

# Shopping Behavior Of Supermarket Consumers In Kuwait

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## ABSTRACT

*This study determines the product selection processes from Kuwaiti nationals based on their shopping habits in the Co-Operative Supermarkets (A government owned grocery stores). This paper expands the concept of Consumer Satisfaction and includes an evaluation of the post purchase affective response. It presents the development of a consumer typology based on affective response, basically broken into two groups. The first group is formed by consumers who face grocery shopping as their duty the second group considers grocery shopping as their pleasure. The paper also presents the implications of such typology in the Co-Op operation itself. The literature on consumer behavior and store choice suggests that consumers make decisions to patronize a particular store on the basis of a set of attributes that they view as important. This study attempts to explore the determinant attributes that influence the patronage decisions of supermarket consumers in Kuwait. Based on a descriptive analysis of data collected via an accidental sampling procedure, fourteen store attributes were identified. These attributes were factor analyzed, generating four image dimensions intuitively labeled merchandise, personnel, accessibility and promotion. A stepwise regression showed that merchandise image was the most salient in determining the frequency of supermarket shopping. None of the demographic characteristics of consumers did seem to have an impact on the perceived importance of the promotion image. Most of the differences among the categories of the consumers' demographic characteristics were found in the accessibility image, providing possible explanation for why the rank of the importance of accessibility elements varies considerably from one study to another.*

**Keywords:** supermarket shopping, patronage behavior, store selection, store image, consumer patronage, Kuwait.

## INTRODUCTION

Throughout the 1960's to early 1990's Kuwait only had a one type of food retailer which is the government owned Co-Operative Society and is conveniently located in each section of a large neighborhood in Kuwait. Food retailing in Kuwait has undergone major changes after the first gulf war. A number of factors including the growth of Private supermarkets, and the increase of needs by consumers of products not available in the government owned Co-Op market chains have significantly opened the food retail market.

The system of consumer co-operatives dominates food retailing in Kuwait. Consumer co-operatives are conveniently located in the center of every residential area in the country. Resembling a joint-stock corporation with common and preferential shares, each co-operative enjoys to a large extent the whole market share within the area in which it operates. Since the early 1990's, a couple of privately-owned, modern western-style supermarket chains have entered the food retailing business in Kuwait. These supermarkets are located away from residential areas, mostly in commercial and industrial sites. Location has been identified as a major factor affecting consumers' choice of food retailers including supermarkets, grocery and convenience stores (Vandell and Carter, 1993; Thang and Tan, 2003; Colome and Serra, 2003). Despite the location advantage that co-operatives have had over private supermarkets in Kuwait, modern supermarkets have successfully managed to differentiate themselves and thus expand their share of the food retailing market.

This study aims at exploring the key determinants of customers' patronization of private supermarkets in Kuwait. The study focuses on studying the importance that customers attach to a set of store attributes drawn mainly from the literature (e.g., Lindquist, 1974; Arnold *et al.*, 1983; Hasty and Reardon, 1997; Solgaard and Hansen, 2003). These consumer-oriented attributes together reflect the personality of the store and create store image in the minds of consumers (Martineau, 1958). Lockshin and Kahrimanis (1998) stated that the more distinct the image, the more differentiated the store from its competitors. Thus, an understanding of patronage behavior demands an identification of the underlying attributes that influence consumers' perceptions and attitudes.

Moreover, the present study attempts to examine the relationships between the perceived importance of the attributes and the characteristics of supermarket shoppers. Consumer characteristics have been shown to have a strong influence on patronage behavior (Pessemier, 1980; Moye, 2000; Black *et al.*, 2002; Gupta *et al.*, 2003). Achieving the objectives of the study is expected to contribute to knowledge about the customers' needs of supermarket services in Kuwait and consumers' behaviors in terms of supermarket choice. In a more practical sense, such knowledge is anticipated to assist supermarket management in the process of formulating marketing strategies necessary to retain existing consumers and to influence the attitudes and perceptions of potential customers. Such strategies are of paramount importance for maintaining survival in the fiercely competitive business of food retailing.

### **PATRONAGE BEHAVIOR AND STORE CHOICE LITERATURE**

From a behavioral perspective, patronage and store choice are intertwined concepts that marketing researchers have studied intensively (e.g., Martineau, 1958; Berry, 1969; Monroe and Guiltinan, 1975; Hansen and Deutscher, 1977; Schiffman *et al.*, 1977; Mazursky and Jacoby, 1986). The patronage behavior and store choice literature basically focuses on studying the principal attributes that influence a customer's shopping decisions and on investigating the interactions among these attributes. This stream of research is guided by the presumption that the consumer's selection decision is not made on the basis of only one attribute; rather, a set of attributes (variables) collectively plays a critical role in how the customer chooses to patronize a specific store and comprises the store image.

Store choice and patronage behavior involve a decision process related to where consumers shop, how they shop and what they purchase (Moye, 2000). Initiated by patronage motives, this process is highly influenced by retailer's attributes, consumer characteristics and choice context (Haynes *et al.*, 1994). Moreover, the consumer's perceptions and attitudes derived from experiences, information and need towards certain store attributes have been recognized as the most influential in the patronage decision making process (Moye, 2000). Store attributes differ from one store type to another and therefore are not broadly applicable (Birtwistle *et al.*, 1999). Which and how many of these attributes a consumer would use when forming attitudes toward stores are highly contextual, varying considerably by store type (Hansen and Deutscher, 1977; Schiffman *et al.*, 1977), purpose of purchase (Davies, 1992) and consumer segment (Pessemier, 1980). Mazursky and Jacoby (1986) emphasized the impact of the time dimension on store choice. Consumers' attitudes and perceptions towards stores are not static in the sense that they change over time in varying degrees.

Several attributes have been identified in the retail and marketing literature as reasons for store patronage and choice. In one of the earliest works on the topic of store choice and image, Martineau (1958) categorized store attributes into two main categories: functional and psychological. The functional category includes attributes such as location, assortment of products and store layout. The psychological category represents the feelings generated by the functional elements of the store. The former category has gained more attention in the subsequent research into store choice than the latter. Fisk (1961) identified six attributes as the most important: location accessibility, merchandise suitability, value for price, sales efforts and store service. In their study of department stores in Arizona, Kunkel and Berry (1968) proposed a twelve-factor scheme which includes price of merchandise, quality, assortment, fashion of merchandises, sales personnel, sales promotion, advertising, store atmosphere, locational accessibility, service, reputation on adjustments and other accessibility factors. In a subsequent study, Berry (1969) identified three general factors that predominantly influenced consumer's store choice regardless of store type: namely, quality and variety of merchandise, sales staff, and store atmosphere.

A prominent and widely-cited work on the topic of store image was that of Lindquist (1974). Based on a review of 19 research articles, he synthesized the framework of these studies into a set of nine groups: merchandise, service, clientele, physical facilities, promotion, accessibility, store atmosphere, institutional and post-transaction satisfaction. Doyle and Fenwick (1974) proposed a five-attribute scheme that includes product, price, assortment, styling and location. Bearden (1977) distinguished seven attributes as potentially significant for store patronage: price, quality of merchandise, assortment, atmosphere, location, parking facilities and friendly staff. Arnold et al. (1983) extended the accessibility attribute to the ease of mobility through the store and fast checkout. In their study of the fashion stores in the US, Greenberg *et al.* (1983) found product choice, promotion and the store atmosphere to be the most important factors involved in consumer decision making. Focusing on the retail marketing mix, Ghosh (1990) identified eight salient attributes: merchandise, location, store atmosphere, customer service, price, advertising, personal selling, and sales incentive programs.

Hasty and Reardon (1997) classified store attributes into three general categories: accessibility (e.g., location, layout, appearance, and knowledgeable staff), facilitation of sales (e.g., low-priced specials, promotional offers and methods of payments accepted) and auxiliary attributes (e.g., play areas for children and food court). Solgaard and Hansen (2003) identified several store attributes that were considered important for the consumer's evaluation of stores. These attributes include merchandise, assortment, merchandise quality, personnel, store layout, accessibility, cleanliness and atmosphere.

The literature on store image and choice is voluminous. The selectively reviewed studies reveal the complexity of store shopping since it involves a number of factors related to the consumer's motives, orientations and perceptions. These elements have an influence on the consumer's patronization decisions. The literature review has focused on the concepts of patronage behavior and store choice from a general perspective. Marketing researchers have intensively investigated these two concepts in almost all types of services, including department stores, banks, restaurants, airlines, hospitals, and brokerage firms, to name a few examples. A wide range of common attributes have been delineated among retail entities. In the literature review, more emphasis was purposefully stressed on the attributes closely related to supermarkets as a self-service retail environment.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Data Instrument**

A self-administered questionnaire was developed on the basis of the foregoing review of the literature. The initial questionnaire included a pool of 19 check-off items pertaining to supermarket choice. The list of store attributes was not extensive. It has been argued that a short list of store attributes is sufficient for accurately predicting patronage behavior of supermarket consumers (Woodside and Trappey, 1992). A five-point Likert-type scale ranging from not important at all (1) to very important (5) was related to each of the identified selection attributes. Since a large number of non-Arabic speaking customers oftentimes shop at private supermarkets in Kuwait, the questionnaire was developed in both Arabic and English.

An expert panel was formed to provide a preliminary evaluation and refinement of the questionnaire. The panel comprised two educators in Business Administration and two individuals highly involved in supermarket retailing. The participants on the panel reviewed the questionnaire for content, wording and readability. Based on their suggestions, three items were removed from the questionnaire and some rewording to a couple of the remaining items was made. The revised version of the questionnaire was pre-tested with 17 trainees enrolled in a marketing program in a local training center. This step was intended to ensure clarity of the instrument and to verify time needed to complete the questionnaire. The final version of the data collection instrument consisted of two parts: Part I included 16 selection items (attributes) and Part II contained a set of questions to obtain information about frequency of shopping and demographic characteristics of the respondents (age, gender, level of education, employment, marital status, children, nationality and monthly income).

### **Sample Selection And Characteristics**

The target population of the study included customers who prefer to shop at privately-owned supermarkets in Kuwait. A sampling frame from which a random sample could be drawn was unavailable, however. An accidental sampling method was chosen to serve the purpose of data collection. This method seemed acceptable and appropriate taken into account the exploratory nature of the study and the lack of a sampling frame.

Initially, three branches of different supermarket chains located in different areas of Kuwait were randomly selected as primary sites for the study. One hundred questionnaires were distributed in each site over a one-week period. Data were collected by trained personnel at different days of the week as well as at uniformly distributed time intervals to assure a high degree of representation of the population in the sample and to minimize day- and time-related response bias. Customers were randomly approached mostly in the vicinities of the selected locations and were asked for their cooperation to answer the questionnaire. Of the 300 questionnaires distributed, 16 were excluded for reasons of inconsistencies in responses and incompleteness of answers.

The demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the 284 participants are shown in Appendix I. The majority of the shoppers participated in the study were males (62.6%), married (56.7%) and Kuwaitis (58.1%). A total of 48.9% of the respondents indicated that they had children, and more than 70% of this group of the respondents had less than 3 children. The average number of children was between two and three children. Nearly 39.8% of the respondents were younger than 29 years of age. The age of the respondents ranged between 18 and 57 with a mean of 31 years ( $SD= 9$  years). About 35.6% of the participants held college degrees, and the monthly income of nearly three fourth of the respondents exceeded 750 KD. In terms of employment, nearly 86.6% held jobs; and out of those employed participants 51.2% worked in the private sector.

### **Statistical Analyses**

The 284 usable questionnaires were analyzed using SPSS software version 12.0. Frequencies were used to generate a profile of the key demographic characteristics of the respondents. Descriptive statistics were utilized to calculate the mean and standard error scores of the 16 supermarket selection attributes. An exploratory factor analysis was used to uncover the underlying dimensions of supermarket image. A stepwise regression was employed to investigate which of the identified factors were salient to the frequency of supermarket shopping. A series of analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests were performed to explore the differences among consumers with respect to their demographic characteristics across the identified image dimensions.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

### **Identification Of Important Selection Attributes**

The means and standard errors of the 16 attributes of supermarket patronage are shown in Table 2 in a descending order. Attributes with a mean score equals to or greater than 3 were considered important since this value denoted moderately important on the scale used. The descriptive statistics revealed that the respondents highly rated the importance of quality of merchandise, fairness of merchandise prices, range of selection of merchandise, friendliness of staff, and variety of merchandise brands. This result to a large extent corresponds to most of the studies previously reviewed (e.g., Kunkle and Berry, 1968; Berry, 1969; Bearden, 1977). The lowest ratings of importance were attached by the respondents to supermarket design and layout, external appearance and ease of mobility through aisles. These attributes represent significant features of a supermarket's physical environment or atmospherics that Kotler (1973) regarded as crucial for producing certain emotional feelings in the customers' minds.

Opening hours and accepted methods of payment appeared to be unimportant for the customers of private supermarkets in Kuwait. Similar result regarding hours of operation was found by Edris and Almahameed (1998) in their study of the determinants of bank selection in Kuwait. This result could be attributed to the indifference between private supermarkets and their competitors (the co-operatives) in regard to those two attributes. All

competitors are open 24 hours and accept similar methods of payments (cash, credit and debt cards). Thus, those two items are not differentiating in the retail supermarket industry. Due to their low rankings and unimportance, hours of operation and methods of payment will be eliminated from further analysis.

**Table 2: Means and Standard Errors of Selection Attributes**

<i>Selection Attributes</i>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>S.E.</b>
▪ <i>Quality of merchandise</i>	4.42	.029
▪ <i>Fairness of prices</i>	4.23	.053
▪ <i>Range of merchandise selection</i>	4.20	.036
▪ <i>Friendliness of staff</i>	4.19	.031
▪ <i>Variety of merchandise brands</i>	4.15	.043
▪ <i>Fast checkout</i>	4.14	.059
▪ <i>Low-priced advertised specials</i>	3.96	.047
▪ <i>Cleanliness of supermarket</i>	3.95	.045
▪ <i>Knowledgeable personnel</i>	3.93	.042
▪ <i>Availability of parking</i>	3.53	.030
▪ <i>Accessibility of location</i>	3.45	.029
▪ <i>Supermarket design and layout</i>	3.36	.035
▪ <i>External appearance</i>	3.19	.037
▪ <i>Ease of walking through aisles</i>	3.11	.045
▪ <i>Acceptance of different payment methods</i>	2.73	.042
▪ <i>Opening hours</i>	2.69	.041

### Grouping Of Important Attributes

Exploratory factor analysis was utilized to group the 14 important attributes into meaningful, manageable factors representing the image dimensions of private supermarkets in Kuwait. Prior to running the factor analysis, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy and the Bartlett's test of sphericity were performed. The generated score of KMO was .77, reasonably supporting the appropriateness of using factor analysis to explore the underlying structure of supermarket image. The Bartlett's test of sphericity was highly significant ( $p < .000$ ), rejecting the null hypothesis that the 14 important attributes are uncorrelated in the population. Using principal components with varimax rotation, only attributes with factor loadings of .5 or greater on a factor were regarded as significant. The factor analysis generated four factors explaining 63.7% of the variability in the original data. The Cronbach's alphas, which measure the internal consistency of each of the identified factors, fell within an acceptable range. The results of the four-factor solution are displayed in Table 3. These four factors exhibited the different image dimensions that form the overall image toward private supermarkets (the retail marketing mix) in Kuwait.

As shown in Table 3, four attributes had high loadings on the first factor. These attributes were range of selection of merchandises, quality and variety of displayed merchandise, and fairness of prices. This factor was dubbed "Merchandise," and it is consistent with Ghosh's (1990) finding that merchandise is the most important element of the retail marketing mix. The high correlations between quality of merchandise and prices suggested that consumers of private supermarkets in Kuwait are concerned with receiving value for what their money worth. The second factor had high coefficients on the items of friendliness of staff, knowledgeable personnel, and fast checkout, and thus it was labeled "Personnel." Since fast checkout efficiency is a function of the presence of adequate number of cashiers, its correlations with the human element of the supermarket are justifiable. The attributes loaded on the personnel factor represent in-store service, which is important for maintaining and improving the supermarket-customer relationship. Availability of parking, cleanliness of store, convenience of location and ease of mobility through supermarket aisles loaded strongly on the third factor, labeled "Accessibility." These attributes constitute the major elements of the physical facilities and characteristics of the supermarket (Donvon and Rossiter, 1982).

The last factor had high coefficients on low-priced advertised specials, supermarket design and layout, and external appearance, and thus this factor was labeled "Promotion." Supermarket design, layout and external

appearance are all major elements of the physical environment of shopping stores (Moye, 2000). Thus, the labeling of this factor and the correlations of these elements with promotional offers and discounts deserve special elaboration. A major tactic of the marketing mix available for a supermarket's management is to deliver promotions. It has been argued that such tactics would be incomplete unless a shopping environment with comfortable surroundings and pleasing imagery was created (Breen, 2003). Thus, the design, layout and the external appearance of the supermarket are expected to contribute significantly to overall sales. Thang and Tan (2003) indicated that the shopping environment effectively enhances the desirability of the merchandises to consumers. Grewal and Baker (1994) found a significant relationship between store environment and consumer's acceptability of offered prices.

**Frequency Of Shopping And Image Dimensions**

Many marketing researchers have paid great attention to consumers' frequency of shopping- or repeat visiting behavior- for its positive association with store loyalty and effect on store's profitability (Enis and Paul, 1979). A loyal consumer to a particular store has a tendency to give that store "a priority visit in any shopping event" (Osman, 1993, 135). In this study, frequency of shopping was measured on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (first time/rarely) to 5 (at least twice a week). Table 4 shows that nearly 61.6% of the respondents (n= 175) visited private supermarkets at least once a week for shopping purposes. This result indicates that private supermarkets have succeeded in their efforts to penetrate the fiercely competitive market of food retailing in Kuwait.

A series of crosstabulations between frequency of shopping and the demographic characteristics of the respondents were conducted to identify the characteristics of those who patronize private supermarkets at least once a week. The results revealed that most of these respondents were married (76.4%), older than 30 years of age (69.7%), employed (69.1%), well-educated (62.3%) and highly paid (87.4%). Male-female differences were not significant in regard to frequency of shopping; nor were the differences between Kuwaiti and non-Kuwaiti customers.

**Table 3: Factor Analysis of Important Selection Attributes**

Attributes	Factors			
	I	II	III	IV
<b>Factor I: Product</b>				
▪ Range of selection of merchandise	.891			
▪ Quality of merchandise	.826			
▪ Reasonability of prices	.671			
▪ Variety of merchandise brands	.659			
<b>Factor II: Personnel</b>				
▪ Friendliness of staff		.876		
▪ Knowledgeable personnel		.852		
▪ Fast checkout		.694		
<b>Factor III: Accessibility</b>				
▪ Availability of parking			.861	
▪ Cleanliness of supermarket			.780	
▪ Convenience of location			.743	
▪ Ease of walking through aisles			.682	
<b>Factor IV: Promotion</b>				
▪ Low-priced advertised specials				.824
▪ Supermarket design and layout				.812
▪ External appearance				.603
<i>Eigenvalues</i>	3.07	1.99	1.784	1.436
<i>Percentage of variance explained</i>	23.63%	15.31%	13.72%	11.04%
<i>Cronbach's alpha</i>	.782	.757	.749	.704

*Note: Factor loadings less than .5 were omitted.*

**Table 4: Respondents' Frequency of Shopping**

<b>Frequency</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
First time/ Rarely	14	4.9
1 – 2 times a month	42	14.8
Three times a month	53	18.7
Once a week	109	38.4
At least twice a week	66	23.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>284</b>	<b>100.0</b>

To investigate which of the identified supermarket image dimensions (factors) were salient in determining the frequency of shopping, a stepwise regression analysis was performed. In the analysis, the frequency of shopping was used as the dependent variable and the scores of the extracted factors were used as the independent variables. The results revealed that only merchandise dimension was statistically significant beyond the 5% level of significance ( $F= 5.214$ ;  $p= .023$ ). This result can be interpreted in light of the fact that the market position of private supermarkets in Kuwait largely depends on a wide range of imported products that are indifferent from those sold in US supermarkets. These products can only be found in private supermarkets, and are highly preferred by most of those who have been educated in the US or other Western countries.

However, though statistically significant, the multiple determination coefficient of the regression analysis ( $R^2$ ) was very low (.018), indicating a lack of support for the null hypothesis that image dimensions are important determinants of the frequency of supermarket shopping. Similar results were found by Lang (1986) in his study of the patronage behavior of supermarkets in Petaling Jaya, Malaysia. He concluded that such results do not imply that image is unimportant; rather, it indicates that "supermarkets have failed to create or project and communicate each" image factor individually.

**Demographic Characteristics And Image Dimensions**

The aim of this section is to explore how respondents actually differ in terms of their demographic characteristics across the identified four image dimensions. To achieve this aim, a series of one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests were run. In these tests, the factor scores produced by factor analysis were utilized as the dependent variables. A summary of the results of these tests is displayed in Table 5. A major finding of this study is that the respondents did not differ with respect to the importance of the promotion image, implying that the demographic characteristics of the respondents did not seem to influence their ratings of the importance of the promotion dimension. Another finding is that employment status of the respondents did not seem to have an impact on their ratings of the importance of any of the four image dimensions.

**Table 5: Summary of ANOVA Tests**

<b>Demographic Variables</b>	<b>Image Dimensions</b>							
	<b>Merchandise</b>		<b>Personnel</b>		<b>Accessibility</b>		<b>Promotion</b>	
	<b>F</b>	<b>p</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>p</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>p</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>p</b>
▪ Gender	<b>11.40</b>	<b>.001</b>	<b>4.70</b>	<b>.031</b>	<b>5.58</b>	<b>.019</b>	0.12	.733
▪ Age	1.49	.203	2.02	.091	<b>3.03</b>	<b>.018</b>	0.71	.587
▪ Education	<b>3.55</b>	<b>.030</b>	0.47	.755	<b>3.87</b>	<b>.004</b>	0.44	.782
▪ Monthly Income	<b>2.90</b>	<b>.022</b>	0.62	.651	<b>8.07</b>	<b>.000</b>	0.71	.586
▪ Marital Status	0.36	.834	2.54	.081	<b>6.86</b>	<b>.001</b>	0.69	.498
▪ Employment	0.02	.892	0.39	.531	2.60	.108	0.03	.871
▪ Nationality	<b>12.86</b>	<b>.000</b>	<b>4.18</b>	<b>.042</b>	0.01	.937	0.66	.418

Male and female consumers had significantly different perceptions of the importance of the merchandise, personnel and accessibility images. While female consumers had higher mean scores in regard to the personnel image, male consumers were more concerned with the merchandise and accessibility images. The differences

between the perceived importance for Kuwaitis and non-Kuwaitis with respect to the merchandise and personnel images were statistically significant. The merchandise image was more important for the Kuwaiti nationals than for non-Kuwaitis who placed more importance on the personnel image. These results combined suggest that non-Kuwaiti females who represent an important segment of consumers valued to have friendly and knowledgeable staff. The difference in the importance of the accessibility image was statistically significant between married and non-married respondents. Married patrons seemed to be more concerned with parking and accessibility of location than their counterparts.

There were statistically significant differences in the perceived importance of the accessibility image across the age, education and monthly income categories. A couple of post hoc Scheffe range tests were performed to uncover where these differences lied. The results showed that the differences were between respondents whose ages were older than 30 and younger respondents, between those with college or graduate degrees and those with lower levels of education, and between those respondents whose incomes were more than 750 KD and those with less monthly earnings. These results suggest that married male respondents who placed high importance on the accessibility image were older than 30 years of age, well-educated and highly paid. Within the education and monthly income categories, there were statistically significant differences in regard to the perceived importance of the merchandise image. A post hoc Scheffe range test was conducted for education and income separately to identify the locations of the differences. The results of these two tests were similar to those produced by the previous tests. These results indicate that Kuwaiti males respondents concerned with the merchandise image were well-educated and had high monthly incomes.

## **CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

The present study attempted to explore the attributes that influence the decisions of the consumers of private supermarkets in Kuwait. The most determinant attributes were related to the range, quality and variety of displayed products and to the fairness of the prices of these products. This finding is in consistence with the findings of a number of previous studies appeared in the marketing literature. The least important attributes were related to the physical environment of the supermarkets. These attributes were external appearance, ease of mobility through aisles, and the design and layout of the supermarket. This finding relatively supports Binter's (1992) assertion that the physical environment influences the patronage behavior of consumers. However, the finding contradicts Kotler's (1973:48) claim that the physical environment is "more influential than the product itself in purchase decisions."

The study focused on the perceptions of consumers toward the importance of a range of attributes deemed significant in creating the supermarket image in the minds of consumers. However, it is important to suggest a need for further research to relate the importance ratings of the key attributes to customer satisfaction. From a strategic perspective, such an examination is essential for gaining feedback about how well the consumers' expectations are exceeded or at least met. The availability of such information allows the supermarket management to align its efforts to particular elements perceived important by consumers. Failing to meet consumers' expectations would result in consumer dissatisfaction, increasing the likelihood that a certain proportion of current customers would shop elsewhere.

Using exploratory factor analysis, four image dimensions were identified. These factors were intuitively labeled merchandise, personnel, accessibility and promotion. Only did the merchandise image have an impact on the frequency of shopping, which is highly associated with loyalty and profitability. Private supermarkets are urged to continue with their strategy of focusing on selling products imported directly from the US and other Western countries. Such a strategy has been successful in differentiating private supermarkets from their competitors (the co-operatives) and enhanced their positioning in the minds of consumers, particularly those who have been educated abroad and those who have been exposed to the Western lifestyle through their frequent tourist trips. These consumers are most often well-off and their willingness to pay for the sorts of products that private supermarkets carry is quite high. In addition to being concerned with the merchandise image, it is recommended that senior managers of private supermarkets should devote serious efforts to improve their performance on other image



elements. To do so, more investment is needed in the areas of staff training, in-store communications and promotional activities.

Supermarket attributes are used to project store image and influence decisions pertaining to supermarket choice. A host of marketing studies have shown that retailers and their customers are at variance with respect to their perceptions of the importance of store dimensions or attributes (Lumpkin and Hite, 1988). That is, the self-image held by senior managers of private supermarkets may differ from the actual image perceived by the customers of these supermarkets. It is recommended that the supermarket management should strive to create congruence between its own perceptions of themselves and those of their own customers (Birtwistle *et al.*, 1999). Ensuring such congruence is essential for satisfying customer's needs and meeting their expectations, eventually sustaining the supermarket-customer relationships in the long run. Further empirical investigation is needed in this area.

An examination of whether respondents actually differ in terms of their demographic characteristics across the four image dimensions resulted in three significant findings. First, the employment status of consumers did not influence their perceptions of the importance of any of the four image dimensions. Second, none of the demographic characteristics did seem to influence the consumers' perceptions of the importance of the promotion image, which is significantly correlated with two attributes related to the physical environment. Though it is the least important, all segments of consumers perceived the importance of the physical environment quite similarly. Finally, most influences of the demographic characteristics of consumers were found in the perceived importance of the accessibility image. Consumers who perceived the accessibility image as more important were older, married men with high levels of education and income. These differences might provide an explanation for why the rank of the perceived importance of the accessibility image varies considerably from one study to another, that is, the accessibility image is more influenced by the demographic characteristics of consumers than the rest of the image dimensions. Further research is needed to test this hypothesis in a different setting or store type.

## Appendix I: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Characteristic- N= 284	N	%
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	178	62.6
Female	106	37.4
<b>Age</b>		
20 or younger	22	7.8
20 – 29	91	32.0
30 – 39	82	28.9
40– 49	54	19.0
50 or older	35	12.3
<b>Education</b>		
Less than high school	11	3.9
High school	39	13.7
Two year college	86	30.3
College degree	101	35.6
Graduate degree	47	16.5
<b>Nationality</b>		
Kuwaiti	165	58.1
Other	119	41.9
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Married	161	56.7
Single	109	38.4
Other	14	4.9
<b>Children</b>		
Yes	139	48.9
No	145	51.1
<b>Number of Children</b>		
1	42	30.2
2	33	23.7
3	24	17.3
4	22	15.8
5 or More	18	13.0
<b>Employment</b>		
Yes	246	86.6
No	38	13.4
<b>Employment Sector*</b>		
Public	84	34.2
Private	51.2	51.2
Other	36	14.6
<b>Monthly Income</b>		
Less than 500 KD	28	9.9
500 – 750 KD	44	15.5
751 – 1000 KD	59	20.8
1001 – 1250 KD	67	23.6
More than 1250 KD	86	30.2

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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