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THE IMPACT OF STORE ENVIRONMENT ON CUSTOMER SATISFACTION: AN EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION

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ABSTRACT

Several works in the literature on store environment primarily have focused on the influence of store ambiance on customer satisfaction. However, there is a lack of knowledge about environmental cues that impact customer satisfaction in different shopping scenarios. This study aims to investigate store environment factors and their impact on customer satisfaction in different types of stores. The study used Amos Structural Equation Modeling on data from shoppers. The results showed that customer satisfaction is primarily influenced by the design and the crowding. This study provides valuable insights into the attributes of retail establishments that influence customer satisfaction, helping retailers differentiate themselves from competitors.

Key Words: store environment, store atmosphere, customer satisfaction, shopping behavior, retailing

1. INTRODUCTION

The retail sector operates within a highly competitive business milieu. The prosperity of retail enterprises hinges upon their rapid adaptability and profound understanding of consumer behavior. Retail establishments are obliged to concentrate on discerning consumer preferences and the determinants influencing consumers' purchase decisions (Singh et al., 2014). Constituent elements of the store's ambiance, encompassing components such as color palettes, lighting arrangements, interactions with sales personnel, and auditory elements, collectively configure the overarching context wherein customers deliberate their choice of store and patronage. Antecedent scholarly inquiries into the retail environment have ascertained that these attributes wield a substantive impact on the store's image(Singh et al., 2014). Retail proprietors are cognizant of the pivotal significance of these attributes and conscientiously craft an environment

replete with judiciously selected color schemes, harmonious musical accompaniments, and other elements tailored to captivate their intended customer demographic. Additionally, the process of making purchase decisions has become increasingly intricate due to the amalgamation of products and services proffered within retail establishments (Singh et al., 2014).

Academic research has shown that a store's environment significantly impacts various variables, including purchases (Sherman et al., 1997) , customer satisfaction (Bitner, 1990), sales performance (Milliman, 1982), product quality (Baker et al., 1994), customer contentment, and the final choice of a retail outlet (Darden et al., 1983). However, most studies focus on discrete dimensions of the store environment, such as store personnel behavior (Hu & Jasper, 2006), retail space convenience and quality (Vahie & Paswan, 2006), store trustworthiness (van der Heijden & Verhagen, 2004), and in-store graphics (Hu & Jasper, 2006).

Research has also shown that music can positively influence temporal and financial expenditures (Milliman, 1982, 1986), while lighting positively influences sensory interactions with merchandise (Areni & Kim, 1994). Donovan et al. (1994) ascertain that the store atmosphere elicits heightened pleasure and augments temporal and financial expenditures within the retail environment. Spies et al.(1997) underscore the pivotal import of an efficacious store layout, and Baker et al. (2002) elucidate the diverse ways in which elements of the store environment influence the choices made by customers regarding their selection of retail establishments. The store's layout, ambiance, and interactions with sales personnel can also exert an influence on unplanned purchases (Geetha et al., 2009; Sherman et al., 1997).

The overarching objective of this academic research is to introduce and substantiate a theoretical framework outlining the significant factors that influence customer satisfaction within a store environment.

2. THEORICAL CONTEXT

2.1. STORE ENVIRONMENT

Retailers commonly strategize the design of store environments with the primary objective of enhancing consumers' positive perceptions, operating under the premise that such enhancements will culminate in the desired consumer behaviors, including increased propensity to make purchases and extended duration of store visits. The importance of the store environment in increasing the shopping experience has been acknowledged over an extended period. An exhaustive study conducted by Baker et al. (2002) rigorously investigated the influence of store environment, unearthing a pronounced positive impact.

Numerous scholars assert that the store environment's effect on consumer purchasing behavior is mediated by the emotional state of the consumer. Donovan and Rossiter, in their seminal work in (1982), were pioneers in investigating the mediating role of consumer emotions within this context. They contended that the store atmosphere, shaped by the various in-store variables, is psychologically represented by consumers in terms of two principal emotional states: pleasure and arousal. These emotional states substantially mediate shopping behaviors within the store, including the overall enjoyment of the shopping experience, the duration spent perusing and exploring the store's offerings, the willingness to engage with sales personnel, the inclination to exceed initial spending plans, and the likelihood of returning to the store (Xu, 2007).

Bitner (1992) posited that the physical environment of the store can evoke cognitive, emotional, and physiological responses that subsequently influence consumers' inclination toward or aversion to engaging in retail transactions. Approach behaviors include protracted store visits, escalated expenditures, and increased acquisition of merchandise. Personal attributes (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) and situational variables (Russell and Snodgrass in 1987) also play a role in shaping an individual's response to their immediate surroundings (Xu, 2007). In the same vein, Donovan et al. (1994) established that emotional states induced by store environments, including sentiments of pleasure and arousal, are substantial determinants that motivate consumers to spend extended times within specific stores and exceed their originally intended expenditure. Their research suggests that these emotional variables substantially impact consumer behavior independently of cognitive variables such as individual assessments of product quality and pricing (Xu, 2007).

Sherman et al. (1997) further explored the mediating role of consumer emotions in the context of the influence of store environments on consumer purchasing behavior. Their findings suggest that while cognitive factors may predominantly account for store selection and planned purchases, the store environment and the emotional disposition of consumers represent significant determinants of certain purchasing behaviors, notably impulse buying.

In addition to ambient, design, and social cues, crowding is another factor posited by researchers to exert an influence on consumer shopping behavior. Perceived crowding, resulting from a combination of physical, social, and personal factors that heighten an individual's sensitivity to spatial limitations, can impinge upon the shopping choices made by individuals and their overall contentment with the shopping experience (Eroglu & Machleit, 1990).

2.2. CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

Ensuring customer satisfaction represents a primary imperative for companies, underscoring the recognition of the critical importance of retaining existing customers, as opposed to the exclusive pursuit of new customer acquisition. Leadership in management and marketing consistently emphasizes the pivotal role of customer satisfaction in achieving sustainable business success, as confirmed by the scholarly works of McColl-Kennedy and Schneider (2000) and Reichheld and W. Earl Sasser (1990). Within the realm of marketing literature, the concept of customer satisfaction emerges as a critical nexus linking the entire spectrum of the customer journey, encompassing the stages of the purchasing process, product consumption, and subsequent manifestations in post-purchase behaviors, such as shifts in attitudes, recurrent purchases, and the cultivation of brand loyalty. Scholars notably investigate the intricate interplay between satisfaction, loyalty, and financial outcomes, accentuating the indispensability of fostering customer contentment for long-term organizational prosperity (Vega-Vazquez et al., 2013).

Multiple interpretations of customer satisfaction exist, each reflecting the absence of a consensus among scholars. In the formal words of Oliver (1997), satisfaction is described as the customer's responsive disposition to the degree of alignment between their expectations and the actual product or service performance. Conversely, Anderson and Srinivasan (2003) postulate that satisfaction evolves as an ongoing appraisal of the delightful surprises encountered when buying or utilizing a product. In the disconfirmation paradigm, satisfaction stands evaluated through the discerning juxtaposition of the supplier's performance with the customer's initial expectations, as elucidated by Kursunluoglu (2011) and Levy and Weitz (2007).

Kotler and Armstrong (1996) provide an accurate perspective, characterizing customer satisfaction as an individual's acquaintance of a product's performance vis-à-vis their pre-expectations. Zeithaml and Bitner (2003) shed light on satisfaction as a discerning evaluation of whether a product or service dutifully fulfills the customer's needs and anticipations. The American Customer Satisfaction Index, diligently administered by the University of Michigan, assumes a pivotal role in tracking and evaluating customer satisfaction across diverse industries, thereby underscoring its significance in measuring contentment and fulfillment with a given product or service (Fornell et al., 1996).

Several empirical investigations have demonstrated the positive repercussions of customer satisfaction on business outcomes. Satisfaction not only furnishes the bedrock for boosting customer loyalty, as articulated by Anderson and Srinivasan (2003), but also precipitates favorable word-of-mouth referrals (Bhattacherjee, 2001), kindles intentions for repeat purchases (Kim, 2010) and ultimately culminates in bolstering market share and profitability (Reichheld & Schefter, 2000). Based on this exhaustive literature review, the present study meticulously formulates a series of hypotheses, as illustrated in the accompanying figure. These hypotheses traverse diverse facets of in-store environmental variables, encompassing design, ambient social cues, and trialability. Expanding upon the findings from this existing body of literature, this research develops a series of hypotheses illustrated in Figure 1. These hypotheses pertain to various facets of in-store environmental elements, encompassing aspects such as design, employee, ambiance, and crowding.

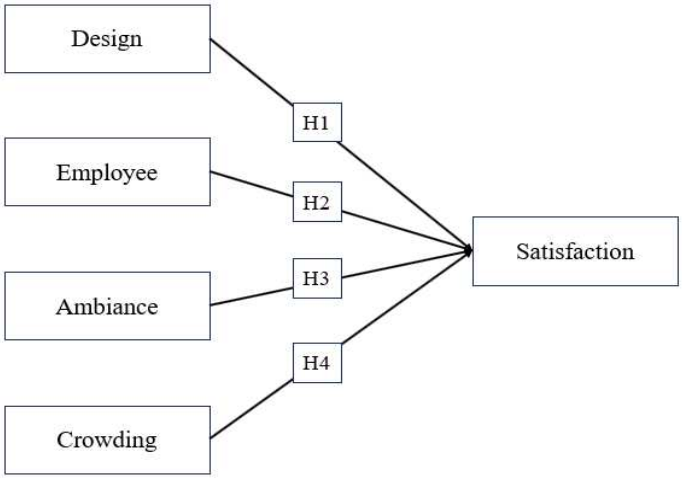

Fig- 1: Conceptual model

2.3. HYPOTHESES

H1. Customer satisfaction is significantly influenced by the ambiance factor.

H2. Customer satisfaction is significantly affected by the design factor.

H3. Customer satisfaction is significantly affected by employee factor.

H4. Customer satisfaction is significantly affected by crowding factor.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. RESEARCH DESIGN

The research hypotheses were subjected to the application of a Structural Equation Model (SEM). Data collection was executed using a quantitative survey methodology. The subsequent analysis of the findings entailed using path analysis, a statistical technique of choice renowned for its proficiency in estimating the extent of interconnections between variables and shedding light on plausible causal relationships, as expounded by Lleras (2005).

3.2. MEASUREMENT OF VARIABLES

The study analyzed four environmental cues in a retail establishment where respondents made significant purchases or spent extended periods. These cues included ambiance, design, employee and crowding prevalence. The assessment used instruments from Baker et al.'s (2002) study and Sherman et al. (1997) scale. Respondents evaluated design, ambiance, and employee-related cues using a 5-point scale. Crowding was quantified using a 5-point Likert scale from Calvo-Porral and Lévy-Mangin (2021). The study also examined customer satisfaction using Mishra et al. (2021) scale. A confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to confirm the relationship between each item and the measured variable.

3.3. SAMPLING AND DATA COLLECTION

The research investigation centered on individuals who visit stores for different shopping purposes. A preliminary evaluation was conducted with 60 participants to confirm the questionnaire's simplicity and comprehensibility to ensure its efficacy. For the primary research endeavor, a convenient sampling methodology was employed, with the questionnaire being published online. This method finds widespread employment in market research, owing to its cost-effectiveness and practicality.

The ultimate iteration of the survey was made accessible through online channels for nine weeks. To safeguard the integrity of the data collected, we adopted a screening question as suggested by Lee and Kim (2010). This particular

question, “Have you visited a sports equipment store?” was employed as a screening criterion to filter out participants who had not previously visited such establishments. Only individuals responding affirmatively with a “Yes” were permitted to proceed with the subsequent sections of the survey. Among the 301 responses received, a subset was deemed ineligible for analysis due to inadequacies or omissions in their responses, culminating in a final sample size of 283 participants for the study. The response rate was subsequently calculated at 81.17%.

3.4. DATA ANALYSIS

To analyze the acquired dataset, we employed IBM SPSS version 25 within this study to conduct an exploratory analysis via Principal Components Analysis (PCA). PCA serves as a valuable tool for researchers to evaluate the characteristics of the measurement instruments utilized in this study and, simultaneously, to reduce the number of measurement items. Scholars (e.g., Gerbing & Hamilton, 1996) recommend this methodology for identifying latent constructs within measurement scales, commonly used for handling extensive datasets and as an initial refinement procedure.

This research used a structural equation model (SEM) within Amos version 23 to evaluate the measurement and structural model. The data analysis involved a strict analysis of reliability and validity, followed by a thorough examination of the research hypotheses.

4. FINDINGS

4.1. SAMPLE PROFILE

The survey revealed a diverse demographic profile, with a female majority of respondents (55.1%) predominantly between 18 and 24 years old (58.7%). A significant proportion of respondents were students (56.5%), and 61.2% held a college degree. Employment status was dominated by students and employees (89.9), while officials represented only 9.2% of the sample. Most of the respondent’s status is single (64.7%), followed by married (32.9%), and last divorced (2.4%). Concerning the most visited store, the category was dominated by grocery stores (42%), followed by sports equipment (28.3%) stores, and fashion stores (26.1%) (see Table 1).

Table 1- Demographic characteristics of the respondents (n=283).

Item	frequency	percentage
Sexe		
male	127	44.9
female	156	55.1
Age		
18-24	166	58.7
25-34	59	20.8
35-44	45	15.9
45 and more	13	4.6
Education		
Baccalaureate	110	38.8
License/bachelor	80	28.3
Masters	93	32.9
Occupation		
Student	160	56.5
Employee	93	32.9
Official	26	9.2
Freelancer	4	1.4

Status		
Single	183	64.7
Married	93	32.9
Divorced	7	2.5
Most visited store		
Grocery store	119	42.0
Sport equipment store	80	28.3
Fashion store	74	26.1
Other	10	3.5

4.2. MEASUREMENT MODEL

To examine the measurement model and the postulated relationships, our data analysis commenced with an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) followed by a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Subsequently, we employed the IBM SPSS Amos statistical software to interrogate the research hypotheses.

4.3. FIT BETWEEN THE MEASUREMENT MODEL AND THE INDEX

The exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was used to validate the unidimensionality and internal consistency of the constructs investigated in the study. The items associated with each construct were tailored from existing literature to align with the study's context. The analysis confirmed the unidimensional structure of the measurement scales about participation behavior, satisfaction, and loyalty, with Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) values surpassing the established threshold of 0.6. A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was executed to scrutinize the relationships between observable indicators and their latent constructs, aiming to optimize the measurement model and achieve commendable goodness-of-fit indices. The scales demonstrated robust reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values consistently exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.7 (Nunnally, 1978). The composite reliability (CR) values for all constructs also exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.7(Fornell & Larcker, 1981) (refer to Table 2).

Table 2- Mean, standard deviation, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability and average variance extracted

Component	Mean	ST.Dev	Cronbach's alpha	CR	AVE	Square Root of the AVE
Design			**0.726**	**0.799**	**0.737**	**0.858**
I think that the store has a pleasing color scheme.	4.288	1.040				
I think that the store has attractive facilities.	4.139	0.854				
I think that the store has an organized merchandise.	4.461	0.916				
Employee			**0.816**	**0.711**	**0.829**	**0.910**
I think that the store has well-dressed employees.	4.387	0.861				
I think that the store has friendly employees.	4.238	0.757				
I think that the store has helpful employees.	4.483	0.793				
Ambience			**0.879**	**0.849**	**0.958**	**0.979**
I think that the store has a pleasant ambiance.	4.390	0.861				
I think that the store has a relaxed ambiance.	4.192	0.723				
I think that the store has a bright ambiance.	4.486	0.774				
I think that the store has pleasant smelling.	4.402	0.818				

Crowding			**0.840**	**0.755**	**0.939**	**0.969**
I think that the store seemed very crowded to me.	4.514	0.749				
I think there was too much traffic and shoppers in the store, and the waiting time was long at the checkout counters.	4.251	0.698				
Satisfaction			**0.879**	**0.738**	**0.933**	**0.966**
In general, I was happy with the shopping experience.	4.387	0.749				
In general, I was pleased with the quality of the service this retailer provided.	4.325	0.720				
In general, my choice to visit this retailer was a wise one.	4.276	0.665				

4.4. CONVERGENT AND DISCRIMINANT VALIDITY

The study aimed to determine convergent validity by examining the average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct and examining individual item contributions. The results showed that the AVE values exceeded the minimum threshold of 0.50 (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988), confirming robust convergent validity in all constructs. Discriminant validity was also evaluated through a comparative analysis of the square root of the AVE and correlation values. The comprehensive assessment confirmed the attainment of discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), as no square root of the AVE showed correlations falling below unity with other constituents, confirming the methodical establishment of discriminant validity across the constructs.

4.5. STRUCTURAL MODEL

a. Structural model fitting index and correlation

The study used various goodness-of-fit metrics to examine the measurement model and its relationships (Table 3). These metrics included the degree of freedom (DF), adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI), goodness-of-fit index (GFI), root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA), comparative fit index (CFI), Tucker and Lewis index (TLI), and root mean residual (RMR). The model's robustness was confirmed by a low value of χ 2/df = 189.106, AGFI = 0.923, and GFI = 0.950, both exceeding the threshold of 0.9. The RMSEA value of 0.021 indicated a highly favorable model fit, while the CFI was measured at 0.993, approximating a near-perfect match (1.0).

Table 3- Goodness-of-fit measures.

χ 2	189.106
DF	165
AGFI	0.923
GFI	0.950
REMSEA	0.021
CFI	0.993
TLI	0.990
RMR	0.023

A comprehensive correlation analysis was performed to understand the interrelationships among variables (Table 4). Pearson's correlation coefficient was calculated to determine the statistical significance of associations between variables (r>0.05). The most significant correlation was found between “ambiance” and “crowding,” with a coefficient of 0.747. The weakest correlations were observed between “design” and “employee” (0.299) and “design” and “ambiance” (0.408).

Table 4- Correlation analysis

	Design	Employee	Ambiance	Crowding	Satisfaction
Design	1				
Employee	0.299	1			
Ambiance	0.408	0.580	1		
Crowding	0.422	0.603	0.747	1	
Satisfaction	0.668	0.460	0.536	0.640	1

b. Hypothesis testing

The study utilized Amos and SPSS to conduct hypothesis testing on the relationship between constructs "design," "employee," "ambiance," "crowding," and "satisfaction." The measurement model was transformed into a structural model, highlighting the interrelationships among these constructs.

The regression analysis revealed several significant pathways between these constructs, confirming the validity of hypotheses (refer to Table 5). The path from the "design" construct to the "satisfaction" construct was statistically significant and positively correlated ($\beta = 0.546$, $t = 6.521$), confirming the validity of H1. The path from the "employee" construct to the "satisfaction" construct was also statistically significant and positively related ($\beta = 0.458$, $t = 3.397$), supporting H2. The path from the "ambiance" construct to the "satisfaction" construct was also statistically significant and positively related ($\beta = 0.999$, $t = 4.063$), supporting H3. The pathway from the "crowding" construct to the "satisfaction" construct was also statistically significant and positively related ($\beta = 1.871$, $t = 5.752$), confirming the validity of H4.

Table 6- Hypotheses testing

Hypothesized paths			B	Standard Error	t-value	Results
Design	→	Satisfaction	0.546***	0.084	6.521	Supported
Employee	→	Satisfaction	0.458***	0.135	3.397	Supported
Ambiance	→	Satisfaction	0.999***	0.246	4.036	Supported
Crowding	→	Satisfaction	1.871***	0.325	5.752	Supported

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The primary objective of this study was to evaluate the store factors and their influence on customer satisfaction within the context of shopping. This research makes a substantial contribution to our understanding of the impact of the store environment on customer outcomes. Moreover, it provides valuable theoretical and managerial insights based on the empirical data presented above.

5.1. THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

Prior scholarly investigations (e.g., Dabija & Băbuț, 2014; Rashid et al., 2022; Xu, 2007) have underscored the profound influence exerted by the store environment on customer satisfaction. In the context of our study, we undertook a meticulous examination of the consequences of the store environment. The principal aim of this research endeavor was to empirically establish the influence of diverse store-related factors and summarize them within an all-encompassing conceptual framework. Empirical data lent robust support to the validity of our measurement model, and the analysis substantiated the formidable performance of the structural model.

The empirical findings disclosed by this study manifest that these variables entailing the store environment, encompassing design, employee, ambiance, and crowding, collectively engender a favorable influence on customer

satisfaction within the context of their shopping experience. These revelations resonate with antecedent research in the realm of store environments (e.g., Calvo-Porral & Lévy-Mangin, 2021; Dabija & Băbuţ, 2014; El-Adly & Eid, 2016; Terblanche & Boshoff, 2006) which proffer analogous assertions concerning the substantial impact of store-related factors on customer satisfaction.

5.2. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this investigation indicate that store owners should allocate their resources toward developing an engaging in-store environment. This can be achieved through the implementation of immersive design, the incorporation of sensory elements, and the fostering of interpersonal relationships. These elements are critical in the Customer Store Experience (CSE) enhancement. Further, store owners are strongly recommended to make investments in functional components to establish an aesthetically appealing and thematic store layout. Moreover, the incorporation of visually pleasing features that engage customers' senses, as well as the introduction of unexpected and captivating elements in the store's backdrop, are advocated.

This research underscores the pivotal role of store design in shaping a tangible and immersive experience for customers. Furthermore, it highlights the importance of recruiting knowledgeable and enthusiastic staff capable of delivering an exceptional social experience to customers. Their expertise represents a competitive advantage that is arduous for competitors to emulate.

In addition, the study emphasizes the significance of offering opportunities for trial and real product experiences within physical stores. Retailers are strongly encouraged to invest in the creation of in-store live experiences, allowing customers to interact with products before their purchase. By enabling customers to physically engage with and experience the products in a brick-and-mortar setting, retailers can provide a more pertinent array of choices and immediate gratification, thus contributing to an elevation in overall customer satisfaction (Brynjolfsson et al., 2013).

6. LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

While this research significantly contributes to the examination of the shopping experience and the in-store environment within the context of e-commerce, it does present certain constraints that warrant acknowledgment.

The study's limitations may stem from factors such as the sample size and the representativeness of the study population. To illustrate, the sample might exhibit a bias toward a particular age group or geographic location, potentially constraining the applicability of the findings to other demographic groups.

Furthermore, it's important to note that our model was exclusively tested within a physical store setting. Consequently, there is a desire for the model to experience testing in alternative environments, such as brand websites. While the study has successfully established a direct link between the store environment and customer satisfaction, there is potential value in delving deeper into the underlying mechanisms or mediating variables that elucidate this connection. For instance, an exploration of the roles played by customer emotions, cognitive processes, and perceptions in mediating the impact of the store environment on satisfaction could provide valuable insights into the psychological processes at work.

Moreover, this study primarily concentrates on the immediate repercussions of the store environment on customer satisfaction. Future research could delve into the long-term effects and the sustainability of customer satisfaction over time. Investigating how the store environment influences customer loyalty and repeat purchases would offer a more comprehensive understanding of its influence.

Lastly, given the swift advancements in technology, it is imperative to investigate the influence of digital and interactive elements within the store environment on customer satisfaction. Analyzing the effects of features such as virtual reality, augmented reality, and personalized digital experiences on satisfaction represents a pertinent avenue for future research.

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