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## **Relationship between In-store Experience Quality and Perceived Green Retail Store Credibility**

by

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**Abstract:** The paper examines the relationship between in-store experience quality and perceived green retail store credibility. It presents a causal model with five hypotheses which examine whether service encounter quality, communication quality and product encounter quality affect perceived green retail store credibility and whether customer perceptions of retail stores' environmental activities has a mediating effect in the relationships. Using a 30-item questionnaire, 356 valid responses were collected from the respondents who had been purchasing from a specific green retail store and have shopped from four kinds (brick-and-mortar store, mobile app, retailer website, retailer products available on general online stores) of retail formats of the store. The data was analysed using factor analysis and structural equation modelling. All the hypotheses were found statistically significant for each of the retail store formats. Also, proposed models for each of the retail store formats were tested and results were interpreted.

**Key words:** Perceived in-store experience quality, Retail store credibility, Green retailing, Green consumers, India

## Relationship between in-store experience quality and perceived green retail store credibility

### 1. Introduction

In the beginning of green marketing in late 1960s, companies could not achieve expected green marketing outcomes because consumers perceived environmental claims made by advertisers as misleading and false which was later known as green-wash (Kumar, 2014; Belz and Peattie, 2012; Karna *et al.*, 2003). Credibility of product or corporate environmental claims is still a key challenge for marketers and they look for feasible approaches to handle this issue. In modern marketing framework, green retail stores have evolved as corporates that source, manufacture and retail green products, as well as act towards reducing environmental footprints of the retail stores in the process. In this context, credibility towards green products and stores' environmental information is intended to develop through store-customer interactions, relationship building and overwhelming experience. The fundamental issue in the study is to examine whether customer perceived quality of in-store experience influences their perceived credibility of green retail stores.

In India, green products are generally sold through exclusive retail stores. Some of the popular corporate green retail stores include MotherEarth, CottonWorld, OmVed and Godrej Nature's Basket that generally operate in metro and tier two cities. They retail green products, advertise environmental information related to their products and store-level practices, and motivate customers for environmentally-sustainable lifestyles. For customer-perceived credibility of green retail stores, following research questions are proposed:

RQ1: To determine whether in-store experience quality has a direct effect on green retail store credibility or this relationship is mediated by customer perceptions of environmental activities.

RQ2: To determine whether this relationship holds true for different kinds of retail formats.

### 2. Perceived Green Retail Store Credibility

To describe and conceptualise perceived green retail store credibility, this study adopts Newell and Goldsmith (2001)'s scale of perceived corporate credibility. As organised retail stores operate in forms of corporations, the conceptualisation of perceived corporate credibility can be equated to retail store credibility. Following the scale, perceived green retailer credibility can be described with two dimensions: green retail store expertise and green retail store trustworthiness. It is a dimension of (corporate) reputation and indicates consumers' belief in retailers' trustworthiness and expertise (Fombrun, 1996). Although credibility in other contexts (such as brand and source credibility) is expressed in several forms, trustworthiness and expertise are most widely accepted. For example, Malshe (2010) explored how marketers' credibility is construed within sales-marketing interface and explained credibility as trustworthiness and expertise. This study explained expertise as ability to create or add value and marketers' experience, and trustworthiness as keeping promise and resource commitment.

From corporate perspective, credibility as a dimension of reputation is studied by Caruana and Ewing (2010). They identified quality of customer service and customers' perceived value as important antecedents to corporate reputation. For credibility of eco-labelling scheme, Nilsson et al. (2012) determined that effective communication between company and its stakeholders, promotional efforts, customers' past experience, fulfilment of consumers' information needs, and transparency intend to improve market acceptability and to build credibility of eco-labels. The two constructs of perceived corporate credibility are studied by many authors as a sub-construct of another higher-order construct. For example, David *et al.* (2005) studied (corporate) expertise to measure corporate identity in CSR context and identified that (corporate) expertise is determined by CSR familiarity, CSR relational actions, CSR moral actions and CSR discretionary actions. In an experimental design, Bobinski *et al.* (1996) measured retailer credibility as trustworthiness and identified whether trustworthiness of a retail store is determined by retail sale advertising elements.

## 2.1 *In-store experience quality literature*

Perceived credibility can be described as a function of in-store experience, involvement, individual differences and knowledge (George *et al.*, 2016). In context of retailing, consumers gather, store and evaluate information through the quality of their in-store experience. This information is used by consumers in their decision-making related to evaluating retail stores' expertise in offering products and services, forming perceptions, and building trust on the retailer (Schneider and White, 2004; Alba and Marmorstein, 1986). Many studies in psychology field have assessed the impact of information on impression formation and consumer commitment to a brand (Ahluwalia *et al.*, 2000; Maheswaran and Meyers-Levy, 1990; Skowronski and Carlston, 1987).

This study describes in-store experience quality in forms of service encounter quality, communication quality and product encounter quality. Dyadic interaction between customers and retailers is described as service encounter (Surprenant and Solomon, 1987). Other than interpersonal element, service encounter also includes physical surroundings and self-service technology (Shostack, 1985) that is relevant in modern-era retailing formats. During the service encounter, emotional and intangible aspects of the encounter influences consumers' opinions about the retail store (Lemmink and Mattsson, 2002; Stauss and Mang, 1999). Quality of service encounter is determined by competency, dedication and effectiveness of retail staff as well as retail technologies (Chandon *et al.*, 1997). The evaluation of service encounters differ in the degree and type (outcome and process) of personalization (Surprenant and Solomon, 1987). This tends to have an impact on judging retail stores' capabilities (Jayawardhena *et al.*, 2007) and forming consumer perceptions of the retail store (e.g. Czepiel, 1990). Thus, the hypothesis is:

*H1: Customers' service encounter quality has a direct and positive influence on perceived green retail store credibility.*

Customer-retail store interactions define communication encounter for the customers in a retail store and the quality of interactions describes communication quality. This indicates formal and informal information sharing between customers and retailers in credible and meaningful manners (Anderson & Narus, 1990; Goodman & Dion, 2001). Accuracy, relevance and timeliness of information describe the quality of communication (Coote *et al.*, 2003). Customer interactions with store's points of contact determine retailing experience of customers. These

interactions develop perception and understanding of consumers towards the retailer (Harman, 1990). The enjoyable interactions and personal connection build rapport between customers and the retail stores (Gremler and Gwinner, 2000) and lead to customer satisfaction (e.g. Chen and Chen, 2010). If consumer interactions with retail-store's points of contact develop positive disposition and a personal bonding, this tends to develop a relationship of trust between consumers and retail stores. This further intends to improve trustworthiness in consumer-retail store relationship and consumers' believability on retail stores' expertise that are named are perceived retailer credibility. A vast literature has established link between communication and trust (e.g. Mohr *et al.*, 1996; Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Anderson and Narus, 1990)

Though most of the studies have focused on employee point of contact in retail store to understand impact of service experience quality on customer satisfaction (e.g. Liao and Chuang, 2004), customer -customer interactions in a retail store also affect quality of service experience (Moore *et al.*, 2005). In other words, in-store experience of fellow consumers influences perceived retail store credibility. Thus, the hypothesis is:

*H2: Communication quality in a retail store has a direct and positive influence on perceived green retail store credibility.*

Product encounter occurs in two forms: (i) customer perceived quality of product when they run a product trial themselves or witness a product trial run by the retail staff, and (ii) when they come to know the product-related experience from other customers within the store. These encounters develop functional, technical and emotional associations between customers and products as well as customers and retailers that result into assessing product usage quality. Eberle *et al.* (2013) hypothesised a relationship between consumer evaluations of communication messages and their credibility and found it significant. Also, many authors have explained how effectively showcasing functional and technical qualities of products determines trustworthiness (Coote *et al.*, 2003; Sharma and Patterson, 1999). Amount of information sharing, participation, efforts in conflict resolution and consumer satisfaction improve consumer awareness (Walker and Kent, 2013) and determine the quality consumer-retail store relationship (Lages *et al.*, 2005; Mohr and Spekman, 1994). This makes consumers familiar with retail stores' expertise in offering products/ services and improves their believability on the retail stores. In CSR context, David *et al.* (2005) determined that (corporate) expertise is helpful in increasing positive perceptions of a company. The following hypothesis is proposed:

*H3: Product encounter quality in a retail store has a direct and positive influence on perceived green retail store credibility.*

## **2.2 Customer perceptions of retailers' environmental activities**

Consumer evaluation and perceptions of corporate activities is an important antecedent of perceived corporate credibility (Speed and Thompson, 2000; MacKenzie and Lutz, 1989). Their evaluation and perceptions depends upon their direct interactions with retail stores. At times, customers gain information about the retail stores and their environmental activities from different media sources. They use the information to develop their opinion on retail stores' expertise and trustworthiness related to green products/ services and other environmental activities. Walker and Kent (2013) found that consumer awareness is found to have an effect on perceived credibility. Nonetheless, corporate credibility researchers have also argued that

individuals develop the perceived credibility of a specific aspect of a company based on its overall perceptions and images (e.g. Haley 1996; MacKenzie and Lutz, 1989). Perceived retail store credibility is also affected by consumer perceptions related to retail stores' product or service quality and their approach towards information dissemination (Fombrum 1996; Gregory 1991). Based on this, this study posits that consumer perceptions of retail stores' environmental activities may have direct effect on perceived retail store credibility or mediating effect in relationship between customer experience quality and perceived retail store credibility. Thus, the hypotheses are:

*H4: The relationship between customer experience quality (H4a: customers' service encounter quality, H4b: communication quality, H4c: product encounter quality) and perceived green retail store credibility is mediated by customer perceptions of retail stores' environmental activities.*

Consumer-possessed information related to product and retail store affects their product and store evaluation (Dodds *et al.*, 1991). When they encounter services of the store, and witness information within the store related to the retail store and/ or its products offered, their judgments related to services and information are influenced by their pre-possessed information. Thus, this study posits relationships of customer perceptions of retail stores' environmental activities with customers' service encounter quality, communication quality and product encounter quality. Thus, the hypotheses are:

*H5: Customer perceptions of retail stores' environmental activities have a direct and positive influence on customer experience quality (H5a: customers' service encounter quality, H5b: communication quality, H5c: product encounter quality).*

### **3. Methodology**

In order to test and quantify the relationships hypothesised, a questionnaire-based survey approach was adopted. A 30-item questionnaire using a five-point Likert-type scale was developed and used as an instrument that included items of relevant existing scales adopted from the literature. Nine items were used for communication quality (Menon *et al.*, 1999; Sharma and Patterson, 1999; Güdüm and Kavas, 1996; Menon *et al.*, 1996), six items for perceived service encounter quality (Jayawardhena *et al.*, 2007) and three items for product encounter quality (Keillor *et al.*, 2007). To measure perceived green retail store credibility, Newell and Goldsmith (2001)'s scale was adapted and seven items were used to measure consumer perceptions of retailers' environmental activities (Salmones *et al.*, 2005; Menon and Kahn, 2003). All the scales were modified to ensure suitability to the context in the study. Steps involved in validation of the questionnaire included obtaining reviews on the questionnaire from a panel of academic and corporate experts with suitable experience and modifying questionnaire based on their feedback, and carrying out pre-test and pilot study using the modified questionnaire. The results indicated that the instrument was understandable, interpreted appropriately, and captured consumer behaviour of interest in this investigation. To avoid non-response bias, the questionnaire was designed in a way that no sensitive or confidential information was asked for. For face validity, a pre-test with 42 consumers conveniently selected from the sampling frame was conducted. It was observed that none of the items were rated by less than 10% of the respondents.

Using purposeful random sampling and snowball sampling methods, customers who have been regularly (once in two to three months) purchasing Retail company X's products for last five years from either of the four kinds of retail store formats (e.g. brick-and-mortar store, mobile app, retailer website, retailer products available on general online stores) and have made a purchase from all the four retail formats at least once in last five years were selected for responding to questionnaire. To each respondent, one 30-item questionnaire was given for each kind of store format. The respondents were selected in Mumbai (India) irrespective of their education, profession, income, origin and other demographic characteristics. The data was collected between October 2013 and April 2015.

Out of 988 consumers contacted, a total of 356 valid responses were obtained. Demographically, the sample had equal number of males and females, within age group of 23 to 36 with minimum bachelor as academic qualification and 90% of them were working professionals. The data was analysed using exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses to identify and validate the constructs. Hypotheses testing using structural equation modelling were carried out to test the proposed relationships.

#### **4. Findings**

Using first 48 responses, a pilot study was conducted to test the reliability of the questionnaire. The questionnaire was found to be reliable with Cronbach's Alpha value as 0.887. All the respondents responded to each item of the questionnaire. Sample characteristics included profiling of consumers based on gender, age, academic qualification and professional status.

Using SPSS 20, measure for factorability of the data and variance explained were calculated. KMO was found as 0.727 and total variance explained was found as 68.3 per cent. In exploratory factor analysis, three factors were extracted after three iterations that removed four items. Further, the constructs were tested for their reliability values. Reliability value for perceived green retail store credibility (PGRC) was found as 0.899 and reliability values of its sub-constructs were: 0.855 for expertise and 0.866 for trustworthiness. Reliability values for other factors were: 0.883 for customers' service encounter quality (SEQ), 0.912 for communication quality (CQ), 0.854 for product encounter quality (PEQ) and 0.799 for customer perceptions of retailers' environmental activities (CPREA). Further, AMOS 20 was used for confirmatory factor analysis and hypotheses testing. The results produced good model fit ( $CFI=0.96$ ,  $GFI=0.92$  and  $RMSEA=0.05$ ). Hypotheses H1, H2, H3, H5a and H5b were supported at  $p<0.001$  for each of the kind of retail store formats. And, hypotheses H4a, H4b, H4c and H5c were supported at  $p<0.05$  for each of the kind of retail store formats.

Five models were tested for each kind of retail store format (table 1). Models 1 and 2 (in appendix) have approximately same explanatory power across all the four kinds of retail store formats. For model 3 (in appendix), it can be observed across retail store formats that CPREA adds to explanatory power of model 1. For models 4 (in appendix), CPREA mediates the most in 'brick-and-mortar' store format. For model 5 (in appendix), CPREA has the least impact on customers' service encounter quality, communication quality and product encounter quality in 'brick-and-mortar' store format while the most in general retail stores' websites.

Models	Retail store formats			
	Brick-and-mortar store	Mobile app	Retailer's own website	General retailers' websites
1 SEQ, CQ, PEQ → PGRC	24.3%	23.9%	25.1%	24.8%
2 CPREA → PGRC	9.5%	10.2%	8.9%	9.7%
3 SEQ, CQ, PEQ, CPREA → PGRC	34.0%	34.2%	33.9%	34.3%
4 SEQ, CQ, PEQ → CPREA → PGRC	79.2%	54.6%	59.3%	61.5%
5 CPREA → SEQ, CQ, PEQ → PGRC	51.2%	75.7%	73.5%	82.6%

Table 1: Explanatory power of conceptualised frameworks

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

The study explores how in-store customer experience is related to perceived green retail store credibility. It answers whether service encounter quality, communication quality and product encounter quality affect perceived green retail store credibility. It also answers whether customer perceptions of retail stores' environmental activities influence in-store customer experience or vice versa that ultimately has an effect on perceived green retail store credibility. For this, five models were developed and tested for each kind of retail store format. Models 3, 4 and 5 have interesting interpretations. For model 3, it can be interpreted that customers' prior knowledge and perceptions about the retail store, together with the effect of their service encounter quality, communication quality and product encounter quality, affects perceived credibility of the retail store. For model 4, customer perceptions of retail stores' environmental activities are formed after they encounter services, interact with retail staff and other customers in the store. The results of model 4 also indicate that impact of service encounter quality, communication quality and product encounter quality on consumer perceptions of retail stores' environmental activities is the most in brick-and-mortar form of store. It may be because customers first visit brick-and-mortar store, gain knowledge about the store and its product/service offerings, and later, they move to other store formats for shopping or interactions with store. In model 5, explanatory power of brick-and-mortar form of retail store is relatively low compared to other retail store formats. For model 5, it can be interpreted that customers generally download mobile app and shop on websites only if they have formed strong perceptions about retailers' environmental activities and tend to trust on retail stores' offerings. So, CPREA has a greater role in determining SEQ, CQ and PEQ to build credibility of the retail store and is seen highest in general retail stores' websites.

This study is distinct for conceptualising perceived green retail store credibility for four kinds of retail store format. In retail stores, consumers access everything in the store from product assortment and store ambience to customer reviews and feedbacks, customers' conversations with retail staffs and product trials. In online store format, customers read and access reviews written by other customers that affect their perceptions about the stores. Findings of the study are in line with literature on similar themes. For example, many studies have conceptualised what causes word-of-mouth publicity and box office revenues (Liu, 2006), online reviews and consumer awareness (Duan *et al.*, 2008) and publicity and sales (Basuroy *et al.*, 2003). Many authors (Jayawardhena, 2010; Jayawardhena *et al.*, 2007; Keillor *et al.*, 2007; Surprenant and Solomon, 1987) have supported the relationships of physical goods quality, service quality, personalisation and servicescape with customers' behavioural intentions. In retailing context, retailing facilities, ease of understanding written materials on advertisements and packaging, store ambience, minimum errors, keeping up promises, safety in transactions, satisfactory answers to customer queries, and personalised attention and product offerings tend to influence consumer perceptions about the retail stores and retail store evaluations.

The study advocates the need of improving in-store experience quality to influence consumer perceptions on retail stores' expertise on offering green products/ services and to improve consumers' trustworthiness on the retail store for its information and environmental claims. Findings of the study indicate that retail store innovativeness in offering experience to customers (service encounter quality, communication quality and product encounter quality) intends to influence customer perceptions and experience with them. Retail stores also need to put efforts in changing perceptions of consumers towards their environmental activities. This can be facilitated by offering retailing facilities that enable consumers to search information themselves, conduct trial of green products themselves and interact (directly and indirectly) with fellow consumers to seek their opinions about green products. When consumers access information with little or no interventions by staff in retail stores, they tend to believe on the information. Also, consumers tend to believe on opinion of other consumers over information delivered by the retail stores (Bickart and Schindler, 2001) and this tends to affect perceived retail store credibility in the minds of consumers. This may counter negative perceptions of customers and establish trustworthiness in their minds. Thus, it acknowledges the scope of using advanced retailing and communication technologies that facilitate many points-of-contact in retail stores.

The study is limited for its dataset as data is collected for a specific retail store and the findings cannot be generalised across industries. The data was collected from consumer population in Mumbai and the respondents might have responded to socially-acceptable responses. Future work can focus on cross-industry analysis and data which is longitudinal in nature. Examining the effect of advanced retailing and communication technologies in improving perceived green retailer credibility may offer good insights.

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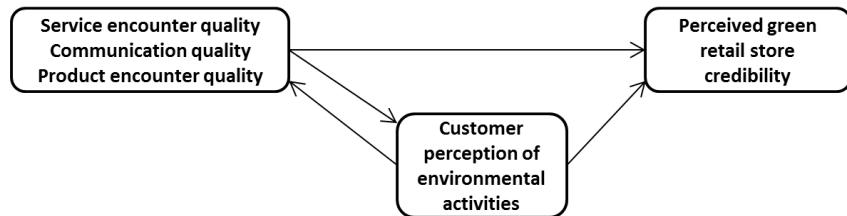
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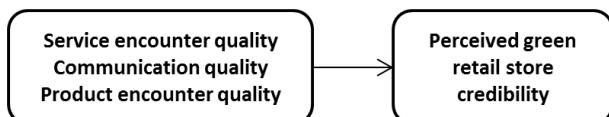
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## Appendix

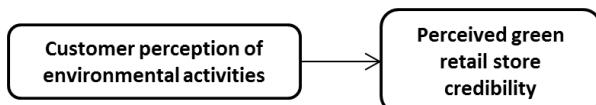
Conceptual framework:



Model 1:



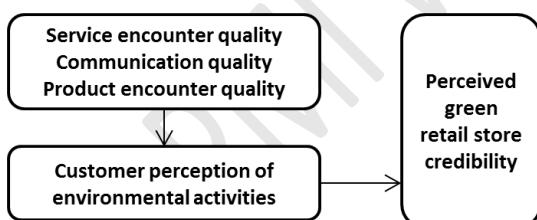
Model 2:



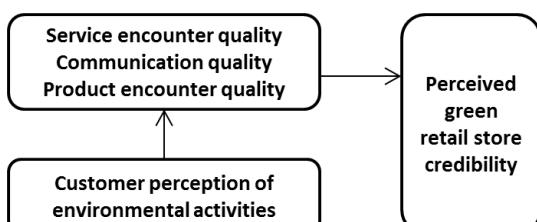
Model 3:



Model 4:



Model 5:



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#### Publications:

1. Kumar, P. (2016). State of green marketing research over 25 years (1990-2014): Literature survey and classification. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, 34 (1), 1-23 (A category journal in ABDC Journal Quality List 2013, Publisher: Emerald).
2. Kumar, P. (2015). Green marketing innovations in small Indian firms. *World Journal of Entrepreneurship, Management & Sustainable Development*, 11 (3), 176 - 190 (Publisher: Emerald).
3. Kumar, P. & Ghodeswar, B. (2015). Factors affecting green product purchase decisions. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, 33 (3), 330-347 (A category journal in ABDC Journal Quality List, Publisher: Emerald).
4. Kumar, P. (2015). Green marketing innovations in small Indian firms. *World Journal of Entrepreneurship, Management & Sustainable Development*, 11 (3) (in press) (Publisher: Emerald).
5. Kumar, P. & Ghodeswar, B. (2015). Green marketing mix: A review of literature and direction for future research. *International Journal of Asian Business & Information Management*, 6 (3), 39-55 (Publisher: IGI-Global).
6. Kumar, P. (2014). Greening retail: An Indian experience. *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management*, 42 (7), 613-625 (B category journal in ABDC Journal Quality List, Publisher: Emerald).
7. Ghodeswar, B. & Kumar, P. (2014). A study on green marketing practices in Indian companies. *International Journal of Applied Management Science & Engineering*, 1 (2), 46-64 (Publisher: IGI-Global).

#### Working Paper:

1. **Prashant Kumar (2016):** A normalised citation and profiling analysis of green consumer research from 1975 to 2014. Working paper submitted by him was accepted and published by TAPMI under its working series during Feb 2016.