ON DEFINING AND MEASURING STORE IMAGE

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Abstract

We review the concept of store image and question whether researchers consistently define and measure this important retailing construct. We pose three questions that researchers must answer before they can uniformly define and measure store images: (1) Is store image 'in the mind' of the consumer, or a property of a store? (2) At what retailing level (e.g., chain, store, department, product class) is the concept of store image most relevant to the consumer? (3) Are aggregate measures or disaggregate measures the most suitable measures of store image? Where possible, we propose answers to these questions or address the consequences of accepting alternative approaches.

Introduction

Image theory suggests that human behavior is directed by the images that humans have of their environment (Hite and Bellissi 1983; Lindquist 1974). A primary tenet of image theory is that humans oversimplify their circumstances (i.e., create symbolic representations imbued with salient meanings, yet representing an entire network of meanings and values (Hite and Bellissi 1983; Lindquist 1974)), particularly when faced with uncertainty.

The idea that a store has an image was advanced first in Martinson (1954). The general acceptance of this notion by marketers is exemplified by the Winter, 1974–75 issue of the Journal of Retailing, which is devoted to retail image research. Yet, despite the myriad of store image studies published since 1954, store image is defined inconsistently. Though some definitions of store image focus on the functional qualities of stores (cf. Veale 1961; King 1979; Hooley and Cook 1983), other definitions focus on perceptions of consumers (cf. Kasulis and Lusch 1981; Hite and Bellissi 1983). Additional definitions assert that store image is more than qualifications or perceptions; thus store image is defined also as an attitude or the result of some process.

Our purpose here is to examine the definitions of store image, to identify the questions that researchers must answer before they can uniformly define or measure store image, and, where appropriate, to suggest our answers to these questions. The questions we pose are:

1. Is store image "in the mind" of the consumer, or a property of a store?
   a. If store image is a cognitive concept, how does a consumer acquire an image of a store?
   b. If store image is a cognitive concept, how does the concept of "store image" differ from the concept of "attitude"?

2. At what retailing level (i.e., chain, store, department, product class) is the concept of store image most relevant to the consumer?

3. Which is the most suitable approach for measuring store image: an aggregate or disaggregate approach?

Store Image: In the Mind of a Consumer or a Property of a Store?


This question has methodological implications: how store image is conceived determines how store image should be measured. Conventional measures of store image rely on semantic differential and Likert-type questions about functional store attributes. Such measures encourage researchers to treat store image as a composite of strategic and tactical decisions (i.e., store image is operationalized as a set of questions about store attributes) rather than as a psychological construct.

We recommend that researchers locate store image in "the mind of the consumer," rather than in the store. Why? First, there is no compelling reason to locate store image in a different place than other types of image; image is conceived generally as a psychological construct. Second, because image theory suggests that consumers' base their behavior on their images about things, rather than the things themselves, measures of consumers are more valid than measures of stores and their associated attributes.

Each consumer's image of a store is determined by many different stimuli, including peer comments, family traditions, advertising and promotion, and the store itself. However, researchers should not equate store image with stimuli. Instead, researchers should base their strategic and tactical advice to retailers (e.g., change the advertising themes) on consumer perceptions and thoughts about stores.
We find the definition in Mazursky and Jacoby (1986) is the most appealing and the most consistent with our notion of store image. Specifically, Mazursky and Jacoby (1986) describes store image as "a set of cognitions and/or affects . . . which represent that phenomenon (store image) signifies to an individual" (p.147).

**How Are Store Images Acquired?**

We believe that a consumer acquires an image of a store through the process of forming perceptions of that store. Viewing store image as the dynamic, complex interaction of many perceptions suggests that store image is more than just a collection of functional qualities and psychological attributes.

On this view, store image is not static; it varies across consumers, stores, situations, and time (Kemmler and Berry 1968). A consumer acquires a store image through a developmental process that involves functional qualities and perceptions as well as the interaction of these qualities and perceptions with individual, situational, and environmental factors. How images are developed and acquired, as well as the relationship of such images to the consumer’s behavior, are considered by this process-oriented view of store image.

Several researchers address or incorporate this process-orientation into their definitions of store image. May (1974) stresses the varying composition and complexity of images and their dependence on store-specific and individual influences. Marks (1976) characterizes store image as the synergy of an individual’s perceptions of associated store dimensions. Perhaps the definition most indicative of store image as a process is the one proposed by Mazursky and Jacoby (1986); their definition emphasizes the determinants of store image (e.g., perceptions or memory inputs) and the interaction of these determinants with each individual’s psyche.

**How Does Store Image Differ from Attitude?**

Several researchers, by defining store image as a type of attitude or set of attitudes, suggest that store image results from the consumers’ affective reactions to or evaluations of store attributes. One shortcoming of this type of definition is that researchers who define store image as analogous to an attitude fail to explain how images are formed within an attitudinal framework. Only Doyle and Pawlitz (1974) avoid this problem; they define store image as " . . . the consumer's evaluation of all salient aspects of this store as individually perceived and weighted" (p.40). Components of Fishbein's multivariate attitude model (e.g., evaluation, salience; Fishbein and Ajzen 1975) are present in this definition, with individual perception and weighting representing belief strength.

Equating store image with attitude also raises the question of discriminant validity. If store image is defined as an attitude or set of attitudes, then what is the difference between image and attitude (Mazursky and Jacoby 1986)? If store image is an attitude or set of attitudes, then why does the stream of store image research continue, rather than being subsumed under the nexus of attitude research?

If we assume that store image is a property of a store, then equating store image with attitude also hinders us from considering “attribute interactions” (Marks 1976). Researchers have explored the notion of attribute interaction and the joint effect of such interactions on store choice (Ring 1979). Reich et al. (1977) suggest that an individual cannot value and perceive store attributes independently. Furthermore, these interactions cannot be captured in the often-used weighted multivariate model of attitude (e.g., Fishbein and Ajzen 1975).

**Store Image: At What Retailing Level Is the Concept Most Relevant to the Consumer?**

Our second question concerns where in the retailing hierarchy store image becomes a salient cognitive concept in the mind of the consumer. For example, if a consumer’s image of one store in a retailing chain is based upon perceptions of the chain, then his or her store image should be global in nature, and accompanied by images of particular stores as members of that chain.

Alternatively, consumers may form an overall image of a department store and form separate images for each department within the store. Cordoso (1974) reports that store images vary across store type and across product classes. These results suggest that consumers form images of the departmental level or the product class level; thus perceptions about the different product classes carried by a store cause consumers to associate many images with that store.

We recommend that researchers conceive store image at the product-class-level. However, retailers who adopt a product-class-level notion of store image face the onerous task of tracking and responding to dozens of images; thus the product-class-level notion of store image is the most valid from a theoretical perspective and the least practical from a managerial perspective.

**Store Image: Aggregate or Disaggregate Measurement Approach?**

Researchers use various techniques to measure store image, including uni- and bi-polar rating scales, rank ordering (of stores or attributes), open-ended questions, paired comparisons (of stores or attributes), perceptual mapping exercises, and psycholinguistic techniques (Cordoso 1974). Their use of such varying techniques begs the question of whether aggregate measures or disaggregate measures best capture the images held by consumers.

As stated in Zimmer and Golden (1988), “the prevailing approaches to image measurement … generally do not attempt to capture the gestalt of store image. Measurement is often incomplete and
focuses only on the parts" (p.265). We agree with Zimmer and Golden (1988). Disaggregate measures (i.e., those measures that rely on attributes-anchored rating scales, rank ordering of attributes, and psychological techniques) do not gauge store images; rather, they gauge the consumers' perceptions of attributes, whether store-specific or not.

Store image research often focuses on identifying relevant store attributes. One shortcoming of this focus is that the attributes thus identified are too store-specific. For example, King (1979) reports that the image of a men's wear store should be measured across three attributes: "best for conservative, everyday men's wear," "best for current, up-to-date man's wear," and "best for the very latest, most fashionable man's wear." Because a different set of attributes best measure the image of a grocery store or another type of retailer, it is unclear that this attribute-based approach will lead to generalizable knowledge about the concept of store image.

Aggregate measures (such as open-ended questions, free response data, focus groups, in-depth interviews, perceptual mapping, and psycholinguistic techniques) are well-suited for capturing the complexity of a consumer's store image. Unlike disaggregate measures of store image, these unstructured measurement techniques (Zimmer and Golden 1988) allow a consumer to evaluate a store from his or her perspective, and not the researcher's perspective. With aggregate techniques, store images are elicited at the consumer's level of abstraction. We believe that an aggregate approach is preferable to relying on a collection of isolated store attributes that may or may not be salient to a given consumer.

Summary

We reviewed various definitions and measures of the concept of store image; as the Appendix shows, store image is not defined consistently. One major inconsistency is how store image is conceptualized — as a set of store attributes or as a psychological construct. We recommend that researchers adopt the latter conceptualization. Those researchers who discuss store image as a set of store attributes only create semantic confusion when they label these attributes themselves as store image.

Furthermore, if store image research is to result in a body of generalizable and usable knowledge, then researchers must determine the location of store image and its relevance to the consumer before they can develop a valid set of procedures for measuring store image. Only after they consistently define, conceptualize, and measure store image can researchers study validly the acquisition and development of store image and the relation of store image to such constructs as store loyalty, store patronage, and store choice.

We believe that retailers will make more effective tactical and strategic plans if they consider the consumer's gestalt perceptions of their stores, rather than the consumer's isolated perceptions of their store's attributes, which may lack salience. Additionally, retailers who believe that store images are dynamic will monitor, and thus respond to, the changing needs of targeted consumers.

We advocate that researchers adopt the measurement approach championed in Zimmer and Golden (1988). If researchers cannot reach a consensus about the nature of store image, then they can use this approach to probe consumers for additional insights. Alternatively, researchers could adopt a theory-in-use approach, where they ask retail managers to articulate their thoughts about store image and how to manage it.

Though we do not offer complete answers to the questions that we originally posed, yet our answers are a beginning. We call for other researchers to improve upon our answers. Once researchers provide such answers, researchers can speak a common store image language; otherwise, researchers will continue to construct a store-image Tower of Babel.

Appendix

A Chronology of Selected Definitions of Store Image

Martineau (1958)

"...the store personality or image - 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" (p.47).

Arona (1961)

"Image" was taken as the "personality" the store presents to the public: a complex of meanings and relationships serving to characterize the store for people (p.2).

Weele (1961)

"...the fact remains that a store's future business with the same customers depends largely on how well it has met the aspirational level of the consumer's image of satisfactory price, quality, and service. It is within this framework that the consumer evaluates her concept of the store's image (p.40).

Kunkel and Barry (1968)

"...image may be defined as discriminative stimuli for an action's expected reinforcement. Specifically, "retail store image" is the total conceptualised or expected reinforcement that a person associates with shopping at a particular store..." Retail store image at any one point in time is the result of previous differential reinforcement in the context of a store (p.22).

Cerdio (1974)

In this new definition, the image of a particular store includes (a) the other stores among which consumers will shop for specified products, and with which consumers will compare the particular store for that product class; (b) the dimensions which consumers use to compare that store with other stores; and (c) the relative position of a store vis-à-vis other stores which consumers regard as its competitors in a specific product class (p.87).
Doyle and Janwick (1974)

What do we mean by the term store image? The term is used interchangeably with attitude toward the store to describe the overall impression a consumer has of it. A store image is complex by nature and consists of a combination of tangible or functional factors and intangible or psychological factors that a consumer perceives to be present (p.31).

Lindquist (1974)

...The store image is complex by nature and consists of a combination of tangible or functional factors and intangible or psychological factors that a consumer perceives to be present (p.31).

May (1976)

...The "image" is the composite of the dimensions which the consumer perceives as the store. What makes up an image is a group of dimensions whose presence and importance vary from store to store. How these dimensions are put together to form the complex image of a particular store - plus the relative importance of each dimension - depends upon the store itself, and on the consumer who shops there (p.19).

Owenfeldt (1974)

...an image is more than the sum of its parts. It represents interaction among characteristics and includes (or is strongly affected by) extraneous elements. It also has some emotional content - i.e., it includes an element of being drawn toward or repelled by the store (p.9).

James, et al (1976)

...a set of attitudes based upon evaluation of those store attributes deemed important by consumers (p.25).

Marks (1976)

...it [store image] is not merely the sum of objective individual dimensions associated with the store; rather, a store's image is a composite of dimensions that consumers perceive as the store. Store image is an overall picture that is more than the sum of the parts, for the parts interact with one another, in the consumer's mind (p.37).

Reich, et al (1977)

...the process of forming an image of a store is like the process of forming impressions of people and other objects. The only major difference between the two is one of content, the specific nature of the informational stimulus themselves and not the fundamental underlying processes (p.609).

Ring (1979)

The sum total of the strategic and tactical actions taken by a given store or chain of stores is the "product" or "image" which the store presents to the consuming public. A store image is produced by the joint effect of a multiplicity of store or product attributes (p.25).

Keswicke and Lasch (1981)

Simply stated, stores project a "personality" to consumers through their design features, employees, merchandising strategies, etc. This personality or image is conveyed through the functional characteristics of the store as well as through their psychological properties. A consumer's image of a store is based on perceptions of both the objective and subjective attributes (pp.419-420).

Fogel and Blackwell (1982)

...one type of attitude, measured across a number of dimensions hopefully reflecting salient attributes (p.518).

Hooley and Cook (1984)

...the current image of the store, namely the beliefs of the customers and potential customers of what the store offers them in its retail mix (p.132).

Hite and Bellissi (1985)

...store image is complex by nature and consists of a combination of tangible or functional factors and intangible or psychological factors that a consumer perceives to be present. Therefore, store image is the stimuli, from a combination of objective and emotional material, which produces the total personality that an individual associates with a particular retail outlet for expected reinforcement (p.8).

Mazursky and Jacoby (1986)

...we propose a definition which more explicitly addresses the process aspect of store image development. According to this definition, image is:

1. a cognition and/or affect (or a set of cognitions and/or affects)
2. which is (are) inferred
3. either from a set of ongoing perceptions and/or memory inputs attaching to a phenomenon (i.e., either an object or event such as a store, a product, a "sale," etc.)
4. and which represent(s) what that phenomenon signifies to an individual (p.147).

References


