DETERMINANTS OF CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE CREATION IN RETAIL INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT

Retailing is one of the channel structure which has distributed goods and services to the consumers all over the world. In the past few years, Malaysian retailing maintained a positive performance despite softening economic conditions. This scenario has reduced spending confidence among lower-income consumers, higher-income consumers seemed to be unaffected as many to continue to indulge in luxury purchases. Moreover, major retailers have sped up the expansion of new outlets and act aggressively in their marketing strategies to ensure they can stimulate demand and encourage people to spend. However, during the year 2016, modern retailers saw more intense competition and faced huge declines in their performance. According to Retail Group Malaysia, they have downgraded Malaysia's 2016 retail sales growth to 3% from 3.5%, after third quarters on year 1.9% sales rise came in below market forecast. The report also stated that, year 2017 will be a challenging year for the country's retailers, as consumers contended with costlier goods and services amid a weaker ringgit. Therefore, customer experience will play an importance role in this situation whereby it will provide a great experience to the consumers while they are shopping in the retail store. Thus, the purpose of this research is to examine the drivers (service interface, retail atmosphere, assortments) which influence customer experience creation in retail industry in Malaysia. Due to this, retailers in Malaysia need to ensure they can provide a great experience to the consumers rather than focus on their marketing strategies because with a great experience consumer gain from retailers, then it will contribute huge numbers in their sales performance as before.

Keywords: Customer Experience, Service Interface, Retail Atmosphere, Assortments

INTRODUCTION

Since year 2000, there was a lot of international retailers come and invest their business in Malaysia. Some notable mentions include Tesco, Jusco, Carrefour, Cold Storage and Sam's Groceria. These players tend to establish their stores especially in a developing city of Malaysia such as Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Johor Bahru and Selangor due to the higher purchase power in that city. Truth to be told, these international retailers have seen big opportunities in Malaysia as consumers have shown a high preference for international brands. Furthermore, Malaysia has a combined population of over 30 million people (Department of Statistics, Malaysia). Because of its central location, between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, Malaysia has traditionally been a meeting point for traders from both East and West. Thus, it is easy for them to generate their profit and compete each other to ensure who can be the best and favourite retailer among consumers.

As everyone know, retailing is the activities directly related to the sale of goods and services to the ultimate consumer for personal and non-business use. Ultimate consumer here representing the people or end users who have high purchasing power and buying decision to satisfy their needs and preferences. Besides that, retailing activities also have contributed to the positive growth in terms of GDP in this country and at the same time, it also has reduced the number of unemployment. However, from the consumer perspectives, even there are a lot of international and local retailers which are operated their business daily, somehow still have consumers who always complaint about the goods and services that they have received or bought. The reason is the goods or services cannot be fulfilled their preferences and this will contribute to the high consumers cognitive dissonance. Currently, the cost of living and economic condition also has donated to this issue and most of Malaysian consumers have switched their buying pattern. Due to this, since year 2015 to 2016 there are poor performance of retail sales in the major retailers as long as small retailers.

Based on the Malaysia Retail Industry, they have reported a disappointing growth rate of 1.9% in retail sales, as compared to the same period in 2015 (Table 1.1). This third quarter of year 2016 result was below market expectation whereby it was 68% lower than the estimate made by members of Malaysia Retailers Association (MRA) in August 2016 (at 5.9%), (Retail Group Malaysia, 2016).

Table 1.1

TABLE 1 : YEAR ON YEAR PERCENTAGE CHANGE IN RETAIL SALES (WEIGHTED), 2015/16		
Type	Period	% growth
Retail sales	Oct-Dec 2015	1.3
	Jan-Mar 2016	-4.4
	Apr-Jun 2016	7.5
	Jul-Sep 2016	1.9
	Oct-Dec 2016	**0.3**
	Jan-Dec 2016	**1.7**

Source : MRA/ Retail Group Malaysia

Parallel to that, based on the table 1.1 also stated that for the fourth quarter of 2016, Malaysia retail industry suffered another sharp drop in retail sales with a growth rate of 0.3% as compared to the same period in 2015. This latest quarterly result also was way below the market expectation. It was 95% below an estimation which was made by members of MRA in November 2016. Besides that, this last quarter's growth rate in 2016 was a let-down taking into consideration the low growth rate of 1.3% during the same period in 2015 (MRA/Retail Group Malaysia).

In addition, according to the Retail Group Malaysia, they have stated that, for year 2017, it projected a 5% growth in the nation's retail sales in anticipation of "significant recovery" during the second half of the year. The first half is, however, expected to be tough for retailers as consumers curb spending. Moreover, as the economy is not expected to recover strongly in the immediate term, Malaysian consumers are expected to hold back on their spending during the first half of the year 2017. At the same time, cost of living of average Malaysians will continue to rise including foods and beverages, medical, transportation, school fees and nurseries for their children and another routine cost and expenses. In time, the continued weakening of the ringgit will impact the costs of retail goods and affected the cost of large number of retail goods which have been sold locally. Retailers may be forced to raise prices, including prices of foods and beverages, household goods as well as other daily necessities again during the first 6 months of next year (Retail Group Malaysia, 2016). Hence, Malaysian consumers are expecting to be cautious in their spending on retail goods during the first half of year 2017 due to the cost of living has risen.

Apart from that, retailers in this country also have suffered from aggressive price promotions that originally sought to stimulate consumer demand and lure consumers away from the outlets of their competitors. To ensure they can sustained their business for the long-term, these retailers have also sought to work on improving their product portfolios and this has led them to import more foreign brands so to ensure better alignment with the ever-changing needs of consumers. As a result, several of Malaysia's leading chained grocery retailers have also slowed the pace of their expansion, while some also closed-down underperforming outlets in 2016. Thus, this is the starting point whereby creating a great customer experience among consumers will slowly solve this phenomenon rather than focusing on marketing activities such as price promotion.

Hence, as a key player in the retail industry, retailers must know that making memorable customer experience is not as straightforward as we do like. Customer preferences and behaviour are constantly changing, and retailers must keep up to maintain ideally and stay ahead for all these changes. According to CEI Survey, about 86% of buyers are willing to pay more for a better customer experience. So, it shows that many business organizations believe a good experience is critical to success. In addition, customer experience is a multi-faceted effort, it is imperative for business to realize that customer experience is fundamentally about the human experience. Retailers need to concern about their products and services which can bring happiness, comfort, relief, and many more to their customer.

According to Robert Johnston and Xiangyu Kong (2011), some of the first writers to address the concept of customer experience are Pine and Gilmore (1998 and 1999). In their paper in 1998; "Welcome to the Experience Economy", Pine and Gilmore observed that as services are becoming more commoditized pioneering companies are competing on experience. This show that, nowadays, services has become a vital part and the business organization must pay full attention towards services which received by their customers even they are selling products or goods. As a fine solution, retailers need to compete in terms of customer experience in order to provide full satisfaction to their customer and boost up their retail sales performance. Furthermore, anything that is service (or product) that a customer is buying or receiving, that customer will having experience of good, bad or indifferent with the service given, (Carbone and Haeckel, 1994). It means that, whatever customers received either the services or goods which they have bought from the company, it always comes with an experience for them either good or bad depends on their perception. According to Prof. Dr. Philipp "Phil" Klaus, what matters to customers is how the customer experiences the extended process of acquiring, integrating and deploying that which is necessary for them to attain their aspirations and higher order goal, that is value in use. Therefore, this research is aims to examined the relationship between the drivers (Service Interface, Retail Atmosphere, Assortments) which influence customer experience creation in retail industry and to identify to what extend these drivers influence customer experience creation. Due to that, hypothesis was developed and tested as follows:

> *H1: there is a positive significant relationship between the drivers and customer experience creation in retail industry*
> *H0: there is no positive significant relationship between the drivers and customer experience creation in retail industry*

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Customer Experience

Customer experience is a measuring strategy to make the customer feel the impact of the services that have been provided by the business organizations. Schmitt (1999), has explored how companies create experiential marketing by having customers sense, feel, think, act and relate to a company and its brands. So, to create the satisfactory experience towards the customers, the company needs to orchestrate all the "clues" that people detect in the buying process, (And, Berry, Carbone, and Haeckel, 2002). This is because, experience is one of the element which based on the personal judgement from the consumers either good or bad depend on the offerings that they are offered by the retailers. As an example, when the consumers want to buy something on the retail store, they will consider and evaluate all the elements or factors surrounding them such as ambient, arrangement of the products, the availability of the information and services, price tagging, the friendliness of the staff and many more. So, it is not just about the products or brands. Gentile, Spiller, and Noci (2007), defined customer experience is originated from a set of interactions between a customer and a product, a company, or part of it company, which provoke a reaction. This experience is strictly personal and implies the customer's involvement at different levels (rational, emotional, sensorial, physical, and spiritual)". Another definition that related according to Meyer and Schwager, (2007), "Customer Experience is the internal and subjective response customers have to any direct or indirect contact with a company. Direct contact generally occurs in the course of purchase, use, and service and it is usually initiated by the customer. In contrast, indirect contact most often involves unplanned encounters with representatives of a company's products, service or brands and takes the form of word-of-mouth recommendations or criticisms, advertising, news reports, reviews and so forth". Furthermore, the interaction starts from the first human behavior which is sees the advertisement, follow by the process of buying, and lastly when the customers experience it by using the services (or product). Hence, the researchers believed that all the process or the activities which was included in the buying process before or after purchased which has made by most people around the globe will affect their personal experience towards the companies itself. This is not just about the marketing strategies which was decided internally within the companies and applied externally with the goal to capture or attract the consumer's attention. "Experience" is the core element within the consumer to ensure that they can be loyal and stick to the companies even the conditions of marketing strategies are not met.

2.2 Service Interface

As a business operated worldwide through retailing industry, retailers should know the medium they need to communicate with the consumers. This is because in the modern age, most people around the world are seeking the easiest alternative to fulfill their wants. As a result, retailers nowadays already involved in online transactions even they are not fully concentrated in providing services. From the researcher's point of view, service interface can be defined as a medium whereby consumers and manufacturers, providers, business entity or retailers meet each other or interact each other by using a computer system such as by using an internet or a machine which was set up in the store like bar code scanner. Moreover, the use of self-service technology (e.g., self-checkout and price scanner machines mounted on a shopping cart) can influence the consumer shopping experience (Verhoef, Peter C., Katherine, Parasuraman, Roggeveen, Tsiros and Schlesinger (2009) According to Colby and Parasuraman (2003), there is an advantages and potential of new service technologies that can give a better service. This show the technology such as online purchasing via internet and social network can be done. Jordan Kasteler (2010) mentioned that, social networks can create a flow of generally emotional feelings such as happiness, love, motivational, anger, sadness and unhappiness. This was supported by Mick and Fournier (1998), stated that, there are positive and negative feelings that trigger when using technologies. In other words, this new form of technology has generated interactions of unexpected challenges, both for the company that provide the service and for their customers (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, and Malhotra, 2002). Hence, this is the reason why researchers have select service interface as one of the variables in this research in order to know either it will contribute to the customer experience creation or not.

2.3 Retail Atmosphere

Atmosphere refer to the environment of the surroundings which involves customer sense such as smell, touch, hear, see and taste. This is because the atmosphere also one of the influential factor for purchasing experience beside product and service (Kotler, 1973). In addition, physical environment also involves elements such as layout, interior architecture and décor, lighting, music, aromas, and cleanliness (Baker, 1986). Previous research has suggested that the physical environment is an important determinant of patronage behaviour. According to Bohl (2011), visual appearance such as lighting, background music, colour, and visual merchandise have been the strongest persuasion factors comparing to other attributes. Hence, researchers have considered the cues such as flooring, cleanliness, lighting, aromas, paintings, the arrangement of racks and decoration in the retail stores will affect consumers shopping experience and this experience finally will lead to the consumers satisfaction and loyalty. Indirectly, it will contribute to the high retail sales performance of the retailer's business. Furthermore, Turley & Milliman (2000) also believe that success or failure of the business come from the environment atmosphere. This is because people nowadays are more preferred to the appearance and convenience of the retail stores as they have paid high cost for any expenses. Other than that, store atmosphere has given an opportunity for the retailer to create positioning strategy, develop store image and enable them to differentiate their store with others in term of product and service (Birtwisle and Hearer, 2009).

2.4 Assortments

Researchers believed that, when there are many options of product assortment in the retail store, it will attract more consumers to come. Assortment can be described as the ability of the retailer to offer a wide array of products to the customer with variety, uniqueness, and quality (Verhoef et al., 2009). As a channel intermediary, retailers need to

overcome discrepancy of assortments which mean that they should offer and provide a variety of all items consumers needs to receive full satisfaction from all products. Moreover, consumers desire flexibility in their choices and demand an array of products to choose from in order to meet their ever-changing goals, needs, and social situations (Mantrala, Levy, Kahn, 2009). Recently, researchers have even conceptualized that larger assortments may benefit customers by providing them desired opportunities for processing (Broniarczyk, 2008). So, this is the situation whereby a great experience will arise depend on the breadth of a company's product which relates to the number of product lines a company produces or a retailer carries.

CONCEPTUAL MODEL

Researchers adapted this conceptual model from the previous study which was conducted by (Verhoef et.al., 2009). In this study, researchers only take into consideration the three drivers (service interface, retail atmosphere and assortment) in order to determine the relationship towards customer experience creation in retail industry in Malaysia which focus in the main city (Penang, Kuala Lumpur, Selangor and Johor Bahru). However, Verhoef et.al. (2009) have proposed several determinants of customer experience including social environment, service interface, retail atmosphere, assortment, price and promotions (including loyalty programs). Thus, with this developed model, the researchers have adapted and run the analysis from the data collected in order to measure the relationship and to identify to what extend these drivers influence customer experience creation.
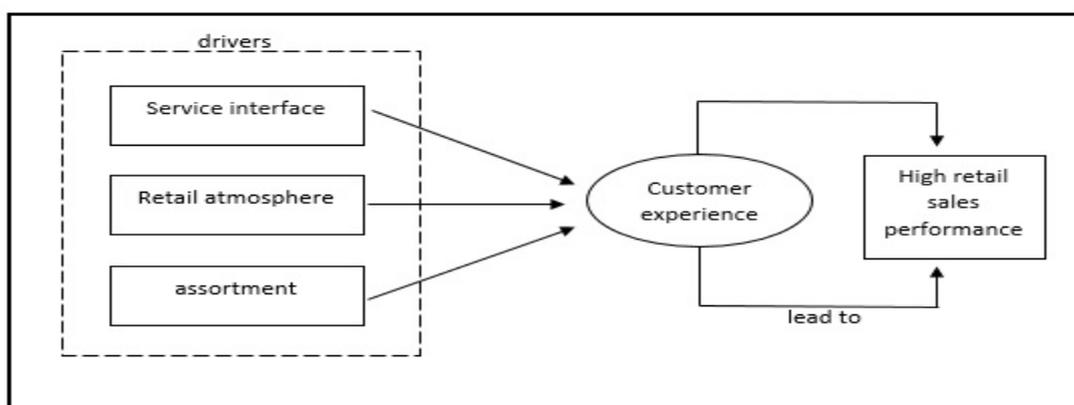
Adapted from Verhoef et. al. (2009)

METHODOLOGY

Research design is the "master technique" (Ghauri & Gronhaug, 2005) which plays a very vital role in answering every research questions. Prior to this, it has been identified that there are three research designs that are commonly used which are the exploratory, descriptive and causal. In this research, the descriptive design has been used to obtain the required information from the problem statement. This is because the study is conducted on a survey basis. Hence, using descriptive design is appropriate to execute the purpose of the study and at the same time, the relationship between variables towards customer experience can be analysed.

As proposed, this research used survey to gather data from respondents. In order to conduct the survey, apparently there are four major modes of survey methods (Malhotra, 2009). Thus, researchers have used questionnaires to obtain data from the respondents by using a convenience sampling technique. According to (Malhotra, 2009) convenience sampling whereby the population elements are selected based on the judgment of the researchers. This technique also helps the researchers to find most appropriate respondents to answer the survey based on their wise judgment. Besides that, this technique is the best way of getting some information quickly and efficiently (Sekaran, 2000). Based on that, the researchers have distributed 300 questionnaires to the respondents in a different location which means the questionnaires was distributed to the people who lives in the major city in Malaysia such as Penang, Kuala Lumpur, Selangor and Johor Bahru. This questionnaire was distributed based on Roscoe's rule of thumb whereby he suggested that, to determine a proper research, the sample size is between 30 and 500 respondents (Roscoe, 1975). Therefore, a sample size of 300 was sufficient based on the Roscoe's idea because the population number is unknown for the study. When the population is unknown, Roscoe's rule is the best method to determine the sample size for the study.

Furthermore, the measurement use is interval scale which allows researchers to perform certain arithmetical operations on the data collected from the respondents. Under this interval scale, the researchers measure the variables by tapping on five-point scale through the Likert scale which designed to identify how strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree or strongly disagree the respondents with the statements stated in the questionnaires. Due to that, the questionnaires were personally administered. As everyone knows, a questionnaire is a reformulated written set of questions to which respondents record their answers, usually within rather closely defined alternatives. Questionnaires are an efficient data collection mechanism when the researchers know exactly what is required and how to measure the variables of interest (Sekaran, 2007).

3.1 Data Analysis Procedure
Once the questionnaire completely returned by the respondents, the questionnaire will be edited to ensure the respondent data are coded, computed and processed. All the data will be coded and edited by using Statistical Package

for Social Science (SPSS) version 21. SPSS is used to process the data to make analysis for the researcher to be more accurate. There is some analysis which have been conducted by the researchers:

3.1.1 Frequency distributions
Frequency distributions were obtained for all the personal data or classification variables. According to Zikmund (2003) frequency distribution refers to a set of data organized by summarizing the number of times a particular value of a variable occurs. It is done to obtain a count of number of responses associated with the different values of variable and to express these counts in percentage term. It is also used to identify the number of times various subcategories of phenomenon occurs, from which the percentages and cumulative percentages of any occurrences can be calculated.

3.1.2 Pearson Correlation
Pearson Correlation is used to indicate the direction, strength and significant of the bivariate relationships of all the variables in the study (Sekaran, 2003). By using this technique, it can help to indicate how one variable is related to one another. The simple correlation coefficient is a statistical measure of the co-variation, or association two variables. The correlation coefficient, r, ranges from +1.0 to -1.0. If the value of r is 1.0, there is a perfect positive linear (straight-line) relationship. If the value of r is -1.0, there is a perfect negative linear relationship or a perfect inverse relationship (Zikmund, 2003).

Furthermore, scales below have been outlined by David (1971) which is can be used to interpret the relationship between independent variable and dependent variable.

I.	*0.80 and above*	*very strong relationship*
II.	*0.50 to 0.79*	*strong relationship*
III.	*0.30 to 0.49*	*moderate relationship*
IV.	*0.10 to 0.29*	*low relationship*
V.	*0.01 to 0.09*	*very low relationship*

FINDINGS
Table 4.1 provides a frequency analysis of the sample characteristic of respondents. On the examination of the respondents (n=300) indicate that majority is female as compared to male only contributed 30.7 percent. In the case of age, most of the respondent is between age 30 to 39 years old followed by the group of 40 to 49 years old and the rest as stated in the table 4.1. Moreover, in terms of marital status of course most of the respondent already married which there is a high percentage (55.7 percent) was contributed in this study if compared to single and others only contributed below than 50 percent.

Table 4.1 Sample characteristic of respondent

Variable	Level	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	92	30.7
	Female	208	69.3
	Total	**300**	**100.0**
Age	20-29	43	14.4
	30-39	121	40.3
	40-49	91	30.3
	50-59	30	10
	60 and above	15	5
	Total	**300**	**100.0**
Marital Status	Single	102	34
	Married	167	55.7
	Others	31	10.3
	Total	**300**	**100.0**
Monthly Income (RM)	2001-3000	39	13
	3001-4000	51	17
	4001-5000	73	24.3
	5001-6000	86	28.7
	6001-7000	31	10.3
	7000 and above	20	6.7
	Total	**300**	**100.0**
Education Level	SPM	24	8
	Diploma	77	25.7
	Bachelor's Degree	134	44.7
	Master's Degree and above	65	21.6
	Total	**300**	**100.0**
City	Penang	75	25
	Selangor	75	25
	Kuala Lumpur	75	25
	Johor Bahru	75	25
	Total	**300**	**100.0**

The income level across the sample can be seen that 28.7 percent of respondent indicate monthly household income in range RM5000 to RM6000 followed by the group of monthly income from RM4000 to RM5000 which indicate 24.3 percent. Besides that, the highest percentage of education level is from bachelor's degree. In case of the city, researchers have equally distributed questionnaires in each city because to avoid bias while collecting the data.

Table 4.2 Pearson Correlation Analysis

Correlations

	Assortment	Service interface	Retail atmosphere	Customer experience
Assortment	1	.815**	.748**	.692**
Service interface		1	.779**	.749**
Retail atmosphere			1	.858**
Customer experience				1

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

From Table 4.2, it shows that all variables which also called as the drivers have a significant relationship towards customer experience. The significant relationship between independent variables of service interface, retail atmosphere and assortment toward dependent variable (customer experience) with the value is more than 0.05. From this table, the researchers have summarized that, two of the variables (assortment and service interface) have a strong relationship towards DV (customer experience) whereas the value for each is 0.69 (assortment) and 0.75 (service interface) while the other driver (retail atmosphere) the value is 0.86 towards customer experience and it is consider as very strong relationship. Therefore, the hypothesis which was develop earlier in this study is accepted:

H1: there is a positive significant relationship between the drivers and customer experience creation in retail industry

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION
Based on the frequency analysis, the researchers believe that, female consumers have frequently visit the retail store compare to male consumers. This is because, nowadays most of the female consumers have their own carrier either involved in the private or government sector. Besides that, this group of consumers is from the middle age group and most of them are married with earnings for the income more than RM5000 per month. Thus, this is the strength or the factors that encourage them to involved in shopping their daily-used product at any retail store near to them. In addition, the trend in this modern era also have influence this group of consumers to keep enjoying their lives to continue shopping because purchasing power possess by women compare to men. The researchers believed that, shopping at the mall not only applicable to the consumers who lives in the modern age but previously, during the 1980s, the mall was a popular destination for shopping and recreation (Kowinski, 1985). In the early 1990s Feinberg and Meoli (1991) reported that half of all retail sales were mall transactions.

Apart from that, correlation analysis also has proven that all the three drivers (service interface, retail atmosphere and assortment) have a positive significant relationship towards customer experience. Meaning to say, in order to create a great experience, retailers should concentrate on their surroundings internally and externally rather than keep focus on the marketing activities like price promotion, contest and others. As mentioned in the literature, service interface would be a vital element in creating a positive customer experience because with the outstanding service provided by retailers to the consumers, it will surely give a pleasant experience while shopping in the store. It was supported by Verhoef et. al., (2009) stated that, the use of self-service technology (e.g., self-checkout and price scanner machines mounted on a shopping cart) can influence the consumer shopping experience.

Furthermore, the atmosphere in the retail store also have its own strength whereby it can influence the moods of consumer while shopping. Previous research has suggested that the physical environment of malls is an important determinant of patronage behavior (e.g., Bellenger et al., McGoldrick, and Thompson, 1992). Thus, the result has proven that retail atmosphere has a very strong relationship towards customer experience because the atmosphere also one of the influential factor for purchasing experience beside product and service (Kotler, 1973). According to Babin and Darden (1996) found that in-store mood influenced consumer spending, and customer satisfaction with the store. Hence, indirectly it will give a great and pleasure experience to the consumers while shopping in the retail stores. In addition, atmospherics, or the retail store environment, refer to both tangible and intangible aspects of a retail store design and can alter the customer experience (Puccinelli at. al., 2009)
Product variety, both within an individual store and across competing stores, is likely to attract consumers to shop for specific product purchases across stores (Mittelstaedt and Stassen, 1990). Due to this, assortments also have contributed to the high satisfaction and positive experience because when consumers spend their time in the retail store, they have a lot of option and

choice to purchase based on their preferences. This is the reason why assortment also have a very strong relationship towards customer experience in the findings. Besides that, it also was supported by Mantrala et.al., (2009) mentioned that, consumers desire flexibility in their choices and demand an array of products to choose from to meet their ever-changing goals, needs, and social situations. Bloch et al. (1994) discovered that exploring new products or stores was a perceived benefit of the mall experience, which they suggest taps consumers' desires for variety. Malls which contain a relatively wide assortment of stores, restaurants, and entertainment outlets are likely to generate greater opportunities for consumers to shop, eat, and recreate within the confines of the mall. Consumers who are motivated to explore a variety of stores, due to variety-seeking tendencies (Raju, 1980; Menon and Kahn, 1995) or shopping tasks, should desire to stay longer at the mall.

In a nut shell, when retailers have the ability to offer and provide a great experience to the consumers, of course it will ensure that they can retain their customer and at the same time they can boost again and improve their retail sales performance even there are so many challenges which cannot be control by them.

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