

Customer Experience as a Driver of Differentiation in Mass Retailing: An Exploratory Quantitative Study of Customer Perceptions, Pain Points, and Loyalty Intentions.

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Abstract

Within an increasingly competitive market, characterised by digitalised shopping journey and homogeneous retail offerings, customer experience can represent meaningful avenue for differentiation. This study investigates consumers' perceptions of customer-experience dimensions, determines the main friction points throughout the shopping journey, and behavioural intentions associated with customer loyalty. The study implements an exploratory quantitative design based on a structured questionnaire comprising ten-item. According to the source dissertation, 50 complete responses were collected and analysed descriptively using indicators linked to all satisfaction, in-store journey fluidity, digital-service usage, product availability, revisit intention, willingness to recommend. The Results suggest an overall favourable customer experience, specifically, 58% of respondents reported being satisfied, 66,7% perceived the in-store journey as fluid or very fluid, and 75% reported using digital tools at least Periodically. Therefore, all respondents reported having experienced stockouts, meanwhile checkout waiting times remained a meaningful source of friction, despite these challenges, revisit intention reached 68,7%. The findings suggest that experiential differentiation is unlikely to result from a single service attribute, rather, it occurs to depend on Regularity across operational efficiency, omni-channel continuity, and quality's' relational. From a managerial perspective, the results emphasize the importance of reducing customer friction, upgrading product availability, strengthening digital personalization and enhancing after sales service

Keywords

Customer experience; retailing; differentiation; satisfaction; loyalty; omnichannel; digitalisation

Introduction

Large retailers face changing market conditions, including easy price comparisons and other competitive pressures as well as consumer demand for convenience and other benefits when shopping online and in stores. Factors affecting a large retailer's competitive position include both the range and price of products offered and the quality of the customer experience. The overall customer experience with a retailer, before, during, and after a purchase, is also important to a retailer's competitive standing. This perspective positions customer experience as a holistic and dynamic construct rather than merely a measure of post purchase satisfaction. (Verhoef et al., 2009; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

Research shows that customer experience involves multiple interactions with a retailer and other entities and includes functional, sensory, affective, intellectual, and relational components (Gentile et al., 2007). For large retailers, these components of customer experience are expressed in practical considerations, including ease of navigating a store, availability of products, checkout wait times, employee interactions, return policies, ease of using a retailer's app, the relevance of marketing efforts, and other cross-channel interactions. Each of these components can positively or negatively impact a customer's assessment of a retailer.

The difference between customer satisfaction and customer experience is crucial within this context. Satisfaction refers to a customer's evaluation of a purchase or service interaction. Customer experience encompasses all aspects of an interaction and may include emotional, mental, and behavioural reactions. According to Klaus and Maklan (2013) , other measures, in addition to satisfaction, should be considered when evaluating the overall customer experience. Customers at mass retailers may be satisfied with their purchases and interactions yet open to buying from competitors.

Against this background, the research topic was leveraging the customer experience to build competitive advantages for mass merchandisers. Research objectives were to learn more about customers' experiences and attitudes toward mass merchandisers, including online and other customer interactions, and other aspects of the shopping experience, and levels of customer loyalty to learn ways to build competitive advantages. Research questions included the following: In what ways can mass merchandisers use customer experience to differentiate their offerings and build customer loyalty?

The article's main contributions are a comparison of functional, digital, and personal aspects of the customer experience and suggestions for several areas of management improvement drawn from the primary barriers to a positive customer experience cited by survey respondents. Limitations of the small sample and other aspects of the research design suggest that the results should be interpreted as

tentative findings about patterns in the customer experience rather than causal relationships among customer experience factors and loyalty and other outcomes.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. The first section reviews the conceptual foundations of customer experience, its main dimensions, and the role of digitalisation and omnichannel integration in retail differentiation. The second section presents the epistemological positioning, reasoning approach, research design, questionnaire, and analytical procedure. The third section reports the descriptive results. The fourth section discusses these findings in light of prior research, followed by managerial implications, limitations and avenues for future research, and the conclusion.

1. Conceptual Framework and Literature Review

1.1. From Satisfaction to Customer Experience

The rise of experiential marketing has changed the study of consumption from a purely utilitarian perspective towards a greater focus on lived experiences. Pine and Gilmore (1998) contributed to this shift by showing how companies can create a value across memorable experiences built around their offerings. From this perspective, customer experience is not simply an additional aspect of service but an important part of the overall value proposition.

In retail, Verhoef et al. (2009) define customer experience as a multidimensional construct that includes factors such as the social context, service encounter, brand, self-service tools, and past experiences. Lemon and Verhoef (2016) build on these factors by introducing the customer journey concept to include the timing of customer encounters. This concept is relevant to big-box retail customer experience because customer attitudes and behaviors toward a retailer are shaped by repeated interactions with the retailer, including interactions associated with purchase-related activities and mobile app use and return and complaint resolution, as well as single interactions with the retailer. Research has found differences between customer experience and satisfaction.

Satisfaction is one measure of customer responses to retailer services and other activities but does not fully capture other elements of the customer's experience with a retailer. Researchers Klaus and Maklan (2013) suggest that measures of experience provide greater insight into loyalty and other behaviours than satisfaction measures.

1.2 Dimensions of Experience in Large-Scale Retail

According to Gentile et al. (2007), value is co-created with the customer through a multifaceted interpretation of experience that includes sensory, emotional, cognitive, pragmatic, relational, and lifestyle-related elements. In addition to operational elements like service quality, in-store ambiance, personalization, and digital technologies, the dissertation specifically draws on four dimensions: emotional, cognitive, sensory, and relational.

The functional dimension of a store refers to the ability of the service system signage, product availability, payment speed, and procedure clarity to minimize effort. The welcome given, staff availability, and the calibre of requests handled are all part of the relational dimension. In contrast, all the interfaces that extend the experience outside of the store are included in the digital dimension. These factors are interrelated: an effective app cannot consistently make up for frequent stockouts, just as a pleasant welcome can be undone by a checkout procedure that is thought to be onerous. Finally, customer engagement offers a conceptual link between loyalty and experience. According to Brodie et al. (2011) and later Pansari and Kumar (2017), engagement encompasses cognitive, emotional, and behavioural aspects in addition to the transaction. This study employs self-reported revisit intention and willingness to recommend the retailer as behavioural indicators without explicitly testing an engagement model.

1.3. Digitalisation, Omnichannel Strategy and Differentiation

The physical store's function and how customers assess journey quality are being altered by digital transformation. According to Verhoef, Kannan, and Inman (2015), the transition from a multichannel logic to an omnichannel one is marked by journeys where customers freely switch between digital and physical touchpoints and by a closer integration between channels. Therefore, omnichannel experiences, including integrated information on products, inventory, rewards, and services, are important.

Data and AI technologies can help companies provide consistent omnichannel experiences in other ways, such as streamlining processes and tailoring communications (Huang & Rust, 2021). Potential benefits of these technologies for national retailers include improved online and offline services and support and sales forecasting. Retailers should carefully consider the benefits of these technologies, as they depend on how well they reduce customer effort and fit with existing processes

2. Methodology

2.1. Epistemological Positioning and Reasoning Approach

This study follows a postpositivist epistemology. Characteristics of the postpositivist approach include use of established variables and other research methods and recognition of the shortcomings of quantitative research on customer attitudes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Deductive reasoning techniques were applied to create and interpret survey questions about customer experiences. Deductive reasoning techniques were applied mainly during the research design and interpretation phases of this exploratory study, not to test causal relationships. Post positivism and the application of deductive reasoning support the use of surveys and descriptive statistics to learn more about customer attitudes and behaviours.

2.1. Research Design

The study employs an exploratory-descriptive quantitative research design. The research design is suitable for this study, which aims to collect and describe data on consumers' perceptions and behaviours related to shopping and other outcomes. The study does not seek to gain deeper insights or test causal hypotheses about consumer behaviour. A self-administered questionnaire was distributed through Google Forms to consumers who shop at large retail chains. The questionnaire was designed to standardize responses and facilitate comparisons across the main dimensions of the shopping experience.

The questionnaire contains ten questions divided into three sections: consumer profiles, shopping experience, and behavioural intentions. The principal variables include shopping frequency, overall satisfaction, checkout waiting time, store organisation, use of digital tools, product availability, revisit intention, and recommendation. Most questions use five-point Likert scales.

The dissertation includes 50 full, usable survey responses. The dissertation does not detail a statistically valid sampling technique or offer enough information about geography to conclude that the sample is representative. This work is considered a descriptive survey. Data analysis techniques include frequency and percentage data and comparisons of patterns. For this reason, the article avoids terms such as 'causal effect', 'demonstrated correlation', or 'statistically meaningful relationship' when these are not supported by the available data.

Table N°1 : Main Dimensions Operationalised in the Questionnaire

Dimension	Main Indicator	Scale / Measurement
Profile and exposure	Shopping frequency	Frequency categories
Satisfaction	Overall satisfaction	5-point Likert scale
Journey fluidity	Store organisation/layout	Likert scale / Level of agreement
Operational efficiency	Checkout waiting time	Satisfaction rating
Digital	Use of self-checkouts, apps and promotions	Never / Sometimes / Regularly
Availability	Frequency of stockouts	Self-reported frequency
Reported loyalty	Revisit intention	5-point Likert scale
Word-of-mouth	Recommendation intention	Self-reported rating scale

Source : Author's Elaboration

3. Results

3.1. Profile and Shopping Frequency

The respondent profile is mainly composed of people aged 26-35, who represent 50% of the sample, followed by those aged 18-25 (25%), 36-50 (16.7%), and under 18 (8.3%). Shopping at large retail stores is relatively frequent, with 33,3% of respondents reporting visits several times a week, while the remaining respondents visit either weekly or monthly. Overall, the same appears to have regular exposure to the large-retail shopping experience. However, these findings should be interpreted with caution due to the absence of a probabilistic sampling method.

3.2. Positive Satisfaction, Without Fully Established Differentiation

The results show that 58.3% of respondents are satisfied or very satisfied with their shopping experience. According to the dissertation s' summary, no respondent reported being completely dissatisfied, while 41.7% expressed a moderate or lower level of satisfaction. Overall, the results suggest that basic service dimension is globally well perceived. However, the findings also indicate that a significant proportion of consumers do not rate the experience highly enough for it to represent a strong source of differentiation on its own.

The physical shopping journey appears to be a relatively strong aspect of customer experience, with 66.7% of respondents describing the store layout as fluid or very fluid. These results suggest that aspects of store layout and display design, including signs and visible products, can reduce customer effort and other shopping challenges.

3.3. Digital Progress, but Persistent Operational Friction

Digital tools are used regularly or sometimes by 75% of respondents and never by 25% of respondents. This suggests some use of digital tools but not widespread use. Benefits of digital tools include perceived value to daily routines; increasing the benefits of an app or website is one of the suggested ways to improve the digital experience, according to respondents. A key drawback of digital tools is product unavailability; 58.3% of respondents are out of stock occasionally, and 41.7% are out of stock often.

None of the respondents reported never being out of stock. Another key drawback is long checkout lines; satisfaction with checkout lines is only moderate, and none of the respondents rated checkout lines highly. These two issues are particularly important because the impact basic aspects of the shopping experience: finding the desired product and completing the purchase efficiently.

3.4. Loyalty Intentions and Improvement Priorities

Revisit intention remains relatively high despite the identified sources of dissatisfaction, with 68.7% of respondents indicating that they intend to continue shopping at their usual retailer. Recommendation is also described as generally favourable in the dissertation. However, these results

reflect stated intentions rather than actual behaviour. They therefore indicate potential loyalty rather than demonstrated customer loyalty.

The main areas for improvement identified by respondents are reducing checkout waiting time and improving the app or website, both cited by 75% of respondents. In store welcome is also mentioned by 58.3% of respondents, while product availability and after-sales service each account for approximately 41.7%. the combination of digital and operational priorities suggests that customers evaluate their shopping experience across several dimensions at the same time.

Table N°2 : Summary of Main Descriptive Findings

Indicator	Reported Result	Cautious Interpretation
Overall satisfaction	58.3% satisfied or very satisfied	Generally positive experience, with room for improvement
In-store journey	66.7% rate it fluid or very fluid	Functional strength
Digital usage	75% at least occasionally	Advanced but not universal adoption
Stockouts	100% have experienced them	Major operational irritant
Revisit intention	68.7% say they intend to return	Potential for reported loyalty
Reduced checkout waiting time	75% cite it as a priority	Top operational action
App/website improvement	75% cite it as a priority	Strong expectation of digital continuity

Source: Author's Elaboration

4. Discussion

The results suggest that customer experience in large- scale retail should be understood as a system of interconnected touchpoints. Overall satisfaction and the positive perception of store organisation indicate that basic service functions are generally well managed. However, frequent stockouts and checkout waiting times show that a generally satisfactory experience can still be affected by recurring operational problems. This finding is consistent with the holistic view of customer experience proposed by Verhoef et al. (2009) and with the customer-journey approach developed by Lemon and Verhoef (2016).

The first main empirical finding is the important role of customer pain points. In intensely competitive industries, differentiation strategies may include both efforts to offer unique customer experiences and efforts to eliminate pain points shared by many customers. Tactics to address these pain points include reducing wait times and other delays, improving product availability, and making it easier for customers to complete transactions after purchase. These tactics can help improve perceptions of

a firm's ease and dependability. These findings align with those of Berry et al. (2002), who concluded that customer perceptions of a firm are influenced by all experiences they have with the firm and cannot be changed by individual actions.

The second main empirical finding is related to digital tools. The survey response that 75% of respondents used digital tools indicates widespread use of digital tools in shopping experiences. However, use of digital tools does not necessarily provide a competitive advantage.. From an omnichannel perspective, their value depends on how well they are integrated with the physical store, stock management, loyalty programmes and after-sales service (Verhoef et al.,2015). The importance respondents place on improving the website or app suggest that they value digital tools mainly for their simplicity, reliability, and continuity rather than for technological novelty.

The third contribution concerns the relationship between satisfaction and reported loyalty. A relatively high intention to revisit coexists with several sources of dissatisfaction. This suggests that satisfaction, behavioural intention, and actual loyalty should not be considered as equivalent concepts. This distinction is consistent with research on customer engagement, which differentiates transactional interactions from more lasting forms of customer attachment and participation (Brodie et al.,2011; Pansari and kumar,2017). However, the available data do not allow statistical testing of a model linking satisfaction, engagement, and loyalty.

5. Managerial Implications

The results suggest that retailers should focus their actions on reducing customer effort rather than implementing isolated initiatives. The first priority is the checkout stage. Optimising staff scheduling, opening additional tills when needed, ensuring reliable self-checkout systems, and assisting customers can reduce friction at the final stage of the shopping journey, which can strongly influence the overall perception of the visit.

The second priority is product availability. Stockouts present more than operational challenges; they can damage customer perceptions of the retailer's ability to provide promised service levels. Tactics to improve customer perceptions of service reliability include improved stock monitoring and forecasting and communication about restocking schedules. Our third recommendation focuses on omnichannel integration. Retailers should ensure seamless integration between mobile apps, websites, loyalty programs, and other in-store technologies. When evaluating new technology investments, retailers should consider factors such as customer effort, in addition to the number of features offered, to assess benefits to customers. AI and other analytic tools can be used to enhance personalization and other services if they make the shopping experience easier and more relevant for customers.

Our final recommendation is to treat post purchase service as part of the overall customer experience. Policies and practices to streamline returns and other customer complaints, including online and offline options, can help retailers repair service relationships with customers. Other practices, such as employee training and other efforts to address customer concerns, can complement digital innovations.

6. Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

This research has key limitations that affect interpretation of the results. In particular, this study includes only 50 participants, and the sampling method is not described as a probability sample. As a result, findings from this research should not be applied to other large-retail customers. Other limitations of this research include a primarily descriptive research approach that prevents drawing conclusions about causal relationships between customer experience and loyalty or testing the strength of relationships between variables.

Future research could address these limitations by using a larger and more diverse sample, stratified by age, geographic area, and retailer type. The use of validated multi-item scales for customer experience, satisfaction, and loyalty would also improve measurement quality. Reliability testing, factor analysis, and regression and structural equation modelling methods could be used to explore relationships involving journey quality, digital experience, emotions, satisfaction, and loyalty intentions.

Finally, a longitudinal approach incorporating behavioural data, such as actual visit frequency, repeat purchases, and app usage, could provide stronger evidence of the relationship between customer experience and customer loyalty.

Conclusion

This research reveals a customer experience that is generally positive but still undermined by recurring operational irritants. The in-store journey and the adoption of digital tools stand out as strengths, while checkout waiting times, stockouts, and limitations in after-sales service represent the main areas for improvement. Revisit intention remains favourable, suggesting that retailers possess relational capital they can build upon. Third, revisit and recommendation intentions are self-reported and do not necessarily reflect actual customer behaviour.

The main conclusion is that experiential differentiation does not depend on a single initiative. Rather, it relies on consistency between the service promise and its delivery across all customer touchpoints. For large-scale retailers, this means aligning operational efficiency, omnichannel continuity, relevant personalisation, and relational quality. Ultimately, consistent execution across these dimensions may be more important than simply adding isolated innovations to create a distinctive and lasting customer experience.

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