



## How do consumers define retail centre convenience?

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### ABSTRACT

The 1980s and 1990s have been labelled the 'decades of convenience'. In spite of this, retail research has often indicated that when compared with other shopping motives, consumers assign relatively less importance to the convenience of a retail centre when deciding where to shop. Such counter-intuitive findings could be due to the way in which academics have defined retail centre convenience. This study develops and tests an alternative definition. Comprising 16 attributes, it represents a fourfold increase over any existing definition. Subsequent empirical analysis provides strong support for the alternative definition, with respondents indicating that 14 of the test attributes serve as convenience attributes. The failure of existing definitions to incorporate so many of these attributes is a likely explanation behind the counter-intuitive proposition that convenience often serves as a less-than-salient determinant of retail centre patronage.

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### 1. Introduction

It is claimed that a fundamental role of retailing is to provide convenience (Merrilees and Miller, 1996) and this is set down in the basic set of services that retailers provide to their customers. Retailers provide convenience in the form of temporal and spatial utility in order to facilitate possession utility. Because consumers' time and effort are finite resources, retail environments must be designed accordingly if they are to secure patronage. This accounts for the inception of such retail innovations as home delivery, Internet shopping, EFTPOS, automatic vending machines, drive-through windows and self-checkout counters (Liebeck, 1996). The nature and purpose of such innovations led to both the 1980s (Gehrt and Yale, 1993) and 1990s (Rubel, 1995) being dubbed the 'decades of convenience'.

In spite of this notion, academic research continues to report that consumers assign less importance to convenience than other shopping motives (McEnally and Brown, 1998). Such counter-intuitive findings may be due to the poor way in which academics have defined convenience rather than the importance consumers actually assign to it (Seiders et al., 2000; Berry et al., 2002). The purpose of this study is to redress this problem by developing a definition of retail centre convenience based on consumer beliefs about its meaning. The rest of this paper is structured as follows: first, a review of literature examines existing definitions and serves as the basis for developing an alternative conceptual definition. The methodology for this study is then described, followed by an

empirical analysis of the proposed alternative definition and then conclusions.

### 2. Review of literature

Somewhat surprisingly, given the number of studies that have reported on its importance, no pre-determined effort has ever been made to define retail centre convenience. This review of literature therefore begins by conceptualising this construct. The subsequent definition will then serve as the standard against which preceding means for operationalising the construct (henceforth referred to as *definitions*) will be evaluated. The importance of such an approach is twofold. Firstly, the lack of any empirical definition of retail centre convenience serves as a research gap in itself. Secondly, any flaws in existing definitions could account for the counter-intuitive notion that in an age of convenience, retail convenience is less-than-important.

#### 2.1. Conceptualising convenience

Convenience is a term that can be applied to almost any human activity, be it work, travel, exercise, cooking or shopping. Convenience should therefore possess both a universal and context-specific meaning. The universal meaning relates to its generic definition – the meaning given to convenience irrespective of the activity being undertaken. Dictionary meanings typically given to convenience include *that which is easy to use, favourable to comfort or savings of trouble*. As such, convenience occurs when the barriers to the undertaking of an activity are reduced or eliminated. In the field of retail research these barriers are referred to as costs (Bell

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et al., 1998). In order to define retail centre convenience, it is first necessary to identify those costs that must be reduced or eliminated in order for shopping convenience to occur.

There is some debate as to the exact nature of these costs. While one view holds that convenience comprises time and effort costs (McEnally and Brown, 1998; Berry et al., 2002), there is an alternative view that it also comprises spatial costs. However this latter view has been put forward in the context of convenience food (Warde, 1999) and catalog shopping (Gehrt et al., 1996) rather than that of a retail centre. Although spatial costs are incorporated within the dimensions of time and effort, such a hierarchy of meaning may not be shared by consumers. In support of this notion, *The American Heritage Dictionary* (2006) defines convenient as that which is *easy to reach, accessible, close at hand or near*, suggesting that consumers may indeed assign it spatial qualities. Hence determining consumer beliefs about the costs that comprise convenience will serve as an important research objective for this study.

It should be noted that price does not serve as a shopping cost in the context of convenience. This is because costs can be classified as either primary or secondary. Whereas price is a primary cost, time and effort are secondary costs, with convenience only comprising the latter (Kim et al., 2007).

## 2.2. Operationalising convenience

The context-specific meaning of convenience relates to the specific attributes necessary to make the activity in question more convenient. In order to correctly identify the specific attributes necessary to operationalise convenience in any given context (e.g. shopping, cooking, travel etc.), it is essential that the criteria used to identify these attributes are based on the universal meaning of convenience. Using secondary costs (e.g. time, effort etc.) as the selection criteria, the authors used a combination of a review of literature, retail centre visits and focus group interviews to identify 16 potential attributes of retail centre convenience (Table 1).

## 2.3. Existing definitions of convenience

It is proposed that retail centre convenience can be defined as comprising all those attributes of a retail centre that influence the secondary costs of patronage. A comparison of this definition with the meaning given to it in academic retail studies (Table 2) supports the assertion that retail centre convenience has been poorly defined. The first problem relates to the number of attributes presently used to define it. Cox (1959) noted half a century

ago that when patronising a retail centre, consumers often shop for multiple items and therefore seek aggregate convenience across the entire shopping trip. Yet in the five decades since, there is little evidence of any academic recognition of this, with no description containing more than four attributes. As a result, fundamental convenience attributes such as one-stop shopping, the climate control provided by enclosure, and shopping services (e.g. information desks, coat storage, crèche) do not appear in any existing description.

A further problem relates to the method used to define convenience. Despite no shortage of studies reporting the importance of convenience, none has yet to define it prior to measuring its influence. Instead, isolated convenience attributes are typically combined with a variety of other attributes and subjected to factor analysis. The decision as to whether the term *convenience* is assigned to one or other of the emergent factors is then determined by the researcher's own individual interpretation of its meaning. It is therefore not surprising that no two descriptions offer the same list of attributes. This in turn has led to the absence of any universal meaning.

A related problem is the failure of existing definitions to link cost-minimising attributes with convenience. This has meant that its influence over retail centre patronage has often gone unrecognised and un-reported. For example, in a study comparing the image of malls with shopping strips, Houston and Nevin (1980) labelled a factor comprising parking, food service, toilets, centre layout, and an easy place to take children as 'facilitative'. The decision not to link this factor with convenience is significant because it was this factor that most differentiated shopping strips from malls. Wee (1986) found that only two of the four factors in his study influenced the image of a retail centre, labelling these 'facilitative' and 'operational'. However, it is only upon closer inspection that the importance of convenience becomes clear, with the facilitative factor comprising such cost-minimising attributes as parking availability, ease of car access, provision of toilets, a compact design and ease of parking. The same applied to the operational factor which comprised caring staff service, trading hours, enclosure and time scarcity.

Such an issue persists with more recent research. Frasquet et al. (2001) identified four factors influencing the perceived value of a retail centre, two of which had a convenience-orientation, but named them 'accessibility' (e.g. parking, access) and 'efficiency' (e.g. one-stop shopping, time-saving) instead. Similarly, in a study of the attributes that determine retail spending, Dennis et al. (2002) identified five cost-minimising attributes amongst the top ten: the layout of the centre (ranked 1st in importance), car access

**Table 1**  
Test attributes of retail centre convenience.

Parking availability	Can park close to desired stores	Extended trading hours	Speed limits
Retail concentration	Proximity to home/work	1-Stop shopping	Enclosure
Pedestrian areas	Number of traffic lanes	Type of traffic controls	Centre size
Store compatibility	Shopping services and facilities	Public transport	Store visibility

**Table 2**  
A summary of the attributes of retail centre convenience from previous studies.

Study	Trading hours	Proximity	Access	Parking	Way-finding	Ease of movement	Supermarket
Howell and Rogers (1980)	✓		✓	✓		✓	
Bell (1999)	✓	✓		✓	✓		
Anselmsson (2006)	✓			✓	✓	✓	
El-Adly (2007)	✓		✓				✓

Note: This table does not include definitions of sub-elements of convenience such as *trip convenience* (e.g. McCarthy, 1980) or *location convenience* (Oppewal et al., 1994). Nor does it include definitions with factors combining some other concept with convenience, such as *convenience and economic* (Bellenger et al., 1977) or *convenience and safety* (Kim and Kang, 1997).

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