

STORE IMAGE AND STORE CHOICE DECISION: AN INVESTIGATION OF CONSUMERS' SHOPPING BEHAVIOR IN MALAYSIA

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INTRODUCTION

The retail sector in Malaysia has been experiencing tremendous changes since the 1950's except for the survival of wet market (a traditional market comprising of small family-run stalls), conventional Mom-and-Pop shops, and the night bazaars (mobile independent retailers) which uniquely co-exist in the retailing environment (Zain & Rejab, 1989). Supermarkets and departmental stores has gradually become a common form of retail outlet even though they have encountered a series of closures mainly due to the competitive environment. In the early 1980's, there was a sudden influx of retail outlets and in a recent account there was about seven million sq.ft. of retail space in Malaysia. It is expected that this will increase to 27 million sq.ft. in the next three years (New Straits Times, 1995).

The field of retailing has sparked extensive empirical investigation on retail image over the past three decades. Articles in business and academic literature have commented on various issues such as retail image attributes, underlying consequences, implications and future developments. However, retail image study has been primarily a concern of large retailers in the United States and Europe where retailing structures are quite advanced. This is in contrast with the other parts of the world, particularly developing countries. In this region, the market place comprised o smaller retail outlets and various consumers representing different cultural groups. It is therefore important to examine the underlying process of store image and shopping behavior in those developing countries as well.

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The study's purpose is to examine the factors that are salient to store image in determining the choice of retail outlets. This investigation is aimed at shedding some explanation on the image attributes of store, which influence shopping behavior of consumers in Malaysia.

Background of the Study

Most of the discussion on consumer behavior revolves around brand choice and product choice of different segments of consumers. Nevertheless, consumer behavior also involves store choice. In fact, for some product categories the choice of a store may be more important to the consumer than the choice of a brand and may involve a more complex set of decision criteria. Consumers frequently shop from store to store for a variety of products, and the motives for shopping may be quite distinct from the motives for buying a particular product. Thus the emphasis on in-store marketing communications (package, display, coupons, price and salesperson) are essential as we can notice that a large number of purchases in unplanned and made solely on impulse (Kollat & Willet 1967; Rook & Fisher, 1995).

The importance of store selection and the impact of in-store stimuli on consumers are best reflected in the strategy of major retailers. For example, greater affluence and time constraints of dual-earning households have led many consumers to put more emphasis on variety and value. Consumers go through a process of complex decision making in selecting stores and they may endure store loyalty. The principles of low involvement decision making of product or brands apply equally well to stores (Spiggle and Sewall, 1987). Consumers may select a store simply because it is not worth the time or effort to shop around. In such cases, stores may be selected for their location. The strategic implications of these differing store decision processes parallel those for brands: use frequent advertising as a reminder for low involvement store selection; use image-oriented advertising for high involvement store selection.

Consumers' store choice can be looked from demographic, lifestyle, and personality attributes which led to the development of certain shopping and purchasing needs. These needs establish certain priorities in evaluating store alternatives, which will form the basis for store image. The closer the store's image is to consumer's need, the greater is the likelihood that consumer will shop in the store. Once the store is selected, the consumer evaluates the in-store stimuli such as product assortment, prices, displays, and so on. If the consumer is satisfied with the store environment and products purchased within the store, a positive image of the store is reinforced and leads to the likelihood of a second visit. Therefore, it is important for retailers to determine consumer imagery or perception of a store. Measurements of store image will assist retailers in determining their competitive strengths and weaknesses.

Store Image

Consumers have a number of enduring perceptions, or images, in their evaluations of retail outlets. Retail stores provide the environment, merchandise, and services that they feel reflect the store's image as well as the consumer's self-image. Consumers tend to shop in stores that have images consistent with their own self-image. Major department stores and supermarkets have begun to focus on the need to build a strong store image for their outlets. They recognize the importance of building an identity to attract loyal customers. Instead of focusing on price promotions, they are increasingly stressing customer service and the provision of "a pleasant shopping experience." (Fahey, 1990)

Compared to manufacturing firms, retailers faced several unique problems in positioning and promoting their offerings. These include store attributes and the importance of store environment. Because these attributes are intangible, image has become a key factor in differentiating their service from that of the competition. Thus, the marketing objective is to enable the consumer to link a specific image with a specific brand name or location.

The term "image" is currently used in a variety of contexts: corporate image, brand image, public image, self-image, store image, and so on. As a whole, an image can be defined as "the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a person has of an object." (Kotler & Clarke, 1987). The process of choosing a specific store is a function of consumer personality and store characteristics. Consumers in each market segment form images of various stores based on their perceptions of the attributes they consider important. This overall perception is known as **store image**. This concept has been defined in various perspectives (Lindquist 1975; Hansen & Deutscher 1978, Hirschman, 1981). Perhaps the classic definition of store image was from Martineau's idea of store personality as "the way in which a store is defined in the shopper's mind, partly by its functional qualities and partly by an aura of psychological attributes." (Martineau 1958). Modern conceptualizations of store image include the definition by Mazursky & Jacoby (1986): "... a cognition and/or effect (or a set of cognition's and/or effects) which is (are) inferred either from a set of ongoing perceptions and/or memory inputs attaching to a phenomenon (i.e. either an object, or event such as a store or a product, etc.) and which represent(s) what that phenomenon to individual."

For decades the conceptualization of store image has been improvised along the same idea as what was proposed by these researchers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the years, there have been numerous attempts to understand store image. The studies of store image were mainly centered on its relationship to store patronage as well as how store image develops (Mazursky & Jacob, 1986). Extensive research

review of this issue can be found in Lincoln & Samli (1979), Hirschman (1981), Berkowitz, Deutscher & Hansen (1978), Wyckham, Lazer & Crissy (1971) and Pessemier (1980).

Image formation and the mental processes whereby information and experiences are evaluated, result in a predisposition that generally guides patronage (Granbois, 1981). The closer the store's image is to consumer's needs, the more positive the individual's predisposition toward the store and the greater the probability the consumer will shop in the store (Monroe & Guiltinan 1975). Research done by several scholars (cf. Cohen 1966; Axelrod 1968; Tigert, 1983; Woodside & Trappey III, 1992) indicate that customers unaided top-of-mind retrieval of store name in response to a general category question is related to their primary choice of store.

Store image and patronage have been found to be closely related in many instances (Doyle & Fenwick 1974; Arnold, Oum & Tigert, 1983; Kumar & Leone, 1988). In a study by Arnold et al. (1983), location, price, assortment, fast checkout, friendly and courteous service, and pleasant shopping environment were critical determinants of store patronage. The first two determinants, location and price, appeared to dominate the choice process. Tigert (1983) obtained some indication of the substantial influence of attitude-accessibility as a moderator variable between store image and store choice using selected determinants of store image. It was found that location and convenience were the most important determinants, followed by price and courteous services. Similarly, Howard (1989) in his study identified three key dimensions of retail image i.e., convenience of a store's location, price of its product, and the information provided about the products. Additionally, the image of a shopping area was found to be a significant factor affecting shopping trips and expenditure behavior (Wee, 1986) and store loyalty (Sirgy & Samli, 1985).

Store image has also been found to affect perceptions of product quality. Research by Darden & Schwinghammer (1985) suggests that store cues may influence shoppers' quality perceptions of product categories found in store chains. Render & O'Connor (1976) also demonstrated that in some cases, the image of stores relates to the perceived quality of some product categories (see also Andrews & Valenzi 1971; Szybillo & Jacoby 1972; Wheatley & Chiu 1977). Finally, consumer's perception of quality of a store merchandise is found to correlate with store patronage (Jacoby & Mazursky, 1985; Olshavsky, 1985). Perceptions of product quality and preferences of products are closely linked to choice behavior.

In the Malaysian context, Zain & Jabri (1994) examined the influences of store image congruity on loyalty patronage behavior of two clothing stores. They focused on gaps between customers' perceptions, customers' evaluation and management perceptions on patronage loyalty on six dimensions of store attributes, namely fashion trendiness, merchandise selection, credibility, location, interpersonal and

merchandise quality. Loyalty behavior was found to be positively related to the gap between customers expectations and customers' evaluation; between customers' expectations and management's perception of customers' expectations between customers' expectation and management's perceptions of customers' evaluation; and between customers' evaluation and management's perceptions of customers' evaluation. In a later study, also in the apparel retail industry, a significant correlation was found between past purchase behavior and store loyalty (Zain, 1995). This present study will focus on the retail industry in general, particularly the departmental stores, and seeks to address the following questions:

- What store attributes are salient in the patronage behavior of departmental stores?
- Do patronage behavior varies by demographic profiles of the respondents?

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted in the island of Penang, a northern state of Malaysia. Four major departmental stores, namely Super, Suiwah, Gama and Yoahan were chosen for this study on the basis of size, variety of merchandise and relative popularity of these stores among the general public of this northern state of Malaysia.

Sample Selection

Area sampling procedure was used with the assistance of a local financial institution which has a wide area network of 12 branches, strategically located to cover the populated areas of Penang Island. A total of 250 questionnaires were distributed equally through the network of branches. The respondents completed the questionnaires then and there at the bank's premises, or at their own free time at home. Within a two-month period, the questionnaires were collected from the respondents in stages from the "agents" appointed to administer the data collection. A total of 148 responses were received which accounted for 60% return rate. However, after screening only 100 questionnaires were useable for analysis purposes.

About two-thirds of the respondents are females, and 54% are married. The average family income ranged between RM10,000 and RM36,000, while the typical respondent age ranged between 25 and 44 years.

Measures

Store patronage.

Store patronage dimension was measured in two aspects: 1) number of visits to the stores, and 2) percentage of the amount of money spent at the stores.

Importance of Store Attributes.

Unlike previous studies using multiple items to measure store attributes (see for example, Zain & Jabri, 1994), this study uses the Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) approach to measure the relative importance of these attributes in their choice of departmental stores. The AHP methodology is a multi-criteria, decision-making technique developed by Saaty to evaluate complex multi-attribute alternatives (Saaty, 1980). It involves 1) building a hierarchy of criteria, with the choices at the bottom of the hierarchy, 2) evaluating the priorities of the elements at each level of the hierarchy, and 3) synthesizing the priorities to determine the overall priorities of the choices. It has been used to rank, select, evaluate, optimize and predict decision problems from socio-economic planning to conflict analysis (Ong & Chew, 1996). Golden et al. (1989) provides a comprehensive review of this technique and its multitude of applications.

The store attributes considered in this study were location, merchandise, price, physical facilities, promotions and advertising, store atmosphere and service. Questions were formulated to solicit opinions for the pairwise comparative importance of each of the evaluative criteria using a 9-point scale. A typical question would be as follows: "In your choice of departmental stores, which attribute would be more important – Location or Merchandise? How much more important, on a scale of 1 to 9, with 1 being equally important, 3 being moderately more important, 5 being strongly more important, 7 being strongly more important and 9 being extremely more important?". Further the relative "attractiveness" of each store with respect to each criterion attribute was also measured. A typical question would be "Between Suiwah and Super, which is better in terms of merchandise? How much better?". These are then synthesized to generate the relative preference of the four departmental stores.

Analysis

The responses from respondents regarding the relative importance of the various store attributes and the relative attractiveness were first fed into the Expert Choice (EC8) software. In AHP technique, the reliability of the measures is measured by the consistency index. Responses with consistency index of less than 0.1 are considered unreliable and therefore unused in this study. The AHP analysis will generate data for the relative importance of each attribute towards the choice of a particular departmental store, the relative attractiveness of each departmental store on each attribute and the overall preference for each of the four departmental stores. This information will have values ranging from 0 to 1. These were then transferred into SPSS as inputs for the statistical analyses such as test of differences (t-test and analysis of variance) and regression analysis.

ANALYSIS

One-way ANOVA and t-test were performed to examine the profile of consumers pertaining to shopping behavior. In the case of frequency of visits (NP), Table 1(a) presents the achieved significance (p-value) of the test of difference across the demographic profiles, namely marital status, sex, age and income. Significant difference was only found for the age category dimension. In particular, the decision concerning store choice and shopping behavior was significantly different among various age groups of consumers. Other demographic factors do not appear to influence patronage behavior of the respondents.

As to the expenditure dimension (TE), age variable was also found to be significant in differentiating the consumers (Table 1b). Thus, the amount of expenditure consumers spent at various superstores will vary according to age. This finding confirmed the result obtained above (Table 1a) showing that age factor indeed influences the choice of store and patronage pattern.

Table 1(a): Test of Differences: Frequency of visits (NP) and Demographic Profiles (achieved significance)

Store	Marital	Sex	Age	Income
Gama	.141	.456	.019*	.969
Suiwah	.179	.164	.019*	.199
Super Komtar	.134	.789	.019*	.986
Yaohan	.153	.279	.278	.242

*p < 0.05 level

Table 1(b): Test of Difference: Expenditure (TE) and Demographic Profiles (achieved significance)

Store	Marital	Sex	Age	Income
Gama	.705	.148	.000*	.550
Suiwah	.142	.567	.017*	.682
Super Komtar	.718	.109	.118	.785
Yaohan	.202	.235	.028*	.075**

*p < 0.05 level ** p < 0.1 level

In looking at how store evaluative attributes (store image) influence the choice of stores, multiple regression analysis was performed. As tabulated in Table 2(a), the results indicate that for GAMA store, there is a significant relationship between patronage behavior and store image with R^2 value of .282. Specific attributes of location and promotion and advertising are significant indicators for the choice of GAMA store as an outlet to patronize. These are further confirmed with the higher coefficients for location (.431) and promotion attributes (.181). There is also a significant relationship between patronage decision of SUIWAH and its evaluative criteria at .05 level. All the seven attributes accounted for 47 percent variance for

the number of visit dimension ($R^2 = .4723$). Five attributes, namely location, merchandise, price, physical facilities and service are significant in explaining the choice of SUIWAH. Relatively, location was found to have the largest influence (regression coefficient value of .445), followed by service (.298) and merchandise (.237).

With regard to SUPER KOMTAR store, significant relationship was found between the store's image and shopping behavior at .05 level, with the R^2 value of .4431. On the whole, the result suggests a significant relationship and thus, our proposition that store image influences choice behavior, is substantiated. It is pertinent to note that six attributes; location, merchandise, physical facilities, promotion and advertising, store atmosphere and service are the salient attributes in determining the preferential choice of SUPER KOMTAR for the respondents. The coefficient scores reinforced these findings revealing the importance of promotion, service and merchandise.

Similarly, the results revealed a significant relationship for YAOHAN store. In particular, the store choice decision for YAOHAN was significant at .05 level with the R^2 value of .4275. Here also it can be noticed that all the store evaluative criteria, except physical facilities, were instrumental in influencing the frequency of visits to YAOHAN. The coefficient value is highest for merchandise (.310), followed by service (.293) and location (.278).

Table 2 (a): Store Image and Patronage Behavior - Frequency of visits (NP)

Attributes	GAMA		SUIWAH		SUPER KOMTAR		YAOHAN	
	B coefficient	Sig. T	B coefficient	Sig. T	B coefficient	Sig. T	B coefficient	Sig. T
Location	.431	.000*	.445	.000*	.211	.008*	.278	.001*
Merchandise	.096	.322	.237	.003*	.256	.003*	.310	.000*
Price	.123	.198	.186	.020*	.142	.106	.244	.004*
Physical facilities	.127	.218	.205	.028*	.156	.074**	.106	.218
Promotion & Advertising	.181	.056*	.005	.949	.287	.001*	.265	.002*
Store atmosphere	.089	.388	.003	.977	.196	.019*	.172	.044*
Service	.038	.687	.298	.000*	.287	.001*	.293	.001*
R^2	.2821		.4723		.4431		.4275	
Sig. F	.0001		.0000		.0000		.0000	

* $p < 0.05$ level ** $p < 0.10$ level

Table 2(b) presents the findings on the second dependent variable, the amount of expenditure at various superstores. Significant relationships were also found for all stores (GAMA, SUIWAH, SUPER KOMTAR and YAOHAN). Looking at

specific attributes, location was found to be the most salient in influencing store choice, followed by service, merchandise and promotion and advertising.

Table 2(b): Store Image and Patronage Behavior - Expenditure (TE)

Attributes	GAMA		SUIWAH		SUPER KOMTAR		YAOHAN	
	B coefficient	Sig. T	B coefficient	Sig. T	B coefficient	Sig. T	B coefficient	Sig. T
Location	.367	.000*	.553	.000*	.168	.092**	.059	.529
Merchandise	.099	.286	.223	.004*	.139	.170	.382	.000*
Price	.255	.006*	.062	.413	.152	.149	.000	.998
Physical facilities	.110	.266	.090	.312	.051	.622	.034	.726
Promotion & Advertising	.212	.021*	.010	.894	.174	.007	.133	.161
Store atmosphere	.115	.234	.099	.303	.158	.113	.118	.225
Service	.127	.159	.183	.022*	.193	.056**	.174	.069**
R ²	.3292		.4988		.1881		.2359	
Sig. F	.0000		.0000		.0063		.0006	

*p<0.05 level ** p< 0.1 level

Table 3: Store Preference by Attributes Evaluation

Store	Overall Attributes	
	Mean ^a	Std. Dev.
GAMA	.243	.096
SUIWAH	.256	.115
SUPER KOMTAR	.263	.108
YAOHAN	.238	.096
Total	1.000	

^ameasured on AHP derived values between 0 and 1

Finally, Table 3 presents the overall store preference across the store image attributes. Based on pairwise comparison values assigned to the seven attributes (e.g., between price and merchandise), the results show that SUPER KOMTAR store was ranked as the most preferred with highest mean value of 0.263, followed by SUIWAH (0.256), GAMA (0.243) and the least preferred store is YAOHAN (0.238).

CONCLUSION

Although this study does not offer conclusive results, it nevertheless lends support to the general idea that store image has some impact on consumers' store choice and shopping behavior. The results found in this study can be said to affirm those previous conclusion by Tigert (1983), Arnold et al. (1983), Howard (1989), Leone & Kumar (1988).

Our findings revealed some insights on the attributes, which are important to choice decision of superstores and supermarkets. Out of seven attributes of store image, location, merchandise, price and service emerged as the salient attributes, having a better bearing to determine store patronage. At its heart, the findings suggest that location and service have a strong impact on consumers' choice.

These findings are of potential value for marketers. First, we can deduce that when one is planning to set up a retailing business, the critical point to be considered is location of the store. This refers to the proximity of the outlet to the residence of the consumers. It also includes the store's location in relation to eating facilities and the provision of parking area. Retailers that are locate in the wrong street, in the wrong town, or have the insufficient parking spaces often fail. Modern theories may say the importance of service factor which produces customer satisfaction, but it is still location that determines whether a retailer gets a chance to satisfy customers (Berman & Evans, 1992).

Secondly, service factor is critical in ensuring success in retail business. This includes those facilities provided at the store such as convenient self-service facilities, ease of merchandise return and adjustment needed, delivery, credit card payment, fast cashier checkout, case dispensing facilities within the premises, courtesy of employees, genuine assistance rendered by employees, and overall good service. Additionally, time appears to be the major factor that shape reactions to shopping orientation. The aspects related to time are: the time it took to pay for the purchases, the total amount of time spent in a store, and the amount of time needed to pay with credit card. Other efficiencies include having enough open lanes and available cash registers, the quality of signs in the store and ease of finding things, and the knowledge of staff about products' location.

Since the results and ideas presented here are basically exploratory, additional studies are needed to further test the conclusions. In order to secure a clearer picture of store image influence, a broader spectrum of store evaluative criteria should be studied. Researchers should also investigate a more diverse background of shoppers, particularly their cultural characteristics and a bigger sample size in extending the generalizations for the whole Malaysian consumers.

Finally, more research needs to be conducted to explore whether similar store choice correlation's can be observed with other behavioral dimensions. In addition,

the possible linkages between store image and various intervening variables of shopping behavior should be examined to more fully comprehend the concept of store image from the perspectives of retailing and marketing.

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