order firms, and *nonprofit and mainstream stores*. Due to this increased competition, understanding socially conscious consumers’ decision making, including the purchasing criteria, is critical to retailers’ success when appealing to socially conscious consumers.

2) Purchasing criteria for apparel

In today’s competitive retail environment, buyers strive

to select saleable merchandise to gain market share (Stone & Cassill, 1989). Sizable capital is entrusted to retail buyers for selecting merchandise that meets consumers' wants and needs. Judging salability is especially critical to successful buying as retailers struggle to differentiate themselves through unique merchandise assortments (Wickett, Gaskill, & Damhorst, 1999). There is, however, little documentation on criteria retail buyers use in judging merchandise, perhaps for two reasons: (1) the complexity of the buyers' decision process and (2) the variety of variables that may influence their decisions (Stone & Cassill, 1989). Variables that have been found to influence apparel buyers' decisions were brand name, construction, delivery, design, fabric, price, personal selling, styling, and quality (Arbuthnot & Slama, 1993; Francis & Brown, 1985; Hirschman, 1981; Stone & Cassill, 1989).

The factors that influence consumers' apparel purchases have been examined by a number of researchers (e.g., Abraham-Murali, & Littrell, 1995a; Abraham-Murali, & Littrell, 1995b; Eckman, Damhorst, & Kadolph, 1990; North, de Vos, & Kotzé, 2003). A review of 21 studies of evaluative criteria used for apparel revealed that style, price and brand name were the most influential (Eckman, Damhorst, & Kadolph, 1990). Purchasing behavior is of strategic importance to producers and retailers of products (Dickson & Littrell, 1997). However, producers of ethnic apparel know relatively little about their consumers' preferences except perhaps that socially conscious apparel consumers use a broader set of criteria to evaluate apparel (Dickson & Littrell, 1997; Dickson & Littrell, 1998). For example, concerns about quality, price and suitability may be more important than aesthetic criteria such as styling. In addition, the desire to contribute to the lives of producers may be equally influential as specific evaluative criteria for the products. However, due to their lack of information about their consumers, producers and retailers of ethnic products may be designing and selecting merchandise based upon their own preferences or stereotypes.

3) Customer service

As the apparel market becomes increasingly competitive and homogenized both at wholesale and retail, the

delivery of improved customer service has been identified as a potential competitive advantage and may be crucial in providing customer satisfaction (Stanforth & Lennon, 1997). Most customer service research has focused on customer characteristics and salesperson behaviors (Stanforth & Lennon 1997). For example, on-line shoppers, who tend to be younger, more demanding and affluent, may also expect better service from "brick and mortar" retailers. Thus expectations for customer service may continue to rise (Young, 1999). However, store policies for customer service may be key in determining customer satisfaction. Comparing retailers' and consumers' perceptions may contribute to developing customer service policies that meet customer expectations. Consumers' evaluations and their expectations for what should occur during the process of purchasing goods are the foundation of most consumer satisfaction models.

4) Satisfaction

Marketers' interest in consumer satisfaction increased in recent decades. However, according to Andreasen (1993), research on consumer satisfaction is biased in several ways, including the focus on the outcome of the purchase rather than on buying/selling processes and the lack of attention to unethical behavior, which may impact satisfaction. According to satisfaction theory, shopping opinions and practices may have an indirect effect on overall satisfaction, which may influence patronage behavior (Francis & Burns, 1992). As a result, further research on consumer satisfaction should address both the processes and outcomes in purchases of goods and services (Andreasen, 1993).

5. Method

1) Sample

A random sampling of the collaborating manufacturing firm's customer list provided names and addresses of 1000 retailers, including catalog companies. Buyers of women's apparel completed the survey. One of the manufacturing firm's major accounts, a catalog retailer, provided a random sampling of 1500 consumers 18 years and older, to

whom the consumer survey was mailed.

2) Instrument

Pilot tested surveys suitable for mailing were developed for retail store/catalog buyers and consumers. Survey questions were based on previous research(e.g., Bickle, Eckman, & Kotsiopoulos, 1998; Dickson & Littrell, 1997; Eckman, Bickle & Kotsiopoulos, 1997; Eckman, Damhorst, & Kadolph, 1990) and input from the production manager at the collaborating manufacturing firm.

Characteristics of sample. Statements addressed eight characteristics of the retail store/catalog buyers: number of years in present business, position within firm, gender, ethnic group, type of business, items carried, selling space, and total net retail sales. Consumers were asked to respond to questions concerning gender, marital status, ethnic group, age, employment status, occupation, income, and education.

Shopping opinion statements. Consumers' and buyers' level of agreement with nine shopping opinions was measured on a 5-point scale(1=strongly disagree; 5=strongly agree). Consumers responded to all statements in the context of shopping for apparel for themselves. To examine the level of agreement between buyers' and consumers' perceptions on some statements, buyers were asked to indicate how they believed their customers would respond on six of the nine statements(e.g., one-size apparel is acceptable to my customer). Retailers responded to the three remaining statements in the context of shopping for their stores (e.g., I would like to see more ethnic-related apparel).

Purchasing criteria. Buyers indicated on a 5-point scale (1=not at all influential; 5=very influential) the degree to which they believed that 15 factors influence apparel purchasing decisions for their firms. Consumers indicated the degree to which they believed that the 15 criteria influenced apparel purchasing decisions for themselves.

Customer service. Buyers provided their perceptions of the importance of 10 aspects of customer service provided to consumers by their firms on a 5-point scale(1=not at all important; 5=very important). For comparison, consumers were asked to evaluate the importance of those aspects of customer service provided by retailers/catalog

companies.

Satisfaction with aspects of shopping for apparel. Buyers and consumers indicated their level of satisfaction by indicating the degree to which they expected and found 18 attributes when shopping for apparel on a 5-point scale (1=strongly disagree; 5=strongly agree). Buyers responded in the context of procuring apparel for their firms, consumers answered relative to purchasing apparel for themselves.

6. Results and Discussion

1) Characteristics of sample

Sixty-six retailers and 344 consumers were the sample for this study. The relatively low response rate from retailers was not unexpected given Greer, Chuchinprakarn, and Seshadri's(2000) finding that the response rate by businesses to mailed surveys tend to be low. A majority of retail buyers had 1-15 years of experience(n=46; 70%); were CEO/president/owner(n=56; 85%), female(n=56; 85%), Caucasian(n=55; 83%); and bought for boutiques and specialty stores(n=82) selling primarily women's apparel/accessories/gifts(n=178) in stores < 2000 square feet (n=44; 67%) with \$100,00 to \$400,000 in net sales(n=31; 53%). Most consumers were female(n=312; 91%), married(n=207; 60%), Caucasian(n=298; 87%), 41 to 60 years old(n=206; 60%); worked full time(n=176; 51%) in professional positions(n=189;55%);earned \$30,001 to \$80,000 (n=175; 51%); and held college/graduate degrees (n=299; 87%).

2) Shopping opinions

MANOVA was used to test for level of agreement on shopping opinions between buyers and consumers [F(1,9) =15.18, p<.001]. Significance levels of ≤.01 were used throughout as a conservative test due to the difference in the sample size of buyers and consumers. To a greater degree than consumers, buyers believed that paying bills on time was difficult and that one size apparel is acceptable to consumers. One-size apparel may be less complex for retailers to merchandise, however it may also be less appealing to consumers.

Table 1. Multivariate and univariate analysis of variance: Buyers' and consumers' levels of agreement with shopping opinion statements

Elements (wording modifications for buyer survey)	Means		Univariate F	Multivariate F
	Buyer(n=59)	Consumer(n=302)		
I find paying bills on time difficult	2.13	1.48	23.42***	15.18***
one size apparel is acceptable to me(my customer)	3.31	2.33	31.07***	
it is important (to my customer) that imported goods provide economic development to individual craftspeople	3.28	4.11	29.17***	
I (mzy customer) want(s) to know about the labor used to produce the apparel I wear	3.00	3.86	31.28***	
I (my customer)am(is) willing to pay more for apparel produced from methods that have a low impact on the environment	3.27	4.07	32.38***	
I am satisfied with the size ranges of apparel available	3.40	3.04	7.05	
I (my customers) appreciate the term handmade	4.02	4.01	.001	
I would like to see more ethnic-related apparel	3.40	3.10	3.91	
I (my customer) want(s) hang tags that explain the products' cultural relationships	3.36	3.23	.63	
** p<.01 *** p<.001		1=strongly disagree	5=strongly agree	

Consumers believed more strongly than did buyers that it is important to customers that imported goods should provide economic development to individual craftspeople, consumers wanted to know about labor that produced apparel, and consumers were willing to pay more for apparel produced from methods that have a low impact on the environment. Thus, consumers in this sample may be more socially conscious than the retailers who were sampled perceive them to be. The interest of these consumers in social and environmental issues may not be surprising as they shop with retailers whose marketing mix included ethnic apparel. In addition the demographic characteristics of the sample resemble those characteristic of socially responsible consumers: young to early middle aged, females who are well educated and have high occupational and socio-economic status(Kim, Littrell, & Paff Ogle, 1999). The retailers themselves, however, may underestimate their customers' concerns. These consumers' interest in the craftspeople, labor and environment implies that societally oriented criteria may influence their purchase decisions(Littrell, 1990). A related finding is that no significant differences were found regarding perceptions of customers' desire for hangtags that explain cultural relationships of products; both buyers(M=3.36) and consumers

(M=3.23) rated the desire for hangtags relatively high. This finding supports proposals to employ hangtags at the point of purchase to provide consumers with information regarding labor practices(e.g., child labor) used to produce garments. However, similar to garment labels, one cannot be certain that consumers actually use hangtag information when making purchase decisions(Dickson, 1999). As Dickson suggests, perhaps associating hangtags containing socially responsible messages with garments that have appealing attributes would increase the influence of the hangtags on purchase decisions, particularly if this association imbues "personal meaning" to the purchases.

Consumers did not find one-size apparel to be as appealing as retailers believed, nevertheless both buyers and consumers were satisfied with size ranges in the market. Both buyers(M=4.01) and consumers(M=4.02) tended to appreciate the term homemade. For this study, the researchers did not differentiate between "homemade" and "handmade". Thus, the results may support Littrell and Dickson's(1998) proposal that apparel with "handmade" features may denote quality.

3) Purchasing criteria for apparel

Multivariate analysis of variance(MANOVA) revealed

Table 2. Multivariate and univariate analysis of variance: Influences on consumers' purchasing decisions for apparel for themselves and buyers' purchasing decisions for apparel for their firms

Elements (wording modifications for buyer survey)	Means		Univariate F	Multivariate F
	Buyer(n=59)	Consumer(n=302)		
exclusivity (restricted delivery/exclusivity)	3.93	1.97	141.97***	21.20***
uniqueness of product	4.75	3.35	73.89***	
fit	4.37	4.85	47.05***	
reorder availability	3.78	3.08	16.89***	
well known brand name	2.00	2.66	15.48***	
recommendation of salesperson	2.66	2.10	14.86***	
styling of the garment	4.93	4.69	11.38***	
size	3.63	4.08	9.68**	
price	4.29	4.52	5.80**	
consistent design each season	2.85	3.11	2.01	
country of origin	2.93	3.19	1.97	
quality of workmanship	4.68	4.75	1.08	
ability to mix and match garments from the same manufacturer	3.86	3.73	.60	
color	4.59	4.62	.07	
consistent product quality	4.75	4.74	.02	
	** p<.01 *** p<.001	1=not at all influential	5=very influential	

differences in the influence of variables on retailers' and consumers' apparel purchase decisions [$F(1,15)=21.20$, $p \leq .001$]. Exclusivity, product uniqueness, reorder availability, salespersons' recommendations, and styling, impacted buyers' purchases for their firms to a greater degree than they influenced consumers. This concurs with previous studies (e.g., Stone & Cassill, 1989; Wickett, Gaskill, & Damhorst, 1999), which indicated that personal selling and product characteristics (e.g., styling) that could differentiate assortments are important to buyers. Observing the mean evaluations of the criteria further indicates this; buyers evaluated styling, uniqueness, and consistent quality as most influential when making purchase decisions concerning apparel for their firms.

When shopping for apparel for themselves, consumers were influenced by fit, well known brand name, size, and price to a greater degree than were buyers' decisions. The influence of brand name and price supports the findings of Eckman, Damhorst and Kadolph's (1990) study of evaluative criteria for apparel purchase. Not only was fit more influential for consumers than for retailers, the means indicate that fit was the most influential variable for consumers' purchases.

Both buyers and consumers were influenced by the quality of the product and workmanship, which were more important than was styling for consumers. Dickson and Littrell (1998) suggested that this would be true for socially responsible consumers. There was no difference between consistent design each season, country of origin, quality of workmanship, ability to mix/match, color, consistent quality.

4) Importance of customer services

Differences between buyers' and consumers' perceptions of the importance of customer services offered to consumers by retail firms were indicated by MANOVA [$F(10)=66.43$, $p \leq .001$]. Buyers believed that fashion advice, ambiance, sales personnel, familiarity of firm to customer, and advertising, were more important to consumers than did consumers. Toll free telephone number, mailing service, pricing, reliability, were more important to consumers than buyers perceived them to be. The fact that buyers and consumers agreed only on the importance of business hours to consumers, suggests that retailers might consider redesigning customer service policies to better meet their consumers' expectations. For example,

Table 3. Multivariate and univariate analysis of variance: Buyers' perceptions of importance of customer service provided by firm and consumers' perceptions of the importance of customer service from retailers/catalogs

Elements of Customer Service (wording modifications for buyer survey)	Means		Univariate F	Multivariate F
	Buyer(n=60)	Consumer(n=303)		
toll free telephone number	1.53	4.14	280.99***	66.43***
fashion advice	4.10	2.03	178.37***	
ambiance	4.63	3.07	102.34***	
sales personnel	4.63	3.55	52.77***	
mailing service	2.78	3.97	51.92***	
pricing	4.05	4.54	23.45***	
familiarity with company (to customer)	4.43	3.96	12.09***	
advertising	3.13	2.60	9.37**	
reliability	4.58	4.79	7.70**	
business hours	4.02	3.81	2.10	

** p<.01 *** p<.001 1=not at all important 5=very important

providing mailing service and a toll free telephone number may be relatively inexpensive yet effective strategies for attracting loyal consumers. In turn, retail firms may be spending more money to provide fashion advice, ambiance, and advertising than is necessary for optimum customer sales and satisfaction.

5) Satisfaction

Satisfaction was estimated as the difference between what was expected and found in the marketplace concerning 18 apparel shopping attributes (Oliver 1980). Paired sample t tests on mean differences between perceptions of what was expected and evaluations of what was found indicated dissatisfaction among buyers on 10 attributes when shopping for apparel for their businesses. Buyers were dissatisfied with six attributes of apparel design, which related to apparel sizing, quality of construction, and uniqueness of merchandise. Buyers were also dissatisfied with all purchasing attributes with the exception of flexible payment schedule, inclusion of manufacturer's hangtags, and easy ordering procedures. Consumers were dissatisfied with nine attributes of shopping for apparel for themselves and satisfied with three aspects. Of the nine apparel shopping attributes with which consumers were dissatisfied, seven concerned the design of the apparel. Specifically, consumers' dissatisfaction focused upon accurate and consistent sizing, construction quality, apparel selection, and availability of unique merchandise and ethnic prints. Opportunities to better satisfy consumers by

improving these aspects of apparel design may be especially effective given that fit and size were found to be influential on consumers' apparel purchase decisions. The suggestion that customer service policies be re-designed is supported by buyers' and consumers' dissatisfaction with this aspect of shopping for apparel. Consumers appeared to be satisfied with availability of smaller sizes, flexible payment schedules, and inclusion of manufacturer's hangtags.

Research on satisfaction with the purchase process as suggested by Andreasen (1993) and the dissatisfaction exhibited by both retailers and consumers when shopping for apparel implies that the redesign of apparel (e.g., fit, quality) and aspects of the purchase process (e.g., customer service) may increase loyalty among both retailers and consumers. This may be particularly critical in the increasingly competitive marketplace. In addition, both buyers' and consumers' dissatisfaction with attributes of the apparel available and the purchase indicates that Andreasen (1993) was correct in suggesting that more attention be paid to the process of buying/selling rather than just the outcome.

7. Conclusions and Implications

The trend toward changes in the traditional supply chain for apparel, namely the increased vertical integration among apparel manufacturers, dictates that these firms satisfy the wants and needs of two constituents, both retail buy-

Table 4. Paired sample t tests: Buyers' and consumers' satisfaction with apparel attributes and purchasing attributes

Apparel Shopping Attributes	Buyers(shopping for firms)	Consumers(shopping for themselves)
<u>Apparel attributes</u>		
accurate sizing	dissatisfied***	dissatisfied***
consistent sizing standards within one manufacturer	dissatisfied***	dissatisfied***
consistency in sizes	dissatisfied**	dissatisfied***
larger sizes (x-large) offered	dissatisfied**	
smaller sizes (x-small) offered		satisfied***
good construction quality	dissatisfied***	dissatisfied***
good selection of apparel		dissatisfied***
unique merchandise	dissatisfied***	dissatisfied***
variety of ethnic prints		dissatisfied**
authentic ethnic colors		
authenticity of ethnic prints		
<u>Purchasing attributes</u>		
competitive prices	dissatisfied***	dissatisfied***
flexible payment schedules		satisfied***
good customer service	dissatisfied***	dissatisfied***
liberal return policy	dissatisfied**	
manufacturers' inclusion of hangtags	satisfied**	satisfied***
toll free number	dissatisfied***	
easy ordering procedures		
** p<.01 *** p<.001	1=strongly disagree	5=strongly agree

ers and consumers. In order to accomplish their goal to satisfy these constituents in the increasingly competitive marketplace, apparel manufacturers must consider re-designing elements of their merchandising strategies. The research indicates that factors influencing the purchase decisions of retail buyers and consumers as well as elements of the purchase process that they find satisfactory vary. Thus, strategies may be enhanced, in some cases, if they are designed differently for retail buyers and consumers. The information may be particularly helpful when merchandising apparel to retailers and consumers who purchase ethnic apparel, target markets about whom very little is known(Dickson & Littrell, 1998). As such, the results have implications for revised business strategies and for further research.

Owing to the fact that the sample for the study was comprised of consumers who purchase goods from companies that sell ethnic apparel and fit the profile for socially conscious consumers(Kim, Littrell & Paff Ogle, 1999), respondents may have heightened sensitivity to social issues. However, these findings suggest that retailers seemed

to underestimate consumers' concerns with social and environmental issues. Appealing to these concerns through strategies such as informational hangtags may contribute to competitive advantage for the manufacturer. As suggested by Dickson(1999), however, further research is necessary to identify whether these concerns influence apparel purchases substantially. In addition revised strategies might address the redesign of apparel lines and new approaches to merchandising the lines. For example, one-size apparel may be acceptable to retail buyers when shopping a line, but is less so to consumers.

Manufacturers may benefit by developing personal selling strategies that appeal to retail buyers' desire for unique and distinctive merchandise that sets their product mix apart from that of their competition. Consumers, on the other hand, may be more influenced by strategies that emphasize specific apparel attributes, particularly brand, fit/size, and price. The lack of agreement between retail buyers' and consumers' perception of the importance of services offered to consumers by retail firms suggests that redesigned strategies for customer services in retail stores

is warranted. Given the level of dissatisfaction among both retail buyers and consumers with apparel shopping attributes, even a slight improvement in apparel attributes, such as consistency in sizing, quality construction, and unique merchandise offered or purchasing attributes, including good customer service and competitive prices may provide apparel manufacturers with a competitive edge. The enhanced offering may help the apparel manufacturer to meet company goals of increasing sales, market share, and customer satisfaction.

The results indicate that a vertically integrated apparel manufacturer may benefit from identifying distinctions between the needs of retail buyers and those of consumers. Thus, just as different merchandising strategies may be designed for these constituents, conceptual frameworks for and theories about decision making for apparel should reflect these distinctions.

While the results may have implications for revised strategies and theory, further research is warranted. A refined instrument could be distributed to a wider sample of retailers and consumers. For example, future studies might extend Dickson and Littrell's (1997) research to compare buyers and consumers' shopping orientations by including other variables such as altruism, social involvement and values. The sampling frame for this study was a catalog company's mailing list. Abraham-Murali and Littrell (1995a) suggested that mail order consumers may be more concerned with visual aspects of the garments than are consumer shopping in brick and mortar retail stores. Thus a comparison of purchase decision criteria for these two groups of consumers is warranted. Given Young's (1999) suggestion that expectations for customer service will continue to rise and given the level of dissatisfaction among retail buyers and consumers in this study, continued research is necessary to help guide apparel manufacturers to use their resources effectively in meeting the expectations of their constituents. A related area of research is to examine the link between ethical business strategies and consumer satisfaction; this area of inquiry may be particularly viable for socially conscious consumers of ethnic apparel (Andreasen, 1993).

Replication of the study that incorporates changes to

the data collection setting, number of retail buyers in the sample, and range of criteria would address limitations of this research. Collecting data in the store setting may enable researchers to more accurately measure the influence of concern for social issues, such as labor used to produce apparel, on consumers' purchase decisions. The number of retail buyers who responded to the survey, while not unusual for a mailed survey, was relatively small. The sampling method for this study did allow comparison of purchase decisions by and satisfaction among retail buyers and consumers of the same apparel manufacturer. However, collecting data from retailers at a trade show or merchandise mart may increase the size of the retail buyer sample. Finally the range of criteria studied, such as apparel and purchasing attributes, was shaped by the needs of the design and production manager of the cooperating company as well as the conceptual framework. A similar study of a wider range of criteria and factors, such as buyer and store characteristics, is warranted.

References

- Abraham-Murali, L., & Littrell, M. A. (1995a). Consumers' conceptualization of apparel attributes. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 13(21), 65-74.
- Abraham-Murali, L., & Littrell, M. A. (1995b). Consumers' perceptions of apparel quality over time: An exploratory study. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 13(3), 149-158.
- Andreasen, A. R. (1993). Unethical seller practices: A neglected issue in consumer satisfaction and dissatisfaction research. *Advances in Consumer Research*, 20, 109-112.
- Arbuthnot, J. J., & Slama, M. (1993). Selection criteria and information sources in the purchase decisions of apparel buyers of small retailing firms. *Journal of Small Business Management*, 31(2), 12-23.
- Bickle, M., Eckman, M., & Kotsiopoulos, A. (1998). A comparative analysis of satisfied versus dissatisfied higher income Hispanic catalog consumers: Shopping orientations, information sources, and store attributes. In R. L. Day and H. K. Hunt (Eds.), *Journal of Consumer Satisfaction, Dissatisfaction and Complaining Behavior*, 11, 172-179. Provo, UT: JCS/D&CB.
- Choi, I. K., & Koh, A. (1998). Benefit segmentation of the Korean domestic jeans market. In N. J. Miller & M. A. Littrell (Eds.), *International Apparel Consumer Behavior*, Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press.

- Darden, W. R., & Reynolds, F. D. (1972). Predicting opinion leadership for men's apparel fashions. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 9(August), 324-328.
- Dickerson, K. G. (1999). *Textiles and apparel in the global economy* (p. 275). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill.
- Dickson, M. A. (1999). US consumers' knowledge of and concern with apparel sweatshops. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, 3(1), 44-55.
- Dickson, M. A., & Littrell, M. A. (1997). Consumers of clothing from alternative trading organizations: Societal attitudes and purchase evaluative criteria. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 15(1), 20-33.
- Dickson, M. A., & Littrell, M. A. (1998). Consumers of ethnic apparel from alternative trading organizations: A multifaceted market. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 16(1), 1-10.
- Eckman, M., Damhorst, M. L., & Kadolph, S. (1990). Toward a model of the in-store purchase decision process: Consumer use of criteria for evaluating women's apparel. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 8(2), 13-22.
- Eckman, M., Kotsiopoulos, A., & Bickle, M. (1997). Store patronage behavior of Hispanic vs. non-Hispanic consumer: Comparative analyses of demographics, psychographics, store attributes, and information sources. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences* 19(1), 69-83.
- Engel, J. F., Blackwell, R. D., & Miniard, P. W. (1995). *Consumer behavior*. Fort Worth, TX: Dryden.
- Fiorito, S. S., & Fairhurst, A. E. (1989). Buying for the small retail store: Job content across four merchandise categories. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 8(1), 10-21.
- Francis, S. K., & Brown, D. (1985). Retail buyers of apparel and appliances: A comparison. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 4(1), 1-8.
- Francis, S., & Burns, L. D. (1992). Effect of consumer socialization on clothing shopping attitudes, clothing acquisition, and clothing satisfaction. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 10(4), 35-44.
- Gutman, J., & Mills, M. (1982). Fashion life style, self-concept, shopping orientation, and store patronage: An integrative analysis. *Journal of Retailing*, 58(2), 64-86.
- Greer, T., Chuchinprakarn, J., & Seshardri, S. (2000). Likelihood of participating in mail survey research: Business respondents perspectives. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 29(2), [On-line]. Available: <http://web.lexisnexis.com/universe/docum>.
- Hirschman, E. (1981). An exploratory comparison of decision criteria used by retail buyers. In R. F. Lusch & W. R. Darden (Eds.), *Retail Patronage Theory*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Printing Services.
- Houston, F. S. (1986, April). The marketing concept: What it is and what it is not. *Journal of Marketing*, 50, 81-87.
- Kim, S., Littrell, M. A., & Paff Ogle, J. L. (1999). The relative importance of social responsibility as a predictor of purchase intentions for clothing. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 3(3), 207-218.
- Kotsiopoulos, A., Oliver, B., & Shim, S. (1993). Buying competencies: A comparison of perceptions among retail buyers, managers, and students. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 11(2), 38-44.
- Kunz, G. I. (1995). Behavioral theory of the apparel firm: A beginning. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 13(4), 252-261.
- Littrell, M. A. (1990). Symbolic significance of textile crafts for tourists. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 17, 228-245.
- Littrell, M. A., & Dickson, M. (1998). Fair trade performance in a competitive market. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 16(4), 176-189.
- Monroe, K. B., & Guiltinan, J. P. (1975). A path-analytic exploration of retail patronage influences. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 2, 19-28.
- North, E. J., de Vos, R. B., & Kotz, T. (2003). The importance of apparel product attributes for female buyers. *Journal of Family Ecology and Consumer Sciences*, 31, 41-51.
- Oliver, R. L. (1980). A cognitive model of the antecedents and consequences of satisfaction decision. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 17(November), 460-469.
- Stanforth, N. E., & Lennon, S. J. (1997). The effects of customer expectations and store policies on retail salesperson service, satisfaction, and patronage. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 15(2), 115-124.
- Stone, L. C., & Cassill, N. L. (1989). Retail buyers' saleability judgments: A comparison of merchandise categories. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 8(1), 56-61.
- Wickett, J. L., Gaskill, L. R., & Damhorst, M. L. (1999). Apparel retail product development: Model testing and expansion. *Clothing and Textile Research Journal*, 17(1), 21-35.
- Young, V. M. (1999). Macys.com sees shoppers' service demands rising. *Women's Wear Daily*, 178(66), 2, 24.

Molly Eckman

Iowa State University (BS)
 Iowa State University (MS)
 University of Maryland (Ph.D.)
 Associate Professor in Apparel & Merchadding, Colorado State University
