Retail Image Dimensions and Consumer Preferences

Art Palmer, Western Illinois University

Abstract

This research attempted to determine the dimensionality of the retail image construct and how consumer preferences were related to retail image. The procedure was to collect similarities and preference data on shopping center image. Also, respondents were asked to rate each shopping center on fifteen image attributes. Multidimensional scaling (MDS) and matrix fitting techniques were used for evaluation.

The major results of this study include a confirmation of the multidimensional character of the retail image construct. The major dimension is an "ideal retail mix" dimension composed of attributes such as "Quality of Stores," "Merchandise Quality," "Product Selection," "General Price Level," "A Fashion Center," "Special Events and Exhibits," and "Variety of Stores." Consumer preference was found to be a one-dimensional construct that is congruent with this dimension.

The second dimension was a "collateral convenience in shopping" dimension, composed of attributes that are not essential to the exchange process but would be desirable to shoppers when present ("Parking Facilities, Comfort Areas, and Availability of Lunch/Refreshments").

Several attributes, commonly accepted in the literature, are not unidimensional constructs. These were "Special Sales/Promotions, Layout of Center, Store Personnel, Great Place to Spend Hours, and A Conservative Center."

Introduction

Retail image research seeks to resolve the question of what draws shoppers to one store rather than another. Early researchers emphasized mass and distance as the forces that determine patronage and developed "gravity models" that stressed convenience to the consumer. Later researchers pointed to the importance of intangible factors in the consumer's decision making process and do not find convenience to be the overwhelming factor determining the consumer's patronage choices (Doyle and Penwick 1974-75). Research on retail image is generally considered to have begun with Martineau (1958), who first conceptualized many of the major components of retail image theory.

Consumers, retailers and scholars agree that there is a something called retail image, of what that something is composed remains unclear. How to research, operationally define, measure, and validate the image variable is a matter of disagreement and concern among marketing scholars (Doyle and Penwick 1974-75, Berkowitz, Deutscher and Hansen 1978, Nevin and Houston 1980).

Berkowitz, Deutscher and Hansen (1978) have stated:

Interestingly enough, the number one priority for image research lies in the area of developing better measures of image. This is true in spite of the fact that most of the previous image work has been done in this area. The fact remains, however, that until the image concept is thoroughly and rigorously operationalized, image research will continue to be a series of one-shot problem-specific research efforts adding little to the understanding of the general issues of image measurement.

Similarly, Doyle and Penwick (1974-75) see two central problems in measuring shopper perceptions of store characteristics. "The first is to isolate in an unambiguous and parsimonious fashion the salient dimensions shoppers actually use in evaluating alternative outlets... The second problem is to meaningfully segment consumers." The measurement of retail image has frequently relied on the use of the semantic differential as a data collection device, and the determination of the relevant attributes to be measured has usually been based on researcher intuition and reference to the marketing literature (Kunkel and Berry 1968, Lindquist 1974-75, Berkowitz et al 1978, Nevin and Houston 1980). This predetermination of the image attributes to be measured has been questioned because the researcher is, in effect, selecting attributes without true knowledge of their saliency in the consumer's perceptions. Thus, the results of the research, though statistically significant, may be merely artifacts of the research process (Nevin and Houston 1980).

In reference to the use of semantic differentials in image research, Kunkel and Berry (1968) have said:

...people are encouraged to respond to characteristics that do not necessarily comprise the image they have of the store being studied. For
example, respondents might be asked to evaluate a store on the basis of whether it has a pleasant atmosphere. The problem is that the consumer may not think of "atmosphere" when he thinks about a particular store. When he is required to make an evaluation of such characteristics, they become a part of the image of the store that he is concluded to have. The resulting "image" then is likely to be more highly correlated with the instrument than with reality.

In other words, the use of the semantic differential may measure store attributes without regard to their importance to the consumer, thus giving a biased view of the image actually held by the consumer. Attempts to overcome this limitation have included having the respondent scale the importance (valence) of each attribute measured (Myers and Alpert 1968, Green and Rao 1972). Nonetheless, no researcher has yet introduced into the work through the researcher's predetermination of which attributes will be considered and which will be excluded from the study. Use of this information by the retailer as a basis for decisions intended to improve the store's image could lead to expensive and unproductive actions (Kunkel and Berry 1968).

Research Design

Previous research efforts have failed to deal with the methodological problems inherent in any technique that predetermines what characteristics (attributes) are selected for the research. Even those research efforts which have employed factor analysis to group attributes into image dimensions have used the semantic differential to select the attributes to be measured, and thus suffer from the same methodological problem (Nevin and Houston 1980).

Noteworthy in the more recent work on retail image is a study by Nevin and Houston (1980), who utilized factor analysis in an attempt to discover salient shopping center image attributes. In this study, Nevin and Houston generated a list of sixteen attribute items to represent the domain of shopping center image. These attributes had been drawn from the literature on retail store image, and then had been either limited or modified to those that would be applicable to the image of shopping centers. Factor analysis of the sixteen image attributes found fourteen to be significant. Table I lists these attributes and their respective semantic differential scale anchor descriptors. The two attributes found to be non-significant were, "Atmosphere" and "Easy to take children." "A Fashion Center" was added due to researcher interest in this attribute.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE I</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>SHOPPING CENTER IMAGE ATTRIBUTE ITEMS</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ATTRIBUTES</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of stores.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variety of stores.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merchandise quality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product selection.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General price level.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special sales/promotions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Layout of area.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Availability of lunch/refreshments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parking facilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great place to spend hours.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A conservative center.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A fashion center.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These fifteen shopping center image attributes form the hypotheses for the present study.

Hypotheses

H(1): Consumer perceptions of retail image consist of two or more dimensions.

Each of the following listed individual attributes is congruent with and is a component of a dimension of retail image.

H(2): Quality of Stores.
H(3): Variety of Stores.
H(6): General Price Level.
H(7): Special Sales/Promos.
H(8): Layout of Center.
H(9): Parking Facilities.
H(10): Availability of Refreshments.
H(11): Comfort areas.
H(12): Special Events/Exhibits.
H(14): Great Place to Spend Hours.
H(15): A Conservative Center.
H(16): A Fashion Center.

Further, the importance or saliency of the dimensions of retail image in the consumer's image-forming process was determined by matching them with consumer preferences.

Method

The basic procedure used in this research project was to collect similarities and preference data about retail shopping center images from a sample of shoppers (n = 181) interviewed at five shopping