

The Importance of the Product Category in Retail Assortments

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Abstract

Product categories are an important feature of assortment management, playing a leading role in consumers' revealed-choice preferences. Therefore, the effectiveness of specific marketing actions taken by retailers is different depending on the product category. Academic research has analyzed the influence of the category on different variables; however, the aim of this paper is to analyze the relationships between different attitudinal variables (category involvement, price consciousness, attitude towards private-label (PL) products, and assortment variety perception) with respect to three dependent variables (store image, PL purchase intention and store-switching intention), which are analyzed to determine the role that different categories play in consumer response to retail assortment. To this end, a review of the literature on different classifications of product categories was carried out. A controlled online experiment was then designed for use with a large consumer panel in the United States. The experiment was conducted with four product categories and structural equations methodology (SEM) was used to analyze the relationships identified in the proposed model. The findings highlight the influence of categories on consumers' response to retail assortment, which implies the need for retailers to offer different strategies, as well as suggesting management implications for branding decisions, this being an important contribution of this research.

Keywords

Product categories; assortment; private label; retailing; branding.

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Introduction

Retailers recognize that categories play different roles with varying degrees of importance with respect to consumers' revealed-choice preferences (Blattberg, 1995). The structure of the categories should therefore be a consequence of the retail consumer decision-making process. How much effort a consumer puts into information search and elaboration about the purchase depends on how involved the consumer is with the product category (Voss, Spangenberg and Grohmann, 2003). The optimum level of an assortment will depend on the product category (Puccinelli et al., 2009). There is consensus in the literature on the fact that, in some product categories at least, consumer brand loyalty is lower (Jensen, 2011). This may be for a number of reasons, such as greater consumer price awareness, less perceived product differentiation and increased emphasis on point-of-sale promotions (Clancy, 2001).

Academic research has analyzed the influence of product category on relationships between different variables. Borle et al. (2005) investigated the impact of a large-scale assortment reduction on customer retention. Gruen and Shah (2000) tested a model in which category plan objectivity and category plan implementation mediate relationships between opportunistic behavior, retailer trust, and precategory plan

activities and category performance. Hense and Hübner (2022) endogenized product assortment decisions under a category management framework in a channel setup. However, the literature has not yet analyzed the joint effect of different relationships with respect to store image, PL purchase intentions and store-switching intention in different product categories.

The main objective of this study is to determine the role that different product categories play in consumer response to retail assortment. For this purpose, a controlled online experiment was designed for use with a large consumer panel in the United States (U.S.), owned by IRI Worldwide. It was then used to analyze the relationships between different attitudinal variables (category involvement, price consciousness, attitude towards PL and assortment variety perception) with respect to three dependent variables (store image, PL purchase intention and store-switching intention).

1. Literature review

1.1. Product category definition

Most retailers classify the products that make up their assortment into different groups or categories. However, there is no standard definition of the category structure of a store. Thus, product category is a distinct, manageable group of products that consumers perceive to be related and substitutable in meeting their needs (Blattberg, 1995). Bauer, Kotouc and Rudolph (2012) expressly introduced the term “category” in the definition of assortment, referring to a mix of products within a specific category of the supermarket. Dhar, Hoch and Kumar (2001) argued that an assortment is characterized by two key dimensions: range (the number of brands offered in the category) and depth (the amount of stock available in the store). Another extended concept of category defines it as a group of products or services that consumers perceive as interrelated or interchangeable in the satisfaction of a need (Gruen and Shah, 2000). In any case, it is always a matter of grouping products or stocks with similar characteristics for better planning. Each category can be considered, therefore, a “strategic business unit”, and the retailer’s objective is to obtain the highest profitability from each of the categories that make up its assortment.

1.2. Role of product categories in explaining consumer behavior

Product categories in fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) are usually classified according to different criteria. Several researchers have utilized the construct of perceived risk to investigate different aspects of consumer behavior. Dowling and Staelin (1994) classify perceived risk in two different parts: product-class risk (category of product) and product-specific risk (specific brand or product). Several factors may influence the level of perceived risk on different products. Some of them are based on consumer characteristics (Verhage, Yavas and Green, 1990), while other factors are based on the product itself or on product attributes (Dowling and Staelin, 1994). Ailawadi, Pauwels and Steenkamp (2008) identified some product categories as riskier than others, and suggested that increased PL share in risky categories is more critical than in other categories. The higher quality of premium PLs reduces this risk (Kumar and Steenkamp, 2007), making it more likely that consumers will buy premium PL in product categories with which they are highly involved.

Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) introduced the concept of hedonic consumption, commonly used nowadays: “Hedonic consumption designates those facets of consumer behavior that relate to the multisensory, fantasy and emotive aspects of one’s experience with products.” So, if we focus on the set of attitudes that typically underlie hedonic consumption, we find emotional considerations (Pham, 1998). In turn, utilitarian consumption experiences tend to be described as fundamentally functional, instrumental, sensible or practical, usually associated with a simple justification (Dhar and Wertenbroch, 2000). Hedonic consumption generally has an intrinsic motivation leading to an inherent reward, while the motivation for utilitarian consumption tends to be extrinsic (Dhar and Wertenbroch, 2000). Therefore, the different nature of product categories may affect the purchasing process, with emotional product buying motives driving consumers to make a greater commitment to brands in hedonic product categories than to those in utilitarian product categories (Sloot and Verhoef, 2008).

Another classification scheme for consumer response to assortment categories, cited by Dhar, Hoch and Kumar (2001), is proposed by the Food Marketing Institute (1995), based on the penetration degree of the category and frequency of purchase. Both variables are divided into high and low, determining the limit between the values through their median. From this classification, the following categories are identified: (1) Staples (high penetration–high frequency); (2) Niches (low penetration–high frequency); (3) Variety enhancers (high penetration–low frequency); (4) Fill-ins (low penetration–low frequency).

1.3. Hypothesis approach

1.3.1. Store image

Inman, Winer and Ferraro (2009) showed that category characteristics, such as purchase frequency, displays, and customer characteristics, affect in-store decision-making, and, therefore, the store's image. On the other hand, price-conscious consumers pay greater attention to the price, focusing exclusively on paying as little as possible (Lichtenstein, Ridgway and Netemeyer, 1993), or prioritizing it with respect to other product attributes. Price is frequently used as a quality indicator, generating significant differences in product image or store image in terms of quality perception (Graciola et al., 2020), and becoming an essential factor in the process of choosing brands and stores (Ailawadi, Neslin and Gedenk, 2001). The assortment even reflects the strategic positioning of the retailer (McGoldrick, 2002) and ranks as the third most important factor (after proximity and price) in terms of power of attraction to the store. Although there is no consensus in the literature on the ideal size of the assortment, as both large and small offer their own benefits and disadvantages (Sethuraman et al., 2022). We propose the following hypotheses with respect to store image:

H1a: A positive relationship exists between product category involvement and store image.

H1b: A positive relationship exists between price consciousness and store image.

H1c: A positive relationship exists between perception of assortment variety and store image.

1.3.2. PL purchase intention

The level of consumer involvement may vary according to the different product categories, and the type of product and its characteristics may, in turn, influence the PL purchase intention (Berkowitz, Bao and Allaway, 2005). PL is perceived by many consumers as an extension of store image (Collins-Dodd and Lindley, 2003). A positive store image, by reducing the perception of risk, adds value to its PL products (Agarwal and Teas, 2001). Liljander, Polsa and Van Riel (2009) argued that store image influences PL purchase intention. The more favorable the store image, the greater the PL purchase intention (Grewal et al., 1998), since when consumers have a high perception of the store image, this reflects positively on the store's PL (Dhar and Hoch, 1997). When the attitude towards the brand is positive, this also has a positive influence on the decision to buy this particular brand (Zielke and Dobbstein, 2007). Garretson, Fisher and Burton (2002) contrasted the positive relationship between a favorable attitude to PL and percentage of PL purchases. Finally, a positive relationship exists between the width of range of an assortment and the number of visits to the store (Borle et al., 2005). The following hypotheses with respect to PL purchase intention are therefore proposed:

H2a: A positive relationship exists between product category involvement and PL purchase intention.

H2b: A positive relationship exists between store image and PL purchase intention.

H2c: A positive relationship exists between positive attitude towards PL and PL purchase intention.

H2d: A positive relationship exists between perception of assortment variety and PL purchase intention.

1.3.3. Store-switching intention

Store image is a critical factor in the competitive position of the retailer, when determining, among other issues, store loyalty and decreased store-switching intention (Sirgy and Coskun, 1985). Wu et al. (2011) state that corporate image is considered an important antecedent of store and brand loyalty, in that it encourages purchase repetition and decreases store-switching intention. Consumers who have a better image of a store develop greater perceived value, satisfaction and loyalty (Lin and Bowman, 2022). In addition, the perception of wide assortments affects consumers' choice of store, there being a positive correlation between perceived assortment variety and store loyalty intention (Verhoef, Langerak and Donkers, 2007). Assortment variety is a strategic element that helps retailers configure their image, while allowing them to meet the different needs and preferences of their customers (Dhar, Hoch and Kumar, 2001). However, numerous research indicates a positive relationship between PL and store loyalty. Porter and Claycomb (1997) argued that a positive image of the PL helps retailers be more competitive while it simultaneously encourages consumers to buy the same PL again, and therefore repeat their purchase in the same store. Corstjens and Lal (2000) maintained that the quality of the PL can be a useful instrument to generate differentiation between retailers and increase store loyalty, especially in low-involvement products. Martín Gutiérrez (2006) stated that, when a customer trusts the PL and the establishment staff,

they will also trust the store itself, and their store-switching intention will be reduced. For all these reasons, the following hypotheses related to store switching intention are proposed:

H3a: A negative relationship exists between store image and store-switching intention.

H3b: A negative relationship exists between perception of assortment variety and store-switching intention.

H3c: A negative relationship exists between PL purchase intention and store-switching intention.

Figure 1 summarizes the theoretical model of proposed relationships.

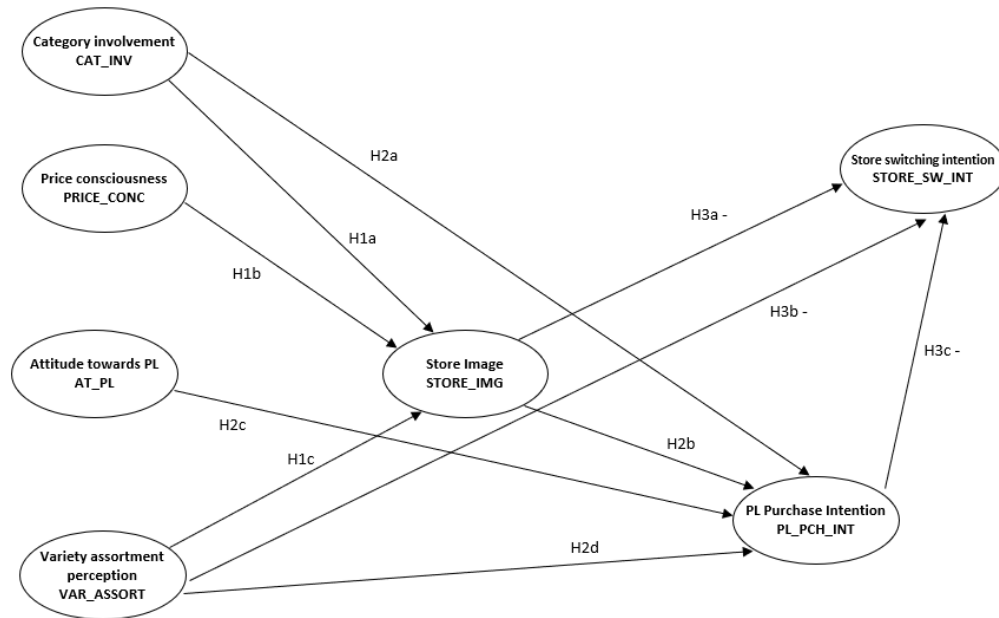


Figure no. 1. Proposed relationship model

2. Methodology

A controlled online experiment was developed in March 2013 with a sample of individuals belonging to a large consumer panel in the U.S., owned by IRI Worldwide. The sample consisted of 1,400 individuals (73% female, 27% male), aged between 24 and 79 (average age: 52.9), all of them responsible for the purchase of household products, such as food, cleaning and personal care products. In the experiment, two aspects of assortment variety were considered: assortment size and assortment composition. Thus, all subjects were presented with one of three different assortment sizes (one brand – only PL; four brands; and ten brands). In addition, assortment conditions included PL only (assortments containing only one brand); and PL and NB. The PL brands presented were classified and selected according to their U.S. market share, and the rating given by the owners of the consumer panel. The experiment was carried out in four product categories, using data on rotation and sales volume, with all categories ranked according to their levels of penetration and frequency, following the classification proposed by Dhar, Hoch and Kumar (2001). Specifically, the following four product categories were selected: yogurt (staples); fresh bread and rolls (niches); toilet tissue (variety enhancers); and laundry detergent (fill-ins). The selection of product categories and their subsequent inclusion in each of the four groups defined by Dhar, Hoch and Kumar (2001) was made from a sample of categories, representing fast-moving consumer goods in the U.S. market. The selection of national brands (NB) was evidently carried out according to product categories. Individuals were randomized into 10 different scenarios. The number of individuals for each category was 35, so the total number of individuals for each type of assortment combination was 350. Since the research was focused on four categories, the total sample was 1,400 individuals. After viewing an online presentation of the assortment, respondents filled out a questionnaire.

Composite scales were employed for measuring the variables of the proposed theoretical model, since these enable the assessment of psychological variables which are not directly observable (Churchill, 2003). Likert

scales were used, as these are widely used in the literature on brands and assortment. For the purposes of this study, the dependent variables were store image, store-switching intention and PL purchase intention. In order to generate relevant image components, we adopted pairs of existing bipolar attributes (Aaker, 1997). Thus, store image was measured with a scale containing six items rated according to a seven-point Likert scale. In order to analyze store-switching intention, a single-item, five-point scale was employed (Rossiter, 2002). Finally, a three-item scale was used to measure PL purchase intention, with a seven-point Likert scale adapted from Grewal et al. (1998) and Liljander, Polsa and Van Riel (2009). The moderating variables for this study were category involvement, price consciousness, attitude towards PL, and variety assortment perception. Category involvement was measured using a three-item scale, adapted from Strazzieri (1994), with a Likert scale of seven points. For price consciousness, three items were extracted from the five-point scale used by Lichtenstein, Ridgway and Netemeyer (1993), which was adapted to seven points. Attitude towards PL was measured using six items, with a seven-point Likert scale adapted from Burton et al. (1998). Variety assortment perception was measured using three items, with a seven-point Likert scale (Chowdhury, Reardon and Srivastasa, 1998). Structural equations methodology (SEM) was used to conduct a confirmatory analysis of all measurement scales, yielding satisfactory results. Indeed, the results confirm that the different indicators show a good fit to the data, with right values for the R² of the variables, and all estimates were significant.

3. Results and discussion

The results obtained show significant differences with respect to product categories (Table no. 1).

Table no. 1. Results by product categories

H	Relationships	Staples	Niches	V. enh.	Fill-ins
H1a	STORE IMG <--- CAT INV	-	0.205	-	-
H1b	STORE IMG <--- PRICE CONC	-	-	-	0.117
H1c	STORE IMG <--- VAR ASSORT	0.271	0.197	0.216	0.267
H2a	PL PCH INT <--- CAT INV	0.276	-	-	-
H2b	PL PCH INT <--- STORE IMG	-	-	-	-0.228
H2c	PL PCH INT <--- AT PL	0.761	0.928	0.948	0.911
H2d	PL PCH INT <--- VAR ASSORT	-	-	0.021	-
H3a	STORE SW INT <--- STORE IMG	-0.300	-0.637	-	-0.398
H3b	STORE SW INT <--- VAR ASSORT	-0.458	-0.289	-0.347	-0.252
H3c	STORE SW INT <--- PL PCH INT	0.092	-	-	-

Regarding store image (H1), we found that perceived assortment variety is a positive influence in all product categories, reaching the highest values in staples (0.271) and in fill-ins (0.267). Product category involvement, however, only has a positive influence on store image in niche products (0.205), while only price awareness has a significant positive relationship with fill-in products (0.117).

In relation to PL purchase intention (H2), only one of the four hypotheses proposed is accepted in all product categories; that is, the existence of a positive relationship between a positive attitude towards the PL and PL purchase intention. It is in the staples category where the ratio obtains a lower value, though still very high (0.761). Category involvement only influences PL purchase intention in staples (0.276). Moreover, perceived assortment variety has virtually no positive influence on PL purchase intention in any product category; only in variety enhancer products is a significant result observed, albeit with a very low value (0.021). Finally, the results show that store image does not significantly influence PL purchase intention; in fact, contrary to the proposed positive relationship, the relationship is negative in the fill-ins (-0.228).

In terms of store-switching intention (H3), assortment variety perception proves a disincentive in all product categories, mainly in staples (-0.458) and in variety enhancers (-0.347). Store image also contributes to consumers not switching establishments, in almost all product categories, primarily in niches (-0.637); only in variety enhancers is the relationship not significant and, therefore, the hypothesis is not accepted. Finally, PL purchase intention does not obtain significant results in any product category, except in staples, where the relationship shows a positive value, albeit low (0.092), the opposite of that expected.

Conclusions and implications for brand management

Staples is the only category in which consumer involvement significantly influences intention to purchase PL. The image of the PL has improved significantly in recent years, having increased its presence in other

product categories and at higher quality levels, such as premium PL. Staples is also the category in which perceived assortment variety has a greater influence on store image and store-switching intention. Assortment variety perception in the staples category is also the most decisive element in decreased store-switching intention. Finally, and contrary to expectation, PL purchase intention in staples negatively influences store loyalty, even slightly favoring store-switching intention. We believe this could be due to the fact that consumers who buy PL in the staples category are more likely to seek out price-quality balance, and are willing to switch stores in search of good opportunities. Enhancing PL purchase intention is not therefore a valid strategy for retailers, in any product category, to strengthen store loyalty.

Category involvement only influences store image in *niche* products. In other categories, no relationship is found between product category involvement and store image, making this a very important category with which to create and improve store image. The niche products category is where store image has the highest negative influence on store-switching intention.

Perceived variety influences PL purchase intention only in the *variety enhancers* category assortment, though the values obtained are very low. This could be due to generic consumer behavior when assessing PLs in the context of widely used products, which would highlight the value of PL in this category. On the other hand, variety enhancers is the only category in which store image has no influence on store-switching intention. In other words, variety enhancers is not a key category for retailer strategies aimed at store loyalty.

Fill-ins is the only category in which price consciousness influences store image, albeit with a very low value. This may be due to the fact that consumers of fill-ins usually spend time observing different variables and comparing prices. Store image has a negative influence on PL purchase intention in the fill-ins category. These findings contradict both the hypothesis raised in this research and much of the literature. However, the results of this study suggest that store image loses importance in this category with respect to PL purchase intention. This could be explained by the fact that the criteria are not as standard as in other categories, since these are low-penetration and low-purchase frequency products, so it would be interesting to know the possible influence of other variables not considered in this analysis.

In conclusion, product category has an important influence on consumer response to retail assortment. This implies a need for retailers to offer different strategies according to categories, as well as suggesting different management implications for branding decisions. This study is not entirely free of limitations, most of which could serve as a basis for future lines of research. The first of these is that the study was limited to the context of the U.S. Furthermore, although the sample is representative of U.S. consumers, we find different socioeconomic circumstances among its members. A further limitation derives from the application of an experimental methodology, a laboratory experiment. Finally, store image is measured as a simplification of the real image.

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