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**RETAIL CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE: A RESEARCH AGENDA****DR. SHILPA BAGDARE****ASST. PROFESSOR****INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF PROFESSIONAL STUDIES****DEVI AHILYA UNIVERSITY****INDORE****ABSTRACT**

*New format retail stores are designing their retail spaces to provide a better experience to their customers. The purpose of this study is to understand retail customer experience and to propose issues for future research and practice. The paper reviews relevant studies, both empirical and conceptual, dealing with theories, processes, related variables and dimensions of customer experience and retail experience. The review clearly establishes the emergence and relevance of retail customer experience in an era of new age retailing to attract, delight and retain customers. It is primarily determined by the use of cognitive and emotional clues used in the retail environment, moderated by customer and contextual characteristics, resulting into a pleasurable experience leading to desirable retail performance. Review of literature suggests use of appropriate combination of cognitive and emotional clues in the retail for creating positive customer experience to improve retail performance. Based on a critical review of important studies, the present paper proposes important determinants and dimensions to understand and design retail experience. The study presents some relevant propositions, and research issues for retail customer experience.*

**KEYWORDS**

retail customer experience, retail store, emotion, cognition.

**INTRODUCTION**

The focus of retailing has gradually shifted from merely facilitating the exchange process to creating shopping experience. The emergence of organised retailing and new format retail stores has transformed shopping into an eventful journey of joyful experiences. Retail experience is a manifestation of customer's perceived cognitive, emotional, sensorial and behavioural value derived during the entire process of shopping. Retailing has been approached to explain creation of shopping values in terms of utilitarian value and hedonic values (Babin et al, 1994, Jones et al, 2006). Utilitarian shopping value includes the functional or rational benefits, whereas, hedonic shopping value refers to the sensorial, emotional dimension of shopping experience. The total shopping value places greater emphasis on experiential perspective (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982; Mathwick et al, 2001). Modern shopping has moved out from being a "buying ritual" to an act of cherishing "experiential value". It is not merely a transaction – an exchange of money for preferred goods or services, rather it consists of a series of events happening in the journey of shoppers from Point of Entry to Point of Exit in any retail store. Retail experience is described as involving, entertaining, fulfilling, rewarding, engaging, exciting, relaxing and pleasurable phenomenon in the life of a shopper (Jones, 1999; Mathwick et al 2001, Jin and Sternquist, 2004; Cox et al, 2005; Hart et al, 2007; Soars, 2009; Verhoef et al, 2009). Positive retail experiences have been associated with a wide range of favourable retail performances in terms of customer satisfaction, sales, profits, loyalty, word of mouth communication and much more. In the recent past retail customer experience management has emerged as an important issue of discussion and research. Some studies have been undertaken to describe its nature and structure, yet it is in nascent stage. In the light of issues raised and lack of conceptual framework, the present study aims at understanding retail customer experience and exploring its determinants and dimensions based on existing literature and practices. The study presents bring out important propositions and suggests research issues which need to be addressed.

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The paper reviews relevant studies, both empirical and conceptual, dealing with theories, processes, related variables and dimensions of customer experience and retail experience.

**EXPERIENTIAL PERSPECTIVE**

For the last few decades, a large number of scholars and practitioners are discussing, debating, exploring and experimenting with the experiential approach to understand and manage the customers. Customer experience has emerged as the new value proposition aimed at creating a unique, superior, pleasurable and memorable experience. In a pioneering work, Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) proposed the concept of experience in the context of consumption of goods and services. Emphasizing the need for experiential perspective, they described customer experience as involving various playful leisure activities, sensory pleasures, daydreams, aesthetic enjoyment, and emotional responses. According to them consumption experience was largely related to feelings, fantasies, and fun. Carbone and Haeckel (1994) opined that the traditional product/service value proposition is inadequate for reaching customers or creating differentiation and suggested that the customers' experience must be given same level of importance as businesses give to products and services for creating a seamless total experience. Pine and Gilmore (1998) have also described the experience consisting of engaging, involving and entertaining dimension based on active or passive participation, and connectivity of the customer in the entire process. They further described that experiences are inherently personal, existing only in the mind of an individual who has been engaged on an emotional, physical, intellectual, or even spiritual level. No two people can have the same experience, because each experience derives from the interaction between the staged event (like a theatrical play) and the individual's state of mind (Pine and Gilmore, 1998). A customer experience is described as the total functional and emotional value of consumed service which is unique to every individual customer and the service consumption situation (Sandstorm et al, 2008). It is suggested that organizations need to develop competencies in creating and managing great customer experiences that leave lasting impressions on customer's mind. Managing each customer's experience is perhaps the most important ingredient in building customer loyalty (Crosby and Johnson, 2007). Palmer (2010) explained that experience involves progression over time, anticipation, emotional involvement, and a "uniqueness that makes an activity stand out from the ordinary". Successful experiences are those that a customer finds unique, memorable and sustainable over time (Pine and Gilmore, 1998). A number of studies have been carried out to define and describe the concept of customer experience and understand its interrelationships with a range of independent variables.

**RETAIL EXPERIENCE**

Retailing is undergoing a major transformation in terms of structure, processes, technology, design, formats, and sizes. It has grown in sophistication, dynamism, vibrancy and interactivity over the years. The use of newer skill sets, redesigned systems and processes, and cutting edge technology has enabled the retailer to create a magical and delightful experience for every shopper. Leading business organizations are even establishing exclusive retail outlets as experience centres. Berry (2002) opined that retailing is about creating a total customer experience by enabling customers to solve important problems, capitalize on the power of respectfulness, connect with customers' emotions, emphasize fair pricing and save customers' time and energy. Bagdare (2010) has reported that retail customer experience is expressed in terms of four dimensions - joy of shopping, leisure, mood setter, and distinctiveness.

Shopping in modern retail stores is essentially a sensory experience which attempts to engage, entertain, involve, and absorb the customers through all five senses. Music, lights, colours, displays, fragrances, ambience and many more elements shape up shoppers' mood and behaviour (Soars, 2009). A retail store experience



involves activities such as browsing, price comparisons, search for merchandise, evaluating product variety and quality, and interaction with store personnel (Terblanche and Boshoff, 2001). The experiential value in retailing can be expressed through customer return on investment, service excellence, aesthetics and playfulness dimensions (Mathwick et al, 2001). Burns and Neisner (2006) also found that cognitive evaluation and emotional reaction explain the level of satisfaction experienced in a retail setting. Pradeep (2010) proposed a shopping experience framework which includes dimensions such as information, environment, entertainment, education, simplicity, self-worth, and community. Customer considers a wide range of cognitive and emotional factors while selecting a particular store. The ability of the retailer to create unique and pleasurable events keep the customers delighted during the entire process of retail experience, and gives the retail store a distinctive image for identification and recognition.

### DETERMINANTS OF RETAIL CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

Berry et al. (1990) explored strategic issues related to retail marketing and suggested that to remain effective retailer should have marketing orientation, provide structural support, customize marketing mix, and focus on customer service. Baker et al. (2002) proposed a conceptual model describing the effect of store environment dimensions – design, social and ambient, on consumer decision making. The model explains that store environmental dimensions' influence consumer's perception of store choice criteria – namely interpersonal service quality, shopping experience costs and merchandise value (mediated through perceived quality, price and shopping experience costs), and these perceptions, in turn, affect store patronage intentions. They found that design cues have a strong influence on shopping experience costs – time/effort cost and psychic cost. Creating a superior in-store shopping experience is critical, and could provide competitive weapon for brick and mortar retailers in the face of growing competition from online retailers.

Kim (2001) observed that experiential retailing merges the applications of merchandising and hospitality. It is based on five key concepts: experiential consumption (cognitive and sensory), symbolic consumption (hedonic / subjective), entertainment retailing (pleasant environment), themed retailing, and cross shopping (broad merchandise). Kim (2001) further suggested that retailers need to create an environment in which consumers can obtain a satisfactory total consumption experience by providing multiple product categories in a pleasing and enticing consumption atmosphere. Terblanche and Boshoff (2001), in an empirical investigation, identified three dimensions of total retail experience – personal interaction (12 elements such as willingness to help, personal attention, prompt services, courtesy, interest etc.), physical cues (7 elements such as good quality products, good looking materials, good physical facilities etc.) and product variety and assortment (5 elements such as choice, variety, range, sizes of products etc.). Hart et al (2007) found that shopping experience is four dimensional: a) Accessibility dimension referred to location, parking, pedestrianization and travel; b) Atmosphere dimension referred to appearance, atmosphere, food stops, variety, fashion / style; c) Environment dimension referred to cleanliness, opening hours and safety; and d) Personnel dimension referred to customer service and staff attitudes.

Cox et al. (2005) identified that pleasures of shopping experience are governed by six factors namely bargain hunting, browsing, being pampered, sensory experience, kinaesthetic experience, and mingling with other shoppers. They observed that consumers tend to be drawn towards more private pleasures as compared to social pleasures in store shopping. They further classified shoppers as joyless shoppers, bargain hunters, enthusiasts, attention cravers, and explorers. Healy et al. (2007) reported that both static and dynamic design elements play equally important role in creating customer experience in retail stores. Static design elements are represented by the atmospheric/ambient conditions of the store (visual, aural, olfactory and tactile cues), which can be used to increase a consumer's rate of consumption, and influence customer product evaluations and purchase behaviour. Retail store's dynamic design elements are described as the relational context between the customer, the store, the staff and other customers. In a study on Indian shoppers, Jain and Bagdare (2009) have identified ten factors determining customer experience in new format retail stores - ambience, design, customer service, visual appeal, customer delight, merchandise, convenience, audio visual, amenities, and value added service. Puccinelli et al. (2009) have identified specific elements of consumer behaviour such as (1) goals, schema, and information processing, (2) memory, (3) involvement, (4) attitudes, (5) affect, (6) atmospherics, and (7) consumer attributions and choices influencing retail experience. Verhoef et al. (2009) proposed a conceptual model describing that the determinants of retail customer experience included social environment (reference group, reviews, tribes, service personnel); service interface (service person, technology, co-creation / customization); retail atmosphere (design, scents, temperature, music); assortment (variety, uniqueness, quality); price (loyalty programs, promotions); customer experiences in alternative channels; retail brand (retailers own brand – private labels and manufacturer or service brand); and past customer experience.

### EXPERIENTIAL RETAILING AND RETAIL PERFORMANCE

Donovan and Rossiter (1982) found that experienced pleasantness of the in-store environment is a significant predictor of willingness to spend time in the store and intentions to spend more money than originally planned. They introduced eight measures of store relevant approach – avoidance behaviours. These measures are: liking of the store, enjoyment of shopping in the store, willingness to spend time in the store, willingness to explore the environment, feelings of the friendliness to others, willingness to return and likelihood of spending more money than intended. In a study of shoppers using critical incident technique, Lucas (1999) found that shopping experience significantly influence customer loyalty. He reported that negative experiences are a key cause of lost sales 10% to 30%, and future sales lost due to shoppers switching retailers. Arnold et al. (2005) have also observed that customer delight is a way to customer loyalty. Wong and Sohal (2006) analysed the consumer perceptions of their shopping experience in a retail environment. Their study found a relationship between service quality, relationship strength, and relationship quality and customer loyalty. It was reported that service quality, trust and commitment have a significant influence on relationship strength, which directly impacts relationship quality. Managing each customer's experience is perhaps the most important ingredient in building customer loyalty (Crosby and Johnson, 2007). Verhoef et al. (2009) observed that customer experience has a positive influence on retail patronage and store loyalty and thus customer profitability. Puccinelli et al. (2009) also proposed that effective management of customer experience largely depends upon greater understanding of consumer behaviour for enhancing customer satisfaction and retail performance.

### PROPOSITIONS

The evolution and developments in the field of customer experience management in general and retail experience in particular are of significant importance to both researchers and practitioners. There is a growing interest among researchers to establish new theories, relationships and models in the area of retail experience and thereby creating valuable applications for the industry. On the basis of established theories and past studies some important propositions have been developed to serve as guidelines for future research.

#### PROPOSITION 1: RETAILING IS AN EXPERIENTIAL PHENOMENON

Experience occurs as a result of encountering, undergoing or living through things, which provide sensory, emotional, cognitive, behavioural and relational values (Schmitt, 1999). It is formed as an outcome of interactive process involving environmental clues and sensory receptors. Retail experience involves consumer processes (product evaluations, attitude formation) and responses (eg. satisfaction or purchase behaviour) affected by aspects of shopping environment, situation and consumer characteristics (Fiore and Kim, 2007, Verhoef et al, 2009). It is the result of all the moments lived through in the entire journey of shopper in a retail store. Shopping in modern retail stores has been widely reported as a sensory experience which attempts to engage, entertain, involve, and absorb the customers through all five senses. Music, lights, colours, displays, fragrances, pleasant ambience and many more store elements shape up shoppers' mood and behaviour.

#### PROPOSITION 2: RETAIL CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE IS CREATED AS A RESULT OF SHOPPERS' INTERACTION WITH THE RETAIL ENVIRONMENTAL CLUES AT EVERY STAGE IN THE SHOPPING PROCESS

Experiences are formed as an outcome of interactive process involving environmental clues and sensory receptors (Gentile et al, 2007, Meyer and Schwager, 2007, Verhoef et al, 2009). Customers interact with the clues through five senses – sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. This leads to cognitive and emotional processing inside the brain and result into a wide range of consumer responses. Experiential process can be explained and understood in line with the theory of environmental psychologists which reports that customer interactions with clues or stimulus result into emotional states of pleasure, arousal, and dominance (PAD) which further leads to approach or avoidance behaviour (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974; Donovan and Rossiter, 1982).

Customers interact with a wide range of clues or stimulus present at various stages of the buying process. Every point of interaction is described as a contact point or "Touch Point", in the literature on customer experience. The retailer's primary task is to identify all the touch points available at each stage, from the beginning when a customer recognises a need for a product and starts the search for information about availability and accessibility at different retail outlets, locating and going to the store, entry, browsing, observing, feeling, communicating, comparing, evaluating, using store services, making payments and moving out of the store from the exit point.

**PROPOSITION 3: ENVIRONMENTAL CLUES CAN BE BROADLY CATEGORISED IN TERMS OF COGNITIVE CLUES AND EMOTIONAL CLUES LEADING TO LEFT AND RIGHT BRAIN PROCESSING BY THE CUSTOMERS**

Customers consciously and unconsciously filter experience clues and organize them into a set of impressions, some more rational or calculative and others more emotional. Berry et. al (2002, 2006) proposed that the clues that constitute a customer experience are divided into two categories: **Functional Clues**, which are related to actual functioning or performance of the goods or services and are interpreted primarily by the logical circuitry of the brain (the left brain). **Emotional Clues**, which are related to the smells, sounds, sights, tastes and textures of the goods or service, as well as the environment in which they are offered and primarily address emotions (the right brain) rather than reason in decision making. Clues can be further divided into two categories: **Mechanic Clues** refer to all the clues emitted by things present in the environment which more relates to the sensory dimensions, and **Humanic Clues** refer to all the clues emitted by people through their interactions, appearance, body language, and behaviour etc.

Retail customer experience is holistic in nature, involving customer's cognitive, affective, emotional, social and physical responses to the retailer's marketing efforts. This experience is created not only by those elements which the retailer can control (eg. service interface, retail atmosphere, assortment, price), but also by elements that are outside of the retailer's control (e.g., influence of others, purpose of shopping) (Verhoef et al., 2009). The customer's retailing experience consists of a series of clues (a) related to actual functioning of retail (logical dimension – price, merchandise, service etc.) and (b) emotional dimension involving five senses and the environment (Knee, 2002). Burns and Neisner (2006) also found that cognitive evaluation and emotional reaction explain the level of satisfaction experienced in a retail setting. Customer considers a wide range of cognitive and emotional factors while selecting a particular store.

**PROPOSITION 4: RETAIL CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE IS INFLUENCED BY A LARGE NUMBER OF MODERATORS SUCH AS THE CONTEXT, CUSTOMER CHARACTERISTICS AND OTHER MACRO ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS**

Retail customer experience is moderated by a large number of variables such as customers – demographic, psychographic, personal, social, and cultural characteristics; macro environment – economic, technology; situational – competition, type of store, product / service category, location, timing of purchase etc. (Bitner, 1992; Verhoef et al, 2009). Changing demographics and psychographics have empowered modern consumer to choose from a variety of value propositions. Growing purchasing power coupled with changing lifestyle of young customers has a major impact on choices of product categories and retail stores. Coley and Burgess (2003) and many other studies have reported a significant difference between the shopping behaviours of men and women. Kaur and Singh (2007) found eight motives governing their shopping behaviour. These motives are described as hedonic shopping motive, market maven, peer group association, utilitarian shopping motives, status conscious personal shoppers, recreational shopping motive, impulse shopping motive, and economic shopper. It has also been observed that shoppers of different age groups tend to respond differently to the retail clues.

**PROPOSITION 5: RETAILERS CAN CREATE AND DELIVER A UNIQUE PLEASURABLE AND MEMORABLE EXPERIENTIAL VALUE PROPOSITION TO THEIR CUSTOMERS BY MANAGING RETAIL CLUES**

Modern retail presents enormous challenges owing to the changing competitive structure, consumer attitudes and lifestyles, technological innovations, and sophisticated marketing practices. Retailers are finding it difficult to attract, develop and retain the customers. Sustaining and improving retail performance in terms of customer satisfaction, sales, profitability and differentiation are presenting major challenges for the modern retailers. Managing the customer experience throughout the stages of pre purchase, purchase and post purchase emerges as the key issue of concern for them. After gaining an understanding of the major determinants of the retail experience, retailers can program and engineer the right proportion of cognitive and emotional clues to evoke the desired response (Berry et al.2002, 2006).

## RESEARCH ISSUES

The above mentioned propositions present important issues for future research and practices related to retail customer experience. It is observed that more researches of both empirical and conceptual nature are required to explore and examine the relationships of experiential variables and their impact in commercial context. Some important areas for future research are presented below:

- The construct, structure and constitution of retail customer experience need to be further discussed, refined and defined.
- Retail customer experience across multiple channels (on-line and off-line) can be compared.
- Relationship between retail experience and various dimensions of retail performance such as store image, purchase intentions, sales, repatronage, loyalty, word of mouth communication can be further explored and validated.
- Environmental clues governing retail experience are to be identified, classified, and prioritised.
- Effect of retail environment clues and its interrelationships with retail customer experience can be explored with a combination of moderating variables relating to customer demographic, psychographic, social and cultural characteristics; store profile; time of the day, and other macro environmental factors.
- Experimental studies can measure the effect of various retail clues, in a controlled manner, on shoppers' behaviours in different retail environment and their relationships with sales, satisfaction, loyalty and other measurable retail performance.
- Metrics for measuring retail experience and its various dimensions need to be clearly defined, developed and validated.

As a part of the second phase of this work, important research issues raised in this paper will be empirically validated.

## MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Conceptualization of retail customer experience provides a better understanding of this phenomenon and establishes its importance in contemporary retailing. Experiential value in terms of pleasurable moments of truth has been reported as the major driving force influencing choice of retail outlets, spending behaviour, satisfaction and store loyalty. The proposed conceptual framework, describing retail experience creation and retail performance provides a clear understanding of antecedents, moderators and performance dimensions. It can guide retailers in designing effective retail experience management strategies by identifying appropriate retail clues and incorporating them in customer facing retail operations.

## CONCLUSIONS

Modern retail stores are professionally designed, use state of the art - sophisticated and high tech tools and techniques to engage, involve and immerse the customers in the entire buying process. Integration of people, process, technology and environmental clues allows retailers to create both utilitarian and hedonic value for its target customers. A retail store does not remain only a point of sale or transaction, it gets converted into an experience factory where every touch point attracts, interacts and creates a pleasurable experience. Shift in customer lifestyle, expectations and value orientations has led to the emergence of experiential retailing following the retailing revolution. Retailers can design strategies to influence shoppers' behaviour and purchase decision making process in order to obtain desired cognitive, emotional, sensorial, and behavioural responses. The present study has attempted to understand retail customer experience and brought out important propositions which need to be further examined. The research issues raised in the study need to be addressed by the scholars to build a stronger theoretical framework for experiential retailing and draw insights for practitioners.

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