

The Effects of Physical Surroundings and Salesperson's Service on Customer Satisfaction and the Intention to Repurchase

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify the physical surroundings and the salesperson's service in apparel stores, and to examine their effects on customer satisfaction and the intention to repurchase. The data was collected from a questionnaire conducted on 312 female adults who had just finished shopping, and was analyzed by frequency analysis, factor analysis, reliability analysis, regressive analysis and ANOVA analysis with SPSS 10.0. The results were as follows: (1) As a result of the factor analysis, five factors were identified with regard to physical surroundings: spatial layout and functionality, presentation and aesthetics, ambience, convenience, and information. The factors pertaining to the salesperson's service in apparel stores were divided into four dimensions: knowledge and assurance, convenience and responsiveness, etiquette, and empathy. (2) As far as physical surroundings are concerned, spatial layout and functionality, presentation and aesthetics, ambience, and convenience were all found to influence customer satisfaction. In terms of salesperson's service, convenience and responsiveness, etiquette, and empathy each had an influence on customer satisfaction. (3) Furthermore, physical surroundings and the salesperson's service influenced the intention to repurchase. The intention to repurchase is influenced by spatial layout and functionality, ambience, convenience, and information with regard to physical surroundings, by knowledge and assurance, convenience and responsiveness, and empathy with regard to the salesperson's service. (4) It was revealed that the significance of the physical surroundings and salesperson service factors varies depending on the consumer's age, level of education, and income.

Key Words : physical surroundings, salesperson's service, customer satisfaction,
the intention to repurchase

I. Introduction

Customers require visible hints that enable them to predict a store's efforts in order to reduce uncertainty when making their purchasing decisions. One such visible hint concerns the physical surroundings that can create the mood of the place where their purchase is made.¹⁾ The consumer's purchasing decisions are greatly affected by physical surroundings while interacting at the point of purchase. Retailers utilize their physical surroundings as part of their essential sales promotion strategy, as it is easier to make changes to a store's physical surroundings than it is to change the prices or quality of a given product.

The majority of store-related research projects conducted so far in the field of apparel have analyzed consumer behaviors by categorizing stores according to the criteria of store selection,²⁾ store image,³⁾⁴⁾ and patronage behaviors.⁵⁾⁶⁾ Further research projects related to stores' physical surroundings have been conducted recently in an attempt to clearly define the differences in consumer preferences and brand effects around the visual factors apparent among the physical surroundings.⁷⁾⁸⁾ As such, insufficient research efforts have been made in the field of apparel.

The sales environment includes the personal interaction between the customers and salespersons in addition to the physical surroundings. The salespersons themselves may have a great influence on consumers' purchasing decisions, as their key role is to convert potential customers into real customers. However, the salesperson service has been treated as a key independent variable in only a few previous studies as it

has been studied as part of either a store's surroundings or the service quality.

Thus, this study attempts to analyze how consumers perceive such factors as physical surroundings and the salesperson service provided by apparel stores, and to further compare and analyze the influence that the physical surroundings and salesperson service have on customer satisfaction and repurchasing intention. We also attempted to analyze the difference between the physical surroundings and salesperson service based on demographic characteristics. This study may present basic data that are helpful to developing sales promotion strategies by specifically analyzing the physical surroundings and salesperson service and then comparing the relative importance of those factors.

II. Literature Review

1. Physical surroundings

The physical surroundings refers to environment that surrounds consumers includes such specific aspects of physical space as product display, color, noise, illumination and the weather.⁹⁾ A store's physical surroundings may enhance its competitive advantage over other retailers by differentiating the store. Bitner asserted that physical surroundings have a very critical influence as the consumers spend money for service within the surroundings of a business.¹⁰⁾ Some other researchers asserted that the consumers' length of stay at, and intention to revisit, a store are the outcome of their satisfaction with the physical surroundings¹¹⁾ and that the store facilities have a significant influence on the consumers' feelings.¹²⁾ Initially, such

research was conducted mainly on the residential conditions of dormitories,¹³⁾ leisure¹⁴⁾ or resort facilities.¹⁵⁾

In recent years, however, research into the physical surroundings of retail stores has been started. Past research projects focused mainly on the influence of such individual dimension factors as music,¹⁶⁾ color,¹⁷⁾ uncleanness and cleanliness,¹⁸⁾ illumination,¹⁹⁾ congestion²⁰⁾ or aroma.²¹⁾ Other researchers studied the relationship between changes in a store's surroundings and consumer behavior.²²⁾²³⁾

Furthermore, research was also conducted into elements of the physical environment. Bitner classified them into three categories: ambient condition, spatial layout and functionality, and signs, symbols, and artifacts²⁴⁾ while Baker et al. categorized them into ambient factor, design factor, and social factor.²⁵⁾ Yu & Kim(1998) categorized them into four factors: accessibility, attractiveness, cleanliness, and convenience.²⁶⁾ Further, Kuruvilla categorized physical surroundings in apparel store into six factors: goods, service, facilities, atmosphere, convenience, and overall satisfaction.²⁷⁾

Such research projects drew the conclusions that customer service satisfaction won by physical surroundings have a positive influence on the intention to revisit, the word of mouth effect and length of stay at a store, and that the influence of specific factors of physical surroundings varies according to a product's characteristics.

2. Salesperson's service

Service can be defined as all the activities, conveniences or satisfaction provided for sales purposes or in connection with the sale

of goods.²⁸⁾ Salesperson service refers to those communication activities which form part of a product's sales promotion, including any efforts to induce customers to purchase goods or services in a personal encounter with them. Research into salesperson services has been conducted mainly on salesperson service variations according to apparel types,²⁹⁾ consumer personality types,³⁰⁾ and age groups.³¹⁾

The scales for service quality measurement include SERVQUAL. SERVQUAL is the scale most often used to measure service quality. Parasuraman et al. categorized it into the following five levels: typicality, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy.³²⁾ In Korea, research has been conducted mainly using revised PZB(Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry)scales. PZB scales were used to measure service quality based mainly on the salesperson service. In Korea, research projects focused on policy factors concerning reliability, customer convenience, and VMD in addition to salesperson service have been conducted.³³⁾ These studies also categorized the salesperson service into empirical attributes, and product quality, price and credit card use into inquisitive attributes.³⁴⁾

As shown above, many research projects studied store attributes at the level of service quality or treating salesperson service as part of service quality. In this study, however, we decided to treat salesperson service and physical surroundings as two independent variables in order to capture their details, as they are both important variables that significantly influence consumer behavior, and customer satisfaction and the intention to repurchase were dependent variables.

III. Research Method

1. Research Questions

The subjects for this study are following as.

Question 1. To identify physical surroundings and salesperson's service in apparel store.

Question 2. To examine the effect of physical surroundings and salesperson's service on customer satisfaction.

Question 3. To examine the effect of physical surroundings and salesperson's service on the intention to repurchase

Question 4. To examine the relationships between physical surroundings and demographic variables, and between salesperson's service and demographic variables.

2. Measurement

The questionnaire consisted of the questions about physical surroundings, salesperson's service, customer satisfaction, the intention to repurchase and demographic variables. Questions on physical surroundings were prepared for measurement on a 7-point scale and some questions posed by preceding studies³⁵⁾³⁶⁾³⁷⁾ were revised and supplemented; questions on salesperson service were also prepared for measurement on a 7-point scale, and questions posed by some preceding studies³⁸⁾³⁹⁾ on service quality or the salesperson service were also revised and supplemented. Further, the levels of customer satisfaction and repurchasing intention were measured on a 7-point scale based on some preceding studies⁴⁰⁾⁴¹⁾ by asking questions about the customer's overall sense of satisfaction, willingness to recommend the store, and intention to continue repurchasing

in comparison with other stores. In addition, demographic variables including age, education, residence and monthly household income were used.

3. Data Collection and Analysis

The data was collected with questionnaire. The main survey was conducted from January 5 to February 10, 2006 in department stores, specialty store, and agency. 312 questionnaire sheets out of the 350 distributed to customers aged 20 to 50 years old as they were exiting stores after purchasing apparel were collected and used for the final analysis. The statistical analysis of this study was conducted using SPSS 10.0. Frequency analysis, factor analysis, reliability analysis, regression analysis and correlation analysis were used.

IV. Results

1. Factors of physical surroundings and salesperson's service

1) Factors of physical surroundings in apparel store

In order to identify physical surroundings in apparel store factor analysis was conducted and the results were summarized in <Table 1>. Physical surroundings in apparel stores was classified into five factors which explained about 80.10% of total variations and had significant explanatory power as the confidence level of .70 and upward. Factor 1 was composed of the materials and color tones, the use of properties, convenience of traffic lines, display and lay out. Thus, it was called as'spatial layout and functionality'

factor. Factor 2 was named as 'presentation and aesthetics' factor since it was related to building signs, interior decoration, harmony of color and illumination. Factor 3 was called as 'ambient' factor since it included adequateness of music, aroma and temperature. Factor 4 was called as 'convenience' factor since it was related to cleanness, convenience of movement, and communication with the salesperson. Factor 5 was called as 'information' factor since it was composed of promotional leaflets, signs and fashion coordination.

Spatial layout and functional factors had the highest incidence(54.91%) out of the various factors, revealing that they are the most important factors that describes the physical surroundings of apparel stores. Spatial layout and functional factors are one of the three classifications presented by Bitner, along with surrounding factors and signs, symbols and art pieces. They best represent the objective physical factor that businesses can control, which is his definition of physical surroundings. Further, factor 2 'presentation and aesthetics' matches the design factor suggested by Baker, the attraction factor proposed by Lee and Kim,⁴²⁾ and the atmosphere factor proposed by Kuruvilla,⁴³⁾ revealing that they are important factors for describing the physical surroundings factor.

2) Factors of salesperson's service in apparel store

In order to identify salesperson's service in apparel store factor analysis was conducted and the results were summarized in <Table 2>. Salesperson's service in apparel store was classified into four factors which explained about 85.40% of total variations and had

significant explanatory power as the confidence level of .80 and upward. Factor 1 was composed of product knowledge, confidence in sensitiveness and advice, service promises, and reliability of service capabilities. Thus, it was called as 'knowledge and assurance' factor. Factor 2 was named as 'convenience and responsiveness' factor since it was related to response to customer demands, understanding of customer needs and positive attitude. Factor 3 was called as 'etiquette' factor since it included manner, appearance and smart clothing, words and behavior. Factor 4 was called as 'empathy' factor since it was related to interest in human beings and burden.

This finding matches the research conclusion reached by Lee and Kim that the salesperson services of apparel stores consist of various different levels. Knowledge and reliability represented an explanatory power of 63.27%, meaning that it is the most important factor of all the factors, and it was also revealed that impression, atmosphere,⁴⁴⁾ and the salesperson's appearance⁴⁵⁾ are important factors of a salesperson service, all of which were previously proposed as service qualities in certain preceding studies. This matches the conclusion reached by Oh & Kim.⁴⁶⁾

2. The effect of physical surroundings and salesperson's service on customer satisfaction

In order to investigate the effect of physical surroundings and salesperson's service on customer satisfaction in further detail, multiple regression analysis was conducted. In this analysis, physical surroundings and salesperson's service were independent variables and customer satisfaction was dependent variables.

<Table 1> Factors of physical surroundings in apparel store

Factors & Items	factor Loading	Eigen value	Explained Value	Cronbach's α
spatial layout and functionality				
The materials and color tones of store floors and walls are harmonious.	.84	8.98	54.91	.81
Mannequins, body forms and small decorative items are used properly.	.84			
Traffic lines are convenient and aisles are wide.	.83			
Merchandise is well displayed for easy or convenient access or view.	.78			
Apparel size and price markings are well displayed for easy location.	.76			
Store furniture and decorative items are well laid out.	.74			
Store counters are well arranged in the right locations.	.69			
presentation and aesthetics				
Building signs are adequate and attractive.	.92	2.94	64.62	.79
Store interior decoration is attractive.	.84			
Store coloring is harmonious and beautiful.	.84			
Illumination is beautiful and has an adequate effect.	.68			
Show window display is attractive.	.61			
ambience				
Background music is adequate.	.86	2.77	73.41	.82
Aroma in the store is adequate.	.72			
Temperature in the store is adequate.	.71			
convenience				
The store is clean.	.58	1.76	77.20	.75
Movement within the store is convenient.	.57			
It is easy to communicate with the salespersons.	.53			
information				
Promotional leaflets and signs provide information clearly.	.72	1.58	80.10	.73
Fashion coordination is properly suggested.	.70			

Based the results of <Table 3>, physical surroundings($F=221.89$, $p<.001$) and salesperson's service($F=408.81$, $p<.001$) were significant variables in explaining customer satisfaction.

The analysis revealed that the four physical surrounding factors of spatial layout and functionality, presentation and aesthetics, ambience, and convenience have significant influence. It was revealed that spatial layout and functionality factors have the most importance influence. However, ambience are the important factor Bitner and Baker et al. proposed while presentation and aesthetic factors match the design factor proposed by

Baker et al.⁴⁷⁾ Kim⁴⁸⁾ reached the conclusion that they have a positive influence on customer satisfaction.

Meanwhile, the analysis revealed that the three salesperson's service factors of convenience and responsiveness, etiquette, and empathy have significant influence. It was revealed that convenience and responsiveness, etiquette have the most importance influence. This result also supports the findings of previous research by Oho & Kim⁴⁹⁾ that etiquette has influence on consumer satisfaction.

<Table 2> Factors of salesperson's service in apparel store

Factors & Items	factor Loading	Eigen value	Explained Value	Cronbach's α
knowledge and assurance Salespersons have sufficient knowledge to reply to the customer's questions. Salespersons have adequate product knowledge. I am confident in the sensitiveness and advice offered by the salespersons. Salespersons keep their service promises with customers. Salespersons are able to suggest diverse coordination styles. Salespersons are reliable in terms of service capabilities.	.89 .88 .84 .84 .83 .80	8.76	63.27	.84
convenience and responsiveness Salespersons immediately respond to customer demands. Salespersons understand customer needs. Salespersons are willing to help customers as requested. Salespersons place top priority on customer benefits. Salespersons are always willing to help. Salespersons provide prompt service.	.74 .71 .70 .69 .68 .63	2.35	77.10	.81
etiquette Salespersons treat customers in an excellent manner. Salespersons maintain a tidy appearance and wear smart clothing. Salespersons are kind and sincere both in their words and behavior.	.92 .85 .79	1.86	82.17	.80
empathy Salespersons are interested in individual human beings. Salespersons do not pressure customers into buying goods.	.79 .54	1.55	85.40	.81

<Table 3> Effect of physical surroundings and salesperson's service on customer satisfaction

independent variables \ dependent variables	customer satisfaction		
	β	t	R ² (F)
spatial layout and functionality	0.61	22.97***	0.48 (221.89***)
presentation and aesthetics	0.54	20.14***	
ambience	0.23	8.65***	
convenience	0.26	9.81***	
information	0.06	2.33	
knowledge and assurance	0.17	1.22	0.44 (408.81***)
convenience and responsiveness	0.60	26.47***	
etiquette	0.53	23.17***	
empathy	0.36	16.00***	

p*** <.001

3. The effect of physical surroundings and salesperson's service on the intention to repurchase

In order to investigate the effect of physical surroundings and salesperson's service on the intention to repurchase, multiple regression analysis was conducted. In this analysis, physical surroundings and salesperson's service were independent variables and the intention to repurchase was dependent variables. Based the results of <Table 4>, physical surroundings(F=303.58, p<.001) and salesperson's service(F=405.10, p<.001) were significant variables in explaining the intention to repurchase.

The analysis revealed that the four physical surrounding factors of spatial layout and functionality, ambience, convenience and information have significant influence. It was revealed that spatial layout and functionality factors have the most importance influence. It was also revealed that presentation and aesthetic quality factors do not influence the

repurchasing intention, though they exercise a significant influence on customer satisfaction. It was further revealed that information delivery factors, including leaflets, signs, etc, and the information factor concerning coordination do not influence customer satisfaction, although they have an influence on repurchasing intentions.

Meanwhile, the analysis revealed that the three salesperson's service factors of knowledge and assurance, convenience and responsiveness, and empathy have significant influence. It was revealed that knowledge & assurance, convenience & responsiveness have the most important influence.

4. Relationships between physical surroundings and demographic variables, and between salesperson's service and demographic variables

In order to investigate the relationship between physical surroundings and demographic variables, and between salesperson's service

<Table 4> Effect of physical surroundings and salesperson's service on the intention to repurchase

independent variables \ dependent variables	salesperson's service		
	β	t	R ² (F)
spatial layout and functionality	0.81	34.70***	0.32 (303.58***)
presentation and aesthetics	0.02	1.00	
ambience	0.17	7.33**	
convenience	0.27	11.63***	
information	0.26	11.19***	
knowledge and assurance	0.62	27.13***	0.47 (405.096***)
convenience and responsiveness	0.55	24.34***	
etiquette	0.13	3.16	
empathy	0.29	12.89***	

p*** <.001 p**<.01

<Table 5> Summary of correlation analysis

	age	level of education	income
spatial layout and functionality	.092	.028	.036
presentation and aesthetics	-.724***	.653***	.798***
ambience	.521**	.878***	.901***
convenience	.124*	-.479**	-.487**
information	-.005	-.546**	.079
knowledge and assurance	-.435**	.498**	.581**
convenience and responsiveness	.078	-.551**	.008
etiquette	.932***	.102	.892***
empathy	.844***	-.896***	-.889***

p*** <.001 p**<.01 p* <.05

and demographic variables, correlation analysis was conducted <Table 5>.

It turned out that the significance of the physical surroundings and salesperson service factors varies depending on the consumer's age, level of education, and income. Younger consumers paid more attention to store presentation and aesthetics, and the salesperson's knowledge and assurance, while older customers paid more attention to ambience, convenience, etiquette, and empathy. Consumers with a higher level of education paid more attention to presentation and aesthetics, ambience, knowledge and assurance, while those with a lower level of education paid more attention to convenience, information, empathy and convenience and responsiveness. Higher income earners paid more attention to presentation and aesthetics, ambience, knowledge and assurance, and manners, while lower income earners paid more attention to convenience and empathy.

V. Conclusion and Discussion

Several conclusions can be derived based on the results of this study.

First, it was revealed that a store's physical surroundings consist of five factors of spatial layout and functionality, presentation and aesthetics, ambience, convenience, and information, while the salesperson service consists of four factors: knowledge and reliability, convenience and responsiveness, etiquette, and empathy. Second, it was also revealed that both physical surroundings and salesperson service have a significant influence on customer satisfaction. It was revealed that the four factors of spatial layout and functionality, presentation and aesthetics, ambience, and convenience bear a significant influence on physical surroundings, while the three factors of convenience and responsiveness, etiquette, and empathy have a significant influence on the salesperson service. Third, it was also revealed that both physical surroundings and salesperson service have a significant influence on the intention

to repurchase. It was revealed that the four factors of spatial layout and functionality, ambience, convenience, and information bear a significant influence on physical surroundings, while the three factors of knowledge and reliability, convenience and responsiveness, and empathy have a significant influence on the salesperson service. Forth, it was revealed that the significance of the physical surroundings and salesperson service factors varies depending on the consumer's age, level of education, and income.

As discussed above, the physical surroundings and salesperson service experienced by consumers at apparel stores consist of various levels and have a significant influence on the customer's sense of satisfaction and repurchasing intention. It was further revealed that their significance varies depending on the age, education, and income of the consumers.

Based on the findings outlined above, we would like to propose the following to marketers: First, it is recommended that a store's spatial layout and functional factors, including floor and wall materials, coloring, adequacy of decorative items be considered as a top priority in order to enhance customer satisfaction and the repurchasing intention. Furthermore, a number of factors that are often neglected – such as music, aroma, temperature, cleanliness, easy movement, and ease of communication with the salesperson – should be properly planned and maintained as these are all important factors that influence a customer's sense of satisfaction and repurchasing intention. Second, consumers are significantly influenced by salespersons who they encounter face to face at stores as, unlike other product categories, apparel

consists of items that involve a high sense of risk and a very high degree of interference. Therefore, retail businesses should channel extensive efforts into improving their salesperson services with sophisticated attention and education, differentiating them from other sales promotion activities such as advertisement and publicity. In other words, salespersons should be educated via advanced service programs so that they are equipped with sufficient product knowledge to give sensible style guide, advice and reliability to consumers. It is also essential for salespersons to maintain smart clothes, a tidy appearance and good manners while showing an understanding of the customer's needs, and they should respond with active and swift manners so that the customer feels comfortable. They will also induce greater customer satisfaction and a better impression by displaying humane attention and an attitude that does not put pressure on customers. Third, retail businesses should make aggressive investment and apply their plans to more important factors by capturing the demographic characteristics of target customers, since customers' attention to a store's physical surroundings and salesperson service varies depending on their age, education and income. Many businesses still adhere to business approaches that focus on sales promotion by offering price discounts or gift items rather than by appreciating the consumers' physical and psychological desires, although they have lately claimed that they are targeting customer satisfaction. This phenomenon is attributable to the fact that many retail businesses or salespersons understand their relationship with customers on a short-term rather than a long-term

basis, which eventually weakens their competitiveness. In order to achieve long-term growth by securing more regular customers and enhancing the intention to repurchase under competitive store conditions, it is necessary to improve a store's physical surroundings and to build up a high quality relationship between the salespersons and their customers so that the store becomes a place where customers want to stay longer or wish to visit again.

This study is limited by the following and suggests further study: this study did not compare stores by type as quite a sizeable majority of the respondents use department stores. A more efficient study will be possible in future research projects if the physical surroundings and salesperson services of the stores in question are compared based on store types. In order to provide more useful information to the marketers, more research work is required to identify and examine the relationships between the diverse factors that affect customer satisfaction and repurchasing intention, other than just the physical surroundings and the salesperson service.

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