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# Making the store a place of learning: The effects of in-store educational activities on retailer legitimacy and shopping intentions

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## ABSTRACT

This article considers the store as a place of learning and builds on institutional theory to examine whether the implementation of educational activities in the store environment has a positive effect on consumer perceptions of retailer legitimacy and whether such legitimacy in turn has positive effects on shopping intentions. Findings from a study conducted in a real retail setting reveal that although in-store activities do not exert main effects on legitimacy and shopping intentions, corporate attributions play a major role. Precisely, the value that consumers derive from practicing an in-store educational activity increase retailer legitimacy and shopping intentions only when consumers do not perceive any corporate goals behind the implementation of the activity. Theoretical and managerial implications are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Retailing is a complex and multifaceted cultural activity that includes not only experiential (Mathwick, Malhotra, & Rigdon, 2001), ludic (Kozinets et al., 2004), or esthetic (Joy, Wang, Chan, Sherry, & Cui, 2014) dimensions but also social dimensions (Ellen, Mohr, & Webb, 2000; Handelman & Arnold, 1999). In a customer-oriented industry such as retailing, consumers pay strong attention to how retailers observe some moral and societal obligations (Brown & Dacin, 1997). In a context where firms have to behave in a socially appropriate way (Humphreys & Latour, 2013) and comply with obligations to society that go beyond profit-making activities (Maignan & Ferrell, 2004) to be perceived as legitimate, adopting such social actions may help retailers to increase their legitimacy and reach social acceptance by the constituents of their environment (Chaney & Marshall, 2013; Suchman, 1995). Such legitimacy gained by retailers is emphasized as a necessary condition for success: organizations that implement legitimization strategies receive more support from their stakeholders (Handelman & Arnold, 1999), which makes success easier to achieve (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Yang, Su, & Fam, 2012).

Although the endorsement of different social roles – among which social supportive roles (Rosenbaum, 2006), coordinators of community (Kim, Ha, & Fong, 2014a), and second home (Debenedetti, Oppewal, & Arsel, 2014) – has been highlighted as a source of social acceptance for retailers, the effects of the educational role remain largely under-investigated. The literature studies the educational role of retailers only in the case of flagship stores and brand museums where consumers can learn about the history of the brand (Hollenbeck, Peters, & Zinkhan, 2008). Yet, retailers can also implement more pedagogical in-store additional services and turn their stores into places where people can engage in and learn from different activities (Sands, Oppewal, & Beverland, 2015), such as painting, scrapbooking, playing music, or even exercising. For instance, in the United States, retailers such as Lowe's, Michael's Craft, Lakeshore, A.C. Moore, Pottery Barn, and Home Depot offer free classes for kids where they learn to build wooden toys, birdhouses, picture frames, and treasure boxes (<http://freebies.about.com/od/freestuffforkids/tp/classes-for-kids.htm>). In Europe, the French retailer Cultura has implemented a similar added service whereby shoppers can learn painting, sculpturing, or scrapbooking in-store (<http://www.cultura.com/ateliers-43.html>). The implementation of this specific kind of social action suggests that stores should not be considered only as marketplaces (Bloch, Ridgway, & Dawson, 1994) but also as places of learning where consumers go to discover, practice, and increase their knowledge through courses provided by the retailers.

However, although the effect of different social actions of retailers on their legitimacy and consumers has been studied in the literature

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(Arnold, Handelman, & Tigert, 1996; Arnold, Kozinets, & Handelman, 2001; Handelman & Arnold, 1999; Kim et al., 2014a), the way these in-store educational activities affect consumer perceptions and subsequent behavior remains unknown. Yet, education refers to universal values (Mason, 2001) and leads to positive social and ethical perceptions (Waples, Antes, Murphy, Connelly, & Mumford, 2009). Because the implementation of such activities might lead consumers to consider retailers to be knowledge providers, consumers might see retailers as extending their social roles to that of educators that are beneficial to the whole society (Handelman & Arnold, 1999). In-store educational activities developed by retailers may thus increase their social acceptance and legitimacy (Carroll, 1991; McGuire, 1963; Suchman, 1995). Therefore, this study proposes and tests a framework whereby the implementation of in-store educational activities increases retailer legitimacy and in turn shopping intentions. Notably, this research also investigates the conditions under which in-store educational activities are beneficial for retailer legitimacy. Specifically, this research examines the crucial role played by corporate attributions, that is, the motives inferred by consumers about the implementation of these activities (Cotte, Coulter, & Moore, 2005; Coulter & Pinto, 1995). When consumers believe the activities are implemented by retailers more in a profitable view (that is, to make money) rather than for their well-being, the value consumers derive from their participation in the activity has a negative effect on legitimacy and subsequent shopping intentions.

This article begins by reviewing research on legitimacy to draw hypotheses on how in-store educational activities may affect consumer perceptions of retailers. A field study in a real retail setting is then described. Following the two-step procedure, the analyses surprisingly demonstrate in the first step that in-store activities do not exert main effects on legitimacy and shopping intentions. In the second step which focuses only on shoppers who participated in an in-store educational activity, the findings show that the value derived from the activity increases retailer legitimacy and shopping intentions. However, this effect occurs only when corporate attributions are low and thus when consumers do not perceive that retailers are seeking to make profit from the implementation of the activity. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications of the research and its limitations.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. In-store educational activities and legitimacy

Institutional theory posits that firms exist within a system of common understanding wherein the constituents share values and norms (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). These norms define the social reality and are rules used to appraise whether firm behaviors are acceptable (Scott, 2013). Institutional theory deals with the process by which social expectations of proper behavior affect the practices of organizations. In this context, the survival of a firm depends on its acceptance by the constituents of the environment (Humphreys & Latour, 2013; Tost, 2011). Legitimation refers to this process of acceptance resulting from the organization's fit with the environmental norms.

Extant research highlights the need for an organization to be considered legitimate to achieve performance and survival (Bianchi & Arnold, 2004; Reast, Maon, Lindgreen, & Vanhamme, 2013). Legitimacy refers to “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). By its nature, legitimacy is thus a perception that “represents a reaction of observers to the organization as they see it” (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). The adoption of socially appropriate practices provides a show of cultural allegiance and the organization is thus likely to be legitimized (Chaney & Marshall, 2013; Humphreys & Latour, 2013). Conversely, a lack of legitimacy implies a lack of social support and resources from stakeholders because of low recognition (Scott, 2013; Yang et al., 2012). The legitimacy acquired by the organization includes

social and pragmatic aspects (Handelman & Arnold, 1999; Suchman, 1995). Social legitimacy occurs when people deem that the organization's business will benefit society as a whole. An organization will be judged to be socially legitimate on the basis of how much it can be considered to show an altruistic nature whose aim is the welfare of others. Pragmatic legitimacy results from the perception that the firm is able to satisfy consumer needs.

While the constituents of the environment confer legitimacy, institutional theory depicts organizations as active agents and thus considers legitimacy to be a status that organizations have to acquire (Deephouse, 1999). The way for organizations to gain legitimacy lies in the adoption of socially recognized behaviors. This definition implies that consumers perceive the legitimacy of a retailer based on all its actions in relation to what is socially responsible (Arnold et al., 2001; Campbell, 2007). In this regard, Kim et al. (2014a) show that retailer community-oriented CSR practices lead to an increase in legitimacy. Arnold et al. (2001) explain Walmart's performance through the legitimacy obtained by its complying with the institutionalized values of American society such as family or nation value. Handelman and Arnold (1999) demonstrate the positive effect of social actions aimed at employees (such as referring to them as “family”) and the community (such as donating to local charities) on legitimacy.

However, although the effect of a diverse set of social actions on legitimacy has been studied in the literature (Arnold et al., 1996, 2001; Handelman & Arnold, 1999; Kim et al., 2014a), the influence of educational activities remains unexplored. Drawing on institutional theory, the effect of such activities may be a function of how well they are the right thing to do for the individual and for society. Education, or the learning in which knowledge is transferred (Dewey, 1916), is a universal value that leads to positive ethical outcomes (Carroll, 1991; Waples et al., 2009). Education deals with ideas such as overcoming handicaps, achieving greater quality, and acquiring wealth and status (Sargent, 1994). As a consequence, the implementation of in-store educational activities by retailers intends mainly to help individuals build and create. These activities are thus beneficial from a societal and an individual standpoint (Mason, 2001; McGuire, 1963). Hence, in-store educational activities may increase retailers' social acceptance and subsequently their legitimacy. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

**H1.** Consumers who participate in in-store educational activities will have a higher perception of retailer legitimacy than consumers who don't participate.

### 2.2. The price of in-store educational activities and retailer legitimacy

The retailing literature uses new institutional theory to highlight that retailers endorse different social roles with the goal to increase their legitimacy (Arnold et al., 1996, 2001; Bianchi & Arnold, 2004; Handelman & Arnold, 1999; Kim et al., 2014a). However, proposing that consumers engage in and learn from different activities such as painting, sculpting, or exercising is a very specific action that deals with education. A communal notion posits that education – similar to other values such as health – should be widely accessible (Darling-Hammond, 1997). Article 13 of the United Nations' 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights recognizes the right of everyone to have an education ([www.ohchr.org](http://www.ohchr.org)). Education is a fundamental right of democracies (Dewey, 1916; Goodlad, Mantle-Bromley, & Goodlad, 2004). Free access to education is thus an institution according to institutional theory (Scott, 2013), that is to say, the status of unwritten rules to respect. Education represents a value of transcendental significance and is deemed “sacred” by consumers (Tetlock, Kristel, Elson, Green, & Lerner, 2000). This sacred status leads consumers to believe that culture and, more broadly, education should be priced according to communal-sharing principles (McGraw, Schwartz, & Tetlock, 2012). Such status mandates

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