

Antecedents of Retail Store Image in the Context of a Leading Retail Superstore in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

This study has examined the relationship of location, store assortment, store service quality, price perception, and communication with store image in the context of a major retail store operating in the metropolitan areas of Dhaka, Bangladesh. This study portrays the important assessment on the influencing antecedents of retail store image. Data was collected from 226 shoppers of the retail store by surveying through personal interview technique. A multi-item structured questionnaire was designed to measure all the studied variables. The items were borrowed from prior researches, which endorsed the fact that the scales were valid and reliable. Stepwise regression has shown that location, price perception, store service quality, and store assortment have statistically significant relationship with store image. The result has shown that location is the most important antecedent influencing a retail store image. Price perception comes second when it comes to influencing the store image. Perceived price is a reflection of whether shopping at that store ensures 'good value for money' also influences the image of a retail store. Shoppers also want good services from the store personnel. Store assortment has been proven to be another important factor in the assessment of store image. However other factor in this study communication, have also played an important role for understanding the factors influencing store image. Through this research, a clear understanding of the antecedents of store image is examined and this would help the retail store operators to recognize the factors to establish and enhance the image of their retail store.

Key Words: Store Location, Store Assortment, Store Service Quality, Price Perception, Communication, Store Image.

INTRODUCTION

Retail stores or supermarkets are the most frequent destination for day-to-day shopping for city dwellers. Urban people carry out their purchase of daily commodities on the way to work and back. Hence it is becoming very common phenomena that modern day shoppers are looking for those retail stores which provide convenient, hassle-free, hygienic, product variety, price fairness, quality products and adequate services (Munni, 2010). As a result the increasing numbers of different types of retail stores are observable recently in urban areas. Namely they differ from one another regardless of their size and type, Departmental stores, retail stores, convenient stores, supermarkets, discount stores etc. (Jeevananda, 2011).

Retail chain stores or superstores have begun their journey in Bangladesh not more than a decade ago. Retail chain stores have set their foot in early 2000 in the urban areas of Bangladesh. Within a very short period of time it captured the attention and confidence of the retail buyers. And the rest it says is history. Within a decade or so, numerous super stores have flooded the city. Currently there are 30 companies operating 200 odd retail stores and the number is expected to grow three times in next five years as per the Bangladesh Supermarket Owners Association (BSOA). It has been reported by BSOA that there is a 15 – 20 percent annual growth in sales which is around 15 billion (Taka) per annum. Many corporate houses have launched retail chain stores and more are on their way. Notably Agora, Meena Bazar, Nandan, PQS, Swapno, Mehedi Mart, Unimart, price bazaar etc are significant to talk about. According to Priyodesk (2012) retail supermarkets are the second largest contributor in the economy of Bangladesh.

Due to the availability of numerous retail chain stores, massive competition is observable between the superstores. Urban shoppers are also becoming increasingly aware, knowledgeable, and convenience-seeker day by day. So the focus has shifted to retain customers' which is becoming ever more significant for retail operators. Numerous researchers in the past have been trying to understand and measure the antecedents for customers' satisfaction and allegiance such as price fairness, service quality, product quality, inventory assortment, trust, commitment, relationship quality, culture, store image, brand image etc. (Chaiyasoonthorn & Suksa-ngiam, 2011; Wong & Sohal, 2006). Nowadays Customer satisfaction, loyalty and retention are the center of attention globally (Hume & Mort, 2010; Kitchathorn, 2009; Carpenter, 2008; Bridson, Evan, & Hickman, 2008; Ciavolino & Dahlgaard 2007; Singh, 2006). Previous researchers also found a significant relationship among the customer loyalty based on corporate image with re-patronage intentions and positive word of mouth communications (McMullan & Gilmore, 2008; Park, Robertson, & Wu, 2006; Yuen & Chan, 2010; Sirohi, Mclaughlin, & Wittink, 1998). In this paper

store location, assortment, service quality, price perception, and communications are selected as exogenous variables, store image is selected as mediating variable and at the end repurchase intentions and word of mouth communication are selected as endogenous variables by the authors. Eventually the purpose of this study is to try and find out by examining the impact of store image on repurchase and word of mouth communication for suggestions and referrals.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Store Image

Businesses consider store image as crucial success factor for retail shops because of the influencing power over shoppers on store patronage behavior and furthermore revenue generation (Hansen & Solgaard, 2004). The image portrays 'personality' of the store in the mind of a shopper. For more than half a century, store image is frequently discussed in the academic field for its characteristics and dimensions. This has been explained as "the way in which the store is defined in the shopper's mind, partly by its functional qualities and partly by an aura of psychological attributes" (Martineau, 1958). Store image can basically be defined as customers' perception of a store, or in other words what customers think of a store based on the stimuli they receive with their senses. (Peter, Olson 2005). Some authors illustrated that customer uses different cues to evaluate the image of the store (Olson and Jacoby, 1972, Smeijn et al. 2004). Sometimes store environment and quality projects on to the good sold in that store hence increases private label brand quality in the minds of a customer (Vahie and Paswan, 2006).

The dimensions of store image have been discussed by many researchers over the years. Chowdhury, Reardon, and Srivastava (1998) reviewed the store image literature and developed a scale containing six dimensions of store image: product variety, product quality, prices/value, service, atmosphere and convenience. While assortment, location, price and promotion, and atmosphere were included by Ailawadi & Keller's (2004). Some authors prefer to split the dimension of a store image into two elements. The physical and psychological characteristics of the products sold in the store like quality, availability and price while the second element depicts the stores' inside and outside arrangements like store layout, atmosphere and displays (Newman, Cullen 2002, 243-244). Ghosh, Tripathi & Kumar (2010) divides store image into two factors: tangible or functional factors and intangible or psychological factors. A good store image would work as a barrier against bad quality perceptions (Grönroos, 2000).

The functional and psychological factors of a store image also play a vital role for

creating a brand image of the store itself. It is not only the image of the products the retailer is selling that affects them; the store also has an image of its own (Schiffman, Kanuk 2000). Especially in the competitive environment of supermarkets today, the success of supermarket significantly depends on its own brand image. Better store image not only plays an important role in competitive advantage of the store, customers are willing to pay more to purchase from these retail stores and the retail stores get more negotiation power over to the suppliers (Davies et. al 2002, 187-189). Customer's perception of store image is characterized by the functional attributes of a retail store such as product, assortment, location, atmosphere, price, facilities, personnel, service etc (He, Hongwei, Mukherje, and Avinandan, 2007; Sirgy and Samli, 1985; Elizabeth, M.V., Ronel, D.P., & Hester, S.J.V.N., 2006). Store image, service, product diversity, price is related more frequently with satisfaction in the retail grocery segment (Chang & Tu, 2005)

Location

Location of a store simply implies the physical space used by a store and the area in which it is situated where ample financial and business activities occur (Mendes, R and Themindo, C.J., 2004). A retail store location mainly depends on a trade area. Levy, M., Weitz, B.A., and Beitelspacher, L.S., (2012) defines trade area as a geographic area where many stores are located adjacently in close proximity.

Location is an important factor for any retail stores. Location normally means the accessibility and convenience for the retail shoppers. When it comes to store selection from customers' perspective, store location is one of the most significant considerations. Customers want to shop from a retail store which is placed near on their way to work or simply near to a public transport stoppage. When it comes to deciding retail store location, accessibility is the most common issue i.e. customer's ability to find the store swiftly and without trouble (Dune, P. M. & Lusch, R. F., 2008). Accessibility normally implies the road and parking arrangement that makes it easy to accessing the shopping vicinity. Location of a store also plays its role as a competitive advantage. Other competitors choose to select the next best location if one retail store occupies the best location (Levy et al, 2012). A significant importance can be seen in the literatures including store location choices (Colome and Serra, 2003; Yrigoyen and Otero, 1998). Shopping convenience, i.e. free enclosed parking facility and store location, is a primary dimension for any retail stores (Elizabeth et al, 2006). Hence, following hypothesis has been developed:

Hypothesis 1: Location has a positive and significant relationship with Store Image.

Store Assortment

Product assortment or store layout literally means how the merchandises are arranged in a store. It is an important factor that facilitates gain in product sale hence revenue. Giving more importance to product layout in a store would attain immense results in sales growth and increased revenue (Clark, 2003, Miranda, Kónya, and Havrila, 2005). Customers are enticed to purchase more when they are provided with a good product assortment (Lavey and Weitz, 2007). While Krishnan, Koelemeijer, and Rao, (2002) found out that when a retail store provides better assortment of customers' favorite brands, it would persuade their repurchase intentions. Location and product display would also play a significant role in influencing consumers when it comes to retail shop selection. For achieving efficient merchandise assortment, retail stores can customize their product display to meet the prospect and requirement of retail customers (Amine and Cadenat, 2003). According to Teller and Reuterrer (2008) customers normally prefer those retail stores with larger assortment of products under one roof.

According to Leszczyc, Sinha and Sahgal (2004) one-stop shopping essentially represents the idea whether the shoppers get an opportunity to buy multiple products or services from a single visit to a retail store. Generally, stores with wider product assortment tend to do better than those with narrower product assortment and vast product assortment helps the shoppers to economize or save money, because such assortment allows them to buy more products in fewer trips (Leszczyc et al., 2004, Boatwright and Nunes, 2001). In the recent past, retailers are combining variety of products to retain and attract more customers, hence improving their brand image (Lowson, 2005). Floor space, integral part of store layout, also plays a critical role in influencing consumers' purchase intention and carries forward a positive image of the retailer (Griffith, 2005). Along with the floor space; ventilation, store entrance, accessibility, hygiene and lighting also important factors for retail stores success. Thus the following hypothesis can be developed:

Hypothesis II: Assortment/Store Layout has a positive and significant relationship with Store Image.

Store Service Quality

Service quality is conceptualized as the consumer's overall impression of the relative inferiority or superiority of the services (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Berry, 1990). Dabholkar, Shepherd, and Thorpe (2000) stated that while judging different dimensions of service quality, the customers tend to form a distinct overall evaluation of service quality, which eventually influences their behavioral intentions concerning whether to become or remain loyal to the service provider. Moreover customer

service quality acts as a competitive force by achieving strategic advantages against competitors (Longenecker, Moore, Petty, and Palich, 2005). However customer expectation of service is different from different retailers, quality of the service is needed more in specialized stores than a discount store. Service is often defined as a set of attributes and impression of efficient economic activities aiming at customer satisfaction by obtaining their needs and psychological benefits (Beer, 2003). Service quality also refers to organization's ability to satisfy the requirements of customers as per their expectations (Yoo and Park, 2007).

There are two elements included in the service quality literature, "what" customer acquires and "how" to acquire them i.e. technical and functional quality (Grönroos, 1983). The interaction result between retailer and consumer delineate the perception about a retailer in the customers' mind. The technical quality entails to the selection of the product while considering wide and dept product range. Whereas functional quality is more complicated, implies on service of the store while obtaining the product, i.e. behavior of the service staff, atmosphere, assortment etc. In SERVQUAL Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, (1988) identified five dimensions of service quality (i.e. reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles) which integrates service distinctiveness as customers' anticipations. To improve overall retail experience, service is the prominent characteristic that helps to determine the store image in addition to the physical products (Homburg, Hoyer & Fassnacht, 2002). According to Davies, Brady and Hobday (2006) competitive advantages can be achieved if a retail store integrates product and service together. So we can come up with the next hypothesis:

Hypothesis III: Perceived Store Service Quality has a positive and significant relationship with Store Image.

Price perception

Price is most likely the prime consideration for regular customers (Cadogan and Foster, 2000). According to Schiffman and Kanuk (2004) perceived price refers to the concept 'whether the customers consider a product's price is high, low or fair'. They also said that if the price perceived to be unfair, it affects the customers' perception of value and ultimately their willingness to purchase the product. Ciavolino and Dahlgaard (2007) refers price paid for a product is relative to the level of quality received as value for money. Consumers are willing to pay more if they are associated with a particular brand. And if the price increases, still they are willing to pay the premium to avoid risk associated with the change (Yoon and Kim, 2000). Retailer overall evaluation are increasingly judged by price fairness and value of the product (De Ruyter, Wetzels, and Van Birgelen, 1999). According

to Jinfeng and Zhilong (2009) consumers are more satisfied if they see a retail store giving better price.

Price/value is a difference among the benefit received and sacrifices conceived. The benefits normally means desired quality and sacrifices refers to monetary value and efforts (Cronin, Brady, and Hult, 2000; Dodds, Monroe, and Grewal, 1991; Monroe, 1990). To provide better value to customers, a retail store either increase product quality or reduce the price and efforts (Li and Green, 2011). Hence the following hypothesis has been developed:

Hypothesis IV: Perceived Price has a positive and significant relationship with Store Image.

Communication

According to Christensen and Askegaard (2001) store image can be build by projection of “the total sum of signs that stands for an organization’s identity”. Hence communication is the most prominent tools to promote and motivate the consumers. Controlled and uncontrolled communication is discussed in many literature related to this issue. Shelby (1993) compares corporate communication with an umbrella comprises of different communication forms and formats.

Advertising and controlled communication are the vital factors which motivates customer to purchase certain product or services. Advertisement directly influence on the perception of consumers (Mittelstaedt, 1990). According to Kotlet and Armstrong (2002) consumer promotion, an important factor of advertising, targeted towards ultimate buyers of merchandises. On the other hand uncontrolled communication such as WOM (word of mouth) significantly influences consumers purchasing behavior which can affect consumers’ judgments and crucial for corporate image formation (Mangold, Miller, and Brockway, 1999; Bone, 1995; Stuart, 1999). Moreover according to Mangold et al.(1999); Murray(1991) consumers depends on WOM communication from personal sources for lower their perceived risk often linked with purchase of product and services. Uncontrolled communication like publicity is viewed as a reliable source of information which sometime overshadows marketer-driven communications and can alter consumer perceptions and attitudes towards a retailer (Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, and Unnave, 2000; Hauss, 1993). Consequently the next hypothesis is:

Hypothesis V: Communication has a positive and significant relationship with Store Image.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Based on the above mentioned hypotheses following conceptual framework is proposed

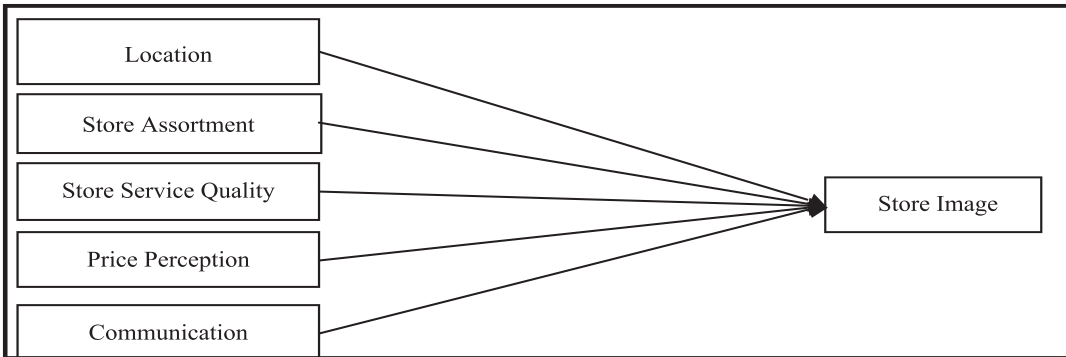


Figure I

METHODOLOGY

Sampling and Data Collection Method

For the data collection purpose, the researchers selected three outlets (Gulshan, Banani, and Uttara) of a leading retail chain shop in Dhaka city. Judgment sampling was employed under non-probability sampling. For data collection purpose, the researcher employed survey via personal interview, which allowed the data collection agents to distribute printed structured questionnaires among 350 (226 questionnaires were usable) regular shoppers of that retail store. 57% respondent belonged to the age group of 35-45 years and average age of the finally used sample was 40.2 years. Ratio of Female respondents to Male respondents was 72% to 28%.

Measurement instruments

The questionnaire was comprised of six sections meant for six variables where the researcher used 7 points Likert scale. The scales for all the variables were borrowed from the researchers who used them in earlier studies after checking the soundness of the scales. Location was measured by three items found in the study of Anselmsson (2006). Store assortment was measured by using a five-item scale used by Chowdhury et al. (1998). Store service quality was measured by five items borrowed from Sirdeshmukh, Singh, and Sabol (2002). The scale used for price perception had five items borrowed from the studies done by Arnold, Oum, and Tigert (1983); Grewal et al. (1998); and Yoo et al. (2000). Communication was

measured by using 5 items collected from Hansen and Deutscher (1977-1978). Finally store image was measured by 4 items, which were used by Verhoef et al. (2007).

Data Analysis

The researcher has employed both descriptive and inferential statistics. Reliability analysis, Correlation analysis and Stepwise Regression have been carried out by using SPSS version 18.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics and Reliability Coefficients

Means, standard deviations and reliability coefficients of the variables are presented in Table II.

Table II: Summary of Descriptive Statistics and Reliability Coefficients (N =226)

Scales	Number of items	Cronbach Alpha	M	SD
Store Image	4	0.768	6.21	0.66
Location	4	0.813	6.14	0.78
Store Assortment	5	0.752	5.86	0.93
Store Service Quality	4	0.807	6.07	0.69
Price perception	5	0.711	5.96	0.56
Communication	3	0.709	6.13	0.84

Cronbach alpha values are in the range of 0.813-0.709; which shows that the internal consistency of the items meant for the variables met the threshold level (i.e. 0.7) set by Nunnally (1978). Mean values of the variables (measured on a seven-point likert scale) are in the range of 6.21 to 5.86 and the range of standard deviations was 0.93 to 0.56. The mean scores of all the studied variables are rather high.

Correlation Analysis

Correlation analysis usually serves two purposes: a) whether there is multicollinearity, which is detected when the inter-correlations exceeds 0.8 (Berry & Feldmann, 1985), and b) to explore inter-construct relationships. The bivariate correlation was done at two levels of statistical significance - highly significant ($p < .01$) and significant ($p < .05$). Correlations matrix presented in Table 3 shows that most of the positive relationships among independent variables and dependent variable are in the hypothesized direction and have high statistical significance ($p < .01$). Moreover, no evidence of multicollinearity was found.

Table III: Correlation Matrix (N = 226)

Variables	Loc	S_Assrt	S_SQ	P_Per	Comm	S_Image
Loc	-	0.17*	0.48**	0.26**	0.57**	0.66**
S_Assrt		-	0.20*	0.39*	0.28**	0.34**
S_SQ			-	0.33**	0.35**	0.52**
P_Per				-	0.17*	0.45**
Comm					-	0.43**
S_Image						-

*Note: (N = 226, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$)*

Regression Analysis (Stepwise)

The purpose of stepwise regression was to assess the discerning relationship of each independent variable with the dependent variable. The method used to predict store image was stepwise multiple regression analysis. The prediction model employing five predictors and a criterion variable reached in the fourth step with one variable (communication) removed. The results show that four variables used in the fourth model were statistically significant in predicting the store image and 56.5% of the variability in store image can be accounted for by these predictors. All the models found to be statistically significant. Based on the results presented on Table IV we can say that hypothesis I, hypothesis II, hypothesis III, and hypothesis IV are supported.

Table IV: Stepwise Regression on Store Image

Variable(s)	B	SE B	β	R ²	ΔR^2
Step 1					
Location	.736	.071	.662***	.438	
Step 2					
Location	.650	.068	.585***	.524	.086
Price Perception	.263	.053	.303***		
Step 3					
Location	.561	.073	.505***	.550	.026
Price Perception	.226	.053	.260***		
Store Service Quality	.197	.070	.189**		
Step 4					
Location	.553	.073	.497***	.565	.015
Price Perception	.184	.056	.212**		
Store Service Quality	.189	.069	.182*		
Store Assortment	.098	.045	.136*		

Note: (N = 226, *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001)

DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS

The present study is significant for a special reason. As to the knowledge of the researches no such study has been conducted in Bangladesh on antecedents of retail store image in the past. The purpose of the current study is to examine the relationship among location, store assortment/layout, perceived price, store service quality, communication, and store image on the retail stores of Bangladesh. Swoboda, Berg, and Meierer (2009) used same variables in a study carried out on Romanian grocery markets.

Stepwise regression has shown that location, price perception, store service quality, and store assortment have statistically significant relationship with store image. As per the finding, location is the most important antecedent of retail stores' image. Accessibility, near to the shopping area, parking facility etc influences the image of a retail store. Customers' perception on the location of a retail store can be rational to their individual convenience but overall image of a store is mostly depends on its location.

Price perception is found to be the second most important influencing antecedent of the retail store image. This has been observed in the similar studies by numerous researchers. However shoppers' perception on price differs in different circumstances based on price fairness, good value for money etc. Hence the retail stores should follow the good/golden practices of retail pricing heuristics and thumb rules that have proven to be effective as reported and recommended by the credible researchers and practitioners.

Store service quality is another influencing antecedent of store image found in this study. Previous academician and researchers also mentioned that store service is the prominent characteristic that helps to determine the store image. Therefore it is advisable to the retail store operators to enable pre and post sale service to improve the image of the store. Moreover store assortment also plays an important role influencing the store image. Customers normally prefer those retail stores with larger assortment of products under one roof. Hence shoppers should be allowed to buy many products in fewer trips to the store.

The findings of this study have to be interpreted considering few limitations of the study. First, data collection was limited to the shoppers of a one major retail chain who live in Dhaka metropolitan area. Second, only regular shoppers were considered for data collection, new or occasional shoppers were not included. Otherwise, a comparison could have been drawn between regular shoppers and new or occasional shoppers regarding their customer satisfaction. Since the researchers' primary intention was to test the conceptual framework, may be in future such a study could be carried out. Finally, inclusion of other variables like- word of mouth communication, repurchase intentions, culture, lifestyle, store personnel, relationship strength or quality, store atmosphere, or shopping orientation could have made the conceptual framework more robust. In future, the authors intend to incorporate some of the aforesaid variables in the conceptual framework to do Structural Equation Modeling (SEM).

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