Retail Store Categorization and Patronage Behavior among Rural Consumers in India

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Key Words
Rural Consumer, Rural India, Store Categorization, Retail Formats.

Abstract
The rural population of India is about 70.2% of the total population. Close to 137,747,384 households reside in more than 0.6 million villages in India. In the last decade spending power of this rural population has been increasing and its attitude and lifestyle have undergone significant alterations. As a result of these transformations, the retail habits and store patronage behavior of the population is also changing. Although retailing in India has traditionally been an unorganized sector, especially in rural markets, that is changing as well. This study focuses on existing retail formats in rural markets in India. The study has two goals: to develop a classification system for these retail formats and then to examine the preferences of segments within the current rural Indian population for the different types of retail formats.

Specifically, the following research questions are addressed:
What are the categories of retail stores available in rural markets?
Are there descriptors that identify segments which vary in preference across the retail store categories identified?

The study helps understanding of the different types of formats existing in the rural markets and the characteristics of segments who patronize the various formats, which can ultimately be helpful to classify the retail stores into different categories for the purpose of systematic study and analysis in the future. This will be extremely helpful to the industry looking at the fast changing preferences of rural consumers and the increasing competition in the retail industry.

Introduction

With the high growth being registered in the retail sector in the developed countries, and the developing countries such as India almost on the verge of a revolution, there is a high research interest in the area. Retail is responsible for delivering the product or the service to the ultimate consumer.

Traditionally the research has focused on the issues of store choice, store patronage and other similar questions from the perspective of urban masses. Some work has been done on household demographic variables (Leszczyc, Sinha, and Timmermans, 2000; Bawa and Ghosh, 1999) and relating them to the shopping behaviour of the household, the trip timing (Kahn and Schmittlein, 1989) and the store choice (Kau and Ehrenberg, 1984). However, as compared to the work on the product and service choices, the work on store choice is quite less and covers few dimensions.

The retail strategy is very important from the manufacturer's point of view and thus the store choice becomes a matter of concern to the manufacturer. In addition with the high growth in the organized retail in the recent times, as well as increasing competition for a retailer the store choice becomes an area of concern. If the urban consumer has an influence in deciding the store choice, the loyalty and the patronage it is very relevant that the perspective of the rural consumer be taken in any future research in these areas.

Objectives

The above discussion reveals that, literature has answered the questions like what to buy and when to buy. However the questions like where to buy and how to buy has as yet not been answered, especially in rural India. As there is very little research in this area, this work is seen as the first step in setting up the outline for further work. It will primarily deal with the question on the classification/categorization of the rural retail stores in answering the question of where to buy. The study is therefore aimed at developing a framework, for exploring the classification variables. It is being conceived as broadly setting the tone for future studies in this direction. It might also be used further to answer the question on how to buy or in other words, how do consumers make store choice of the rural retail store, therefore the two objectives are:

- *What are the categories of retail stores available in rural markets?*
- *Are there descriptors that identify segments which vary in preference across the retail store categories identified?*

Literature survey

Store choice: The study of consumer store-choice or patronage behavior has been an important area of research in retailing for many decades. The decision on the choice of store has been modeled in different ways in the literature. Some of the studies have taken the household as a rational decision making unit, (Goldman and Johansson, 1978; Bawa and Ghosh, 1999). However, the research has also revealed that customers also care about other store attributes in making their patronization decision. Some of the researchers (Bell, Ho and Tang, 2001) have worked on the shoppers perceived utility and the store image in making the store choice. Research also exists on how store environment cues influence consumers' store choice decision criteria, such as perceived merchandise value and shopping experience (Baker, Parasuraman, Grewal, and Voss, 2002). Store choice has also been seen in the context of the risk reduction strategies of the shoppers (Mitchell and Harris, 2005). In addition work on store choice has also been done on the role of situational factors (Wu, Petroshius, and Newell, 2004) and the task-store attribute relationship (Kenhove, Wule, and Waterschoot, 1999). It has also been found to be dependent on the timing of shopping trips, with consumers visiting smaller local store for short "fill-in' trips and larger store for regular shopping trips (Kahn and Schmittlein, 1989). Most of the studies in store choice have however pointed out the primacy of store location (Freymann, 2002) and price (Bell, Ho and Tang, 2001) as the key drivers of store choice. Lastly Bell and Lattin (1998) found a systematic relationship between a household's shopping behavior and store preference, especially in the context of choice of a format (EDLP/Hilo).

Consumers typically shop for multiple items on a given trip rather than a single item; and these items form the shopping basket for the shopper. Shopping basket has been defined as ‘comprising the collection of categories that consumers purchase on a specific shopping trip’ (Manchanda, Ansari and Gupta, 1999). Shopping basket will affect the store choice in various ways such as the size itself will affect the store choice, as shoppers are prepared to go farther to shop for a larger basket than a smaller basket (Bawa and Ghosh, 1999). The contents of the basket will affect the shopper’s perspective of the store and affect the ongoing store choice (Desai and Talukdar, 2003). Overall preference for the store might shift as a function of the composition of the shopping basket (Leszczyc and Timmermans, 1997).

In the literature pertaining to store choice the consumers evaluate a group of stores on a set of attributes and then, depending upon their individual preferences, patronize the best store. It has generally been seen that all the stores in the choice set are in the same formats (Bhatnagara and Ratchford, 2004). This indicates that the first choice for the shopper is that of the format. Since not all the products/services are available in all retail formats, this means that the shopping basket will narrow the scope of the store choice to particular formats. However, since some formats offer overlapping products or services, the choice is also between various formats. These indicate that the first choice for the shopper is that of the format, which depends to a large extent on the shopping basket, but will also depend, on the other format attributes that the shopper would derive from the format.

The choice of the shopping basket will then play a major role in deciding first the format and then the store. The final store will be chosen keeping in mind the store attributes such as location, store image, price image, ambience etc. In certain exceptional circumstances, such as strong loyalty to a store, a particular type of ambience or location, considering the composition of the basket and the availability in the store of the merchandise, the choice might be made directly for the store instead of going through the process of basket-format-store. Therefore this study has been focused on classification or categorization of the rural retail stores and then deals with the store choice based on the consumer demographics.

Retail Classification/Categorization/Formats

The retail format has been discussed in the retailing literature in a variety of contexts: the history of retailing and the evolution of retail formats and innovations (Bucklin, 1983; Jonathan et. al., 2007), retail management and merchandise assortments (Jozefina Simova, Colin M. Clarke-Hill, Terry Robinson, 2003). A distinction is often drawn between the offering and the know-how parts of the format. The first includes the external elements (eg. assortment, shopping-environment, service, location and price) delivering the functional, social, psychological, esthetic and entertainment benefits attracting consumers to stores. The second, the internal part, determines a retailer's operational strength and strategic direction. The drivers of store choice in various product categories, in the context of the evolving retail industry. (Piyush Kumar Sinha, Arindam Banerjee, 2004).

The field of retail distribution is so complex and dynamic that any method used to compile and class its statistics should be reviewed for possible improvement. Retail-store classifications are based on "Establishment" basis and grouped into categories classified according to predetermined structure characteristics (Stephen Brown, 1987).

Present Scenario of Rural Store categorization in India

There has been no significant research for the purpose of classification and categorization of retail stores in rural markets in India. The reason is lack of census data for retail classification, which makes it almost impossible to study the categories of rural stores. This study aims to do some preliminary work to fill the existing gap by exploring current retail stores and their practices in rural markets of western Uttar Pradesh in India.

Therefore the variables which were selected for the purpose of store categorization is based on literature as given above and own observation of the stores in 16 districts (markets). The first factor is ownership, which has four variables; second is construction type, which refers to the external features or aesthetics of the store, it has three variables – pukka (good construction), semi-pukka (not so good construction), and kuchha (temporary construction); third is size of the store, which refers to physical size and has four variables; fourth is type of the product assortment, with one variable food items separated from grocery as it refers to ready-made food items; fifth is brand, which refers to branded or private label and unbranded or commodity items and both for those stores who keep branded as well as commodity items; sixth is location of the store; seventh is category; and eight is price, which is as per the perception of the customer. These eight factors along with its parameters serve as the basis for developing a framework for store classification (Table 1).

Ownership	**Construction type[1]**	**Size**	**Product Assortment**	**Brand**	**Location**	**Category**	**Price**
Self–owned	Pukka	Very small	Grocery	Branded	Independent	General Merchandise	Low
Partnership	Semi pukka	Small	Personal products	Unbranded	Shopping centre	Discount	High
Company owned	Kuchha	Medium	Food items	Both	Strip centre	Specialist	Normal
Government owned		Large	Shoes		Regional business district(RBD)	Category specialist	
Co-operative			Clothes		Central business district(CBD)		
			Durables				
			Electrical				
			Kitchenware				

Table 1: List of Eight Factors and its paramete

The proposed framework in Figure 1 is further expanded on in Figures 1(a) and 1(b) the list of the eight factors along with their variables for the categorization of retail stores in Indian rural markets is as under:

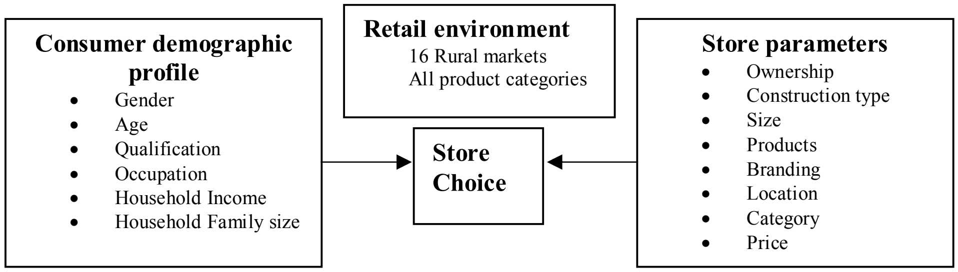

Figure 1: Theoretical framework

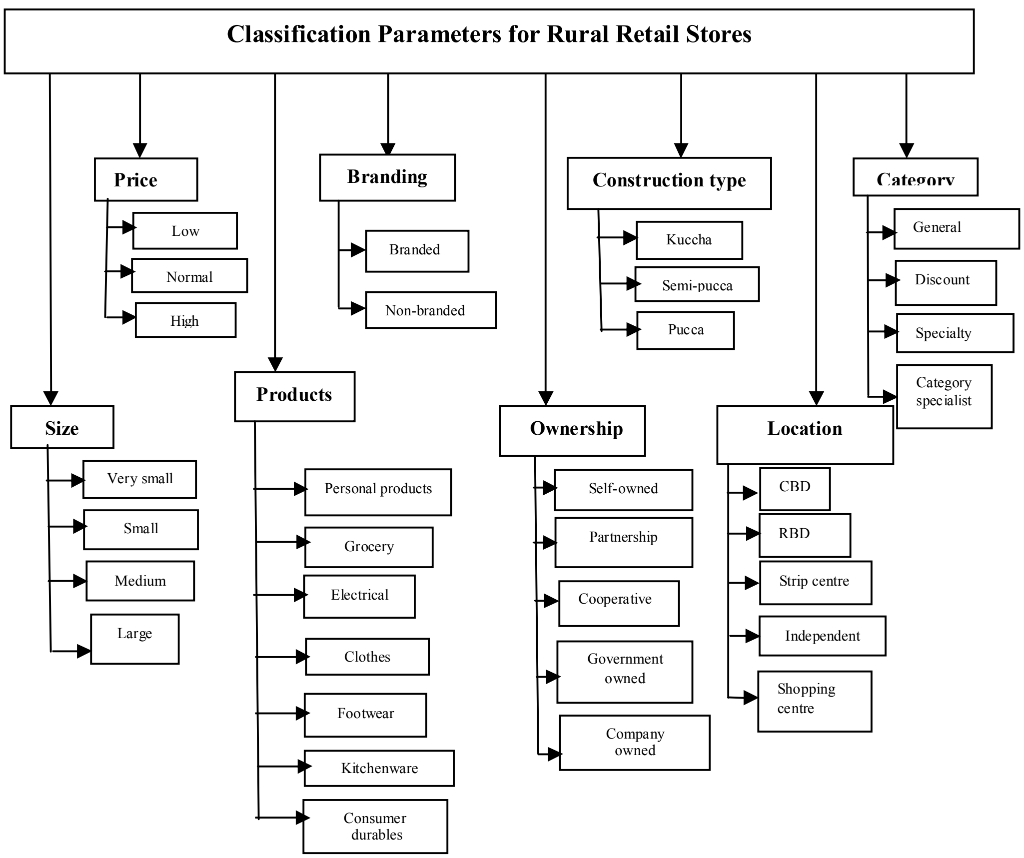

Figure 1(a): Theoretical framework: Classification Parameters

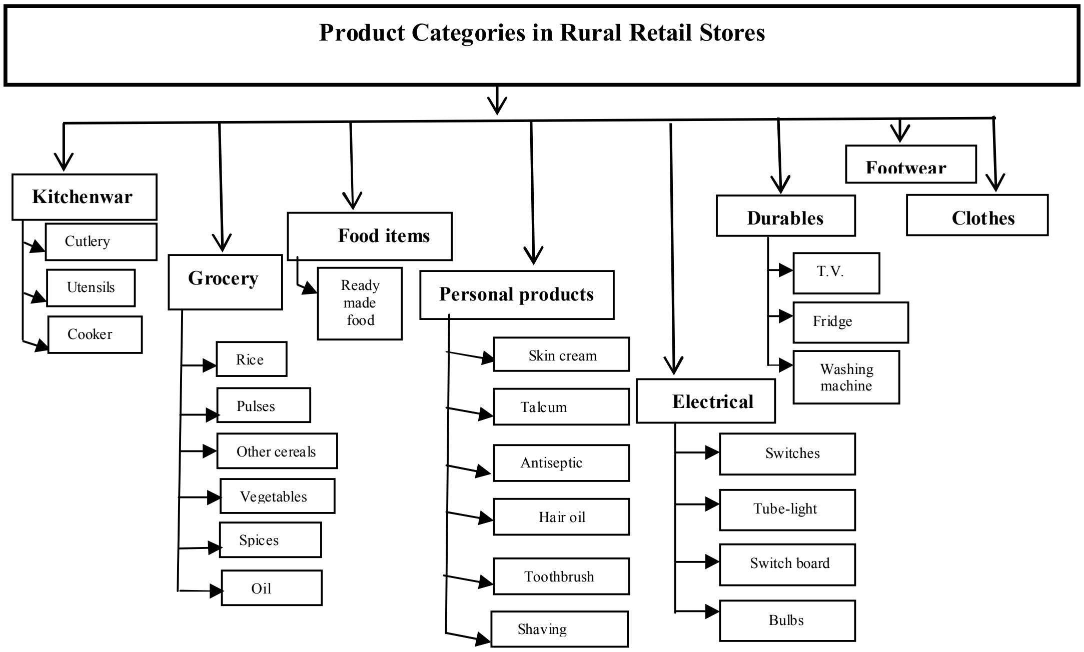

Figure 1(b): Theoretical framework: Product Categories

Methodology

Rural markets from sixteen sub-districts of the western part of the state of Uttar Pradesh in India were studied. A total of 359 retail establishments across the 16 rural markets were surveyed with the help of a template/format. Individual retail outlets were approached along with the template to get the response. A minimum of ten stores from each market were analyzed for categorization. The main market of each district was visited for collection of the responses.

A convenience sample of 160 retail consumers was also gathered from the 16 markets to collect the response on store choice. A structured questionnaire was comprised of closed ended questions. The respondents were asked to rank their top three choices for choosing a store in each of the eight different product categories. They were also asked to identify their frequency of purchase for all of the eight product categories. Finally respondents were asked to identify and rank by importance three of their monthly expenditure categories other than food and housing. A brief demographic profile of the respondent was collected as part of the survey instrument.

Demographic Profile of Respondents

- Gender
  - 67.5% were male, 32.5% were female.
- Age
  - 100% of the respondents were above 18 years of age. The majority of them were in the age category of 27 to 35 yrs. (82.6%).
- Education
  - 40% of the respondents were Bachelor degree holders and 25% were 10+2 & 35% were uneducated.
- Occupation
  - 30% Agriculturalists, 30% Private Service, 22.5% business people.
- Household Income
  - 40% were in the monthly household income group of Rs.7-11000, 12.5% were in Rs. 12-16000 and 10% were more than Rs. 22000.
- Household Size

- Majority (78.8%) is in the bracket of 3-5 family size, and 20% were in the bracket of 6-9 members in one family.

Descriptive statistics like frequency and cross tabulation and correlation were calculated using the statistical software package – SPSS version 11.5 (Tables 2, 3, 4 & 5 under results and findings).

Discussions

Rural Retail Store Categorization: The first objective was to find out the categories of retail stores available in rural markets in India. The framework developed through a literature review and focus group discussions, was tested by conducting survey and observation.

The results showed that, retail stores in rural areas have shown some fundamental characteristics, which are common in all the rural markets surveyed. The prominent characteristics emerged from the data collected are as follows (Table 2):

Ownership	%
Self owned	98.9
Partnership	0.6
Company Owned	0.3
Govt Owned	0.0
Cooperative	0.3
Construction type	
Pukka	71.6
Semi-pakka	11.7
Kuccha	16.7
Size-wise	
Very small	54.3
Small	38.4
Medium	7.0
Large	0.3
Product type	
Grocery	35.3
Food-items	10.7
Personal products	4.5
Shoes	11.3
Clothes	20.7
Durables	1.9
Electrical	10.7
Kitchenware	4.9
Branding	
Branded	12.6
Unbranded	33.7
Both	53.7
Location-wise	
Independent	0.0
Shopping Centre	2.8
CBD (others)	0.0
RBD	0.0
Strip Centre	97.2
Category-wise	
General	40.8
Discount	26.8

Speciality	32.4
Category Specialist	0.0
Price	
Low	16.8
Normal	64.4
High	18.8

Table 2: Market Survey Result

Based on Ownership parameter: In this parameter of retail store classification, in rural markets almost 99% retail stores are self owned or sole proprietorship shops. An important observation can be made from this data, which may be useful for the companies who are interested in sharing the risk in terms of sharing the promotional costs. As it is evident that in other types of ownerships it is difficult to take these decisions.

Based on Construction type parameter: It is evident from the data that majority of retail stores are *pukka* types (71.6%), which signifies the development of permanent markets in the rural districts. It was not very common a few years back.
Based on Size-wise parameter: Size-wise majority of the retail stores are very small (less than 100 sq feet, 54.3%) or small (101 to 500 sq feet, 38.4%) in sizes. It can be derived that scope for medium to large retail stores is thus obvious in these markets.
Based on product type parameter: Looking at the product types it is clearly evident that there is scope for personal products, shoes, and durables in these markets.
Based on branding type parameter: From the data it is evident that most stores have a mix of both branded as well as commodity products (53.7%). This shows that there is a gap in terms of the type of formats in the rural markets, like factory outlet or exclusive branded store, which can be filled.

Based on location type parameter: Markets are mostly located on or near the highways in a strip centre style (97.2%). The markets are divided by geographical or political boundaries. Lack of any specific trading-area identity is a cause of concern, as marketing analysis will become difficult, when required for 'shopping' goods and 'specialty' goods.

*Based on category type parameter: S*hops in these markets are mostly General and Specialty store types, 40.8% and 32.4% respectively. Similar lines, varieties and assortments offered are not carried by all stores within each group. No clear lines of demarcation exist.
Based on Price: Price as perceived by the customers, majority of the retail stores are normally priced (64.4%). This highlights the scope of discount stores and even premium priced stores in the rural Indian markets.

Further analysis is done on the basis of three important determinants - Brand, Store Category and Price. It was necessary as one of the most important factor for categorization is "Kind-of-Business" or "Product Category" (eg. Grocery, food items, durables, shoes, clothes etc.). Relative importance of the specific lines carried and sold may be evaluated for the purpose of better understanding. By applying cross-tab with the product categories, and finding out the correlation the following results were found:

Crosstab with brand clearly reflects that almost in all the product categories the retail stores have to keep multi brands (or both branded & unbranded products). In case of durables and clothes, where unbranded products are high in demand as compared to branded, the probable reason is that these are high end and technical products therefore going in for brands will either mean too much of a cost or customers could not perceive much difference in the quality of the two. It is also possible that mere possession of these products satisfies them, especially with their appearance, colour and design (Table 3).

Product Category	**Branded**	**Unbranded**	**Both**
Grocery	6.4%	24.8%	68.8%
Food items	6.1%	30.3%	63.6%
Personal products	35.7%	14.3%	50.0%
Shoes	11.4%	42.9%	45.7%
Clothes	10.9%	68.8%	20.3%
Durables	20.0%	63.3%	16.7%
Electrical	9.1%	18.2%	72.7%
Kitchenware	20.0%	20.0%	60.0%

P<.000

Table 3: Product Category by Branding

Crosstab with product category and store format type (store category) shows that consumers in these markets have not experienced the formats like discount stores, general merchandise shop, specialty stores etc. As is evident from the data that there is not even a single case of Category Specialist available in these markets. Thus, lot of scope in terms of the category of stores is there in these markets (Table 4).

Crosstab with price as perceived by the consumers with the product category shows that consumers prefer paying normal cost for the most of the products, but for items like durables, personal products and kitchenware they are ready to pay a premium. This is positive sign for those companies which are looking to serve these markets in either discount stores or premium category formats (Table 5).

Product category	**Discount**	**Specialty**	**General**
Grocery	19.3%	.9%	79.8%
Food items	18.2%	-	81.8%
Personal products	14.3%	-	85.7%
Shoes	22.9%	77.1%	-
Clothes	21.9%	78.1%	-
Durables	-	100.0%	-
Electrical	3.0%	97.0%	-
Kitchenware	-	100.0%	-

P<.000

Table 4: Product category by Store format type

Product category	**Low**	**Normal**	**High**
Grocery	19.3%	55.0%	25.7%
Food items	18.2%	78.8%	3.0%
Personal products	14.3%	42.9%	42.9%
Shoes	22.9%	57.1%	20.0%
Clothes	21.9%	70.3%	7.8%
Durables	-	33.3%	66.7%
Electrical	3.0%	93.9%	3.0%
Kitchenware	-	60.0%	40.0%

P<.000

Table 5: Product Category by Price

Rural retail stores classification parameters and there characteristics and implications as adapted from literature survey is summarized here as a part of the results (Table 6):

CATEGORIES	**CHARACTERISTICS**	**IMPLICATIONS**
Kind-of-Business	General-commodity group	Relative importance of the specific lines carried and sold

(eg. food stores, general merchandise, drug stores etc.)	sales by merchandise lines.	cannot be evaluated because of wide overlapping of similar merchandise.
Ownership classes	Affiliated or Non-affiliated Independent Stores.	Whether they work cooperatively in promotion, merchandising, and operation through the sponsorship of manufacturers, wholesalers, or through joint efforts with other retailers.
Sales-volume Size	Comparative sales Size and by Geographical areas.	Trends concerning market concentrations, competitive conditions and general types of consumption expenditures made can be determined.
By Functions Performed		Useful in analyzing relative operating costs of stores handling similar merchandise and similar services. More so, if location is also added.
Extent and Nature of Merchandise lines Handled	On this basis, stores are combined into general stores, specialty stores, departmentalized specialty stores, department, variety stores etc.	Influenced by size of trading area, degree of population concentration, and the location of stores within the trading area. Shortcoming of these groupings is that similar lines, varieties and assortments offered are not carried by all stores within each group. No clear lines of demarcation exist.
By Location	Size of geographical and political sub-divisions. Marketing analysis of widely distributed 'convenience' goods is less dependent on correlations to particular types of shopping locales.	Without any regards to 'Natural' or 'Planned' shopping areas, which is a sever limitation. Trading area represents only a 'first approximation' for scientific market analysis. There are so many different types of 'shopping' and 'buying' areas within 'Standard Metropolitan Areas' that determination of markets is too often the result of educated guesswork. Lack of any specific trading-area identity is much more acute when marketing analysis is needed with reference to 'shopping' goods and 'specialty' goods.

Table 6: Adapted from "Suggested Changes in Census Classifications of Retail Trade" by Robert D. Entenberg.

Store Choice or Store Patronage

The second objective of the study was to find the descriptors in terms of the preference of the customer segments across the retail store categories. For this analysis, the variation in preference was analyzed across all eight factors of store classification with the six demographic variables - gender, age, education, occupation, household income, and household size. Out of the eight factors used to classify retail outlets in the proposed framework, only three were significant in consumer store choice. The three were *brand* ***(B)***, *price* ***(P)*** *and location* ***(L)***. The cross-tab of these three factors with the demographic variables are presented in the table below (Table 7):

	Grocery	**Food Items**	**Personal product**	**Kitchenware**	**Electrical**	**Shoes**	**Clothes**	**Durables**
Gender								
Male	B-74.1	P-74.1	B-81.5	B/L/P-33.3	P-63	P-59.3	P/L-44.4	P-48.1
Female	B-76.9	B-53.8	B-92.3	B-92.3	B/L-46.2	L-46.2	P-84.6	P-53.8
Age								

27 to 35	B-81.9	B-75.0	B-89.6	B-59.8	B-68.1	B-70.5	B-78.4	B-65.0
Educational Qualification								
Illiterate	B-77.3	B-72.7	B-95.5	B-77.3	L-54.5	L-63.6	P-77.3	P-72.7
10 +2	B-70.0	P-80.0	B-70.0	B-55.0	B-55.0	P-90.0	P-75.0	B-60.0
Bachelor	B-81.3	P-68.8	B-87.5	B/L-40.6	P-56.3	P-43.8	L-43.8	B-50.0
Occupation								
Business	B-66.7	P-88.9	B-77.8	B-66.7	P-66.7	P-77.8	P-77.8	B-100
Ser.(Pvt.)	B-66.7	P-100	B-66.7	L-66.7	P-100	L-66.7	L-66.7	P-100
Agri.	B-75	B-58.3	B-100	B-100	B/L-50	P/L-50	P-100	P-66.7
Household Income								
7 -11000	B-84.4	P-75	B-87.5	L-43.8	P-81.3	P-46.9	L-68.8	P-50
12 -16000	B-80	P-50	B-100	B-70	B-70	P-60	P-60	P-66.7
>22000	B-100	P-87.5	B-100	B-100	B-100	P-87.5	P-87.5	B-100
Household Family Size								
3 to 5	B-81	P-71.4	B-87.3	B-47.6	B/P-49.2	P-60.3	P-47.6	B-50.8
6 to 9	B/P-50	B-75	B-75	B-75	L-75	L-75	P-100	P-100

Table 7: Significant Descriptors for Product Assortment Categories

Consumer Profiles by Product Category

Consumer profile by product category has brought atleast one relevant finding from the analysis, that is age-wise, young adults between 27 to 35 yrs. prefer *brand* as the only store choice factor, irrespective of the product category.

The other findings are more of relevance as it gives direction for further research. Example, for grocery items, irrespective of the demographic variables brand is the preferred factor for store choice. It is important to mention here that branded in this study refers to the brand of the retailer i.e. his own brand image and relationship in the market and with consumers. For ready to eat food items, it is price which is more important determinant for store choice in general and specifically for males in private service or business, irrespective of their household income. For personal products and kitchenware, brand is the preferred factor for store choice. For electrical goods, brand is the preferred choice, if price is acceptable to the consumers. For shoes, clothes and durables, price is the most preferred factor and location being the next.

When frequency of visit for a particular category of product was analyzed, the following observations were made:

This data was collected to see whether different profiles of the customers behave in different ways. The outcome when observed showed that the behavior of the customers was more as the logic goes, and no significant change was evident. For example, for products like grocery and food items people of the lower socio-economic class preferred going twice a week as compared to the higher in come class who would go once a month.

When preference for retail store location for a particular category of product was asked, the following observations were made:

Location is one of the most significant factors in store choice, but in rural India distance between retailer and the consumers is not much, and market differentiation in terms of central and regional business districts does not exist. Therefore, it is important to mention that as is evident from the data that no clear preference for any of the locations is observed.

When preference for the type of store was asked, the following observations were made:

For grocery products, food items, personal products, people preferred going to *general merchandise stores (60-65%)*. For kitchenware and shoes, 52.5% and 62.5% people preferred going to *specialty store*. For electrical, clothes and durables people preferred going to *discount stores.*

Conclusions

The objective of this study was to find out the classification factors for retail stores, and to find out the demographic predictors if any for the store choice. Though the literature supports the eight factors, which are present in the Indian rural environment, *viz*. Ownership, Construction type, Size, Product type, Branding, Location, Store type, and Price. Result of this study does not support the proposed framework in fullest. The three important and significant factors emerged as *Brand, Location, and Price.* Consumer demographic variables also did not emerge as clear cut predictors for store choice.

Consumer profile by product category has brought atleast one relevant finding from the analysis, that is age-wise, young adults between 27 to 35 yrs. prefer *brand* as the only store choice factor, irrespective of the product category. Brand here stands for local retailer's brand-image and relationship, which means that there is lot of scope for the organized players to enter these markets and use Customer Relationship Management strategies.

It is worth mentioning here that people in rural areas prefer going to a discount store for products like consumer durables and electrical, which means that unlike in urban areas rural people do not differentiate between qualities even in technical products. They look for economical or cheaper products because for them possession of these products itself is a source of status.

Limitations and Direction for Further Research

The literature survey and the findings of this study are indicative and are good enough to give an overview of the rural retail scenario in northern India. It shows that a proper framework for the classification of rural retail stores is needed because of its vast potential.

The limitation of this study is in terms of limited resources of finance, time and manpower because of which the sample size was of 160 consumer respondents, and 359 retail stores from 16 rural markets. It is recommended and suggested to conduct the research work on a large sample size covering at least 50 sub-districts to give a comprehensive picture of the retail scenario in this region in India.
Few areas for further research include product category wise detailed study of each type of store, for continuous research and analysis by marketers. The development of rural retail classification and store choice predictors would not only bring hopes for organized retailers to explore these markets, but would also provide ideas for the improvement of other services in rural India.

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