SALIENT STORE IMAGE ATTRIBUTES IN CONSUMER STORE SELECTION DECISIONS AND THE RELATIONSHIP WITH STORE SATISFACTION AND LOYALTY

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The study examines salient image attributes in consumer store selection and subsequently tests the relationship with store satisfaction and store loyalty. A structured questionnaire containing 32 variables relating to store image attributes was administered to two hundred and forty seven hypermarket shoppers. The use of exploratory factor analysis resulted in six store image attributes, namely, employee interaction, atmospherics, merchandise variety, facilities, value for money and convenience. The six image attributes were highly correlated with store satisfaction and store loyalty. The results were then used to construct two regression models to predict store satisfaction and store loyalty. Four of the six factors showed significant predictive power on customer satisfaction and store loyalty. The results indicate that practitioners should reflect on all dimensions of image attributes and to judiciously manage these factors in order for consumers to reap the benefits of the total retail experience. By doing so, store satisfaction and store loyalty can be enhanced. Managements of hypermarkets also needs to be vigilant to the changing consumer buying patterns in the wake of escalating price of consumer products witnessed in the past year. Future studies should be extended in other formats of retailing and product categories.

Key phrases: Image attributes, store choice, store satisfaction, store loyalty, hypermarkets.

1   INTRODUCTION

South Africa has a fascinating retailing landscape in that it has both a sophisticated first-world retailing sector especially in the urban areas and a third world retailing infrastructure in the rural and township areas(Terblanche 1998:26). The township and rural areas are not fully developed, with great reliance still on traditional forms of retailing with a unique blend of 'spaza' shops. However, on the contrary, the urban retailing infrastructure pride itself with a wide range of retail institutions in urban and semi-urban areas, including sophisticated hypermarkets, hyper-stores and malls which compare with the best in the world. Within the retail industry, supermarkets, hypermarkets/hyper stores are distinguished for their intensity of competitive rivalry among various national chains stores (Evangeldis 1994:5).

The last decade has witnessed national chain stores making huge inroads within the retailing landscape (Farquhar 2002:6; Farhangmehr, Marques & Silva 2000:204). Driven by competent and competitive management, national chains are continually engrossed in seeking larger market shares and in doing so apply pressure on smaller, independent retailers. Retailers have established retail store formats which are differentiated from each other, either based on a single dimension or a combination of dimensions (Uusitalo 2000:214) to lure consumers. Two commonly used dimensions used by retailers are product range (assortment) and everyday low pricing (ELDP). With a proliferation of retail choices, shoppers have also undergone

Dhurup &
Oosthuyzen

Salient store image attributes in consumer store selection decisions and
the relationship with store satisfaction and loyalty

many changes in their lifestyles, spending habits, shopping tendencies and strategies especially in the light of tough economic strains currently witnessed as a consequence of the global financial crisis. In addition, an alarming increase of the food prices in South Africa over the past year has raised recent suspicion of possible collusion along South Africa's food value chain especially the cartel activities that were revealed by the Competition Board in the milling, dairy and poultry industries (Anon 2009). Collectively, these observations send a clear signal to the research community: there is a need to review and redirect research exploring retail patronage phenomena in general. Understanding local customers' perception towards different retail formats is crucial as such perceptions may be susceptible to international cultural differences (Jin & Kim 2003:396).

Consumers have a choice among the various types of retail outlets (Leszczyc & Timmermans 2001:494). At one end of the retail spectrum, there is a plethora of small-scale retail operations offering convenient location and high quality products yet on the other end, lie the larger mega-stores including hypermarkets/hyper stores offering one stop convenience and low prices (Dhurup 2008:65). To make informed decisions, retailers need to know more about consumer store choice decisions.

Hence the primary purpose of this study is to provide additional perspective and empirical evidence regarding consumer store choice criteria in hypermarkets within a South African context. Knowledge of store salient attributes will enhance efforts to test theories of shopping behaviour and could guide future research (Visser & du Preez 2001:3). Against this background, the study seeks to complement existing literature by identifying:

- store salient attributes (store image) which shoppers seek when patronising hypermarkets,

- the nature of the relationship between store image and store satisfaction and store loyalty.

2   RESEARCH PROBLEM

The South African market is characterised by heterogeneous groups of consumers. This heterogeneity exists in the food and non-food markets, which comprise customers with different cultures, income, tastes, expectations, and motives (Evangeldis 1994:5). McCort (1993:91), reviewed literature from cross cultural fields of psychology, anthropology, consumer behaviour and international marketing revealed that culture has an influence on consumer behaviour constructs of perception, information processing and self-concept. Similar sentiments are resonated by Ackennam and Tellis (2001:57) whereby the authors emphasised that

Dhurup &
Oosthuyzen

Salient store image attributes in consumer store selection decisions and
the relationship with store satisfaction and loyalty

national characteristics of consumer behaviour are unique within national boundaries. These unique characteristics are clues to shared norms, values, learnt behaviours and store choice decisions. In addition, research also suggests that the importance of specific store choice criteria may be partially determined by demographic characteristics of the consumers (Baltas & Papastathopoulou 2003:499) which may lead to heterogeneous preferences that vary with different demographic profiles.

Retailers need to move swiftly to adapt to the needs of the customer or face the risk of their customer being enticed by competitors. Not only does a store lose a loyal customer, but they may also lose the competitive advantage in the market. In order to effect meaningful changes to the existing store image, retailers need information about consumers in their respective market environments. While statistical information such as the number of household, incomes, family size and age structure may be useful in calculating market potentials, information is also required on consumer store choice criteria (Sirohi, McLaughlin & Wittink 1998:234). Relatively little research has directed its focus on various dimensions of store salient attributes within a hypermarket retailing environment and the relationship with store satisfaction (Dong 2003:43) especially within a South African context. The study therefore emanates from the following research questions:

- Can a configuration of store attributes be developed for hypermarket shoppers?

- What is the nature of the relationship between store salient attributes (store image) and store satisfaction and store loyalty?

3   STORE IMAGE ATTRIBUTES

Store image attributes are those descriptive features that characterise a store; what a consumer thinks a store is or has; and what is involved with its patronage (Dong 2003:46). Marketers have known for some time that store environment is used by many consumers as a component when forming perceptions of store image and store choice (Wakefield & Baker 1998:530; Erdem, Oumlil & Tuncalp 1999:137; Baltas & Papastathopoulou 2003:499). The formation of store image is a complex process which may be influenced by various variables, which have been difficult for researchers to conceptualise and operationalise. Once formed, store image is associated with a number of critical behaviours and variables including store patronage and store loyalty (Korgaonkar, Lund & Price 1985:39). In their efforts to identify determinants of retail patronage, researchers have also highlighted store image as an important determinant. Martineau (1958:47) was one of the earlier scholars to offer the following description of store image: "it is … the way in which a store is defined in the shoppers mind, partly by its functional qualities and partly by its

Dhurup & Oosthuyzen

Salient store image attributes in consumer store selection decisions and the relationship with store satisfaction and loyalty

aura of psychological attributes. The more favourable the image, the more likely it is that the consumers would shop and buy at the store". Store image has also been viewed as an overall attitude of the consumer towards a store (Steenkamp & Wedel 1991:310). Lindquist (1974-1975:30) for example, defines store image as a "structure of some sort that ties together the dimensions that are at work and conceptualises store image as nine key attributes: merchandise, service, clientele, physical facilities, convenience, promotion, store ambience, institutional factors and post-transaction satisfaction. Other studies have examined the role of store environment (Baker, Grewal & Parasuraman 1994:334), store atmospherics (Donovan, Rossiter, Marcoolyn & Nesdale 1994:284; Turley & Milliman 2000:193) on customers store choice and store image. Researchers have also advanced various conceptualisations of store image (Kim & Jin 2001:243; Dong 2003:54) in an attempt to examine consumer store choice decisions in varied retail settings. Studies undertaken by Erdem et al (1999:142) reflect three store attributes, status, merchandise and price for with the context of apparel shoppers. Kim and Jin (2001:243) used six image dimensions: merchandise, service convenience, facility convenience, congestion, atmosphere, price competitiveness, and fashion goods to compare local and multi-national discount retailers.

An abundance of studies have been conducted on the meaning and measurement of store image (Lindquist 1974-1975:35; Hansen & Deutscher 1977-1978:60) whereby store image is considered as a critical component in store choice and store loyalty (Thompson & Chen 1998:161). The perspective that is taken in retail literature treat store image as a result of store salient attributes *i.e.* image is a function of store salient attributes. Thus over the years different authors have distinguished various store attributes that are part of the overall image (Dickerson & Albaum 1977:88; Hansen & Deustscher 1977/78:62; Lindquist, 1974/75:31; Dawson, Bloch & Ridgway, 1990:409; Moschis, Curasi & Bellinger 2004:125). Store choice may also be governed by situational circumstances where decisions are made which are quite separate from those that are made when consumers are under less time pressure (Van Kenhove, De Wulf & Van Waterschoot 1999:130). These situational conditions are often referred to in literature as task definitions. From a marketing perspective, task definitions are reasons or circumstances that make it necessary to buy or consume a product or service. Therefore, understanding the role of task definitions in store choice context is important as it may affect retailers' marketing positioning and retail mix strategies.

As a measure of retail store patronage, several variables were used by researchers in examining customers' patronage behaviour, such as the level of excitement, shopping satisfaction, re-patronage intentions, and total time and money spent during

Dhurup &
Oosthuyzen

Salient store image attributes in consumer store selection decisions and
the relationship with store satisfaction and loyalty

a shopping trip. Store attributes researchers have also examined the extent to which these attributes affect store choice. Bearden (1977:18) for example, found that atmospherics, location, parking, friendliness of staff affect store choice decisions. Peter et al (2001:493) found that consumers tend to choose a single store where prices are lower, parking is cheap, broad assortment is found, where travel times are reduced, and where check-out times were faster. According to the central place theory, location is frequently emphasised to be an important factor in attracting patrons to a store (Kim & Jin 2001:236; Dong 2003:43).

Evident from the above discussion is that store choice may be influenced by various factors and that there are considerable variations among researchers in the number of store attributes used in their studies in order to ascertain salient store image attributes and store choice. Store image therefore reinforces the belief that customers will hold opinions about a store based on functional features. These features include store characteristics such as product assortment, store layout, store location, price-value relationship and other elements that consumers compare with competitors. The variety of attributes identified by researchers and their related findings suggest that all retail store attributes are not equally salient in affecting store choice (Paulins & Geistfeld 2003:371). The analysis of the streams of retail images is based on the theoretical foundation on the cognitive structure theory which explains that the formation of attributes of consumers can be achieved through the formation of cognitive structures. A well-known theory of the cognitive structure, the multi-attribute model, assumes that attributes are a function of the associated attributes and benefits that are salient for a brand or are merely salient beliefs on attributes (Dong 2003:47).

Also apparent from the varied research findings is that store attributes may vary by store types, customer characteristics, and cultural differences. Straughan and Albers-Miller (2000:521-522) argue that retailers need to be aware of culture for at least two reasons. Firstly, in many countries, domestic markets are becoming more culturally diverse. This allows retailers to use cultural themes as a means of segmenting and targeting various groups. Secondly, competitive saturation of domestic markets has led many retailers to explore market development strategies as a primary means of business growth.

4   THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN IMAGE ATTRIBUTES, STORE SATISFACTION AND LOYALTY

Satisfaction has been considerably debated in services marketing literature (Dong 2003:45). Bloemer and Ruyter (1998:501) define store satisfaction as "the outcome

Dhurup &
Oosthuyzen

Salient store image attributes in consumer store selection decisions and
the relationship with store satisfaction and loyalty

of the subjective evaluation that the chosen alternative (store) meets or exceeds expectations". The basis of this definition stems from the disconfirmation paradigm as a post-purchase evaluation (Torres, Summers & Belleau 2001:206). Westbrook (1981:80) is of the view that store satisfaction includes consumer's perception of store characteristics as well as consumers' evaluation of the products acquired from the store. Hunt (1977:459-460) maintains that satisfaction is an "evaluation of emotion" and resonate similar views that a consumer is satisfied when the service evokes a positive feeling based on the disconfirmation paradigm. Westbrook and Black (1985:84) maintain that the level of satisfaction could measure the motives underlying consumers' shopping activities. The authors found that there were significantly different levels of satisfaction during shopping activities. Dawson et al (1990:424) also established that shoppers with strong product motives were more satisfied with the product, whereas shoppers with high experiential motives were more satisfied with the facility. Customer's patronage behaviour towards a particular store is therefore dependent on their image of that particular store. The more favourable the store image, the higher the valence of the store to the consumer. Na, Marshall and Keller (1999:171) view satisfaction as a resulting variable of strong association or images, along with preference and loyalty. As a consequence, consumers shop at stores where they can maximize their satisfaction considering both retail attributes and shopping costs. Research on the relationships among store image, store satisfaction and store loyalty among Korean discount retail customers found that there is a positive direct relationship between store image and store satisfaction (Dong 2003:54).

Satisfaction is also viewed as a post-decision customer experience (Caruana 2002:815; Torres et al 2001:205) and a key diagnostic measure of loyalty (Aaker 1991:45). Satisfaction is often regarded as an antecedent to store loyalty (Bitner 1990:69) and a favourable store image leads to store loyalty (Dick & Basu 1994:108). In their study Bloemer and De Ruyter (1998:503) established that store image affects store loyalty, via satisfaction, *i.e.* satisfaction is a mediator variable. This implies that when customers are satisfied, they have a higher propensity to store loyalty (Brink & Berndt 2004:32) and store satisfaction often leads to shopper loyalty (Berman & Evans 2004:177). Oliva, Oliver and MacMillan (1992:90) suggest that the relationship between satisfaction and loyalty is nonlinear. That is, when satisfaction increased above a critical level, repeat purchase also increases. In retailing literature store loyalty is most frequently related to store image (Dick & Basu 1994:108; Dong 2003:46). This notion suggests that a favourable store image leads to store loyalty (Hirschman 1981:125). Mazursky and Jacoby (1986:160) described three factors of store image: merchandise-related aspect, service related aspects and pleasantness of shopping at a store, implying that cognitive and affective antecedents are critical in

Dhurup &
Oosthuyzen

Salient store image attributes in consumer store selection decisions and
the relationship with store satisfaction and loyalty

establishing an overall store image evaluation. Literature also suggests that loyalty comprise two dimensions: attitudinal and behavioural aspects. The behavioural aspect of loyalty focuses on a measure of proportion of a purchase of a specific brand, while attitudinal loyalty is measured by a psychological commitment to a store (Dong 2003:45). Where there is no store commitment in the consumer's repeat visit, the consumer becomes spuriously loyal (Dick & Basu 1994:101). Knox and Denison (2000:34) defines store loyalty as "the consumers' inclination to patronise a given store or chain of stores over time". All these definitions suggest that consumers' commitment as a necessary condition for store loyalty to occur. In addition, previous studies in retail settings suggest a direct link between store images and store loyalty (Dong 2003:49; Lindguist 1974/75:30); Bearden 1977:19).

Although a number of studies of store image have identified store attributes, evidence suggests that these attributes vary by store type. However, the exact relationship between store image and store satisfaction remains inconclusive.

With previous research either showing positive or negative relationship between store image and store satisfaction and store loyalty, the study tests the following hypotheses:

H_1 Store attributes exhibits a positive relationship with store satisfaction.

H_2 Store attributes exhibits a significant causal relationship with store satisfaction.

H_3 Store attributes exhibits a positive relationship with store loyalty.

H_4 Store attributes exhibits a significant causal relationship with store loyalty.

5   RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Population and sample

The target population for this study was a purposive sample of consumers above 18 years of age from Southern Gauteng. A quantitative approach was used by means of a survey using a questionnaire. The facility location (store) was used to draw the sample in the absence of a sample frame. In order to randomise the data collection procedure, the survey was conducted at different days and times of the week. Furthermore, representivity was achieved by ensuring that respondents visited the facility at least once in the last month. Both male and female consumers over the age of 18 years where chosen as respondents. A hypermarket was chosen as our object of study. First, its situational variable (geographical distance) was suited for determining customer attitude and patronage. Secondly, a wide variety of the different segments of the population frequent the store. Thirdly, the store guarantees

Dhurup & Oosthuyzen

Salient store image attributes in consumer store selection decisions and the relationship with store satisfaction and loyalty

variation in terms of products, brands and assortment. Finally, this store places emphasises on image building and customer satisfaction.

Development of the instrument

Statements used in the development of the questionnaire was based on a multi-item scale of previous research studies of Tauber (1972:47); Lindquist (1974-1975:29); Westbrook and Black (1985:90); Dawson et al (1990:408); Kim and Jin (2001:248); Lumpkin, Greenberg and Goldstucker (1985:83); Jin and Kim (2003:407) and Dong (2003:53). The questionnaire was pre-tested using a snowball sample of twenty hypermarket shoppers, who patronised hypermarkets in the last month. Pre-testing was done by personal interviews by the researchers in order to observe respondents reaction and attitudes (Malhotra 2004:301). Debriefing occurred after the questionnaire was completed and changes were made to questions with regard to re-phrasing, sequence and layout (Chisnall 2005:151).

The questionnaire consisted of four sections that measured consumer store image attributes, store satisfaction, store loyalty and demographic variables. Store image attributes was measured using a forty-two item scale. Satisfaction was measured using five items. A seven point Likert scale was used to measure store attributes and a five point Likert scale was used to measure store satisfaction and store loyalty. Respondents were asked to rate each item on store attributes in terms of their decision to shop at hypermarkets ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. To measure store satisfaction, respondents were asked to rate each satisfaction statement ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Shopping orientation was measured using three closed questions based on the days of the week respondents undertake most of their shopping, main reason for shopping on the day identified and frequency of shopping at the store. Demographic questions included gender, marital status, age and income.

Data collection

Data was collected with shoppers in the parking lot of the store after the shoppers completed their shopping so that valid measures of the time spent shopping, experiencing the environment and satisfaction could be obtained (Reynolds, Ganesh & Luckett 2002:689). Post graduate students who were trained in interview techniques administered the questionnaire. This method of data collection has been used in previous studies (Babin & Darden 1996:204). The interviewers approached 330 shoppers of which 269 shoppers met the criteria (over the age of eighteen years and have shopped in the store at least in the past month) and agreed to participate in the interview. A total of 247 questionnaires were suitable and used for data analysis,

**Dhurup &
Oosthuyzen**

**Salient store image attributes in consumer store selection decisions and
the relationship with store satisfaction and loyalty**

resulting in an effective response rate of 75%. A total of 22 questionnaires were excluded from the analysis due to large sections not completed.

7   RESULTS

The empirical results presented in this section comprise the following steps. The characteristics of the sample are reported, followed by the results of the factor analysis of the store image attributes. A correlation analysis was undertaken to examine significant relationships between the identified dimensions with store satisfaction and store loyalty. Finally, regression analysis was undertaken to establish the causal relationship between the store image attributes, store satisfaction and store loyalty.

Demographic profile

Cumulative frequency analysis was conducted on the respondents' shopping orientation and demographic characteristics. In terms of shopping orientation, some shoppers preferred to undertake their shopping on weekends (n=93; 38%) whilst weekday shopping was concentrated mainly on Wednesdays (n=35; 14.2%), Thursdays (n=43; 17.4%) and Fridays (n=29; 11.7%). Shoppers choose these days either because it fits in with other shopping activities, the store is not busy or they were not working on these days. Majority of the respondents (n=223; 96.6%) visit the store at least once a month. Female respondents (n=155; 62.8%) were more than males (n=88; 35.6%) in the sample. There was a fairly even distribution of single (n=122; 49%) and married (n=125; 51%) respondents. Majority of the respondents (n=134; 54%) were between 26 to 45 years of age. The sample distributions in terms of income were as follows: below R100 000 (n=128; 51.8%), between R100 000 to R300 000 (n=95; 38%), between R300 000 to R500 000 (n=5; 2%) and above R500 000 (n=3; 1.2%).

Factor analysis

A common factor extraction route with varimax rotation was used to extract factors (Bristow & Schneider 2003:118). Prior to factor extraction the Bartlett's test of Sphericity and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was conducted to establish whether the factor analysis procedure was appropriate for the data set. The Bartlett's test of Sphericity was significant at $p<0.000$ inferring that the data set is not an identity matrix with zero correlations, thus suitable for factor analysis. The KMO measure of sampling adequacy was 0.946 which is considered 'meritorius" by Kaiser (1974:35) inferring that the data is suitable for factor analysis. The percentage of variance explained, the scree plot and eigenvalue criterion guided

**Dhurup &
Oosthuyzen**

**Salient store image attributes in consumer store selection decisions and
the relationship with store satisfaction and loyalty**

the extraction of factors. In addition, items that load heavily on more than one factor
were eliminated from further scale development. Hence, cross-loading were also
examined in the factor structure. Ten items were eliminated either because of cross
loading or low factor loading (<0.45). This procedure resulted in the extraction of six
meaningful factors which were labelled as employee interaction, atmospherics,
merchandise quality, facilities, value and convenience. Table 1 summarises the
factor structure and psychometric evaluation of the scale.

Table 1: Factor loading matrix and psychometric evaluation of the scale

Scale item no	Factor 1 Employee interaction	Factor 2 Atmos-pherics	Factor 3 Merchandise quality	Factor 4 Facilities	Factor 5 Value	Factor 6 Convenience	Item-to-total correlation	Alpha if item deleted
1	.243	.269	**.791**	.206	.195	.056	.734	.966
2	.261	.255	**.812**	.189	.215	.037	.743	.966
3	.276	.232	**.820**	.166	.193	.053	.730	.966
4	.326	.264	**.756**	.096	.200	.072	.724	.967
5	.324	.089	**.457**	.313	.390	.234	.692	.967
6	.237	.218	**.502**	.272	.158	.228	.625	.967
7	**.824**	.229	.179	.166	.213	.095	.738	.966
8	**.829**	.229	.210	.220	.114	.131	.745	.966
9	**.842**	.196	.219	.200	.207	.073	.753	.966
10	**.852**	.185	.142	.129	.192	.043	.678	.967
11	**.661**	.263	.397	.069	.206	.096	.734	.966
12	**.639**	.299	.241	.111	-.043	.125	.594	.967
13	**.697**	.238	.290	.181	.251	.192	.771	.966
14	.322	.288	.158	.213	**.714**	.072	.714	.967
15	.213	.293	.276	.169	**.788**	.130	.740	.966
16	.184	.313	.287	.193	**.751**	.036	.712	.967
17	.137	.237	.283	.450	**.605**	.152	.707	.967
18	.250	**.575**	.364	.224	.256	.154	.758	.966
19	.190	**.810**	.207	.178	.164	.087	.705	.967
20	.187	**.822**	.202	.167	.167	.096	.708	.967
21	.232	**.600**	.332	.189	.433	.213	.819	.966
22	.229	**.677**	.233	.161	.267	.163	.726	.966
23	.225	**.673**	.087	-.163	.027	-.027	.403	.969
24	.236	**.739**	.195	.244	.238	.098	.749	.966
25	.246	**.572**	.206	.359	.298	.280	.778	.966
26	.314	**.545**	.217	.272	.327	.206	.766	.966
27	.197	.132	.044	.215	.106	**.862**	.471	.968
28	.119	.182	.151	.090	.103	**.883**	.463	.968
29	.146	.282	.368	**.562**	.296	.248	.717	.967
30	.228	.203	.116	**.692**	.300	.111	.622	.967
31	.169	.096	.162	**.877**	.101	.100	.545	.967
32	.210	.116	.212	**.824**	.155	.089	.599	.967
Eigenvalues	16.36	2.18	1.97	1.62	1.26	1.04	Overall Cronbach α	**0.968**
% of variance	51.15	6.84	6.15	5.06	3.95	3.27	Overall Cronbach α	**0.968**
Cumulative %	51.15	57.99	64.15	69.21	73.17	76.45	Overall Cronbach α	**0.968**
Cronbach α	0.948	0.936	0.922	0.882	0.913	0.866		

**Dhurup &
Oosthuyzen**

**Salient store image attributes in consumer store selection decisions and
the relationship with store satisfaction and loyalty**

Correlations

The Pearson's Product Moment Correlation Coefficient (r) was used to analyse the bivariate relationship between the six dimensions with frequency of attendance and length of time being a fan. To make qualitative judgment in order to assess the size of the correlation coefficients, Cohen's measure of effect sizes were used to measure the importance of an effect. The size of the effect as suggested by Steyn (2000:1) is summarized below:

- $r = 0.10$ (small effect);

- $r = 0.30$ (medium effect); and

- $r = 0.50$ (large effect).

The results of the correlation are summarized in table 2.

Table 2:   Correlations between six store image factors, store satisfaction and store loyalty

	Factor 1 Employee interaction	Factor 2 Atmospherics	Factor 3 Merchandise quality	Factor 4 Facilities	Factor 5 Value	Factor 6 Convenience	Store Satisfaction	Store Loyalty
Factor 1 Employee interaction	1.00	0.682*	0.660*	0.530*	0.590*	0.383**	0.546*	0.510*
Factor 2 Atmospherics	0.682*	1.00	0.688*	0.617*	0.683*	0.386**	0.641*	0.615*
Factor 3 Merchandise quality	0.660*	0.688*	1.00	0.583*	0.718*	0.436**	0.611*	0.617*
Factor 4 Facilities	0.530*	0.617*	0.583*	1.00	0.651*	0.426**	0.588*	0.625*
Factor 5 Value	0.590*	0.683*	0.718*	0.651*	1.00	0.376**	0.660*	0.673*
Factor 6 Convenience	0.383*	0.386*	0.436*	0.426**	0.376**	1.00	0.306**	0.330**
Store Satisfaction	0.546*	0.641*	0.611*	0.588*	0.660*	0.306**	1.00	0.827*
Store Loyalty	0.510*	0.615*	0.617*	0.625*	0.673*	0.330**	0.827	1.00
* Large practical effect		** Medium practical effect						

Regression

The results of the factor analysis provided empirical support for six factors. Of interest was the relationship between the six factors, satisfaction and loyalty. As a result of the relationship, a regression analysis was undertaken between the six factors with satisfaction and loyalty. The results of the two regression models are presented in table 3.

Dhurup &
Oosthuyzen

Salient store image attributes in consumer store selection decisions and
the relationship with store satisfaction and loyalty

Table 3: Regression of six store image factors with store satisfaction and store loyalty

Independent variables	Store satisfaction (dependent variable)		Store loyalty (dependent variable)	
Factor 1: Employee interaction	0.067	p=0.304	-0.005	p=0.934
Factor 2: Atmospherics	0.225	p=0.002	0.155	p=0.030
Factor 3: Merchandise quality	0.128	p=0.082	0.161	p=0.026
Factor 4: Facilities	0.177	p=0.005	0.252	p=0.000
Factor 5: Value	0.274	p=0.000	0.295	p=0.000
Factor 6: Convenience	-0.037	p=0.464	-0.014	p=0.779
R-Square	0.533	p=0.000	0.544	p=0.000

With two store image factors, namely, employee interaction and convenience showing statistically non - significant contribution in the prediction of both store satisfaction and store loyalty a stepwise regression analyses was undertaken. This regression technique builds a model one variable at a time and indicates only those variables that are statistically significant to the model (Paulins & Geistfeld 2003:376). The results are depicted in Table 4.

Table 4: Stepwise regression of store image factors with store satisfaction and store loyalty

Store Satisfaction				Store Loyalty			
Variable to enter	Beta	p-value	R^2	Variable to enter	Beta	p-value	R^2
Factor 5: Value	0.299	0.000	0.434	Factor 5: Value	0.327	0.000	0.452
Factor 3: Merchandise quality	0.270	0.000	0.504	Factor 3: Merchandise quality	0.184	0.007	0.497
Factor 2: Atmospherics	0.151	0.030	0.514	Factor 4: Facilities	0.159	0.005	0.515
Factor 4: Facilities	0.114	0.048	0.522	Factor 2: Atmospherics	0.175	0.012	0.527

8   DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The primary objective of the study was to empirically test a store attribute scale. The six factors accounted for 76.45% of the variance explained which according to Malhotra (2007:617) is satisfactory. **Factor one, employee interaction** relates to employee-customer relationships and the employees willingness to assist customers. This factor accounted for 51% of the variance. The appearance of employees, interaction of store employees, friendly and knowledgeable personnel are important determinants for consumers to make future purchase decisions at a store. **Factor two, atmospherics** is a broad construct measuring the physical environment of the store. This factor accounted for approximately 7% of the variance. Atmospherics are elements that contribute to a pleasant shopping environment such as store layout that makes it easy to get around the store, interior and exterior store design and merchandise display. Previous research emphasise that the physical features of a retail environment to be important in store choice decision (Reynolds et al 2002: 693). Baker's et al (1994:335) study also revealed that the physical environment of a store enhances customer emotions or minimises negative mood states and more specifically entices customers to stay longer in the store and spend more money than

Dhurup &
Oosthuyzen

Salient store image attributes in consumer store selection decisions and
the relationship with store satisfaction and loyalty

they had originally intended. The role of atmospherics in store choice is found to be significant and an important part of retail marketing strategy (Kotler 1973:60) where shoppers determine the value of merchandise based on monetary as well a non-monetary costs (Zeithaml 1988:19). Wakefield and Baker's (1998:530) study revealed that architectural design and interior décor play in determining and desire to stay in an environment. Sirohi et al (1998:237) are of the view that facility design such as overall appearance of the store, cleanliness, wide and well marked aisle directions leads to enhanced perceptions of overall merchandise quality.

Factor three, merchandise variety relate to the quality, assortment and reliability of the products on offer. This factor accounted for approximately 6% of the variance. Merchandise assortment relates to variety and choices offered within a category of products. Sinha and Banerjee (2004:486) found in their study that more than 70% of the respondents mentioned merchandise quality and variety as strong reasons for store choice. Researchers have been consistent in reporting the importance of merchandise assortment in the evaluation of a retailer's image (Dabholkar, Thorpe, & Rentz 1996:4; Terblanche & Boschoff 2004:2). Merchandise variety and depth of assortment will to a large extent be influenced by the image the retailers wishes to portray (Terblanche & Boschoff 2004:3). The study is in congruence with the findings of Mahoney and Sternquist (1989:107) and Thorpe and Avery (1983:39) where high-quality merchandise and merchandise selection were identified as desirable characteristics in store choice decisions. **Factor four facilities** refer to services that are provided at the store such as ATMs, post office, banking facilities and payment by means of various types of cards. This factor captures attributes that are influenced by the retailer's responsiveness to the needs of the customer as they contribute towards a pleasant shopping experience. This factor accounted for approximately 5% of the variance.

Factor five, value for money refers to prices of well-known brands, advertised specials and brand variety the store offers. This factor accounted for approximately 4% of the variance. Price seems to be an important determinant in store choice decisions (Athanasspoulos 2000:192). Terblanche and Boschoff (2004:2) affirm that price has an important bearing on satisfaction primarily because customer satisfaction is the result of a customer's perception of the value received compared to the price paid. Within a hypermarket setting, variety and different brands are well catered for. Apart from offering a wide selection of national brands, private label and no name brands are competitively priced to appeal to both price sensitive shoppers and those who prefer specific brand names. The study by Torres et al (2001:211) revealed that price was an important criterion considered when choosing a store. Lambert (1979:39), Lumpkin et al (1985:96) resonates similar views that an important

attribute in store selection is price. Previous studies (Carpenter & Moore 2006:436; Baker et al 1994:328) affirm that pricing, product assortment and variety, merchandise quality, store environments and atmospherics are important factors determining the choice of format by consumers. Hence, consumers try to find satisfactory products to match the price and choose a store with a competitive price structure (Oates, Shufeldt & Vaught 1996:16).

Factor six, convenience relates to the shopping convenience in terms of time, location, shopping hours and the ability to buy goods and services at one destination, under one roof. This factor accounted for approximately 3% of the variance. Research has shown convenience has led many consumers to move towards one-stop shopping (Reynolds et al 2002:695). Hypermarkets are well positioned to meet the one stop shopping needs of customers. These results are consistent with the findings of Schiffman, Dash and Dillon (1977:6) as location becomes critical as the population move towards the suburbs.

The results of the Pearson **correlations** coefficients revealed that statistically significant positive correlations exist between all six store image factors and store satisfaction as well as store loyalty. All these correlations have a large practical effect (r>0.5) except for factor 6 (convenience) which has a medium effect (r>0.3). This indicates a positive relationship between the store salient attributes and store satisfaction as well as store loyalty.

The hypotheses:

H_1 Store attributes exhibits a positive relationship with store satisfaction; and

H_3 Store attributes exhibits a positive relationship with store loyalty are therefore not rejected.

Regression analysis shows significant causal relationships between the store attributes and store satisfaction as well as between the attributes and store loyalty (R^2>0.3). It can therefore be concluded that the higher prevalence of store attributes the higher the level of store satisfaction and store loyalty.

The hypotheses:

H_2 Store attributes exhibits a significant causal relationship with store satisfaction; and

H_4 Store attributes exhibits a significant causal relationship with store loyalty are not rejected.

Dhurup &
Oosthuyzen

Salient store image attributes in consumer store selection decisions and
the relationship with store satisfaction and loyalty

The Beta coefficients in Table 3 indicate that factor 1: employee interaction as well as factor 6: convenience contributes very little to the prediction of both store satisfaction and store loyalty. The stepwise regression results depicted in Table 4 confirm this. Store satisfaction can be predicted by Factor 5 (value; β = 0.299), Factor 3 (merchandise quality; β = 0.270), Factor 2 (atmospherics; β = 0.151) and Factor 4 (facilities; β = 0.114) (ranging from the highest to the lowest contributions). Store loyalty can be predicted by the same factors except that the contribution of Factor 4 (facilities; β = 0.159) is lower than that of Factor 2: (Atmospherics; β = 0.175). In total the four factors predicts 52% of the variance in store satisfaction and approximately 53% of the variance in store loyalty. The fact that employee interaction and convenience did not make a large impact on satisfaction and loyalty does not make the dimension unimportant as choice behaviour is rather a complex phenomenon and it is quite unrealistic to assume that all variables can account for substantial proportion of variability (Schiffman et al 1977:10). In addition, within a hypermarket context, very little employee interaction takes place save for interactions with employees in the purchase of products that require involved and extended decision-making (such as a purchase of a household appliance) or interaction with the cashier as majority of the purchased is based on a self-service format. These results are not surprising as studies undertaken with a Greek grocery retailing context (Theodoridis & Chatzipangiotou 2009:727) revealed mixed results where atmospherics and merchandising were found to be non significant determinants of customer satisfaction. The results on the salespersons interaction had little impact on store satisfaction and store loyalty is not uncommon as the studies undertaken by Baker *et al.*, (1994:336) also established that the employee factor had little impact on service evaluations. A study undertaken by Terblanche (1999:145) on super regional shopping centres in South Africa also revealed that convenience did not feature as a benefit. The magnitude of hypermarkets and the large opening parking spaces may be responsible for creating very long cognitive distances in consumers' mind (Terblanche 1999:145). Research has also shown that the more a customer visits a store, the more consumers place some factors in their subconscious level and unless the factors such as employee presence and convenience causes a substantial (negative or positive) surprise the customer will not notice it (Spies, Hesse & Loesch 1997:4). This theory is embedded in Kano's quality model and more specifically, the basic needs dimension (must-be-needs) (Zhang & Von Dran 2002:12). Basic needs are the minimum attributes acceptable to a customer (Shen, Tan & Xie 2000:92) and encompasses attributes customers take for granted. Their presence goes unnoticed, but their absence will generate complaints and dissatisfaction. Store satisfaction does not rise with the presence of such attributes (Tan & Pawitra 2001:421). These

Dhurup & Oosthuyzen

Salient store image attributes in consumer store selection decisions and the relationship with store satisfaction and loyalty

attributes are naturally expected and customers normally do not verbalise (Matsler & Hinterhuber 1998:28) or explicitly demand them (Martensen & Gronholdt 2002:954).

9 RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY

The standardized Cronbach **α** was 0.968 for the scale and the reliability for the individual factors ranged from 0.882 to 0.948. All the factors were above the acceptable benchmark levels of 0.70 (Malhotra 2004:314). Three types of validity tests were performed namely, content, construct and predictive validities. Content validity was ascertained by pre-testing the questionnaire and a review of the questionnaire by retail and marketing management academics and a statistician. In addition, a pilot test was undertaken where changes were made to the questionnaire regarding the deletion of items, addition of items, rewording and rephrasing of questions. Construct validity of the scale was assessed by the computation of the Cronbach alpha coefficient for the scale which was acceptable and an indirect indicator of construct validity (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry 1988:28). In addition, factor analysis was performed on each of the constructs to determine what percentage of variance is explained by each factor. The results indicate that the six factors accounted for approximately seventy six percent of the variance explained thus inferring construct validity. The results of the multiple regression analysis provide evidence of predictive validity whereby a causal relationship was hypothesised between the six factors and store satisfaction and store loyalty. Stepwise regression results indicate that four of the six factors significantly predict store satisfaction and store loyalty.

10 RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, the results provide interesting insights into consumer choice of shopping at hypermarkets. Six salient image attributes were developed. Six major attributes namely, employee interaction, atmospherics, merchandise variety, facilities, value for money and convenience were established through factor analysis. In addition, the results demonstrated that store image attributes and satisfaction relationships are robust in a hypermarket context. In particular, four of the six attributes namely, atmospherics, merchandise quality, facilities and value for money emerged as significant determinants of satisfaction and loyalty.

There seems to be an increasing tendency towards price-oriented strategies in retailing as in many industrialised countries discount retailers are the winners of the century (Groeppel-Klein, Thelen & Antretter 1999:67). The triumph of hypermarkets,

Dhurup &
Oosthuyzen

Salient store image attributes in consumer store selection decisions and
the relationship with store satisfaction and loyalty

being not only restricted to food and groceries is achieved particularly at the cost of traditional speciality stores. It has also become evident that shoppers have become smart shoppers and shop for clever bargains, an international phenomenon and relevant for all income categories. Since value received for money is a salient store choice, it is prudent for management to emphasize quality products with reasonable prices that are affordable to the majority of the population. With the global economic crisis affecting economics including South African consumers, offerings of products with more value for money will definitely be advantageous to the consumer especially in the light of high price inflation experienced in the food and grocery prices over the past year. The hypermarkets format is positively viewed by customers with respect to having reasonable prices. Enhancing the other identified dimensions would be counter-productive if higher prices were a result. Customers who have been pleased with prices of products and other key store attributes will continue to express shopping preference for hypermarkets.

Visually appealing atmospherics can be another strategy to attract and retain current customers. Atmospherics can be promoted through a variety of means: through layout, convenient location of products and lively in store displays. In the past, store displays were primarily used for promotional purposes (Hu & Jasper 2006:42). With customer sophistication, retailers have discovered new roles for effective displays; communicating product information and store image, assisting customers in making purchase decisions and creating a pleasant shopping environment. Various aspects of ambiance should be continuously emphasised by managements of hypermarkets. Retailers can make the store more personal by introducing social cues that are relevant to customers' lifestyle and values.

Attention to deep inventory and operational efficiency are already an important operational component with hypermarkets formats and should continue to be emphasised. In addition, the importance of catering for a diverse consumer base compared to neighbourhood stores who tend to draw on more local and suburban customer bases is essential. Appealing merchandise selection, assortment and variety is one of the reasons to shop at hypermarkets. Hypermarkets that lose touch with their customers through inappropriate merchandise selections will lose customers (Paulins & Geistfeld 2003:382).

Facilities such time saving services such as ATM, restaurants, prepared food does provide benefits to hypermarket customers. Available facilities enhance the one-stop-shopping experience of hypermarket customers. These facilities have to be favourably natured by hypermarkets in order to promote positive store attributes

Dhurup &
Oosthuyzen

Salient store image attributes in consumer store selection decisions and
the relationship with store satisfaction and loyalty

among customers. A well-planned hypermarket can be a major facilitator in shopping convenience.

The results indicate that for hypermarkets to main sustained patronage all store image attributes (employee interaction, atmospherics, merchandise variety, facilities, value for money and convenience) needs to be enhanced in order to create a total retail experience for consumers as opposed to focusing on a single dimension.

11   LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The result included in this study were gathered and reported on an individual format and one store only. A useful addition to this area of research would be to examine different retail formats. However, this shortcoming should not negate usability of results. A limitation of this study was the size of the sample. Future studies should be extended to other types of retail stores in South Africa. Generalization of the results to a broader population must be treated with caution. These results provide several pertinent avenues for managements of hypermarkets to nurture alluring relationships with customers. Specific product categories were not addressed in this study. Retailers can benefit from conducting surveys of specific category products. Despite limitations, the findings from the study point toward several useful directions for future study. Different store images need to be brought into the equation mainly driven by changing consumer preferences and needs. Additional variables added to the store image equation may enhance our understanding of salient image attributes, store satisfaction and store loyalty.

12   CONCLUSION

This study reinforces previous streams of research which demonstrates the value of salient store attributes in store choice decisions. It consolidates previous study on retail images producing a six factor model within a South African context and provides results of the interrelationships among retail store images, store satisfaction and store loyalty. Forming attitude towards hypermarkets is closely related to employee interaction, atmospherics, merchandise quality, facilities, value and convenience. In essence store image is important in generating a pleasant total retail experience, satisfaction and loyalty.

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Dhurup &
Oosthuyzen

Salient store image attributes in consumer store selection decisions and
the relationship with store satisfaction and loyalty

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Dhurup &
Oosthuyzen

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Dhurup &
Oosthuyzen

Salient store image attributes in consumer store selection decisions and
the relationship with store satisfaction and loyalty

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