

The Relationship between Store elements and In-Store Shopping Experience for Customer Satisfaction at Rural Grocery Stores

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Abstract: *In the retail environment, customers are stimulated by the look and feel of a store and how the store is laid out. Certain store elements create a shopping experience that attracts customers to a certain store as their preferred shopping destination. Therefore, grocery stores need to ensure that customer's shopping experience is pleasant. This article focused on determining the relationship between store elements and the in-store shopping experience of grocery store customers in the King Sabata Dalindyebo(KSD) Local Municipality in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. The study aimed to identify the relationship between various store elements and customers' in-store shopping experience in ensuring customer satisfaction. A sample of 256 customers who frequently shopped at grocery stores in the KSD Local Municipality was used for the part of the study in which a quantitative research design was followed. A web-based questionnaire was used to collect data. The data were then analysed using regression analysis and hypothesis formulation. According to the findings of the research, there is a strong correlation between the in-store shopping experience and store elements, such as personal interaction, merchandise value, the internal store environment, merchandise variety and assortment, and the handling of customer complaints. The handling of complaints from customers was found to have the strongest relationship with customers' in-store shopping experience, followed by merchandise variety and assortment, and the internal store environment. Furthermore, customer satisfaction was found to be affected by customers' shopping experiences inside stores. Consequently, grocery stores ought to enhance store elements to improve customers' in-store shopping experience.*

Keywords: *in-store shopping, store element, customer satisfaction*

Introduction

The grocery store industry is extremely competitive. Retailers constantly enhance and remodel their stores in response to continuous developments in the industry and the need for an improved in-store shopping experience to reinforce customer satisfaction. In the past, customers were most interested in product features, benefits, and attributes. Nowadays, customers want more than just to purchase a product – they seek additional benefits within the shopping environment. Customers want a pleasant in-store shopping experience. Consequently, retailers must improve store elements to make customers' in-store shopping experience pleasant. By doing market research and gaining a better understanding of customers' needs, retailers can create the in-store shopping experience that customers want, thereby improving customer satisfaction.

Although some research has been conducted on the in-store shopping experience of grocery store customers in South Africa, no research has been carried out to investigate the in-store shopping experience of customers of grocery stores located in rural areas and its influence on customer satisfaction. Therefore, the research problem dealt with in this article is the lack of understanding of the store elements involved in creating customers' in-store shopping experience and the degree to which customers' in-store shopping experience is related to customer satisfaction in the South African rural retail environment. The aim of this article, which is part of a larger study, is to determine the relationship between store elements and customers' in-store shopping experience in respect of customer satisfaction based on customers' perceptions.

The existing body of knowledge about grocery stores located in rural areas of South Africa was explored through a review of extant literature to establish the basis for an empirical investigation into the relationship between store elements and customers' in-store shopping experience in respect of customer satisfaction at grocery stores located in the King Sabata Dalindyebo Local

Municipality. Dependent and independent variables are discussed in the literature review.

Literature Review

Store elements

Grocery stores are made up of both tangible (buildings and furniture) and intangible (temperature, colour, scent, and music) elements. Store elements assist retailers in displaying, selling, guarding, and providing storage space for merchandise (Jin & Cheng, 2018). Tomazelli, Broilo, Espartel and Basso (2017) state that grocery stores use store elements to design buying environments that produce specific emotional effects in customers that enhance purchase probability. According to Parsad, Prashar, Vijay and Sahay (2019), store elements stimulate several reactions in customers – they can influence customers' conative replies, such as the decision to upgrade their purchase or expenditure, impulse buying and the desire to spend more time in a shop. Store elements can also have an impact on the pleasure, mood, and emotions of customers, as well as the perceived quality of merchandise. Therefore, store elements are a potentially important source of competitive advantage in the grocery environment. The purpose of this article is to assist grocery stores in identifying the relationship between store elements that could be incorporated into existing and future retail strategies aimed at creating a pleasant in-store shopping experience for customers.

In-store shopping experience

Retail in-store shopping experience involves all the elements that encourage or inhibit customers during their contact with a retailer. Customers engage in a variety of activities while selecting a retail store and going shopping, as well as during the post-shopping stages, leading to a complete experience that determines their satisfaction levels and the likelihood of repeat visits. In-store activities, such as browsing, price comparisons, the search for merchandise, the evaluation of product variety and quality, and interaction with

store personnel, are instrumental in forming in-store shopping experiences (Terblanche, 2018). There is enough evidence that retail customer experience has a significant impact on retail sales, customer satisfaction, more frequent shopping visits, larger wallet shares, loyalty, profitability, word-of-mouth communication and image formation (Cachero-Martínez, & Vázquez-Casielles, 2017; Bustamante & Rubio, 2017). Terblanche and Boshoff (2001) identify factors that constitute the in-store shopping experience of supermarket customers. Based on the findings of their study, they argue that supermarket customers' in-store shopping experience is affected by five constructs. These constructs are set out below.

Personal interaction

The term "personal interaction" refers to all in-person communication between business partners and clients (Agarwal & Singh, 2018). The personal interaction construct includes elements such as prompt service, the knowledge of staff and courtesy. Terblanche (2018) found that the interaction between store employees and customers affects the in-store shopping experience of customers in a retail store. Agarwal and Singh (2018) assert that the degree of human interaction between customers and store personnel frequently affects customers' shopping experiences.

Blazquez, Boardman and Xu (2019) note that the friendliness of security staff at store entrances is important. Madhani (2021) argues that the kindness of security personnel can make customers feel welcome and safe. Bagdare (2016) asserts that employees' courteous and friendly behaviour toward customers has always led to a greater shopping experience. Bustamante and Rubio (2017) found that approachable employees are more likely to make the environment for consumers lively and stimulating than employees who are unpleasant and distant. Bustamante and Rubio (2017) established in their research that employees who provide personal attention, are knowledgeable about the products they sell, and deliver prompt service contribute to a more positive customer shopping experience.

Furthermore, Terblanche (2018) found that the number of employees within a retail store influences the shopping experience of customers.

Albrecht, Walsh and Brach (2017) state that in a retail store that has many employees, it is easier for customers to be assisted on time compared to a retail store that only has a few employees. A salesperson's cheerful outlook and willingness to assist a customer with a product or service query can create a pleasant environment (Cachero-Martínez & Vázquez-Casielles, 2017). A positive experience for customers can promote the creation of connectedness between a store and its customers. Albrecht, Walsh, and Brach (2017) argue that employees who are incapable of performing a store's daily business activities will create an environment where customers are not assisted.

H1: Personal interaction has a statistically significant effect on the in-store shopping experience of grocery store customers in rural areas.

Merchandise value

Terblanche (2018) indicates that you get what you pay for when it comes to merchandise value, implying that the price of an item has an impact on the value of the item and the perceived quality of the product. Merchandise value represents customers' perception of the price and the quality of merchandise. Schweiger, Grewal, Roggeveen and Beitelspacher (2020) found that customers' perceptions of product price and quality are crucial for evaluating retail stores. According to Zaid, and Patwayati (2021), customers use the price of a product as a gauge of its quality. As a result, if the price of a product is high, customers' expectations about the performance and the quality of the product are also high (Terblanche, 2018). Bustamante and Rubio (2017) state that product quality is the determining factor in respect of customers' perception of the price of a product and, therefore, has an influence on the shopping experience of customers.

H2: Merchandise value has a statistically significant effect on the in-store shopping experience of grocery store customers in rural areas.

Internal store environment

The term “internal store environment” refers to the tangible elements of a retail store that contribute to customers’ shopping convenience (Gorji, Grimmer, Grimmer & Siami, 2021). These tangible elements include both interior design and physical store elements, such as checkout counters, store shelves and promotional displays (Jung, Bae, Moorhouse, & Kwon, 2021). Shopping carts are imperative physical facilities that create a pleasant shopping experience if they are fully functional and reliable, often making customers enjoy shopping (Padma, Aravindakshan & Prakash, 2019). Daveler et al. (2022) suggest that shopping carts should be designed in a way that accommodates all types of customers, for example, elderly customers, customers with children and customers who are in wheelchairs. Padma, Aravindakshan and Prakash (2019) highlight that using shopping carts might be difficult for the elderly and physically challenged because they may be unable to push around heavy shopping carts.

The store layout, aisles, cleanliness, product and service grouping, shelf space allocation, colours and signage also form part of the internal store environment (Chuchu, Venter de Villiers & Chinomona, 2018). The internal environment provides a visual metaphor for a retail store’s total offering and helps customers to make purchases (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). According to De Villiers, Chinomona and Chuchu (2018), a well-designed internal environment leads to an increase in customers’ in-store exploration, which improves the purchasing experience. Hashmi, Shu and Haider (2020) also note that the emotional moods of customers are influenced by the environment inside a store.

Retail-related studies suggest that customers value the convenience that the internal store environment contributes to shopping (Chuchu, Venter de Villiers & Chinomona, 2018). Terblanche (2018) found that the internal environment makes purchasing more convenient for customers, which enhances their enjoyment of the process. Lata and Jain (2019) established that good facility design using floor plans, layout, equipment, and

shelving, coupled with the cleanliness of a store, have a major impact on customers’ shopping experiences. Moreover, Mowrey, Parikh and Gue (2019) and Lemon and Verhoef (2016) found that in a store interior where the aisles are broad, the different departments are situated appropriately, and the aisles have designated directions leads to the enhancement of customers’ perceptions of the variety and the quality of merchandise.

H3: The internal store environment has a statistically significant effect on the in-store shopping experience of grocery store customers in rural areas.

Merchandise variety and assortment

The term “merchandise variety and assortment” refers to different types of products offered by a retailer and the number of variations available in each merchandise category (Berkhout & Berkhout 2019). The merchandise variety and assortment construct represent different types of well-known brands that are available in many different sizes, styles, and colours in a retail store (Yu-Che, Chia-Chi & Chia-Cheng, 2019). Ademe-Godwin, & Opuene, (2023) states that customer attitudes toward shopping at a particular retail store are associated with the variety and assortment of merchandise offered by the store. Berkhout & Berkhout (2019) reported that among the 10 factors presented to customers regarding how they chose a particular retailer, merchandise variety and assortment were rated the highest. Terblanche (2018) found in a study on shopping experiences that customers are disappointed when a store has limited merchandise, as well as brands that they are not familiar with.

H4: Merchandise variety and assortment have a statistically significant effect on the in-store shopping experience of grocery store customers in rural areas.

Complaint handling

Complaint handling can be described as the strategy used by a retailer to solve service failures (Jeanpert, Jacquemier-Paquin & Claye-Puaux, 2021). The complaint-handling construct captures the elements that are related to store policies and

how a retailer responds to customer queries and needs (Terblanche, 2018). The complaint elements apply to areas of store operations such as returns or exchanges of purchases, payment options, shopping hours and systems or processes for dealing with customer queries (Abbasi, Fayyaz, Ting, Munir, Bashir & Zhang, 2022). Owing to the crucial component of a store's reaction to a customer's needs, service recovery is also recognised as one of the elements of complaint handling (Jeanpert, Jacquemier-Paquin & Claye-Puau, 2021). Since service failures and associated recovery efforts leave a lasting impression on customers, how a retailer handles them is crucial for a great shopping experience (Terblanche, 2018).

H5: Complaint handling has a statistically significant effect on the in-store shopping experience of grocery store customers in rural areas.

Customer satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is related to customers' evaluation of a product or a service, as well as the overall customer experience, which is shaped by customers' needs and expectations. A high degree of customer satisfaction can lead to customer retention and increased market share (Otto, Szymanski & Varadarajan, 2020). Satisfied customers are less price sensitive, tend to buy additional products and are less influenced by competitors, staying loyal for longer (Daultani, Goyal, & Pratap, 2020). A portfolio of satisfied customers enhances the economic, competitive, and strategic advantages of a company (Vakulenko, Shams, Hellstrom & Hjort, 2019).

Research Method

The following section provides a brief summary of the method used to gather the data for this study

Sample

As a result of the non-availability of a sampling frame, the use of non-probability sampling was deemed appropriate. Convenience sampling is a non-probability sampling technique where

samples are selected from the population only because they are conveniently available to the researcher (Stratton, 2021). Convenience sampling was selected because the target population is composed of members of the public who are customers of grocery stores in the King Sabata Dalindyebo Local Municipality, Mthatha, Eastern Cape.

Data collection

WhatsApp was used as the medium for distributing LimeSurvey links, which redirected the participants to a web-based questionnaire. The contact details of potential participants were obtained through the interception of grocery store customers at shopping malls, workplaces, and social/public gatherings. The participants were given information regarding the research study and were asked whether they would be willing to participate in the study. The researcher asked for the contact details of willing participants to consolidate the contact list of participants.

WhatsApp was deemed appropriate for collecting data since it is the most popular form of electronic communication in the King Sabata Dalindyebo Municipality (Fuzile, 2021). One telecommunications company indicated that WhatsApp accounts for 98% of instant messages sent through its network and enables a higher percentage of prompt returns (Amukeshe, 2018). WhatsApp policies were complied with because they ensure that WhatsApp conversations are protected by end-to-end encryption, which means no one outside of chats, not even other users of WhatsApp or Meta, can read or listen to conversations on WhatsApp.

Analysis

Regression analysis was used to determine how the independent variables affected the dependent variables. According to Desboulets (2018), regression analysis is a statistical tool that enables the researcher to examine the influence of the independent variable on the dependent variable. The chi-square test was used to test the hypotheses. According to Gaboardi and Rogers

(2018), the chi-square test is a statistical method for determining whether categorical variables have a relationship that is statistically significant. A chi-square test indicates a significant relationship between the categorical variables when the p-value is less than or equal to the significance level ($p=0.05$).

Findings

Reliability

The reliability of each construct in the model was tested using Cronbach’s alpha coefficient. The Cronbach’s alpha coefficient for each construct was higher than the recommended value of 0.60 (shopping experience, 0.844; handling of customer complaints, 0.873; customer satisfaction, 0.885; internal store environment, 0.840; personal interaction, 0.847; merchandise value, 0.763; and merchandise variety and assortment, 0.720), indicating that the constructs were scored in an acceptable and consistent manner.

Relationship between store elements and in-store shopping experience

The relationship between store elements and the in-store shopping experience of grocery store customers is depicted in Table 1. A summary of the ANOVA test is as follows: $x^2=47.571$; $df=1$; mean square= 47.571 ; and p -value= 0.001 . The ANOVA test revealed that the predictors- store elements predicted the dependent variable- in-store shopping experience with a p -value of 0.001 . A summary of the model fit is as follows: $R=0.697$; R -squared= 0.485 ; adjusted R -squared= 0.475 ; and standard error of the estimate= 0.45888 .

The findings presented in Table 1 reveal a positive correlation (0.697) and a strong relationship between in-store shopping experience and Handling of Customer Complaints (β -value= 0.262 , $p<0.001$), Merchandise Variety and Assortment (β -value= 0.219 ; $p<0.001$), Merchandise Value (β -value= 0.015 ; $p>0.802$), Personal Interaction (β -value= 0.012 ; $p>0.802$) and Internal Store Environment (β -value= 0.224 ; $p<0.001$).

Table 1: Coefficients of in-store shopping experience

Model	Unstandardised coefficients		Standardised coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity statistics		
	B	Std. error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF	
1	(Constant)	0.988	0.185		5.330	<0.001		
	Personal interaction	0.012	0.046	0.016	0.251	0.802	0.539	1.857
	Merchandise value	0.015	0.059	0.015	0.251	0.802	0.541	1.847
	Internal store environment	0.224	0.068	0.233	3.287	0.001	0.411	2.436
	Merchandise variety and assortment	0.219	.053	0.245	4.100	<0.001	0.577	1.734
	Handling of customer complaints	0.262	0.054	0.318	4.839	<0.001	0.476	2.101

Correlation between customer satisfaction and In-store Shopping Experience

The findings presented in Table 2 reveal a strong relationship between the level of customer satisfaction and in-store shopping experience (β -

value= 0.682). Furthermore, the findings indicate that the in-store shopping experience is a predictor of customer satisfaction ($p<0.001$). The findings reveal a positive correlation and a strong relationship (57.5%) between customer satisfaction and in-store shopping experience.

Table 2: Coefficients of customer satisfaction

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics		
	β	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF	
1	(Constant)	1.089	0.222		4.904	<0.001		
	Shopping experience	0.682	0.061	0.575	11.188	<0.001	1.000	1.000

The hypotheses were tested using the chi-square test. The reliability and validity of the scales were assessed before the hypothesis testing was conducted. Based on the measurement model, using a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA)

approach, all the constructs were found to be reliable and valid. According to the results of the hypothesis testing, all the hypotheses (H1, H2, H3, H4 and H5) were statistically significant, with a p-value below 0.05. Table 3 shows the results of the hypothesis testing.

Table 1: Hypotheses test results

	Hypotheses	Significance	Decision (Accept/Reject)
H1	Personal interaction has a statistically significant effect on the in-store shopping experience of grocery store customers in rural areas.	β -value=0.012 P-value=0.001	Accepted
H2	Merchandise value has a statistically significant effect on the in-store shopping experience of grocery store customers in rural areas.	β -value=0.015 p-value=0.001	Accepted
H3	The internal store environment has a statistically significant effect on the in-store shopping experience of grocery store customers in rural areas.	β -value=0.224 p-value=0.001	Accepted
H4	Merchandise variety and assortment have a statistically significant effect on the in-store shopping experience of grocery store customers in rural areas.	β -value=0.219 p-value=0.001	Accepted
H5	Complaint handling has a statistically significant effect on the in-store shopping experience of grocery store customers in rural areas.	β -value=0.262 p-value=0.001	Accepted

The relationships between the individual store elements, in-store shopping experience and customer satisfaction are depicted in Figure 1.

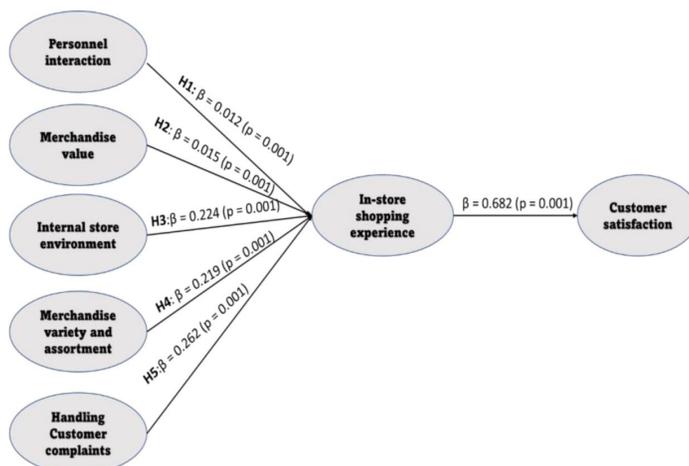


Figure 1: Theoretical model

Conclusion

This study showed that there is a strong relationship between the store elements of grocery stores and the in-store shopping experience of grocery store customers and that

customers’ in-store shopping experience has an impact on customer satisfaction. In other words, store elements determine the in-store shopping experience of grocery store customers, which, in turn, influences customer satisfaction.

It is clear from Figure 1 that, of all the constructs, the construct, handling of customer complaints, has the strongest relationship with customers' in-store shopping experience. This construct refers to how grocery stores resolve customer queries or problems, such as the exchange and return of products, and warranties. This result further reveals that the construct is a significant predictor of customers' in-store shopping experience. The regression coefficients (beta) indicate that customers' in-store shopping experience increases by 31.8% for each additional increase in the handling of customer complaints.

The second strongest relationship is between the internal store environment and customers' in-store shopping experience, indicating the overall importance of the internal store environment in respect of customers' in-store shopping experience. According to the result obtained, the internal store environment has a statistically significant effect on customers' in-store shopping experience ($p < 0.001$).

Merchandise variety and assortment were rated as the construct with the third strongest relationship with customer's in-store shopping experience. This result indicates that grocery stores should provide customers with different brands, different product sizes and different types of products. Merchandise variety and assortment can be regarded as a predictor of customer's in-store shopping experience ($p < 0.001$). An improvement of 24.5% in merchandise variety and assortment will increase the shopping experience of customers.

Personal interaction was rated as the construct with the fourth strongest relationship with customers' in-store shopping experience (β -value=0.012). However, the p-value of personal interaction was statistically significant ($p = 0.001$), which means that personal interaction has a statistically significant effect on customer's in-store shopping experience. The findings further indicate that a 1.6% change in personal interaction will lead to a change in customers' in-store shopping experience. Respondents highlighted that the willingness of personnel to help them is

the most important factor that affects their in-store shopping experience.

Merchandise value was the construct with the fifth strongest relationship with customers' in-store shopping experience. This construct refers to the quality and the price of a product or a service. The construct is among the constructs that influence customers' in-store shopping experience, with a p-value greater than 0.001.

The findings of the study suggest that if grocery stores in the KSD Local Municipality want to improve their customers' in-store shopping experience, their efforts should primarily focus on improving the handling of customer complaints. The improvement of merchandise variety and assortment is the second most important area of focus, followed by the internal store environment. Nevertheless, an improvement in any of the five constructs would improve customer satisfaction and customers' in-store shopping experience.

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