AN EVALUATION OF THE WALK-IN AND ONLINE COUNTERPARTS OF THE LEADING US STORES

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ABSTRACT

This article describes ten major US stores on six dimensions of customer satisfaction. These stores are Costco, Kohl's, JC Penny, Target, Macy's, Meijer, Sears, Sam's Club, Kmart, and Walmart. The customer satisfaction dimensions are quality, selection, value, checkout, service, and layout. These ten leading walk-in stores were evaluated by 55,108 customers, and their online counterparts were evaluated by 26,344 customers. Statistical techniques like cluster analysis and principal components analysis are utilized to summarize, analyze, and describe this information for a better understanding of customers' perceptions and evaluations of the leading walk-in stores and their online counterparts. The customers rated Costco the highest and Walmart the lowest among the ten major stores evaluated here. Further, the customers consistently rated the online stores higher in overall satisfaction than their walk-in counterparts.

INTRODUCTION

The US household consumption is about 70 percent of the US Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Retail sales account for about 35 percent of the US economy. US households spend less than one third of their earnings on retail purchases, the rest are spent on services and medical care (Weil, 2013). The retail sector is an important source of jobs in the US economy and it experiences seasonal fluctuations in sales and employment.

Background and Overview on Bricks-and-Mortar and Online Retailing

Interest in the relationship between traditional in-store shopping experiences and online shopping has been keen among researchers since the rise of the Internet. For example, Avery et al. (2012) report that online stores can help expand overall sales by adding brick and mortar stores to their channel as new in-store customers tend to then shop at the firm's online offer as well. They also report that the online channel hurts catalog sales. Additionally, Schramm, Swoboda, and Morschett (2007) confirm differences in motives between brick and mortar and online shoppers. Regarding the characteristics that influence satisfaction in online shopping, Xiaoying, Kwek Choon, and Min (2012) report that website design, security, information quality, payment method, e-service quality, product quality, product variety and delivery service are positively related to consumer satisfaction towards online shopping in China. As for vendors who offer both online and traditional shopping, some evidence suggests this is a good thing for shoppers. For example, Fernando et al. (2008) demonstrate that consumers are generally better off with clicks-and-mortar retailers, at least in oligopolistic markets. If such firms align with pure e-tailers to reach the online market, their research shows that a "prisoner's dilemma-type equilibrium may arise."(p. 671).

It is also the case that there is an increasing interest in whether and how customer satisfaction affects future firm behavior in both online and in-store formats. Fornell, Rust, and Dekimpe (2010) show that consumer satisfaction is a leading predictor of future sales, though the amount of increased spending resulting from higher satisfaction is mitigated by other factors as well. Ginafranco et al. (2010) find that relationship quality is similarly important for retaining customers in online and traditional retailing settings. In contrast, Jifeng, Sulin, and Han (2012) suggest high levels of customer dissatisfaction with online retail encounters can hurt customer loyalty and find that increased service quality and better web design can help qualm high levels of product uncertainty among consumers. Similarly, Seiji, Jun, and JungKun (2012) find that e-satisfaction for online purchases is enhanced by two factors: increased selection in the pre-purchase stage and service quality in the post-purchase stage. Taken together, these studies suggest there is interest in and important implications for studying the relationship between customer satisfaction and its effects on traditional versus online retail formats.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Retailing at best is always a difficult business proposition: success breeds competition and later entrants often have the advantages of studying and learning from early mover learning curves. The woes of Best Buy are typical of such trends. Once the clear market leader in consumer electronics, Best Buy has of late seen losses in both market share and profits (Reisinger 2011, Cheng 2013). In many cases the trends are difficult to understand and come from a myriad of factors. For example, while on the one hand the closing of Circuit City created gains for Best Buy, it also gave a chance for other retailers to compete for that business. Even more, the advent of online shopping has negated some of such category-killers inventory advantages as online inventory costs far less to display and can benefit from just in time order placement directly to the consumer's door. As such, firms like Best Buy not only face competition from well-heeled rivals like Target and Wal-Mart; they must respond to the increasing threats from the online offers from these firms as well as those of others (Bhasin 2013).

It is within this context that recent research on customer satisfaction with leading chain stores has received new interest (Blair 2012, Hess 2013, Norman 2012). Of these, Blair (2012) reports on the recent *Consumer Reports* (2012) survey of its subscribers' satisfaction with the 10 major US retailers. But *Consumer Reports* (CR) is not the only organization measuring satisfaction. The CR survey is noteworthy because of the total market share these top walk-in chains command, but it is worth recognizing that these same firms rarely lead customer satisfaction rankings overall. For example, Norman (2012) notes that Amazon.com tops the survey of customer satisfaction sponsored by American Express and the National Retail Federation Foundation, whose posted top ten list includes only two of the top retailers surveyed by CR: Kohl's and JC Penney (NFR Foundation 2012). Alternatively, in a Temkin (a national analytics company) survey of customer satisfaction and service, "[o]ut of the top ten companies, six were grocery store chains or subsidiaries – Publix, Hy-Vee, H.E.B., Winn-Dixie, ShopRite and Aldi (Insight 2013). The remaining spots were taken up by credit unions (in general), Chick-fil-A, Sam's Club and Starbucks." (Insight 2013). Even more, Hess (2013) takes a somewhat different 180 degree look at customer satisfaction by looking at the 9 *worst* retailer ratings and here only one of the *CR* survey's makes the list: Wal-Mart. Still, while not exhaustive of either the customer satisfaction in retailing literature nor what factors make smaller stores (and some of them still quite large in terms of sales) more competitive, the *CR* survey is important to analyze

in greater depth in order to identify the underlying dimensions of customer satisfaction with leading chain stores.

As noted above, it is possible to select other stores to survey but the *CR* survey has a number of advantages. First, all of the firms in the *CR* survey are growing (Top 100 Retailers 2012). While other firms surveyed elsewhere may be larger, they may be shrinking and/or losing market share to one or more of the *CR* survey firms, as in the Best Buy example above. Second, the firms in the *CR* survey are among some of the most visited stores in the US and a mix of national and regional chains. For example, Walmart claims about 38.8% of the total US population among its customers (America's Most Popular Stores 2013). As such, knowledge of their level of customer satisfaction may be of broader interest than for stores with a narrower customer base. Third, the size of the *CR* survey (over 55,000 in store shoppers and over 26,000 online shoppers) provides a large dataset from which to compare in-store and online shopping experiences. Fourth, while sales from online vendors still account for only about 6 percent of all retail sales, the growth in online sales is very strong – at about 300 percent since 2004 (Jones 2013). And most recently, though overall retail sales for the start of the holiday season this year are slightly below last year's figures, the so-called "Cyber-Monday" sales (the Monday following Thanksgiving) was up 20 percent over last year, setting a sales record for the fourth straight year in a row (Kucera 2013). For these reasons, a more detailed examination and analysis of the *CR* Survey results is of interest to those studying the relationship of retailing and customer satisfaction of retailers competing in both the brick and mortar and online space.

Research Questions

The following research questions (RQ) are investigated in this study.

> *RQ1.* *How do the major chain stores compare on the shoppers' overall satisfaction ratings of their walk-in and online counterparts?*

> *RQ2.* *Are there differences between the shoppers' overall satisfaction ratings of major walk-in stores and their online counterparts?*

> *RQ3.* *What are the underlying dimensions of shoppers' overall satisfaction ratings of major chain stores?*

> *RQ4.* *Do the underlying dimensions of shoppers' overall satisfaction ratings of major chain stores vary across walk-in versus online chain stores?*

> *RQ5.* *What are the underlying clusters of the leading chain stores for their walk-in and online counterparts?*

STATISTICAL ANALYSES AND RESULTS

This section describes the sample, the variables in the data set, and conducts various statistical analyses to address the research questions.

Sample Description

The data for this study were obtained by the *CR's* National Research Center that surveyed its subscribers in the spring of 2011. The data consisted of 55,108 subscribers' valuations of the

ten major walk-in chain stores, and 26,344 subscribers' evaluations of the retailers' online stores. Additional information, like the number of stores and their sales for these ten major chain stores, was current as of January 2012 (America's top stores, 2012). The major chain stores are: Costco, Kohl's, J. C. Penny, Target, Macy's, Meijer, Sam's Club, Sears, Kmart, and Walmart. *CR* utilized 5-point bipolar adjectives to measure quality, selection, value, checkout, service, and layout. We used the R statistical software to analyze this sample.

The *CR's* readers' overall satisfaction ratings of the walk-in and online counterparts of these ten retail stores and additional information is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: An Overview of Stores				
Stores	No. of Walk-in Stores	Average Customer Satisfaction with Walk-in Stores (W.Sc), maximum score = 100.	Average Customer Satisfaction with Online Stores (O.Sc), maximum score = 100.	Sales (2012, in $ millions)
Costco	432	84	88	105,156
Kohl's	1127	81	84	19,279
JCP	1100	80	82	35,395
Target	1767	79	80	73,301
Macys	810	78	82	27,686
Meijer	200	78	NA	9,801
Sam's Club*	610	77	79	54,000
Sears	2196	77	77	48,024
Kmart*	1300	71	NA	6,388
Walmart	3790	71	77	469,162
*Revenues for Sam's Club are also reported in Walmart's earnings, comprising just under 12% of its sales. The same is true for Kmart as a subsidiary of Sears.				

Table 1 addresses RQ_1 and RQ_2.

> *RQ_1.   How do the major chain stores compare on the shoppers' overall satisfaction ratings of their walk-in and online counterparts?*

Table 1 shows that among these ten stores, Costco earned the highest ratings for its walk-in and online stores, Target was in the middle, and Sears, Kmart, and Walmart were rated lowest.

> *RQ_2.   Are there differences between the shoppers' overall satisfaction ratings of major walk-in stores and their online counterparts?*

The rank order of ratings for walk-in stores is almost consistent with that of their online counterparts. The customers rated the online stores higher than their walk-in counterparts with the exception of Sears for which the walk-in and the online counterparts were rated equally. There appears to be a strong positive correlation between the ratings of walk-in stores and their online counterparts.

In addition to the overall satisfaction ratings of the walk-in and online counterparts of the retailers under study, the *CR* subscribers also evaluated these retailers on their quality, selection, value, checkout, service, and layout. Table 2 lists the labels and descriptions of these six underlying dimensions which answers RQ_3. The same six underlying dimensions were measured for the walk-in stores and for their online counterparts in this study.

RQ₃.   *What are the underlying dimensions of shoppers' overall satisfaction ratings of major chain stores?*

Table 2: Description of Variables for Customers' Evaluations		
	CR Readers' Walk-in Store Scores	*CR* Readers' Online Store Scores
Response Variables	W.Sc: Overall Score for Walk-in Stores	O.Sc: Overall Score for Online Stores
Predictor Variables	W.Ql: Quality for Walk-in Store W.Se: Selection for Walk-in Store W.Va: Value for Walk-in Store W.Ch: Checkout for Walk-in Store W.Sv: Service for Walk-in Store W.La: Layout for Walk-in Store	O.Ql: Quality for Online Store O.Se: Selection for Online Store O.Va: Value for Online Store O.Ch: Checkout for Online Store O.Sv: Service for Online Store O.La: Layout for Online Store

The underlying dimensions of the *CR* subscribers' average ratings of their overall satisfaction scores for the walk-in stores are given in Table 3 and for their online counterparts are given in Table 4.

RQ₄.   *Do the underlying dimensions of shoppers' overall satisfaction ratings of major chain stores vary across walk-in versus online chain stores?*

This question is answered in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3. Customers' Aggregate Evaluations of Walk-in Stores						
Store	W.Ql	W.Se	W.Va	W.Ch	W.Sv	W.La
Costco	5	2	4	2	2	4
Kohls	3	3	4	3	3	4
JCP	4	3	3	3	3	3
Target	3	3	3	3	3	4
Macys	4	3	3	3	3	4
Meijer	3	3	3	2	3	4
Sams	4	1	3	1	2	4
Sears	4	3	3	3	3	4
Kmart	2	2	2	2	2	3
Walmart	2	2	3	1	1	3

Table 4. Customers' Aggregate Evaluations of Online Stores						
Store	O.Ql	O.Se	O.Va	O.Ch	O.Sv	O.La
Costco	5	3	5	5	3	5
Kohls	4	3	4	4	4	4
JCP	4	3	4	4	3	3
Target	4	4	4	4	3	3
Macys	4	4	4	4	3	4
Meijer*	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Sams	4	2	4	4	2	3
Sears	4	4	3	3	2	3
Kmart*	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Walmart	3	3	4	4	3	3
*Customer responses were too few for a meaningful analysis for Meijer and Kmart.						

An examination of Tables 3 and 4 indicates that the underlying dimensions vary by walk-in stores versus their online counterparts. Generally, the customers rated online stores higher on most underlying dimensions than their walk-in counterparts. For example, the online Costco store was rated higher on every underlying dimension than its walk-in counterpart. Similarly, the online Walmart store was rated higher on most dimensions than its walk-in counterpart. This result for the six underlying dimensions of overall satisfaction is consistent with the respondents' overall satisfaction ratings for the walk-in stores and their online counterparts as discussed in RQ_1 and RQ_2.

| Table 5. Seven Point Summary of Variables							
Variables	Min.	Ist Qu.	Median	Mean	3rd Qu.	Max	NA's
W.Sc	71	77	78	77.6	79.8	84	
W.Ql	2	3	3.5	3.4	4	5	
W.Se	1	2	3	2.5	3	3	
W.Va	2	3	3	3.1	3	4	
W.Ch	1	2	2.5	2.3	3	3	
W.Sv	1	2	3	2.5	3	3	
W.La	3	3.25	4	3.7	4	4	
O.Sc	77	78.5	81	81.1	82.5	88	2
O.Ql	3	4	4	4	4	5	2
O.Se	2	3	3	3.25	4	4	2
O.Va	3	4	4	4	4	5	2
O.Ch	3	4	4	4	4	5	2
O.Sv	2	2.75	3	2.88	3	4	2
O.La	3	3	3	3.5	4	5	2
W.Stores	200	660	1114	1333	1650	3790	
*Both O.Va and O.Ch have the same average values, so the correlation between them is 1.							

Table 5 summarizes all of the variables for the ten chain stores under study. More than twice as many *CR* subscribers (55,108) evaluated the ten walk-in chain stores than did (26,344) their online counterparts. Compared with the walk-in stores, the data for their online counterparts had two limitations. First, there were insufficient responses for a meaningful analysis of the online counterparts of Meijer and Kmart as represented by NA's. Second, the customers' evaluations for Value and Checkout were identical for all online stores in this study.

Data Reduction: Cluster Analyses and Principal Components Analyses

An agglomerative cluster analysis was performed using the complete linkage method and the six underlying dimensions of the respondents' overall satisfaction, namely, quality, selection, value, checkout, service, and layout. This cluster analysis was performed for the walk-in stores and separately for their online counterparts. A two cluster solution was plotted in a two dimensional space using the first two principal components for walk-in stores and separately for their online counterparts. These results are given in Figure 1 and Table 6. Figure 1 and Table 6 address RQ_5.

> *RQ_5.   What are the underlying clusters of the leading chain stores for their walk-in and online counterparts?*

**Figure 1. Store Displays in Cluster Analysis Plots and in Principal Components Space:
Walk-in Stores and their Online Counterparts.**
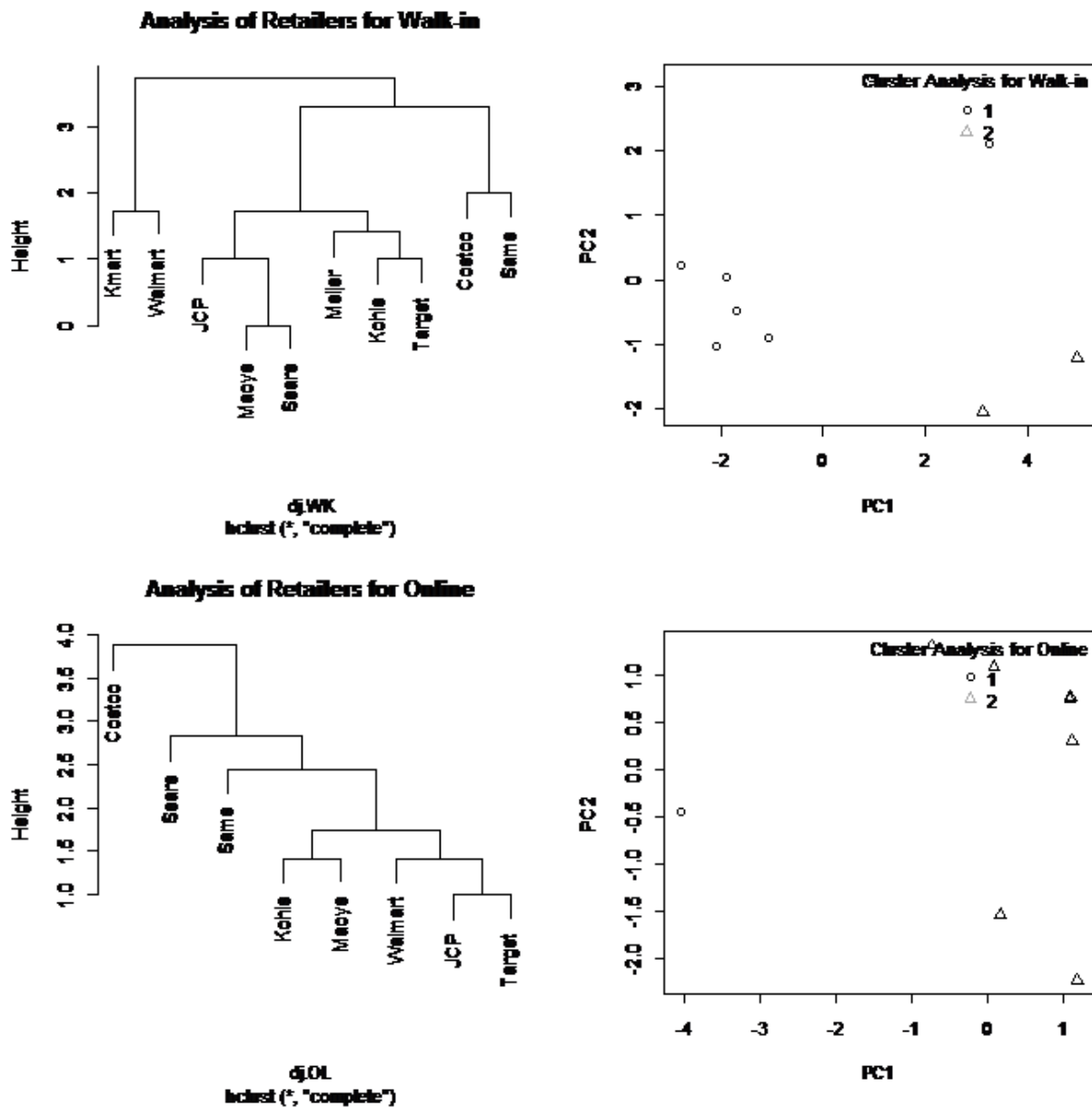
Walk-in Stores

Figure 1 presents four plots. The top two plots represent, respectively, a cluster analysis of the walk-in stores and their two-cluster solution in the first two principal components space. Table 6 presents this information in numerical form and can be used to interpret the plots in Figure 1. Figure 1 generates many cluster solutions and here we preset two-cluster and three-cluster solutions for the walk-in stores:

A two-cluster solution: (The principal components plot: Cluster #1 as circles and Cluster #2 as triangles)
    Cluster #1: Costco, Sam's Club, JC Penny, Macy's, Sears, Meijer, Kohl's, Target.
    Cluster #2: Kmart and Walmart

A three-cluster solution:
    Cluster #1: Costco and Sam's Club
    Cluster #2: JC Penny, Macy's, Sears, Meijer, Kohl's, Target,
    Cluster #3: Kmart and Walmart,

The first two principal components of the two-cluster solution in the upper-right-hand side of Figure 1 can be interpreted as follows:

The first principal component (PC1) displays Walmart, Kmart, and Sam's Club on the right hand side and Macy's, Sears, and Target on the left hand side.

The second principal component (PC2) displays Costco (followed by Sam's Club) at the top and Kmart (followed by Walmart) at the bottom.

This principal components plot shows Kmart and Walmart together (triangles) in the Southeast corner, Costco's in the North, Sam's Club in the Northeast, and the rest of the stores (JC Penny, Macy's, Sears, Meijer, Kohl's, and Target) are clustered together in the West.

Table 6: Cluster Analysis and Principal Components Analysis	
Walk-in Stores	**Online Stores**

Call:
hclust(d = dj.WK)
 	
Cluster method   : complete
Distance   : euclidean
Number of objects: 10
 	
          PC1   PC2
Costco 0.9508 3.13474
Kohls -1.7089 -0.48251
JCP   -1.8771 0.04397
Target -2.0936 -1.03971
Macys -2.7868 0.21376
Meijer -1.0531 -0.90612
Sams   3.2584 2.10922
Sears -2.7868 0.21376
Kmart   3.1249 -2.06208
Walmart 4.9721 -1.22504
 	
    PC1   PC2
 Min. :-2.79 Min.   :-2.062
 1st Qu.:-2.04 1st Qu.:-1.006
 Median :-1.38 Median :-0.219
 Mean   : 0.00 Mean   : 0.000
 3rd Qu.: 2.58 3rd Qu.: 0.214
 Max.   : 4.97 Max.   : 3.135
	Call:
	hclust(d = dj.OL)
	
	Cluster method : complete
	Distance : euclidean
	Number of objects: 8
	
	           PC1 PC2
	Costco -4.0540 -0.4385
	Kohls -0.7355 1.3047
	JCP 1.1058 0.7649
	Target 1.0937 0.7380
	Macys 0.0959 1.0795
	Sams 0.1755 -1.5255
	Sears 1.1900 -2.2192
	Walmart 1.1286 0.2961
	
	    PC1 PC2
	 Min. :-4.054 Min. :-2.219
	 1st Qu.:-0.112 1st Qu.:-0.710
	 Median : 0.635 Median : 0.517
	 Mean : 0.000 Mean : 0.000
	 3rd Qu.: 1.112 3rd Qu.: 0.844
	 Max. : 1.190 Max. : 1.305

Online Counterpart Stores

The bottom two plots in Figure 1 respectively represent a cluster analysis of the online counterpart stores and their two-cluster solution plot in the first two principal components space. Table 6 presents this information in numerical form and can be used to interpret the plots in Figure 1. Meijer and Kmart are not included in the online counterpart store analysis since there was not sufficient data for these two stores. Figure 1 generates many cluster solutions and here we preset two-cluster and three-cluster solutions for the online counterpart stores:

A two-cluster solution: (The principal components plot: Cluster #1 as circles and Cluster #2 as triangles)
        Cluster #1: Costco
        Cluster #2: Sears, Sam's Club, Kohl's, Macy's, Walmart, JC Penny, and Target.

A three-cluster solution:
        Cluster #1: Costco
        Cluster #2: Sears
        Cluster #3: Sam's Club, Kohl's, Macy's, Walmart, JC Penny, and Target.

The first two principal components of the two-cluster solution in the lower right-hand-side of Figure 1 can be interpreted as follows:

The first principal component (PC1) displays Costco on the left hand side and JC Penny, Sears, Target, and Walmart on the right hand side.

The second principal component (PC2) displays Kohl's and Macy's at the top and Sears and Sam's Club at the bottom.

This principal components plot shows Sears and Sam's Club (triangles) in the Southeast corner, Costco in the West, Kohl's and Macy's in the North, and JC Penny, Target, and Walmart cluster together in the Northeast corner.

CONCLUSION

This paper presents empirical evaluations of customer satisfaction with ten large US walk-in stores and the online counterparts for eight of them based on two large samples of the readers of *CR.* These findings are preliminary in nature and they should be replicated for generalizability. This study utilized aggregate data so the results are valid for the average respondent. This study asked five research questions and obtained insightful information by answering these research questions. Some main points are presented here:

1. Customers evaluated both walk-in stores and their online counterparts.
2. Customers provided their overall satisfaction with retail stores and also their underlying dimensions of overall satisfaction.
3. Six underlying dimensions of overall customer satisfaction are quality, selection, value, checkout, service, and layout.
4. Shoppers consistently rated the major walk-in stores lower than their online counterparts in their overall satisfaction and also for their six underlying dimensions of satisfaction.

5. Shoppers rated Costco the highest and Walmart the lowest in overall evaluation and also in their six underlying dimensions of satisfaction.
6. A low dimensional solution (using cluster analysis and principal components analysis) is helpful to summarize and interpret the data set for walk-in stores and also for their online counterparts.

Among the conclusions that can be drawn is that the relatively low level of customer satisfaction manifest in a Walmart may be partially offset by its practice of the low cost leadership strategy. As has been surmised elsewhere, consumers may be expecting less satisfaction in exchange for lower prices (Hess 2013). By contrast, the higher levels of satisfaction experienced by higher cost competitors may be evidence of successful non-price competition.

From a competitive analysis perspective, the relative weakness of firms "in the middle" in terms of customer satisfaction maybe more ominous: lacking the compensatory advantage of the lowest price, these firms maybe the most vulnerable to attacks on their market share. To the extent that online customers report higher levels of satisfaction, these brick and mortar "middle" retailers may be more vulnerable to nimble online retailers than has been previously documented. This is certainly a possibility for Best Buy (Reisinger 2011) and future research on the firms studied here should investigate whether in fact so-called "middle" firms do indeed tend to lose market share from new online competitors. Other authors (for example, Ries & Ries 2005) present powerful arguements for the demise of businesses that exist in the "mushy middle."

FUTURE RESEACH

This study is essentially empirical in nature and future researchers should develop and test theoretical models of customer satisfaction with their retail experiences. However, this study offers interesting insights into the perceptions of shoppers in comparing their walk-in and online shopping experiences. Future researchers should further analyze this and other data using sophisticated techniques like correspondence analysis to simultaneously present the variables and stores in a low dimensional space to facilitate interpretation and explanation of customer perceptions and evaluations. Future researchers should also utilize robust techniques like Partial Least Squares that do not require restrictive distributional assumptions and can provide robust results even for small samples.

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