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**CUSTOMERS' EXPERIENCE WITH SMALL SCALE RETAIL STORES – AN EMPIRICAL STUDY****DR. K. RAMA MOHANA RAO****PROFESSOR****DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE AND MANAGEMENT STUDIES****ANDHRA UNIVERSITY****VISAKHAPATNAM****DR. K. RATNA MANIKYAM****LECTURER****DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE****SRI A.S.N.M. GOVERNMENT COLLEGE****PALAKOL****ABSTRACT**

*One of the major challenges for retailers, irrespective of their size of operations, is to create experiences to the customers differently to that of competitors. It is not sufficient to meet the expectations of the customers; one has to find out ways to delight customers with a proper mix of service performances. Retailers need to work for improvements in quality performances for creating shopping experience, buying experience, service experience and relationship experience. This paper presents the customers' perceptions on the experiences related to the four specified areas. The findings are expected to benefit the small scale retailers to identify the areas that require further improvements and help in providing customer satisfaction and building loyal customer base.*

**KEYWORDS**

Shopping Experience, Buying Experience, Service Experience, Relationship Experience, and Service Performance.

**INTRODUCTION**

Retail sector plays a vital role in the economic development of any country, particularly in a populous country like India. Small scale retailing is predominant in India with more than 14 million retailers spread over all parts of the country. The small scale retailing constitutes 95 per cent of the total retail trade activity. The employment opportunities on large scale and its role in economic development keeps retailing at a prominent place in Indian economy. The changes after 1991 liberalization policy paved way for the growth of organized retailing. The changes in many facets of business environment are forcing the small scale retailers to modernize and improve their operations to satisfy the customers and to retain them against the serious competitive threats from the fast growing organized retailers.

The major challenge in retailing is to provide valuable experiences to the customers continuously all the time. The customer experience management begins with customer pre visit preparation to the retail store to post purchase satisfaction. Many moments take place in between the two stages and all those moments contribute to customer experience. The retailer needs to identify the moments that are capable of creating experience to the customer and then plan and organized the moments in such a way that each moment provides optimum value to the customer. It requires great amount of critical information, management commitment, dedicated and knowledgeable work- force and an efficient process flow and system backup. Creativity, innovation, adaptability and ability to take measured risks are some of the essential qualities required for affectivity customer experience management.

The customer experience from a retail store can be broadly be classified into four heads. They are shopping experience, buying experience, service experiences and relationship experience. Each of these experiences contributes to the overall customer experience from a retailer. These experiences are not mutually exclusive but complementary to each other. Retailers need to work for achieving excellence in all the four areas to maximize the value of customer experience. These experience areas provide competitive edge to the retailer and become core competences if managed effectively, consistently and continuously.

**REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Research on retailing particularly small scale retailing is not carried out to the level it deserves. The following are the studies selected for review which are related closely to the concept under study.

The study undertaken by **Yogesh Upadhyay and Shiv Kumar Singh (2008)**<sup>1</sup> found the upper hand of hypermarkets as far as hedonic aspect of consumer perceived value is concerned. **Keval Sheth, Rohit Divekar, R. Srinivasan and R. K. Srivastava (2009)**<sup>2</sup> stated that unorganized retailers cannot compete with big retailers on head-to-head basis. They must either target a different market or offer something different to customers. Since the major retailers aim at the mass – consumption middle class, small scale retailers can successfully target lower income group. The study found that market orientation and small scale retailers' performance are positively related. The customer service focus of small scale retailers is the key determinant of success compared to other components of market orientation. The study by **Sasikumar and Regina Sibi Cleetus (2008)**<sup>3</sup> revealed that there is serious impact of corporate retailing on small scale retailers. Many small scale retailers were displaced due to corporate entry in retail as per the study. **Asit Gope and Arindam Ghosh (2009)**<sup>4</sup> in their study suggested the retailers, to remain competitive in the market. They must offer price advantage to attract customers. As per the researchers opinion the retail market is the next growth frontier for corporate India and it offer an opportunity for the large players to build highly customized retail business consist of multiple categories by 2015.

**John Egan (2008)**<sup>5</sup> identified customer satisfaction as the outcome of relational strategies and a prerequisite for loyalty and retention. **Maria-Eugenia Ruiz-Molina, Irene Gil-Saura and Gloria Berenguer-Contró (2008)**<sup>6</sup> identified that confidence benefits and special treatment benefits have major influence on customer loyalty towards the retailer. The benefits related to purchase risk reduction and confidence are the most influencing factors on customer loyalty. In order to improve corporate image retailers need to concentrate their efforts in offering guarantees for their products along with communication campaigns. According to researchers special treatment benefits may positively influence consumer loyalty.

**Yang-Im Lee and Peter R.J. Trim**<sup>7</sup> found that a successful retailing strategy will be embedded within a customer-driven general business strategy. Marketing managers should plan to develop and sustain long-term trust-based working relationships, which take into account organizational and national values. Successful partnership arrangements depend on mutuality and resilience, as well as trust. Marketing intelligence is a vital ingredient in the formulation and implementation of plans to achieve these goals. **Suresh Garinella (2005)**<sup>8</sup> opined that bigger stores do not have a personal touch; modernization of conventional shops would help conventional Indian retail outlets to cope with changing times and customer requirements.

According to **H. Venkateswarlu and Ranjani (2007)**<sup>9</sup> the survival of retail malls is not very easy, and it would take long time for survival of malls because breaking cultural and demographic barriers is extremely difficult. Until then, small scale retailers would play a dominant role in Indian retailing. **Grete Birtwistle and Linda Shearer**<sup>10</sup> reaffirmed that retail image and store positioning are factors which influence consumer loyalty and retail success.

**OBJECTIVE**

The objective of the present study is to ascertain the total customer experiences with small scale retailers.

**HYPOTHESES**

The null hypotheses set for the study is as following:

1. Ho: The factors such as sufficient product choices, adequacy of information, qualitative information, information access, pressure from salesman and evaluation assistance do not influence the shopping experience of the customers.
2. Ho: The factors such as fair price, fair negotiation process, free from deception and dishonesty, convenience, honest and courteous treatment and availability of sufficient inventory do not influence the buying experience of the customers.
3. Ho: The factors such as quality of the sales force, accessibility of salesperson, timeliness of the service, ability to understand customer problems, supporting shopping and buying and after sales services do not influence the service experience of the customers.
4. Ho: The factors such as recognize the regular customers, preferential treatment, hospitality, price concession, credit facility and quick and positive response do not influence the relationship experience of the customers.

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

To test the set hypotheses an opinion survey was conducted in the state of Andhra Pradesh.. The study covers small scale retail units in different retail categories. For the purpose of the study, five retail categories were selected based on the number of retailing units established in Andhra Pradesh. The five categories selected for the study are food and grocery, textile and apparel, electrical and electronics, jewellery, and footwear. To elicit the opinion of the customers on shopping, buying, service and relationship experiences with small scale retail establishments, a sample of 450 customers are selected from the three regions of the state viz, Coastal Andhra, Telangana and Rayalaseema. Scaling technique was used to measure the opinions and weighted scores are calculated for analysis and interpretation.

**SHOPPING EXPERIENCE**

**Ho: The factors such as sufficient product choices, adequacy of information, qualitative information, information access, pressure from salesman and evaluation assistance do not influence the shopping experience of the customers.**

Shopping experience of the respondents was measured in terms of sufficient product choices, adequacy of information, qualitative information, information access, pressure from salesman and evaluation assistance provided by the sales persons. The overall assessment of the factors contributing to shopping experience related to small scale retail outlets was presented in Table 1. It reveals that 'sufficient product choices (score: 7680) got the highest rating followed by adequacy of information (score: 7567 and information access (score 7546). The mean value of all the six variables varied between 2.80 and 3.41. In terms of percentage to MPS the values of each variable varied between 56.09 per cent and 68.27 per cent. The study revealed that all the variables got more than 50 per cent value rating by the respondents in respect of shopping experience from small scale retail outlets under study.

**TABLE - 1: SHOPPING EXPERIENCES WITH SMALL SCALE RETAILERS**

Particulars	Score	WM	% to MPS
Sufficient product choices	7680	3.41	68.27
Adequacy of information	7567	3.36	67.26
Qualitative information	7482	3.32	66.51
Information access	7546	3.35	67.08
Pressure from salesman	6310	2.80	56.09
Evaluation assistance	6852	3.05	60.91

Source: primary data

The top three rated shopping experiences of the respondents in relation to small scale retail shops of the five categories under the study were shown in Table 2. The study revealed that the top three rated shopping experiences are not similar among the five categories. However, some experiences are commonly figured in top three ratings. 'Sufficient product choices' is the factor that figured in top three ratings of all the categories except jewellery category. 'Information access' is the factor that found a place in top three ratings of all the categories. 'Adequacy of information' is another identified shopping experience in four of the five categories (this factor was not found in top three ratings in the case of textile and apparel category). 'Qualitative information' is the factor identified with textile and apparel and jewellery categories.

**TABLE - 2: TOP THREE RATED SHOPPING EXPERIENCES WITH SMALL SCALE RETAIL SHOPS**

FactorRatings	Food & Grocery	Textile & Apparel	Electrical & Electronics	Jewellery	Footwear
1	Sufficient product choices	Sufficient product choices	Information access	Qualitative information	Adequacy of information
2	Information access	Qualitative information	Sufficient product choices	Adequacy of information	Information access
3	Adequacy of information	Information access	Adequacy of information	Information access	Sufficient product choices

Source: primary data

**As the findings of the study reveal that the factors such as sufficient product choices, adequacy of information, qualitative information, information access, pressure from salesman and evaluation assistance influence the shopping experience of the customers, the null hypothesis is rejected.**

**BUYING EXPERIENCE**

**Ho: The factors such as fair price, fair negotiation process, free from deception and dishonesty, convenience, honest and courteous treatment and availability of sufficient inventory do not influence the buying experience of the customers.**

The buying experience of the respondents with the small scale retail shops are ascertained by using six variables which include fair price, fair negotiation process, free from deception and dishonesty, convenience, honest and courteous treatment, and availability of sufficient inventory. Table 3 depicts the overall rating of the respondents on buying experience related the small scale retail outlets selected for the study. The study revealed convenience (score: 7796) is the top rated buying experience followed by fair negotiation process (score: 7279) and fair price (score: 7110). The mean value of each variable varied between 2.98 and 3.46 and the percentage to MPS varied between 59.64 per cent and 69.30 per cent.

**TABLE -3: BUYING EXPERIENCES WITH THE SMALL SCALE RETAIL SHOPS**

Particulars	Score	WM	% to MPS
Fair price	7110	3.16	63.20
Fair negotiation process	7279	3.24	64.70
Free from deception and dishonesty	6902	3.07	61.35
Convenience	7796	3.46	69.30
Honest and courteous treatment	6709	2.98	59.64
Availability of sufficient inventory	6927	3.08	61.57

Source: primary data



The top three rated buying experiences of the respondents related to small scale retail shops were presented in Table 4. 'Convenience' is the factor that found in all the five categories as one of the top three factors influencing buying experience of the respondents. 'Fair negotiation process' is the other buying experience identified by the respondents. This factor found place in top three positions in food and grocery, textile and apparel, electrical and electronics and footwear categories. 'Fair price' is the highly rated factor in food and grocery, and jewellery categories. 'Free from deception and dishonesty' is the identified buying experience in textile and apparel, and footwear categories. 'Availability of sufficient inventory' is specially rated in electrical and electronics category while 'honest and courteous treatment' is the buying experience specially identified with jewellery category.

TABLE - 4: TOP THREE RATED BUYING EXPERIENCES WITH SMALL SCALE RETAIL SHOPS

Factor Ratings	Food & Grocery	Textile & Apparel	Electrical & Electronics	Jewellery	Footwear
1	Fair price	Convenience	Convenience	Fair price	Convenience
2	Convenience	Fair negotiation process	Fair negotiation process	Convenience	Fair negotiation process
3	Fair negotiation process	Free from deception and dishonesty	Availability of sufficient inventory	Honest and courteous treatment	Free from deception and dishonesty

Source: primary data

As the findings of the study reveal that the factors such as fair price, fair negotiation process, free from deception and dishonesty convenience, honest and courteous treatment and availability of sufficient inventory influence the buying experience of the customers, the null hypothesis is rejected.

**SERVICE EXPERIENCE**

**Ho: The factors such as quality of the sales force, accessibility of sales person, timeliness of the service, ability to understand customer problems, supporting shopping and buying and after sales service do not influence the service experience of the customers.**

The service experience of the respondents with the small scale retail units has been assessed by using the variables such as quality of the sales force, accessibility of sales person, timeliness of the service, ability to understand customer problems, supporting shopping and buying, and after sales service. The data related to service experiences of the respondents in small scale retailing outlets were presented in Table 5. The study revealed that 'accessibility of sales person' is the service experience that is rated by most of the respondents. This factor got a score of 7825 which represents 69.56 per cent to MPS (mean value 3.48). 'Quality of the sales force' and the support extended by the sales persons in shopping and buying are the two service experiences occupied second and third positions respectively as per the ratings of the respondents. All the factors secured the mean value of > 3. The mean values among the variables varied between 3.09 and 3.48. The scores as percentage to MPS of the variables varied between 61.14 per cent and 69.56 per cent.

TABLE - 5: SERVICE EXPERIENCE WITH SMALL SCALE RETAILERS

Particulars	Score	WM	% to MPS
Quality of the sales force	7792	3.46	69.26
Accessibility of salesperson	7825	3.48	69.56
Timeliness of the service	7024	3.12	62.44
Ability to understand customer problems	7235	3.22	64.31
Supporting shopping and buying	7676	3.41	68.23
After sales service	6946	3.09	61.74

Source: primary data

Table 6 presents the top three service experiences rated by the respondents. 'Accessibility of sales person' is in the top three service experiences related to all categories of retail outlets except in the case of jewellery category. 'Support of the sales force in shopping and buying' is the factor that was perceived in all the categories under the study. 'Quality of the sales force' is other factor which is perceived by the respondents in food and grocery, textile and apparel, jewellery and footwear. 'After sales service' is the experience perceived in the case of electrical and electronics and jewellery categories. Thus, it can be inferred that there are similar perceptions as far as service experience is concerned in food and grocery, textile and apparel, and footwear categories. Two out of the three factors are common between electrical and electronics and jewellery categories.

TABLE - 6: TOP THREE RATED SERVICE EXPERIENCES WITH SMALL SCALE RETAIL SHOPS

Factor Ratings	Food & Grocery	Textile & Apparel	Electrical & Electronics	Jewellery	Footwear
1	Accessibility of sales person	Accessibility of sales person	Accessibility of sales person	After sales service	Accessibility of sales person
2	Quality of the sales force	Quality of the sales force	After sales service	Supporting shopping and buying	Supporting shopping and buying
3	Supporting shopping and buying	Supporting shopping and buying	Supporting shopping and buying	Quality of the sales force	Quality of the sales force

Source: primary data

As the findings of the study reveal that the factors such as quality of the sales force, accessibility of sales person, timeliness of the service, ability to understand customer problems, supporting shopping and buying and after sales service influence the service experience of the customers, the null hypothesis is rejected.

**RELATIONSHIP EXPERIENCE**

**Ho: The factors such as recognize the regular customers, preferential treatment, hospitality, price concession, credit facility and quick and positive response do not influence the relationship experience of the customers.**

The relationship experience is assessed by using variables includes, Recognize the regular customers, Preferential treatment, Hospitality, Price concession, Credit facility and Quick and positive response. The data related to relationship experiences of the respondents were presented in Table 7. 'Recognize the regular customers' is the factor secured highest score of 8190 (mean value 3.64) which represents 72.80 per cent to MPS. 'Preferential treatment' and 'quick and positive response' are the two relationship experiences rated high in the order by the respondents. The mean values of the six variables varied between 2.50 and 3.64. The scores of the variables as percentage to MPS varied between 49.99 per cent and 72.80 per cent. 'Credit facility' is the factor that secured the lowest rating.

TABLE - 7: FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO RELATIONSHIP EXPERIENCE WITH THE SMALL SCALE RETAILERS

Particulars	Score	WM	% to MPS
Recognize the regular customers	8190	3.64	72.80
Preferential treatment	7219	3.21	64.17
Hospitality	6758	3.00	60.07
Price concession	6863	3.05	61.00
Credit facility	5624	2.50	49.99
Quick and positive response	7182	3.19	63.84

Source: primary data

The top three rated relationship experiences of the respondents in the five retail categories were presented in Table 8. The study revealed that 'recognition of the regular customers' is the top rated perception of the respondents in all the categories. 'Quick and positive response' is perceived in food and grocery, textile and apparel, electrical and electronics as a response to customer relationship. 'Preferential treatment' is perceived in electrical and electronics, jewellery, and footwear categories as an outcome of relationships. 'Price concession' is the relationship experienced by the respondents in textile and apparel and footwear categories. 'Credit facility' is the relationship benefit perceived in food and grocery category while 'hospitality' is found in jewellery category.

TABLE - 8: TOP THREE RATED RELATIONSHIP EXPERIENCES WITH SMALL SCALE RETAIL SHOPS

Factor Ratings	Food & Grocery	Textile & Apparel	Electrical & Electronics	Jewellery	Footwear
1	Recognize the regular customers	Recognize the regular customers	Recognize the regular customers	Recognize the regular customers	Recognize the regular customers
2	Quick and positive response	Price concession	Preferential treatment	Preferential treatment	Preferential treatment
3	Credit facility	Quick and positive response	Quick and positive response	Hospitality	Price concession

Source: primary data

As the findings of the study reveal that the factors such as recognize the regular customers, preferential treatment, hospitality, price concession, credit facility and quick and positive response influence the relationship experience of the customers, the null hypothesis is rejected.

TABLE 9: FACTOR SCORES OF CONSUMER EXPERIENCES

Experience	Score	WM	% to MPS
Shopping experience	7240	3.22	64.36
Buying experience	7121	3.17	63.30
Service experience	7408	3.30	65.85
Relationship experience	6973	3.10	61.98
Total customer experience	7186	3.32	63.87

Source: primary data

## CONCLUSION

The findings of the study rejected the entire null hypothesis and established the fact that the small scale retailers are providing valued experiences to the customers. Though the rating of the customers is positive on all the four measured experiences, the overall score represents 63.87 per cent to the maximum possible score as shown in Table 9. It indicates that there is a lot of scope for further improvement in providing experiences to customers. Further the table reveals that the service experience in small scale retailing got relatively high score while relationship experience got the lowest it reveals that the small scale retailer need to focus more on quality in customer relationships. The customer experience management requires an organized effort from retailers, continual review and committed effort of the management for improvements qualitatively.

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