Antecedent factors for supermarket visits of Vietnamese consumers: A proposal for store image dimensions

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Abstract

This study aims to discuss a practical set of store image dimensions in a supermarket format to understand the relationship between store image and consumer patronage behaviour. A quantitative approach was applied to 506 datasets obtained from a survey conducted in Ho Chi Minh City. Using a structured equation modelling (SEM) approach, an analytical framework with practical dimensions is proposed to measure consumers' perspectives and attitudes.

Five dimensions have been validated, resulting in consumers' intentions to visit supermarkets: store atmosphere, merchandise, store location, customer service and promotional tools. The SEM results reveal that the most significant impact comes from store atmosphere, followed by merchandise dimension as a merged dimension based on product price. The findings imply that Vietnamese consumers perceive store image through a more holistic and interrelated view of newly boosted retail formats in the transitional market.

The study's examination of the factors that determine supermarket image in Vietnam – a leading retail market in a booming, medium-developed country – provides guidelines that contribute to the development of strategies to win consumers' support.

The study is expected to be a valuable reference for research on retail markets in other emerging countries and to provide helpful information for winning consumer support and ensuring business sustainability beyond the impact of COVID-19.

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Introduction

The research context

In recent years, the Vietnamese retailing space has witnessed changes in structure and the way people purchase products and services. Economic reforms and structural adjustments have changed the retail distribution system throughout the country (Maruyama & Trung 2007a). Market incentives for farmers have promoted rapid marketplace development. Vietnam's retail sector has embraced the supermarket influx in transitioning East Asian countries and progressed with a fast growth rate (Reardon et al., 2003; Traill, 2006). In the very early period of development, supermarkets were set up successfully and claimed to have played a significant role in the retail scenario (Speece & Huong, 2002). In the past, Vietnamese consumers shopped at mom-and-pop stores, specialised stores and traditional wet markets (Maruyama & Trung, 2012).

Even though traditional markets unceasingly outnumber modern ones, modern retail outlets have continued to grow impressively in urban areas. These modern formats cater to the needs of new Vietnamese consumers with higher incomes and a more robust demand for high-quality and reliable products and services (Breu et al., 2010).

Problem statement and aim of the study

Given the increasing competition in the retail market, retailers, for their survival and progress, must strengthen their position in the market and attract customers. To do so, understanding consumer-perceived store image is crucial, as it directly connects with the positioning strategy (Giraldi et al., 2003). Developing and evaluating a store image that is of interest to customers is essential to maintaining market position (Steenkamp & Wedel, 1991) and encouraging patronising behaviours (Oh et al., 2008). A favourable store image can influence consumers' patronage behaviour (Thang & Tan, 2003). More recently, several studies have analysed supermarket choice behaviour in fast-growing, middle-income markets while focusing on the relationship between antecedents (Dokcen et al., 2021).

While numerous pieces of research have been conducted on store image (e.g., Bloemer, 1998; Burlison & Oe, 2018), there are limited studies that analyse how the perceived importance of store image affects patronage behaviour on supermarket types in emerging markets. Although some recent studies have attempted to link consumer attitudes and consumer perception to supermarket development (Maruyama & Trung, 2007a, 2007b, 2012), under the recent blow of COVID-19, a more practical analytical framework is needed to contribute to the development of effective marketing strategies (Asghar Ali et al., 2021). Therefore, this study focuses on filling the gap in theoretical and empirical research by presenting the perceived importance of store image attributes and how these perceptions influence consumer patronage behaviour in the supermarket format in the most recent market context.

Literature review

Current situation of the retail market in Vietnam

The Vietnamese retail market is projected to register a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of over 10% during the forecast period of 2021–2026. Although the COVID-19 crisis remains complex globally, the effective containment of the pandemic by Vietnam is now leading to a recovery in retail sales of consumer goods and services. In terms of growth rates, while the global retail market suffered a sharp fall in revenues during the pandemic, the economic community in Vietnam has shown promise. This is a rare case in which the signs are promising.

Vietnam is witnessing urbanisation, evolving demand trends among young urban consumers, robust growth in modern retail channels such as convenience stores, and the rapid expansion of e-commerce (Ehlert, 2021). At the same time, this has meant increased competition in modern retail in general, with retail outlets devising their own customer retention by, for example, offering exclusive private brands/products for purchase (Sgroi & Salamone, 2022).

Meanwhile, Vietnam's fastest-growing supermarkets offer a one-stop shop service, offering a wide range of products more suited to the everyday needs of the average consumer. To further enhance the shopping experience, some shops have in-house bakeries and cafés where consumers can hang out with family and friends, a trend that demonstrates that they are more than just a place to shop but also a place for communication (Tien et al., 2021).

The Vietnamese retail market offers Vietnamese consumers a complex of sales outlets with individualised services by distribution channels (e.g., hypermarkets/supermarkets, convenience stores, speciality shops, department stores and e-commerce). At 36.63%, Vietnam's urbanisation rate across the region is low when compared with 47% to 76% in other Southeast Asian countries. This represents an area of high potential and expected growth potential. The urban population in Vietnam is expected to record a CAGR of around 3% by 2025, which is a characteristic trend compared to Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand, where the growth rate is only around 1% to 2%. The analysis of urbanisation rates in comparable Southeast Asian countries indicates that the initial phase of urbanisation in VIetnam is likely to be rapid. As urbanisation in Vietnam is expected to reach 55% by 2030, it is assumed that the country's growth will follow a similar trajectory (Singh et al., 2020).

This high level of consumer purchasing power will significantly impact growth in the Vietnamese retail market. Although major international players are heavily involved in the Vietnamese retail market, they compete with each other and have a split market share. Technological advances and product innovations have also allowed small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to increase their presence in the market by opening new markets through franchises and other means. The thriving consumer spending has established a picture that supports the diversification of retail players and encourages the further entry of SMEs. On the other hand, it is critical for businesses to develop supportive strategies to survive tough competition (Phuong et al., 2022).

Given these characteristics of the Vietnamese retail industry, this study focuses on supermarkets, which are growing as a channel for supplying goods to Vietnamese consumers. It examines the antecedents that define the current Vietnamese consumers' intentions to use these stores and aims to validate and present models and measures for analysing consumers' supermarket choice behaviour. The following section draws on previous research to unravel the debate about the antecedents that contribute to consumers' supermarket choice decisions.

Store image
Definition

The study of store image has long been an area of interest for marketing scholars. Martineau (1958), known for driving some of the earliest research on store image, describes store image as a concept formed in consumers' minds through functional properties and psychological attributes. From a behavioural perspective, Kunkel and Berry (1968) characterise store image as a connected and expected consumer perception in consumers' minds. Doyle and Fenwick (1974) argue that store image is inseparable from attitudes towards a particular store and can be explained by the impression customers have of it. James et al. (1976) similarly argues that store image is an important set of attributes in customers' thinking. Store image, in other words, is perceived by users as a formative object that may change due to exposure to the store environment (Oh et al., 2008).

Thus, although various definitions have been established for store image (Table 1), it can be seen that the majority of researchers consider it a multi-attribute utility function for consumers to evaluate (Bloemer & de Ruyter, 1998; Houston & Nevin, 1981). The idea is that these salient attributes function together to represent the store image. Bloemer and de Ruyter (1998), James et al. (1976) and Lindquist (1974) also believe that there is an interaction between these attributes. According to them, these attributes are measured and weighed against each other. In other words, store image is preferred to be defined as a composite of consumers' perceptions of a store, and these perceptions are sometimes shifting (Bloemer & de Ruyter, 1998).

Consumer patronage behaviour

Consumer patronage is considered a consumer decision about where to shop (Fox et al., 2004). This has been the central theme for retailers to sustain their businesses (Tang et al., 2001). Osman (1993) developed five elements to evaluate this concept: (1) the frequency of store visits, (2) the purchase percentage of a particular product category, (3) the ratio of stores' ranking, (4) the level of customers' willingness to recommend the store to others and (5) the future propensity of consumers to shop at a particular store. Other empirical studies in this realm depict consumer patronage behaviour as either shopping frequency or people's store choice. Several researchers have examined customers' store patronage choices from the intention or behaviour aspect (Grewal et al., 2003; van Kenhove et al., 1999), while others have approached shoppers' repeated patronage over a specific period (Darley & Lim, 1993). In a more recent study, Pan and Zinkhan (2006) simplify patronage behaviour into two elements: (1) a consumer choice to patronise a particular store and (2) the frequency of visiting a particular store. Visit frequency is also analysed to examine consumer patronage behaviour across different retail formats (Nilsson et al., 2015). This research approaches consumer patronage behaviour in the form of patronising frequency – how frequently customers visit a store.

Store image dimensions in the retail context

Store image is a composite perception based on each user's view of its attributes. Researchers have discovered diverse aspects of store image. For example, Lindquist (1974), based on empirical evidence from 26 field authors, recommends analysing it according to nine categories: convenience, service, merchandise, clientele, physical facilities, store atmosphere, promotion, institutional factors and post-transaction satisfaction. Fenwick (1974) presents a dimensional model with a smaller number of dimensions: price, merchandise, assortment, location and styling. On the other hand, Bearden (1977) suggests that different dimensions should be used to analyse store image, arguing that store image is constructed by seven attributes: assortment, price, product quality, location, atmosphere, sales staff and parking. In addition, Ghosh (1994) argues that the store image is shaped by the retail marketing mix of merchandise, location, store atmosphere, price, advertising, customer service, personal sales and sales incentives. Subsequent studies have built on the work of these predecessors (Bloemer & Odekerken-Schroder, 2002), and some have modified it to fit the context of each study (Lin & He, 2015; Thang & Tan, 2003; Verma, 2012).

Based on a systematic literature review, Burlison and Oe (2018) summarise eight dimensions of store image attributes and find that the retail marketing mix influences the store image composition process. Burlison and Oe (2018) find that different formats of grocery retailers rely on a more contemporary and relevant approach to the research context, which can be useful guidance for today's store image research. Store image is inextricably studied with marketing. For example, many experts demonstrate personal sales and sales incentive programmes together in the category of promotional tools (Berman & Evans, 2013). Table 1 presents several scholarly discussions of store image dimensions. Following the accumulation and foundation of these studies on store image, this study establishes six components of store image: store location, store atmosphere, product, price, customer service and promotional tools, which will be used in the analysis.

Authors	Number of dimensions	Dimensions
Lindquist (1958)	9	Convenience, service, merchandise, clientele, physical facilities, store atmosphere, promotion, institutional factors and post-transaction
Doyle and Fenwick (1974)	5	Price, product, assortment, location and styling
Bearden (1977)	7	Assortment, price, quality of merchandise, location, atmosphere, salespeople and parking facilities
Ghosh (1994)	8	Merchandise, location, store atmosphere, price, customer service, advertising, personal selling and sales incentive programmes
Bloemer and Odekerken-Schroder (2002)	8	Same dimensions as in Ghosh (1994)
Thang and Tan (2003)	8	Modified based upon previous studies, merchandising, store atmosphere, accessibility, reputation, in-store service, promotion, facilities and post-transaction
Verma (2012)	5	Modified based upon previous studies, product and operational quality, overall visual appeal, customer convenience, perceived price, past satisfaction and promotional effectiveness
Lin and He (2014)	9	Modified to fit apparel stores context, availability of big brands, atmosphere, pricing, location, customer service, in-store facilities, variety of products, merchandise quality and staff friendliness
Grah and Tominc (2015)	8	Same dimensions as in Ghosh (1994)
Burlison and Oe (2018)	8	Based on a systematic literature review from 1950 to 2017, eight dimensions are identified: merchandise, service, convenience, promotion, client, physical facilities, atmosphere and institutions

Table 1. Dimensions of the store image

Vietnam's retail market and consumers

The retail structure and changing consumers

The political and economic reforms in Vietnam, called *Doi Moi*, have been adopted to encourage an open-door socialist-oriented market monetary policy. The country has been undergoing a significant transition and is experiencing rapid demographic and social changes (World Bank, 2019). In line with these developments, retail modernisation is in the early stages of transformation. Seven years since joining the World Trade Organisation, Vietnam has become one of the most attractive markets in the world.

After the reforms, a wide array of products flooded Vietnam's markets, leading to retail proliferation and social and economic transformation in the country (Shultz Ii, 1994; Vann, 2005). Now, consumers have an opportunity to access neighbouring countries' market information, especially other wealthier Asian nations (Tráng & Dũng, 2019). The social middle class has evolved and stepped into the world of mass consumption, and the aspirational middle class has enhanced opportunities in Vietnam's retail market (Brueckner et al., 2018; Freire, 2009).

Supermarkets in the Vietnamese retail market

The significant shift from traditional retail formats to modern ones is apparent in Vietnam. Of the big cities, Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), with 8.64 million citizens in 2019, is the nation's business hub and financial capital (General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2019) and the most populous city in Vietnam (Nguyen et al., 2016). In HCMC, the retail growth rate reached 8.2% in 2015 (Colliers, 2015). As of 2015, 126 retail centres have operated in the city (Cushman & Wakefield, 2019).

Supermarkets in Vietnam focus on consumers' need for variety and choice of products and services since a full line of offerings are available at these stores (Nilsson et al., 2015). This store type is predicted to resolve food safety issues and enhance food sanitation in Vietnam (Cadilhon et al., 2006).

Consumer decisions regarding supermarket choice

Store location

As a primary driver of the retail mix, location is particularly essential for any business in a modern retail environment (Pan & Zinkhan, 2006). A good location leads to good accessibility with easy transportation and reduced travel time to the store (Thang and Tan, 2003). It is believed that consumers' store choices are vastly influenced by retail locations (Blut et al., 2018; Brooks et al., 2004; Mann & Jha, 2013). Léo and Philippe (2002) and Reardon et al. (2001) give evidence that customers prefer a location more if it is suitable for daily or weekly trips, particularly if it is convenient to visit from home or work (Yan & Eckman, 2009).

Alternatively, some supermarkets are located outside the city centre (Nilsson et al., 2015), but others are situated in densely populated areas as well (Dabija & Băbuț, 2012; Terano et al., 2014). This store type also provides easy access (Clarke et al., 2006) and parking lots (Dabija & Băbuț, 2012) to encourage customers to shop. Therefore, the first hypothesis emerges as follows:

Hypothesis 1: Store location influences consumer patronage behaviour in the supermarket format.

Store atmosphere

Retail atmosphere often affects shopping enjoyment, willingness to communicate with the staff and the likelihood of future patronage (Berman & Evans, 2013). In a review of 60 experiments conducted on store atmosphere, Turley and Milliman (2000) indicate a relationship between atmospherics and shopping behaviour. Donovan and Rossiter (1982, 1994) believe that atmospheric components might lead to a desire to stay in the store, explore further and interact, or ignore it and abide by the study outcomes by Baker et al. (1992) and Wakefield and Blodgett (1999). Retail crowding is another sub-component of store atmosphere that shapes consumer behaviour and emotions (Eroglu et al., 2005; Kazakevičiūtė & Banytė, 2012) and influences customer satisfaction (Eroglu et al., 2005; Li et al., 2009).

According to Chen and Hsieh (2011), in the supermarket context, customers pay special attention to the overall store layout and structure, interior decoration, music and noise. Cleanliness, freshness, consistency within the store chain and brightness (Chanil, 2004) are also key reasons that attract customers. All of these tangible and intangible factors inevitably influence consumer behaviour, as indicated in prior research (Herrington & Capella, 1996; Wang & Lang, 2015). Therefore, the second hypothesis emerges as follows:

Hypothesis 2: Store atmosphere influences consumer patronage behaviour in the supermarket format.

Product

Some studies state that the higher the number of product choices, the higher the positive impact it will have on consumers' perceptions (Fox et al., 2004; Lancaster, 1990). Supermarkets offer not only grocery products (e.g., meat, fish, vegetables) but also other items such as clothes, books and ready-made meals (Clarke et al., 2006; Hsu et al., 2010). Chen and Hsieh (2011) discuss how commodities are displayed and classified and whether the convenience of browsing significantly affects consumer behaviour.

Other academic findings claim that reducing the size of an assortment can improve purchase probability. Several pieces of research have advocated that shoppers appreciate whether they can choose products efficiently through a well-organised layout (Zairis & Evangelos, 2014; Zentes et al., 2011). Therefore, the third hypothesis emerges as follows:

Hypothesis 3: Product influences consumer patronage behaviour in the supermarket format.

Price

The relationship formed between price, quality and value is critical for consumer patronage and buying behaviour (Gilbert, 2002). Han et al. (2001) emphasise the significant influence of price on consumers' purchase behaviour. Shoppers tend to expect deals from retailers. As price reflects the amount of money a customer pays for a product or service, higher prices tend to negatively affect purchase probabilities (Lichtenstein et al., 1993). However, the influence of price on consumer behaviour is complicated. Fox et al. (2004) claims that, even though many consumers are price sensitive, they are not attracted by the lowest-priced format only.

Supermarkets can realise deeper discounts based on the scale of the economy in logistics and sales management (Terano et al., 2014). Hence, price may have the advantage of attracting consumers. Introducing everyday low-price strategies has drawn more middle- and lower-income consumers to stores (McNeill, 2012).

Hypothesis 4: Price influences consumer patronage behaviour in the supermarket format.

Customer service

It has been argued that staff performance influences customer behaviour at a store and their loyalty to a store (Jayawardhena & Farrell, 2011). Through their interactions with customers (e.g., coming across as polite and knowledgeable), store personnel can create a relationship between the retailer and its shoppers (Berman & Evans, 2013). Their performance can lead to positive word-of-mouth referrals, additional purchases, recommendations for others and higher price tolerance (Anderson et al., 2004; Bettencourt & Brown 1997).

According to Berman and Evans (2003), some types of customer service can be considered patronage builders and solidifiers. These include transaction speed, credit, gift registry and courtesy. In the supermarket context, customer service can enhance the benefits gained from shopping (Sirohi et al., 1998), affect patronage (George, 2005; Jayawardhena & Farrell, 2011) and stimulate customer loyalty (Kitapci et al., 2013).

Hypothesis 5: Customer service influences consumer patronage behaviour in the supermarket format.

Promotional tools

Promotions can help retailers improve the likelihood of patronage and increase consumption (Thang & Tan, 2003). Some activities can also enhance post-promotion preferences, such as coupons or premiums (Del Vecchio et al., 2006; Prendergast et al., 2005).

To enlarge market share and increase sales revenue, supermarkets slowly implement promotional devices to attract calculative shoppers (Goswami & Mishra, 2009; Prendergast et al., 2005). Therefore, supermarkets tend to offer a wide variety of sales promotions all year round, which affects consumer decisions to patronise a store.

Hypothesis 6: Promotional tools influence consumer patronage behaviour in the supermarket format.

Theoretical framework and hypotheses

Based on the literature review, the following framework for this research is proposed (Figure 1). The relationship of six store image dimensions towards consumers' intentions to visit supermarkets will be examined with the primary data obtained from HCMC in Vietnam.

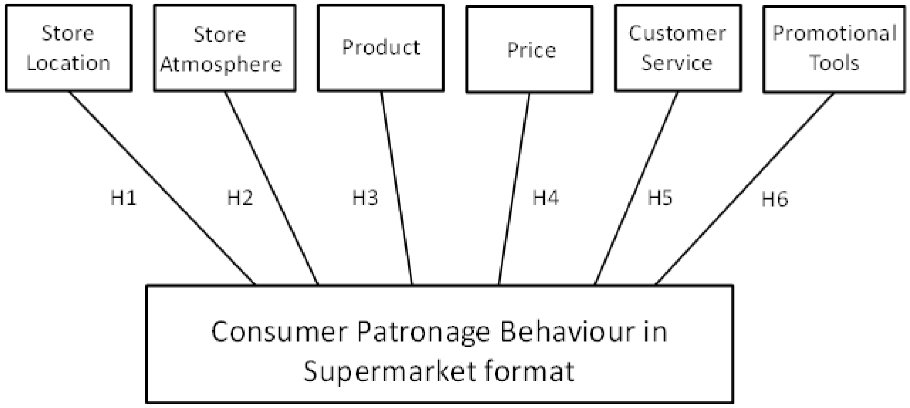

Figure 1. The analytical framework of the study

Methodology

Research approach and questionnaire design

A quantitative method was applied to the dataset to validate a set of developed hypotheses (Park & Park, 2016). Items regarding the hypotheses for the questionnaire were reviewed and modified following suggestions from six pilot tests. The questions and corresponding options used in this research were carefully measured and chosen based on six store image dimensions.

The participants' perceptions were gauged using a five-point Likert scale. One bilingual person translated the scale from English to Vietnamese in the original English version. Following the translation of those items into English by a second bilingual person who had not seen the original, a third bilingual person checked the English to Vietnamese translation. To complete the questionnaire, several discrepancies were explored and rectified during the procedure. This process involved establishing the cultural and linguistic equivalence of the scales utilised, as described by Ruvio and Shoham (2007).

Data collection

The survey was conducted on a web-based survey system (http://docs.google.com). The online survey questionnaire was distributed to 600 participants, with the aim of receiving responses from at least 500 participants. Krantz (2016) suggests this as the most suitable sample size because 400–500 is the economic number of questionnaires to collect while keeping the confidence level at 95% and margin of error at 5%. Eventually, following the data cleaning procedure, 506 responses were completed for the analysis, representing a wide spectrum of age and gender in HCMC. The obtained data were analysed using SPSS ver. 26 and AMOS ver. 26.

Analysis and findings

Descriptive analysis

Table 2 shows an outline of the data profile. Table 3 presents the results of the descriptive statistical analysis.

Variable	Level	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Age				
	18 - 24	228	45.1	45.1
	25 - 34	182	36.0	81.0
	35 - 49	49	9.7	90.7
	50+	47	9.3	100.0
	Total	506	100.0	
Gender				
	Female	326	64.4	64.4
	Male	180	35.6	100.0
	Total	506	100.0	
Employment status				
	Student	162	32.0	32.0
	Governor officer/ office worker	169	33.4	65.4
	Business owner/ Freelancer	97	19.2	84.6
	Housewife/ homemaker	35	6.9	91.5
	Blue-collar worker	13	2.6	94.1
	Unemployed	16	3.2	97.2
	Retired	14	2.8	100.0
	Total	506	100.0	
Marital status				
	Single	326	64.4	64.4
	Married	180	35.6	100.0
	Total	506	100.0	
Educational background				
	High school	45	8.9	8.9
	College/ university	378	74.7	83.6
	Postgraduate	83	16.4	100.0
	Total	506	100.0	

Table 2. Respondents' demographics

Q number	Questionnaire	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Deviation
LOC1	It is easy to access the store location.	506	2	5	4.34	.579
LOC2	The traffic flow near the store area is acceptable.	506	2	5	3.99	.541
LOC3	The store offers a convenient parking lot for shoppers.	506	2	5	4.16	.696
LOC4	The location is convenient from home.	506	2	5	4.45	.697
LOC5	The location is convenient from work.	506	1	5	3.62	1.095
LOC6	The location is convenient to shop different items at a time.	506	1	5	3.47	.865
ATM1	The overall atmosphere is comfortable	506	1	5	4.18	.706
ATM2	The store colours and decoration make me feel pleasant while shopping.	506	1	5	3.85	.952
ATM3	The music played at store makes me happy and relaxed while shopping.	506	1	5	3.36	1.134
ATM4	The store layout is convenient and attractive.	506	1	5	4.31	.795
ATM5	The crowded time of the store is acceptable.	506	1	5	3.99	.726
PROD1	The PRODhandise quality is good	506	3	5	4.56	.547
PROD2	The products I need are often available in store.	506	1	5	4.23	.609
PROD3	When I cannot find the items I want, substitute items are available in the	506	1	5	4.06	.633
PROD4	There is a wide variety of products I can choose.	506	2	5	4.30	.712
PROD5	The visual display of products is eye-catching, easy and helpful to find the	506	1	5	4.23	.771
PRIC1	The price here is acceptable for me.	506	2	5	4.36	.598
PRIC2	The store offers products of great value for the price.	506	1	5	4.57	.594
PRIC3	I can find low-priced product ranges in this store compared to other stores.	506	1	5	3.58	.894
PRIC4	The store offers products at lower prices than other stores.	506	1	5	3.58	.931
SERV1	The store provides excellent customer service.	506	2	5	4.08	.614
SERV2	The staff are polite and friendly.	506	2	5	4.40	.723
SERV3	The staff assists me in shopping when I need.	506	2	5	4.31	.765
SERV4	The staff are knowledgeable.	506	2	5	4.10	.763
SERV5	It is convenient to park my motorbike/ car near the store location.	506	1	5	4.11	.756
SERV6	The customer service quality is good as guaranteed in the brochures,	506	4	5	4.44	.496
PROMO1	The store offers attractive promotions in the store.	506	1	5	4.04	.771
PROMO2	The store's advertisements are reliable and of good quality (e.g., ads,	506	1	5	4.04	.876
PROMO3	Besides price reduction, there are many other price incentive programmes	506	1	5	3.86	.885
PROMO4	There are more promotions in this store than in other places.	506	1	5	3.41	.932
PROMO5	The discounted items are of good quality despite having low-priced.	506	2	5	4.26	.727

Table 3. Descriptive analysis of the dataset

Exploratory factor analysis and reliability of scales

All 31 variables, as candidates for the store image dimensions, were used for exploratory factor analysis and generated 15 observed variables for five factors, including promotional tools, customer service, store atmosphere, store location and merchandise (Table 4). This outcome suggests that price and product, which are expected to be perceived by consumers as two separate dimensions, are in fact merged as a new dimension: this newly developed dimension is now named merchandise. From this process, 31 variables are now reduced to 15 with a more suitable explanatory impact on each of the five factors. The Cronbach's alpha values for these actors are reliable (Gliem & Gliem, 2003; Tavakol & Dennick, 2011), as each variable has an alpha over the cut-off level of 0.6, which indicates significant strength and reliability (Bonett & Wright, 2015; Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). Therefore, the obtained dimensions are reliable and suitable for the dataset. This analysis can be taken forward to the next step.

Observed Valiables	Component					Cronbach's Alpha
	1	2	3	4	5	
PROMO1	.824	.084	.051	.115	.044	
PROMO4	.805	-.074	.059	-.260	.038	.824
PROMO3	.758	-.025	.240	.021	.070	
SERV1	.008	.776	.022	-.088	.116	
SERV2	-.012	.745	.205	.097	.159	.748
SERV5	.075	.712	.104	.099	.032	
ATM2	.076	.301	.699	.087	.081	
ATM4	.095	.214	.694	.280	.117	.751
ATM3	.361	.241	.674	.082	-.003	
LOC4	.038	.128	.064	.729	.063	
LOC5	-.054	-.113	.366	.610	-.092	.716
LOC1	-.020	.093	.313	.485	.264	
PROD4	.088	.081	.422	-.159	.633	
PRIC2	.112	.150	.025	.324	.605	.723
PROD3	.213	.235	.147	-.122	.539	

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.
Rotation converged in 11 iterations.

Table 4. Factor analysis and reliability test results

Structured equation modelling analysis and hypothesis testing

A structured equation modelling (SEM) analysis was conducted to test the hypotheses. Figure 2 presents the SEM analysis results demonstrating the statistical coefficients and significance for the relational paths among the latent factors.

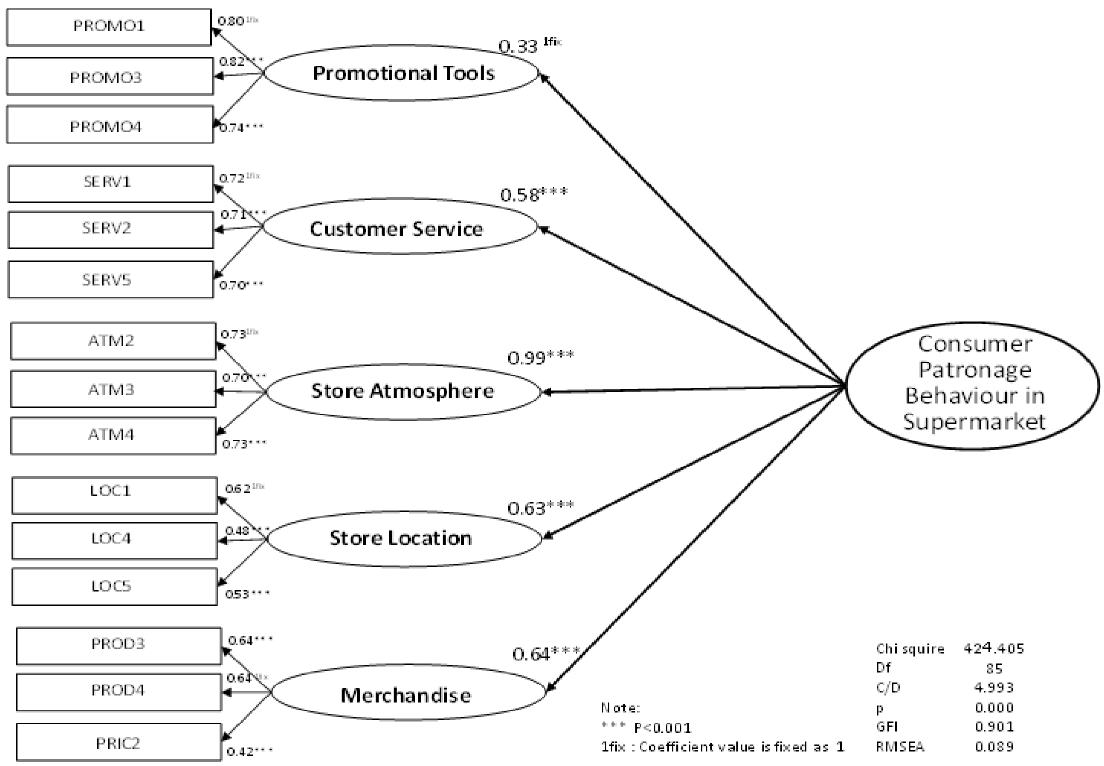

Figure 1. Results of the structured equation modelling analysis

The SEM analysis reveals that the proposed model has an acceptable fit. Specifically, the fit measures for the research model include an $\chi2$/degree of freedom of 4.993 ($\chi2$=424.405, df=85). This meets the recommended level of 5 (Hair et al., 1998). For the results of the other fitting tests, the values for GFI (0.901) are well above the recommended level of >0.9, while the results for RMSEA (0.089) are also within the recommended range of <0.1 (Hair et al., 1998). The SEM analysis results are summarised in Table 5.

To		From	Std. path coefficient	p
Promotion Tools	<---	Behavior in Supermarket	0.327	1 fix
Customer Service	<---	Behavior in Supermarket	0.575	***
Store Atmosphere	<---	Behavior in Supermarket	0.994	***
Store Location	<---	Behavior in Supermarket	0.627	***
Merchandise	<---	Behavior in Supermarket	0.635	***
PROMO1	<---	Promotion Tools	0.796	1 fix
PROMO3	<---	Promotion Tools	0.818	***
PROMO4	<---	Promotion Tools	0.739	***
SERV1	<---	Customer Service	0.722	1 fix
SERV2	<---	Customer Service	0.714	***
SERV5	<---	Customer Service	0.700	***
ATM2	<---	Store Atmosphere	0.726	1 fix
ATM3	<---	Store Atmosphere	0.729	***
ATM4	<---	Store Atmosphere	0.696	***
LOC1	<---	Store Location	0.617	1 fix
LOC4	<---	Store Location	0.480	***
LOC5	<---	Store Location	0.527	***
PROD4	<---	Merchandise	0.643	1 fix
PROD3	<---	Merchandise	0.643	***
PRIC2	<---	Merchandise	0.424	***

*** means p<0.001

Table 5. Path coefficients

Results of hypotheses test and discussion

Based on the SEM analysis, all five dimensions have a significant impact on consumers' patronage behaviour. H3/H4 are now merged as one dimension, which is called merchandise and has the second most significant impact on patronage behaviour (0.635) following store atmosphere (0.994). Store location has the third most significant impact out of five dimensions (0.627).

Discussion

The research reveals the current Vietnamese consumers' perspectives on the proposed dimensions of their intentions to visit supermarkets. The results imply that the atmospheric dimension has the most significant impact on patronage, which might be because of the market transition phase of retail grocery shopping diversities. Supermarkets provide consumers with different shopping experiences in the new retailers' formats transitioning from traditional retail shops.

One thing that was not expected is a new merged factor, merchandise, which was perceived by the consumers as one element rather than two independent factors. On the other hand, product and price are closely interrelated and perceived as one dimension. This new dimension, merchandise, has the second most significant impact on consumers' patronage behaviour. This is a suggesting outcome, as previously, marketing mix established two Ps, and now, consumers perceive these two Ps in one category in a more holistic way. The result of this study designates salient attributes to work together to express store image (Bloemer & de Ruyter, 1998; James et al., 1976; Lindquist, 1974). The merchandise dimension is supported by the discussion on existing interactions between the attributes, which are weighed against each other (Bloemer & de Ruyter, 1998; Burlison & Oe, 2018). This research authenticates these discussions with an empirical analysis of a recent dataset.

Store location has the third biggest impact on patronage behaviour, which follows the earlier findings (e.g. Clarke et al., 2006; Mann & Jha, 2013; Pan & Zinkhan, 2006). This finding supports a prior study that finds the store location to be moderately and lowly important to Vietnamese consumers (Maruyama & Trung, 2007a). The relatively lower impactful factors, customer service and promotional tools, suggest that consumers' perceptions in Vietnam indicate a different landscape from a matured market context.

Conclusion

Overall findings and contribution

As a result of the SEM analysis, all five dimensions have a significant impact on patronage behaviour with different levels of impact. Out of the proposed five dimensions, it has been found that store atmosphere has the most significant impact on merchandise, which implies that consumers appreciate the overall functions of supermarkets as a shopping channel. Although consumers concentrate mainly on their desired goods, they also perceive some other holistic service levels, including unique values, to be impactful components when choosing a supermarket. This could be the upshot of the newly boosted retail format for grocery shopping in the transitional economy.

More specifically, the dimension of merchandise may result from the fact that supermarkets offer a wide array of goods, product safety, clear origin and a high level of hygiene and freshness with reasonable pricing. This feature should be what Vietnamese consumers need the most (Maruyama & Trung, 2007a). A supermarket is also the channel for well-balanced product quality and price due to the synergy between economies of scale (Terano et al., 2014) and the accelerating expansion of supermarkets in developing countries, such as Vietnam (Maruyama & Trung, 2012).

This research contributes to the store patronage study with a practical and analytical model of the dimensions. The empirical outcome based on this proposed model provides a snapshot of consumer patronage behaviour in emerging markets, which is useful for relevant research in other emerging markets. The newly merged dimension merchandise, based on price and product, emphasises that consumers perceive store image from a holistic and interrelated view, which also suggests that even the established elements of the marketing mix framework – the two Ps – are perceived as a joint dimension in the supermarket context.

Theoretical implications

This study contributes to an integral part of consumer patronage behaviour and store image research. It mainly contributes to the limited number of studies conducted on supermarket formats in emerging markets. Traditional and modern formats have been in a race to engage an increasingly higher number of customers, but new modern retail types, such as supermarkets, have emerged on the scene. Thus, it can be viewed as a substantial contribution to introducing how consumers think and act in the developing world.

Managerial implications

With the increasingly competitive market in Vietnam, residents quickly become accustomed to various kinds of stores, and they choose stores based on the cues they value and the expectations they have. Retailers need to understand, in depth, the factors and perceptions that encourage shoppers to patronise more frequently at a particular store type. By emphasising these salient components, retailers are more likely to enhance store patronage and customer loyalty. The managers of supermarkets can focus on improving their store atmosphere and product lines with balanced pricing policies.

Limitations and further research opportunities

While there have been numerous studies on retail store image, few have focused specifically on the supermarket business type. This study proposes and demonstrates the construct dimensions of store image, limited to the new business category of supermarkets in Vietnam, a typical market in a medium-developed country. Although this study proposes a model and dimensions that can contribute to retail practices and is expected to provide effective guidance for both research and practices, at the same time, the authors recognise that this study has several limitations.

First, the data used in the empirical study are limited. To develop more robust recommendations and suggestions for research areas, models and measures need to be validated with a larger dataset. Second, to make the results of this study more generalised and useful in practice, it is necessary to present implications through comparative studies using data on consumer attitudes, not only in the Vietnamese market but also in other middle-income countries and other markets.

Finally, the impact of COVID-19 on consumers' store choices and purchasing behaviours also needs to be examined. We hope to contribute more vigorously to academic activities, scholarships and practices to develop viable management strategies in the retail industry during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

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