

# Assessment Of Retail Apparel Brands' Value Proposition, Client Contentment, And Loyalty

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## Abstract

*This study presents a comprehensive examination of the intricate interplay within the dynamic context of retail-branded products. It extends its insights using a well-structured sample comprising 150 adult consumers, who actively participated by providing feedback through a self-administered questionnaire. To delve into the complexities of this relationship, this research employs a range of sophisticated statistical techniques. These techniques allow for a robust analysis of the data and facilitate the identification of patterns, correlations, and associations among the variables under investigation. The study's findings are enlightening, revealing significant and positive correlations between shopping benefits and key factors such as client contentment, client fidelity, and verbal referral. These results offer valuable insights into the complex array of influences that impact consumer behavior and decision-making within the fiercely competitive landscape of retail. While the study has taken significant strides in advancing our understanding of this complex interplay, it acknowledges its limitations, including the composition of the sample and its specific focus on specialty apparel retail branding. Nonetheless, the study's core contribution remains clear: it underscores the paramount importance of comprehending the nexus between shopping benefits and the key outcome variables, shedding light on how retailers can navigate and succeed in the fiercely competitive retail landscape. These findings not only contribute to academic research but also offer practical guidance for retailers seeking to refine their strategies and enhance their performance in the ever-evolving retail industry.*

**Keywords:** *Shopping Benefits, Client contentment, Client fidelity, Competitive Retail Landscape, Consumer Decision-Making.*

## INTRODUCTION

In the fiercely competitive retail industry, businesses worldwide are constantly striving to enhance their profitability. With an abundance of shopping options available to consumers, both online and offline, the ability of a retailer to distinguish itself from competitors becomes imperative for its long-term financial success. The need for distinction has driven the extensive use of personal label brands. This approach has received significant attention and endorsement from numerous researchers, including (Johnson and Smith 2018; White 2022). Retail brands encompass products that are exclusively owned, controlled, and marketed by a retailer, providing the opportunity to sell these products at full price and circumvent profit-reducing markdowns, a concept that has been corroborated by researchers.

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Several studies consistently underscore the pivotal role of retail brands in achieving differentiation, nurturing client fidelity, and ultimately augmenting profitability, as elucidated by scholars (Fitzell, 1998; Corstjens and Lal, 2000; Johnson and Smith; 2018; White et al., 2022).

Retail branding empowers retailers to institute valuable market-based relationships, particularly client fidelity. This serves as a competitive advantage, as noted by (Srivastava et al. 1998). More recent research by (Lee and Martinez 2020; Garcia et al. 2021) has further underscored the significance of client fidelity in driving retail success. Subsequently, client fidelity tends to lead to higher profits for the retailer, as consumers tend to make a larger portion of their purchases from that retailer. Gaining insights into the elements that impact client fidelity is essential for the effectiveness of a retail branding strategy.

The success of this approach hinges on multiple elements, the foremost being the ability of the company or brand to consistently uphold its promises to its clientele. This consistent delivery builds a lasting and fruitful relationship between retailer and shopper. The promises extended by a retail brand directly correlate with the perks consumers receive during their shopping journeys, with these rewards growing over time and repeated visits. Previous research mainly delved into advantages linked to loyalty towards sales staff, the retail outlet, and the broader company. However, this study charts a unique path. It delves into cases where the retailer's name and the brand are one and the same. This creates a context where the shop and its brand merge in consumers' minds, associating the brand's identity with the entire range of products the retailer offers.

(Smith and Carter 2020) Explored the significance of client fidelity within the realm of e-commerce, uncovering that digital loyalty extends beyond mere repeat purchases and is intricately linked to online communities and engagement. This study broadened the perspective on loyalty in the evolving landscape of online retail. Recent research by (Brown and Evans 2021; Chen et al. 2023) has further expanded our understanding of digital loyalty in e-commerce settings.

(Choi and Kim 2021) Explored the correlation between client fidelity and brand advocacy within the luxury fashion sector. Their findings indicated that loyal customers not only repeatedly purchase from a brand but also actively promote it within their social circles. This study emphasized the link between loyalty and brand advocacy, shedding light on the power of loyal customers as brand ambassadors. This concept has been reinforced by subsequent studies by (Martinez and Davis 2022; Patel et al. 2023), further emphasizing the link between client fidelity and brand advocacy.

(Anderson et al. 2018) Investigated the influence of loyalty programs on customer verbal referral, revealing that members of loyalty programs are inclined to participate in positive verbal referral, thereby emerging as brand advocates. This study underscored the symbiotic relationship between loyalty initiatives and word-of-mouth promotion. Recent studies by (Li et al. 2021; Robinson and Garcia 2022) have reinforced the role of loyalty programs in fostering verbal referral and brand advocacy.

These additional studies provide insights into various facets of client fidelity, including its digital dimensions, its connection with brand advocacy, and the impact of loyalty programs on verbal dissemination. They contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of loyalty's multifaceted nature in contemporary marketing contexts.

The primary objective of this study is to elucidate the impact of consumer shopping benefits on client contentment, loyalty, and verbal referral within the realm of retail branding. By crafting a theoretical structure and empirically substantiating our suppositions, we aspire to deepen our grasp of the determinants that fuel contentment and allegiance in relation to retail brands. As a result, this inquiry seeks to answer the crucial question: Do the benefits linked with purchasing retail-branded products have an impact on client contentment, verbal referral, and loyalty?

The insights derived from this research offer valuable contributions to future academic studies and provide practical guidance to retailers contemplating retail branding strategies.

## REVIEW LITERATURE

### Shopping Benefits

This study places a significant emphasis on shopping benefits, a concept that has been explored in various academic chastisements pertaining to how consumers evaluate the extent to which their shopping experience effectively met the needs and objectives that motivated their shopping trip. These benefits encompass consumers' perceptions of whether they achieved specific goals during their shopping outing, such as locating the desired item. Additionally, they encompass the hedonic benefits that arise from the enjoyment, excitement, and pleasure experienced during the shopping process.

Research has presented substantial evidence indicating that shopping benefits are a direct outcome of the retail purchase experience. Building on this foundation, (Babin et al. 1994) developed a scale to measure shopping values, drawing on prior research and insights from focus groups, identifying two distinct factors: utilitarian and hedonic. Similar findings have also been reported by other researchers, including (Thompson et al. 1990)

In the ever-evolving retail landscape, recent research has shed new light on the concept of shopping benefits. A study by (Garcia et al. 2022) delves into the role of sustainability in shopping benefits. The research highlights that modern consumers increasingly value sustainable and environmentally friendly shopping practices. They seek shopping benefits not only in terms of the products they purchase but also in the positive impact their choices have on the planet. This expansion of shopping benefits to include sustainability reflects a growing trend in consumer preferences and necessitates adjustments in retail branding strategies.

Moreover, a study by (Chen and Wang 2023) examined the influence of social media and online reviews on consumers' perception of shopping benefits. The findings demonstrate that consumers now derive shopping benefits from the information and recommendations provided by their online social networks. This signifies a shift towards digital social engagement as a source of hedonic and utilitarian shopping benefits, emphasizing the need for retailers to adapt their branding strategies to incorporate these emerging dynamics.

In the digital age, an investigation by (Li et al. 2024) explored the role in enhancing shopping benefits. The study reveals that consumers find immersive AR and VR experiences to be a source of both utilitarian benefits, such as product visualization and customization, and hedonic benefits by creating exciting and enjoyable shopping experiences. Retailers aiming to provide superior shopping benefits must consider the integration of AR and VR technologies.

Incorporating these recent studies into the framework of shopping benefits, it is clear that this concept is evolving in response to changing consumer expectations and technological advancements. Retail branding strategies must adapt to address the shifting landscape of

consumer preferences and leverage emerging opportunities. Understanding and effectively delivering shopping benefits, whether in traditional brick-and-mortar stores or in the digital sphere, is crucial for enhancing client contentment concerning retail branding.

### **Client contentment**

(Giese and Cate 1999) undertook a thorough examination of client contentment, providing a detailed description: "Satisfaction embodies three core components: a reaction tied to a specific focal point pinpointed at a given time." In essence, client contentment represents a response, which can be either cognitive or emotional. While a significant portion of the research on consumer satisfaction has predominantly centered on the product level, there have been limited conceptual and empirical advancements concerning other levels, such as brand, store, and salesperson satisfaction.

It is widely acknowledged that client contentment significantly affects client fidelity and verbal referral. In a research study the authors established that satisfaction has an impact on relative attitude, repurchase intent, and recommendations but it does not directly affect the store loyalty. To enhance loyalty the study highlighted the importance of factors like cultivation of a positive relative attitude and encouraging customer recommendations. (Reynolds and Beatty 1999) unveiled that consumers' perceptions of benefits, which, consequently, is associated with salesperson loyalty, salesperson verbal referral, and the share of purchases.

Recent studies have continued to explore the connection between client contentment and loyalty. (Smith & Johnson 2018) examined the influence of client contentment on online shopping behavior. Their study found that in the e-commerce context, client contentment significantly impacts not only repurchase intent but also online reviews and ratings, underscoring the significance of contented customers in fostering favorable online word-of-mouth and shaping subsequent online shopping choices.

In the domain of fashion retail, (Chen and Wang 2021) Explored the contributory role of client contentment in aspects like brand loyalty within the fast-fashion industry. Their results indicated that client contentment not only had a direct impact on brand loyalty but also acted as a mediator in the association between perceived brand quality and loyalty. This study emphasized the significance of client contentment in building brand loyalty in highly competitive markets.

(Hartley et al. 2019) Explored the influence of client contentment on employee engagement and its consequent impact on client fidelity. Their research revealed that satisfied customers contributed to higher employee engagement, which, in turn, enhanced client fidelity. This study highlighted the interconnectedness of employee satisfaction, client contentment, and brand allegiance.

Furthermore, recent studies have confirmed the predictive power of client contentment on future purchase behavior and its profound influence on profitability and loyalty. (Newman and Webel 2018) demonstrated that satisfied customers are more likely to engage in repeat purchases and positive verbal referral. This aligns with the findings emphasizing client contentment's role as a dependable predictor of future purchase behavior.

Empirical studies by (Van der Wiele and colleagues 2022) corroborate the favorable link between client contentment and the performance of an organization. These studies expand the understanding of client contentment's role in various contexts and its ripple effects on loyalty and verbal referral, underscoring the multi-faceted nature of client contentment across diverse industries and dimensions of the customer experience.

### **Client fidelity and Verbal referral**

Loyalty, as defined by (Dick and Basu 1994), involves the connection between one's relative attitude toward a brand, product, service, store, or vendor and their actual patronage behavior. This definition underscores the dual nature of loyalty, encompassing both attitudinal and behavioral aspects, as originally emphasized by (Jacoby 1971). In light of this comprehensive view, our study considers both the attitude and behavior dimensions of loyalty.

The prevailing literature frequently positions client contentment as a forerunner to client fidelity. It's commonly noted that consumers who are profoundly contented tend to return for further purchases and are inclined to recommend the provider to their peers (Reynolds and Arnold, 2000; Reynolds and Beatty, 1999). Scholars commonly contend that elevated client contentment fosters loyalty, acting as a protective mechanism for companies against competitive pressures by diminishing consumers' inclination to explore alternative options.

Recent study, such as the study by (Smith and Carter 2020), delved into the role of client fidelity in the digital realm, particularly in e-commerce. Their research highlighted that digital client fidelity extends beyond repeat purchases, encompassing the establishment of online communities and the level of engagement. This perspective broadens our understanding of loyalty in the evolving landscape of online retail.

(Choi and Kim's research 2021) investigated the connection between client fidelity and brand advocacy, with a focus on the luxury fashion industry. Their findings underscored that loyal customers not only engage in repeat purchases but also actively promote the brand within their social circles, serving as brand ambassadors. This study sheds light on the synergy between loyalty and brand advocacy.

In addition, (Anderson et al. 2018) examined the impact of loyalty programs on customer verbal referral. Their study revealed that loyalty program members effectively becoming brand advocates. This research emphasizes the interplay initiatives. These additional studies collectively enrich our understanding of the multifaceted nature of loyalty in contemporary marketing contexts, underscoring its continued relevance and evolution in the ever-changing landscape of consumer behavior. Incorporating these recent findings into the existing body of knowledge, our study gains a more comprehensive perspective on the complex dynamics of client fidelity and its role in shaping modern marketing strategies.

### **HYPOTHESES**

The theoretical framework employed in this study draws upon the model developed a well-established model known for its effectiveness in examining consumer benefits, satisfaction, and loyalty within the retail context.

As discussed earlier, recent research by (Smith and Carter 2020; Choi and Kim 2021; Anderson et al. 2018) has significantly contributed to our understanding of client fidelity and its multifaceted nature in the evolving landscape of retail and e-commerce. Incorporating these findings, our study seeks to expand the framework originally proposed by Reynolds and Beatty, aligning it with contemporary insights.

Building upon recent findings from (Smith and Carter 2020), there exists a significant and positive correlation between shopping benefits, both utilitarian and hedonic, and client contentment (H1)

In alignment with the study carried out by (Choi and Kim 2021) within the luxury fashion sector, a prominent and positive association between client contentment and client fidelity has been identified, emphasizing the critical role "satisfaction" plays in fostering brand loyalty (H2).

In line with (Anderson 2018) study on loyalty programs and verbal referral, a noteworthy and positive correlation exists between client contentment and verbal referral, emphasizing the role of satisfied customers as brand advocates (H3)

Consistent with the integrated view of client fidelity and advocacy proposed by (Choi and Kim 2021) and the impact of loyalty programs on verbal referral as noted by (Anderson et al. 2018), a significant and positive relationship exists between client fidelity and verbal referral, further highlighting the interconnectedness of loyalty initiatives and word-of-mouth promotion (H5)

By integrating these contemporary studies into the established framework of (Reynolds and Beatty 1999), our study aims to offer a more comprehensive and enriched understanding of the complex dynamics between shopping benefits, satisfaction, loyalty, and verbal referral in the context of retail branding.



**Figure 1 – Theoretical Framework**

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

### **Store format and retail brand selection.**

In the contemporary retail landscape, modern retailers predominantly adopt formats such as department stores and specialty stores. Department stores offer a diverse array of products, encompassing clothing, cosmetics, artificial jewelry, watches, accessories, and home furnishings. According to Deloitte's "Future of Retail" report for India, it is forecasted that modern retail, which includes malls, supermarkets, and department stores, will expand to a value of \$230 billion by 2030. Concurrently, online retail is anticipated to experience significant growth, reaching \$325 billion, nearly 2.5 times its current size.

This study specifically concentrated on the young adult demographic, a key target audience for specialty apparel retailers. The chosen retail outlets for the study comprised well-known establishments such as Pantaloons, Shoppers Stop, Lifestyle, Westside, and Trends.

Integrating the insights from this recent study on the retail landscape in India, it becomes evident that the retail industry is on a trajectory of significant growth and transformation. The coexistence of traditional department stores with the burgeoning online retail sector offers a dynamic

environment for retailers and researchers alike. Understanding these shifting dynamics is crucial for retailers, particularly those catering to specific demographics, as highlighted in our study, where we focused on the young adult segment – a prime target audience for specialty apparel retailers.

As modern retail expands in India, it's becoming increasingly vital for retailers to tailor their strategies to meet the unique demands of different consumer segments. The prominence of established brands like Pantaloons, Shoppers Stop, Lifestyle, Westside, and Trends in our study underscores the competitive nature of the retail landscape, where these retailers vie for the attention and loyalty of the young adult demographic. Additionally, the concurrent growth of online retail, as forecasted, further emphasizes the need for retailers to adapt and innovate to remain competitive.

This study aims to provide valuable insights for retailers seeking to enhance their strategies in an ever-evolving retail environment. By considering the latest trends and forecasts for the retail industry in India, our research becomes more insightful and enriched, offering a comprehensive understanding of the study factors.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Incorporating insights from this recent study into the previous research on the retail landscape enriches our understanding of the data collection process for our study on verbal referral, client contentment and loyalty. Our research specifically targeted the young adult demographic, a key audience for specialty apparel retailers such as Pantaloons, Shoppers Stop, Lifestyle, Westside, and Trends, which were among the retail brands we examined.

To ensure the accuracy and relevance of our findings, data for our study was collected via an in-person survey conducted at these retail establishments. Survey participants were explicitly asked to provide input based on their most recent shopping experiences with one of the four specified retail brands included in the research. The questionnaire commenced with an elimination question on purchase from one of these retail brands within the last two months.

This approach to data collection aligns with the in-person survey method utilized in the recent study on the retail landscape in India. Both studies recognize the value of gathering real-time insights from customers based on their most recent shopping experiences. By integrating this methodological approach into our research, we aim to ensure the timeliness and relevance of our findings. Additionally, this alignment highlights the practical applicability of our study's results for retailers seeking to enhance their strategies in the competitive and dynamic retail environment, as identified in the recent study's forecasts for India's retail sector.

### **Pretest**

We undertook a preliminary test that involved a group of shoppers (N=25) at a branded apparel store in Dehradun. Participants were guided to fill out a questionnaire about their latest shopping experiences with one of the four chosen retail brands.

The insights gathered from these respondents proved invaluable. The feedback received during this pretest indicated that the phrasing of our questionnaire items was clear and easy to understand, ensuring that our survey measures are appropriate and resonate with our target audience.

Moreover, we conducted a comprehensive examination of descriptive statistics and scale reliability for each of our measurements. This process identified no significant concerns such as skewness or kurtosis. It verified that our measures exhibited satisfactory reliability, reinforcing the robustness of our research methodology and findings, while aligning with the dedication to methodological rigor.

### **Sampling Method and Procedure**

Our primary aim was to identify a similar group of clients who frequently engage in shopping at department stores. To achieve this, we focused on individuals categorized as regular shoppers as our sampling frame, ensuring consistency.

Our sampling methodology combined aspects of convenience and purposive sampling, following a method reminiscent of the one outlined by (Kerlinger and Lee 2000). We emphasized the voluntary nature of survey participation, emphasizing our unwavering commitment to ethical research practices and the freedom of participants to choose whether or not to take part. To pinpoint the most relevant participants, we incorporated a screening question. This question helped us identify and include respondents who had made a recent purchase from a department store. We had selected within the preceding two months. Respondents who hadn't made such a purchase within this specified timeframe were intentionally excluded from the survey. This approach allowed us to zero in on a particular consumer segment that is well known for its consistent engagement with these retail brands.

Subsequently, we structured our survey to collect information from respondents regarding the benefits they associated with, a concept we also referred to as "shopping benefits." After exploring this aspect, we delved into the specific attitudes, emotions, and beliefs that had emerged with an experience. This focus aligned with the recent study's emphasis on understanding "satisfaction." Furthermore, we inquired about the actions or behaviors that might have emanated from their attitudes, emotions, and beliefs, including verbal referral and loyalty. Lastly, we requested demographic information from our respondents to better understand the background and characteristics of the individuals comprising our research sample.

### **Measures**

The measurement scales used variables were selected from existing researchers, chosen due to their contextual similarity with proposed study.

To assess utilitarian and hedonic shopping benefits, we employed the 15-item scale developed by (Babin et al. 1994). This scale captures the perceived value and experience in utilitarian shopping, associated with the shopping experience, through four items, and the perceived hedonic value through 11 items. Participants were instructed to express their perceptions using a seven-point Likert scale.

To gauge customer satisfaction and loyalty, we employed measurement scales developed by (Reynolds and Beatty 1999). Additionally, we employed the (Harrison-Walker 2001) metric for assessing verbal referral. Attitudinal loyalty was operationalized using (Reynolds and Beatty's 1999; Harrison-Walker 2001).

### **Analysis**

For this study, data analysis was carried out utilizing a two-stage structural equation modeling (SEM) approach. In the initial stage, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to evaluate whether any adjustments were necessary for the scales utilized to measure the constructs. Additionally, the reliability of the confirmatory analytic model findings was evaluated. Once the scales were validated, a structural equation model (SEM) was formulated.

## **RESULTS**

### **Sample Characteristics**



This study's final sample comprised 200 regular shoppers. The participants' ages spanned from 21 to 65 years, with an average age of 34 years. The gender distribution was notably skewed, with 62% of respondents being male and 38% female. Regarding occupations, the sample included professionals (32%), self-employed individuals (30%), government service workers (25%), students (8%), retirees (2%), and homemakers (3%). In terms of education, 35% of respondents held postgraduate degrees, 52% were graduates, and 13% were undergraduates. Regarding income levels, 45% reported earning ₹2,00,000 or less, while 37% reported earning ₹2,00,001 to ₹4,00,000.

### Confirmatory Factor Analysis

To ensure the reliability and validity of the measurement scales, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was undertaken, comprising three iterations aimed at refining the measurement model.

The conclusive CFA yielded a model with acceptable fit indices, including  $X^2/df=1.61$ , root mean square error of approximation=0.043 ( $p=0.73$ ), GFI=0.87, NFI=0.89, and CFI=0.95. Notably, all item loadings ( $\lambda$ ) on the constructs were statistically significant ( $p=0.000$ ), and the standardized residuals did not surpass 1.92. These results offered no indication against the discriminant validity of the measurement model.

### Structural Equation Model

The initial run of the structural equation model (SEM) revealed that the data exhibited an acceptable fit ( $X^2=646.74$ ,  $X^2/df=1.77$ ). Fit indices for this model fell within acceptable ranges, including GFI=0.86, NFI=0.87, CFI=0.94, and RMSEA=0.05. Additionally, a lack of fit resulted in a non-significant outcome ( $p=0.227$ ). However, it's worth noting a considerably high modification index of 79.88, indicating a substantial correlation.

To delve deeper into the function of attitudinal loyalty as an intermediary between customer satisfaction and verbal referral, an alternate model was devised. In this model, the path from client fidelity to verbal referral was excluded. A nested modeling technique was utilized to compare the fit of both models. The alternative model exhibited comparable fit indices and an enhanced RMSEA (0.05,  $p=0.25$ ). Consequently, the alternative model was considered appropriate, and hypothesis testing was conducted based on this model.

### Hypothesis Tests

All hypotheses were validated by the data. The study revealed positive and significant correlations between utilitarian and hedonic shopping benefits and client satisfaction. Furthermore, a positive and significant association was observed between client satisfaction and client fidelity. While hypothesis H4 was not applicable in the alternative model due to the mediating effect of attitudinal loyalty, the relationship between client fidelity and verbal referral was positive and notable, affirming hypothesis H5. Comparison is shown in table 1.

	<i>A priori model</i>	<i>Rival model</i>
$X^2/df$	646.73	646.98
GFI	1.77	1.76
NFI	0.86	0.86
CFI	0.87	0.83
CFI	0.94	0.94
RMSEA (p-value)	0.05 (0.22)	0.05 (0.25)

**Table 1. Comparison of model fit.**

## DISCUSSION

This study has several limitations, including a sample primarily consisting of college students, potential lack of generalizability to the broader population, and specific focus on specialty apparel retail. Additionally, other variables influencing client contentment, loyalty, and verbal referral were not explored.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this research demonstrated that consumer shopping benefits, including utilitarian and hedonic, have a significant impact on client contentment, loyalty, and verbal referral in the context of retail branding. The study contributes to theory-building in marketing and consumer research, providing valuable insights for both academics and retail practitioners. The findings emphasize the importance of understanding and delivering both utilitarian and hedonic benefits to consumers. Retailers should strive to meet consumers' expectations regarding these benefits to build client contentment and, in turn, loyalty and positive verbal referral. The mediating role of attitudinal loyalty between client contentment and verbal referral highlights the need to prioritize satisfying consumers to foster loyalty and advocacy.

Future research should explore different types of consumer benefits, replicate the study with diverse demographics, and investigate the mediating role of attitudinal loyalty further. Expanding the research to different retail formats and categories would enhance its applicability.

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