SHOPPING CENTER ATTITUDES: AN EMPIRICAL TEST OF PREDICTIVE ATTRIBUTES

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ABSTRACT

Though they have experience a relative decline with the advent of the internet, shopping centers and shopping malls remain a critically important retail channel for the distribution of goods and services. They consequently remain an important object of study for marketing researchers. This exploratory, empirical study identifies factors that strongly influence perceptions of shopping centers and shopping malls. Key factors include perceived management efficiency, product assortment, center maintenance and cleanliness. Other important factors are also identified along with paths of influence in a structural equation model.

INTRODUCTION

Shopping malls are major centers of retail activity in the United States and around the world. The exponential growth of the Internet notwithstanding, they remain an important channel through which goods and services flow to the public. The identification of factors that drive or discourage mall sales is, consequently, a critically important question for marketers. Indeed, as malls and shopping centers face additional competitive pressure, it becomes all the more important for them to understand what factors affect attitudes and patronage of their business.

Researchers have studied malls from a variety of points of view over the years. Exploring the old adage, "location, location, location," some researchers have developed a gravitational model that focuses on location and proximity as predictive factors in shopping mall patronage (Bucklin, 1971; Nevin and Houston, 1980). But the effects of these factors have proven to be inconsistent (Cox and Cooke, 1970). In a more recent study, Eppli and Shilling (1997) found that distance was not predictive of patronage, but the agglomeration of stores and store synergies was an important predictor. Synergies between stores have also been found such that sales for small specialty stores in a category are larger when the store is located near a bigger store selling the same merchandise (Mejia and Eppli, 1999). In this study, the finding that distance is not a predictor of preference will be supported for contemporary shoppers.

Other researchers have focused on various characteristics of shoppers that affect mall patronage. In a study that linked both personality and gravitational factors Burns and Warren (1995) found that willingness to shop at the nearest mall versus outshopping a mall further away was affected by a personality characteristic of the shopper--degree of need for uniqueness. In a

study that focused exclusively on consumer attributes, Babin and Darden (1996) found that the mood of shoppers, especially negative moods, had a strong effect on satisfaction with the mall but not on spending. In a more broad based study, Swinyard (1998) found that mall patronage was driven by shopper values, with shopping incidence being high for shoppers with high need for sense of belonging, warm relationships, and security but low for those with high need for self-fulfillment, self-respect, and sense of accomplishment.

Apart from distance from the home of the shopper, past researchers have paid less attention to specific attributes of the mall itself, but Bloch, Ridgway, and Dawson (1984) using an ecological framework, studied the mall as consumer habitat and identified various habitat related activity patterns and shopping orientations that affected mall performance. More recently, one specific attribute, scent, has received attention of various researchers who have found that is has important effects on mall shopping behavior (Chebat and Michon, 2003).

But perhaps because of its relative decline compared to alternatives such as the Internet, shopping malls and shopping centers have received comparatively little attention from academic researchers in the past fifteen years, and certainly much less than they received prior to that time. And yet, space devoted to shopping mall retailing increased 12% from 2006 to 2011 to a total of more than one billion square feet of retail space (Brown and Kircher, 2011). In light of that major presence in the market and the additional five percent increase in free standing retail center space to more than 3.3 billion square feet, continued attention to the drivers of retail effectiveness in the traditional retail venues is warranted. Focusing on the young consumers whose behavior will determine the retail landscape in the future, this study examines various factors that influence shopping center patronage behaviors of millennial shoppers.

SEMANTIC DESCRIPTORS OF TRADITIONAL RETAIL LANDSCAPE

The objective of this study was to sample broadly attributes of shopping centers that may affect attitudes toward these shopping venues, then determine which attributes in fact affected consumer attitudes. To ensure a broad sampling of the domain of attributes, we review all verbal entries in a 64,000 word English dictionary to identify semantic descriptors of shopping centers and the shopping center experience. All words judged to be descriptive of shopping centers were identified and listed. Words that tapped similar attributes of shopping centers and the shopping center experience were grouped. This grouping produced fourteen broad dimensions of the shopping center or shopping center experience: personal responses to the shopping center, physical characteristics of the center, ease/difficulty of shopping, location attributes, management attributes, entertainment attributes, product mix perceptions, price perceptions, employee perceptions, promotion perceptions, customer service perceptions, social network responses, perceptions of other patrons, and perceived shopping center social responsibility. To get to a manageable list of descriptors while preserving the scope of the metric, multiple terms that were very similar semantically were reduced to one representative term. This winnowing process yielded a set of 159 semantic differential scales, an average of 11 items per dimension. Attention to maximizing the scope of each dimension meant that most of the 14 broad

dimensions could be broken down into sub-dimensions, e.g., physical characteristics of the center included size, distinctiveness, attractiveness, and enclosed/open layout.

Sample

Since the focus of this study is attitudes of the emerging millennial generation of shoppers, a sample of college students from a major mid Atlantic university was judged to be appropriate. The survey was administered as a take-home exercise for class extra credit. To ensure that respondents paid attention to items in the survey, it was seeded with four items that should have been either unknown or irrelevant in evaluating a shopping center, e.g., an item anchored by *denouement* and *undenouement*. Responses were given on a 7 point semantic differential scale with the option of indicating Don't Know / No Opinion / Doesn't Apply, which was the correct answer for *denouement*/*undenouement*. Respondents who did not exclude the inappropriate items were dropped from the study. The resulting sample included 515 usable responses.

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was exploratory. The study was designed to identify factors that influence shopping center attitudes. No particular theory on which attributes of a shopping center would be most influential was propounded prior to data collection, so the focus of this section is not on specific hypothesis tests. However, a hypothesis test was implicit in the specification of each shopping center attribute which was facially judged to influence overall attitude toward the shopping center. So each of the results in the table 1 can be seen as a test of the hypothesis that the specified independent variable affects overall shopping center attitudes.

To identify which factors influenced attitudes towards a shopping center, regressions were run in which center attributes were predictor variables and overall attitude toward the mall was the dependent variable. To ensure reliability of the measures used, regressions were run and are here reported only in cases where a suitable multi-item scale was available with reliability as measured by Cronbach's alpha of .70 or greater, the minimum reliability standard specified by Fornell and Larker (1981) for exploratory research. The Cronbach's alpha for the dependent variable, shopping center attitude was .76. Cronbach's alpha for the scale and results of the regressions are reported in Table 1.

Table 1

Predictor	α	β	t - value	p - value	R^2
Product Assortment	.84	.506	14.243	.000	.54
Management Effectiveness	.87	.590	15.116	.000	.44
Cleanliness	.80	.510	16.425	.000	.36
Staff Diligence	.84	.438	11.072	.000	.28
Staff Attitude	.90	.417	12.093	.000	.23

Stores	.89	.456	12.248	.000	.23
Promotion	.92	.312	10.568	.000	.20
Ease of Shopping	.79	.360	10.092	.000	.17
Friends Who Shop There	.90	.352	9.088	.000	.15
Enclosed Layout	.83	.068	2.820	.005	.13
Entertainment Available	.84	.152	5.590	.000	.08
Parking Availability	.82	.142	5.584	.000	.06
Proximity	.91	.031	1.305	.190	.01
Prices	.82	-.006	.210	.834	.00

*Dependent variable for all regressions is Shopping Center Attitude

These results suggest that the perceived assortment of products and effectiveness of the center management have the biggest effect on shopping center perceptions. How clean or well maintained the center was perceived to be was also an important predictor as was the diligence of the staff. Among the various predictors considered, only proximity to home or work and prices were not significant predictors.

Systemic Relationships Among Predictors

Measurement Model. To explore the discriminant validity of the measure of shopping center attitude and the most important predictors of that attitude, confirmatory factor analysis was conducted. The analysis included shopping center attitude and the six predictors that most powerfully explained attitude toward the shopping center based on t – value and r^2: product assortment, management effectiveness, cleanliness, staff diligence, staff attitude, and stores. The items that measured each construct, with their associated Cronbach's alpha, are reported in Table 2.

Table 2

Shopping Center Attitude:		
SC1	pleasant/unpleasant	α = .76
SC2	appealing/unappealing	
Product:		
P1	many product styles/few product styles	α = .84
P2	well-known brands/little known brands	
Management:		
M1	efficient/inefficient	α = .87
M2	effective/ineffective	
Cleanliness:		
C1	clean center/dirty	α = .80

C2	well maintained center/poorly maintained	
Staff Diligence:		
D1	careful/careless	α = .84
D2	hard working/lazy	
D3	honest/dishonest	
Staff Attitude:		
A1	cheerful employees/sad employees	α = .90
A2	friendly employees/unfriendly employees	
Stores:		
S1	popular stores/unpopular	α = .89
S2	well-known stores/little known store	

All relationships between constructs and semantic differential measures were significant at the .000 level. Unsurprisingly given the large number of constructs and the large sample size (N = 515), the Chi Square statistic, 137.301, df = 83, was significant at the .000 level. According to Byrne (2001), Kline (2005), Schumacher and Lomaz (2004), and Tabachnick and Fidell (2007), the Chi Square is not a good indicator of model fit when sample sizes are large. They recommend, instead, that researchers rely on the Goodness of Fit indices reported in Table 3. As the table indicates, all measures of Goodness of Fit are well within specified parameters. This suggests that the seven constructs in the measurement model are discriminantly valid. With respect to reliability, all have Cronbach's alpha values well above the standard specified by Fornell and Larker (1981). The measures, thus, appear to be well defined, distinct, and reliable.

Structural Model. To identify the causal paths among the seven variables, a structural equation model was proposed and tested. The hypothesized model suggested that attitudes toward a shopping center would be directly affected by the perceived product assortment available at the center and by how well the center was managed. Perceptions of management were expected to be influenced by how clean and well maintained the shopping center was and by attitudes and behavior of the staff. Perceptions of the product assortment were expected to be influenced by the mix of stores at the shopping center.

This analysis produced the model in Figure 1. Standardized regression coefficients are reported with the critical ratio (the ratio of the parameter estimate divided by its standard error) in parentheses.

Table 3

Goodness of Fit Indices

Index	Standard	Result
CFI	> .95	.989
NFI	> .90	.973
TLI	> .95	.982
RFI	> .90	.956
RMSEA	< .08	.036
PCFI	> .50	.604

PNFI	> .50	.594

Once again, as expected given the large sample size (N = 515), the Chi Square statistic, 151.114, df = 78, was significant at the .000 level, a negative indicator for model fit because it suggests there is a difference between the proposed model and the full model. But if the more suitable Goodness of Fit indices recommended by Byrne (2001), Kline (2005), Schumacher and Lomaz (2004), and Tabachnick and Fidell (2007) are applied, the model is well within acceptable parameters as indicated in Table 4.

Table 4

Goodness of Fit Indices

Index	Standard	Result
CFI	> .95	.984
NFI	> .90	.968
TLI	> .95	.975
RFI	> .90	.950
RMSEA	< .08	.043
PCFI	> .50	.640
PNFI	> .50	.629

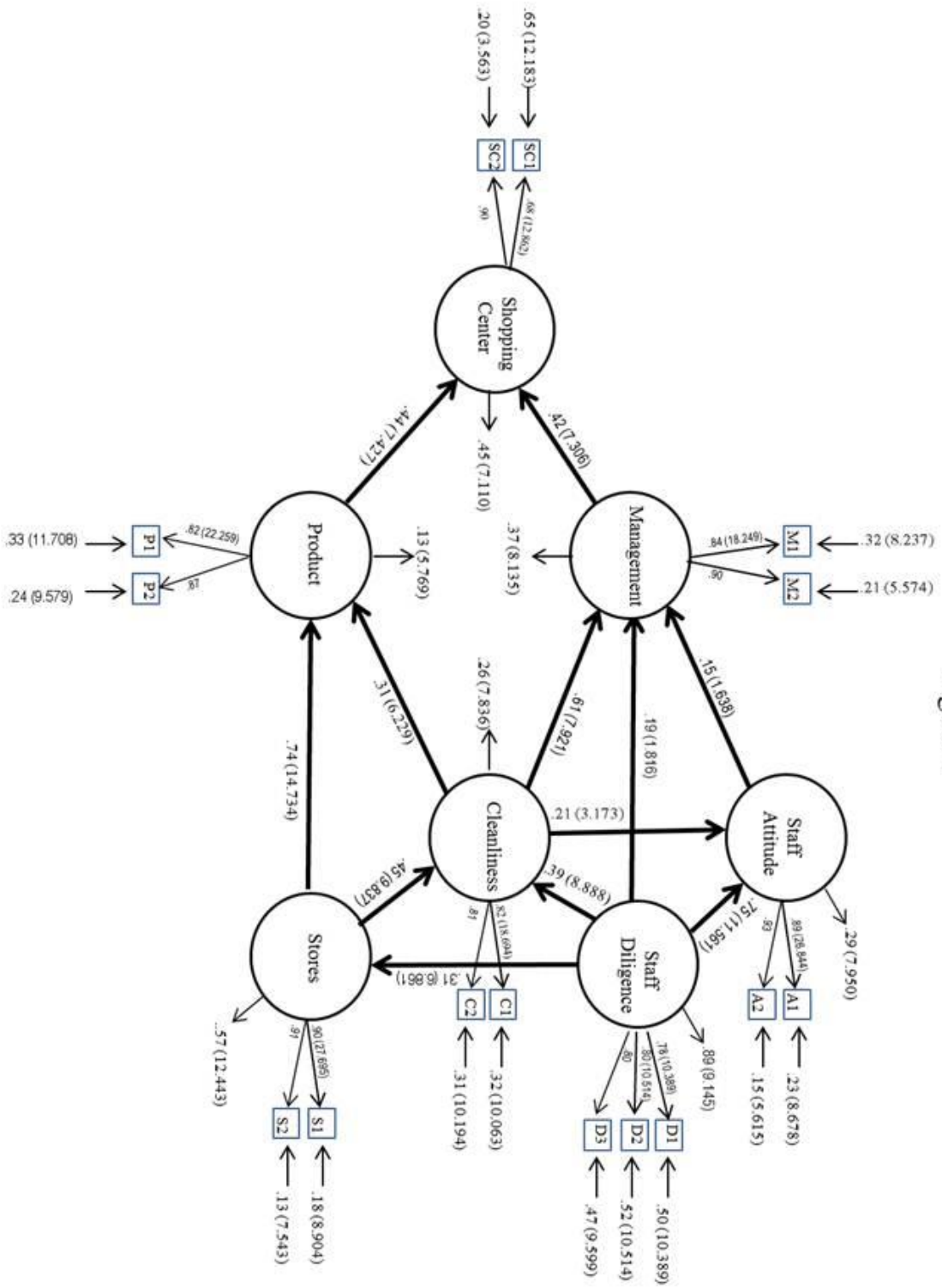

Figure 1

These indices suggest that little residual variance is explained by the saturated model in

comparison with the much simplified proposed model.

DISCUSSION

Error reported for the endogenous variables suggests that a substantial proportion of the variance of all the endogenous variables is explained by the model, the best explained variable being product assortment, the worst being the popularity and familiarity of the stores. All paths within the model are significant at the .000 level as measured by the critical ratio, except for the Staff Attitude => Management path and the Staff Diligence => Management path. The latter is significant at the .10 level (p = .07) and the former approaches significance at that level (p = .12). These results suggest that perceptions of management are affected—but rather weakly affected—by characteristics of center employees. An objective characteristic of the shopping center itself—how clean and well maintained it is—much more strongly affects perceptions of center management. Those perceptions of management do, then, have a strong effect on perceptions of how pleasant and appealing the shopping center is for the consumer.

The product mix of the shopping center has almost an identical effect on shopping center perceptions as management does. The most powerful determinant of product assortment perceptions is the mix of stores at the mall or shopping center. But how clean and well maintained the center is also influences perceptions of the product mix. The cleanliness of the shopping mall appears to have a halo effect on product assortment, a facially unrelated variable. It is unsurprising that the profile of stores at the shopping center create a framework within which the maintenance and cleanliness of the center are assessed. The store brand creates priors that frame judgments of the center as a whole, and the cleanliness of the individual stores in a shopping center will naturally influence perceptions of the center as a whole.

While the diligence of the staff has only a marginally significant effect on store management, it is nevertheless an important variable in the model as a whole. It directly affects perceptions of the store brand, which is an important variable. And it also affects perceptions of how clean and well maintained a shopping center is, which then affects both management and assortment perceptions. Unlike the more objective dimensions of staff performance, staff attitudes have no collateral effects within the model. For this sample of consumers, staff attitude was clearly the least important aspect of their shopping center experience at least among the six factors considered in this model.

These results suggest that as shopping center managers face competitive pressures, it will be especially important to focus on having well known store brands and a good assortment of merchandise in the shopping center. The main focus of management should be keeping the mall clean and well maintained. Staff diligence is most important insofar as it feeds into the quality of mall or shopping center maintenance. For millennial shoppers, the attitudes of shopping center staff are less consequential.

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