

# Competitive Positioning of Organised Apparel Retail Stores: A Critical Review and Proposed Research Framework

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## ABSTRACT

*Store positioning has become a concern for the organized apparel retail stores in view of growing competition in the retail sector particularly in view of grant of permission for Foreign Direct Investment in India. The determination of true positioning from consumer perspective through an objective analysis has become quite indispensable if the strategic growth of a retail store is needed. This paper makes an attempt to review existing literature regarding competitive positioning of apparel retail stores and work out a mechanism to study the subject through proper alignment of all the factors which have hitherto almost remained non-aligned in the absence of a proper measuring instrument. By examining competitive positioning in a broad and integrated way, three conceptual dimensions have been identified viz, Store attributes; Apparel attributes; & Individual psychological characteristics. These factors have been integrated to develop a framework for objective and comprehensive analysis of competitive positioning of apparel retail stores. This paper provides a new and added perspective, rather than substitutes for the various constructs of earlier research on the subject.*

**Keywords:** *Competitive, Positioning, Retail stores, Apparels.*

## Introduction

### *Positioning*

Positioning refers to how customers think about proposed and present stores in the market (Perreault & McCarthy, 1999). It is what you do to the mind of the prospective customer (Ries and Trout, 1986). In today's highly competitive marketing environment, positioning has become an integral element of marketing (Hooley, Broderick & Moller, 1998; Kotler, P., 2000; Ries & Trout, 1986; Trout, 1996). Currently, it has become essential to the companies (Blankson & Kalafatis, 2001) due to rise in competition. The target market and perceived differentiation from competitors are prerequisites to successful positioning.

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### ***Positioning Concept in Retailing***

Positioning in retail refers to strategy for development of a desirable image, which would help to differentiate a retailer and move away from direct price competition. Retailing activities have strong specifics, which make them different both from manufacturing companies and service providers. Nevertheless, the concept of positioning starts to be considered as a central concept of the competitive strategy of a retail company (Birtwistle, Clarke, Freathy, 1998). Through positioning a retailer differentiates itself from its competitors and reveals its strength and advantages. In case of clearer and more significant differentiation, shoppers are less willing to switch to other retailers as substitutes. As a result of favourable positioning the retailers can increase their market share and retain existing customers. Initially price was considered the competitive weapon but with time retailer came to know that price alone represents a no-win situation in the long term it needs to position itself in both store service as well as product attributes to make itself sustainable in this stiff competition. Competitive position is essential for retailers to compete with other players in the market to occupy specific market niche and decrease direct pressure of competition.

Position is achieved through development of retailer image. Image in retailing refers to how a retailer is perceived by shoppers. In other words, image is an overall impression about a retailer as it is perceived by shoppers. In earlier studies it was found that importance of image attributes differ in different retail sectors and it depends on factors like store type, product type, customer characteristics & study time.

### **Rationale of the Study**

In times of increasing competition at national and international levels, the large retail business houses have to understand their positioning so as to formulate policies to fortify their strengths and improve upon their deficiencies to capture a good market share and show their existence on ground. This is possible only through an objective study not their standing in the market and the image they have developed in the minds of customers. For this purpose development of a holistic model is required by inclusion and convergence of all the related variables which the present paper has attempted to do. The framework will be useful for managers of retail stores who manage the store activities as well as those who want to set up new stores. It would be of use to consultants who advise retailers on operation of old stores and also establishment of new stores. It would be of use to researchers and academics in business sciences as it would provide an alternate way to conceptualize and analyze the management of the new and established stores.

### **Objectives**

1. Contribute to the emerging literature on competitive positioning in examining and defining the key perceived values which from the concept of competitive positioning.

2. Interpret and expand existing models in order to develop a specific apparel store positioning framework.
3. To help researchers, marketers to understand the competitive positioning after proper alignment of factors.
4. Stimulate further research on competitive store positioning.

### Conceptual Framework

Conceptual framework includes store attributes, apparel attributes and individual (psychological) characteristics in order to understand store positioning from practical perspective.

Different criterions have varied importance in every consumer's mind. Researchers have identified several product attributes; store attributes and individual psychological differences criteria that are critical for consumers in store selection. All these can be summarized under (a) apparel attributes i.e. /intrinsic (inherent to the product) and (b) store attributes i.e. extrinsic categories. Apparel (product) attributes are those that cannot be changed without altering the physical characteristics of the apparels, while store/extrinsic ones are those that are exerted by manufacturers or retailers and do not form the component parts of the apparels. Intrinsic i.e. apparels and extrinsic i.e. store attributes are integral and key factors of competitive store positioning (Olson and Jacoby 1972). Therefore, it is imperative for retailers to identify consumers' point of view with respect to tangible factors like apparels as well as intangible factors like In store mobility, convenience, sales personnel service etc. which have an impact on consumer (Gagliano & Hathcote, 1994; Naylor & Frank, 2000; Sheinin & Wagner, 2003; Shaw & Haynes, 2004). Consumer select the store with respect to intrinsic and extrinsic attributes are associated with desired benefits of clothing alternatives (Davis, 1985, Hatch and Roberts, 1985, Eckman et al, 1990, Hawkins et al., 1995, Forney et al., 1999).

Shoppers' decision may vary or come out to be dissimilar under the influence of environmental characteristics, shoppers' individual characteristics, store attributes, apparel attributes. In the extant available literature, most researchers have suggested that several store and apparel attributes affect store image. Store and apparel attributes dimensions used in the study were developed on the basis of (a) *Field survey*; (b) *expert opinions* and (c) *literature review* of widely cited studies on apparel store attributes This paper provides the overview of store service (extrinsic) attributes and product (Intrinsic) attributes.

#### (i) Store Service Attributes (Extrinsic)

Earlier, consumers mainly focused on product functions or attributes to opt for a shopping place. Nowadays, consumers ask for added beneficial elements to select retail outlets for their purchases. A pleasant atmosphere of the retail chain outlets is one of those elements which are extremely desired. The role of store atmosphere in the success of retail outlet cannot be neglected (Turley & Milliman, 2000) Extrinsic

(store) attributes are executed by retailers. It does not form the component part of the physical product like apparels. 'Store attributes' refers to those grouped under store layout, ambience, sales personal interaction and promotional offers etc. *Schiffman et al. (1977)* used convenience of store location, best price and/or deals, guarantee/warranty policies, salesmen expertise, and variety of merchandise in their research. Respondents were studied on each attribute and findings indicated that expert salesmen and the assortment of brands are important, while, retail stores were more concerned with store location and warranty policies. *Lee et al. (2005)* indicates that the customers were more concerned with quality of merchandise, ease of the shopping process, cleanliness of the store and post-transaction satisfaction. *Lindquist, (1974-75)* identified attributes are merchandise, service, clientele, physical facilities, convenience, promotion, store atmosphere, and post-transaction satisfaction). Shoppers select specific stores based on proximity, in-store shopping convenience, and wide selection of merchandise (*Michman, 1991*). Apparel shopping store attributes such as parking, lighting, ambient factors, design factors, and sales personnel characteristics were adopted from Shim, Soyeon, and Kotsiopulos (1992), Grewal (1992), Wakefield and Baker (1998), Pauline and Geistfeld (2003), Heitmeyer and Kind (2004) and so on. Furthermore, the other store attribute items were drawn from Manolis et.al. (1994); Dabholkar, Thorpe and Rentz (1996); Oppewal & Timmermans (1997); Sinha, Banerjee and Uniyal (2002); Morschett et. al. (2005); Yoo and Chang (2005) etc. The main factors on the basis of which store positioning has been studied & analysed the factor are discussed below.

**Store layout & ambiances** - It encompasses of all those things that a customer can see or touch (Kurtz and Clow, 1998). Retail literature suggests that store layout & ambiances is important to retail customers (Baker et al. 1994); as was supported by the findings of in-depth interviews. Store layout and physical aspect have been often cited as key drivers for retail service quality experience (Gutman & Alden, 1985; Hummel & Savitt, 1988; Mazursky & Jacoby, 1985; Oliver, 1981). This dimension has a broader meaning than the SERVQUAL (Parasuraman et al. 1988) tangible dimension. The layout & ambience factor refers to the internal atmospherics; easiness for customers to locate what they need; amusement to shoppers by playing soft music; pleasing & soothing interior decoration; adequate lighting, proper ventilation; visually appealing facilities; attractive and clutter free areas. This factor does not have any sub-factor.

**Sales personal service (interaction)** - The interaction with customers through sales personnel is central to consumer-focused communication (Knee, 2002). This factor essentially captures the service offered by store service personnel. It plays an important role in building interpersonal relationships, social interaction and social cues with customers. Sales personnel service is a crucial factor of a store (Nhat and Hau, 2007) & it is the personal interaction of staff-customer that makes differences in the 'shopping experience' between retail outlets (Gomez, Miguel et, al, 2004; Newman & Patel, 2004).

For this study predicts items as: store gives customers individual attention; sales personnel are consistently courteous, well informed, helpful & friendly; sales personnel of this store have expertise/excellence in customer service; employees respond to customer's request; employees are capable to answer customer's queries to their satisfaction; employees treat customers courteously on the telephone. These items (statements) are very closely related and capture how the shoppers are treated by the employees of the store.

**Promotional offers and discounts-** Promotional offers are a precondition of store recognition and enhancement, which influence sales (Ratnatunga & Ewing, 2005). A study on branded men's wear was conducted and identified that advertising & promotions has maximum impact in creating awareness to shoppers in their mind while shopping (Narang, R., 2006). It makes significant impact in retailer's choice (Kumar and Steenkamp, 2007). The goal of promotion is to build a stronger store image and increase sales through the influence of consumers. The promotions factor is therefore a significant tool in the store service attributes because of its proximity to consumers and its direct influence on consumer behavior. This study includes demonstrations of new apparels; extensive, informative & credible advertisements; gift vouchers & loyalty cards offered to existing customers; discount on bulk buying; special offers/ discounts on special occasions under the factor i.e. promotional offers & discounts.

**Auxiliary (supportive) service** - This factor was identified after qualitative research and captures aspects of store service quality. This factor has not been used in many previous studies on store service attribute. The factor refers to *Auxiliary (supportive) services*, which are provided by the store to benefit its customers. However, effects of such allied services on overall service quality or satisfactions have been explored by Dabholkar et al. (1996) under the factor Store Policy. Researchers give a much broader scope and meaning for the allied services and calls it 'supporting services' as it includes all the extra services which the store extends to satisfy its customers. The supporting services include acceptance of all credit/debit cards, facility for keeping personal belongings, availability of baskets & trolleys, alteration facilities, safe drinking water and washroom facilities for its customers etc.

**Convenience facilities** -The following items come under this factor: Store provides plenty of space for parking; convenient operating hours (Hyllegard et al, 2005); display of price tags on every apparel; several changing (trial) rooms in store; remains open on selected holidays; easiness of extensive purchase due to availability of multiple brands.

**Problem solving-** This factor involves interaction between the customer and the employees although it is specifically related to the handling and solving customers' problems and therefore emerge as a separate factor. It addresses items as suitable and customer friendly sales return policy: handling customer complaints in prompt and effective manners, allows exchange of apparels within a stipulated time period, employees show a sincere interest in solving it, appreciates feedback from customers.

The ease of returning and exchanging merchandise is very important to retail customers (Mazursky & Jacoby, 1985). Service recovery is recognized as a critical part of good service (Kelley and Davis, 1994).

**Reliability-** This is related to the consistency of performance and dependability (Grönroos, 1983). This factor includes a number of items and other variations similar to the RSQS reliability dimension. Customers view reliability as a combination of keeping promises, availability of merchandise, error free transactions. (Dabholkar, Thorpe and Rentz, 1996). Literature revealed that keeping up promises in the store to do something by a certain time; error-free and reliable billing system, right service at the first time, psychological comfort to customers in their transactions & availability of merchandise are significant to determine reliability.

### ***(ii) Apparel (Merchandise) attributes / Intrinsic***

Intrinsic characteristics refer to the style, fabric, quality, size/fit, color, brand name etc. of the apparels. It cannot be manipulated without changing the products' physical characteristics (Eckman et al, 1990). The widely regarded items of apparels attributes included in the study are stitching, fitting, choice of colour, design, fashionable, status symbol, eco-friendly, wide price ranges, durability and fabric quality. Beaudion, Moore, and Goldsmith (1998) include attributes are good fit, durability, ease of care, good price, comfort, quality, choice of colour, attractiveness, fashionableness, brand name, appropriateness for occasion, and choice of styles.

Other items of apparel attributes were drawn from previous studies such as McLean, Roper, & Smothers 1986; Cassill & Drake (1987); Eckman, Damhorst, & Kadolph, (1990); Workman (1990); Forsythe (1991). It is also identified from the literature that earlier researchers have been less investigative towards all apparel attributes.

**Exotic appearance and appeal of apparels -** Appearance is comprised of observable and compositional attributes and it includes fit, style, fabric, color/texture and pattern (Abraham, Murali & Littrell, 1995; Zhang et al., 2002). For this study choice of colors, latest design, status symbol, trendy & fashionable items were included under this factor. These items were revealed on the basis of previous literature and depth interview with retailers and experts.

**Functionality & physical comfort of apparels -** Previous research found eight attributes- warmth, permeability, fabric softness, fabric thickness, fiber content, easy care, durability, and comfort within the functionality attribute factor (Zhang et al., 2002). The main focus of the functionality factor was physical comfort of the apparel for the consumer. Researchers predicts that items under functionality & physical comfort factor are branded apparels (Brand name), eco-friendly (organic clothing), wide price ranges, durability and availability of all sizes.

**Aesthetics -** Quality and aesthetics have been included in the previous attribute literature (Fiore & Damhorst, 1992; Abraham-Murali & Littrell, 1995). The factor

consists of attributes related to the beauty (surface) and overall quality of the apparels (Fiore & Damhorst, 1992; Abraham-Murali & Littrell, 1995). Shoppers are buying branded ready-to-wear because of quality and status symbol (Lalitha, A. Ravikumar, J. & Padmavalli, K., 2008). The physical performance of apparel is important to consumers while shopping (Abraham-Murali & Littrell, 1995).

Previous literature has grouped fabric, fiber content, fabric quality, warranty, fit, color, care, workmanship and overall garment as important determinants of quality (Abraham-Murali & Littrell, 1995; Beaudoin, Moore, & Goldsmith, 1998). It is also found that previous research does not adequately explore visual fashion apparel attributes beyond the appearance factor. Furthermore, Abraham-Murali and Littrell (1995) stated four apparel factors. These are physical appearance, physical performance, expressive, and extrinsic. Besides this, another four factors stated by Zhang et al. (2002) are function, appearance, symbolism, and price. Factors that represent apparel attributes are:

### *(iii) Consumers' Psychological Individual Characteristics*

Individual differences stand for the variations or deviations among individuals in regard to a single characteristic or a number of characteristics. Consumers' psychological aspects (i.e. individual characteristics) include personal values, lifestyles, fashion involvement (Kahle, 1983; Omar, 1999, Schiffman et al., 2001). These differ from consumer to consumer and also have an effect on apparel buying behavior.

**Personal values** - Personal values are defined by philosophers as a link between subject and the object i.e. products; as well as subject's understanding abstract ideas i.e. wisdom, truth & courage (Alicke, 1983). Personal values are widely recognized in the literature as a factor influencing and motivating consumer behavior. These values organize the perception of an individual's system to regulate his or her behavior and set meaningful position. An individual pursues several personal values instead of only one, and the importance of these values is not necessarily equal. Further, all personal values were not found to be tapped for every purchasing situation. Consumers' deep rooted personal values act as a useful tool in explaining why consumers differently evaluate product and buy one product over another (Vinson et al. 1977). Two main kinds of personal values, including *terminal and instrumental values*, have been recognized by philosophers.

*Terminal values* represent an individual's general beliefs concerning the desirable end-states of existence like self concept, security, warm relationship, sense of accomplishment, self-fulfillment, sense of belonging, being well-respected, fun & enjoyment in life and excitement (Kahle, 1983).

While *instrumental values* influence consumers, they comprises of moral and competency values dealing with desirable modes of conduct that can lead to the terminal values of an individual. It includes functional value, conditional value, social value, emotional value & epistemic value (Sheth et al, 1991).

**Lifestyle** - Consumers' lifestyle, (psychographic characteristics) determines how the consumer spends his/her time and money and it is influenced by individual's norms, values and roles. Lifestyle focuses on actions within a social context. Psychographics measurement is a composite of an individual's activities, interests and opinions, while lifestyle entails this and more (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2007) and it also influences consumers' acquisitions, consumption and disposition activities in daily life. AIO (Activities, Interests and Opinions) approach measured, consumers' activities in terms of how they spend their time, their interests in terms of what they place importance on in their surroundings, their opinions in terms of their view of themselves and their world and their basic demographic characteristics (Plummer 1974). Fashion lifestyle includes variety, frequency, organization, fashion priority, time frame and initiative.

**Fashion involvement** - This factor involves mainly interest, pleasure, sign, risk importance and risk probability (Kapferer and Laurent, 1985 and Mittal and Lee, 1989). Kopp et al (1989) & Fairhurst et al., (1989) identified fashion consciousness, fashion innovativeness, fashion importance and pleasure construct among consumers in their research. Evidence supports the statement that fashion-involved consumers would demonstrate interest, pleasure and eagerness toward clothing products (Goldsmith, 1991). Consumers with high fashion involvement were identified as more likely to purchase more clothes than were consumers with low involvement. Fashion involvement is used primarily to predict behavioral variables related to apparel products such as product involvement, buying behavior, and consumer characteristics (Browne and Kaldenberg, 1997; Flynn and Goldsmith, 1993). Therefore, different types of consumer's involvements like product involvement, purchase decision involvement and apparel advertising & pleasure involvement are included in the fashion involvement investigation (O'Cass, 2000).

#### ***(iv) Retail Store Positioning***

Store positioning stands for an individual's attachment to the specific store. The concept of store positioning was first proposed by Henry Ford in 1922. Further, concept of retail store image became of interest when Martineau (1958, p.55) described the "...personality of the retail store". Store image is the communication to shoppers in order to manipulate consumer perceptions of reality (Ries and Trout, 1989). Evaluation of retailer's offering to shoppers is defined by Martineau (1958) as "*store image*".

Without a well-defined positioning paradigm, it is hard for a product or a company to serve its intended purpose and survive in today's competitive market place (Gursoy et al., 2005). For this, Positioning is one of the powerful tools and also the most difficult decisions (Gursoy et al., 2005) in this competitive environment. Store positioning is not confined to tangible products as it can relate to other intangibles to build a sustainable competitive advantage in the mind of shoppers. Store positioning components are target shoppers, subset of identifying/value propositions, create advantage, and actively communicate (Aaker, 1996). Operational

efficiency and effective marketing are two key factors of positioning for survival and competitiveness of apparel stores. Thus, positioning depends on retailer's competitive advantage(s) from competitors, needs and wants of target market & current perceptions of the shoppers.

Stores must firstly understand their occupied position and then, if needed, attempt to amend that position according to the perspective to shoppers. Store positioning was recognized as a critically important and influential component of corporate strategy. Store's positioning communicated through the marketing mix and disseminated through the marketing communications mix. Each of the marketing mix elements like product, price, place and promotion add up to the positioning required (Hooley, Saunders and Piercy, 2004). Understanding the various attributes involved in positioning a store will help retail brand builders take a holistic view of positioning.

Retailers cannot offer a high-quality product at a low price, as these elements do not align equally with the designed (framed) position. When elements of the marketing mix do not pull in the same direction, but rather contradict one another, the result will be confused positioning. To develop an effective position, retailer must determine the current positions of competitors (Gilligan and Wilson, 2003) that how well they are positioned in the marketplace, consistency across the various dimensions to give shoppers a consistent image (position) of the store.

The positioning concept became more critical for apparel retail stores due to intensifying competition. Thus, it has become more important for apparel stores to differentiate their store service & products i.e. apparels in the most meaningful way. This differentiation can be achieved through positioning. Retailers tried to position in the mind of the consumer through eight different areas: advertising, location, exterior design, signs, words-of-mouth, previous visits, approach, and display windows. Positioning leads to a perception of the store's products and services as being superior to and distinct from those of its competitor in the mind of target consumers. The apparel stores, which have well positioning in the shopper's mind, have a better chance of survival in this competitive environment. Positioning provides the reason to shoppers for buying a store's service or apparel and helps shoppers to see why one retailer's services are different from the other. Every retail store enjoys a "Position" in the minds of its customer whether such positioning is a deliberate and planned effort or not. The advantage of well thought out and customer focused positioning has been well established.

### **Research Gaps and Contribution**

Shopper decision to purchase from a particular store is mainly affected by factors like cultural/environmental factors (culture, sub-culture, social class, groups); social factors (family, roles, age and lifecycle stage); personal/individual factors (occupation, economic situation, motivation, personal values, lifestyle characteristics, fashion involvement); psychological factors (perception, learning, product, price) and marketing mix (promotion, placement). Existing studies have used financial

measures, and brand evaluation measures (e.g. attribute evaluation etc.) to capture the outcomes of positioning (Carpenter, Glazer, and Nakamoto 1994; Dubè and Schmitt 1999; Pechmann and Ratneshwar 1991). In addition, other researchers such as Eris (1974) include personal factors & social factors; Cross & Peterson (1987) includes social factors & physical factors; Dibb et al (1991) comprised of personal factors, social factors, physical factors; zikmond and Amico (1993) amalgamate social factors, environment factors, individual factors; McCarthy and Perreault (1993) merge physical factors, social factors; Keegam (1995) combined social factors, cultural factors, economic factors, geographic factors; Lancaster and Reynold (1998) consist of physical factors, social factors, cultural factors, personal factors; Pride and Ferrell (2000) includes social factors, physical factors, attitudinal factors in their research. In this connection, the scope of earlier studies was narrow (Areni & Kim, 1994; Bitner, 1992). Hence an attempt was made to broad base the scope and adopts a holistic approach for converging all the related factors for objective study.

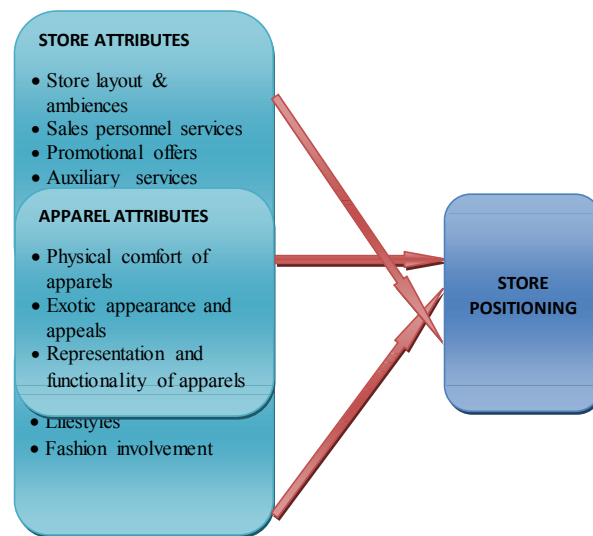
Further, multi-brand retailers' position with respect to store attributes, apparel attributes & individual characteristics is yet to be analyzed especially in organized apparel retail stores; alignment of all these three factors is still not explored so far. Several researchers have identified the effect of attributes (store and product) on the behavior of consumers, but still empirical research is limited. The review of literature therefore, reveals that the researchers mostly have considered personal and social factors to determine the positioning and only a limited work has been done to account for the store attributes. Besides, the researchers have not aligned product attributes, store attributes and individuals' psychological differences which the present authors feel are very inalienable to determine the positioning of multiband retail stores through a comprehensive, reliable and valid scientific enquiry.

### **The Proposed Research Framework**

Research framework is developed & it addresses the research gaps identified from the literature review. A shopper's decision to visit a store is based on numerous influencing factors. Among all the influencing factors individual characteristics, store attributes and apparel attributes were judged as the best determinants of positioning (Dabholkar et al 1996). The three independent factors of the study are individual (psychological) characteristics, store attributes and apparel attributes. Dependent factor is store positioning.

The rationale behind the study was to provide an introduction to the development of a theoretical model and to provide a clear understanding of the relational determinants of store positioning. The study is intended for application of research in the field of store positing in a systematic and scientific manner so that valid inferences can be drawn to help marketers to devise strategies for enhancing the brand positioning of their stores in the competitive market. The model has been devised to help the academicians in conducting studies on brand positioning of apparel retail stores through holistic measures for real generation of knowledge

in the field. The proposed theoretical model presented in figure 1 is empirically tested by using all attributes specific to product, store and individual differences. The hypothesized framework relationships among the constructs are summarized in figure 1.



**Figure 1: Proposed Research Framework**

### Limitation and Scope for Future Research

The study is limited and has not taken into account some factors like economic, social, cultural, environment etc which have a bearing on customer behaviour. There is a scope to study the influence of other factors on store positioning. Researchers need to check if the framework works in other context. Studies may be conducted also to ascertain in other type of organised retail stores.

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