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Attributes of young consumers' favorite retail shops: A qualitative study

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Abstract

Purpose – The study attempts to identify the common attributes of the physical retail outlets favored by Hong Kong youths and to assess the relative importance of “hard” and “soft” aspects of the retail marketing mix in appealing to this consumer segment.

Design/methodology/approach – A convenience sample of 89 Hong Kong youngsters aged 15 to 21 were asked to describe their favorite shops and explain why they favored them. They were asked to take pictures of their favorite shops and participate in a face-to-face interview.

Findings – The two types of shop most frequently named were food outlets and apparel retailers. The attractiveness of these stores was mainly based on product or service quality and price, but location and the behavior of the shop assistants were also cited as influential. Ranking as “my favorite shop” was a combination of tangible qualities and intangible services.

Research limitations/implications – The convenience sample used probably was not representative of all young people in Hong Kong.

Practical implications –The results reinforce the conclusion that Hong Kong retailers need to emphasize sales training and management in order to create an appealing shopping experience for young consumers.

Originality/value –This has been the first study to explore in detail the attributes of young Chinese consumers' favorite retail shops.

Key words Retailing, Store attributes, Store preference, Young consumers, Hong Kong, Chinese consumers

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Hong Kong positions itself as Asia's world city (Hong Kong Tourist Board, 2011) and has long been considered a shopping paradise (Choi *et al.*, 1999). Enormous malls, district shopping centers, high-rise retail towers, department stores, themed shopping streets, street hawkers, open air bazaars, street-front shops and neighborhood stores provide a robust retail landscape for both local residents and tourists to browse, to shop and to enjoy. The profusion of retail stores ranges from Michelin-starred restaurants to the proprietary outlets of world-famous fashion and jewelry brands, to global fast food chains, local food stalls, and street corner handicraft shops.

According to government statistics, by the end of 2005 the total internal floor area of retail property in Hong Kong had reached 10.8 million sq. meters (Planning Department, Hong Kong Government, 2009). Hong Kong's retail space per capita was slightly larger than in other developed Asian economies such as Japan and Singapore (Baker, 2004). Retailing and restaurant sales in Hong Kong amounted to US\$41.7 billion in 2010. The total number of retail establishments was over sixty thousand, and they employed a workforce of more than 240,000 persons (Hong Kong Retail Management Association, 2011).

Shopping is an essential part of the lives of Hong Kong people. With family members or friends, young and old alike frequently hang out at malls for shopping, dining and entertaining. It can be treated as a functional activity or leisure, or just as an excuse to get away from Hong Kong's very small homes (Chan, 2010). Hong Kong people spend about thirty percent of their household budgets on retail purchases. The proportion of disposable income spent on eating out is about 17 percent, and the proportion spent on durable goods, clothing and footwear is close to 9 percent

(Census & Statistics Department, Hong Kong Government, 2011).

A global online survey conducted among 22,000 Internet users in 42 markets indicates that “the world’s biggest shopaholics” were found in Asia. Among the Asian countries, Hong Kong people hold the top rank with over 90 percent of the respondents admitted to shopping “as a form of amusement” or even “when [they] don’t actually need anything”. Hong Kong people ranked the first for shopping once a week for “entertainment” (37%), followed by the United Arab Emirates (30%) and Thailand (27%) (ACNielsen, 2006).

Focusing on youngsters’ shopping habits, a 2005 survey showed that secondary school students in Hong Kong were frequent visitors to retail shops. Their brand awareness for fashion and electronics goods was high (Chan, 2010). As active players in a “born-to-shop” milieu, these teenagers not only have good knowledge about fashion trends, they have grown up as savvy consumers in a competitive retail landscape.

This study attempted to gain a better understanding of the attributes of young Hong Kong consumers’ favorite retail shops. The results may be of interest to marketing scholars and marketers in three ways. First, the updated knowledge about the young patrons in a top retail city may reveal the nature and antecedents of the retail shops that currently seem appealing to them. Then, these data on young urban Chinese consumers’ store preferences add to the growing body of scholarly work on Asian retailing. And third, “my favorite place to shop” as a word-of-mouth topic is known to be important in shaping the store preferences of various social groups including close friends, relatives and entire generations (Chen and Xie, 2008; Thang and Tan, 2003). Scholars have argued that adolescents are agents of reverse socialization in terms of their attitudes towards branding (Harradine and Ross, 2007),

food (Ayadi and Bree, 2010) and new technology (Grossbart *et al.*, 2002; Ekström, 2007). Shops that win the hearts of the young consumers may eventually get access to their parents and grandparents.

The death of the malls has been predicted for years in North America (The Economist, 2007; The Week, 2009), but malls (albeit of a rather different design) continue to multiply in Hong Kong. The shopping centers in Hong Kong are blend well into the living environment. Using Irazábal and Chakravarty's words (2007:225), "Hong Kong's transit-oriented entertainment-retail centers are a result of strategic planning. As a way of life, most of the retail shops are fully integrated into the functions of everyday life and the regular pathways of many pedestrians. Hong Kong's strategy is not to make malls a destination, but rather to place them on the way to every destination." A survey has found that most Hong Kong people patronize shops within 10 minutes' walk from their home for food items and general household goods (Planning Department, Hong Kong Government, 2009).

Asian youth have been recognized as a crisis-resistant market during economic downturns. For example, it has been reported that the purchasing power of youngsters was not seriously affected by the Asian financial crisis beginning in 1997, as most young Asians live at home with their parents. PepsiCo Asia's double-digit growth in 1997 and 1998 is evidence of this (Ko, 1998 cited in Ang *et al.*, 2000).

Youth is a major target market for the retail industry everywhere. The apm mall is the most notable youth-oriented shopping mall in Hong Kong. It targets young people aged 19 to 39. The mall's opening hours last until 2am and it presents free shows where fans can meet popular singers and other media celebrities. On the days before the results of public secondary school examinations were released, apm organized event to cheer up the youngsters (Chan, 2010).

apm illustrates how retailers employ a creative synthesis of multiple attractions to deliver additional value to young consumers. The success of the apm mall illustrates that young consumers seek more than a place to shop, but a place to connect to others and even to express themselves.

Retailing studies have provided a great deal of knowledge about shop attributes, store preferences and shopping satisfaction. Effective marketing-mix factors in retailing have been identified and tested over the last few decades (e.g. Arnold *et al.*, 1983; Bloemer and Odekerken-Schröder, 2002; Hoffman and Turley, 2002). The multitude of variables can be grouped along a continuum from the tangible/“hard” to the intangible/“soft” (e.g. Gilmore and Carson, 1993). However, most of these studies were conducted with adult consumers in Western countries. Only a handful of studies have treated Asian consumers (McDonald, 1991; Siu and Cheung, 2001; Wong and Yu, 2003; Zhao *et al.*, 2002). Recently, though, several studies have examined the shopping behavior of Asian youth. Chen-Yu’s comparative study of South Korean and American adolescents (Chen-Yu *et al.*, 2010) is one example, along with Narang’s (2010) study of Indian retailing. Studies of young shoppers often focus on shopping motivations and psychographic profiles (e.g. Breazeale and Lueg, 2011; Cardoso and Pinto, 2010; Kaur and Singh, 2007; Park *et al.*, 2010). Such studies have found that young consumers’ motives for shopping are both utilitarian and hedonistic. A qualitative study of adolescent girls’ mall experience identified trend consciousness, comfort, safety, mall atmosphere, and accessibility as new factors that affected interviewees’ choice of mall (Haytko and Baker, 2004).

With this in mind, a “my favorite retail shop” study was designed which asked youngsters to answer a simple yet significant question: “Among all the stores you visit and make a purchase in the past six months, which is your favorite, and why?” It

was a qualitative study with two research objectives:

1. to explore attributes of retail facilities that appeal to young Hong Kong consumers;
2. to examine the relative importance of the tangible/“hard” and intangible/“soft” aspects of retail facilities in attracting young Chinese consumers.

Method

The study adopted a qualitative approach to identifying the attributes of young consumers’ favorite shops. Shops were defined as physically existing retail outlets. Online virtual shops were excluded. According to Euromonitor International (2011), virtual retailers do not attract a significant value share in Hong Kong.

Procedures

The data were collected in November 2010. Students from a university in Hong Kong were recruited as interviewers, and the respondents were then recruited through the interviewers’ personal networks. Altogether, 89 interviewees aged from 15 to 21 participated in the study. Among them, 67 were females and 22 were males. Individual face-to-face interviews were conducted in Cantonese (Hong Kong’s principle Chinese dialect). The interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed in traditional Chinese.

Each participant was required to name his/her favorite retail store among those where the respondent had bought a product or service during the six months prior to the interview. The participants were then asked why they liked that particular shop, and to recall experiences related to shopping there. No limit was set on the number of reasons provided. All participants were required to provide two photos of their favorite shop, one showing the exterior layout and the other showing a specific element inside the shop that the participant particularly liked. Photo-taking was

assumed to help the interviewees recall details of their shopping experiences.

Data analysis

The analysis consisted of coding and developing themes, organizing the themes, and then deducing and commenting on the findings. The coding was based on the questions asked in the interviews, interpretations by the researchers, and ideas from the relevant literature. Marshall and Rossman's (1999) comparison analysis method was used throughout the data analysis process to link data by constantly comparing and contrasting them (Strauss, 1987). Similar answers were grouped, and frequencies were computed. For the purposes of data presentation, Booms and Bitner's (1981) extended marketing mix (7Ps) was selected as a viable point of departure for organizing store attributes and descriptions, since it is generic, simple, and comprehensive. Both "hard" and "soft" (physical, emotional/affective and cognitive) as well as relational dimensions/components were covered by this framework (Bitner, 1991; Rafiq and Ahmed, 1995). The categories (i.e. the marketing mix elements) were people, physical evidence, place, price, process, product, and promotion. All selected quotes were translated into English in the final stage of report writing.

Findings

Types of shops

The interviewees were asked to name their favorite retail shop among those they had visited and spent money in within the previous six months. The types of shops reported are summarized in Table 1. The top two types reported as favorites were stores for food services and clothing stores. These two types accounted for 37 percent and 34 percent respectively. Shops for durable goods and shops selling luxury goods were seldom reported as the participants' favorites.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Reasons for being “my favorite retail shop”

The interviewees’ reasons for their favorites and their comments and identified attributes were organized into seven categories by employing the 7Ps framework.

Table 2 summarizes the results.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

Product

Attributes related to this category were mentioned by all of the interviewees. The most common were excellent product quality, a variety of choices, trendy products, and uniqueness. For example, the following two quotes were about food shops:

“The toast is tasty and excellent. You cannot get such a good one from other cafes.” (male, age 16)

“The food is very delicious, especially the Bandit Chicken Wings and the hot and sour noodles.” (female, age 18)

Another interviewee praised her favorite shop for its variety of choices:

“7-Eleven is my favorite store brand. They offer all kinds of stuff. I can get cooked food when I am hungry. If I am bored, I can get newspapers and magazines. When I want to look great and pretty, they have personal care products. What’s more, I can add value to my Octopus card” (a debit card for public transportation). (female, age 16)

For fashion and clothing shops, participants most often reported that their favorite shops were “in” and “unique”. Here are two quotes:

“Designs are fashionable, ...most of the items are trendy.” (female, age 21)

“The boutique really matches my personal style. The designs are cool, cute, and special. When I go out, I don’t need to worry that everyone

is wearing the same design.” (female, age 19).

In addition to innovative products and up-to-date items, participants reported that their favorite stores gave them surprises. Here is one quote:

“When I cleaned up my room, I realized that one comic book in my collection was missing. So I looked for it everywhere, including the internet and many second-hand comic book shops. All failed. Time passed, I almost forgot it. One day I went to buy the latest comic book and I went to this store. I noticed that the missing book was hiding at the corner. The feeling was just like finding a family member who had been lost for many years.” (female, age 16)

Physical Evidence

This was the marketing mix element participants brought up the second most frequently. Participants reported that their favorite shops offered an enjoyable physical environment. For example, their favorite restaurants were clean, tidy, and spacious. They appreciated attractive window displays and well-organized interiors. Atmospheric attributes such as stylish design, harmonious background music, comfortable air-conditioning and a cozy setting were important to them. The importance of ambience is vividly demonstrated by the following comment and photo:

“Though the [cake] shop I love is a small one, its design is unique. The minimalist design makes me feel comfy. You can hardly find any cake shops in Hong Kong that use Chinese antique chairs and door as décor. I am impressed by its style.” (male, age 19)

[Insert plate 1 about here]

People

This category received the third largest number of responses. Participants

considered the service standard provided by the staff a significant attribute. The interviewees reported that “helpful staff”, “friendly service”, and “informative employees” were reasons of making a shop their favorite. In some restaurants, “we found waiters were friendly and pleased to chit-chat with us”; “the waiters know our names and some even recall our favorite dishes”. A participant reported the shop of the fashion brand “Liz Liza” as her favorite and remarked

“The salesgirl recognized me when I walked into the store. We had a casual talk and we exchanged contacts. I bought many clothes there. As a surprise, the salesgirl told me that I am eligible to apply for VIP membership immediately.”
(female, age 20)

[Insert plate 2 about here]

Some interviewees told us they felt good when the salespersons provided professional advice. For example, a cosmetics salesperson offered color matching tips for make-up. Some interviewees said they appreciate the extra miles a salesperson walked for them. For example, a salesperson looked up a pair of shoes of the right size from another branch of the shop, and delivered the pair of shoes to her office. The interviewees also said that they appreciated salespersons who gave them “freedom” to browse around, and did not push them to make a purchase decision right away.

Price

Attractive prices ranked fourth on the list of participants’ reasons. Many interviewees explained that their pocket money was limited and that they needed to spend it on products that are affordable and give value for money. They felt a sense of achievement when they got a good deal. Here is an example:

“Once at my favorite snack store I found the chocolates had an attractive discount. They lowered the price for items that were close to the expiry date. I

was so thrilled that I could buy high quality imported Japanese snacks for a bargain price.” (male, age 15)

Place

Convenient location ranked fifth in the number of responses. Respondents reported favoring shops close to their school or residence. They found them highly accessible, making it easy to go in groups with friends.

Promotion

The total number of responses related to this marketing mix element ranked sixth. Participants reported that they were attracted by sales promotion tools such as discounts, couponing, stamp redemption, buy-one-get-one-free offers and free samples. Price discounts were frequently mentioned as reason in this category.

Process

Attributes related to this marketing mix element received the fewest mentions. Participants most often reported that their favorite retail shops allowed them to have a sense of control. For example, a yogurt shop allowed customers to add their own toppings. A food restaurant allowed them to hang around with friends for as long as they pleased.

Discussion

The two most mentioned types of favorite shops were food outlets and clothing shops. Both sell non-durable goods. Shops selling durable goods such as electronics and electrical appliances, home appliances, motor vehicles and parts, watches and jewelry were seldom reported as favorite shops. This may be because young consumers have limited experience purchasing such items. In particular, Hong Kong people in this age group very rarely own any sort of motor vehicle. Luxury brand stores were also seldom mentioned. This is consistent with the results of a previous

study which showed that ownership of luxurious brands among adolescents is low in Hong Kong (Chan, 2010). Although the young interviewees are style conscious, with limited disposable income, most of them were not attached to high fashion. The attribute “affordable price” was deemed important because it enabled the young people to be fashionable and stylish without digging deep into their pockets.

Both hard and soft attributes played an important role in appealing to these young consumers. From previous scholarly work on youths’ store selection behavior we know that their cognitive response to product and service quality is important. This is true both for the Western and Hong Kong young consumers. For example, Chen Yu cites studies by Rabolt and by Velde (Rabolt *et al.*, 1988; Velde *et al.*, 1996) showing that merchandise assortment, quality and price range are the three most important criteria for college students in selecting a clothing store in Canada, the UK and the USA (Chen Yu *et al.*, 2010). However, our findings indicate that location, the environment and the people are also important for these Hong Kong youth.

Unfocused shopping is not the same as product-specific buying, so the evaluation of an attitude object (my favorite store) in that situation is also highly influenced by the consumption context. For example, superior interior design or a comfortable environment can reinforce the worth of a product or service. A beloved store is not just a seller of food, clothing or cosmetics. It is the supplier of a good shopping experience. Proximity, accessibility and convenience are some of the important hard store attributes our participants highlighted as supplementing the soft or the interpersonal attributes. Favoring a store can apparently be regarded as a cumulative effect of a young customer’s contentment and perceptions, both rational and emotional. Cognitive and affective elements seem, on average, to be about equally important in appealing to young Chinese consumers. Our data show that the relative

importance of cognitive and affective evaluations differs by type of shop. Cognitive evaluations emphasize aspects such as perceived product quality, perceived service efficiency and perceived price. Affective evaluations concern about the emotion-eliciting qualities of the environment and service such as ambient cues (e.g. music), as well as the friendliness or service attitude of a store's employees, all of which contribute to the customers' pleasure or arousal (Baker *et al.*, 1992; Oliver, 1993; Stauss and Neuhaus, 1997; Zeithamel, 1988). When classified under the 7Ps framework, the attributes seem separate in the analysis, but they are in fact interrelated and interdependent. The challenge for further studies is to chart these relationships.

All the attributes mentioned come together in various proportions in any particular physical retail store. The traditional product, place and price are certainly significant for almost all youngsters, but physical evidence and people are noteworthy too. A successful retailing formula in Hong Kong must chart the relationships and relative importance of these attributes, so determining the relative weights of the attributes for young consumers could be a useful next step for scholars in this field. Further quantitative studies should be conducted with a representative sample.

In particular, we recommend applying the video ethnography approach (Belk and Kozinets, 2005) and photo-elicitation interviews (Venkatraman and Nelson, 2008) to more reproducibly probe young consumers' in-store shopping experience and attitudes toward the visual presentation of retail shops.

Marketing implications

The results of this study have some useful implications for practical marketing.

1. Young consumers are price-sensitive. Retail shops targeting them should have at least some of their products priced in a range that can evoke consideration

by young consumers.

2. Managers should train retail salespersons in communicating with young consumers. The salesperson should be friendly, helpful, and sensitive to young consumers' needs. They should be accommodating to young consumers even if their visits do not lead to purchase or they hang around in the retail shop for a long period of time.
3. Durables retailers need to take special measures to establish brand loyalty among young consumers. As young consumers have developed strong emotional links with selected food outlets and clothing stores, durables retailers should identify these shops and explore cross promotion with them.
4. Retail shops should continue to invest in creating a pleasant physical environment while still offering affordable prices and friendly staff to keep the young consumers loyal and happy.

Table 1 Summary of results for “my favorite retail shop”

<i>Type of store</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
Bookshop	4
Beauty and cosmetics	3
Convenience store	4
Entertainment	2
Fashion and clothing	30
<i>Fashion and casual wear</i>	14
<i>Executive wear</i>	9
<i>Sportswear</i>	5
<i>Bags and accessories</i>	2
Food services	33
<i>Dessert and ice cream</i>	8
<i>Fast food restaurant</i>	6
<i>Café or Western restaurant</i>	5
<i>Japanese restaurant</i>	4
<i>Noodle shop</i>	3
<i>Chinese restaurant</i>	2
<i>Snack and confectionery store</i>	2
<i>Take-away snacks and drinks</i>	2
<i>Street food stall</i>	1
Furniture and lifestyle store	7
Gifts and toys	5
Supermarket	1

Table 2 Reasons for being “my favorite retail shop”

Reasons	Frequency*
People	82
<i>Customer-salesperson contact (e.g. friendliness, helpfulness, personal attention of the employees)</i>	49
<i>Not being monitored by the employees</i>	19
<i>Knowledge of the employees or salespersons</i>	6
<i>Appearance/attractiveness of the employees or salespersons</i>	4
<i>Right kind of consumers in the shop</i>	4
Physical evidence	92
<i>Attractive décor and color scheme</i>	27
<i>Cozy setting</i>	22
<i>Attractive window display and organized interior layout</i>	12
<i>Atmospherics (air-conditioning, background music, lighting)</i>	11
<i>Clean and tidy environment</i>	10
<i>Spacious environment</i>	10
Place	52
<i>Proximity to school/work/home</i>	28
<i>Accessibility</i>	21
<i>Opening hours</i>	3
Price	54
<i>Affordable prices</i>	43
<i>Perceived good value</i>	11
Process	29
<i>Free to stay as long as I wish</i>	17
<i>Efficiency</i>	9
<i>Self-help service format</i>	3
Product	131
<i>Excellent product quality</i>	55
<i>Variety of choices</i>	42

<i>Trendiness and innovation</i>	15
<i>Uniqueness</i>	12
<i>Others (guarantees, availability, packaging)</i>	7
Promotion	43
<i>Discounts</i>	20
<i>Events</i>	8
<i>Free samples</i>	7
<i>Coupons</i>	4
<i>Friends' recommendations</i>	4

* Participants could report more than one reason

Plate 1 An example of the exterior decor of a favorite retail shop



Plate 2 A shop described as “my favorite princess style shop with good service”



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