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## **Guest Editorial Preface. Special Issue on Retailer-Consumer Relationships**

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GUEST EDITORIAL PREFACE

# Special Issue on Retailer-Consumer Relationships

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## RETAILER-CONSUMER RELATIONSHIPS: A MATTER OF CULTURE

The consumer-retailer relationship is based on an economic transition, but it is also a social interaction. The norms of economic and social behavior permeate, inform and, in some cases constrain the retail-consumer interactions. This depends on culture, but culture is a complex, multi-dimensional concept that derives from a range of personal and group values and attitudes (De Mooij & Hofstede, 2002). There are a number of implications of culture and its components. As culture is absorbed, learnt and transmitted from generation to generation, certain aspects of it may become deep-rooted and thus hard to change. At the same time, behaviors and codes of conduct change over time, and this change is becoming faster due to the convergence at international level of income, media, and technology (Bullmore, 2000), on one side, and the increased mobility of people, on the other side, that favor the encounter and interaction between different cultures.

As a consequence of cultural change, consumers change and their behavior alters over time. As economies and societies have

developed so consumers have evolved. Norms of consumers behavior that were once thought to be immutable have altered in few years. The way in which time and money are interrelated is one illustration of this process. Consumers decide which of their wants they wish to satisfy, and how, when and where they are going to obtain satisfaction. They are also aware of sustainability issues related to products, production processes and also distribution processes.

The shopping behavior is changing as well. And so the elements of the retail offer that attract customers and encourage them to purchase or consume have changed. Much more attention has to be paid by retailers to elements of store design, ambience and smell as well as issues to do with the balance between price, service and quality. Consumers expect to be more in control of the shopping trip and to be on occasions entertained (Birtwistle et al., 1998).

Companies, both at the production and the distribution level, react and adapt to these changes. However, their responsive nature has not to be over-emphasized. Whilst companies operate mainly within cultural norms and thus reflect these, they can also shape the cultural norms in many ways. In recent years the retail sector played a relevant role in this direction. Firstly because of its increased autonomy

from manufacturing industry and the adoption of brand strategies that enforced the retailer's identity. Secondly, since shopping has become something more than a necessary activity – with leisure and entertainment components – new horizons to the development of enriched shopping experiences started to be opened on the basis of lifestyle and culture elements related to the retailer's identity and brand.

This means that retail operations and environments are no more neutral entities, but rather can condition and structure consumer moods and behaviors and in some cases can over the long term influence cultural norms (Freathy, 2003). With the emergence of modern techniques of retailing and the raise of large retail companies and new retail forms and formats, retailing assumed a more central role to consumers' concerns.

## **THE NEED FOR NEW KNOWLEDGE ON CONSUMERS' BUYING BEHAVIOR**

The changes described above require an examination and updating of knowledge on consumers and their buying behavior, in order to suggest solutions to companies for new models and operating tools in their marketing strategies.

This issue of the journal focuses on some topics related to the changes that are occurring. The first three contributes deepen some aspects of the in-store interaction within the retailer-consumer relationship. The fourth and fifth contributes deal with Corporate Social Responsibility as a strategy by which retailers are responding to an increased public demand for more sustainability in economic activities and trade (Whysall, 2000; Jones et al., 2005).

The article by Mark Lang, Primidya Soesilo, and Richard Lancioni illustrates how alternative judgments and choices by retailers can produce different effects on individual consumers' preferences, attitude, and behaviors. The food retailing industry is trying to respond

to the changing preferences of customers who are seeking a more convenient shopping experience including easier access, navigation, selection, and transactions. There is an apparent disconnect between what shoppers indicate they want from their primary food store (large assortment, more space, and extra services) and the stores that shoppers are increasingly attracted to (small stores). In response, large scale grocery retailers are taking different approaches to design new smaller format stores and are making decisions and choices with respect to consumption and non-consumption related factors such as store size, configuration, merchandising, and atmosphere.

The research presented in the article finds that these different approaches to solve the problem can have very different consequences in terms of individual shoppers' response to new formats and offerings. The study is a demonstration of how the understanding and application of behavioral economics in a very practical area, daily food shopping, can influence organizations decisions and choices, with market consequences in terms of individual consumer outcomes.

The second article by Susana Henriques Marques and Maria Santos presents a comparison of the consumer perception about the in-store environment between different retail store formats. Previous literature has shown the influence of certain attributes of retail store environment on the store choice by customers. In this study, a large set of in-store environment variables – included some of the less studied variables such as temperature and cleanliness – was considered as well as the overall perception of the store atmosphere. A survey on a sample of hyper and supermarket customers revealed a very high degree of importance attributed to a pleasant clean and hygienic environment, to an adequate lighting and to the presence of employees for supporting customers. A retail atmosphere can lead to the success or failure of a retail business, and retailers need to be aware that customers' evaluation criteria are changing over time.

The third article by Mirian Palmeira, Denise Palmeira, and Cassia Maria dos Santos examines the presence of prejudice related to age, gender and appearance in face-to-face retail services. In retailing, it is possible that employees that are involved in serving customers and customer care activities are subject to influence from their cultural background behaving differently when attending customers which differ by age, gender, clothing style, and appearance. The study revealed that well-dressed young female customers receive better face-to-face retail services and, on the opposite, badly-dressed young men receive the lowest level of attention.

The fourth article, by Min-Young Lee and Scarlett Wesley examines the differences between two countries with opposite cultures – United States and South Korea – by considering the drivers of socially responsible purchasing behavior.

Social responsibility issues have been studied in depth in Western countries but relatively little focus has been given to exploring Asian perceptions. As Asian countries are increasingly more involved in international and global business, they see the need to establish their reputation in Western countries, being more involved in CSR.

The findings of the study suggested that companies must develop different CSR strategies in different countries to enhance customer commitment to their initiatives. Companies' resources may be wasted when they invest in elements that have no influence on customer commitment in a given cultural context. In particular, perceived consumer effectiveness and awareness resulted more effective elements to strengthen consumers' commitment in countries whose cultures are collectivist, long-term oriented, and low on power distance (i.e., Korea) than in cultures with opposite traits (i.e., United States).

The fifth article by Mario Risso shows how companies are implementing various responsible strategies to address the growing consumers' demand of socially responsible be-

haviors. In particular, large retailers are engaged in the development of responsible policies at two levels: the upstream level (supply chain) related to the relationship with manufacturers, and the downstream level in the relationship with consumers' community of the areas where retailers' stores serve.

The article investigates through a case study analysis the emerging behaviors of large retailers in the food sector, in building a socially responsible relationship with customers' communities, considering simultaneously social, economic and environmental aspects of their activities.

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