

Customer experience in supermarkets and hypermarkets – A comparative study

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Abstract: *The purpose of this paper is to explore the relationships between the various determinants and customer experience in the two types of retail formats widely seen in the Indian market place. A survey of 418 respondents was carried out with the help of a questionnaire. Descriptive (frequency and percentage) and inferential (multiple linear regression) statistical techniques were used to analyse the data. In case of supermarket previous experience, atmosphere, price, social environment and alternate channel experience play a major role in creating a superior customer experience. In the case of hypermarket past experience, assortment, social environment and alternate channel experience play a major role in creating a superior customer experience. The results included in this research about the demographic variables and the determinants of customer experience are focussed on super market and hypermarket respectively. Further studies could compare different formats which will throw light on the preferences of the retail customers of India. This paper provides retailers with specific knowledge of the determinants that the customer considers being most important and significant contributor to an enhanced customer experience. It is suggested that the retailers take note of the significant predictors while developing retail format strategies. It also identifies the demographic characteristics of these customers. Understanding the customer and the key determinants of his experience are critical to the retailer in order to withstand the competition in the Indian market. This paper is original because only few studies of this nature have been attempted in Indian context. This descriptive study makes use of demographics and determinants which contribute to a superior customer experience for the two most popular retail store format namely supermarkets and hypermarkets. The theoretical/conceptual model has not been used for studying customer experience in the Indian context.*

Keywords: *Demographics, Retailing, Store format, Customer experience, India*

I. Introduction

Retailing in India is one of the pillars of its economy and accounts for 14 to 15 percent of its GDP (Mc Kinsey, 2007). The Indian retail market is estimated to be US\$ 450 billion and it is one of the top five retail markets in the world by economic value (Dikshit, 2011). India's retailing industry consists mainly of owner manned small shops. In 2010, larger format convenience stores and supermarkets accounted for about 4 percent of the industry, and these are present only in large urban centers. India's retail and logistics industry employs about 40 million Indians roughly about 3.3% of Indian population (Sanjoy, 2011).

Any retail outlet chain (not a one shop outlet) that is professionally managed (even if it is family run) can be termed as organised retailing in India if it has the following features – accounting transparency (with proper usage of MIS and accounting standards), organised supply chain management with centralised quality control and sourcing. (Zameer and Mukherjee, 2011). This accounts for 7 percent of India's roughly \$435 billion retail market and is expected to reach 20 percent by 2020.

In order to achieve long-term financial benefits, companies must design and deliver a service that satisfies customers so that they have a positive experience during the service encounter (Lovelock et al., 2004).

Managers need to recognise the importance of creating value for their customers in the form of experiences (Berry et al., 2002). Offering products or services alone is not enough; organisation must provide their customers with satisfactory experience. Gilmore and Pine (2002) agree by saying that the way for a company to reach its customers is through creating a memorable experience for them. It is said that companies should be urged to create market experiences by creating places (real or virtual) where they can try out offerings as they indulge themselves in the experience.

Dramatic technology changes have contributed vastly to improve the shopping experience of customers (Corbett, 2006). The customer experience is defined as the “combination of everything you do, or fail to do for that matter, that underpins any interaction with a customer or potential customer” (Shaw, 2005).

According to Shaw (2005) the customer experience is the next competitive battle ground and it will provide a source of sustainable differentiation. In the commoditized economy customer experience acts as a possible differentiator when product, price, people and technology are all similar. The meaningful things that customers remember, over and above the product, such as the feel and perception of the organization and the

brand, are derived through customer experience. It is therefore the customer experience that makes the difference.

Obtaining and sustaining a competitive advantage in retailing, specifically in Indian retail environment today – is a challenge and hence it is important to find the one aspect that is capable of differentiating one retailer from another. Retail establishments all over the world are trying to find that sustainable competitive advantage and it now seems possible by strategically focusing on customer experience which can act as the key differentiator.

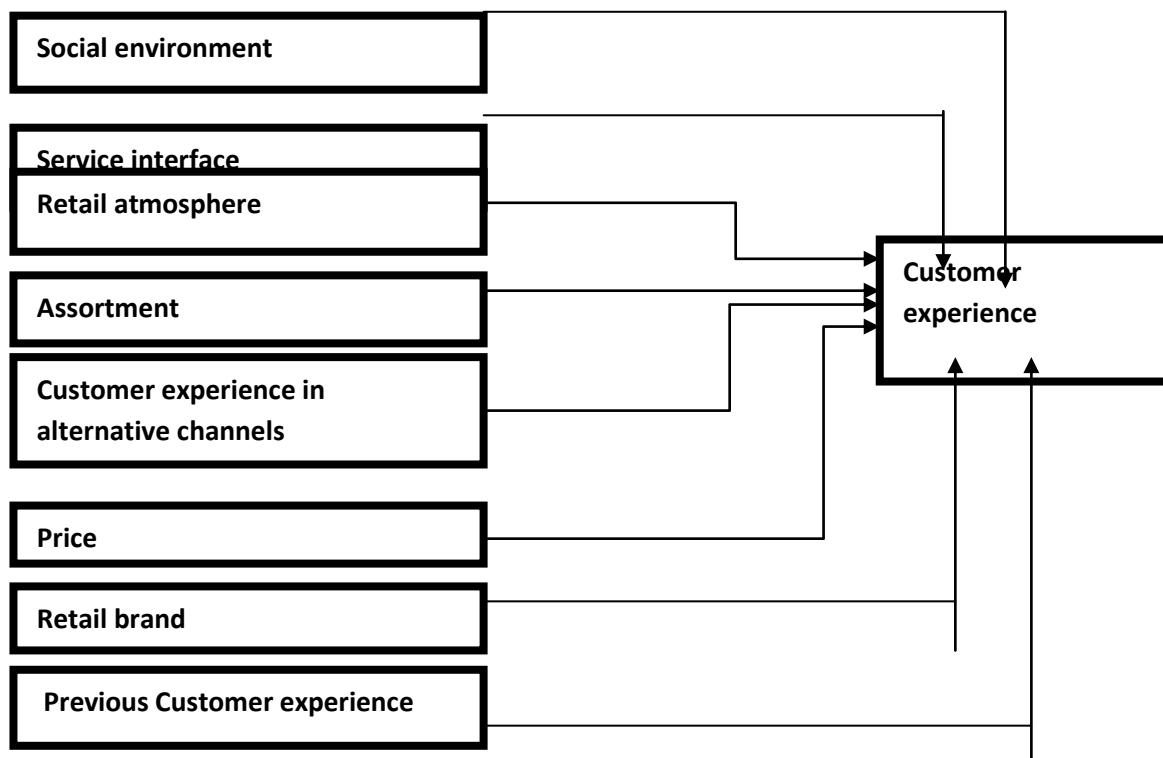
A supermarket, a form of grocery store, is a self-service store offering a wide variety of food and household merchandise, organized into departments. It is larger in size and has a wider selection than a traditional grocery store, also selling items typically found in a convenience store, but is smaller and more limited in the range of merchandise than a hypermarket (Srivastava, 2008). On the contrary hypermarkets are very huge shopping areas where the customer can buy groceries, food, garments, home appliances, durables, toys, cosmetics, toiletries, books and music at a price that is always lower than the market price by 5-50 percent (Srivastava, 2008). E.g.: Big Bazaar, Star Bazaar, Saravana Stores etc.

II. Conceptual model and literature review

The theoretical framework, or the conceptual basis, leading to the development of this study is based upon the model, Conceptual Model of Customer Experience Creation, developed by Verhoef et al. (2009).

As shown in Figure 1, there are several determinants or elements of the customer experience, including social environment, service interface, retail atmosphere, assortment, price, customer experience in alternate channels, retail brand and previous customer experience.

Figure1: Customer experience model



The social environment is one retail element, which is in the direct control of the retailer. There are often multiple customers in a store simultaneously and the experience of each customer can impact that of others. In addition, customers often visit a retail space with friends or family members. This can also affect the customer's own experience as well as that of fellow customers (Verhoef et al., 2009). The positive and negative effects of customer-to-customer interactions have been empirically documented for the tourism industry (Wu, 2007).

Service interface refers to the interaction between the customer and the service person throughout their entire experience with the retailer (Verhoef et al., 2009). The employees are the key ingredient in any branding effort. It is the actions of employees inside an organisation that feed the experience to those outside it. The

journey of providing quality customer experience is long and can be arduous. It begins at the heart of an organisation- the employees (Harris, 2007).

The atmosphere of the retailer can have a significant impact on the purchase behaviour and perception of the customer. Colour, music, and design can all influence whether or not a customer chooses to patronize a retail store and how much time and money is spent in the retail unit. The in-store atmosphere of a retailer can also have an affect on how the customer perceives the quality of merchandise as well (Ailawadi and Keller, 2004).

Assortment can be described as the ability of the retailer to offer a wide array of products to the customer with variety, uniqueness, and quality (Verhoef et al., 2009). Customers desire flexibility in their choices and demand an array of products to choose from in order to meet their ever-changing goals, needs, and social situations (Mantrala et al., 2009). Recently, researchers have even conceptualized that larger assortments may actually benefit customers by providing them desired opportunities for processing (Broniarczyk, 2008).

By the definition of Verhoef et al (2009) the factor of price in the concept of customer experience is defined by the way customers perceive loyalty programmes and discount policies. Relationship marketing tactics, such as loyalty programs, company credit cards, and e-mail promotions, are becoming increasingly popular. Benefits offered to a customer for engaging in relational exchanges include price decreases, special offers, personalized attention, and customized products. With such benefits, the assumption is that customers will want to develop a relationship with an organization and be rewarded for their loyalty (Noble and Phillips, 2004).

According to weiss et al (2003) when a number of channel options are available to the customer, they may rotate channel usage and thus experience of one channel is most likely to affect the experience in the other channel. It can be seen that in a multichannel context, the online channel experience is assessed relative to a benchmark alternative channel and vice versa. The retailer's alternate channel constitutes as a reference point for customer evaluations (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, and Malhotra, 2002)

The retail brand is an important element to consider when attempts are made to understand the creation of the ultimate customer experience. There are two types of brands considered by the customer, the retail brand (e.g. Wal-Mart) and the brand sold within the store (e.g. Coca-Cola). In turn, the customer's behaviour can be influenced by their perception of the specific brand and the type of brand (Verhoef et al., 2009).

Some studies emphasise the importance of the customer's previous experience in subsequent responses to the purchase. Ruyter and Wetzel (2000) say that dissatisfaction has more negative effects on new customers than repeat customers. Findings are that customer familiarity causes satisfaction to have a greater impact on subsequent loyalty. This suggests that positive experience with the retailer at earlier instances is more likely to generate a similar situation in the future (Velazquez et al., 2010).

III. Objectives

The main objectives are as follows:

1. To measure the experience of the customers at the supermarkets and hypermarkets
2. To identify the set of determinants which the customer consider as the most important contributors to experience.
3. To find out whether there is any significant difference in the determinants of customer's experience in supermarket and hypermarket.

IV. Method

Sampling method

This study is descriptive in nature. All the retail customers above the age of 18 years who shop at the various organised retail outlets present in the Chennai city were considered for the study. Respondent for the study is the person who does shopping in supermarket/hypermarket within the limits of the Chennai city. The geographical scope of the study is confined to Chennai – which is one of the most vibrant markets in south India.

Thus Chennai is one of the most happening places of south India. The city has several popular organised retail outlets most of them domestic retail giants running chain stores in India. The city was chosen as it had almost all major store formats which make the environment suitable for testing the model. Convenience sampling a method of non probability sampling was used for this particular study.

Measurement

The survey questionnaire consists of two parts: part-A and part-B. The part-A consists of questions connected to respondent's socio-economic, demographic profile. The responses are measured using nominal scales. The second part-B consists of items for customer experience and also for each dimension of the determinants. All items are measured on 7-point Likert scale (7 "strongly agree" to 1 "strongly disagree"). All

the measurement items were adapted from the existing scales to measure the constructs proposed in the model. Pre testing of the questionnaire was done before the final survey (n=50). The internal consistency of the instrument was tested through reliability analysis using Cronbach’s alpha. All reliability results were in the range 0.70 to 0.92 which exceeds 0.70 limit of acceptability.

The main survey was carried out with 500 respondents and 418 questionnaires were found to be valid of which 256 belonged to the supermarket category and 162 belonged to the hypermarket category.

Analysis

The collected data were coded in an SPSS spreadsheet and a simple statistical analysis such as frequency distribution and percentage was carried out along with multiple regression models. Linear regression using the enter method was used. Significance tests and β estimates were used to evaluate the magnitude and direction of the effect(s) of each of the determinants and the customer experience for both supermarket and hypermarket. Large tolerance values and variance inflation factors were observed, indicating no issues with multicollinearity (Hair et al., 2006).

V. Results

Table 1 provides a comparison of sample characteristics for supermarket and hypermarket. On examination of the respondents (n=418) indicated a majority of females (61.7% for supermarket and 54.9% for hypermarket) compared to males (38.3% for supermarket and 45.1% for hypermarket). In the case of supermarket a majority of respondents age were in the range of 19 to 29 years (31.2%). In the case of hypermarket respondents age were in the range of 19 to 29 years (25.9%) followed by 30 to 39 years (33.3%), 24.1 percent indicating age between 40 and 49, 13 percent indicating age between 50 and 59 and 3.7 percent indicating ages greater than 60.

Sample characteristics – Table 1

Variable	Level	Supermarket		Hypermarket	
		Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	98	38.3	73	45.1
	Female	158	61.7	89	54.9
	Total	256	100.0	162	100.0
Age	19-29 years	80	31.2	42	25.9
	30-39 years	75	29.3	54	33.3
	40-49 years	57	22.3	39	24.1
	50-59 years	30	11.7	21	13.0
	60 years and above	14	5.5	6	3.7
	Total	256	100.0	162	100.0
Marital status	Married	179	69.9	112	69.1
	Unmarried	75	29.3	45	27.8
	Others	2	.8	5	3.1
	Total	256	100.0	162	100.0
Monthly income(rupees)	less than 10000	33	12.9	16	9.9
	10001-20000	52	20.3	26	16.0
	20001-30000	53	20.7	36	22.2
	30001-40000	48	18.8	22	13.6
	40001-50000	29	11.3	29	17.9
	more than 50000	41	16.0	33	20.4
	Total	256	100.0	162	100.0
Education	high school	11	4.3	7	4.3
	diploma	19	7.4	17	10.5
	graduate	163	63.7	89	54.9
	post graduate and above	63	24.6	49	30.2
	Total	256	100.0	162	100.0

The marital status of the respondents of supermarket and hypermarket shows that a majority of the respondents are married.

The income levels across the sample for supermarket can be seen that 12.9 percent of respondents indicate monthly household incomes less than 10000 rupees, 20.3 percent indicating incomes between 10000 and 20000, 20.7 percent indicating incomes between 20000 and 30000, 18.8 percent indicating incomes between 30000 and 40000, 11.3 percent indicating incomes between 40000 and 50000 and finally 16 percent indicating incomes greater than 50000. The income levels across the sample for hypermarket can be seen that 9.9 percent of respondents indicate monthly household incomes less than 10000 rupees, 16 percent indicating incomes between 10000 and 20000, 22.2 percent indicating incomes between 20000 and 30000, 13.6 percent indicating

incomes between 30000 and 40000, 17.9 percent indicating incomes between 40000 and 50000 and finally 20.4 percent indicating incomes greater than 50000.

Approximately in the case of supermarket, 4.3 percent of the respondents have completed high school, 7.4 percent have completed their diploma, 63.7 percent were graduates and 24.6 percent respondents hold a postgraduate degree or above. Approximately in the case of hypermarket, 4.3 percent of the respondents have completed high school, 10.5 percent have completed their diploma, 54.9 percent are graduates and 30.2 percent respondents hold a postgraduate degree or above.

Determinants and customer experience

The effects of the various determinants namely social environment, service interface, retail atmosphere, assortment, price, retail brand, previous customer experience and experience in the alternate channels were examined using linear regression. The resulting regression models for the dependent variable (customer experience) produced significant results including distinct predictors at varying alpha levels.

The overall regression model for supermarket yielded a significant statistic (F=51.972, p<0.000) with previous customer experience ($\beta=0.276$, t=5.041, p<0.000), atmosphere ($\beta=0.320$, t=5.274, p<0.000), price ($\beta=0.147$, t=2.080, p<0.039), social environment ($\beta=0.175$, t=2.750, p<0.006) and experience in alternate channels ($\beta=0.112$, t=1.991, p<0.048) as significant predictors.

The overall regression model for hypermarket yielded a significant statistic (F=47.334, p<0.000) with previous customer experience ($\beta=0.404$, t=6.695, p<0.000), assortment ($\beta=0.191$, t=2.114, p<0.036), social environment ($\beta=0.277$, t=4.078, p<0.000) and experience in alternate channels ($\beta=0.121$, t=1.960, p<0.052) as significant predictors.

Predictor effects and β estimates for determinants on customer experience

Model/predictor variable	Unstandardised coefficients		Standardised coefficients	t	Sig
	B	SE	β		
Supermarket					
constant	.477	.230		2.078	.039
Past experience	.261	.052	.276	5.041	.000
Atmosphere	.306	.058	.320	5.274	.000
Assortment	-.038	.066	-.040	-.576	.565
Price	.135	.065	.147	2.080	.039
Service interface	-.054	.063	-.057	-.853	.395
Social environment	.156	.057	.175	2.750	.006
Retail brand	.013	.084	.013	.161	.872
Alternate channel experience	.091	.046	.112	1.991	.048
Hypermarket					
(Constant)	.036	.252		.143	.887
Past experience	.398	.060	.404	6.695	.000
Atmosphere	.072	.057	.082	1.248	.214
Assortment	.194	.092	.191	2.114	.036
Price	-.011	.094	-.010	-.118	.906
Service interface	-.037	.076	-.037	-.487	.627
Social environment	.254	.062	.277	4.078	.000
Retail brand	-.005	.100	-.005	-.051	.959
Alternate channel experience	.101	.046	.121	1.960	.046

VI. Discussions

From the demographic profiling of the customers it can be seen that for both the retail formats are visited by a majority of females roughly about 62% in case of supermarket. A relatively younger population seem to be patronising these organised retail formats and there is significantly lesser patronage among the older customers. Roughly about 70% of the people visiting both the formats are married. Customers who visit supermarkets and hypermarkets belong to the middle income group of rupees 20000 to 30000 per month. Most of the customers are also highly educated with the number of graduates outnumbering the other categories.

The regression model and its related β estimates indicate that in case of supermarket previous experience, atmosphere, price, social environment and alternate channel experience play a major role in creating a superior customer experience. In the case of hypermarket past experience, assortment, social environment and alternate channel experience play a major role in creating a superior customer experience.

In both the formats the previous experience has a significant role in determining customer experience which clearly reiterates the fact that over a period of interactions the customers learn more about a particular attribute and they become more efficient users of it and that efficiency directly may affect the level of satisfaction they experience(Mittal et al., 1999). Therefore customer experience is significantly shaped or reiterated in the minds of the customer every time he comes in contact with the system and this makes it

necessary for the retailer to provide a positive experience every time the customer comes in contact with the retail format.

In the case of supermarket atmosphere plays a significant role since the customer may feel that he has solely selected this format over the other local stores due to the fact that the space is designed more appropriately with facilities such as proper lighting, design, layout and music which may naturally lend a pleasant experience and this atmosphere has a huge impact on customer experience in the supermarket customer. The significant influence of design cues on the shopping experience costs underscores the need for retailers to give careful consideration to store design features. These features have a great potential to influence the shopping experience and store patronage behaviour of shoppers/customers (Baker et al., 2002).

In both the formats social environment plays a prominent role and this stresses the need for retailers to closely look into the components of social environment namely crowding, influence of friends/peers, the influence of parents and also that of the fellow customers. Previous studies have shown that the presence of co-customers can make or ruin the experience of the other customers. There are many studies showing that customers may affect one another indirectly by being part of the environment or more directly through specific interaction incidents (Baker, 1987; Bitner, 1992). Such an interactive incident may be an upside experience, or more likely a distressing experience. Therefore, fellow customers will be influenced by the perception of these customer-to-customer interaction incidents. Hence the retailer should make it a point to attract likeminded customers so that the experience of every customer is enriched. This would create a positive influence in the minds of the customer and enable them to further act as ambassadors by positive word of mouth. The retailer can thus take charge by attracting similar customers.

The demographic profile shows that the customers of both the formats are relatively younger, well educated, with a good income at their disposal, this clearly paves the way for their exposure to the other alternate ways of shopping, namely the internet for gathering information and also for shopping. The results clearly show that alternate channel shopping experience is a significant determinant in the case of and hypermarket. This emphasises the need for the retailer to significantly increase their offering through the internet to capture more customers and also to provide a better online experience. This is necessary since the experience of the customers in this channel directly influences the in store experience. In India the level of internet usage is gradually increasing and it is necessary to focus on the rapidly growing importance of online shopping experience. Multichannel retailers stand to capture the most value from the internet because of the advantages of having an existing brand, marketing leverage, merchandising skills, multiple points of customer contact and distribution expertise (Hutchinson, 2001). Multichannel retailing fosters long term loyalty by providing customers with shopping options for their convenience and ultimately long term business success (Dholakia, Zhao, Dholakia, 2005).

Price perception which mainly deals with the promotions, discounts and loyalty schemes of the retailer is another determinant which significantly contributes to the customer experience in supermarket. It can be seen that the customers look forward to such deals. Various features such as club cards, frequent shopper programs and loyalty coupons and the other promotional deals are actively looked upon by the customers and hence the retailers should concentrate on these deals and differentiate themselves from the other retailers. Store loyalty programs that encourage repeat visits become barriers to switching (Dholakia, Zhao, Dholakia, 2005). As many major services firms (supermarkets, department stores, car rentals, hotels, airlines, insurance, etc.) launched similar loyalty programs, many customers participate in multiple loyalty programs offered by different firms within the same industry. Consequently, it is more difficult for firms to compete for larger “share of wallet” from their customers unless they can establish deeper relationship with their key customers (Wirtz et al., 2007).

Assortment of goods actively contributes to the overall experience in hypermarkets. On comparison with the supermarket customers expect a wider range of products of several brands and better quality. The hypermarkets also store their own store brands along with several popular brands which gives a lot of choice to the customers. The customer experience is better shaped by a wide variety of choices.

VII. Implications of the study

The present study provides a comprehensive knowledge about the determinants of the customer experience for supermarkets and hypermarkets. This helps the managers to design appropriate strategies to attract and retain customers by providing a superior experience. Information about the demographics of customers for each format would reveal areas for offering customised marketing programmes.

Past experience, social environment and alternate channel experience are the significant predictors for both the supermarket as well as hypermarket. In addition atmosphere and price act as significant predictors for supermarket whereas in case of hypermarkets assortment plays a significant role. It is suggested that the retailers take note of the significant predictors while developing retail format strategies.

Given the absence of published academic literature relating to customer experience in retailing in India, this study may serve as the starting point for future studies in this particular area of concern.

VIII. Limitations and future research

Our aim here has been to contribute to the knowledge of customer experience by studying the various determinants. Along with the merits, the study also has some limitations. The data collected are from Chennai and the sample size is restricted to 418 for both supermarket and hypermarket put together. In addition to this the sampling procedure was non probability convenience sampling and thus it inherently brings all the limitations of it. Finally the generalisation of the findings of the study may not be applicable to other geographical areas outside India due to difference in customers and the type of retail format that are available in different countries.

This study has shown the various determinants of customer experience and also to identify the key variables for the two very important organised retail store format namely supermarket and hypermarket concentrating on the urban customers. The study has not included rural customers. It would be very interesting to include the rural customers in the future studies.

Future studies can incorporate situational moderators (location, culture, economic climate) as well as consumer moderators (goals and involvement) to study the moderating effect of these variables which significantly influence the formation of customer experience. Further research across the other formats of organised retailing is warranted to get a deeper understanding of the antecedents across formats.

It is assumed that the study would be very useful to retailers and researchers as it provides a clearer insight into the various contributors to a superior customer experience which in turn may create a deeper bond toward the retail outlet and will directly impact the purchase behaviour of the customer.

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