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ABSTRACT

The growing shift to niche strategies has created a need for context specific research to address issues faced by today's marketing manager and to determine whether longstanding consumer self-concept issues are pertinent in niche markets. Regarding the context of retailing and the ability of retailers to serve the desires of individual self-identities, streams of research regarding consumer self-concept, store image, service quality, loyalty, and share of wallet have been prominent in research. However, to the best of our knowledge, these concepts have not been concurrently empirically examined in a niche market context. This study addresses this gap by examining the relationship between self-concept, store image, service quality, loyalty, and share of wallet in a high-end niche retail market. This research meets the growing need to investigate concepts relevant to meeting the desires of idiosyncratic individual self-identities in niche markets.

A high-end outdoor retail store in the Midwestern US that sells a variety of items pertaining to backpacking, camping, mountain climbing allowed the researchers access to 1000 established customers with a history of repeat purchases, contained on their email database. The store is exclusive to the outdoor enthusiast category and does not sell unrelated items. A survey was developed to obtain the data for this research as well as other data requested by the retailer. The hypotheses were tested by examining the structural model. There is a positive relationship between self-concept and store image. Store image is positively related with loyalty. However, we did not find evidence that actual self-concept is significantly related to service quality perceptions. Service quality is positively related with loyalty and loyalty is positively related with share of wallet.

Probably the most surprising outcome of this research is the lack of a significant relationship between consumers' self-concept and service quality. Three explanations may account for the inability of this study to find such an association. First, it is plausible that consumers who frequent high-end specialty stores assume service quality will be higher than other non-niche stores who may offer similar but lower-quality products as disconfirmation may be driven primarily by product quality evaluations in a high-end retail context. This perception may persist as long as high quality products are present and not offset by egregious service failures. Second, the service quality measure used for this study may have been somewhat limited as it was a broad measure of service quality perceptions. An investigation into more specific dimensions of

service quality may provide further insight into how self-concept affects service quality judgements. Finally, the actual process of measuring service quality may have primed a more critical mindset, possibly reducing variance when measuring service quality. However, an examination of the data revealed that this is the least likely explanation since a negativity bias was not evident. A more plausible explanation from psychology literature might come from confirmation bias which posits that individuals seek information that confirms their beliefs. It is plausible that respondents evaluated the service quality as consistently high due to the desire to reinforce that shopping at said retailer was a good decision.

This study reinforces self-concept relationships in a niche-retail context. It seems reasonable to conclude that loyalty and share of wallet can be enhanced by improving customer service perceptions. However, the magnitude of this relationship was the smallest of all significant relationships. This suggests that other factors may play a more critical role or that boundary conditions may exist in regards to the relationship between service quality and loyalty in a niche retail context. In the context of a high-end niche sporting goods retailer, store image seemed to serve as a more profound driver of loyalty. Consumers' actual self-concept was shown to hold a clear positive association with store image in the high-end niche category.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Gary R. Holmes received his PhD from the University of North Texas and is an Associate Professor of Business Marketing in the School of Business, at University of North Texas at Dallas. He has nine years of experience in bank services marketing. His research has appeared in Journals such as *International Journal of Advertising*, *Journal of Current Issues and Research in Advertising*, *Journal of Product and Brand Management*, *Journal of Promotion Management*, and *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, among others.

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