INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RESEARCH IN COMPUTER APPLICATION & MANAGEMENT

IJRCM

A Monthly Double-Blind Peer Reviewed (Refereed/Juried) Open Access International e-Journal - Included in the International Serial Directories

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A STUDY ON CUSTOMERS' PERCEPTION TOWARDS MARKETING MIX STRATEGIES ADOPTED BY RURAL RETAILERS IN COIMBATORE DISTRICT

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ABSTRACT
The Retail industry is at its boom in India. The corporates have turned towards retail business adopted in rural areas. The role of media has played its major role in creating awareness to customers even in remote rural areas of India. The consumers have started to turn towards fashion, it is a right pace to study the customers' perception on the strategies adopted by rural retailers. This article is aimed to analysing the gap between the customers' perception and strategies adopted in terms of marketing mix by retailers. It also brings out the major issues faced by the customers. The researcher has adopted descriptive research design using convenience sampling technique to seek out 120 samples from the customers of rural India, confining the study in Coimbatore district.

KEYWORDS
customer perception, marketing mix strategies, rural retailers.

INTRODUCTION
The Retail Industry has undergone with many changes in the Indian market. The corner grocer or the 'Kirana' store is a key element in the retail of India due to the housewife's unwillingness to go long distances for purchasing daily needs. Although convenience and merchandise were the two most important reasons for choosing the store, the choice of inertia varied across product categories. Convenience was indicated by consumers as the most important reason in the choice of groceries and fruit outlets, chemists and lifestyle items while merchandise was indicated as the most important in the choice of durables, books and apparel.

In recent years, some formats have been spread gradually in retail chains such as super markets, department stores, malls and discount stores. The following factors facilitate the spread of chains are the availability of quality products at lower prices, improved shopping standards, convenient shopping and display and blending of shopping with entertainment and the entry to industrial houses into retail.

Although the present ideas and innovations are well thought to giving in short term results, the Indian organized retailing is still in its evolutionary stage. Though, the heavy competition prevailing in the market has forced the retailers towards rural areas. The customers of rural areas have also become aware of the new brands and latest fashion prevailing in the market. This is enrooted through the emerging success of media and technology. The credit and instalment pay options have given strength to the consumers to purchase their favourite products. Thus the retailers upgrade their strategies in order to satisfy the demanding and awakened consumer group.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE
Retail shops in smaller towns and rural areas have been experienced in increasing competition from large shopping centres and supermarkets in larger cities (Guy, 1990). The unfaithfulness towards the stores of rural areas, with the availability of better range in low prices at large organized retailers, has resulted in increasing erosion of small rural shops (Crank etl.1995).

Development is also seen in rural markets of Sweden, where this has been caused by changes that includes increase of car owning, resulting in increase of mobility and out-shopping in urban centres (Forsberg, 1998). Rural retailers have considerable influence, since shop layouts do not allow consumers to browse (Dawar & Chattopadhyay, 2000).

In Rural India, consumers usually purchase what is available, and distribution is a major problem for entrants. The major issues faced by retailers are distribution of cost and non-availability of retail outlets (Sathyanarayana. S & Ramani Ganesh, 2008)

It is observed that many MNC footwear giants started with exclusive stores and later realized that they never enjoy much brand equity in rural markets. To capture the market share in rural India, they had to go to the local shoe sellers. (Siddique and Siddique, 2012).

All-around consulting abutting McKinssey and Co. projected that India's Rural market would be US $ 500 Billion by 2020. While this estimation would be acceptable, it has been accustomed at demography literacy, accessibility, amount of penetration; accretion assets levels, ambit from above bartering and business hubs, cast awareness, and concepts of superior accretion consumerism a part of average in rural areas yet not have necessary announcement for a blooming affirmation in rural India (Neha Nazneen Siddiqui, 2016)

The core concepts indicate that traditional rural retailers persuade to purchase high-demand products and brands, through the provision of credit, discounts, quantity discount schemes, margins and commissions using local distributors and provide products at regular service. The analysis has yielded two conceptual clusters: high-demand products and brands and credit; and doorstep delivery and regular service (Dev Narayan Sarkar etl. 2016)

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY
OBJECTIVES
1. To study customer perception towards marketing mix strategies adopted by rural retailers in Coimbatore district.
2. To study the demographic profile of rural area people
3. To find the major issues faced by rural customers.

HYPOTHESIS
1. Ho: There is no association between Age and Perception of Product strategies.
2. Ho: There is no association between Income and Perception of Price strategies
3. Ho: There is no association between Marital Status and Perception of Place strategies
4. Ho: There is no association between Gender and Perception of Promotional strategies

The study attempts to make know the characteristics of the rural customers using Descriptive Research Design. The researcher has adopted Convenience Sampling technique for the study. The sample Population considered for the study were the rural people of Coimbatore district. The data was collected through the accumulation of both primary and secondary sources. A schedule was followed for collecting primary data. Secondary data was collected from text books, journals and websites. The sample size is 120. Statistical tools like ANOVA and Henry Garrett Rank test were used to analyse the data.

The Cronbach's Alpha reliability test result as follows:

TABLE 1

S. No	Factors	Cronbach's Alpha Test
1.	Product Strategies	0.874
2.	Price Strategies	0.857
3.	Place Strategies	0.847
4.	Promotion Strategies	0.821
5.	Overall Result	0.813

The above Cronbach's Alpha Reliability test is above 0.700, which shows that the data is reliable and good.

LIMITATIONS

1. The study is limited only to rural areas of Coimbatore.
2. The sample is 120, so that the results cannot be generalised
3. The study limits to four major marketing mix factors which are product, price, place and promotion only.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

1. PERCENTAGE ANALYSIS

TABLE 1.1: PERCENTAGE OF CUSTOMERS OPINION ON RETAILERS PRODUCT STRATEGIES

S. No	Strategies	SA	A	N	DA	SDA	Total
1.	Wide Product Range	0 (0)	22 (18.33)	38 (31.67)	42 (35)	18 (15)	120 (100)
2.	More Brands	0 (0)	24 (20)	34 (28.33)	47 (39.17)	15 (12.5)	120 (100)
3.	Better Product Quality	0 (0)	11 (9.17)	50 (41.66)	37 (30.84)	22 (18.33)	120 (100)
4.	New Stock Availability	0 (0)	16 (13.33)	55 (45.84)	39 (32.5)	10 (8.33)	120 (100)

(**SA** – Strongly Agree, **A**-Agree, **N**-Neutral, **DA** – Disagree, **SDA** – Strongly Disagree)

(**Note**: Values in brackets represent Percentages)

Source: Primary Data

From the Table 1.1, the researcher infers that majority of the customers disagree that the retailers provide wide product range (35%) and more brands (39.17%). On the other hand, majority of customers agree that retailers provide better product Quality (41.66%) and new stock is available (45.84%).

TABLE 1.2: PERCENTAGE OF CUSTOMERS OPINION ON RETAILERS PRICE STRATEGIES

S. No	Strategies	SA	A	N	DA	SDA	Total
1.	Discounts Provided	0 (0)	15 (12.5)	49 (37.5)	44 (36.67)	12 (10)	120 (100)
2.	Reasonable Price	0 (0)	14 (11.67)	45 (37.5)	48 (40)	13 (10.83)	120 (100)
3.	Instalment Facility	0 (0)	15 (12.5)	40 (33.34)	50 (41.66)	15 (12.5)	120 (100)
4.	Credit Facility	0 (0)	12 (10)	60 (50)	39 (32.5)	9 (7.5)	120 (100)

Source: Primary Data

The Table 1.2, denotes that majority of the customers are neutral towards the retailer's discounts (37.5%) and credit facilities (50%). Further, most of the customers disagree reasonable pricing (40%) and instalment facility (41.66%).

TABLE 1.3: PERCENTAGE OF CUSTOMERS OPINION ON RETAILERS PLACE STRATEGIES

S. No	Strategies	SA	A	N	DA	SDA	Total
1.	Better Accessibility	0 (0)	11 (9.17)	43 (35.83)	52 (43.33)	14 (11.67)	120 (100)
2.	Transport Availability	0 (0)	18 (15)	43 (35.83)	49 (40.84)	10 (8.33)	120 (100)
3.	Convenient Operating Hours	0 (0)	20 (16.67)	34 (28.33)	51 (42.5)	15 (12.5)	120 (100)

Source: Primary Data

From the Table 1.3, the researcher infers that majority of the customers disagree that the retail outlets have better accessibility (43.33%), Transport availability (40.84) and Convenient operating hours (42.5%).

TABLE 1.4: PERCENTAGE OF CUSTOMERS OPINION ON RETAILERS PROMOTION STRATEGIES

S. No	Strategies	SA	A	N	DA	SDA	Total
1.	Samples	0 (0)	17 (14.17)	45 (37.5)	48 (40)	10 (8.33)	120 (100)
2.	Demonstration	0 (0)	25 (20.84)	49 (40.83)	36 (30)	10 (8.33)	120 (100)
3.	Gifts	0 (0)	14 (11.67)	39 (32.5)	49 (40.83)	18 (15)	120 (100)
4.	Seasonal Discounts	0 (0)	17 (14.17)	45 (37.5)	42 (35)	16 (13.33)	120 (100)
5.	Promotional Schemes	0 (0)	20 (16.67)	41 (34.17)	49 (40.83)	10 (8.33)	120 (100)

Source: Primary Data

The Table 1.4, states that majority of the customers disagree to retailer's strategies on Samples (40%), Gifts (40.83%) and Promotional Schemes (40.83%). Most of customers are neutral in Demonstration (40.83%) and Seasonal Discounts (37.5%).

2. ANOVA (TWO WAY) METHOD

a) Ho: There is no association between age and perception of product strategies.

TABLE 2.1: ASSOCIATION BETWEEN AGE AND CUSTOMERS' PERCEPTION TOWARDS PRODUCT STRATEGY

Product Strategies	Sources	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Result
Wide Product Range	Between Groups	2.673	4	.668	.717	.582	Accepted
	Within Groups	107.194	115	.932			
	Total	109.867	119				
More Brands	Between Groups	6.523	4	1.631	1.856	.123	Accepted
	Within Groups	101.069	115	.879			
	Total	107.592	119				
Better Product Quality	Between Groups	11.142	4	2.785	3.812	.006	Rejected
	Within Groups	84.025	115	.731			
	Total	95.167	119				
New Stock Availability	Between Groups	4.679	4	1.170	1.796	.134	Accepted
	Within Groups	74.913	115	.651			
	Total	79.592	119				

Source: Primary Data

The above Table 2.1 clearly states that no significant association is existing between Age and product strategies such as wide product range, more brands and new stock availability except better product quality which is associated with age.

b) Ho: There is no association between income and perception of price strategies

TABLE 2.2 ASSOCIATION BETWEEN INCOME AND CUSTOMERS' PERCEPTION TOWARDS PRICE STRATEGY

Price Strategies	Sources	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Result
Discounts Provided	Between Groups	7.677	2	3.839	5.916	.004	Rejected
	Within Groups	75.914	117	.649			
	Total	83.592	119				
Reasonable Price	Between Groups	3.179	2	1.590	2.301	.105	Accepted
	Within Groups	80.821	117	.691			
	Total	84.000	119				
Instalment Facility	Between Groups	2.181	2	1.091	1.456	.237	Accepted
	Within Groups	87.611	117	.749			
	Total	89.792	119				
Credit Facility	Between Groups	3.674	2	1.837	3.234	.043	Rejected
	Within Groups	66.451	117	.568			
	Total	70.125	119				

Source: Primary Data

The above Table 2.2 indicates that no association is existing between income and price strategies such as reasonable price and instalment facility. There is association between income and discount provided and credit facility.

c) Ho: There is no association between marital status and perception of place strategies

TABLE 2.3: ASSOCIATION BETWEEN MARITAL STATUS AND CUSTOMERS' PERCEPTION TOWARDS PLACE STRATEGY

Place Strategies	Sources	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Result
Better Accessibility	Between Groups	1.126	1	1.126	1.700	.195	Accepted
	Within Groups	78.199	118	.663			
	Total	79.325	119				
Transport Availability	Between Groups	.905	1	.905	1.265	.263	Accepted
	Within Groups	84.420	118	.715			
	Total	85.325	119				
Convenient Operating Hours	Between Groups	1.025	1	1.025	1.222	.271	Accepted
	Within Groups	98.967	118	.839			
	Total	99.992	119				

Source: Primary Data

The above Table indicates that no association is existing between marital status and place strategies such as better accessibility, transport availability and convenient operating hours.

d) Ho: There is no association between gender and perception of promotional strategies

TABLE 2.4: ASSOCIATION BETWEEN GENDER AND CUSTOMERS' PERCEPTION TOWARDS PROMOTIONAL STRATEGIES

Promotion Strategies	Sources	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Result
Samples	Between Groups	.050	1	.050	.071	.790	Accepted
	Within Groups	83.275	118	.706			
	Total	83.325	119				
Demonstration	Between Groups	1.316	1	1.316	1.694	.196	Accepted
	Within Groups	91.676	118	.777			
	Total	92.992	119				
Gifts	Between Groups	.464	1	.464	.591	.443	Accepted
	Within Groups	92.528	118	.784			
	Total	92.992	119				
Seasonal Discounts	Between Groups	.144	1	.144	.177	.675	Accepted
	Within Groups	95.781	118	.812			
	Total	95.925	119				
Promotional Schemes	Between Groups	.018	1	.018	.023	.879	Accepted
	Within Groups	88.974	118	.754			
	Total	88.992	119				

Source: Primary Data

The above Table 2.4 states that no significant association is existing between gender and promotional strategies such as samples, demonstration, gifts, seasonal discounts and promotional schemes.

3. HENRY GARRET RANKING METHOD

TABLE 3.1: RANKING OF ISSUES FACED BY CUSTOMERS IN RURAL RETAIL

S. No	Factors	Total Score	Mean Score	Rank
1.	Product issues	10720	89.33	II
2.	Price issues	5540	46.17	IV
3.	Place Issues	3160	26.33	V
4.	Promotion Issues	10980	91.5	I
5.	Consumer Service Issues	5760	48	III

Source: Primary Data

The customers have ranked promotional issues as first (91.5), which clearly states that the rural retailers do not engage any promotional activities. The Product issues have been ranked second (89.33), wherein the customers feel that more unbranded and adulterated products are sold in the retail outlets. The Consumer services which have been ranked third (48) states that retailer's services are not up-to their expectations. The price issues have been ranked fourth (46.17), shows that the prices of products sold are reasonable and not costly. The Place issues have been ranked fifth (26.33) which states that only minimal issues about the place and the shops are convenient for the customers.

MAJOR FINDINGS

Majority of the customers disagree that the retailers provide wide product range (35%) and more brands (39.17%). On the other hand, majority of customers agree that retailers provide better product quality (41.66%) and new stock is available (45.84%).

Majority of the customers are neutral towards the retailer's discounts (37.5%) and credit facilities (50%). Further, most of the customers disagree reasonable pricing (40%) and instalment facility (41.66%).

Majority of the customers disagree that the retail outlets have better accessibility (43.33%), Transport availability (40.84) and convenient operating hours (42.5%).

Majority of the customers disagree to retailer's strategies on samples (40%), gifts (40.83%) and promotional schemes (40.83%). Most of customers are neutral to demonstration (40.83%) and seasonal discounts (37.5%).

No significant association is existing between age and product strategies such as wide product range, more brands and new stock availability except better product quality which is associated with age

No association is existing between income and price strategies such as reasonable price and instalment facility. There is association between income and discount provided and credit facility.

No association is existing between marital status and place strategies such as better accessibility, transport availability and convenient operating hours.

No significant association is existing between gender and promotional strategies such as samples, demonstration, gifts, seasonal discounts and promotional schemes.

The customers have ranked promotional issues as first (91.5), which clearly states that the rural retailers do not engage any promotional activities. The Product issues have been ranked second (89.33), wherein the customers feel that more unbranded and adulterated products are sold in the retail outlets. The Consumer services which have been ranked third (48) states that retailer's services are not up-to their expectations. The price issues have been ranked fourth (46.17), shows that the prices of products sold are reasonable and not costly. The Place issues have been ranked fifth (26.33) which states that only minimal issues about the place and the shops are convenient for the customers.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The Customers' perception towards marketing strategies of rural retailers reveals that promotional strategies should be given more importance by the retailers. The rural retailers do not engage in any type of promotional activities like providing samples, gifts or any that schemes. So, it is high time to spend some amount in promotional activities.

The product strategies followed by rural retailers do not provide a wide range. The retailers have to provide more branded products and latest fashionable items to gain the attention of the customers.

The customers also feel that the pricing strategies should be transparent. They also expect instalment facilities and credit facilities. Though pricing strategies are prevailing in the rural retail, they should be properly systemised.

The customers also expect customer services from the retailers. The retailers have to train their employees to maintain customer relationship for long term success of the business.

Thus, as competition arises in the Indian rural retail industry, many big firms have turned towards rural areas, it is important for the retailers to maintain cordial relationship with customers and to maintain trustworthy business for surviving in the future retail markets.

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