

An Examination of Marketing Mix Elements and Customer Retention in Malaysian Retail Market

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Abstract

This paper was designed to test the effect of selected marketing mix elements on customer retention in retail industry. Based on the review of past literature, it appears that there are only few studies which examined the empirical link between both constructs, particularly in Malaysian retail sector. To accomplish the above objective, a quantitative survey method was employed for collecting the data from several customers of retail stores in East Coast Malaysia. The collected data were inserted into SPSS and analyzed using structural equation modeling (AMOS). The findings revealed that advertising has an insignificant effect on customer retention. The results also showed that distribution intensity, price, and store location have significant positive effects on customer retention. Finally, the outcomes confirmed that store image plays a significant role in affecting customer retention. The study builds upon the literature by confirming the importance of the selected marketing mix elements in affecting customer retention in retail industry with empirical data from Malaysian context.

Keywords

Advertising, Customer Retention, Distribution Intensity, Place, Price, Store Location, Store Image

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1. Introduction

Customer retention is one of the most important topics in marketing which received a significant attention from large number of scholars and business practitioners. Maintaining customers is regarded as an important objective for several business organizations in today's highly competitive market conditions [17]. A lot of companies are extensively utilizing their time and financial expenditures for establishing long-lasting and beneficial relationships with potential and existing customers to enhance and strengthen their market place performance [15]. Past researches showed that the focus on customer retention has widely been considered to be the most important objective for organizations that adopt relationship marketing strategy [8, 15]. Although conceptualizing and measuring customer retention can differ from industry to industry [3], there is an agreement among a

number of scholars that emphasizing on customer retention can result in numerous financial benefits [11]. Consequently, the creation and implementation of relationship marketing strategy to maintain business customers can enable organizations to obtain sustainable competitive advantages [41].

Customer retention has become a very important marketing paradigm nowadays, particularly in retail sector. This is because the retail industry has experienced a stable growth over the past few years as new retail designs have emerged from the traditional markets through the growth of supermarket philosophy which is making an enjoyment and distinctive shopping experience among various retail customers in different parts of the world [44]. For customers, shopping has recently become an interesting experience that

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can ensure their delight and decrease their tensions as they get exposed to various brands and product categories under one roof where the choices are appreciated and treated with expertise and friendliness [47]. Past researches reported that customer retention in retail sector can be influenced by various marketing factors, such as advertising, price, retailer's image, distribution intensity, and retail store's location. This is because these factors are considered to be important for delivering customer value and satisfaction.

Despite the increased interest of research on customer retention, there exist some gaps on this topic. According to Ang and Buttle [2], customer retention has largely been accepted as an important topic over the past decades, but there are limited research works that focused on the management processes which are allied with the performance of customer retention. Moreover, various studies have been carried out in the developed countries about customer retention and its key antecedents. However, there are only few researches which have been conducted on customer retention in the developing world. Based on the stated gaps, this study is designed to examine the effect of selected marketing mix elements on customer retention in the retail industry. The findings would provide useful implications for the decision makers in retail industry. The following section presents the literature review for this study followed by the methodology and findings. After that, the discussion of the findings and conclusion are explained in the last sections.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Customer Retention

Customer retention is undoubtedly considered as one of the key relationship marketing objectives. In the current business environment, the emphases on customer retention have significantly become valued for several organizations. Therefore, in order to apply the marketing principles efficiently, it is vital to empirically examine the predictors of customer retention [49]. Customer retention was viewed by certain scholars [52] as an element of customer loyalty; whereas Zineldin [53] considered retention as a commitment to maintain a relationship with a certain organization on a continuous basis. Another definition of customer retention refers to the preference, trust, attachment, and commitment of a customer towards a brand and willingness to recommend it to others. In other words, customer retention refers to the process which creates customer's loyalty towards a certain brand which can be reflected through repurchase behavior [9]. Similarly, Njane [34] stated that customer retention exists when a customer continues to purchase the products or services of a brand within a long period of time. Additionally, customer retention suggests that a lasting-relationship

between a firm and its customers can result in economic benefits for both parties [6].

By looking at past literature, it shows that there are several benefits for customer retention, such as superior business growth and greater profit margins [21]. Additionally, customer retention can save a lot of costs on the part of the company as the cost of obtaining new customers generally surpasses numerous times the cost of entertaining current ones. Certain scholars also revealed that long-lasting customers are likely to purchase more, attract new customers, take less time from the service providers, and have less sensitivity to price changes [40, 46]. Moreover, Reichheld [39] reported that the acquisition of new customers costs seven times more than that of maintaining existing ones, and therefore, focusing on customer retention can enhance organizational profits. This means that lasting customers are likely to have higher degree of satisfaction and may spread positive word of mouth among others [22]. However, to enhance the creation process of customer retention, organizations should provide excellent services to their customers and handle any complaints from them efficiently [2]. Gummesson [14] also pointed out that in order to maintain customers, the service providers should put higher efforts on building personal customers' relationships which can result in their attachment to the organization.

2.2. Marketing Mix Elements

Kotler and Armstrong [27] established that marketing mix consists of a set of various marketing tools that can be used by organizations to reach their marketing goals. The factors of marketing decisions in diverse marketing mix models provide a guide and direction for business plans that emphasize on marketing tactics [36]. Marketing mix specifies the primary activities that should be taken by marketing managers. Once a target market is identified, it is then the responsibility of the marketing managers to come up with a marketing plan for selling their products/ services to customers and creating lasting relationships with them. Marketing plan comprises important decisions with regard to product, place, price, and promotion which are considered to be the most significant aspects which require efficient allocation of organizational resources to increase the sales and profit margins [13]. Similarly, Lovelock [30] integrated seven marketing mix elements in the modern marketing practices which included product, place, promotion, price, process, people, and physical evidence. Other scholars incorporated additional elements to marketing mix such as advertising, distribution and brand image building factors. This study integrates five elements to measure marketing mix in retail industry; advertising, distribution intensity, price, store image, and store location.

Advertising is regarded as a key marketing factor that influences consumer behaviour. Certain researchers [28] described advertising as a form of communication between an organization and its customers which is designed mainly for promoting certain products and services. However, the ability of marketing managers to create brand awareness for their products/ services and persuade or convince potential customers to make purchase deals depends in most cases on several factors, such as convenience, price fairness, and also on the attractiveness of promotional campaigns. The efficiency of advertising messages depends on the capabilities and skills of marketers in identifying their target customers clearly. Organizations spend a lot on research to be able to identify the characteristics of their target audience, and then design the appropriate advertising messages and choose the most relevant media to communicate the benefits of their products and service to potential customers. Therefore, advertising programs are directed towards influencing consumers' reactions to the marketing activities of a brand and maintaining successful relationships with them.

Distribution intensity is another important element of marketing mix which was defined in the literature as the total intermediaries employed by an organization to facilitate the sales of its products or services within certain geographical zones [12]. However, the decision of selecting distribution intensity usually depends on numerous factors, such as the population of target markets, pricing decisions, promotional campaigns, production volume, and the aggregate level of services that customers need after the purchasing process. In consumer markets, previous marketing researches revealed that the performance of channel intermediaries provide significant contributions to the creation of brand loyalty among customers. Furthermore, distribution intensity has a positive impact on customer loyalty towards a brand as it increases the possibility of purchasing its products easily and conveniently. As a result, the increased distribution intensity minimizes the efforts of consumers in searching for and obtaining a desired brand and this enhance their perceived value which can lead to higher degree of satisfaction and retention [26]. Therefore, simplifying the shopping experience for customers at a department store enables the retailers to maintain their customers and gain several competitive advantages.

Price has also been considered as a key marketing tool for selling a product or service to customers [38]. The concept of price was previously defined in the literature as the value of a product or service that is expressed in monetary terms [42]. In other words, price is the financial value that is given on a product which comprises its cost as well as the desired profits. Martin-Consuegra et al. [32] demonstrated that consumers who are likely to be sensitive to price tend to

avoid purchasing from brands which sell at higher prices and do not take consumers' interests at hand. Other scholars [35] also reported that when consumers tend to form purchase decisions, they initially look at the price and give it high credit as compared to other attributes. Similarly, Mahmood and Khan [31] confirmed that consumers' repurchase decisions from a particular service provider depend on their past purchase experiences in terms of value for money. For this reason, price has been considered to be an important determinant of customer retention and satisfaction.

Furthermore, place or location is an important marketing mix element which can be defined as where a brand chooses to sell its products or services to particular market segments, so that it can be easily accessible to them. Davis and Brush [10] illustrated that place is the management judgements regarding the location for delivering the products or services to customers, and it may consist of online or physical distribution channels. Moreover, Jonson et al. [24] expressed place as any means that customers can get the product or service of a certain brand. Apparently, an effective channel decision requires firms to have a clear knowledge about their target markets [19]. In the retail industry, store's location is considered to be the foremost important factor for business success and customer retention. The convenience of the location plays a key role in influencing customer's choice regarding the store's services. Overall, a good place appears through making the right decision to locate an intermediary store for selling its products and services that result in fulfilling customers' needs.

Finally, store image is regarded as an important factor that affects customer retention. Hartman and Spiro [18] described store image as the distinct image in which customers hold about a store, which can be determined through functional qualities and environment of psychological characteristics. In other words, store image refers to the reputation of certain store that is established in customers' minds over time. Store image consists of several elements such as physical environment, place or location, products, and the knowledge and friendliness of employees [48]. Favorable brand image can enable brands to attract higher attention, bring interests and form contacts from potential customers, as well as to improve their satisfaction and influence them to spread positive word to mouth [16]. On whole, store image can be created based on the quality and diversity of carried brands, convenience in getting the products, prices, physical atmospheres of shops, and customer service. These factors affect consumer behaviour and retention towards the brand [26]. Based on the above literature, the hypotheses for this study are presented as follows:

H1: Advertising has a positive effect on customer retention.

- H2: Distribution intensity has a positive effect on customer retention.
- H3: Price has a positive effect on customer retention.
- H4: Store image has a positive effect on customer retention.
- H5: Store location has a positive effect on customer retention.

3. Methodology

This study used the quantitative research approach for collecting the data from respondents. The target population for this study comprised of customers of retail stores in East Coast Malaysia. The data were collected using a survey method from 278 customers who have actual experience in visiting retail stores in the stated part of Malaysia. The survey tool allows for obtaining responses from large number of individuals at minimal cost and within shorter period of time as compared to other data collection methods. According to Barrett [4], the minimum sample size for analyzing data using structural equation modelling (SEM) should be 200. Therefore, the sample employed in this study is considered sufficient for analyzing the data using AMOS. Data collection process was started after designing the questionnaire based on previous researches. Customer retention was measured using a four items scale being adapted and modified from the study of Hennig-Thurau [20]. Similarly, the measurement scales of the selected marketing mix elements were adapted from previous studies. For instance, advertising was measured using four items being adapted from Shareef et al. [45]. To measure distribution intensity, three items were also developed based on previous research and literature. The items to measure price were also developed based on the measurement scale which was used by Ling [29]. Additionally, a four items scale was adapted from Yoo et al. [51] to measure store image. Finally, store location was measured using four items being taken from the study of Ling [29]. All of the items are measured on a five-point Likert scale which ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

4. Analysis of Results

The descriptive analysis showed that 45.3 percent of the participants are represented by male, whereas 54.7 percent are female. The analysis also revealed that most of the participants have a degree certificate. With regards to monthly income, a total of 48 respondents had an average income that is below RM500 represented by 17.2 percent, and 15 participants (5.4 percent) had an average income that ranges from RM501 to RM1000. There are also 44

respondents whose monthly income ranged between RM1001 and RM4000 and accounted for 52 percent, and finally, 71 respondents (25.4 percent) had a monthly income of more than RM 4000. Moreover, the reliability of constructs was calculated on SPSS 19 through Cronbach’s Alpha analysis and the findings showed that all of the constructs achieved acceptable reliability alpha with values of more than 0.70. The details are shown in Appendix A.

In order to verify the hypotheses of this study using structural equation modeling method (AMOS), the data were screened at first and all of the missing values were replaced. After that, the measurement model was estimated using AMOS 18 in order to calculate confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and solve the issues of multicollinearity. Overall, the outcomes indicated that the measurement model achieved a reasonable fit with the data, and the correlation between any pair of constructs is less than 0.80. Additionally, the factor loadings of items are reported at values of more than 0.50; thus, convergent validity assumptions are fulfilled. The structural model was then estimated and the results showed that it has achieved an adequate fit using several criterion values (GFI = 0.836, df = 174, GFI = 0.859, TLI = 0.830, and RMSEA = 0.074). Based on these findings, it was possible to verify the research hypotheses and conclude that the structural model adequately fits the data of this study.

This study has five hypotheses which were stated earlier in the section of literature review. As it can be seen in Table 1, the findings reveal that advertising has an insignificant effect on customer retention ($\beta = 0.138$, $t\text{-value} = 1.497$, $p > 0.05$), therefore, H1 is rejected. The results of this study also showed that distribution intensity has a significant positive effect on customer retention ($\beta = 0.713$, $t\text{-value} = 2.618$, $p < 0.05$), and this means that H2 is accepted. This study also confirmed that price has significant positive effect on customer retention ($\beta = 0.232$, $t\text{-value} = 3.091$, $P < 0.05$), thus, H3 is supported. Furthermore, the analysis of data showed that store image ($\beta = 0.361$, $t\text{-value} = 2.571$, $P < 0.05$) and store location ($\beta = 0.610$, $t\text{-value} = 2.448$, $P < 0.05$) have significant positive effects on customer retention, Hence, H4 and H5 are supported.

Table 1. Results of Hypotheses.

Hypotheses		Beta	t-value	P
Advertising	→ Customer Retention	0.138	1.497	0.134
Distribution Intensity	→ Customer Retention	0.713	2.618	0.009
Price	→ Customer Retention	0.232	3.091	0.002
Store Image	→ Customer Retention	0.361	2.571	0.010
Store Location	→ Customer Retention	0.610	2.448	0.014

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the effects of selected marketing mix elements on customer retention in retail industry. The findings revealed that advertising has an insignificant effect on customer retention. This could be attributed to the fact that customers usually tend to maintain their relationships with a brand based on previous experience and interactions with the service provider rather than on what is advertised. Additionally, the trust of consumers is likely to be built based on the perceptions and feelings which result from past purchases or comparisons with other brands. The second objective of this study was to examine the causal effect of distribution intensity on customer retention. The results confirmed that, consistent with past literature [50], distribution intensity plays an important role in affecting customer retention. Previous studies indicated that when consumers evaluate brands, they select those which provide a good value for them which can be reflected through purchase convenience and cost savings in getting the desired products or services.

The findings of this paper also showed that price has significant positive impact on customer retention. The result was supported by a number of scholars [23, 37] who confirmed that price is the most important factor which determines whether customers continue or terminate their relationships with a brand based on the perception of product quality and worth of the amount money being paid to get a certain product. Furthermore, Abrat and Russell [1] illustrated that the perceptions of customers about the price of a products or service is an important determinant of their decision regarding whether to maintain their relationships with the service providers or switch to others. They also concluded that customers tend to switch to other brands if they perceive the prices of its products and services to be high and not worthy to buy them. Martin-Consuegra et al. [32] added that price conscious customers are usually not willing to buy services or products from certain brands if they perceive their prices to be unreasonable.

Additionally, the findings indicated that store image has a significant positive effect on customer retention, and this is consistent with past researches [37]. Nazir, Ali, and Jamil [33] reported that a brand which acquires a positive image in consumers' minds can reinforce their degree of retention and repurchase behavior. Christopher et al. [7] also found that a favorable corporate image can influence customer retention in the same direction. Finally, the outcomes of this research confirmed that store location has a significant positive impact on customer retention. The result was supported by previous research [23] who reported that store location plays a significant role in affecting customer retention. Past studies also showed that the convenience of location is likely to be

considered as one of the foremost important factors which affect consumer behavior [25]. The result also indicates that consumers tend to search for brands that provide them with value which is convenient with regards to the search, access, and ease of purchase [43].

This paper has some limitations which would provide opportunities for future researches. First, the main focus of the study was restricted to department stores and only involved consumers. Therefore, future studies can extend the scope and be conducted at different areas in the country by including the staff of department stores in order to get better insights about the important factors in retail sector. Moreover, the data were gathered through quantitative survey using structured questions; thus, future studies can employ other research methodologies to confirm the findings. Finally, only five independent variables were examined in this study; hence, future researches can consider other factors that can influence customer retention in Malaysian retail sector, such as social media marketing and corporate social responsibility.

Appendix

Appendix A. Measurement Scale of Final Items.

Code	Construct/ Item
Customer Retention (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.771)	
CR1:	I am a loyal to this store's brand
CR2:	I enjoy shopping at this store
CR3:	This store's brand is my first choice when I intend to go for shopping
CR4:	In future I will continue buying products from this store
Advertising (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.925)	
AD1:	This store is intensively advertised.
AD2:	The advertising campaigns for this retail store seem very expensive as compared to the campaigns of competing brands.
AD3:	The advertising campaigns for this retail store are frequently seen.
AD4:	The advertising campaigns for this retail store are attractive
Distribution Intensity (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.876)	
DI1:	This store is widely distributed as compared to its competing brands
DI2:	This store has many branches.
Price (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.860)	
P1:	This store offers the lowest prices in the area.
P2:	This store maintains the best prices for most products
P3:	The prices of products in this store are reasonable
P4:	This store consistently provides the best values for money
Store Image (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.860)	
SI1:	This store carries products of high quality.
SI2:	This store provided me a better lifestyle.
SI3:	This store has well-known brands.
SI4:	This store offers variety of products and services to its customers.
Store Location (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.860)	
SL1:	This store provides convenient parking of vehicles to its customers
SL2:	There is a convenient public transport to get to this store
SL3:	It is easy to get into this store and checkout from the area after shopping

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