

THE IMPORTANCE OF PRODUCT ATTRIBUTES INFLUENCING PURCHASE DECISION: A COMPARATIVE STUDY BETWEEN FMCG LAUNDRY SOAPS

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***Abstract:** The present paper provides a view of decision making based on low involvement product where consumers are not motivated to engage in a systematic decision process rather they apply very simple, quick and effortless decision. To have a cavernous understanding of consumer buying behavior, the marketing manager should have a thorough knowledge regarding the influence of product attributes. This article is dedicated to exploring and examining the importance of product attributes on consumer decision making for low involvement product. Analyses of the results reveal significant difference between the two selected brands of laundry soaps with respect to smell and hygiene. However, this study failed to validate any difference between the selected brands of laundry soaps with respect to quality, durability, price, availability, attractive packaging and brand reputation. Finally overall no significant difference was found between the two selected brands of laundry soaps that affects purchase decision. At the end of the paper, a few recommendations along with some agenda for future research studies are proposed.*

***Keywords:** purchase decision, low involvement product, product attribute.*

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, different researchers have been devoted a considerable amount of effort to the understanding of consumer purchasing decision process. Information acquisition (Bettman and Park, 1980 and Jacoby, 1977) and information integration (Ryan and Bonfield, 1975 and Wilkie and Pessemier, 1973) were two basic issues on these research areas. Besides how information about alternatives are evaluated to arrive at a final purchase decision are also emphasized in some literature on consumer decision making (Bettman et al., 1991). In today's highly competitive business environment understanding consumer decision-making process is a very necessary issue for the corporate managers (Sheth and Mittal, 2004). Firms can satisfy those needs only to the extent that they understand their customers. Thus the strategic marketing plan along with the marketing strategies must incorporate knowledge in the field of consumer behavior (Solomon, 2002).

Consumer decisions has been divided in the consumer behavior texts as low

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involvement and high involvement purchase decisions. Low involvement decisions cover all Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) that represent the majority of consumer purchases. The fast moving consumer goods (FMCG) industry is highly fragmented and consists of segments like house-hold products (laundry soaps, detergents, toiletries', air fresheners, etc.), personal care products (soaps, cosmetics, perfumes) and food and beverages (processed food items, bakery products, processed fruits, soft Drinks etc.) These FMCG products move off the shelves of retail shops quickly and require constant replenishing ("A dictionary of business", 1996). The sector has been dominated by multinational companies with strong distribution network and intense rivalry among firms (Dhopatkar, 2011).

Like other developing countries in Bangladesh, changes in consumer's buying behavior, growing urbanization, increasing disposable income in rural and urban market, increase in consumption levels, changing life styles of middle income group, etc have been contributing in growing demand for FMCG products. The significance of the research interest is to analyze the purchasing decision for low involvement product laundry soaps in the context of Bangladesh. However, in Bangladesh, probably, no research works in these contexts is found to appear in the literature. Therefore, the benefit of the study is to explore marketers' awareness to understand the purchasing decision for low involvement product that will necessarily increase the FMCG companies' ability to obtain sustainable competitive advantage and future growth opportunities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Purchasing Decision Making:

Consumer decision making have been considered in the literature from several perspectives (Hansen, 2005). For making the purchasing decision in the marketplace a customer used to play the roles of buyer, payer and user (Sheth and Mittal, 2004). Purchase decisions are made by individuals, households, spouses or sometimes even by committees in business organizations. It can be defined as an act of information processing: the transformation of knowledge and information into action (Galbraith, 1974). Different literature focus on traditional five phases in the decision-making process (Kotler and Keller, 2006). This process of decision making include the need for recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post-purchase behavior (Kotler and Keller, 2006). These five stages of decision making process are most widely used tools for marketers to gain a better understanding about their customers and their behavior (Commegys et al., 2006). In this regard Wright (1975) states that five stages of decision making process require a considerable degree of cognitive effort which the consumer may be unwilling to expend. However, a considerable amount of the research on consumer decision making has focused on cognitive processing that occurs immediately prior to the act of purchase (or selection). Yet

many decisions are made repeatedly or frequently over time and thus in these instances, consumers may rely not only on previously acquired product information stored in memory, but also on judgments of brand satisfaction or dissatisfaction which occur in the post-purchase evaluation (or usage) stage of the decision process (Hoyer, 1984). Thus for many purchases situation deliberate decision process never occurs, because consumers are not sufficiently motivated to think deeply about the ordinary consumption decisions they usually face. Indeed, in-store decision making during the purchase of laundry detergent customers simply choose the cheapest brand (Hoyer, 1984).

Classification of product Involvement:

Product involvement is commonly defined as a consumer's enduring perceptions of the importance of the product category based on the consumer's inherent needs, values, and interests (De Wulf et al., 2001; Mittal, 1995 and Zaichkowsky, 1985). For understanding consumer decision-making behavior the importance of product involvement cannot be disregarded (Chakravarti and Janiszewski, 2003). Past research has suggested that product can be classified into high involvement and low involvement category depending on the nature of importance to the customers ((Zaichkowsky, 1985, 1986 and Wells et al., 1995).

In the consumer decision making process, consumers spend a lot of time, effort, and energy for more expensive and personal products which are called 'high involvement products' (e.g., computers, automobiles and medical care). Research shows that under high involvement conditions, buyer decision processes are thought to proceed through extended decision-making, a series of sequential stages involving information search and evaluation of criteria (Celebi, 2009; Browne and Kaldenberg, 1997). On the other hand, consumers spend less time, effort, and energy for inexpensive and less exciting products which are called 'low involvement products' (e.g., soft drinks, cereals, and washing powders) (Celebi, 2009; Wells et al., 1995 and Chung and Zhao, 2003). However, literature suggested, different people may show high involvement or low involvement to the same products (Zaichkowsky, 1985). Thus the main feature of product involvement is the personal relevance of the product to the need and values of the consumers. If consumers perceive that the product is relevant, their involvement is higher (Celebi, 2009). The current interest of this study is to analyze the low involvement product's purchasing decision. In this study two selected laundry soaps namely 1937 Bnagla Shaban and Wheel are considered as low involvement products. Therefore, this paper focuses to investigate the difference of purchasing decision regarding the product attributes for the selected brand s of laundry soaps.

Product attributes:

Product attributes are the characteristics of products through which products are identified and differentiated. In other words, product attributes can be defined as

the features or specific descriptive aspects of a marketing strategy that represent the consumer's evaluative criteria in the selection of particular goods or services. By identifying the product attributes and measuring their relative importance in the target market, marketers can determine the most suitable offering for a given market (Hawes and Baker, 1994). Moreover, marketers' are gradually focusing more importance on product attributes by catering to the personal and socio-economic preferences of the customers (Uusitalo, 2001). Thus, to cope with the ever changing customer perception retailers' are becoming significantly concerned about product attributes as these are often continuous in nature (Vishwanathan and Childers, 1999).

Studies from different literatures show that availability of various merchandise, their price, freshness, and originality are essential product attributes (Ahmed, 2007). However, Beaudoin et al. (2000) identified 12 attributes that correlated with attitudes when purchasing apparel, namely: good fit, durability, ease of care, favorable price, comfort, quality, color, attractiveness, fashionableness, brand name, appropriateness for occasion, and choice of styles. Anderson and Mittal (2000) considered product quality as the most influencing product attribute in customers' purchase decision. Product quality is an important determinant for the customers for purchasing a brand. Quality belongs to the product perspective of a brand's identity whereas perceived quality is how a brand's quality is seen by the consumers. A higher price is a sign of high quality to the consumers. Different studies focus the importance of product attributes in determining consumer preferences and decision making (Olson et al., 1979). For purchasing food items consumers may considered price as the most important aspect. For some consumers, the price is vital particularly when they are purchasing everyday products. Some consumer may choose a brand just because it has the lowest price, while other consumers may choose a brand just because it has the highest perceived price inferring that it is of high quality. The product attributes used in previous studies are quality, price, availability, variety, assortment and value of the products (Gwin and Gwin, 2003).

In some studies availability (Fotheringham, 1988), brand reputation (Temporal and Lee, 2001) and packaging (Prendergast and Pitt, 1996) have also got importance for consumer purchase decision. A number of studies have pointed out that, consumer purchase decision are influenced by the travel costs of shopping (Brown, 1989; Craig et al., 1984). Globalization and advanced technology have made the market more competitive, thus customers, now, are more brand sensitive during the purchase decision. Every brand represents distinct values, creates a distinct profile in the minds of the customers in respect to what it stands for. Brand reputation is the image of superior quality and added value, which justify a premium price. Ultimate goal of highly reputed brands should be to strengthen the image of the product (Kapferer, 1997). Thus brand reputation is an important product attribute enhancing purchase decision. Another important product attribute is attractive packaging that plays a major role by

representing the product for many consumers, especially in low involvement purchase decision (Silayoi, 2004). Packaging seems to be one of the most important factors in purchase decisions made at the point of sale (Prendergast and Pitt, 1996). The critical importance of packaging design is growing as package becomes a primary vehicle for communication and branding (Rettie and Brewer, 2000) which ultimately influences the purchase decision.

However, all these product attributes discussed above in the literature will not have almost equal importance for all the customers. Consumers may differ in the importance they assign to different product attributes. These differences in attribute weighting are likely to influence how decision making proceeds. This study has been conducted on FMCG laundry soaps which can be appropriately consider as a low involvement product. The product attributes are measured in terms of quality, durability, price, availability, attractive packaging, brand reputation, smell and health hygienic.

OBJECTIVES

This main objective of this paper is to empirically examine the extent to which the low involvement product attributes vary with the purchasing decision process for the selected brands of laundry soaps. In this study two selected laundry soaps namely 1937 Bnagla Shaban and Wheel are considered as low involvement products. Therefore, the objective determined to achieve from the study is to investigate the difference of purchasing decision regarding product attributes for the selected brands of laundry soap.

HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Based on the above objective, the following null hypotheses have been proposed:

- H₀ 1 : There is no difference regarding purchasing decision for the selected brands of laundry soaps with respect to quality.
- H₀ 2 : There is no difference regarding purchasing decision for the selected brands of laundry soaps with respect to durability.
- H₀ 3 : There is no difference regarding purchasing decision for the selected brands of laundry soaps with respect to price.
- H₀ 4 : There is no difference regarding purchasing decision for the selected brands of laundry soaps with respect to availability.
- H₀ 5 : There is no difference regarding purchasing decision for the selected brands of laundry soaps with respect to attractive packaging.
- H₀ 6 : There is no difference regarding purchasing decision for the selected brands of laundry soaps with respect to brand reputation.

H₀ 7 : There is no difference regarding purchasing decision for the selected brands of laundry soaps with respect to smell.

H₀ 8 : There is no difference regarding purchasing decision for the selected brands of laundry soaps with respect to health hygiene.

METHODOLOGY

The study was geographically confined to Chittagong metropolitan area and all laundry soap users initially formed the sampling frame of the study. The study followed the survey approach using a structured-non-disguised closed-end questionnaire. Both primary and secondary information were used in the study. Secondary data were collected from various published sources including books, online journals, newspapers, magazines, and reports. Primary data were collected from interviewing a total of 200 respondents through questionnaire from the major super stores of Chittagong Metropolitan City. For the ease of possible bias due to time period, respondents were interviewed in the morning, afternoon, and evening. Every consumer who entered in the super stores was approached immediately with the questionnaire after selecting a brand of laundry soaps. The sample size for the study was calculated by Cochran's (1963) formula. On the basis of the formula, at 95% confidence level and 7% precision level with maximum degree of variability ($p=.5$, $q=.5$), the sample size arrived at 196. After sorting the collected questionnaires, 35 were found to be incomplete. Finally, 165 questionnaires were used for the purpose of data analyses.

The questionnaire had two sections. The first section with four questions was developed to collect the demographic information of the respondents including their gender, age, income, and occupation of the laundry soap purchaser. In the second section, the respondents were given 8 statements to analyze their purchasing decision regarding the factors of importance of the laundry soaps. It was interesting to observe that respondents were choosing only two brands of laundry soaps. Thus the study has to conduct on the two selected brand of laundry soap. Reliability of the instrument was calculated employing the Cronbach's Alpha (Cronbach, 1951) since it is the most commonly used tool in measuring the internal consistency. Since all the scales in the present study produced desirable Cronbach's alpha (Churchill and Peter, 1984 and Nunnally, 1978, 1988), the data reliability issue in the study can be considered highly satisfactory. The statements were measured on a five-point Likert Scale ranging from most important with scale point 5 to least important with scale point 1. Data were collected on the basis of natural observation with simple random sampling. All the data were collected during the 1st and 2nd week of August 2012. Statistical tools including percentage, average, frequency distribution, and *t*-test were employed to analysis the data. All the calculations were conducted by using SPSS (Leech, Barrett, and Morgan, 2005), version 13.5. Referencing was done by the publication guidelines of the American Psychological Association (2001).

FINDINGS

Demographic Profile of the Respondents:

Table 01 indicates the results of how purchasing decision varies with gender, age, income and occupational status. In the case of gender, out of 51 male respondents, 43.1% (22) were the purchaser of 1937 and 56.9% (29) were the purchaser of Wheel; whereas out of 114 females, 37.7% (43) decide to purchase 1937 and 62.3% (71) decide to purchase Wheel. In terms of age, out of 86 respondents under 30 years of age 36.0% (31) were found to purchase 1937 and 64.0% (55) were found to purchase Wheel compared to 43.0% (34) were purchaser of 1937 and 57.0% (45) were purchaser of Wheel of the 79 respondents above 30 years of age. Under the income category, 98 respondents belong to the 'lower income' group and the remaining 67 respondents constituted the 'higher income' group. In the lower income group 40.8% (40) were the purchaser of 1937 and 59.2% (58) were the purchaser of Wheel compared to 37.3% (25) were purchaser of 1937 and 62.7% (42) were purchaser of Wheel of the higher income group. Finally, occupational categories 53 were found to be employed in against of 112 unemployed (Housewives). In the employed sub-category 43.4% (23) were found to purchase 1937 and 56.6% (30) were found to purchase Wheel. In the unemployed sub-category 37.5% (42) decide to purchase 1937 and 62.5% (70) and decide to purchase Wheel.

Table 01: Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Decision to Purchase	Gender of the respondent			
	Male frequency	female Frequency	Male Percentage	Female Percentage
1937 Bangla shaban	22	43	43.1	37.7
Wheel	29	71	56.9	62.3
Total	51	114	100	100
I am loyal to the brand				
Decision to Purchase	Age of the respondent			
	Below 30 frequency	Above 30 frequency	Below 30 Percentage	Above 30 Percentage
1937 Bangla shaban	31	34	36.0	43.0
Wheel	55	45	64.0	57.0
Total	86	79	100	100
I am loyal to the brand				
Decision to Purchase	Income of the respondent			
	Below 30,000 frequency	Above 30,000 frequency	Below 30,000 Percentage	Above 30,000 Percentage

1937 Bangla shaban	40	25	40.8	37.3
Wheel	58	42	59.2	62.7
Total	98	67	100	100
Decision to Purchase	Occupation of the respondent			
Purchase decision	Employed frequency	Unemployed Frequency	Employed Percentage	Unemployed Percentage
1937 Bangla shaban	23	42	43.4	37.5
Wheel	30	70	56.6	62.5
Total	53	112	100	100

Mean difference between two selected brands of laundry soaps:

The study has been conducted on two different laundry soaps. The following table shows the mean difference between two selected brands of laundry soaps

Table 02: Mean difference between two selected brands of laundry soaps

Sl.	Factors	1937 Bangla Shaban		Wheel		Mean differences
		N=65		N=100		
		Mean	Std. deviation	Mean	Std. deviation	
1	quality	4.6615	.56670	4.8000	.56854	-.1385
2	durability	3.7077	1.30771	3.7600	1.05524	-.0523
3	price	3.7077	1.19534	3.8900	4.05242	-.1823
4	availability	4.0154	1.15234	4.0300	1.21817	-.0146
5	Attractive packaging	2.5692	1.26206	3.0100	4.06884	-.4408
6	Brand reputation	3.4462	1.27513	3.6900	1.32341	-.2438
7	smell	2.4923	1.31248	3.5100	1.25927	-1.0177
8	Health hygienic	3.1385	1.56002	3.9300	1.40169	-.7915

The above table shows mean difference between 1937 Bangla Shaban and Wheel. Among these mean differences the highest mean difference observed with smell (-1.0177), Health hygienic (-.7915), Attractive packaging (-.4408), Brand reputation (-.2438), price (-.1823), quality (-.1385), availability (-.0146) and finally durability (-.0523).

Test of hypotheses:

The analyses used eight null hypotheses which were assumed previously to fulfill the objectives of the study. Since the study has revealed some mean differences in customer purchasing decision of the selected brands of laundry soaps, it became necessary to see if true differences prevailed between the two brands. For this purpose, item-wise independent sample *t*-test were conducted.

Table 03: Independent sample t-tests

No.	Factors	Equal variances assumed Equal variances not assumed	Levene's Test for Equality of Variance		t-test for Equality of Means		
			F	Sig.	t	df	Sig (2-tailed)
1	quality	Equal variances assumed	4.539	.035	-1.531	163	.128
		Equal variances not assumed			-1.532		
2	durability	Equal variances assumed	5.946	.016	-.283	163	.778
		Equal variances not assumed			-.270		
3	Price	Equal variances assumed	.745	.389	-.353	163	.725
		Equal variances not assumed			-.422		
4	Availability	Equal variances assumed	.285	.524	-.077	163	.939
		Equal variances not assumed			-.078		
5	Attractive packaging	Equal variances assumed	1.068	.303	-.847	163	.399
		Equal variances not assumed			-1.011		
6	Brand reputation	Equal variances assumed	.040	.842	-1.173	163	.242
		Equal variances not assumed			-1.182		
7	smell	Equal variances assumed	.169	.681	-4.989	163	.000
		Equal variances not assumed			-4.945		
8	Health hygienic	Equal variances assumed	2.163	.143	-3.389	163	.001
		Equal variances not assumed			-3.313		

In table 03 *t*-test was conducted to see if there is any difference between the two selected comparing brands with respect to quality, durability, price, availability, attractive packaging, brand reputation, smell and health hygienic. In doing so, *f* test was conducted to see the variances of the sample groups. With respect to 'Quality' the *F* value was found to be 4.539 ($P < .10$) which confirms unequal variances between the sample group i.e. Bangla Shaban and Wheel. From the *t*-test it has been observed that there is no difference between the means of the sample groups ($t = -1.532$, $P > .10$) with respect to quality. Thus, it can be confirmed that, there is no difference between Bangla Shaban ($M = 4.6615$) and Wheel ($M = 4.80$) with respect to quality. Hence null hypothesis 1 is accepted.

With respect to 'durability' equal variances between the sample group were not assumed from the Levene's F-test ($F= 5.946, P < .016$). However, the t-test result confirms that there is no difference between the sample groups with respect to 'durability' ($t= .270, P > .10$), which accepts the null hypothesis.

The F test conducted for item 'Price' finds equal variances between the sample groups ($F= .745, P > .10$); whereas the t-test doesn't find any difference between the sample groups ($t= -.353, P > .10$). Thus, the null hypothesis is accepted which means that there is no significant difference between Bangla Shaban and Wheel with respect to 'Price'.

Similarly, for items 'Availability', 'Attractive packaging' and 'Brand reputation', the F values ($F= .285, P > .10$), ($F= 1.068, P > .10$) and ($F= .040, P > .10$) confirm equal variances between the sample groups respectively. However, the t-tests for 'availability' ($t= -.077, P > .10$), 'Attractive packaging' ($t= -.847, P > .10$), and 'Brand reputation' ($t= -1.173, P > .10$) do not confirm statistical differences between the sample groups. Thus, in all three cases, null hypotheses are accepted resulting in no gap between Bangla Shaban and Wheel.

With respect to smell, the F value being, .169 with P being more than .10 which confirms that equal variances between the sample groups. However, t value being -4.945 with corresponding p value less than .10 validates that there is difference between the samples groups with respect to smell. Therefore, H_{07} should be supported and significant relationship was found between smell and purchasing decision.

In terms of health hygienic, the F value being, 2.163 with P being more than .10 which confirms that equal variances between the sample groups. However, t value being -3.313 with corresponding p value less than .10 verify that there is significant difference between the sample groups with respect to health hygiene. Therefore, H_{08} should be supported and significant relationship was found between health hygienic and purchasing decision.

It became necessary to see if there was any overall difference between the two brands. Therefore the following null hypothesis is proposed:

H_{09} : There is no overall difference between the two selected brands of laundry soaps that affects purchase decision.

For this purpose, t -test was conducted. The following table shows the results of t -test.

Table 04: t-test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variance			t-test for Equality of Means		
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig (2-tailed)	Mean difference
Overall average	Equal variances assumed	.230	.632	-3.066	163	.003	-.3102
	Equal variances not assumed			-3.271	160.685	.001	-.3102

The F-test assumes equal variance between the comparing group with F value being .23 and p being more than 10%. Then, the t-test confirms that, overall there is no difference between Bangle Shaban and Whell ($t = -3.066$, $P > .10$) which accepts the null hypothesis.

CONCLUSION

The present study is an attempt to explore consumer decision making for two selected laundry soaps. Results of study revealed that H_{01} , H_{02} , H_{03} , H_{04} , H_{05} and H_{06} have been accepted which means that there is no significant difference between Bangla Shaban and Wheel with respect to quality, durability, price, availability, attractive packaging and brand reputation. This could be probably due to the fact that the brand of laundry soap is one, which seeks low involvement purchasing decision where these six attributes really does not make any differences for the frequent use by the customers. H_{07} and H_{08} have been rejected which means significant difference between Bangla Shaban and Wheel with respect to smell and health hygiene. Finally overall there is no difference was found between Bangle Shaban and Whell for which H_{09} has been accepted. These findings, in addition to build to the marketing literature, have important implications to adopt strategic marketing decisions by expanding the product portfolio and global foot prints for the FMCG companies. As the domestic FMCG companies are facing intense competition from the new as well as the existing players since they should aggressively focus on branding, sales promotion, product development, and innovation techniques to grab the untapped rural and semi urban market of Bangladesh.

However, the study suffers from some limitations. First, the study was conducted only in Chittagong metropolitan city of Bangladesh, though the largest laundry soap users are geographically concentrated in rural areas of the country. Hence, it does not represent the complete picture of the nation as long as purchasing decision is concerned. Moreover additional category of washing material like

detergent power and other laundry soaps were not included in the research design. These variables might have had their influences on the results of current study. Additionally, the behavioral aspects of users could have been widened with the inclusion of some other factors such as word-of-mouth communication, impact of promotional offers and the like. Despite these limitations, the researcher confidently believe that the results of the study deserve consideration for strategy formulation by FMCG companies as a way to improve the purchasing decision toward the customers' preferred brand.

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