Perception of Private Label Brand image: A comparison between three different nationality consumer groups.

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ABSTRACT *The market share for store brands across different food categories have increased in all Western countries within the last decade. In an increasingly competitive retail market, retailers have turn to focus on their brand image in an attempt to further differentiate themselves from competitors and create a distinctive retail offer, through manipulation of tangible and intangible assets. This article seeks to investigate Private Label Brands (PLB) image perceptions by consumers living in a multi-cultural context. Based on the case of Carrefour, the French leading retailer, two focus groups and a consumer survey including three different nationality consumer groups living in France were used to see how PLB products are perceived. The results of Means and Kruskal-Wallis Test procedures show that there are more similarities than differences in PLB image perceptions between three consumer groups and indicate also that PLBs are increasingly well perceived by consumers. This suggest that PLB are becoming more strategic for retailers in the sense that similarities of PLB image perceptions allow to standardize the retail offer in a multi-cultural context.*

KEY WORDS: Private Label Brands, Perception, Brand image, Cross-cultural branding

Introduction

Private Labels Brands (PLBs), also called store brands (SBs), are goods owned and merchandised by retailers. PLBs have long been considered as an important aspect of merchandising practice, both as a strategic tool for retailers and a unique source of competition for manufacturers. The market share for store brands across different food categories have increased in all Western countries within the last decade and retailers have a number of incentives to create store brand programs (Juhl and al., 2006). In Western Europe, PLBs penetration exceeds 50% of sales by volume in Switzerland and more than 35% in major markets like the United Kingdom, Belgium, Germany and Spain (Planet Retail, 2007). In fact, the margins on private brands are substantial. Higher sales of higher margin private label brands increase profits and may enable retailers to face competition. Furthermore, preference for Private Label Brands contributes to store loyalty, resulting in higher sales of both national and private label brands. This prevents the store from margin-killing price promotions and an ever escalating need to respond to competitive price pressures (Richardson and al., 1996). However, in an increasingly competitive retail market, retailers have turn to focus on their brand image in an attempt to further differentiate themselves from competitors. In this respect, they try to create a distinctive retail offer, through manipulation of tangible and intangible assets. As reported by Burt and Mavrommatis (2006), an important element of developing retail brand identity is the consumer perception of store image and consequently of PLBs image. The issue is further more interesting when retailers operate in different countries, in other words, when they are involved in a multi-cultural context.

The purpose of this exploratory study is first to see whether consumer differentiate PLBs from NBs in terms of quality and second to investigate consumer perceptions of Private Label Brands in a multi-cultural context. Consequently, the study aims to assess whether there are differences or similarities in PLB image perceptions and to try to explain these potential differences and similarities. In this respect, two taste tests are performed in a focus group to assess quality perceptions of PLBs versus NBs and Means and Kruskal-Wallis Test procedures are used to assess differences and similarities in PLB image perceptions.

The paper starts with a review of PLB image as a mixture of cues and of tangible and intangible assets. The research approach and method is then explained, the results drawn from a convenience sample of 93 respondents involving French, Chinese and Senegalese consumer students living in France are reported. To conclude, potential issues for retail organizations exposed to a multi-cultural context and orientations for future research are considered.

1. Literature review

A brand-image is defined as the total sum of brand associations held in consumer memory that lead to perceptions about the brand (Keller, 1993). These associations of brand image are multidimensional and consist of the *affective dimension* or the attitudes towards the brand and the perceived *quality dimension* (Keller, 1993). Simply stated, brand image can be defined as the meaning consumers develop about the brand as a result of the firm's marketing activities.

Thus brand image encompasses the holistic interpretation that consumers have about a brand, and the meaning, or personal relevance, they ascribe to it.

A brand is a central node of an associative network constituted by consumers' learned connections between the brand and a variety of cues, benefits, user types, and symbolic meanings. In the case of PLB, things are much more complicated. In fact, grocery stores are facing problems in differentiating themselves due to the lack of a perceived core product/service and the need to address the broadest possible range of consumers and purchase situations. However, authors observed that the store image acts as an important indicator of store brand quality (Semeijn and al., 2004). Researchers have studied a multitude of retailer attributes that influence overall store image, e.g., the variety and quality of products, services, and brands sold; the physical store appearance; behavior and service quality of employees; the price levels, depth and frequency of promotions; and so on (Burt and Carralero-Encinas, 2000; Ailawadi and Keller, 2004; Sorrenberg and Erasmus, 2008).

We think that cue utilization theory may provide an interesting framework to assess PLB image for two reasons. First, globally, when evaluating PLBs image, consumer tend to focus on cues in connection with PLBs instead of assessing them alone (Paswan and Vahie, 2006). Invariably, all studies indicate that Private Label Brands suffer from a low-quality image compared with National Brands. Richardson and al. (1996) found, in their analysis of aggregate across-category data, that perceived quality concern led to reduced perceived value-for-money of PLB both directly and via perceived risk. Hoch and Banerji (1993) found that PLB share was lower in categories where the quality concern of store brands was high. Supporting this notion, previous studies have argued that the degree of perceived risk increases with the degree of perceived quality concern across brands in product category (Hsu, 2007). However, in the specific case of Private Label Brands, some scholars (i.e. Richardson and al., 1996) determined that, as the level of use or consumption of this type of brand increases, the risk associated with buying it decreases and, as a consequence, consumers change their preferences regarding the brand. That is to say, the National Brands lose out as experience with PLBs increases so long as the experience has been positive. Second, following Richardson and al. (1994) regarding store brand quality perceptions, cue utilization theory can be used to assess PLB image perceptions.

According to this theory, products consist of an array of cues that serve as surrogate indicators of quality to shoppers (Olson and Jacoby, 1973). According to these authors, we can distinguish two kinds of cues: extrinsic or intrinsic to the product. Extrinsic cues are product-related attributes - as price, brand name, etc. - which are not part of the physical product. Extrinsic are particularly valuable in risk reduction when consumers have low confidence in a producer's intrinsic cues and the cues have low predictive value. Intrinsic attributes are construed as the tangible component parts of a product that contribute to its functional performance (Grohmann and al., 2007). These attributes cannot be manipulated without also altering physical properties of the product. Generally, research evidence suggests that consumers tend to use both intrinsic and extrinsic cues concurrently when evaluating product quality. However, in the case of PLBs, extrinsic cues such as price and quality are supposed to be more used than intrinsic cues because store brands suffer from deficiencies relatively to national brands (Paswan and Vahie, 2006). Store brands are lower priced, are frequently poorly packaged, lack strong brand recognition, and are generally not advertised at the national level (Richardson and al. 1994).

2. Research methodology

2.1 Focus groups & gustative tests

In an experimental study, we performed two focus groups combined with gustative tests (a blind test and a non blind test) in order to have more insight about PLBs perceptions by the three different consumer groups of students. The objective was to see if consumers differentiate PLB products from National Brand ones and whether there is an effect related to the brand awareness of NBs. Focus groups and gustative tests were found to be appropriate to study consumer perceptions about PLBs (De Wulf and al., 2005; Shimp and Sprott, 2006). We selected fruit juices and yoghourts as products from Carrefour (French leading retailer) and Danone (French manufacturer), first of all because for these products, past research indicate that store brands obtain market shares above 50 percent, which makes these products interesting to study (Planet Retail, 2007). In this research, each subject had to rate items (fruit juices and yoghurts) from 1 to 5 in terms of taste (cf. Table 1 & 2).

2.2 Measures

Data was collected via an interviewer administered questionnaire which required respondents to indicate their level of agreement/disagreement on a five point-Likert scale (ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5) to a series of statements (items) related to various aspects of store brand image commonly identified in previous academic studies (Dimitriadis, 1991; Paswan and Vahie, 2006) and in the focus groups. All of the statements were positive; therefore high scores/levels of agreement could also be taken to represent some degree of positive perception with the attribute concerned. Given the exploratory nature of the study, a convenience sample of 120 respondents was first used in three different consumer groups of students (French, Chinese, and Senegalese). We think that there is a need for cross-cultural studies related to PLBs because most of the existing results are based on one culture. The use of student sample is suitable because most of the students purchase a great percentage of PLBs because of their low income level (Paswan and Vahie, 2006). The analysis was performed with 93 respondents (rate of response of 75%) after deletion of questionnaires not properly filled or with missing values. The matching of sample sites and respondents is not a problem here because all the respondents are students living in France on the campuses of Aix-en-Provence and understood French and mainly make shopping at the same store (the French hard discounter ED).

The data were analyzed using Means and Kruskal Wallis Test procedures. The Kruskal-Wallis Test is a non-parametric test equivalent of the analysis of variance (ANOVA). This fundamental technique is used when we want to know that a categorical variable (independent) has an effect upon a variable of interest (dependant variable) and when we want to compare average between groups. It is performed when the data don't fulfill ANOVA conditions, i.e. normality and homoscedasticity and when the grouping variable has more than two levels as it is the case here (cf. Appendix A.1, A.2 and A.3)

2.3. Results analysis and discussion

The taste tests

The main objectives of the taste tests were to assess perceptions of PLBs in comparison with National Brands. In fact, it is recognized in the food sector that some PLBs (premium PLBs), case of Casino and Carrefour - in a lesser measure - in France, are very similar or higher to NBs in terms of quality. But consumers may be influenced by the packaging or by advertising of NBs and tend to assess them more favorably. So, in order to have a more precise idea of this, we performed two taste tests. In past research, some studies have found that consumers perceive national brands to be superior to store brands and to generic grocery items on attributes such as overall quality, taste, aroma, and reliability (De Wulf and al. 2005).

In fact, it is generally thought that National brands provide hedonic utility and quality, whereas store brands are lower priced, lack strong brand recognition, and are rarely advertised at the national level. Our non blind test supports this hypothesis (cf. Table 1) since the National Brand (NB) Danone was better evaluated than Carrefour PLB. However, the outcome of our blind taste test was interesting but rather surprising: the PLB was better rated than the National Brands (cf. Table 2).

Non-blind test on fruits juice										
	PLB (Carrefour)					NB (Danone)				
Rating (1 to5)	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Subject A				+						+
Subject B			+						+	
Subject C			+						+	
Total / 15	10					13				

Table 1 : Non Blind test on fruits juice

Blind test on yoghurts										
	PLB (Carrefour)					NB (Danone)				
Rating (1 to 5)	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Subject A				+					+	
Subject B				+				+		
Subject C				+				+		
Total / 15	12					10				

Table 2 : Blind test on yoghurts

This result confirms once again the common belief that Private Label products can offer the same or even better quality than National Brands, but at a lower price. This result is interesting in the sense that it suggest that PLBs must be considered just as other brands.

Besides, some scholars found the same results (De Wulf and al., 2005) even if the context was not the same, i.e. cross-cultural.

Means and Kruskal-Wallis tests

From the data it was possible to assess how PLBs was viewed or perceived in a multicultural context with respect to identify differences in perceptions of attributes (Appendix A.5 & A.6). When comparing the means (Table 3), potential differences and similarities in perceptions of the same statement between the three consumer groups of students can be seen. Kruskal-Wallis test showed that only two attribute statements were found to show significant differences between the means at the 0.05 level of confidence whereas there are similarities of perceptions for the other statements.

Statements	**Chinese** N = 27	**French** N= 31	**Senegalese** N= 35	**Total** N= 93	**Chi-Square**	**Sig.**
	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean		
1. I feel **confident** when I use PLBs	2.22	2.09	2.55	2.28	5.074	. 079 ns
2. I find **economical** to buy PLBs	3.96	3.94	3.43	3.75	4.502	. 105 ns
3. PLBs may be associated to **luxury**	1.67	1.71	1.77	1.72	.542	. 762 ns
4. I find PLBs good for one's **image**	2.59	2.42	2.31	2.43	1.298	. 523 ns
5. PLBs have **youthful** image	3.52	2.90	2.97	3.11	10.229	. 006 s*
6. It'is **securing** to use PLBs	2.44	2.48	2.60	2.52	1.034	. 596 ns
7. I find PLBs **simple** to purchase	3.48	3.35	3.26	3.35	.604	. 739 ns
8. It's **reasonable** to buy PLBs	3.30	3.26	2.89	3.13	3.748	. 154 ns
9. **Warranty** is provided with PLBs	2.30	2.29	2.20	2.26	.338	. 845 ns
10. I think that PLBs are **innovating**	2.33	2.06	2.20	2.19	1.770	. 413 ns
11. It is **convenient** to purchase PLBs	3.48	3.03	3.11	3.19	6.882	. 032 s**

Notes: * p-value < 0.01; ** p-value < 0.05

1. strongly disagree ; 5. strongly agree

Grouping Variable: Nationality

Table 3. Attribute statements: Means and Kruskal-Wallis Test results

According to the Kruskal-Wallis Test, the first statement showing differences in means at the 0.10 level of confidence is "*PLBs have youthful image*". Here we can oppose French students (Mean of 3.52) to Senegalese (Mean of 2.97) and Chinese students (Mean of 2.90). The high score of French consumer students may be linked to the fact that these consumers may consider PLBs as not serious brands purchased by young who don't have high income or enough money. On the other hand, Chinese and Senegalese students may consider PLBs as serious brands purchasable by everyone. More precisely, they may be influenced by the fact that PLBs are manufactured in France. There may be here also a country of origin image effect.

The second statement showing a mean difference at the 0.05 level of confidence is "*It is convenient to purchase PLBs*". Convenient referred here to the ease of access to PLBs and to their appropriateness to meet the consumers' needs. We can notice that highest mean scores are given by the Chinese (3.48) and Senegalese (3.11) consumers in comparison with French consumers (3.03). So, there is here also a better perception of PLBs by consumers from less developed countries. This result may be linked to the image of France and to the ease to have access where one can buy PLBs. We know that in less developed countries such as Senegal and China, it may be more difficult to have access to PLBs because the retail network is less developed compared to France.

The Kruskal-Wallis Test is not significant at the 0.05 level of confidence for the other statements showing also that there are no differences of PLB image perceptions concerning these statements. In other words, French, Senegalese and Chinese consumer students found that PLBs are "*economical"* (Mean of 3.75), not associated with *luxury* (Mean of 1.72), not very good for one's "*image"* (Mean of 2.43), not associated to warranty (Mean of 2.26), not very "*innovating"* (Mean of 2.19) but they found them "*confident*" (2.28), "*securing"* to use (Mean of 2.52), very "*simple"* to purchase (Mean of 3.35), very *reasonable* to buy (Mean of 3.13). Most of these results are consistent with past research. For instance, "*economical*" - referring to the good price/quality relation - is reported to be strongly associated with PLB purchase (i.e. Burton and al., 1998).

Similarly, "*luxury"* and "*warranty"* cannot be really associated with PLB because these products don't have a good image for most of the consumers. This is all the more true as we were dealing here with grocery products (fruits juices and yoghurts). However, the high scores of "*securing*", "*simple*", "*reasonable*" and "*convenient*" are very interesting for PLB product image perceptions. These items were usually associated with national brands. So, we can suggest that PLB image perception is changing and retailers must be aware of this shift and give a more focus on the PLB product ranges.

3. Conclusions

Managerial implications

In consumer marketing, brands often provide the primary points of differentiation between competitive offerings, and as such they can be critical to the success of retailers and manufacturers. Private label brands have made tremendous inroads over the past two decades. Although the success of private labels has been limited to certain product categories and segments of consumers, retailers continue to expand the domain of private label offerings. In this exploratory study, our objective was to assess how PLBs are perceived in a multicultural context. Findings comprise some main points that are valuable for retail firms operating in multi-cultural contexts. First, an array of statements is found to be highly associated with

PLBs image including convenience, youth, economy, reason and simplicity. Some of these items (i.e. convenience and reason) were previously associated with national brands. This result shows that consumers are now aware that PLBs are improving their quality. So, from now on, retailers have to launch much more PLBs products and to focus on their improved PLBs quality. Similarly, the results of the blind test are interesting yet surprising in the sense that respondents found PLBs to be higher than national brands in terms of taste. Retail firm may try to encourage consumers to compare the taste of their brands versus national brands in their campaigns of communication. In addressing the question whether consumers from different cultures but living in the same context perceive differently PLBs image, the findings of the study suggest that there are much more similarities than differences of PLB image perceptions. Only two attribute statements (related to convenience and youth) on eleven are differently perceived by consumers. This result is interesting in a strategic level because similar image perceptions in a multicultural context allow retailers to standardize their retail offer and communications. This means that they spend much less money on communication.

Limitations and orientations for future research

This work does suffer from some limitations. The first of these limitations stems from the use of a student sample. Although the sample does have some characteristics that are desirable in terms of their similarity to the wider population of consumers students (cf. Appendix A.4), the sample does not allow for consideration of the impact of consumer variables such as income or education, both of which have been demonstrated to impact private label purchasing behavior (see e.g., Burton and al., 1998). Given the importance of consumer use of Private label brands in all countries, future research in this area needs to consider a broader array of consumers living in multi-cultural contexts. Second, future studies should also investigate other factors that influence the PLB image perception, i.e. characteristics of the consumers who buy PLBs, their exposure to global consumer culture, amongst other traits. In this respect, they can distinguish clearly between intrinsic and extrinsic cues in PLB image perceptions. Finally, while we have used Means and Kruskal-Wallis Test procedures, future studies should investigate the relationships between PLB image perception, its antecedents and consequences using multiple regression analyses and structural equation modeling techniques.

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Appendix

A.1 Test of Homogeneity of Variances

	Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
Q1	1.894	2	90	.156
Q2	3.558	2	90	.033
Q3	.276	2	90	.759
Q4	.395	2	90	.675
Q5	.265	2	90	.767
Q6	.461	2	90	.632
Q7	2.308	2	90	.105
Q8	.004	2	90	.996
Q9	1.342	2	90	.267
Q10	.047	2	90	.954
Q11	1.405	2	90	.251

A.2 Quasi normality statistcs (Skewness and Kurtosis)

	N	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
Q1	93	.050	.250	-.430	.495
Q2	93	-.986	.250	.123	.495
Q3	93	.651	.250	-.076	.495
Q4	93	-.008	.250	-.514	.495
Q5	93	-.213	.250	.192	.495
Q6	93	.051	.250	-.173	.495
Q7	93	-.644	.250	.571	.495
Q8	93	-.601	.250	.316	.495
Q9	93	-.034	.250	-.368	.495
Q10	93	-.057	.250	-.741	.495
Q11	93	-.203	.250	-.191	.495
Valid N (listwise)	93				

A.3 Tests of Normality

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov(a)			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Q1	.254	93	.000	.852	93	.000
Q2	.339	93	.000	.804	93	.000
Q3	.263	93	.000	.790	93	.000
Q4	.228	93	.000	.868	93	.000
Q5	.247	93	.000	.883	93	.000
Q6	.274	93	.000	.812	93	.000
Q7	.251	93	.000	.851	93	.000
Q8	.262	93	.000	.860	93	.000
Q9	.277	93	.000	.828	93	.000
Q10	.234	93	.000	.842	93	.000
Q11	.244	93	.000	.856	93	.000

A.4 Sample characteristics: sex, age, level of income

			Nationality			Total
			Chinese	French	Senegalese	
Sex	Men	Count	13	10	25	48
		% of Total	14.0%	10.8%	26.9%	51.6%
	Women	Count	14	21	10	45
		% of Total	15.1%	22.6%	10.8%	48.4%
Total		Count	27	31	35	93
		% of Total	29.0%	33.3%	37.6%	100.0%

			Nationality			Total
			Chinese	French	Senegalese	
Age	<20years	Count	1	8	3	12
		% of Total	1.1%	8.6%	3.2%	12.9%
	[20-25years]	Count	18	21	17	56
		% of Total	19.4%	22.6%	18.3%	60.2%
	>25years	Count	8	2	15	25
		% of Total	8.6%	2.2%	16.1%	26.9%
Total		Count	27	31	35	93
		% of Total	29.0%	33.3%	37.6%	100.0%

			Nationality			Total
			Chinese	French	Senegalese	
Level of Income (in €)	<400	Count	18	16	14	48
		% of Total	19.4%	17.2%	15.1%	51.6%
	[400-600]	Count	4	11	14	29
		% of Total	4.3%	11.8%	15.1%	31.2%
	>600	Count	5	4	7	16
		% of Total	5.4%	4.3%	7.5%	17.2%
Total		Count	27	31	35	93
		% of Total	29.0%	33.3%	37.6%	100.0%

A.5 Kruskal Wallis Test Statistics (a, b, c)

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10	Q11
Chi-Square	5.074	4.502	.542	1.298	10.229	1.034	.604	3.748	.338	1.770	6.882
df	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Asymp. Sig.	.079	.105	.762	.523	.006	.596	.739	.154	.845	.413	.032

Note:
a. Kruskal Wallis Test
b. Grouping Variable: Q39 (nationality)
c. Q refers to the statements

A.6 Kruskal-Wallis Test : Ranks for Q5 and Q11

	Q39	N	Mean Rank
Q5 (Youthful image)	Chinese	27	59.94
	French	31	40.73
	Senegalese	35	42.57
	Total	93	
Q11 (Innovating)	Chinese	27	57.44
	French	31	41.26
	Senegalese	35	44.03
	Total	93	

Note: Q refers to the statements