Role of Retail Store Attributes on Store and Customer Engagement in Food Industry

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ABSTRACT

Indian youth is emerging as a very powerful and significant consumer market. Food retailers have to adopt new strategies to win the hearts of the customers, especially youths of India. The present study has tried to understand the level of perception and consumption behaviour of the youth by examining the retail store attributes of the food outlets which are considered important in making the buying decision of food products from the local or franchise-based food outlets. Further, the study provides an empirical evidence for the relationships among the food quality and servicescapes as the retail store attributes and this attempt to bring strong store and customer engagement towards a particular food outlet. In this regard, the present study includes two important components of retail store attributes, i.e., food quality and servicescapes. The data was collected from registered Ph. D research scholars and final semester students of post-graduate courses enrolled in Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar for the session 2016-17 through self-modified and well-structured instrument. Selection of food outlets, specifically local food outlets and franchise-based food outlets is done because of fast changing trends in food and eating habits of consumers which have contributed largely to the growth and development of organised food retail formats in India. The statistical technique, such as reliability and validity, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), structural equation modelling (SEM) were used for data analysis. The study found that among the two dimensions of retail store attributes, food quality has a positive and significant impact on store engagement. However, the impact of servicescape on store engagement was found to be non-significant. When we analysed the direct impact of food quality and servicescape on customer engagement, we found that servicescape has a positive and significant impact on customer engagement. On the other hand, the impact of food quality on customer engagement is insignificant. Further, store engagement significantly leads to customer engagement in context to food retail outlets. Thus, the study reveals that the impact of food quality on customer engagement is significant through store engagement. In order to make maximum footfall in the food outlets substantive other insights must be brought into the retail store attributes like in atmospherics or ambience of the food outlet. The results of the study are helpful for future service providers, tourism businesses, tourism retailers, and other service sectors to plan better services and equip a wider range of service skills and this exaggerates more store patronage towards the particular food outlet.

Keywords: Servicescapes, Store Engagement, Customer Engagement, Atmospherics

INTRODUCTION

In the past few years, Indian retail sector has seen remarkable changes and has gone through major transformation particularly over the last decade with a perceptible shift toward organised retailing and food retailing is one among these (Thomas, 2013). Major domestic players have stepped into the retail arena with long-term ambitious plans to expand and prosper their business across verticals, cities and formats (Das, 2014; Moona & Songb, 2015). Food dominates maximum shopping basket in India. The organised food retailing sector in India is on the verge of a boom with almost big corporate houses including Tata, Reliance, ITC group, Future group's Big Bazaar, RPG group with its hypermarket and supermarket chain, and even multinationals such as Shoprite as well as Metro AG eyeing this sector aggressively. The recent expansion of global food retailers in the form of franchise food outlets into emerging economies has made the study of food retail modernisation especially relevant at this time (Gallarza, Gil-saura & Holbrook, 2011; Gomez & Rubio, 2010). The evolution of both local and franchise-based food outlets in developing countries like India has been characterised by variety of retail store attributes (Huang

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& Huddlestone, 2009) which attracts and charm the customers visiting the respective food corners and thus helps in developing food store patronage. The retail food industry is a highly competitive and challenging industry and requires more than just low prices and innovative products. To compete effectively, food houses must focus on the customer's buying experience and store engagement (Yi-Chun, Vries, Wiesel, & Verhoef, 2014). Hence, there is a dire need to study the role of retail store attributes on store and customer engagement in food industry.

Despite the growth of new product categories and new industry players, no empirical study has been conducted in Indian context, which had studied the role of food quality and servicescapes as retail store attributes and its combine impact on store and customer engagement within the food industry (Rezende & Silva, 2013). In addition, there has been a shift in focus in recent years from finding customers to keeping customers, which has caused an increasing number of retailers to utilise direct marketing in promoting their offerings (Cuneo, Lopez, & Yague, 2012). The young consumers form an important section for the food retailers. As members of a highly consumption oriented society, youngsters have become increasingly aware of special tastes, flavours, new products, and brands. They indulge in buying food products with great interest and might also spend more money in food stores they patronise (Wang & Ha, 2011). Besides, targeting the customers at a young age could help in creating strong patronage in the long run. Ramaswamy and Namakumari (2009) reported that the youth is set to change India's consumer market. Though Indian youth constitutes a powerful and significant segment of the market in the changed retailing scenario, very limited research has been done on them and most of which are unavailable to academic researchers (Anselmsson, Bondesson, & Johansson, 2014). The youngsters generally have a propensity to hang out with their friends and 'eating out' is one of the favourite preferences for today's youth. This is exactly the reason why the fast food outlets in the country always experience high footfall of youngsters. The food service industry comprising of both local as well as franchise-based food outlets have realised this fact and hence have set their eyes on the youth as their primary targets. The food corners leave no stones unturned in making their outlets look extremely attractive and appealing to the youngsters and it is quite evident from the colourful and aesthetic servicescapes (Bagdare & Jain, 2013) and atmospherics maintained by

these food outlets. Moreover, Indians are also gradually foraying into the fast-food culture and it is getting adapted to Indian food requirements and is gaining acceptance primarily from Indian youth. Out of all the age groups, the youngsters are considered to be the primary target by the fast food service industry. However, not much research literature is available on fast food preferences of consumers, especially young consumers, keeping in mind the retail store attributes that include quality, image, value, consumer confidence, satisfaction, and commitment. However, restaurants do not sell merely food; they sell an experience (Ballester, Espallardo & Orejuela, 2014).

Extant literature on retail store loyalty reveals the individual impact of psychographics and atmospherics on different retail outlets but no study has empirically examined the retail store attributes on retail store loyalty in food retailing (Prasad & Aryasri, 2011). Thus, the purpose of the present study is to fill the gap by focusing on retail store attributes, retail store experience, and retail store loyalty of food retail outlets. Although most of the previous retail research studies have focused on retail store image and importance of retail store factors in understanding the concept of retail store choice and patronage behaviour (Terblanche & Boshoff, 2006; Voss, Spangenberg & Grohmann, 2003; Butcher, Sparks & O'Callaghan, 2002; Carpenter & Moore, 2006). Furthermore, Ltifi and Gharbi (2015) analysed the impact of price, product, and promotion in retail store to determine customer outcomes such as happiness, satisfaction and commitment for creating value for the customers. They suggested that the effect of location be examined on the store satisfaction and less educated and lower income category respondents be contacted in future. Also, future studies should incorporate consumer confidence, future purchase intention and commitment for the food retail store. While Rubio, Oubina, and Villasenor (2015) explored consumers' involvement with store brands in achieving positioning in value-in-use and creating associations for smart shopping experiences for the brands. They stressed that future studies should analyse store brands at the segmented level in different food retail settings in the developing countries where changes in food markets become an important driver for offering labelled and branded food products and offer more choice than traditional markets. Furthermore, with regard to food retailing, Ihtiyar, Ahmad and Baroto (2013) studied service quality and customer satisfaction as one of the variables in the food retail industry to determine inter-

cultural competence, reliability and customer satisfaction for major retail settings in supermarkets and hypermarkets. They recommended that future studies should examine the impact of salespersons' attitude and behaviour which operate in multi-cultural atmosphere of different retail settings in emerging economies. Porral and Mangin (2014) explored customer-based store brand value by comparing three different retailing formats - supermarkets, hypermarkets, and discounters to assess store brand value and store format influence. The study further extends that future research should consider the impact of other store brand equity dimensions on purchase intent, such as store brand familiarity, store attitude, role clarity and ambiguity in other geographical distributions of store formats in emerging countries. On this premise, the present study strives to exploit the potential of combined effects of various retail store attributes on retail store loyalty by taking into consideration customer engagement and store engagement so as to improve relationship equity and store equity in food retailing.

The study contributes to the existing literature in different ways:

  (i) It analyses the individually impact of food quality and servicescapes on store engagement.

 (ii) It examines the impact of store engagement on customer engagement in food retailing.

(iii) It computes the direct impact of food quality and servicescapes on customer engagement.

Our three specific research questions are as follows:

  (i) Which retail store attribute, whether food quality or servicescapes has a greater impact on store engagement for the food outlet?

 (ii) Does store engagement significantly lead to customer engagement?

(iii) Does food quality or servicescapes have a direct significant impact on customer engagement?

The paper is structured as follows. First, the paper presents the conceptual model and formulates the hypotheses. Next, the methodology section describes the sample, measures, and methods used for data analysis. Based on data collected from registered Ph.D. research scholars and final semester students of post-graduate courses enrolled in Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar for the session 2016-17 the hypotheses are tested. Finally results, conclusion, and managerial implications are present. The paper ends up with the limitations and suggests avenues for future research.

HYPOTHESES FORMULATION

Retail store attributes affect customers' retail store choice and purchases during their shopping that formulate their retail experiences in terms of store engagement and patronage (Ballester, Espallardo, & Orejuela, 2014). The retail store attributes include food quality and servicescapes (Hino, 2014; Martinelli & Balboni, 2012; Yusof, Musa, & Rahman, 2011). This examines the association between customers' preferences for the food outlet that leads to store engagement (Das, 2015; Molina, Martin, Santos, & Aranda, 2009) and helps in developing retail store experiences (Kremer & Viot, 2012). Furthermore, retail store attributes have been explored for their influence on consumers' attitudes and behaviour (Dong and Sui, 2013; Lang & Hooker, 2013) that attract retail location, retail atmosphere, servicescape, and merchandise selection and display (Ahmad, Ihtiyar, & Osman, 2014) to accept and adapt to the new retail formats. In this regard, Wang and Ha (2011) reported that a pleasant food retail environment with good food quality and servicescapes has a positive effect on consumer behavioural participation and satisfaction that focus on store engagement as store related attributes. Thus, on the basis of above statements, we have framed our first hypotheses:

H1(a): There is a positive association between food quality and store engagement.

H1(b): There is a positive association between servicescapes and store engagement.

Brodie, Ilic, Juric, and Hollebeek (2013) reported that store image is the total impression represented in the memory of customers regarding the perceived servicescapes and atmospheric attributes associated with the food store that establishes a link between store image and in-store experience. Antecedents of store engagement, such as retail atmospherics (Greve, 2014), merchandise assortment (Massa & Testa, 2012), designing and infrastructure (Chang, Cho, Turner, Gupta, & Watchravesringkan, 2015) and servicescape (Greve, 2014; Walsh, Beatty & Shiu, 2009) can impact the store equity (Rubio *et al*., 2014) that facilitates and supports buying endeavours for re-patronising the food store (Dong & Siu, 2013; Grewal, Levy & Kumar, 2009).

This generates long-term customer engagement towards a particular food outlet. Bompolis and Boutsouki (2014) found that customers' engagement choice for a particular food retail store depends on trusting beliefs, shopping orientation as well as satisfying experience toward the store that may result from the evaluation of the retail store attributes that has a direct influence on customer engagement (Zhang, 2015) and value creation (Verhoef, Lemon, Parusuraman, Roggeveen, Tsiros, & Schlesinger, 2009). It leads to the setting up of our second hypothesis:

H2: Store engagement of food outlet has a significant and positive impact on customer engagement.

Ryu, Lee, and Kim (2012) reveal that retail store attributes including food quality and servicescapes have a positive impact on customer engagement. In this context, Rubio *et al.* (2014) revealed that consumers with a favourable attitude toward a particular food retail store will most likely help in patronising that store and this ultimately helps in forming retail store loyalty and high customer engagement (Rose, Clark, Samouel, & Hair, 2012). Thus, on the basis of above discussion we framed our third hypotheses:

H3(a): Food quality of the food outlet has a direct positive and significant impact on customer engagement.

H3(b): Servicescapes of the food outlet has a direct positive and significant impact on customer engagement.

Research Methods

Sample Design and Data Collection

The study generated primary data through well-structured questionnaire obtained personally from the registered Ph.D research scholars and final semester students of post-graduate courses enrolled in Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar for the session 2016-17. As per the list obtained from the Establishment Branch, GNDU, Amritsar, total number of departments was 38 and the full-time registered scholars in Ph.D were 276 for 2016-17 session with 109 male and 167 female candidates. All the departments were arranged alphabetically for the selection of the

scholars and census sampling was applied to contact each scholar personally. Out of total number of scholars, only 265 scholars returned the complete questionnaires.

For the selection of final semester students of all PG Courses from GNDU, Amritsar, the list was collected from the Establishment Branch, GNDU, Amritsar, and the total number of students in third semester came out to be 2082 in total for the session 2016-17. Therefore, in order to contact students, initially, pilot survey was conducted and information was collected from 50 students in order to check the reliability and to determine the sample size. All the departments were arranged alphabetically for the selection of the students and only two departments were contacted for the pilot study namely, Department of Arts and Department of Biotechnology comprising 30 and 20 students respectively. On the basis of pilot testing results, sample size is calculated using the formula given by Burns and Bush (2006, p. 378):

$$n = s^2 z^2/e^2$$

where, "n" is the sample size; "Z" is the standard error associated with the chosen level of confidence, which is taken as 1.96; "S" is the variability indicated by an estimated standard deviation as per the pretesting results, which came out to be 0.36510; and "e" is the amount of precision or allowable error in the sample estimate of population.

Thus, the final sample size calculated for the final semester students arrived at 205. Out of 38 departments, 10 departments straight-forwardly denied to provide the required information. Hence, remaining 28 departments were personally contacted to collect the information from the final semester students. Simple random sampling technique was applied to contact the final semester students and on an average 6 to 7 students from each department were contacted by preparing chits with their roll numbers written on the chits. Therefore, from every department only those candidates were asked to fill the questionnaires whose names on the chits had been drawn. In total, the final sample comprised 470 respondents from GNDU, Amritsar including 276 Ph.D scholars and 205 final semester students (Table 1).

Table 1: Profile of the Sample from GNDU, Amritsar

List of Registered Ph. D Students (2016-17 session)			
Total Departments in GNDU, Amritsar	Total	Male	Female
38	276 Ph.D Scholars	109	167
List of Students in Master Degree Programmes Third Semester (2016-17 session)			
12 Faculties	2082 Students in Third Semester		

Population and Sampling Frame

The population for the study is formed by all the young consumers in the age group of 20-30 years. Respondents were the registered Ph.D scholars and final semester students studying in Guru Nanak Dev University (GNDU), Amritsar for the session 2016-17. As youth has maximum footfall in the food outlets therefore, GNDU, Amritsar has been selected as a source for the survey since a university has maximum youth footfall and hence, we can easily approach them. The sampling frame comprised young consumers visiting the local or franchise based food outlets in Amritsar. Few local food outlets are Bharawan da Dhaba, Bansal Sweets, Pizzeria, Hanspal Chole, etc. KFC, MD, Dominoz, Yellow Chilli are few franchise based food outlets where the youths go out to dine for.

Variables and Measures

Relevant literature has been reviewed extensively to generate items pertaining to different dimensions of retail store attributes, store engagement and customer engagement. A well-structured questionnaire was developed to gather required information. Some items were repeated to judge the consciousness and active participation of respondents as well as to examine internal consistency and cross checking of the data.

Retail Store Attributes

With respect of retail store attributes comprising of food quality and servicescapes, eight items related to food quality were borrowed from Julie, Parasuraman, Grewal, and Voss (2002) and nine items pertaining to servicescapes were taken from Eroglu, Machleit, and Barr (2005). The study used second-order construct to confirm these dimensions.

Store Engagement

It comprised ten items taken from Collins-Dodd and Lindley (2003) and used first-order reflective construct to confirm these items.

Customer Engagement

This comprised eight items borrowed from Brodie *et al*., (2011) First-order construct was used to capture customer engagement.
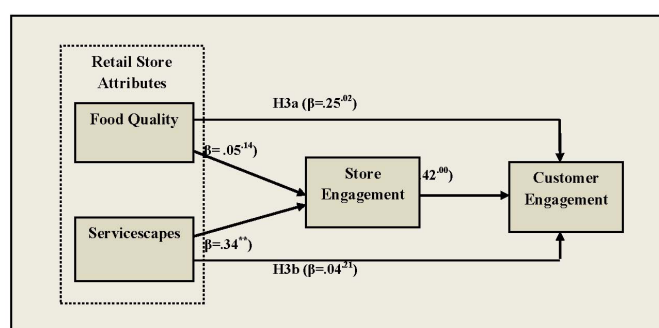
Fig. 1: Structural Model

The instrument comprised total 46 items, out of which 11 pertained to demographic profile and remaining items belonged to three major constructs of the study. A 5-point Likert scale was employed ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5) for retail store attributes, store engagement and customer engagement.

Method of Analysis

Before applying any multi-variate research technique, data have to be screened and normalcy has to be verified. Two graphical techniques for identifying outliers are scatter plot and box plot along with an analytic procedure for detecting outliers when the distribution is normal (Grubbs, 1969). Outliers were checked item-wise through box plots. There were 470 subjects out of which we observed six outliers, finally deleted from the dataset and thus, the usable sample arrived at 464. After outliers normality was checked and we used two ways of testing normality, i.e., graphical method and numerical method (Park, 2008). In case of graphical method, we used histogram, Box plot and Q-Q plot, while in case of numerical method we examined skewness and kurtosis to check the normality

of the data (Mardia, 1970) and the data are normal when its skewness and kurtosis have value between -1 and +1 or closer to zero (Gao, Mokhtarian & Johnston, 2008). Through SPSS (17.0 version) skewness and kurtosis values were observed and the value of skewness was -.31 and that of kurtosis was -.10 respectively. Thus, the data were found to be normally distributed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The three major constructs (viz., retail store attributes, store engagement, and customer engagement) under the study have been analysed as reflective and multi-dimensional. After applying CFA, three items of food quality, one of store engagement and two items of customer engagement were deleted, as the standardised regression weight (SRW) was below the acceptable criterion of .50. These models have been found to be valid and reliable after deleting insignificant items and reliability also gets confirmed through Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (Table 2). The remaining indicators predict a good fit model in terms of CMIN/df, GFI, AGFI, NFI, TLI, CFI, and RMSEA (Table 5).

Table 2: Correlation Matrix and Descriptive Statistics

S. No.	Variable	Mean	S.D	1	2	3	4
1.	Food Quality	3.83	0.65	1			
2.	Servicescapes	3.74	1.00	.20*	1		
3.	Store Engagement	4.08	1.07	.30	.45**	1	
4.	Customer Engagement	3.41	0.44	.14*	.05	.17	1

S.D= Standard Deviation
* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

Table 3: Reliability and Validity of Latent Constructs

S. No.	Constructs	Average Variance Extracted	Composite Reliability	Cronbach's Alpha
1.	Retail Store Attributes	.60	.98	.78
2.	Store Engagement	.74	.98	.75
3.	Customer Engagement	.79	.99	.79

Table 4: Discriminant Validity of Latent Constructs

S. No.	Average Variance Extracted	Retail store attributes	Store engagement	Customer engagement
1.	Retail Store Attributes	(0.60)		
2.	Store Engagement	0.13	(0.74)	
3.	Customer Engagement	0.20	0.21	(0.79)

Table 5: Results of Measurement Models and Structural Model

S. No.	Constructs	CMIN/df	GFI	AGFI	CFI	NFI	TLI	RMSEA
1.	Retail Store Attributes	1.17	.97	.93	.98	.97	.98	.04
2.	Store Engagement	1.25	.99	.95	.99	.99	.98	.05
3.	Customer Engagement	1.48	.98	.92	.99	.98	.97	.07
4.	Structural Model RSA→SE→CE	1.72	.97	.98	.98	.97	.95	.06

On the basis of SEM, the framed hypotheses (Fig. 1) have been tested. It becomes evident from the SEM results that food quality has no significant impact on store engagement (β=.05, p>.14), hence H1(a) stands rejected. On the other hand, servicescapes has significant impact on store engagement (β=.34, p<0.01), thus H1(b) stands supported. Further, the impact of store engagement on customer engagement in food retailing, appears to be significant (β=.42, p<0.00), leading to the acceptance of

H2. When we analysed the direct impact of food quality on customer engagement we found it to be significant (β=.25, p<0.02), but the direct impact of servicescapes on customer engagement found insignificant (β=.04, p>0.21), indicating that H3(a) stands supported, while H3(b) rejected.

Overall the study shows that food quality does not predict store engagement, but there is a direct significant impact

of food quality on customer engagement. On the other hand, servicescapes positively and significantly leads to store engagement but their direct impact on customer engagement found to be insignificant. Thus, we can say that there is a direct significant impact of food quality on customer engagement, while servicescapes significantly leads to customer engagement through store engagement in context to Indian food retailing. This result finds support from (Netopila, Antosovaa, & Turcinkova, 2014). Amine and Lazzaoui (2011) found that servicescapes works better in emerging economy, where food outlets comprising physical attributes in the store appeal the consumers and positively influence their emotions and decisions towards the particular food retail store (Wallace, Buil, & Chernatony, 2014) that leads to food retail store loyalty and patronage (Das, 2014). Further, we found that in food retailing, store engagement significantly leads to customer engagement. Achieving customer engagement has become a priority and one of the key issues by the food retail outlets that lead to the formation of loyalty and commitment for the particular food store (Chen & Hu, 2010). This result finds support from Chang *et al*., (2015).

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The food retailing industry must incorporate efforts to introduce more varieties of food items in the menu for targeting the novelty conscious consumers. Food retailers must invest more in retail store psychographics like quality, building good image, consumer confidence, value satisfaction, commitment and trusting beliefs in order to attract more young youth towards the local or franchise-based food outlets of the respective areas. Modern food stores must have attractive and appealing atmospherics, infrastructure and designing of a retail store which positively impact the customer's attitude and preferences in context to the particular food store and this helps in creating long-term progress and growth of the outlet hat brings food store patronage.

Furthermore, efficient service personnel could help the consumers to overcome their confusion to choose food items which are available in both local or franchise-based food outlets. The quality and brand conscious consumers are likely to respond positively to outlets offering a great assortment of branded high quality products. The food service outlets may come up with innovative combo

packages for its price conscious customers. These combo packages can be in such a way that it comprises of the most frequently ordered food items by the customers. Eating patterns of the customers are to be studied to identify the most frequently consumed food dishes. The food retailers of both local or franchise based food outlets must keep certain things like pricing element, promotional aspect, language used, future purchases, health consciousness, share-of-wallet and relationship age and strength while deciding about their respective food items. Future research must focus on servicescapes and atmospherics of the food outlet for building sound retail store experience that brings youth more loyal towards the particular food outlet to support the continuity of customer engagement, and the determinations of their value-in-use. Future studies may be conducted to investigate the decision-making styles of youth with respect to other products and services. There is scope for analysing the influence of culture on decision-making styles of youth since India is a country with vast cultural and geographical diversity. Moreover, in future studies could be attempted to compare the decision-making styles of youth from urban and rural areas. Hence, the current study has attempted to make a valuable contribution to the existing literature relevant to perception and consumption behaviour of the consumers especially youth towards organised food services. Such attempts can help in providing direction to the food service industries to target the consumers more effectively and formulate marketing strategies to enhance the experience at the outlets. The present study suggests that apriority should be given in maintaining and improving high-quality food along with providing pleasant physical surroundings and good service rather than cost savings to establish a favourable image towards the food outlets. Therefore, food outlets must develop good ambience and atmospherics for generating good dining experience.

CONCLUSION

The present study has made an attempt to provide an answer to the three questions. First, which retail store attribute, whether food quality or servicescapes has a greater impact on store engagement of the food outlet? The study reveals that servicescapes has a greater as well as positive and significant impact on store engagement of the food outlet. Second, does store engagement significantly lead to customer engagement in food retailing? The findings suggest that store engagement of the food outlet

has significant impact on customer engagement. Third, do food quality and servicescapes have a direct impact on customer engagement in food retailing? The study depicts that only food quality has a direct significant impact on customer engagement, while the impact of servicescapes on customer engagement is through store engagement in the context to food retailing both local or franchise-based food outlets in India.

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