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THE EFFECT OF STORE IMAGE ON CONSUMERS' STORE BRAND PURCHASE FREQUENCY AND PERCEIVED QUALITY OF STORE BRANDS: THE TURKISH CASE

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine store image and its influence on the consumers' store brand purchasing behavior and their quality perception concerning store brands. Store image dimensions' effect on each mentioned variable is tested on a sample of 378 customers in Ankara, Turkey. It is shown that store atmosphere dimension of store image affect perceived quality of store brands. Perceived quality of store brands is found to affect the purchasing frequency of store brands whereas any of the store image dimensions does not. Variances between perceived quality of food and non-food categories are also identified.

Keywords: retailing, store image, store brands, consumer purchase behavior, perceived quality.

Introduction

Positive store image is a key asset for retailers to achieve and sustain success in an increasingly competitive marketplace (Grewal et al., 1998). Because of this, retailers are trying to make their customers perceive their store image positively. Retailers who manage their image effectively can influence consumers' store patronage decisions and improve their competitive situation (Grewal et al., 1998). On the other hand, store brands - that are unique to the store - may increase customer traffic and generate greater store loyalty (Corstjens and Lal, 2000; Richardson et. al. 1996). Accordingly, it has been shown that store brands contribute to profitability (Corstjens and Lal, 2000). For example, in Britain and USA, store brands have helped retailers have profit margins close to 8 and 1-2 percent of sales respectively (Richardson et al., 1994).

Turkey concerning retailing is a very attractive market. Growth rate of retailing in last 7 months is stated to be is %18. The more the market's growth rate, the more is the competition among the retailers. In this tough economic condition the critical element of success for the retailer is their store image and store brands. Although it is not that much early to adapt store brands in Turkey as in the US or other European countries, according to Retailing Institute growth rate of store brands is 69%, 39%, 34% respectively in 2002, 2003 and 2004 (Bas 2007: 53).

In this context, evaluating the transferability of a positive store image to the store brands can be useful for managers since store brands represent a crucial source of differentiation or competitive advantage among retailers (Smith and Burns, 1996).

Store image composed of many dimensions and knowing which dimensions of store image contribute positively to the perceived quality of store brands can provide retailers with a strategic advantage. By investing in those specific dimensions, they can gain the advantage of store image on the one hand and on the other hand transfer this positive image to the perceived quality of their store brands, which are generally perceived as low quality compared to the national brands (Omar, 1996; Richardson et. al. 1996). A store brand can be successful in one category whereas not in other category. This may be because of the variances in promotional activities, design of package, and the perceived quality of store brands in different product categories or may be the store image.

In the marketing literature store image and its dimensions are identified and studied by many researchers. However, store image's influence on consumers' store brand purchase frequency with its effect on perceived quality is rarely studied. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the influence of a set of dimensions of store image on customers' perceptions about the quality of store brands in the specific context of Turkey. In different product categories such as food and non-food are the other findings of this research. Hence, the objectives of the study are three fold (1) to determine if the hypermarket's store image affects the perceived quality of store brands (2) if it is the case, on which dimensions of store image they play to generate a maximum of benefits for the perceived quality of store brands (3) to determine whether store brands' quality affects store brand purchasing behavior and (4) to identify whether the store image dimensions affects store brand purchasing behavior.

Our research provides retailers with preliminary answers to those questions and contributes to literature in retailing since there is a limited number of empirical studies (Collins-Dodd and Lindley, 2003; Semeijn et. al. 2004) especially in Turkey investigating the links between store image dimensions and perceived quality of store brands. This study's contribution to the literature is to identify the potential role of store image in the formation of store brands perceived quality. Moreover, perceived quality's effect on the customers' store brand purchasing behavior is investigated. According to the differences between low users and high users of store brands, retailers may decide to implement different marketing strategies to improve the store brands' perceived quality of those different groups of consumers.

The paper starts with a brief review of literature about store image, its dimensions and store brands' perceived quality that leads to the development of hypotheses. The research methodology is then presented, followed by the results drawn from the sample. Finally, the most important contributions, managerial implications and limitations of our research are presented.

Store Image and Store Image Dimensions

Martineau (1958, p. 47) defined the store image as "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." For James et al. (1976) store image is "A set of attitudes based upon evaluation of those store attributes deemed important by consumers." Parallel to this view, Engel and Blackwell (Mazursky and Jacoby, 1986) defined store image as "One type of attitude, measured across a number of dimensions hopefully reflecting salient attributes." On the basis of an extensive literature review, we have decided to adopt the conceptualization of Bloemer and Ruyter (1998, p. 501) who defined store image as "The complex of a consumer's perceptions of a store on different (salient) attributes."

In order to maintain and enhance their position under today's tough competition environment, retailers can use store image as a strategic tool, which has a positive effect on profitability (Chowdhury et. al., 1998) and store performance (Hartman and Spiro, 2005). Additionally, store image can increase the customers' likelihood to shop in the store again (Hu and Jasper, 2007), length of stay in the store and quantity of purchase (Jacoby and Olson, 1985).

In the marketing literature investigated there are some little differences among authors with respect to dimensions of store image. The store image attributes applied in this study is adapted from the related literature (Linguist, 1974; Mc Dougall and Fry, 1974); Jain and Etgar, 1976; Mazursky and Jacoby, 1986; Ghosh, 1990; Richardson et. al. 1994; Baker et. al., 1992; Bloemer and Ruyter, 1998; Chowdhury et. al., 1998; Samli et. al., 1998; Cudmore, 2000; Sirgy et. al., 2000; Collins-Dodd and Lindley, 2003; Semeijn et. al., 2004). Store image dimensions commonly mentioned by those studies are product variety, products' quality, prices, store atmosphere, employee service and location/convenience.

Effect of Store Image Dimensions on Perceived Quality

Store image can be a determinant of product quality (Collins-Dodd and Lindley, 2003; Wheatley and Chiu, 1977). Consumers use store image dimensions to form an overall evaluation that will not only affect their attitude toward the store as a whole but also their attitude towards the store brands. Moreover, as consumers think positively toward a store,

their evaluations for its store brands will be more positive (Semeijn et al., 2004). Collins-Dodd and Lindley (2003) also found the effect of products' quality that the store offers to its customers on the attitude toward the store brands. It has been shown that merchandise (quality and assortment) influences positively consumers' attitude towards the store brand (Semeijn et al., 2004). So, we hypothesized that:

H1. Consumers' perceptions about merchandise variety affect the perceived quality of store brands.

H2. Consumers' perceptions about merchandise quality affect the perceived quality of store brands.

With respect to the price dimension of store image, Collins-Dodd and Lindley (2003) reported that low prices in the supermarkets do not have any impact on consumers' attitudes towards store brands. It may be because of the product specific nature of price's effects on quality perceptions (Wheatley and Chiu, 1977). Product's price solely is an indicator of perceived quality (Richardson et al. 1994) whereas price level in the store is not. That's why we do not hypothesize an effect of price dimension of store image on perceived store brands quality.

Semeijn et al. (2004) showed that service (knowledgeable, courteous and helpful employees, no problems when returning items, convenient opening hours) could influence consumers' attitude towards store brands. Consumers may believe that a store offering services of good quality (essentially, by the intermediary of its salespeople) is likely to stock and recommend products of quality (Jacoby and Mazursky, 1984; Sweeney et al., 1999).

H3. Consumers' perceptions about the service affect the perceived quality of store brands.

According to environmental psychology, environmental factors such as interior design, store layout, lighting, color, music, overall cleanliness of the store, etc. influence the customer response (Richardson et al., 1996). The shopper may believe that the store brands of a positively featured store may have good quality (Richardson et al., 1996). Collins-Dodd and Lindley (2003) found store atmosphere have a positive influence on store brands' quality. In addition, Richardson et al. (1996) showed that store brand quality was perceived as higher in an aesthetically attractive store than in an aesthetically unattractive one. Aesthetically attractive store were described as stores with wide aisles, creative layout, bright colors, modern fixtures, and a clean retail environment.

H4. Consumers' perceptions about the store atmosphere affect the perceived quality of store brands.

As store brands are becoming more popular nowadays, the reason for this was stated as the quality of store brands (Miquel et al., 2002). This may be related to the consumer buying habits. Consumers' perception about a store may be like whatever was purchased from that store is the very best product that money can buy (Fitzell, 1992: 192). Netemeyer et al. (2003) also reported that perceived quality and perceived value for cost affects not only brand purchase but also the willingness to pay a price premium. We think that non-buyers and rarely buyers of store brands are more cautious or biased against the quality of store brands compared to frequent users. The reason for not/rarely buying store brands may be because of perceiving the quality of those products lower. They may perceive store brands as lower quality products than frequent buyers. So, it is hypothesized that:

H5. The perceived quality of store brands affects store brand purchasing frequency.

Baker et. al. (1992) and Buckley (Grewal et. al., 1998) found a link between store image and intention to purchase a product. Purchase intentions are used in the literature as a predictor of subsequent purchase behavior (Grewal et. al., 1998). Omar (Omar, 1996) also suggested that consumers while shopping for groceries are influenced by store image. That's why we hypothesized that:

H6. Store image affects customers' store brand purchasing frequency.

Marketing literature has revealed that very little is known about the differences in factors affecting consumers' food choice and non-food choice for store brands. In this study, store image's effect on store branded products' perceived quality and consumers purchasing frequency are also investigated in the context of food and non-food categories.

Questionnaire Design

The measuring tool for store image was a self-administered questionnaire containing 19 items. The measuring scale used was a 5-point Likert scale as (strongly disagree and 5 strongly agree. The items considered evaluate the following factors: merchandise variety (4 items) merchandise quality (2 items), store atmosphere (9 items), and service (4 items). Those items were adapted from previous store image studies (Baker et. al. 1992; Bloemer and Ruyter 1998; Chowdhury et. al. 1998; Cudmore 2000; Mazursky and Jacoby 1986; Richardson et. al. 1994; Samli et. al. 1998; Semeijn et. al. 2004). A five-point Likert scale utilized to measure store image, using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). In addition, *perceived quality of store brands* (Compared to other brands of (product), (brand name) is of very high quality (Netemeyer, 2003)),

purchasing frequency of store brands (how often -never, rarely, sometimes, often, and always- do you buy this hypermarket's store branded products (Dick et. al., 1995)), *product category of the purchased store brand* (food, non-food), and *socio-demographic variables* (age, gender, education, income) are also considered in the questionnaire.

Sampling

The questionnaire has been administered by face-to-face on a sample of 378 Turkish consumers interviewed between March 2006 and May 2006. Nowadays in Turkey there are an increasing number of stores esp. hypermarkets and the competition among them has never been so strong. As a result, it becomes harder for retailers to attract consumers and to differentiate their store image from the others which in turn may affect their store brands' perceived quality. The respondents were selected at random and surveyed after they had finished their shopping in the hypermarket. Most of the respondents accepted to participate are average income earner and university graduates, 61 % of them are women. Table 1 provides the demographic profile of the sample in detail. Distribution of the consumers according to the usage rate of store brands is as follows: 22 % of respondents are non-buyers, 26 % rarely buyers, 36% sometimes buyers, 15 % often buyers and 0.8% of the participants always buy store brands. In addition, 27% of participants' who buy store brands preference of the store brands is food category (milk, pulses, delicatessen, sugar, yoghurt etc.), whereas 54% of them prefer non-food (detergents, cleaning materials etc.) category.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of the Sample

Demographic variables	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Demographic variables	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender			Income Level		
Female	232	61.4	Low	25	6.6
Male	146	38.6	Medium	307	81.2
Age			High	46	12.2
20-29	49	13.1	Education Level		
30-39	150	40.3	High School	117	30.9
40-49	104	27.8	Undergraduate	152	40.2
50 +	75	18.8	Graduate	109	28.8

Analysis and Findings

Stepwise principal component factor analysis was applied to identify factors (KMO: 0.816; 2271.701, df. 171, sig.000). The factors identified as store atmosphere, merchandise variety, service, layout, merchandise quality. Three items are excluded from the analysis based on low communality values (<0.50). Their factor loadings and cronbach alpha coefficients showing their reliability are given in Table 2. Although store layout is regarded as a component in

store atmosphere, according to factor analysis results, layout is perceived as a separate factor. So hypothesis 4 should be divided into two as;

H4.a. Consumers' perceptions about the store atmosphere affect the perceived quality of store brands.

H4.b. Consumers' perceptions about the store layout affect the perceived quality of store brands.

The reliability of the store image factors were found to be acceptable as given in Table 2.

Table 2. Store Image Factor Loadings

Store Image Variables	Store Atmosphere ($\alpha = 0.71$)	Merchandise Variety ($\alpha = 0.78$)	Service ($\alpha = 0.73$)	Layout ($\alpha = 0.71$)	Merchandise Quality ($\alpha = 0.65$)
This store smells nice.	0.763				
Air conditioner is adapted according to weather.	0.667				
I like the music played in the store	0.653				
I like colors used in this hypermarket.	0.602				
I can find everything I need in this hypermarket		0.828			
I can find everything that I am looking for.		0.765			
I can't find the items I'm trying to find (R)		0.695			
This hypermarket has a variety of products.		0.691			
Employees are helpful			0.738		
When I have a problem employees are trying to solve sympathically			0.714		
No problems when returning items			0.702		
Sales promotions are attractive			0.634		
This hypermarket's is a nice place to shop				0.638	
I like this hypermarket's layout.				0.588	
Products are fresh					0.814
I am satisfied with the products I bought					0.790

In order to get a profile of the data correlation matrices are listed in Table 3. Most of the variables are significantly correlated, stating that the store image variables which hypothesized to affect the perceived quality of store brands and store brand purchasing frequency are related.

Table 3. Correlation Matrices

Variables	MEAN	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Store brand purchasing frequency	2.47	1.02	1.00						
2. Store brands' perceived quality	3.30	1.09	0.496*	1.00					
3.Store atmosphere	3.69	0.77	0.115*	0.235**	1.00				
4. Merchandise variety	4.35	0.68	-0.027	0.115*	0.331**	1.00			
5. Service	4.02	0.76	0.121*	0.150**	0.428**	0.261**	1.00		
6. Layout	4.00	0.97	0.122*	0.198**	0.504**	0.333**	0.368**	1.00	
7. Merchandise quality	4.21	0.87	0.018	0.131*	0.266**	0.251**	0.229**	0.335**	1.00

** p<0.01

* p<0.05

Regression analysis is performed to test the hypothesis. Perceived quality of store brands is regressed on the store image factors store atmosphere, merchandise variety, service, layout, merchandise quality. The results of the regression are given in Table 4. Regression parameters confirmed that store atmosphere affects the perceived quality of store brands. The more highly a consumer thinks of a store atmosphere the more positively she/he will evaluate store brands. H.1., H.2., and H.3. are therefore not supported by the data.

Table 4. Regression Analysis Results for Store Brand Perceived Quality

Variables	Adj. R ² =0.055		N= 378
	β (B)	t	σ
Constant	1.525	3.395	0.001
Store atmosphere	0.227	2.541	0.011
Merchandise variety	0.022	0.241	0.809
Service	0.052	0.630	0.529
Layout	0.096	1.372	0.171
Merchandise quality	0.059	0.851	0.395

To investigate the effects of perceived quality of store brands and store image on store brand purchasing frequency regression analysis is performed. Perceived quality of store brands is found to affect store brand purchasing frequency whereas store image does not. Hence, it can be concluded that consumers store brand quality perceptions about the store brands influence consumers store brands purchasing behavior in a positive sense and H.5. is supported. On the other hand store image has no effect on the consumers store brand purchasing behavior and H.6. is rejected.

Table 5. Regression Analysis Results for Store Brand Purchasing Frequency

Variables	Adj. $R^2=0.244$		N= 378
	β (B)	t	σ
Constant	0.987	6.793	0.000
Perceived quality of store brands	0.457	10.953	0.000

Hypothesis and their status are summarized in Table 6.

Table 6. Hypothesis Test Results

Hypothesis	Status
H1. Consumers' perceptions about merchandise variety affect the perceived quality of store brands.	X
H2. Consumers' perceptions about merchandise quality affect the perceived quality of store brands.	X
H3. Consumers' perceptions about the service affect the perceived quality of store brands.	X
H4.a. Consumers' perceptions about the store atmosphere affect the perceived quality of store brands.	✓
H4.b. Consumers' perceptions about the store layout affect the perceived quality of store brands.	X
H5. The perceived quality of store brands affects store brand purchasing frequency.	✓
H6. Store image affects customers' store brand purchasing frequency.	X

Other findings of this study are about the consumers' perceptions about the category variances. In food category the effect of store image on the perceived quality of store brands is found to be statistically not significant. On the other hand, in non-food category, perceived quality of these products are affected by store atmosphere dimension of store image ($R^2=0.094$; $\beta=0.340$; $p<0.001$). In addition, in food category, store brand purchasing frequency is affected by the perceived quality of store brands ($R^2=0.082$; $\beta=0.236$; $p<0.01$). In non-food category, store brand purchasing frequency is also affected by the perceived quality of store brands ($R^2=0.100$; $\beta=0.251$; $p<0.001$).

Discussion and Conclusions

From an academic viewpoint, this study contribute by illustrating that store image is a major strategic tool in the highly competitive retailing environment (Reardon and Miller, 1995).

Indeed this research shows that the store image – and more particularly the store atmosphere – influences perceived quality of store brands. The more positively the customers' perceptions of store atmosphere the more positively the store brands will be perceived. These findings are consistent with the results of Richardson et. al. (1996), Michon et. al. (2004), and Semeijn et. al. (2004). This study also extends Richardson et. al. (1996)'s as paying attention on the potential variances in the quality perception in different product categories (food, non-food). In the food category, store image does not affect perceived quality. In the contrary, consumers are influenced by the store atmosphere in assessing non-food category of store brands. Moreover, consumers' perception about the quality of store brands is found to have an influence on their store brand purchasing frequency. As consumers perceive store brands of quality, they purchase those products more frequently. In addition to these findings, store image does not affect store brands perceived quality and perceived quality of store brands affects purchasing behavior in food category. In non- food category store brands perceived quality is affected by store atmosphere and perceived quality affects store brand purchasing frequency. Store image is influential for non-food whereas for food is not. This variance according to category may be because of different perceptions of risks devoted to those categories. Hence, consumers may be more open to external cues for non-food but may perceive food category more risky (i.e. functional risk and/or financial risk) and pay more attention on its product specific cues instead of store image dimensions. Store image dimensions could not overcome these risks. To reduce risks consumers most possibly will prefer national brands to store brands as quality variance increase within a product category (Semeijn et. al. 2004).

From a managerial point of view, this research has specific implications in terms of resource allocation for improvement programs of consumers' quality perceptions about store brands. This paper shows the relevance of the implementation of strategies oriented to store image improvements. On our sample, it was shown that investments in store atmosphere could have a positive impact on consumers' perceptions about store brands quality. Furthermore, we showed that retailers have to focus their efforts esp. on store atmosphere for non-food category. However, none of the store image dimensions was found to have an impact on store brand purchasing frequency. Retailers should therefore implement other marketing decisions than store image to attract new buyers of store brands, such as if possible "trial of store brands in the store" which was found to benefit the perceived quality of store brands positively (Sprott and Shimp, 2004). Since, store brands purchasing frequency is found to be affected by

product quality, retailers can benefit by upgrading their store brands' package and design. In addition, in order to reduce the functional risk perceived by the consumers, retailers can put more information on the store brands' package about their ingredients and performance (Batra and Sinha, 2000). Furthermore, advertising may help retailers by transmitting the perception of quality product (Sprott and Shimp, 2004; Kirmani, 1990; Kirmani and Wright, 1989). Although these strategies may affect the cost and in turn the prices of the store brands, these may increase the customers' likelihood of purchasing the store brands who does not buy just because of lower prices.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

A key limitation of this research is the measurement of perceived quality of store brands with only one item. Intrinsic (i.e. product performance, taste, smell) and extrinsic cues (package, price, and brand name) could have been measured. In addition to intrinsic and extrinsic cues, other important store image dimensions that may affect perceived quality such as the store's attractiveness, involvement of the store in community programs, customer profile, and customers' general attitude towards the store could be evaluated. Participants' income and education level was mostly medium and university graduates respectively. This study can be replicated in a larger sample to generate other levels of demographic variables. In this study hypermarkets' store image was measured, future research can overcome the mentioned limitations and replicate the study by a cross cultural research or/and in other types of stores such as convenience stores, specialty stores, supermarkets. Furthermore web-based stores' image and its influence on its store brands can be evaluated. Moderating role of perceived quality of store brands on the relationship between store image and store brand purchasing frequency may be investigated for future research.

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