

A STUDY OF CONSUMER PREFERENCES TOWARDS BRANDED GLUTEN-FREE PRODUCTS

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ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, there has been a significant increase in consumer demand for gluten-free products. This trend is primarily driven by heightened awareness of gluten-related health issues and evolving dietary preferences. Consequently, numerous brands are now investigating opportunities within this expanding market. This paper analyzes the factors influencing consumer preferences for specific gluten-free brands. A comprehensive survey was conducted to collect pertinent data involving 600 consumers residing in Punjab who frequently purchase gluten-free products. The study employed the Garrett ranking technique to assess the relative significance of factors affecting brand preference. The findings indicate that quality is the foremost criterion for consumers when selecting gluten-free products, underscoring the importance of product integrity and reliability. Brand trust ranked at number 2, which highlights that if a consumer trusts a brand, it creates a preference. Price was identified as the third most important factor, suggesting that while consumers place a high value on quality and brand reputation, cost considerations remain a significant aspect of their purchasing choices. Among the six factors investigated in the study, advertising was the least influential in shaping brand preference. This insight suggests that consumers prioritize tangible product attributes and experiences over promotional messaging concerning gluten-free offerings despite the considerable investment many brands allocate to marketing strategies. This research provides essential insights for brands aiming to strengthen their positioning within the competitive gluten-free market.

KEYWORDS: Brand Trust, Brand Preference, Brand Image, Gluten-Free, Price, Quality.

I. INTRODUCTION

The importance of brand preference in influencing customers' purchasing decisions cannot be overstated. Consumers frequently consider brand preference an important aspect before buying (Kwok et al., 2006). They are likelier to choose brands that deliver outstanding functional value and satisfy their requirements. However, if a brand does not uphold quality and sustainability, customers are less inclined to stay loyal to that brand over time (Diputra & Yasa, 2021). Brand preference plays a vital role in competitive markets. Consumers may switch to different brands if they believe there is a better value proposition available, which in turn increases competition. This inclination towards brand preference makes customers' buying decisions less complicated (Gensch, 1987). At first, customers are presented with various brands and must navigate a complex selection process (Cătălin & Andreea, 2014). Ultimately, some brands are ruled out, leaving only their preferred option for future purchases (Roberts & Lattin, 1991). Moreover, brand preference is closely interlinked with brand loyalty and can significantly impact sales margins (Rundle & Mackay, 2001).

Businesses consistently strive to position their brands as customers' preferred choice by offering diverse products (Mathur et al., 2003). Conversely, customers assess brands based on the quality of products and services they provide. Understanding brand preference is critical to consumer behaviour, significantly influencing consumer choices and purchasing decisions (Isik & Yasar, 2015). Brand preference indicates consumers' degree of attraction and loyalty toward a specific brand, profoundly impacting consumer behaviour and decision-making processes (Rijnsoever et al., 2009). Product image, encompassing aspects such as quality, design, and perceived value, is a crucial determinant of brand preference (Lema & Wodaje, 2018). The pricing of a product can significantly impact consumer preferences. Price changes may lead consumers to consider substitute products.

A significant price increase can lead consumers to switch to a different brand, while the unavailability of their preferred brand may result in them selecting a second choice. Additionally, consumers may be encouraged to try new brands through sales promotion and other allied techniques, such as reward checks, free samples, and discount coupons offered by alternative

brands. Keiningham et al. (2005) noted that brand preference is largely shaped by customer experiences, with positive experiences contributing to the development of these preferences. Product and service experiences play a crucial role in influencing customer attitudes. A loyal consumer who favours a specific brand is typically hesitant to try alternative products on the market. Additionally, consumers frequently show curiosity about different food brands. Therefore, it would be insightful to examine the various factors that affect consumer decisions when choosing gluten-free products and how these factors influence brand loyalty.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A. Brand Price

The connection between price and brand value is crucial, as brands need to substantiate their pricing to achieve a competitive edge (Bosona & Gebresenbet, 2018). Price is a key factor in consumers' decision-making, especially for those who are not well-informed about brands (Diallo et al., 2013). Research has shown that shoppers actively seek detailed insights about product pricing (Estelami, 1998; Evanschitzky et al., 2004; Jensen & Grunert, 2014). In the food retail sector, consumers are particularly responsive to price changes (Dawson, 2013; Cranfield, 2020; Kenning et al., 2011). Price consistently emerges as the leading criterion influencing choices between products and brands in this industry (Severin et al., 2001).

This factor becomes even more critical when the distinctions among brands are slight. Sinha and Batra (1999) examined how customers perceive brand pricing in relation to the costs associated with private-label alternatives. Furthermore, Khan and Rohi (2013) highlighted that pricing plays a crucial role in influencing brand preference and consumer purchasing behaviour. Organizations formulate their pricing strategies by analyzing a variety of factors, including the economic climate, target demographics, competitive environment, geographical considerations, and cultural influences. Customers endeavour to evaluate the perceived value of the product (Ghose & Lowengart, 2013).

Laroche et al. (2001) supported this viewpoint by stating that a product's price represents the amount a consumer is willing to spend. Two main pricing categories affect the market: one associated with strong brand images and the other related to lesser-known brands. Well-known brands typically set higher prices, which can lead customers to incur additional costs. Rijnsoever et al. (2009) revealed that less-recognized brands frequently adopt innovative ways to appeal to

today's era consumers, thereby enhancing the value of their products. The pricing of food items has a notable impact on sales and profit margins (Ghose & Lowengart, 2013). For example, gluten-free products are typically priced higher than their gluten-containing counterparts.

A consumer's perception of whether the pricing is fair can greatly influence their decision to buy (Herrmann et al., 2007). Successfully distributing products relies on accurately setting prices to effectively reach customers. It's important to provide value in the retail landscape while considering sales opportunities and price cuts to establish the costs for branded food products (Apéria & Back, 2004). Nevertheless, quality and price are often viewed as interconnected by consumers. Offering substantial discounts may lead to negative perceptions, prompting customers to question the integrity of the product. Diallo et al. (2013) further suggested that repeated price reductions may erode a brand's perceived value and impact consumer preferences.

B. Brand Image

Brand image encompasses various aspects of marketing, branding, and market offerings. It is widely understood as customers' perception of a brand based on their associations. These associations can stem from direct experiences, information about the brand, or pre-existing interactions with the organisation. Brand image is a brand's mental representation, encompassing symbolic meanings related to its specific attributes (Malik et al., 2012; Halkias, 2015). It includes consumers' emotional connections and consistent beliefs about a brand (Nandan, 2005). The image a brand projects plays a vital role in shaping how consumers behave and perceive it, embodying the symbolic significance of their purchases and encouraging brand loyalty. A strong brand image guides customers interested in branded products and impacts consumer purchasing behaviour and loyalty (Ogba & Tan, 2009). It can also facilitate the introduction of new brands and enhance the profitability of existing brands. Celebrity endorsements, integrated marketing communications, and word-of-mouth strategies can influence and shape the brand image (Sari & Yulianti, 2019).

C. Brand Availability

A brand's visibility is vital for making a significant impact on its users (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006). When a product is not easily available, it is likely to be forgotten, along with its features. A product that is readily available in retail outlets and supported by effective merchandising plays a key role in brand awareness. This is especially true in the food sector, where brand availability considerably affects consumers' purchasing choices more than other aspects (Khan & Rohi, 2013). Brand availability can be viewed as psychological ease of access, which determines how likely a

buyer is to notice, recognize, and contemplate a brand while making a purchase (Emari et al., 2012). This availability is influenced by the strength and number of memory associations related to the brand. Thus, brand availability encompasses more than just recognition; it includes top-of-mind awareness and recall.

The extent of brand availability differs in various situations, and a brand that is strongly present in consumers' minds is more likely to be recognized or considered during different buying situations (Bosona & Gebresenbet, 2018). Effective brand availability allows consumers to engage with products, thereby aiding the company in achieving its goals (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006). Furthermore, it boosts customer engagement with product campaigns (Blanchard & Markus, 2004). To ensure brand availability, companies need to undertake diverse activities and advertising strategies. This encompasses marketing communication approaches such as advertising, sales promotions, word-of-mouth marketing, viral campaigns, and social media outreach. Each strategy aims to improve accessibility and build a strong market presence. Amaldoss (2005) reveals that brand availability is instrumental in forming consumer perceptions of a brand and shaping their purchasing intentions.

D. Brand Trust

The existing literature on branding highlights that brand trust is essential for forming a strong bond between brands and consumers (Zehir et al., 2011). Numerous interpretations of brand trust have been proposed in recent academic work (Shin et al., 2019).

It is generally defined as the confidence consumers have in the quality and dependability of a brand's products (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999). Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) assert that brand trust reflects a customer's readiness to rely on the brand's identity to deliver on its commitments. Additionally, it conveys the expectation that the brand will consistently be reliable and meet consumer expectations (Delgado-Ballester et al., 2003). Trust becomes even more critical in high-risk scenarios. When consumers view products as particularly risky, their trust in brands can wane; leading to a greater reliance on brands they already trust (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Doney & Cannon, 1997).

Moreover, brand trust can be seen as the consumer's willingness to depend on a brand amid uncertainty, anticipating favorable results (Lau & Lee, 1999). When consumers have trust in a brand, they are more inclined to repurchase, resulting in a preference for that brand (Chinomona et al., 2013; Sheth & Parvatijar, 1995). Studies indicate that brand trust is a significant predictor of brand preference (Afsar, 2014; Chinomona et al., 2013). Furthermore, there is a well-established link between brand trust

and purchase intention: as trust in a brand rises, so does the likelihood of purchasing its products (Aydin et al., 2014; Sanny et al., 2020). In short, brand trust positively influences consumers' intentions to buy (Aydin et al., 2014; Sanny et al., 2020).

E. Advertisement

Advertising is a common strategy that brands use to engage effectively with a wide variety of target consumers. It significantly influences consumer preferences for brands (Daniel, 2019). Recently, the focus on advertising has increased as companies seek to create positive connections with their brands, particularly because the lines between brands are becoming less distinct, they are more prevalent in the market, and it is essential to grab consumer attention. Studies by Kotler and Keller (2006) demonstrate a strong positive link between a brand's share of voice in advertising and its market share. Share of voice is defined as the proportion of a company's advertising spending relative to the total expenditure in a given product category over a specific timeframe. This indicates that brands that invest more in advertising are likely to enjoy a larger market share. Furthermore, research by Clark et al. (2009) shows that advertising expenditure can help maintain or disrupt the balance of demand within a market, affecting brand recognition and consumer interest.

Advertising influences purchasing decisions by providing persuasive reasons for consumers to make a purchase (Keller, 2004). Aynawale, Alimi, and Ayanbimipe (2005) support this idea, emphasizing that advertising is vital for highlighting product quality and value, which significantly affects brand preferences.

F. Quality

The quality of a product significantly impacts its performance, which is closely tied to how customers perceive its value and the satisfaction they derive from it (Kotler & Armstrong, 2010). Quality can be defined as the collection of features and characteristics of a product or service that relate to its ability to fulfil both the stated and underlying needs of consumers (Kotler et al., 2006). Furthermore, the assessment of quality is frequently determined by customer perceptions in the market. It can further be evaluated from two key viewpoints: objective quality and perceived quality (Brunso et al., 2005). Perceived quality is the evaluation consumers make regarding the overall excellence or superiority of a product, and this evaluation can change depending on how and where the product is used.

On the other hand, objective quality pertains to the quantifiable and verifiable attributes of a product, which are assessed according to established standards based on its fundamental characteristics (Golder et al., 2012). Quality is essential for influencing brand choice, as it reflects the level of personal risk a consumer assumes during the purchasing process (Hoyer et al., 2017). Additionally, studies by Bornmark et al. (2006) indicate that perceived quality helps consumers reduce risk, thereby building trust in a brand and clarifying their expectations. Consequently, consumers are more inclined to choose a brand they believe exemplifies high-quality standards.

III. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- A.** To study the concept of brand preference.
- B.** To study the various factors affecting brand preference.
- C.** To evaluate the consumer preference regarding different gluten-free brands.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A quantitative research design was employed to investigate the specified objectives using written, structured questionnaires. Data were collected from consumers purchasing gluten-free products in Ludhiana, Amritsar, and Jalandhar in Punjab. Respondents visiting retail locations to purchase gluten-free items were approached to collect the data. Before data collection, participants were provided a comprehensive briefing regarding the study's objectives, and only those who consented to participate were asked to complete the questionnaires.

A total of 650 questionnaires were distributed to customers during the designated period, of which 623 were returned. Among these, 23 responses were excluded due to insufficient information. Consequently, 600 responses were deemed appropriate for further analysis. Before the final distribution of the questionnaires, a pilot study was conducted involving 30 different consumers of gluten-free products. Modifications to the questionnaire statements were made based on feedback obtained during the pilot study to enhance clarity. The factors undertaken in this study were based on previously validated research by Baourakis et al., 2007, and Garrett's ranking technique is used to evaluate consumer preferences concerning various gluten-free product brands available in Punjab.

V. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Garett's ranking technique has been employed to assess consumer preferences among various brands systematically. This methodology has been previously applied in research within the food industry, affirming its applicability in evaluating consumer preferences across diverse product categories. The study concentrated on six essential factors influencing consumer decision-making: brand trust, price, quality, availability, brand image, and advertising. Participants were instructed to rank these factors according to their significance concerning brand preference. A rank of 1 was assigned to the factor regarded as the most important by the consumer, while a rank of 6 was designated for the least important factor. By utilizing this structured ranking approach, the study aims to comprehensively understand each factor's relative importance in shaping consumer preferences.

Table 1: Frequencies of Ranks Assigned to Factors Influencing Brand Preference

Ranks	Brand Trust	Price	Quality	Availability	Brand Image	Advertisement
1	89	136	290	—	85	—
2	260	104	87	42	86	21
3	133	232	115	38	57	25
4	82	66	87	99	202	64
5	18	55	21	161	130	215
6	18	7	—	260	40	275
Total	600	600	600	600	600	600

Source: Compiled by Author

Table 1 provides a detailed breakdown of the frequencies of ranks assigned by respondents regarding various factors that influence their preferences for different gluten-free brands. This data is derived from a comprehensive survey conducted with 600 participants across Punjab, which offers valuable insights into consumer behaviour concerning gluten-free products. In the study, each factor influencing brand preference, such as brand trust, price, quality, availability, brand image and advertisement, was carefully evaluated by the respondents, who assigned ranks based on their perceived importance. The ranks reveal how much each factor affects their decision-making when preferring a gluten-free brand.

The table presented above conveys the survey results in which participants ranked various factors that influence their purchasing decisions. Findings indicate that quality is regarded as the most critical factor, followed closely by brand trust, price, and image. Brand trust was assigned the second-highest ranking, while subsequent factors included price, quality, brand image, availability, and advertising effectiveness. The Garrett ranking technique was utilized to analyze the significance of these factors comprehensively. This method facilitates the quantification of the influence each factor holds based on the ranks assigned by the survey respondents. Individual rankings were converted into Garrett score values using a statistical method called percent positioning. The percent positioning for each factor was determined using the following formula:

$$\text{Percent Position} = 100 * (\text{R}_{ij} - 0.5) / \text{N}_j$$

In this formula, R_{ij} denotes the specific rank assigned to a factor by the j^{th} respondent, while N_j represents the total number of factors ranked by the j^{th} respondent. By employing this formula, it becomes possible to derive a score that accurately reflects the relative importance of each factor based on the respondents' perceptions.

Table 2 provides a comprehensive breakdown of the percent positions calculated according to this formula, thereby clarifying how each factor is prioritized in the decision-making process. This thorough analysis not only elucidates consumer preferences but also assists businesses in identifying critical areas to enhance their marketing strategies and product offerings.

Table 2: Percent Position

Rank	$100(\text{R}_j - .5/\text{N}_j)$	Percent Position
1	$100*(1-.5)/6$	8.333333
2	$100*(2-.5)/6$	25
3	$100*(3-.5)/6$	41.66667
4	$100*(4-.5)/6$	58.33333
5	$100*(5-.5)/6$	75
6	$100*(6-.5)/6$	91.66667

Source: Author's Calculations

The Garrett value has been found in the Garrett ranking conversion table for each per cent position value. The corresponding Garrett value has been allotted for each per cent position from the Garrett ranking conversion table. Table 3 depicts Garrett's value:

Table 3: Garret’s Value

Rank	Percent Position	Garret’s value
1	8.33	77
2	25	63
3	41.66	54
4	58.33	46
5	75	37
6	91.66	23

Source: Authors Calculations

These Garrett’s values have been used to find out the mean score of the rank given by the respondents to each of the factors. The mean score has been calculated using the following formula:

$$\text{Average Score} = \text{Frequency Rank} * \text{Garrett Value} / \text{Number of Respondents}$$

Table 4: Mean Scores and Garrett’s Ranking

Factors/Rank	1	2	3	4	5	6	Sum of mean	Garrett ranking
Brand Trust	11.4216	27.3	11.97	6.28666	1.11	0.69	58.7783	2
Price	17.4533	10.92	20.88	5.06	3.39166	0.26833	57.9733	3
Quality	37.2166	9.135	10.35	6.67	1.295	0	64.6666	1
Availability	0	4.41	3.42	7.59	9.92833	9.96666	35.315	5
Brand Image	10.9083	9.03	5.13	15.4866	8.01666	1.53333	50.105	4
Advertisement	0	2.205	2.25	4.90666	13.2583	10.5416	33.161	6

Source: Author’s Calculations

The above table depicts the ranking of various factors considered in the study. As revealed in the above table, respondents were given rank 1 in quality among all the factors considered in the study. This result shows that the respondents prefer a particular brand and prioritize one that offers them quality gluten-free products. The results further reveal that respondents prefer to buy gluten-free products from that brand, which they have built trust in. The above table reveals that brand trust is second most crucial factor in giving preference to the brand. Price is ranked 3rd among the factors studied in the research. This reveals that if the respondents believe that a brand offered them gluten-free products at a justified price, they prefer that brand. Brand image, availability and

product advertisement were ranked 4th, 5th and 6th consecutively. This reveals that respondents preferred the brand that offered them superior quality. At the same time, advertisement was considered the least important factor for brand preference among the different factors taken under the study.

VI. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

- A. Quality** ranks as the top factor (mean score: 64.67), indicating it is the primary determinant in brand preference among respondents. This aligns with the frequent high ratings in Table 1.
- B. Brand Trust** ranks second (mean score: 58.78), reinforcing its importance as a major factor in brand loyalty and preference.
- C. Price** holds the third rank (mean score: 57.97), reflecting its significance, though slightly less critical than Quality and Brand Trust.
- D. Brand Image** is fourth (mean score: 50.11), suggesting some impact on consumer perception but not as strong as core attributes like Quality and Trust.
- E. Availability** ranks fifth (mean score: 35.32), implying that while access is essential, it is less crucial than intrinsic brand qualities.
- F. Advertisement** ranks last (mean score: 33.16), indicating that advertising alone is less influential in shaping brand preference among these respondents.

VII. SUGGESTIONS

- A. Invest in Product Quality:** Brands should prioritize quality improvements, as it is the top-ranked factor. Quality assurance can lead to repeat purchases, positive word-of-mouth, and strong customer loyalty.
- B. Foster Brand Trust:** Building and maintaining trust is essential. Brands can achieve this by ensuring consistency in their offerings, providing transparent communication, and delivering on promises. Trust is the foundation of brand loyalty and substantially impacts customer retention.
- C. Competitive Pricing Strategy:** While price ranks slightly lower, it remains a critical factor in purchasing decisions. Brands can benefit from adopting a competitive pricing strategy, especially in highly commoditized markets where consumers may weigh costs heavily.

- D. Enhance Brand Image Creatively:** Brand image, though not as influential as quality or trust, shapes consumer perceptions. Innovative branding and a strong brand story can enhance the brand's appeal, making it memorable and relatable.
- E. Focused Advertisement Approach:** Given that Advertisement ranks the lowest, brands should utilize advertising strategically. Rather than focusing on high advertisement volumes, brands may benefit from content that highlights product quality and reliability, aligning with the factors consumers prioritize.
- F. Ensure Availability in Target Markets:** While not critical in decision-making, ensuring consistent product availability across key markets prevents potential dissatisfaction and reinforces brand reliability.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The Garrett Ranking analysis reveals a clear hierarchy of factors influencing brand preference, with Quality and Brand Trust as primary considerations. This data underscores the importance of intrinsic product qualities and trust in shaping consumer loyalty. The relatively lower influence of Advertisement and Availability suggests that while these factors support brand awareness, they are insufficient in building enduring customer relationships. Brand managers can leverage these insights to allocate resources effectively, focusing on enhancing product quality and nurturing trust to meet consumer expectations. This strategic emphasis on high-impact factors will likely yield long-term customer loyalty and positive brand perception.

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