INFLUENCE OF SHOPPING CENTRE IMAGE ATTRIBUTES ON CUSTOMER CHOICES

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crossref http://dx.doi.org/10.5755/j01.em.18.3.5132

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to identify the main image attributes determining shopping centre selection in Lithuania. By applying Pajuodis (2005) statement that shoppers select a shopping centre by its image and the models of Sit, Merrilees & Birch (2003), Wong, Lu, Yuan (2001), Gonzalez-Hernandes & Orozco-Gomez (2012) and Singh & Sahay (2012) this paper develops suggestions of what shopping centre image attributes should be emphasized in shopping centre promotional campaigns and how to improve the perceptions of shopping centre patrons of the overall centre image. The theory part of the paper uses systemic and comparative scientific literature analysis. Based on Lithuanian and foreign authors' scientific works, the paper analyses image attributes that influence the selection of the shopping centre as a place for shopping and leisure. An empirical study was conducted applying a quantitative method for data collection – a survey. After generalising theoretical shopping centre image aspects, attributes that represented the shopping centre image was identified. A review of the retailing literature reveals several attributes in shopping centre image studies: merchandising, accessibility, service, facilities, atmosphere, amenities, ambulance, entertainment, security and other. An empirical study indicates main shopping centre image attributes in the Lithuanian market in particular.

The type of the article: Research paper.

Keywords: shopping centre, image, image attributes, merchandising, accessibility.

JEL Classification: M31.

1. Introduction

Prior to making an analysis what factors affect the customer’s selection of one or another shopping centre most, what image attributes make the highest impact on the customer, one needs to define the meaning of a shopping centre and discuss customers’ behaviour while choosing a place for shopping.

A shopping centre is a group of retail and other commercial establishments that is planned, developed, owned and managed as a single property, typically with on-site parking provided. The centre's size and orientation are generally determined by the market characteristics of the trade area served by the centre. A shopping centre is an object which is centrally managed and which comprises operations of at least 10 independent stores (tenants), the area (rented or usefule space) allocated to them makes up at least 5 thousand sq. m., and the anchor tenant occupies up to 70 percent of the rented area (International Council of Shopping Centres (ICSC), 2013).

A shopping centre is a planned form of concentration of retail and service objects in one land plot which must be separated from a naturally formed city centre (Pajuodis, 2005).

Kirkup & Rafiq (1999) define the supply of the shopping centre also as a goal: to offer the target group of consumers a desired and conveniently accessible combination of stores in one place, in unanimous environment and ensure a safe and comfortable shopping and entertainment. This definition points out such essential elements of a shopping centre as a combination of tenants, a common shopping area, safety and a wide range of entertainment.

Both retailers and customer benefit from the shopping centre as a shopping object (a place for shopping from the point of view of a customer) that comprises a large quantity of goods and
services in one place. Agglomeration gives advantages to retailers, and customers enjoy a wide range of goods and services as well as competition among retailers.

The key ratio of shopping centres is flows of customers (Finn, Louviere, 1996), whereas the key ratio of retail companies is the turnover of commodities.

In order to attract as many customers from the surrounding area as possible, each shopping object needs to know answers to two questions (Pajuodis, 2005): (1) How does the customer choose the shopping place? (2) what determines that the customer shops at a certain shopping object and not at competitors’?

Foxall, Goldsmith & Brown (2006) while analysing the complexity of the consumers’ shopping and the process of selection of a store where the customer wants to shop, also distinguish the importance of the selection of the shopping centre. The consumer, while choosing to which store he/she would go, first chooses a shopping place – i.e. a certain shopping centre where his/her preferred store operates. Second step - selection of stores operating in that shopping centre.

The selection of the shopping area is related to the aspect of macroaccessibility, and the selection of stores operating in the certain shopping centre is related with microaccessibility.

Kirkup & Rafiq (1999) outline that the main success factor of a shopping centre is an ability to attract as many customers as possible. The fact that this statement works in reality is evidenced by the survey on the marketing managers of regional shopping centres made by Warnaby ir Yip (2005), during which all respondents named as their main task the attraction of as higher number of customers as possible and consistent increase of the revenues of the retailers operating in the shopping centre. As a tool to achieve this goal, the respondents indicated permanent clarification of needs, wishes, shopping habits of the shopping centre visitors. Kirkup & Rafiq (1999) note that still the main task for the marketing in a shopping centre is to be as close to the customer as possible and influence his/her decision: make sure that he/she chooses that particular shopping centre to do shopping. This is the reason why selection, determination and assessment of factors that influence the choice of a shopping centre gain special importance in the marketing researches of shopping centres.

**Theoretical background. Trends in researches on shopping centre selection.** With an increasing number of shopping centres worldwide, the number of researches aimed at defining various aspects related with these shopping complexes grew as well. A motivation to shop in a certain shopping centre is one of the most frequently analysed areas; however, in spite of the attention given to the researches on shopping motivation, Dennis, Marsland, Cockett (2001) stated that little analyses was done on how different consumer segments react to the marketing mix of a shopping centre. Warnaby and Yip (2005), based on researches made, point out a necessity not only to attract customers to the shopping centre, but prolong the customers’ stay in the shopping centre as much as possible. The time spent by a customer in the shopping centre not always has a strong correlation with sales, but the fact that customers spend a lot of time in a certain shopping centre evidences that this place is attractive to them and there is a potential of increase in sales revenues. The importance of duration of the customers’ stay in the shopping centre for the image of the shopping centre was proved by the research of Dennis, Marsland, Cockett (2001); the results of this research demonstrated the shopping centre being a „nice place to spend time“ is the second most important factor for both male and female customers. Females gave the first priority to cleanliness in the shopping centre, and males outlined the general layout of the shopping centre.

El–Adly (2007) made a research on attractiveness factors of shopping centres and presented an overview of researches on shopping centre selection criteria. El–Adly, referring to Mas-Ruiz (1999) is of the opinion that the starting point in the area of researches on shopping centre selection was that some customers choose shopping centres based on purely economic criteria, others consider emotional criteria as more important, and multi-purpose customers follow a combination of these motives while selecting a shopping centre for shopping (Mas-Ruiz, 1999). Bodkin & Lord (1997) presented findings of their research which suggest the main criteria for choosing a shopping centre is the convenience of the location, a draw tenant, services offered by the shopping centre and a price level. A number of authors say that a decisive factor in customers’ choice of a shopping centre is a general image of a shopping centre as settled in the customer’s mind (Finn, Louviere,
Thus, one may conclude that the academic publications that explore the peculiarities of selecting a shopping centre as a place for shopping reveal the following two main directions of the research:

1. **Definition and assessment of attractiveness factors of a shopping centre that affect the selection of a shopping centre** (Dennis, Merrilees & Birch 2001; Dennis, 2005; El-Adly, 2007; Arslan, Sezer & Isigicok, 2010; Singh & Sahay, 2012; Juwaheer, Pudaruth & Ramdin, 2013).

2. **Definition of image attributes of a shopping centre that affect the selection of a shopping centre** (Nevin & Houston, 1980; Finn, Louviere, 1996; Wong, Lu, Yuan, 2001; Sit, Merrilees & Birch, 2003; Yilmaz, 2004; Hunter, 2006; Rajagopal, 2011).

Attractiveness and image are inseparable, most of their elements concur, as attractive elements of a shopping centre form its positive image. Often the customer makes a decision about the choice of a shopping place based on its image. Therefore, this paper will focus on defining on the most important image attributes of a shopping centre that determine the decision of customers which shopping centre to choose.

**Image attributes of a shopping centre.** Pajuodis (2005) suggests that a brand is a subjective vision that is formed in the mind of an individual based on the personal perception about a certain object. A customer chooses a place for shopping based on its image (Sit et al., 2003). A brand that is often defined by a term branding image is often applied to create of the exceptional character and positioning of various products in the consumer’s mind. However, Dennis, Marsland & Cockett (2002) proved that techniques of brand image measurement may be successfully applied for shopping centres and facilitate increasing of customer satisfaction and the commercial success of a shopping centre. The more positive image of a shopping centre is, the higher is the probability that customers will visit it and do shopping. Customers choose a place for shopping whose image is closest to the supposed ideal. The brand is a simplified assessment of a shopping place, however it determines the acceptance or rejection of this place.

Nevin & Houston (1980), being among pioneers that analysed image attributes of shopping centres in detail, distinguished 3 main brand attributes of shopping centres: (1) **assortment** (quality and variety of stores operating in a shopping centre, quality of goods sold there, range of products, sales promotion actions, special events within a shopping centre, a good place to spend time), (2) **facilities** (layout of a shopping centre, convent parking lot, possibility so buy snacks, comfortable recreational areas) and (3) **market position** (general price level, staff of stores and the shopping centre).

Mas-Ruiz (1999), having analysed the peculiarities of shopping centre marketing, also distinguished three image attributes of shopping centres: (1) **shopping environment and variety**, (2) **parking** and (3) **shopping environment and professionalism**.

Wong, Yu and Yuan (2001) suggested the SCATTER model to measure attractiveness of shopping centres. This model measures the attractiveness of a shopping centre based on 21 elements grouped into five groups of attributes:

1. **Location** (convenient location of a shopping centre);
2. **Quality and variety** (reputation of the operators of the shopping centre, quality and variety of goods and services offered by the stores operating in the shopping centre, general pricing level);
3. **Popularity** (fashion, uniqueness);
4. **Facilities** (convenient entries and exists of the shopping centre, vertical transportation (elevators, escalators), comfortable car parking lot, quantity and convenience of recreational zones, atmosphere of the shopping centre, general layout);
5. **Sales promotion** (supermarket (available or not), choice of restaurants and other catering services, special events arranged in the shopping centre, duration of the working hours, sales promotional activities).

A model that distinguishes the highest number of image attributes was suggested by Sit, Merrilees & Birch (2003) who made a detailed analysis of academic publications suggested the following image attributes of a shopping centre: (1) **layout of stores and merchandising**, (2) **promotion actions**, (3) **services**, (4) **facilities**, and (5) **parking**.
accessibility (macro and micro accessibility), (3) service, (4) atmosphere, (5) amenities, (6) ambulance, (7) entertainment, (8) security. Yilmaz (2004) names 14 image attributes of a shopping centre divided into 5 groups: (1) features of goods sold, (2) attitude and behaviour of staff, (3) geographic location, (4) lowering of prices, (5) regularity. Singh & Sahay (2012) distinguished 20 image attributes of a shopping centre which are classified into 5 groups: (1) ambience (illumination, landscaping, background music, ambient odour, general hygiene, temperature control), (2) physical infrastructure (open space, size of the shopping centre, parking space, size of the atrium), (3) marketing focus (promotional schemes, tenant-mix, external environment, promotional events), (4) convenience to a customer (utilities, lifts and escalators, distance of a shopping centre to home), (5) safety and security (safety from accidents, safety while shopping, security against acts of terror). Gonzalez-Hernandes & Orozco-Gomez (2012) names as many as 28 items, which are connected into 6 groups of factors: (1) shopping centre essence, (2) popularity and promotional programs, (3) personal service, (4) internal atmosphere, (5) recreational options, (6) external atmosphere. One may notice that the authors distinguish a lot of elements of the same nature though name them differently or classify different elements into the groups of attributes.

As it is visible from the analysis of publications, consumers of different cultures, traditions, different level of the economic development indicate different most important image attributes that affect the choice of the shopping centre.

The purpose of this paper is to identify the main image attributes determining shopping centre selection in the Lithuanian market.

In summary, this paper theoretical studies will focus on defining on the most important image attributes of a shopping centre that determine the decision of customers which shopping centre to choose.

As the number of shopping centres in the world increases, so do studies that aim to determine various aspects related to these shopping complexes. Reasons for shopping at a particular shopping centre – one of the most analysed areas; however, only few studies analyse how consumers in different countries react to actions of shopping centre marketing, what aspects dominate the during the selection of a shopping centre as a place for shopping and leisure. Very few in depth studies of such nature in the Lithuanian market have been conducted, hence the originality of this paper.

2. Method

The research consists of two stages. The first stage covered the analysis of secondary data by making an overview of previously made researches in this area and indicating image attributes determining the choice of a shopping centre. Various authors, having analysed this area, distinguish different attributes. Based on the results of the research of Sit, Merrilees & Birch (2003), Wong, Lu, Yuan (2001), Gonzalez-Hernandes & Orozco-Gomez (2012), Singh & Sahay (2012) and other authors, one may conclude that some key image attributes are prevailing; more or less all authors mention them: (1) merchandising (or features of goods sold), (2) accessibility or location (macro and micro), (3) service, (4) atmosphere, (5) facility (6) security, (7) entertainment.

The main aim of the empirical study is to define what image attributes make the highest influence on the Lithuanian customers in choosing the shopping centre.

Research format – pilot research.

Sampling. For this research population was defined as people visiting shopping centres in Lithuania. Researches of other authors of a similar nature cover a number of respondents from 50 to 1500. The questionnaire was filled in by 230 respondents, 15 questionnaires were damaged.

Survey instrument. While making the research, most references were made to the methodology of Sit, Merrilees & Birch (2003), Singh & Sahay (2012) and Wong, Yu and Yuan (2001) the SCATTER model to measure attractiveness of shopping centres, however particularities of Lithuanian retail trade and the structure of Lithuanian shopping centres that is alike in essence were taken into account. While making a questionnaire the number of image attributes of the shopping centre to be analysed was expanded to 7 aforementioned attributes. Taking into consideration a high influence of
retail networks in Lithuanian retail trade, the questionnaire includes a question to define whether customers consider it to be important what the anchor tenant is in the selected shopping centre. Five-score Likert scale was used to form the main questionnaire questions.

The following segmentation criteria were selected in the questionnaire: gender, age, education, and the means of transportation to the shopping centre (customers are divided into those who travel by car and by public transport).

**Data analysis.** Data was analysed using descriptive statistics, frequency analysis, means and cross-analysis.

### 3. Results

**Respondents’ characteristics.** Table 3 shows the socio-demographic findings of the respondents. The survey covered visitors of shopping centres of age 16 to 76. Most of them had no higher education and were travelling to the shopping centre by car.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Sample profile</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Variables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender:</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Age:</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education:</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Means of transportation to the shopping centre</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>N</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

In the data processing the encoded answers were entered into the data matrix. By means of it some cross analyses were made that helped to analyse interrelation of the research variables as well as outline image attributes of shopping centres which are the most important for certain customer segments.

The first part of questions was intended to determine general shopping habits of customers and peculiarities of visiting shopping centres. It was found out that most of the respondents (~80 percent) do shopping from two to seven times a week, in most cases in the store which is located closest to their home or workplace (en route).

While selecting a shopping centre, the means of transportation to the shopping centre by the respondents matters. The research results demonstrated that more than 80 percent of respondents go to shop in the shopping centres by car. Major part of males: 89 percent and about 74 percent of females travel by car.

The analysis of the frequency of customers’ visits in shopping centres led to the following results: a large part of customers (45 percent) intend to visit shopping centres on weekends, once a week. Almost one third of the respondents visit shopping centres more frequently: three times a week. It is worth noticing that young people visit shopping centres more often than once per week. Also, one may state that the young people find offers for leisure and entertainment interesting, and more senior visitors give preference to criteria of stores located in the shopping centre, size of the shopping centre, convenient accessibility.

In choosing the shopping centre, 43 percent of respondents consider it important what anchor tenant operates there, i.e. they prefer shopping centres with their favourite shop. A slightly lower number of respondents draw less attention to the anchor tenant, and 20 percent think it is of no importance.

Table 2 presents the results of the analysis of answers of respondents to the main questions of the questionnaire.
Table 2. Distribution of image attributes of the shopping centre by the influence on the choice of a shopping centre

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Image dimension</th>
<th>General assessment</th>
<th>Gender: (1) - Male (2) - Female</th>
<th>Transportation method: (3) – by car (4) – by public transport</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merchandising</td>
<td></td>
<td>I</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A wide choice of brands</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stores with preferred brands</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macro accessibility</td>
<td></td>
<td>II</td>
<td>II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance to the shopping centre</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality to roads to the shopping centre</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment</td>
<td></td>
<td>III</td>
<td>IV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variety of catering services</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selection of various entertainment</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Micro accessibility</td>
<td></td>
<td>IV</td>
<td>III</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size of the car parking lot</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convenience of navigation within the shopping centre</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atmosphere</td>
<td></td>
<td>V</td>
<td>V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pleasant interior design of the shopping centre</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proper interior illumination</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on the assumption that customers behave in the same way in choosing a shopping centre, five most important image attributes were derived from seven attributes of shopping centres:

1. **Goods (merchandising)**, the most important element of which – stores with preferred brands,
2. **Macro accessibility** (Distance to the shopping centre),
3. **Entertainment** (variety of catering service)
4. **Micro accessibility** (convenience of navigation within the shopping centre),
5. **Atmosphere** (pleasant interior design of the shopping centre).

Merchandising as the most important image attribute in choosing the shopping centre was indicated by an absolute majority of respondents. The first preference to this attribute was given by 74 percent, the second by 26 percent of the surveyed customers. The analysis of their assessments revealed that in selection of a shopping centre the most element of this attribute is stores with preferred brands. The second most important element is macro accessibility; it was most frequently mentioned by respondents in the second place and scored the distance to the shopping centre high (4.6 on average), and considered the quality of the road to the shopping centre as less important (2.5 on average). The third position was given to entertainment in the shopping centre. The most significant element in entertainment is a variety of catering services, though another element – a wide choice of various types of entertainment – got similar assessment from respondents. The forth most important attribute was micro accessibility, and its most important element was convenience of navigation within the shopping centre (score of 3.7). The last but not least position was given by respondents to the atmosphere of the shopping centre with an emphasis on the importance of pleasant interior design of the shopping centre in the shopping centre.
4. Discussion

The analysis of publications revealed that motivation of customers in different countries is different in choosing one or another shopping centre. For instance, customers from Chile as surveyed by Nicholls, Li, Mandokovic, Roslow & Kranendonk (2000) basically were relying on purchasing factors in choosing a shopping centre, and customers from the USA mostly focused on the offered entertainment and leisure. Yilmaz (2004) states that in Turkey while choosing a shopping centre the highest influence is made by features of goods sold and geographic location of the shopping centre. Arslan, Sezer & Isigicok (2010) study reveals five shopping centre attractiveness factors from the young Turkish consumers’ perspective: retail environment, comfort, conditions, socializing in a secure environment, accessibility, leisure. Wong, Lu, Yuan (2001) spotlight cultural differences and say that unlike Western countries (where location, anchor tenant image and physical facilities in shopping centres are the most important determinants of a shopping centre’s success or failure), the research made in China demonstrated that for customers of this country the most significant attribute is quality and variety of stores and services, followed by location, popularity and facilities. The research made by Rajagopal (2011) in Mexico shows that “major factors that affect shopping arousal among urban shoppers are recreational facilities, location, ambience, and store attractiveness regarding products and services, brand value, and price”. Gonzalez-Hernandes, Orozco-Gomez (2012) state that in case of consumers of this country the dimension of popularity and promotion programs is the first, followed by internal and external atmosphere. Singh & Sahay (2012) distinguished ambience, convenience to shopper and marketing focus as the most important factors that motivate Indian customers to visit shopping centres.

Empirical study revealed the following results:

- a large part of Lithuanian customers intend to visit shopping centres on weekends, once a week;
- young people visit shopping centres more often than once per week;
- in choosing the shopping centre, most of respondents consider it important what anchor tenant operates there, i.e. they prefer shopping centres with their favourite shop;
- customers in Lithuanian shopping centres named merchandising, accessibility (macro and micro), entertainment and atmosphere as image attributes that make the highest impact on the choice of a shopping centre.

This pilot research made also set guidelines for further research: it would be worth making a research of factors that affect the choice of a shopping centre of a wider extent, with a wider scope and analysing a higher number of image attributes and including more elements. The research made only revealed the main trends in Lithuanian consumer choices, which could serve as a basis and facilitate a more deep study on image attributes of a shopping centre.

Theoretical insights and empirical study results in this paper may be useful for managers of shopping centres in Lithuania. Knowing which shopping centre image attributes and their elements (proper combination of tenants, merchandising, accessibility, etc.) are most significant for different segments enables application of various means of marketing via different channels to help improving customer satisfaction and ensure sufficient customer flows.

References


