

**RETAIL STORE IMAGE: A COMPARISON AMONG THEORETICAL AND
EMPIRICAL DIMENSIONS IN A BRAZILIAN STUDY**

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Artigo recebido em dezembro de 2006 e aprovado em dezembro de 2007.

Resumo

O ponto de venda pode ser o elemento principal para o sucesso, sendo a vantagem competitiva de uma empresa varejista. Um importante elemento para a estratégia varejista é a imagem da loja; a soma total das percepções dos clientes com relação à loja. O presente artigo compara as dimensões teóricas e empíricas da imagem de loja varejista em um estudo brasileiro. O tipo de pesquisa usado foi o estudo quantitativo, e os dados coletados foram analisados pela técnica de análise fatorial, de forma a identificar os fatores subjacentes da imagem de loja. Em conclusão, foi observado que a forma pela qual os respondentes avaliaram a imagem de um dado supermercado no Brasil é mais simples do que aquela prevista na teoria, com nove fatores representando as seguintes dimensões de imagem de loja: qualidade, preço, serviço pós-venda, propaganda, clientela, sortimento, conveniência, atmosfera e serviços. Uma importante contribuição prática do presente estudo refere-se ao desenvolvimento de uma escala mais simples, que pode ser utilizada pelos varejistas em uma forma viável para obter os dados sobre sua imagem percebida.

Palavras-chave: imagem de loja, varejo, posicionamento, estratégia.

Abstract

The retail store can be the key success factor, the competitive advantage of a retail company. An important element to the retail strategy is the store image; the total sum of customers' perceptions about a store. The present paper compares the theoretical and empirical dimensions of retail store's image in a Brazilian study. The type of research used was the quantitative study, and the data collected was analyzed by use of the factor analysis technique, in order to identify the underlying factors to retail store image. In conclusion, it was observed that the form by which the respondents evaluate the image of a specific supermarket in Brazil is simpler than what was foreseen by theory, with nine factors representing the following store image dimensions: quality,

price, after sales service, advertising, clientele, assortment, convenience, atmosphere and services. An important practical contribution of the present study refers to the development of a simpler scale, that can be used by retailers in a viable form to obtain data on their perceived image.

Key words: store image, retailing, positioning, strategy.

Introduction

Until some years ago, in order to build a store, the only decision to make was to choose the location and to display the items on the shelves. However, nowadays, with the market getting more saturated, the consumers usually make their purchase decisions based more on the store image than on its tangible physical attributes. The retail stores have images of their own, which serve to influence the perceived quality of products they carry and the decisions of consumers as to where to shop. Consumers also possess self-images, which are strictly associated with their personality. Consumers tend to shop in stores that have images consistent with their own self-images (SCHIFFMAN; KANUK, 1997).

According to Burt and Carralero-Encinas (2000), the retail store can be the key success factor, the competitive advantage of a retail company. The major source of competitive advantage for retailers can be found in the value added delivered to customers, through the performance of functions or activities. This added value must be firmly based on the customer needs and values, and may comprise both tangible or functional and intangible or symbolic elements. Therefore, it is fundamental that the stores understand the store image importance in their positioning statement. The success or failure of stores can often be attributed to undertested or underemphasized elements of their image. That is the reason why a number of chains are increasingly stressing customer service and the provision of a pleasant shopping experience, rather than focusing on price promotions.

The process of monitoring the store image is, therefore, a tool that can either dictate immediate actions or direct longer-term marketing programs. For McGoldrick (1990), the accumulated image is also an indicator of the asset value of the "retail brand", which represents the long-term results of the marketing activities. In this context, it is noticed the importance of comprehending the image formation in the consumers' minds, both to marketing professionals as well as to researches. On the one hand, to understand the image effects can lead to better purchase decisions for consumers and, on the other hand, to better strategies for retail stores.

Objectives and method

The present paper aims to compare the theoretical and empirical dimensions of retail stores' image, identifying the dimensions used by the respondents to evaluate a retail store image. This study can be characterized as an exploratory research, since it tries to understand how

consumers evaluate the image of a retail store. This type of research can be conducted to determine beliefs, attitudes and opinions about products' characteristics, being adequate for this study.

The development of this work can be understood in two complementary parts. The first one refers to the bibliographic survey and to the qualitative research. The bibliographic survey, according to McDaniel e Gates (1996), helps to better define the research problem and to identify the subject's key questions. By turn, the qualitative research is important to generate hypotheses and to identify the variables that should be included in the research. In the case of the present paper, it was used the focus group technique (MALHOTRA, 2001).

The second part of this work refers to the application of a quantitative research, characterized by the use of statistical techniques to treat the information collected (RICHARDSON, 1999). The quantitative research is a structured form of data collection, specially projected to generate precise and accurate measures, being appropriate to measure opinions, attitudes, preferences and behaviors (MALHOTRA, 2001). During this phase, a structured questionnaire was elaborated, based on the theoretical frame researched and on data from qualitative research.

The questionnaire application was performed in person by the authors, to business undergraduate students of a large Brazilian university that usually go shopping in supermarkets. After the two phases were accomplished, the data collected were analyzed with the factor analysis technique.

What retail store image is about

For Burt and Carralero-Encinas (2000), defining store image is far from easy. The mixture of tangible and intangible dimensions and the complexity of meanings and relationships attributed to retailers by customers have long been recognized. One of the earliest definitions of store image was offered by Martineau in 1985, in his classical book "The personality of the retail store" (MCGOLDRICK, 1990), which emphasizes the need to consider not only more visible or measurable factors, but also the less tangible factors, such as the "personality" of the store.

According to this author, store image is the way in which the store is defined in the shopper's mind, partly by its functional qualities and partly by an aura of psychological attributes. This definition, however, was criticized for tending to ascribe a "mystique" to the concept that is not entirely warranted.

Other authors suggested that, rather than classifying image as part of the "non-logical basis of shopping behavior", it would be reasonable to view the customer as rationally evaluating the store on a multi-attribute utility function (MCGOLDRICK, 1990). This definition was approached by Bloemer and Schroder (2002): the sum of all the stores' attributes, in the way perceived by the consumer, through his or her experience with the store.

Sheth, Mittal and Newman (2001) also define store image as the total sum of customers' perceptions about a store. This perception is determined by factors such as: merchandise, service, price, atmosphere, promotions and people. For these authors, store image determines the type of customer to be attracted to the store and, by turn, this customer feeds back this image.

However, there are discussions about the use of the term "perception" in marketing, because the psychologists say that it is very difficult to get a "perception" of someone about a subject. That is a very specific matter on the field of psychology, and there are specific techniques to apply. They say that one cannot sum "perceptions". Using questionnaires, one can get "opinions", "attitudes" and "beliefs", but not "perceptions".

Moreover, many of the definitions that have emerged could be criticized for implying stability in store image that is not likely to exist. Images can be changed as a result of relatively minor observations or occurrences that happen to be noticeable and salient to particular shoppers. Berry (1969) has largely overcome this limitation, by defining store image in behavioral terms. For this author, an image is the result of differential reinforcement in the context of a given stimulus or set of stimuli. Therefore, store image is the total conceptualized or expected reinforcement that an individual associates with a particular store.

The effect of any specific stimulus would be largely determined by a number of individual "state variables" or conditions of deprivation/satiation, and societal and sub cultural norms. It means that many personal characteristics and expectations of the society within which the individual lives influence opinions, reactions and therefore the nature of the images formed (MCGOLDRICK, 1990).

McGoldrick (1990) observes that while images are usually formed on the basis of limited information, they nonetheless assume a greater proportion and significance than the individual contributory components. Thus, the images held by consumers are formed, somewhat selectively, from a combination of factual and emotional material.

Sometimes, the term "image" is used in a very limited sense, only to denote the less tangible aspects of a store. To McGoldrick (1990), this fact, however, does not imply an artificial distinction among the tangible and the intangible components, which would be potentially dangerous due to two main reasons. The first reason considers that, although consumers can, theoretically speaking, obtain precise and objective measures of tangible attributes, such as price and location, in reality the images will probably be formed from more subjective impressions, based on various indications in the store that suggest the price level or the convenience of location. The second reason denotes that the intangible elements, like store atmosphere, are increasingly being disaggregated and studied as a collection of attributes reasonably tangible such as music, lightning, space, colors, smells, among others.

Store image components

Despite having many discussions regarding the most adequate definition of store image, one element of this concept about which writers do not disagree is its complexity, in terms of both the many components involved and the diverse patterns of relationship involved. With regard to the components, many writers have chosen to classify factors in a way that relates to elements of the retail marketing mix. The following table (Table 1) presents a compilation of the store image components classification prepared by the authors of this paper.

Table 1 – A classification of store image components

Component	Details
Price of merchandise	Low prices Competitive or non-competitive prices
Quality of merchandise	Good or poor quality of merchandise Stock brand names
Assortment of merchandise	Breadth and depth of assortment Carries or not the brand the customer wants Carries or not elegant brands
Sales personnel	Attitude of sales personnel Knowledgeability of sales personnel Number of sales personnel Good or poor service
Location convenience	Location from home/work Access Good or poor location
Other convenience factors	Parking Hours store is open Convenience with regard to other stores Store lay-out with respect to convenience Convenience in general
Services	Credit Delivery Ease of return Self-service
Sales promotions	Special sales Stamps and other promotions Displays Symbols and colors
Advertising	Style and quality of advertising Media and vehicle used Reliability of advertising
Store atmosphere	Lay-out of store without respect to convenience External and internal décor of store Congestion Prestige of store Congeniality
Institutional	Reputation for fairness Conservative or modern
Clientele	Social class Self-image
Physical aspects	Facilities Architecture Shopping ease
Post-transaction	Satisfaction or dissatisfaction

Source: adapted from DOYLE and FENWICK (1974), KUNKEL and BERRY (1968), Lindquist (1974), MCGOLDRICK (1990), and GIRALDI, SPINELLI and MERLO (2003)

The relative importance of the various image components varies considerably between markets, sectors, competitive situations and customer segments (MCGOLDRICK, 1990). There are sound reasons why the relative importance of attributes should vary between markets, whether the comparison is on an international, regional or even locality scale. First, insofar as different localities are likely to be dominated by different shopper segments, no matter how these are defined, they will inevitably have some different attitudes, needs and priorities. Second, competition varies within each market.

McGoldrick (1990) asserts that a generalized view of attribute importance may offer little insight into how consumers may react to a specific competitive situation. If consumers perceive few differences between the stores on the attributes that are usually the most salient, they would

probably discriminate between the stores on attributes that would usually be given only low markings.

One component that has attracting increasing importance is the store atmosphere, the physical ambient. Parente (2000) defines store atmosphere as the psychological feeling that the retailer develops in the consumer when it visits the store. It could also be understood as the store personality. In order to develop the atmosphere, retailers use resources that influence the sight, smell and other customers' senses.

The atmosphere includes lightning, store layout, aisle space, placement and form of displays, colors, presence and volume of in-store music, smells and temperature, which can create stimuli for the customer to stay or to get out the store. For instance, songs with fast rhythms can influence the customers' permanence time in the store, since the rhythms speed may be related to time. Classic music, on the other hand, may be related to sophistication and higher prices (ENGEL; BLACKWELL; MINIARD, 1995).

This component of store image is of special interest to companies for two fundamental reasons (SHETH; MITTAL; NEWMAN, 2001). The first one refers to the marketer's ability to control the situational influences and create the retail environment. The second one regards the location of this influence: inside the store. The atmosphere can help shape both the direction and duration of consumers' attention, thereby enhancing the odds of purchasing for products that otherwise might go unnoticed. Besides, the retail environment can express various aspects about the store to consumers, such as its intended audience and positioning. Finally, the store setting can also elicit particular emotional reactions, such as pleasure and arousal, from consumers.

These feelings can influence the amount of time and money consumers spend while shopping. The store atmosphere is, therefore, part of the store image, and not a synonym, since the store image is a broader concept, formed by not only the atmosphere, but also by other elements of the retail marketing mix that determine the store positioning (ENGEL; BLACKWELL; MINIARD, 1995).

Another store image component that has nowadays received considerable attention from retailers is the assortment of merchandise. One assortment differentiation strategy that is being increasingly used is the inclusion of private label products in the set of merchandise offered to consumers (COUGHLAN et al., 2001). Private labels can help build the store image, because they allow a retailer to differentiate itself from close competitors and to drive store traffic. Since private labels are available in one only specific store chain, they can be unique in terms of value and performance, and this exclusivity can be considered a form to obtain customer loyalty (SHETH; MITTAL; NEWMAN, 2001).

According to Porter and Claycomb (1997), one tactic for ensuring a favorable retail store image is a merchandise mix composed of a relatively high number of brands possessing high brand awareness, and one or more brands with a strong brand image. For the authors, brand image and retail image are inextricably linked to one another, since favorable images of brands positively influence patronage decisions and purchase behaviors, while unfavorable images adversely influence such decisions and behaviors. It means that the images associated with the brands a store carries influence a store image, which in turn, influences consumers' decision-making processes and behaviors.

Store image measurement

Since the present study aims to compare the theoretical and the empirical dimensions of store image, by means of a quantitative research, and because the research on this topic is more concerned with the measurement of attitudes and opinions, rather than with more easily quantifiable factors, it is appropriate to summarize the main measurement techniques used and the issues that have arisen.

Although one can have the impression that store image research is only concerned to the comparison among a retailer and its competitors, there are other contrasts that can be extracted, such as: comparison of store images within the same chain, comparison of clients from different stores, and comparison of departments within a single store (MCGOLDRICK, 1990). A variety of structured and unstructured tools has been used, and the most used ones are explained in the following paragraphs.

The first group of instruments is the semantic differential scale, which is the most widely used scaling system in retail image research (MCGOLDRICK, 1990). The construction of a semantic differential scale involves the selection of dichotomous pairs of words or phrases that could be used to describe the store image concept. Respondents then rate the concept on a scale of, usually, seven points. The responses average for each pair of adjectives is computed and marked in a graphic. The semantic differential scale is a fast and efficient method for examining the strong and weak points of the store image, related to the competition. However, the most important is that this scale has been shown sufficiently reliable and valid for the decision making and for forecasting in marketing.

Despite the fact that these advantages have led many researchers to use the semantic differential scale as a tool to measure image, it also has disadvantages. Firstly, there is the lack of standardization, since the scale has to be adapted for each research problem, turning its development an integral part of the research. Secondly, there is a problem related to the number of divisions in the scale: if too few divisions are used, the scale becomes rough and senseless. On the other hand, if too many divisions are used, the respondent loses the ability to discriminate among them. The seven-point scale has been considered the most satisfactory (MCDANIEL; GATES, 1996). Amirani and Gates (1993) observe other limitations of the scale: the inability to capture the relative importance of attributes and to measure the general impressions about the store image. To overcome the limitations of semantic scales, many researchers opt to use Likert-type scales.

A second group of instruments is open-ended questions. The open-ended techniques overcome an important drawback of attitude scales; the fact that they involve forced-choice measures that may not isolate critical image components (MCGOLDRICK, 1990). It happens because the factors that are relevant in a product's purchase may be irrelevant for other product. For McDaniel and Gates (1996), one of the advantages of these techniques is that the respondent uses its own frame of reference in its answers, using "real world" terminology that can be used in the development of promotional campaigns. The main problem of using open-ended questions is the probable limitation in quantification and data comparison. Another problem refers to the

subjectivity of the analysis, which can be biased by the analyst that processes the data (MCGOLDRICK, 1990).

The multidimensional scaling, the third group of instruments analyzed, is an approach that permits some structuring and quantification of images, while avoiding the rigidity of fixed scales. This technique begins with the judgment of similarities among all the stimuli pairs inside the set of stimuli studied. From these judgments, the researcher tries to infer the basic attributes underlying people's opinions with regard to the set of stimuli. By this approach, perceptual maps can be evolved, indicating the perceived similarities and differences between stores and the most salient dimensions by which these are assessed. The technique has the potential of exposing judgment criteria of which the respondents are not consciously aware or less willing to discuss. A disadvantage is the fact that its final stage requires a subjective judgment from the researcher, when trying to identify the dimensions evaluated (MCGOLDRICK, 1990).

Finally, one last set of techniques is the multi-attribute models. The application of these models came into vogue as a result of the inadequacies of the semantic differential scale (AMIRANI; GATES, 1993). According to Sheth, Mittal e Newman (2001), a consumer's attitude with regard to a product or service is the weighted sum of the beliefs about the extent the product or service possesses a set of attributes or characteristics. In the multi-attribute models, the importance of an attribute to a person is measured by means of this weighted sum; therefore it is necessary to first measure the consumer beliefs in relation to the product's attribute and next measure the importance given to these attributes (SHETH; MITTAL; NEWMAN, 2001).

Thus, the multi-attribute models measure the attitude profile of consumers in relation to an object (in this case, the attributes that compose the store image) as a function of consumers' opinions and assessment of the key attributes or beliefs held with regard to the particular attitude object (SCHIFFMAN; KANUK, 1997). Although these models capture both the salience (importance) and the valence of the store's attributes, they impose problems with regard to the model specification.

Considering the advantages and disadvantages of each method presented above, the following part depicts the methodological aspects of this research.

The study

The present study was designed to compare the theoretical and the empirical dimensions of supermarket store image. The theoretical dimensions are the ones presented in Table 1. The study's first step was to perform a focus group with eight people from the same target population of the research, in order to obtain inputs for the questionnaire elaboration, in addition to the information collected by the bibliographic survey. The group was homogeneous in terms of socio-demographic characteristics, and the participants were carefully selected, attending to some previously set specifications. The discussion lasted one hour and, besides the participants group, a moderator and a person who recorded the discussion were present. According to Malhotra (2001), the focus group represents the most important process on qualitative research, and its value lies on the unexpected results that, in general, are obtained from a free discussion group.

For obtaining the information necessary for this study development, the authors opted to apply projective techniques. According to Malhotra (2001), a projective technique is a non-structured and indirect form of questioning, which is able to incentive the respondents to project their underlying motivations, beliefs, attitudes or sensations about the problem under study. The types of projective techniques used in this research were the association techniques, in which it is presented to the respondent a stimulus and it is asked for him to tell the first idea that comes to his mind, and the complementing techniques, in which the respondent complements an incomplete stimulus situation (MALHOTRA, 2001).

In the case of the association technique, it was asked what came to the respondents' minds when they thought about the supermarket where they usually shop and do not shop. For using the complementing technique, the respondents completed the following sentences: "To me, the ideal supermarket would have..."; "If the supermarket where I shop were a person, it would be like..."; "If there were no supermarkets..."; "I don't shop in supermarkets that...".

From these pieces of information, a list of sentences containing attributes, characteristics and terms related to the supermarket stores image components was elaborated. These sentences were gathered in a research instrument, applied in the second phase of this study in an undergraduate students' sample, as explained next.

The sample

This study's population was defined as the Business undergraduate students from a large Brazilian university, located at the São Paulo State. In this specific course, 240 students were enrolled, that usually shops at grocery stores and supermarkets. Once the target population was defined, the attention was turned to the type and size of the sample with which the empirical research would operate. For Malhotra (2001) and Churchill (1991), the sample types that allow for inferences are the probabilistic ones, in opposition to the non-probabilistic ones. The present study uses the convenience non-probabilistic sampling method, in which the sample elements are chosen in locations of the researcher's convenience. In this research, it was asked for the students that were present in class at the date of data collection to answer the questionnaire. Thus, the absent students, and the ones that were on exams were not able to participate in the research. Even so, it was obtained answers from almost 39% of the target population.

It has to be noticed that the non-probabilistic techniques produce samples whose population representativeness is not known, since the probability of a given population element to be included in the sample is not the same for all the elements. Therefore, conversely to what happens in probabilistic samples, the results cannot be inferred to the population, within the established confidence and error margins.

In the present research, questionnaires were distributed to 101 students from the referred course from the Brazilian university. From this total, 93 questionnaires were considered valid for the analysis. This sample was considered appropriate, since many students represent a potential target market for the Brazilian supermarket stores and the sample students actually shop at grocery and supermarket stores.

In relation to the used sample profile, the majority of respondents (35,5%) shops in supermarkets up to once a month, while 29% shop up to once a week, 23,7% once every fifteen days, 9,7% more than once a week, and 1,1% does not usually go shopping in supermarkets. The major part of the sample is male (59,1%), and the respondents' average age is 21,25 years.

The scale used in the research

The scale used in this research had 55 items, which measured the respondents' accordance degree in relation to the sentences related to the image components of the supermarket where they shop most of the times. The scale was a Likert-type one, with five items, in which 1 represented total disagreement with regard to the sentence and 5 total agreement. In the questionnaire, there were also questions about the respondents' shopping frequency, an ordering of the supermarkets where they shop, and data to verify the sample profile.

The Likert scale is very popular due to the easiness to build and apply. On the other hand, a large disadvantage of this type of scale is that it is essentially an ordinal one. However, there is a lot of controversy with regard to the measurement of attitudes; if it can be done with ordinal or interval scales. The debate centers in the following question: the differences in the scores reveal more meanings than the relative ordering of individuals? According to Churchill (1991), the preponderant posture in marketing seems to agree with many psychologists, i.e., many attitude scales are interval ones. The present paper adopts the preponderant position reported by Churchill (1991), and, therefore, uses parametrical statistical procedures to treat the Likert scale.

The dimensional structure analysis of the scale used in the present study was performed by means of exploratory factor analysis, whereas the internal reliability was evaluated with alpha coefficient. Factor analysis is the general name given to the class of procedures used, primarily, for data reduction and data summarization (MALHOTRA, 2001). The relationships among sets of several interrelated variables were examined and represented in terms of some underlying factors.

Results and discussions

Firstly, data were examined to verify the existence of typing errors and outliers. The data frequency tables were analyzed in search of unexpected codes or values. The Mahalanobis distance was used to identify possible outliers within the set of quantitative variables. There were not found errors or outliers in the database.

The extraction method used in the exploratory factor analysis was the principal components analysis. In this approach, total variance of data is considered. To Malhotra (2001), this type of analysis is recommended when the main objective is to determine the minimum number of factors that will respond for the maximum variance of the study's data. With regard to the rotation method, it was employed the Varimax method, which is the most commonly used one (MALHOTRA, 2001).

For measuring the susceptibility degree, or data fit, it was employed the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test (KMO) and the Bartlett test of sphericity [Hair et alii, 1995]. These tests were used to verify the confidence level that can be expected from the data, when treated by the multivariate method of factor analysis.

Table 2 bellow presents the values obtained in the factor analysis and in the fit tests: KMO and Bartlett test of sphericity. In the present study, the value obtained in the KMO test was 0,692, which demonstrate a good fit for data treatment by the method cited. The value for the Bartlett significance test was bellow 0,0001, which allows, once again, for the confirmation of the factor analysis method adequacy for treating the data.

Table 2 – KMO test and Bartlett test of sphericity for factor analysis

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin		,692
Measure of Sample Adequacy.		
Bartlett test of sphericity	Aprox. Chi-Square	1046,076
	df	406
	Sig.	,000

Three exploratory factor analyses were performed. In each one of them, the questions with factor loadings under 0,50 were identified and excluded from analysis. Its was also removed questions that did not load on any factor, after verifying if there was already a factor measuring the underlying dimension related to the question removed. After these procedures, 29 questions remained from the initial set of 55 ones.

The final number of factors found in this study was 9 factors, whose descriptions are presented in Table 3. The percentage of total variance explained by the nine factors is 69,9%. The questions composing each factor were subjected to a reliability analysis, by means of the alpha coefficient, or Cronbach alpha. This coefficient varies between 0 and 1, and a value of 0,6 or less in general denotes an unsatisfactory internal reliability (MALHOTRA, 2001). The values found for the alpha coefficients calculated for each factor are also shown in Table 3.

Table 3 – Factors found for evaluating supermarkets' images

Factors	Representing the dimension	Questionnaire questions composing the factors	α Coefficient
1. Fatquali	Quality	The brands sold by the supermarket are good ones The best brands are presented in the supermarket The supermarket has special decor in holidays and special dates I find my preferred brands in the supermarket I never find the products and brands I look for in the supermarket	0,81
2. Fatprec	Price	I find good promotions in the supermarket The supermarket has low price merchandise The supermarket charges fair prices for the merchandises The supermarket has always special promotions	0,77
3. Fatposv	After-sales	The supermarket listen to my complaints The supermarket has a good after-sales service I am satisfied with the supermarket's after-sales service The supermarket show interest in my opinions	0,80
4. Fatprop	Advertising	The TV channels used by the supermarket's ads are good quality ones	0,72

		I believe in the supermarket's ads The messages in the supermarket's ads are clear and I always understand them	
5. Fatclien	Clientele	The supermarket's customers belong to a high socio-economic level The supermarket' customers are elegant	0,76
6. Fatsort	Assortment	There is a large brand variety for each type of merchandise sold in the supermarket The supermarket offers a broad line of products The supermarket has more different products than the other ones	0,72
7. Fatconv	Convenience	The supermarket's opening hours are more convenient than the other supermarkets' ones The supermarket's opening hours are convenient	0,76
8. Fatatmo	Atmosphere	The supermarket has a sufficient number of employees The supermarket's employees are well trained The supermarket's stores has a high quality decor The supermarket's stores are beautiful	0,68
9. Fatserv	Services	I can finance my shops in the supermarket I have many shops payment options in the supermarket	0,75

Source: Elaborated by the authors

According to the alpha coefficient's values presented, it can be said that the factors found in the analysis are considered internally reliable. This is an indication of the fact that the consumers studied use basically nine store image dimensions (the factors found), which are consistent in the measurement of the different supermarket store image components.

In order to verify the strength of the linear associations among the factors found in this study, a Pearson correlation analysis was performed. The statistically significant results are presented in Table 4. The values on the lower part of the matrix were suppressed for a better vision of the results. The factors found are not totally independent one from another, but, due to the low correlation values found, one can consider that the store image dimensions are distinct.

Table 4 – Statistically significant results of the correlations among the factors

	Fatquali	Fatposv	Fatprec	Fatprop	Fatclien	Fatsort	Fatatmo	Fatconv	Fatserv
Fatquali	1	0,256*	N.S.	0,336**	0,240*	0,509*	0,341**	0,283**	0,294**
Fatposv		1	0,276*	0,316**	0,308**	0,270*	0,278*	0,261*	0,267*
Fatprec			1	0,318**	N.S.	0,273*	0,213*	N.S.	N.S.
Fatprop				1	0,220*	N.S.	0,469**	N.S.	0,258*
Fatclien					1	N.S.	0,287**	N.S.	N.S.
Fatsort						1	N.S.	N.S.	N.S.
Fatatmo							1	0,250*	N.S.
Fatconv								1	0,272*
Fatserv									1

* Significant correlation at the 0,05 level (two-tailed)

** * Significant correlation at the 0,01 level (two-tailed)

The exceptions are related to the quality factor (fatquali) and the assortment factor (fatsort): 0,509, N=89, $p < 0,001$ and between the advertising factor (fatprop) and the atmosphere factor (fatatmo): 0,469, N=89, $p < 0,001$ that presented reasonable values. One can suggest that a supermarket, worrying to maintain a pleasant store atmosphere, also invest in high quality ads. Besides, one can also suggest that merchandise quality and assortment are close attributes in the consumers' minds: when a supermarket offers a high number of items, it is more probable that it offers good quality items among the products offered.

Conclusions

For the retailer, all marketing decisions have one focal point: the store, where the customer has his behavior observed and develops his attitude and satisfaction with respect to the store. As retailers have to attract consumers to get to the sales, they need to ensure that the store image is the most possible positive for the customers. It means that consumers' expectations with regard to the store image must be accomplished. Nowadays, with fast movements in our competitive environment, a good image is a competitive advantage that is considered increasingly more important. A positive store image may generate consumer loyalty and can act as a natural entry barrier to other competitors.

In the present study, the main conclusion refers to the simpler form than the one foreseen by theory, with which the respondents evaluate the image of a given supermarket store. It is probable that the classification of the factors composing the store image is not very clearly understood by the customers. This can be an explanation for the correlations observed among the factors. Another explanation for the fewer number of dimensions observed in the study and for the correlations among the factors is the fact that consumers can obtain opinions about the store image both from more tangible attributes (price and location), and from more subjective impressions, based on the various store indications (price level or convenience of location).

The present paper's objective was to compare the theoretical and the empirical dimensions of supermarket stores' image, based on the components that, according to the proposed theory, form the store image. Results indicate that respondents classify the questions related to the supermarket stores' image into nine dimensions. The observed dimensions are: quality, price, after-sale, atmosphere, advertising, assortment, clientele, convenience and services. The factors found were considered internally reliable, meaning that the dimensions are reliable in the measurement of the different supermarket store image components.

An important practical contribution of the present study refers to the development of a simpler scale (for it contains 9 dimensions instead of the 14 foreseen by theory, showed in Table 1), containing only the actually perceived dimensions by the respondents. Due to this fact, this scale can be used by retailers in a viable form to obtain data on their perceived image.

The dimensions foreseen by theory that did not emerge in this study were: physical aspects, sales people, location convenience, promotion and institutional. It was observed that the dimension "physical aspects" and the dimension "sales people" were joined to the dimension "atmosphere", i.e., the respondents consider such dimensions as part of the store atmosphere. This fact implies that, if retailers wish to alter their image through this dimension, they have to

invest in people's training and in the store's physical aspects. By turn, the dimension "promotion" was considered part of the dimension "price", meaning that the retailer that wishes to change its price image has also to invest in promotions. Finally, the dimensions "institutional" and "location convenience" did not emerge in the analyses.

It is important to highlight that, since the study was developed from a non-probabilistic sample, it is possible that the dimensions that did not emerge are, actually, relevant for the consumers. Therefore, future studies should be developed, aiming to explain these dimensions absence in the respondents' evaluations. Moreover, the correlations observed among the dimensions resulting from the study also deserve a deeper analysis. With this information available, the retailer could better direct its actions, since it has to attract consumers into its stores, and to ensure that the store image is the most positive possible for the customers.

Finally, it has to be observed that, although the convenience sample used by the authors may be considered adequate for the exploratory purpose of this study, the results cannot be generalized to the target population or to other segments of consumers. Therefore, an important limitation of the present research refers to the non-probabilistic nature of the sample used. A contribution of future researches would be the empirical verification of the dimensions that other consumer segments use to evaluate supermarket stores image, such as: housewives, elderly people, and professionals, among others, in order to verify the results validity for these other segments.

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