

## TOWARD A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RETAIL IMAGE AND PATRONAGE

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### Abstract

Retail store image is usually considered to be an important factor influencing customer patronage. For example, it appears that frequent patrons of a store have a more favorable image of a store than non-patrons. Generally, it is understood that store image dimensions should be consistent with store choice criteria, and retailers should stress those store image dimensions to which consumers attach the most importance (Rosenbloom, 1981).

Research suggests that store image variables do impact patronage to some degree. However, for the most part, the empirical evidence on the relationship between retail store image and store patronage has been weak (Peterson and Kerin, 1983). The purposes of this paper are to provide a brief review of the literature on retail image construct and to introduce a working model in which a couple of previously ignored variables are incorporated.

### The Definition and Construct of Retail Image

The notion that a retail store has an image can be traced to a motivation researcher of the 1950's, Pierre Martineau. In 1958 he suggested the idea that retail outlets, like people, had personalities which differentiated one store from another (Martineau, 1958). He defined store image 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." Researchers, however, note that there are several recurrent problems that arise in connection with the application of this definition (Greenberg, 1983). For instance, Pathak et. al. (1975) observed that a variance exists between the image that a retailer attempts to project and the image that is actually perceived by customers. Other researchers have recognized limitations in describing a store's image as a storewide concept (Cardozo 1975; Hansen and Deutscher 1977; and Schiffman et. al. 1977). Variance in perception of image between retailers and customers, and the limitations in describing a store's image as a storewide concept imply that there are potential interactions between store image and customer characteristics and between store image and product characteristics.

Various definitions of image have been used by researchers, and, as yet, there exists no common definition. Some say that image is intangible something (Schiffman et al. 1977, Fisk 1961-62). Others say that it is perceived definition of the store by functional and by psychological attributes (Pessemier 1980, Weale 1961, Pathak et al. 1974-75, Bellenger et al. 1976, Doyle & Fenwick 1974-75). Still others say that image is a comparative position between stores (Cardozo 1974-75, Singson 1975).. These diverse definitions imply that image consists of the consumers' perceptions of tangible as well as intangible characteristics of the store. And consumers view stores in comparative positions.

In most conceptualizations, store image has consisted of distinct dimensions or attributes, such as merchandise, service, clientele, physical facilities, conveniences, promotion, store atmosphere, institution, and post transaction. Image has typically been measured through reference to merchandise (selection, quality, styling, and price), locational convenience, and service (both in general and salesclerk). In particular, merchandise factors have dominated in almost all of the review studies. It also seems that the intangible aspects of the "image" construct have been neglected in most of the studies.

According to Oxenfeldt (1974/75), the intangible aspects of an image can be distinct as well as wholistic features. Some researchers argue that the wholistic image can be more important than the separate parts, and that the intangible factors may be more important than the tangible factors. For instance, a review of the studies on inter- and intra-type competition indicates that as the physical/functional attributes of stores (in terms of the merchandise, price, and locational convenience) become more and more similar, the store image, particularly the intangible dimensions of that image, takes on added importance (Bellenger et. al. 1976). Furthermore, it is hypothesized that the intangible overall image may be more related to patronage behavior than the parts (Golden and Zimmer 1985).

The following section of this paper reviews the role of image in retail patronage behavior. It contains the relationship between image and store patronage, and addresses some potentially intervening variables that could influence this relationship.

The Role of Image in Retailing

Image, in any context, interacts with other variables. In other words, image is but one of a number of influences governing consumer actions (Fisk, 1961-62). Store image interacts with other frame of reference variables such as product, brand, and consumer characteristics. Depending on the situation, the relevancy of these frame of reference variables may vary. For example, in case of some retail situation such as service retailing, brand may not be a relevant issue.

Peterson and Kerin (1983) hypothesized the simple three link schematic relationship shown in Figure 1. In their view, store image and choice criteria are implicitly linked together. Furthermore, choice criteria have been shown to influence patronage behavior when multi-attribute models are used (James, Durand and Dreves, 1976; Swinyard, 1977). The last link in the Peterson and Kerin's model - store image and patronage behavior - is hypothesized to be an associative one, and not a causal link. Therefore, as previous commentary has suggested, a high frequency of shopping is associated with a favorable store image and vice versa. Patronage can influence a consumer's image of the store and store image can influence patronage behavior, or, more likely, each simultaneously influences the other.

Figure 1

The Hypothesized Relationship of Choice Criteria, Store Image, and Patronage Behavior

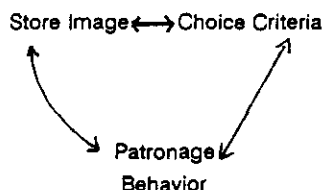
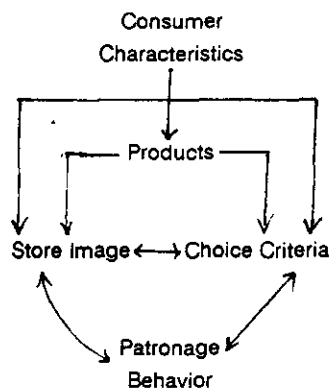


Figure 2 illustrates the working model that explains the hypothesized relationship of store image, choice criteria,

and patronage behavior. In this model products and consumer characteristics play the role of intervening variables.

Figure 2

The Proposed Relationship of Choice Criteria, Store Image, and Patronage Behavior



Unlike the Peterson and Kerin model, this model hypothesizes two way interaction between choice criteria and patronage behavior, and a potential interaction between product and store image. Consumers often make a trade-off between the negative and positive image factors of a store according to the relevancy of image in conjunction with a specific product type (Kunkell and Berry, 1968). For example, consumers may patronize a specific store for a specific product (e.g., Penny's for children's clothes shopping and foley's for adult clothes , or a neighborhood bank for the primary checking account and a credit union for a personal loan).

As mentioned earlier, empirical researchers have recognized limitations in describing store image as a storewide concept. Rather, image is found to vary by product class. Researchers argue that the image concept is most meaningful when considered in a product specific content, and that image should be differentiated by departments.

Hirschman (1979), in her investigation of intra-type competition of department stores, found that interaction

between store type and choice behavior should be viewed from both an overall and a merchandise-line perspective, that is, the store image as a whole and the image of merchandise are complementary rather than separate. King and Ring (1980) also found a relationship to exist between a consumer's image of a store on a product class and the choice of store type.

#### Summary and Conclusion

It appears that there is enough evidence which suggests that the image of store and the image of product interact, especially for those products with which a consumer is more involved. The model proposed in this paper shows an interaction between store image and customer characteristics. In the discussion of his patronage determinant model, George Fisk (1961-62) suggested that a number of customer characteristics have to be considered in order to measure the influence of store image on store choice behavior. He implied that shoppers with different characteristics (e.g., lifestyle, norms, aspirations, etc.) have different requirements for a given type of retail institution. Darden and Ashton (1974-75) found that shoppers with different lifestyles have different shopping orientations, and that these shoppers can be grouped in terms of different attribute preferences. Furthermore, it has been found that customers match stores having specific consumer stereotypes with themselves. Pessemer (1980) hypothesizes that there may be an interaction between clientele characteristics and the image of the store. What tends to appeal to one status level is not likely to appeal to another level. As an illustration, the lower-status shopper looks at goods in a functional sense; he or she wants the store image to reflect his or her values of concreteness, practicality, and economy. The upper-status shopper, by contrast, is interested in whether or not the symbolic meaning of the store reflects his or her status and lifestyle.

In sum, the affect of variables such as product and customer characteristics, on image attributes should be taken into consideration in determining the reasons for customer choice of a retail institution. It is believed that such concept should be carried over into empirical studies in assessing the influence of store image on customer's store choice behavior. Such assessment, in turn, would result in a better understanding of the relationship between retail image and patronage behavior.

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