



When nature calls: The role of customer toilets in retail stores



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ABSTRACT

The scarce previous literature indicates that the customer toilet facilities influence shopping value and should be a concern for retailers. However, customer toilets are often inadequately capitalised in retail stores. This study aims to provide a scientifically robust argument about the critical role of customer toilets in retail stores. The explanatory survey data ($n=655$) from a Finnish out-of-town department store is examined to explore (1) the importance that consumers place on the customer toilets and (2) the effect of toilet usage on actual shopping behaviour. The results support the assumptions of previous literature by suggesting that customer toilets are considered as an important store attribute and, more importantly, the use of toilets is associated with prolonged in-store time which, in turn, increases spending. The findings offer both academic and managerial contribution and encourage academics and practitioners to regard customer toilets as more than mere an unwanted property expense and discover their full marketing potential.

1. Introduction

Physiological needs of urination and defecation are fundamental in nature. They outweigh the more advanced needs and can be satisfied only in certain places, i.e., toilets. Nature can call anywhere and anytime, also in a retail environment. As a consequence, the desire for shopping may logically fall behind until the compelling need is satisfied. Offering appropriate toilet facilities for customers should, thus, be expected to increase shopping value and, consequently, be of high relevance for all retailers.

However, many stores seem to pay insufficient attention to their customer toilets and, in response, the managerial literature provides common guidelines on how to develop these facilities successfully (e.g. Lofstock, 2013; Rigik, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013; Riell, 2011; Wilson, 2007; Coleman, 2006; Danziger, 2006; Renner, 2004a,b; BSCS, 2000). These guidelines are certainly worthwhile for practitioners, but they tend to rely on intuition and subjective experiences rather than on robust scientific knowledge. Moreover, it seems that the managerial suggestions have not been implemented in the retail industry as customer toilets are still inadequately maintained and capitalised (e.g. Danziger, 2006). In retail management, the lack of solid consumer research seems to lead to either aimless development or even ignorance on the importance of customer toilets (Piha, 2013). It is, therefore, apparent that a clear, scientific argument that sheds light on the managerial guidelines on how customer toilets influence consumer behaviour, is needed.

In the retail literature, customer toilets are surprisingly rarely

mentioned (e.g. Hsu et al., 2010; El-Adly, 2007; Anselmsson, 2006; Wong et al., 2001; Davies, 1992) and even then regarded as a marginal issue or treated as a single attribute influencing store choice, customer satisfaction, or store image (e.g. Nilsson et al., 2015; Huang and Dubinsky, 2014; Dennis, 2005; Mitchell and Harris, 2005; Ting and Chen, 2002; Sirohi et al., 1998; Wakefield and Baker, 1998; Hackett and Foxall, 1994; Lindquist, 1974). Furthermore, there is a lack of research on how the use of toilets influences consumers' actual shopping behaviour, such as shopping time or spending. So, even though some studies have touched upon the role of customer toilets, within retailing or consumer behaviour literature, there are hardly any studies that exclusively focus on customer toilets.

To fill this gap, this study aims to provide a scientifically robust and empirically justified argument about the critical role of customer toilets in retail environments. The specific purpose is to examine (1) how much importance consumers place on customer toilets as a retail store's supplementary service and (2) what is the influence of toilet usage on actual shopping behaviour. To address these questions, the study analyses the explanatory survey data ($n=655$) collected in a Finnish out-of-town department store.

The current study belongs to a retailing research stream that operationalises the store into a set of *store attributes*, such as parking facilities, background music and product assortment (e.g. Baker et al., 1994; Lindquist, 1974; Martineau, 1958). Most of the studies representing this stream measure all or at least a wide variety of different attributes and compare their relative weights in influencing customer evaluations, emotional states or behavioural responses (Turley and

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Milliman, 2000). However, there are also studies that focus merely on one attribute such as fitting rooms (Ayalp et al., 2016). Similarly, this study extends the store attribute literature by focusing entirely on one attribute, customer toilets, which is believed to have considerable effects on the performance of retail stores. On a more general level, the study accentuates the role of very basic physiological needs in shaping consumer behaviour (cf. Xu et al., 2015; De Ridder et al., 2014; Tuk et al., 2011).

2. Literature review

2.1. Customer toilets in retail environments

“An essential part of serving people is providing for their basic animal needs. Deep inside every person there is a remnant of the reptile, thus the need to think about Jurassic Park retailing, which is about satisfying the beast in all of us. Far too few stores offer comfort services to their guests, yet none of us would invite people over to our house and not let them use the bathroom. Malls need to offer superior bathroom facilities to their guests that are spotlessly clean, comfortable, and safe. In my experience, many malls, even the most luxurious, don’t attend to these facilities as they should.” (Danziger, 2006, pp. 225–226).

Our basic needs evolved in the early stages of evolution, much earlier than the more advanced needs. When a fundamental need, such as the urgency for urination and defecation, occurs, the more advanced needs temporarily move to the background until the “beast” inside us is satisfied (cf. Kenrick et al., 2010; Bernard et al., 2005). Humans, however, have the ability to physiologically and socially control their urination and defecation, at least to some extent. In the modern environment, the social rule is that urgencies are allowed to be satisfied only in certain places, i.e., in toilets (cf. Haslam, 2012). Therefore, if a particular place, such as a retail store, does not offer toilet facilities, people can spend only a restricted amount of time there or may avoid going there in the first place.

In retail literature, it is well acknowledged that the basic needs of the consumers must be taken care of in order to attract consumers to patronise the retailer. Shopping centers invest heavily on, e.g., catering services, air condition, and the safety of the environment (Coleman, 2006). Based on this background, it is quite surprising that customer toilets have been so widely neglected in retail development (Danziger, 2006). This negligence may partly be related to the taboos surrounding urgencies and toilets (cf. Haslam, 2012; Molotch and Noren, 2010; Gerhenson and Penner, 2009). Additionally, retailers may regard toilets as an unnecessary expense which tend to draw unwelcomed people and, thus, toilet usage is often restricted or subject to a charge (BSCS, 2000; Goss, 1993).

2.2. Perceived importance of toilets

In the few previous studies that have assessed the role of toilets, consumers have perceived them as important and given them very high rankings. Dennis (2005) found that the availability of a toilet is considered as the eighth most important store attribute in shopping centre choice – interestingly, more important than, e.g., “friendly atmosphere” and “helpfulness of staff”. Similarly, in a study by Sit et al. (2003) the cleanliness, availability and locational convenience of a shopping centre’s toilets were rated with an importance score of 3.4 (scale from 0 to 4) and again toilets were considered more essential than most of the other attributes.

Distinct consumer segments tend to assess the importance of customer toilets differently. It seems that females regard toilets more important than males (Barber and Scarcelli, 2009; Dennis et al., 2001; BCSC, 2000). As women also tend to visit retail stores more often than men (Ellis et al., 2012; Pan and Zinkhan, 2006; Dholakia, 1999), it is reasonable that retailers concentrate especially on the females’ toilet

facilities (Molotch and Noren, 2010; Mui et al., 2009; Wong and Yau, 2005). Toilets seem to be quite equally important for all age groups (Dennis et al., 2001). However, as ageing consumers are an increasingly important target segment for retailers (Kohijoki and Marjanen, 2013), the issues related to toilet accessibility for older and disabled consumers (Kitchin and Law, 2001) need to be taken into account. In a study on retail stores (Ong and Chuah, 2006), consumers aged 60 and over gave toilets an importance rate of 4.03 (scale from 1 to 5) which exceeded, e.g., the importance of customer service and accessibility by public transportation. Barber and Scarcelli (2009) reported a similar tendency in their study on the effect of toilets on restaurant attractiveness.

Customers’ expectations regarding customer toilets may also be relative to their shopping motives, i.e., whether they are utilitarian or hedonistic shoppers (cf. Babin et al., 1994). This is particularly apparent when comparing utilitarian and hedonistic retail environments (cf. Yim et al., 2014; Chang and Fang, 2012). Grocery stores are often regarded as utilitarian environments that are designed to be visited with efficiency. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that their customer restrooms are perceived as less important than restrooms in hedonistic environments such as shopping centers (cf. Davis and Hodges, 2012). In a recent study on grocery store attributes by Nilsson et al. (2015), the customers gave restrooms an importance score of 4.6 (scale from 1 to 7), which seems to be slightly lower when compared to similar studies in the context of shopping centers (Dennis, 2005; Sit et al., 2003). The perceived importance of restrooms may vary not only between hedonistic and utilitarian retail environments but also in relation to the size of the retail environment. In other words, it can be assumed that restrooms are perceived more important in larger department and grocery stores than in smaller specialty and grocery stores.

2.3. Toilet usage and actual shopping behaviour

While previous literature indicates that customer toilets are perceived as important by consumers, it is unclear whether they also affect actual shopping behaviour. The distinction between perceived importance and actual behaviour is crucial, as it is well-known that what people say and do are often incoherent, especially when considering socially sensitive subjects (e.g. King and Bruner, 2000). The actual shopping behaviour is widely examined topic (cf. Davis and Hodges, 2012), and it has been operationalised in many different ways. In this study, actual shopping behaviour is measured by in-store time (cf. Bell et al., 2011; Inman et al., 2009; Donovan et al., 1994; Granbois, 1968) and actual spending (cf. Chebat et al., 2014; Donovan et al., 1994).

From the perspective of the retailers, the most important business aspect is to stimulate spending in order to gain profit. Spending is, indeed, a common outcome variable in many retail studies (e.g. Sherman et al., 1997), and some studies suggest that basic physiological conditions, such as hunger, satiation and high bladder pressure, may have effects on spending and impulsivity in monetary decision-making (Xu et al., 2015; De Ridder et al., 2014; Tuk et al., 2011). Many stores are already investing heavily on catering services, for example, and it is known that these additional services influence the overall profits of store. Thus, the remaining question is whether the provision of customer toilets might have a similar effect on spending as, for example, the catering services do.

The association between toilet usage and spending would probably be indirect, as the unavailability of customer toilets may primarily restrict the in-store time that consumers are able to spend in the specific store. The duration of the shopping experience has, in turn, been found to positively influence spending (Path Intelligence, 2015; Milliman, 1986). Prolonged in-store time also boosts impulsive buying (Hui et al., 2013; Inman et al., 2009; Granbois, 1968), which may lead to the increase of total spending, as impulse purchases represent a substantial proportion of all in-store purchases (e.g. Inman et al., 2009;

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