Conceptual Paper Proposing the 'Vishvas - Valleti Consumer Empowerment Model'

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Abstract

The concept of 'consumer empowerment' is widely seen as an area of interest not just to researchers, but also to retailers at large. As a result, it becomes important to explore the major retail factors that result in the experience of empowerment among consumers. The study tries to identify five major retail constructs, that is, retail store environment, expansion and control over choice, store convenience, store information, and consumer involvement based on vast and quality literature. Furthermore, after reviewing the existing five models of retail constructs, a new conceptual model the *"Vishvas-Valleti Consumer Empowerment Model"* is proposed. The proposed model tries to explain the combined effect of retail constructs resulting in the subjective experience of empowerment among consumers while shopping. Furthermore, the model signifies and emphasizes the importance of empowered consumers for businesses and the society in the long run.

Keywords : consumer empowerment, retail store environment, expansion, control over choice, store convenience, relevant information, consumer involvement, customer satisfaction, store patronizing

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> *'Consumer Empowerment' is going to be a win-win situation for both the marketers and consumers as 'Consumer Empowerment' has a beneficial effect in the short and long- term of leading to improved business results.*
>
> **Wright, Newman, and Dennis (2006)**

The term 'Empowerment' is used across a wide range of disciplines and each brings differing interpretations (Lincoln, Travers, Ackers, & Wilkinson, 2002) and is used to represent a wide range of concepts and to describe a proliferation of outcomes (Malhotra & Schuler, 2002). Empowerment has been a pioneered subject of discussions in behavioral and social sciences (Perkins & Zimmerman, 2005 ; Wilkinson, 1998), feminist agenda (Bisanth, 2001), psychology (Pires, Stanton, & Rita , 2006), and constituent elements of the development issues for policy makers (World Bank, 2001). Most advocates of the new consumer empowerment have documented the conditions for empowerment to occur, rather than demonstrating its existence and practice (Newholm, Laing, & Hogg, 2006). So, the present study finds its value from both practitioners and theory building perspective by proposing a model of consumer empowerment, and testing its existence in the presence of major retail factors. Most of the existing literatures on consumer empowerment have commenced their studies with an assumption that consumers are already experiencing a state of empowerment. Furthermore, authors have attempted to establish the relationship between empowerment and satisfaction (Hunter, Garnefeld, Kucuk, Gau, & Viswanathan, 2008 ; Wathieu et al., 2002), and better decisions in purchasing (Koriat, Lichtenstein, & Fischhoff, 1980) as an outcome of empowerment.

This paper tries to understand the concept of empowerment from the consumers' perspective. The study assumes retailers as the key source of unprecedented power, trying to pass on this control to their consumers with the intention

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of co-creating value. This study is similar to the studies of firm activities evoking the subjective experience of empowerment (Wathieu & Bertini, 2007) among consumers, but differs by identifying the collective effect of retail factors in causing a state of empowerment among consumers.

Research Gap

The reviews of the afore - mentioned literatures on 'consumer empowerment' have majorly focused on the consequences of its presence in the retailing industry by assuming consumer empowerment as a starting point. Some of the studies are worth mentioning - those that focused on firm-related activities such as control over choice set and allowing the consumer to specify product features (Wathieu et al., 2002), educating consumers (Brennan & Ritters, 2003), increasing the quantity and quality of information available to consumers (Rust & Oliver, 1994), increasing access to information (Keh & Park, 1998), and enhancing communication with important others such as consumers, experts, and so forth (Berthon, Pitt, McCarthy, & Kates, 2007). All these factors are specifically studied in isolation while explaining the consumer empowerment construct. However, considering the realistic unorganized, fragmented, and complex nature of the Indian retail industry, it is quite challenging to explain the concept of consumer empowerment based on a single retail factor in isolation.

The control over choice set and allowing the consumer to specify the product features that he or she would like to have it in their baskets might not be always appreciated by the consumers themselves. For instance, in case of the consumer purchasing over the counter (OTC) medicines from a drug / medical retail store in India, though he /she is given a control over choice and an opportunity to choose the products / brands of his/her choice, a majority of the consumers would still prefer to take the suggestion of the pharmacist / retailer before making a final decision. It does not mean that all consumers are not knowledgeable about the product/brand. However, in this case, they strongly trust the expertise and knowledge of the pharmacists / retailers than their own. By doing so, they want to minimize the risk of selecting a wrong product. So, such retail store formats try to extend the control to the consumer, and the consumers tend to avoid and want to depend on the retailers' suggestions.

The above-mentioned scenario is found to be more common during the purchase of a high ticket good with a high risk factor. For instance, a vast majority of Indian consumers would prefer to be assisted either by experts, friends or family members, or colleagues while they decide on products such as car, insurance, mutual funds, real estate, house, and so forth. Even though the control of product selection is extended by the retailer to the consumer, they would still prefer to seek 'expert suggestions' before making the final purchase. On the contrary, though gold (yellow metal) is considered as a high investment product among Indian consumers, they tend to take the control on their own by specifying the designs, grams of gold to be used in making the ornaments, quality of gold to be used, and so forth to the goldsmith / jewellery retailer. Hence, the control over choice or specifying a product feature alone might not be a sufficient latent variable defining the consumer empowerment construct in case of shoppers shopping from different retail formats as mentioned above.

Similarly, even the retail factors like educating consumers alone may not be highly generalized across various retail formats. Even though drug manufacturers educate the consumers through advertisements, the consumers will exhibit a powerless state in the absence of an expert advisor / retailer. It is similar in case of deciding on a travel / tour - you tend to seek the experience of trip advisor or another consumer for his/her experience, though you have all the knowledge and power to make your own choice. Hence, along with educating the consumers, providing an efficient (right quantity and quality) communication, control over choice as required, along with two more retail activities identified in the literature, that is, store image and consumer involvement together can result in a better value co-creation and result in a feeling of empowerment among the consumers. The combined effect of retail factors can compensate the requirements of different consumer segments and can answer the unique challenges of different retail formats, thereby helping realize consumer empowerment as a generalizable construct for any retail industry. So, in the backdrop of the above, an effort is made to identify five major retail constructs based on the existing literature that can together result in the subjective experience of empowerment among consumers. Based on a similar study by Zimmerman and Warschausky (1998), the present study considers the outcome 'consumer empowerment' as a subjective experience of consumers while shopping in different retail formats. As in the Maccoby's (1999) study, the present study considers that it is the responsibility of the marketers to empower their consumers and make them confident in their purchase decisions. So,

the present research tries to fill the gap in the existing literature by providing a new model of consumer empowerment and indicating its benefits to the retailers in the form of a satisfied and loyal customer base patronizing the retail stores.

The proposed **Vishvas-Valleti Consumer Empowerment Model** is explained with the help of five retail constructs, which are given in the form of Figures 1-5 as theoretical retailing factors. The proposed model emphasizes and suggests the retailers to change their attitude of capturing and luring the consumers. Considering the important outcomes of the consumer empowerment model, it recommends the retailers to learn the strategy of captivating based on the consumers' trust and belief. The success of the strategy depends primarily on the positive attitude of a retailer towards accepting 'power shift' and secondly, on their relentless effort towards involving and treating customers as business partners. The study also tries to give a unique orientation for the retail business to be transparent, trustworthy, and committed to serve the consumers. By doing so, retailers can win the consumers' confidence and make them as value creating partners in the process of the retail business. The challenge ahead of retailers is to hand over the power before the consumers ask for it and struggle to get it from external agencies or forums (Kaur, 2006). Finally, the model proposes to change the caveat of 'buyers beware' into 'buyer is a believer' in trusted retail services of the retailers.

Operational Definition

Based on the literature reviewed, the following operational definition of consumer empowerment was constructed to set clear objectives for the research. Consumer empowerment can be defined as, "the process of getting consumers involved in retailing activities encompassing *expansion of control over choice, conducive store environment, convenience, and relevant communication* to make them confident in their purchase decision-making process while shopping- that they naturally like to do."
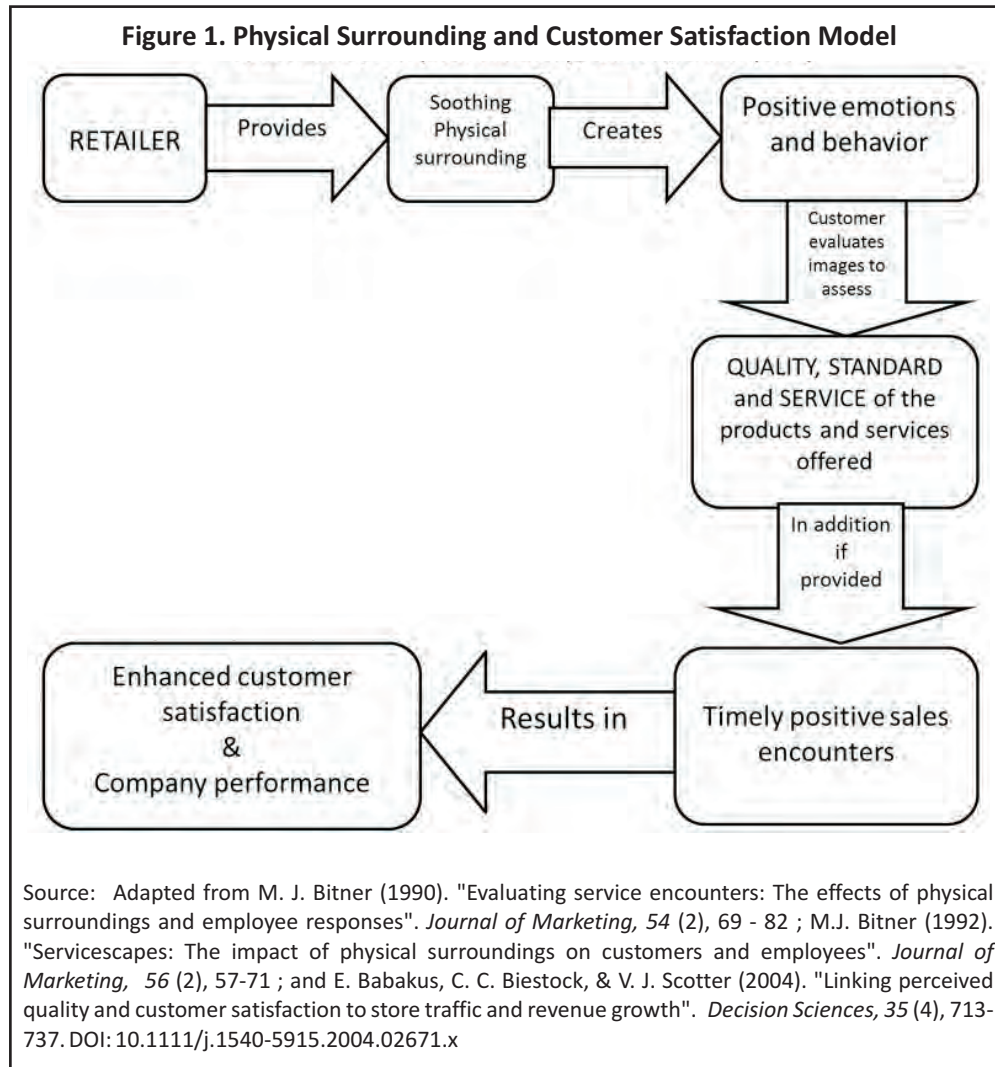
Theoretical Retailing Constructs

1) Retailing Environment : The study of the potential effects of retail environment (atmospherics) on buyers' behaviour has been a curious study of the academicians of the West as evidenced in 1920s (Copeland, 1927). Further, with increasing retail store formats, the retail environment of the conventional stores has become an interesting area of research in examining the impact of atmospheric cues on consumer behaviour (Gardner & Siomkos, 1986; Turley & Milliman, 2000). Past studies evidenced that consumers' respond not just to core product or service, but to the most important feature of the total product. The total product definition mainly focuses on the place where the product is bought or consumed. In some instances, the place, or to be more specific, the atmosphere of the place is more influential than the product itself in the purchase decision (Kotler, 1973 - 1974). Hence, there is an increasing emphasis given on store designs, interiors, and the overall store environment by the brick and mortar stores. According to the conventional store environment theory, the basic components that form the store environment are store image, store atmospherics, and store theatrics (Lewison, 1994).

The principles of 'environmental psychology' (Donovan & Rossiter, 1982) and the S-O-R paradigm (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) suggest that consumers' internal states mediate the relationship between the environmental stimulus and the individual's responses. Nebula of research from psychology has shown how people apply mental abstraction - when people recall images of environments. The presumption is that people respond emotionally to environmental stimuli, and that marketing environments provide a certain level of rate of information (Russell & Snodgrass, 1987). This rate adds to the complexity of the environment as it compounds the level of information to be processed. Increases in information such as aroma (Chebat & Michon, 2003), music (Dube & Morin, 2001) and video screen media (Clarke, 2003) are generally related to increased emotional response, which in turn can moderate the desire to remain (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) and spend more time inside a store. Hence, the rate at which the surrounding and immediate environment stimulates positive behaviour (or information rate) is a function of the physical and social stimuli. These multifarious factors affect the emotional states of individuals, which in turn influences their behaviour, and a pleasurable atmosphere enhances the shopper's mood (Sherman & Smith, 1987; Spies, Hesse, & Loesch, 1997).

The research work of Babakus, Biestock, and Scotter (2004) clearly signified the credence of store atmospherics on the consumers in evaluating the image of quality of products sold and mainly found it to be influencing both customer satisfaction and, consequently, company performance. In marketing terms, the perceived clarity of a company's image

is ,therefore, intertwined with the perceived legibility of the setting in which the consumption (whether aesthetically or economically driven) takes place (Newman & Patel, 2004). The retail environment is the major criteria for the consumers when they are asked to compare or express store preference or rank the retail outlets / organizations (Baker, Grewal, & Parasuraman, 1994 ; Bitner & Booms, 1981; Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Berry, 1985). Thus, the atmospherics of marketing environments for shops (Dube & Morin, 2001), malls (Chebat & Michon, 2003), banks (Thomke, 2003), and restaurants (Booms & Bitner,1982) are designed eloquently to give high and positive perceived image among consumers.

Figure 1. Physical Surrounding and Customer Satisfaction Model

RETAILER → Provides → Soothing Physical surrounding → Creates → Positive emotions and behavior

Customer evaluates images to assess

QUALITY, STANDARD and SERVICE of the products and services offered

In addition if provided

Enhanced customer satisfaction & Company performance ← Results in ← Timely positive sales encounters

Source: Adapted from M. J. Bitner (1990). "Evaluating service encounters: The effects of physical surroundings and employee responses". *Journal of Marketing, 54* (2), 69 - 82 ; M.J. Bitner (1992). "Servicescapes: The impact of physical surroundings on customers and employees". *Journal of Marketing, 56* (2), 57-71 ; and E. Babakus, C. C. Biestock, & V. J. Scotter (2004). "Linking perceived quality and customer satisfaction to store traffic and revenue growth". *Decision Sciences, 35* (4), 713-737. DOI: 10.1111/j.1540-5915.2004.02671.x

Pleasant shopping places, such as malls, hypermarkets, complexes, restaurants, multiplexes, and so forth have been successful in attracting customers because of their pleasant store atmospherics. These are further linked to enjoyment and entertainment factors vis-à-vis aesthetic enhancements during shopping (Babin, Darden, & Griffin, 1994; Sit, Merrilees, & Birch, 2003 ; Yoo,Park, & MacInnis, 1998). A result of staying for a longer period of time inside stores may be subsequently reflected in consumer spending (Jones, 1999; Machleit & Mantel, 2001). So, it is clear that store environment indirectly builds the sales for the retail firm. Indeed, enhanced moods and higher spending on unplanned / impulsive purchases are all associated with pleasant atmospheres, which assist consumers with their attainment goals (Ang, Leong, & Lim, 1997 ; Spies et al., 1997). Newman and Patel (2004) said that consumers consistently choose shopping locations for the pleasantness of the atmospheres, and pleasant store atmosphere can be linked explicably to the profitability of the business (Figure 1). Hence, it becomes important for the marketers to understand how consumers evaluate and respond to the shopping environment. It is to be remembered that one may not have control

over the consumers' wallet but, as a service provider, you have all the control over your own intangible areas that often make the most impression and can generate the rules that influence customer behaviour (Branthwaite, 1984). As a result, it is viable for the retailers to use retail environment not just as a potential marketing tool, but as a part of their overall merchandising strategy (Darden & Babin, 1994 ; Kotler, 1973 - 1974) in order to be successful in the business. So, based on the afore - mentioned literature, it is evident that store environment is construed as one of the primary constructs resulting in the experience of consumer empowerment among the consumers. The next important construct under the study is providing consumers with numerous choices backed by the control over the choice set.

2) Expansion and Control Over Choice : In the neo-liberal economy, choice involves the creation of markets, consumers, and consumption (Dholakia, N., & Dholakia R.R., 1985). Choice as a manifestation of people's ability to exercise free-will, thereby demonstrating their autonomy and self-determination has become normalized - at least in advanced industrialized economies - with a long intellectual heritage that can be traced back to the writings of the ancient Greek philosophies like Plato (Schwartz, 2004). An oral history study by Davies and Elliott (2006) on women consumers of Britain during the pre-war (1918) period showed that these women consumers were greatly empowered when they were given a choice in case of clothes and food in the post-war period (1965). Whereas, for the post-war period born women consumers, they expected more choice as they were already exposed to a given choice set. Hence, a large choice set turned out to be an important factor of consumer experience for their shopping and was perceived as a parameter of their improved quality of life and critical analysis of their mass consumer culture in Britain.

Figure 2. Consumer Control Leading to the Consumer Empowerment Model
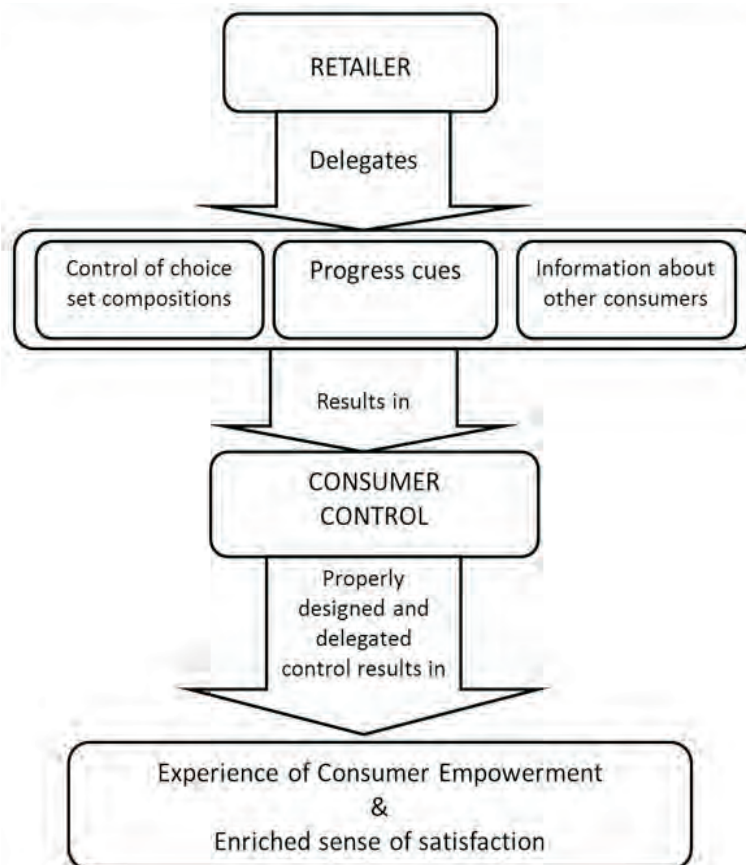
Source: Adapted from L. Wathieu, L.Brenner, Z.Carmon, A. Chattopadhyay, K. Wertenbroch, A. Drolet, … & G. Wu (2002). "Consumer control and empowerment: A primer". *Marketing Letters, 13* (3), 297-305.
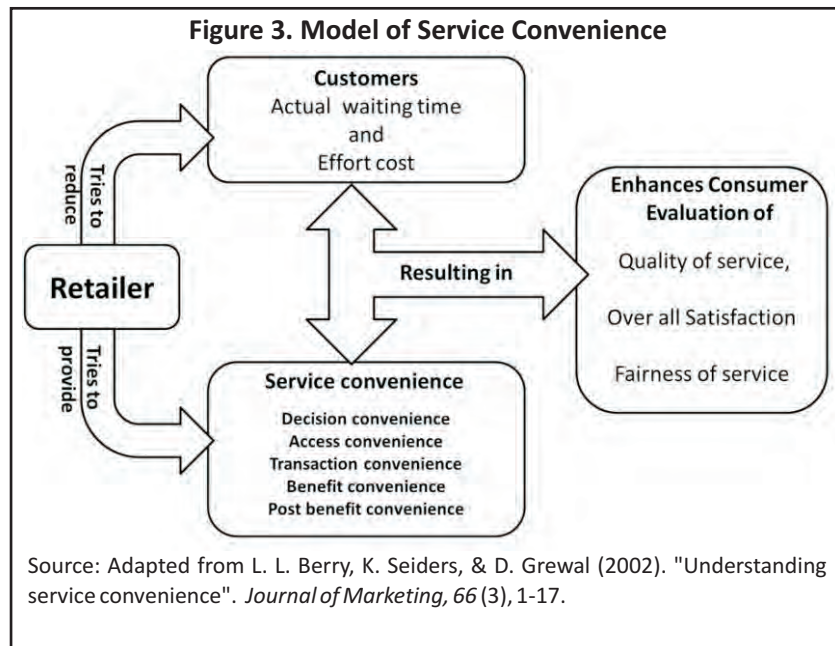
Conventional firms have used targeted media to promote pre-determined products to pre-selected target customers through pre-existing channels at pre-set prices. Correspondingly, the conventional situation assumed in most theories of choice involves a set of well-defined options existing prior to choice (Wathieu et al., 2002). Thanks to the increasing competition in the marketplace, it has stimulated technological change and productive efficiency and thereby, manufacturing and supplying the market with a greater array of goods and services for the consumer, therefore, consumers have greater freedom to choose and have less dependency on any one producer (Shankar, Cherrier, & Canniford, 2006). Also, this has greatly helped the consumers to choose what, when, and how they want to have the service on their own terms. Kreps (1979) found it as an obvious benefit for both consumers and businesses. For instance, Dell Corporation could be portrayed as the ideal example of a successful retailer adopting this model of providing wider choice set along with the complete control over product specification to its customers based on their requirements.

The Figure 2 depicts the "Consumer Control Model" based on the study of Wathieu et al. (2002), which is a very vital theoretical contribution in the area of consumer empowerment. The authors tried to build the theory beyond lay wisdom that more control is always better and built the hypotheses concerning the factors that influence the perception of empowerment, and the consequences of greater control and the subjective experience of empowerment on consumer satisfaction and confidence. The present paper sheds light on the three specific elements that influence the subjective experience of empowerment: Control of choice set composition, progress cues, and information about other consumers. The research evidences from eminent literatures prove that simple enlargement of the choice set will not be sufficient; rather, delegating control to have choice sets of consumers' choices is important, resulting in subjective experience of empowerment. In other words, consumers' ability to specify and adjust the choice context truly results in the experience of empowerment.

Finally, the consumer control model concludes by saying that even though traditional economics assumes that a larger choice set results in an improvement of the consumer's situation, ability to specify a number of dimensions of interest prior to choice is likely to be perceived as empowering ; it is actually the freedom or flexibility or control given to consumers in defining their choices is what results in the subjective experience of empowerment among consumers. Hence, along with expansion, control over choice set is a necessary construct for the experience of empowerment among consumers while shopping.

3) Store Convenience : The concept of convenience first appeared in marketing literature in relation to categories of products. Copeland's (1923) classification of consumer products included convenience goods: Intensively distributed products that require minimal time, physical, and mental effort to purchase. Later, product classification schemas also incorporated the convenience goods category (Murphy & Enis, 1986). Thus, in early marketing usage, "convenience" denoted the time and effort consumers used in purchasing a product rather than a characteristic or attribute of a product (Brown 1990), but it is viewed as an attribute that reduces the non-monetary price of a product (Etgar,1978; Kelley, 1958; Kotler & Zaltman, 1971) because consumer efforts are considered as an opportunity cost that prevent consumers from participating in other activities (Bivens & Volker, 1986). The study by Berry, Seiders, and Grewal (2002) pointed out the dearth of a comprehensive analytical framework of service convenience in literature, which highlighted on not well understanding the consumer convenience in buying and using services and for not being researched enough to understand the construct or its evaluation methods.

According to Morganosky (1986), a convenience oriented consumer can be defined as "one who seeks to accomplish a task in the shortest time with the least expenditure of human energy." More recent research defines convenience orientation as "the value consumers place on goods and services with inherent time- or effort-saving characteristics" (Brown, 1990). Researchers agree that convenience orientation has a major impact on consumers' buying decisions. Understanding the importance of consumer convenience, the study widens its scope of study by not just considering locational proximity, but also covering all those store and service convenience (such as reducing consumers' time or effort in shopping, such as operating hours or credit availability, helping hands, and so forth) that help in reducing the feeling of opportunity cost forgone through experiential shopping and store service. Different types of conveniences are traced out based on the consumer perception of time and cost analysis , which are decision, access, transaction, benefit, and post benefit- which mirror the activities consumers undergo to purchase or use a service (Berry et al., 2002).
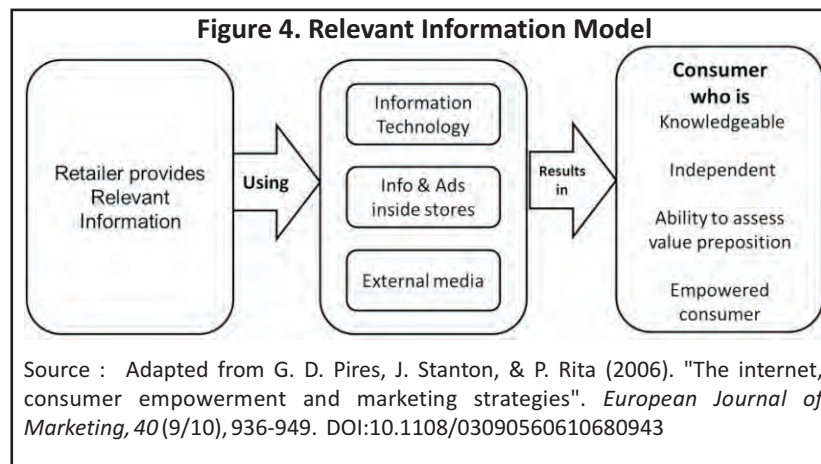
Figure 3. Model of Service Convenience

Source: Adapted from L. L. Berry, K. Seiders, & D. Grewal (2002). "Understanding service convenience". *Journal of Marketing, 66* (3), 1-17.

The conceptual "Model of Service Convenience" is based on the Berry et al.'s (2002) study results, which are presented in a pictorial diagram as depicted in the Figure 3. The conceptual model assumes that retailers try to reduce the waiting time of consumers and save effort cost to reduce the psychological cost (Pruyn & Smidts, 1998). For instance, a recent trade study by America's Research Group reported that 91% of men, compared with 83% of women, said long lines prompted them to stop patronizing a particular store (Nelson E., 2000) near the billing counters (Nelson, 2000). On the other hand, every six seconds saved using drive-through McDonald's windows resulted in 1% increase in sales for the company (Ordonez, 2000). This is because for the consumers, most services are time-cost services rather than time-investment services (Berry et al., 2002).

So, this conceptual model of service convenience proposes that the retailer tries to reduce the actual waiting time of the customers by providing quick and multiple self-billing counters and so forth to enhance the perception of less psychological cost or effort cost involved in shopping. Furthermore, the retailer tries to provide service (decision, access, transaction, benefit, and post benefit) conveniences, which are perceived to be important for an experiential shopping activity based on the research findings. As a consequence of this effort, the consumer perceives and evaluates the store on various dimensions such as quality, fairness of service, and overall satisfaction with the store (Seiders & Berry, 1998; Tax, Brown, & Chandrashekaran, 1998), and convenience directly affects their perceptions of a firm's service quality and their satisfaction with a specific encounter or experience (Berry et al., 2002). A satisfied consumer is seen in the act of repeat purchases and patronizing a store. So, store convenience can be a vital construct that can make the customer store loyal and satisfied while they are inside the store using retail services.

4) Relevant Information : Information is not scarce for consumers in this digital world. The Internet is transforming "information scarcity" into "information democracy" (Sawhney & Kotler, 2001) or "transparency" (Deshpande, 2002). The advent of information technology has made the consumer more powerful in their bargaining and purchase decision making. In other words, free access to information has literally made the consumer confident and less dependent on the marketers. So, it is a challenging situation for the marketers to equip themselves with more relevant information to satisfy the knowledgeable customer. Visionary marketers are strategizing themselves and their smart marketing teams with relevant information to educate and empower the customers. For instance, a study conducted in the area of healthcare by David (2001) exemplified recent articulation of the notion that in more affluent societies, unprecedented access to information, especially via the Internet, has 'empowered consumers'.

It is quite a natural tendency of the customer to seek product information prior to consumption. It is interesting to note that the consumers interested in an issue (protecting themselves or the wider world) would be more receptive to information concerning that issue and would also be likely to articulate their concerns and spread the message to others

Figure 4. Relevant Information Model

Source : Adapted from G. D. Pires, J. Stanton, & P. Rita (2006). "The internet, consumer empowerment and marketing strategies". *European Journal of Marketing, 40* (9/10), 936-949. DOI:10.1108/03090560610680943

(Jamrozy, Backman, S.J. , & Backman, K.F., 1996). This results either in the positive or negative word of mouth depending on the nature of information received and accessed about any product or service. For instance, the growing environmental friendly groups among consumers in USA and Europe have forced the marketers to produce and market in an eco-friendly way (Stone, Barnes, & Montgomery, 1995). So, the first step for the successful acceptance of any new product in the market lies in its information acceptance by its knowledgeable consumer segment.

Information is a very powerful weapon in the hands of the consumers which can make or mar a business. From a consumers' perspective, access to more information about the market is complemented by larger choice sets due to the global reach of the Internet, by the ability to exchange information and opinion with peers, to change their own perceptions and behaviour in a rapid and largely unchecked manner, and to define brands on their own (Morrissey, 2005). Since consumers with more knowledge will feel more powerful (Foucault, 1969), it becomes utmost important for the marketers to deal with the customers. In order to cater to such customers, retailers have to be up to date and creative in their approach.

The Figure 4, "Relevant Information Model", is mainly based on the study "The Internet, consumer empowerment, and marketing strategies" by Pires et al., (2006). The model indicates the importance of relevant communication in enhancing the shopping experience and empowering the consumers. Providing a perfect blend of relevant information optimally using present technology (the Internet and mobile), relevant and informative store advertisements, and making proper use of external media (TV, radio, print media, and so forth) can result in creating knowledgeable consumers. As it is understood from the literature, a knowledgeable consumer takes independent decisions and perceives the value prepositions based upon the knowledge gained and experiences an empowered state. Relevant information from the retailer need not mean only information related to product or its availability on the store shelf. Rather, it is a gamut of information encompassing information related to new arrivals, discounts, promotions, conditions and limitations, pricing, positioning, branding, country of origin, pack, service, atmosphere or ambience (if a restaurant), and overall marketing communications (Wright, Nancarrow, & Kwok, 2001). Also, the firm can provide relevant information about other customers' purchase decisions and can use it to help and navigate through other set of consumers' complicated decision process (Wathieu et al., 2002). So, in this way, information can be made more exciting and interesting for the consumers, which otherwise could have been an unexciting chore.
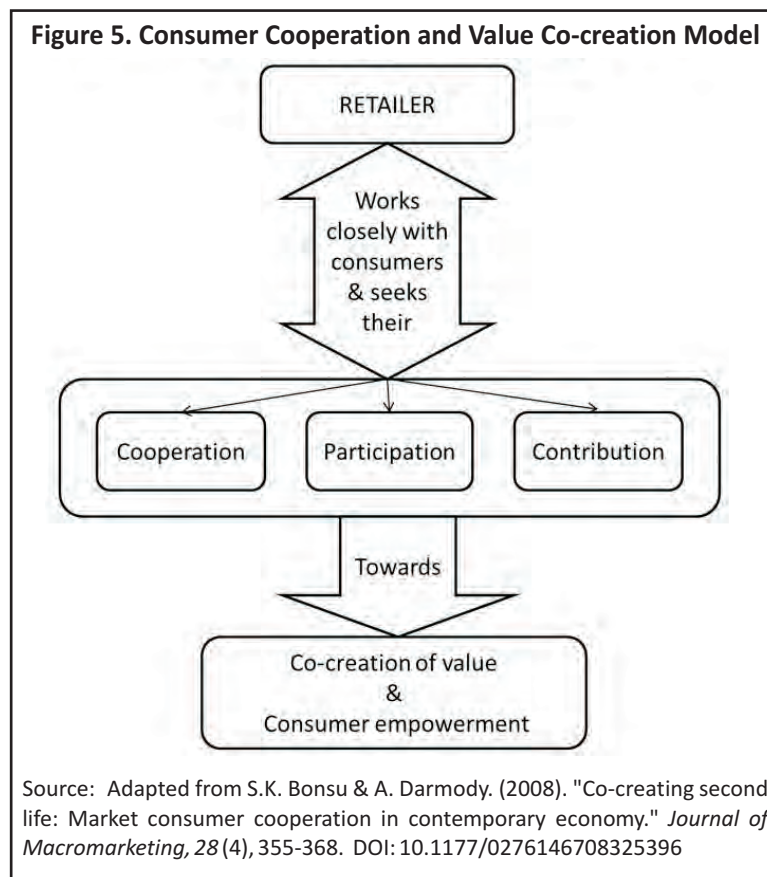
Information is no more a simple act of stating the existence of business in the market. The support of IT and external media such as TV, radio, and print support has to be optimally taken to inform the consumers. Because of the change in the lifestyle of the consumers, 'reach' has become complex and difficult. Hence, a multi modal communication strategy is suitable to the present market situation of 'customarization' (Wind & Rangaswamy, 2001). Retailers have to struggle to make information so efficient, attractive, professional, and timely in order to make customers move out of their convenient couches. Contribution of IT to retailing in terms of back end (supply chain management) and front end (Customer relationship management) has been a great support. The developments in the power of visual techniques have been a great help to the retailers while communicating to consumers inside the store. It has been evident from the studies that powerful visual techniques can bolster the pleasure, arouse the need, and even increase the spending among consumers (Mattila & Wirtz, 2001; Spies et al., 1997). So, appropriate, informative, and

entertainment content inside the stores backed by positive sales encounters by efficient sales executives can improve the customers' experience and enhance footfall for the stores.

Considering the importance of relevant communication for the success of a retail business, retailers have to unlearn (faulty and obsolete communications patterns), learn (contemporary communication skills), and relearn (the best practices from successful players) communication strategies. Retailers have to learn not to bombard, but to be eloquent in providing relevant information to keep the interest of the consumers.

5)   Consumer Involvement : Consumer involvement literatures shed light on two forms of involvement: Enduring and situational involvement. While situational involvement is a person's temporary interest in an object, enduring involvement is a consumer's general interest in that object (Zaichkowsky, 1985). In this study, the consumer involvement refers to the latter, defining consumer involvement as the degree to which a product is more relevant to a consumer (Bloemer & de Ruyter, 1998). For instance, in case of virtual game creations, that is, Second Life (Linda's), customers (users) (Bonsu & Darmody, 2008) associated the product (game) deem it to be more relevant to them, and they are deeply involved with the product (game) creation and functioning of the same. Even though sometimes, the consumer realizes the free labour concept and the firm's strategic device to revitalize its capitalist zeal and market control, still, customers show interest in getting part into it as the non - financial motive exceeds their joy and satisfaction of being in the value co-creation process.

The Figure 5 represents the "Consumer Cooperation and Value Co-creation Model" based upon the studies of Bonsu and Darmody (2008). This model tries to explain how the consumers greatly involve themselves into the activity of processing the information and experiencing a feeling of control over retail activities when the retailer tries to involve them by seeking their cooperation and creating interest in the retail processes (Celsi & Olson, 1988). Also, it has to be noted that consumers try to participate as per their full potential only if they perceive the activity as joyful and satisfying to themselves.

Figure 5. Consumer Cooperation and Value Co-creation Model

Source: Adapted from S.K. Bonsu & A. Darmody. (2008). "Co-creating second life: Market consumer cooperation in contemporary economy." *Journal of Macromarketing, 28* (4), 355-368. DOI: 10.1177/0276146708325396

Many studies have also shown consumers as non-profit seeking partners. This means that a vast majority of the consumers involve themselves in the process of the marketers' business with low or no financial motive. It is these psychological factors such as satisfaction derived from creation, appreciation, achievement, pride, and so forth, that drives them to spend their extra time and effort in others' business processes. Though consumers may not earn a financial win, but the joy and satisfaction of improving someone's services, processes, products, indirectly helping other customers, and so forth, can bring in the feelings of being recognized and conquering something. For instance, a very popular and over 30 years-old ice cream store named Corner House in the city of Bangalore in Karnataka state has been highly successful in involving its customers in their business process of inventing a variety of ice creams and flavors. By doing so, the retail firm has given the consumers an opportunity to participate and contribute value to the business. In this case, though consumers do not get any financial benefit, but they still cooperate with the retailer in improving and contributing to the business. The psychological feeling of 'achievement' matters the most when their idea gets implemented in the form of a new product in the menu list of Corner House, and other consumers start appreciating that product. This encourages them to further cooperate constantly and enduringly with the retailer, participate in the retail activities, and contribute newer and creative ideas for the business and service improvement. Here, both the retailer and the consumer are in a win-win situation because of the financial (new customers, repeat purchases, loyalty, increased transactions etc.,) or non - financial (feeling of joy, pride of creation, sense of achievement, satisfaction, celebration, etc.,) value generated as a result of their collaborative participation.

According to Bloemer and de Ruyter (1998), high levels of involvement strengthen the experience of emotions, and this view is based on the conceptualizing of emotions as a combination of variance (positive versus negative) and level of arousal (Chinh,1992). According to this view, positive feelings should be more amplified in an area which is of greater relevance to the consumer. This is in line with the studies showing an effect of involvement on satisfaction (Richins & Bloch, 1991). This kind of new development in retail activities of engaging customers is often cited as a celebration of consumers' control of market activities (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). It is important to note that engaged/ involved consumers generating product / brand referrals, co-create experience and value, and contribute to organizational innovation process and consumer loyalty (Brodie, Hollebeek, Juric, & Ilic, 2011 ; Hoyer, Chandy, Dorotic, Krafft, & Singh, 2010; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). The study conducted by Hunter et al. (2008) concluded that consumer involvement mediates the relationship between consumer empowerment and consumer satisfaction, indicating the significant role of consumer involvement in the firms' activities in evoking consumer empowerment and in turn, leading to satisfaction as an outcome of consumer empowerment.

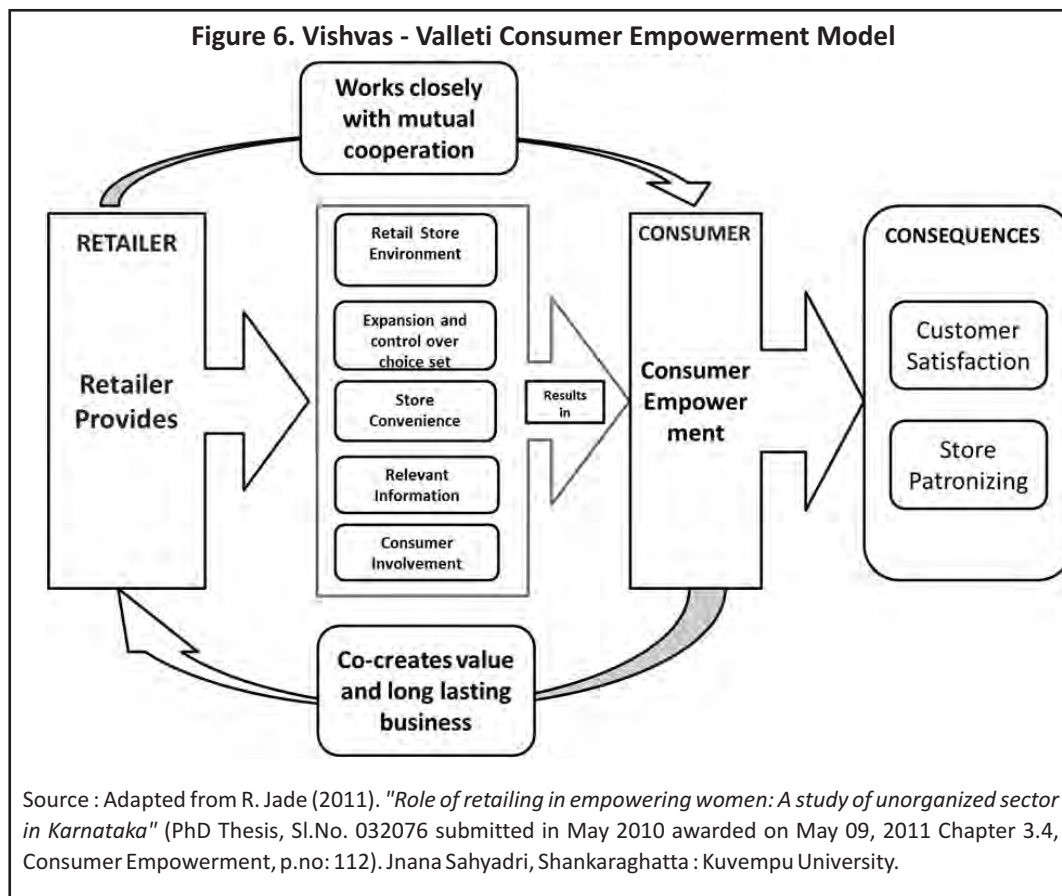## Proposed Conceptual Model of Consumer Empowerment

Even though studies evidence the benefits of consumer empowerment to the consumers (Goldsmith, 2005; Henry, 2005), the benefits were less well known as marketers were the potential benefits receivers by giving control to consumers (Hunter et al., 2008). As the marketers have realized that 'empowering consumers' results in very important outcomes such as **positive word of mouth** (Anderson & Sullivan, 1993; Wangenheim & Bayon, 2007), **loyalty** (Fornell, Michael, Eugene, Jaesung, & Barbara, 1996; Olsen, 2002), **willingness to pay more among consumer**s (Fornell et al., 2006 ; Homburg, Koschate, & Hoyer, 2005), and can result in **improved firm's financial performance** (Anderson, Fornell, & Rust, 1997), they have been making use of this powerful marketing tool to stay competitive and satisfying their customers (Hunter et al., 2008). Visionary marketers can foresee consumer empowerment as a powerful differentiation strategy during the challenging situations of 'competitive sameness' and 'market saturation (Betancourt & Gautschi, 1986).

Today, empowerment has been identified as a growing force in marketing (Rust & Oliver, 1994) and of the future marketing conditions as confident consumers, possessing all the elements needed to make informed choices and the ability to defend themselves and to promote their own interests in increasingly complex markets, are good for the competitiveness of the economy and ,therefore, for business expresses (Byrne, 2004). Considering the very benefit involved for both consumers and retailers, the present consumer empowerment study was undertaken. An attempt is made in this study to identify the major retail factors from the vivid literature contributing towards the experience of empowerment among the consumers while shopping. A research gap was identified, which can be covered by contributing this article to the body of literature. The necessity of a consumer empowerment model which can be used

by both organized and unorganized retailers is realized to be in the latent demand state. Though the existing literatures contributed their might in identifying retail activities in explaining the consumer empowerment construct, the factors dwindled to explain the benefits of outcomes such as control and power factors when used in isolation. Hence, an effort is made to study the combined effect of retail factors in contributing towards consumer empowerment. Furthermore, it was also realized that the above mentioned five retail factors are commonly found across retail major formats, but in varying degrees. These can further be strategized and configured to suite the requirement of specific consumer segments in empowering them. The argument laid is that the combined effect of the retail factors can result in the outcome of subjective experience of empowerment among consumers across different retail formats unlike when used in isolation.

In order to put forth the argument, we have made certain assumptions based on the evident literature. The first assumption is that empowerment is a state of mind in which individuals are not forced or obligated to do the things unnaturally (Manimala, 2005). That means that in order to experience empowerment, the individual / respondent has to naturally like that particular activity (in this case it's shopping), and it cannot be a forced effort. Secondly, it is hypothesized that retailers enable and accept empowering consumers as their personal responsibility (Maccoby, 1999). And through their unprecedented power, they try to empower the consumers by providing a blend of retail activities such as retail environment, expansion and control over choice set, store convenience, relevant communication, and consumer involvement while shopping. Thirdly, the study assumes that consumers exhibit that state of mind to accept the power while they are shopping, an activity that they naturally like to do.

The following Figure 6 (the Vishvas-Valleti Consumer Empowerment Model) is a pictorial representation of the proposed model of consumer empowerment. The first rectangular arrow box indicates the retailer, with an assumed unprecedented power due to its financial power, supply chain capacity, control over choice, product information, image, market information, human capital, and so forth, who tries to pass on the power to the consumers (third

Figure 6. Vishvas - Valleti Consumer Empowerment Model

Source : Adapted from R. Jade (2011). *"Role of retailing in empowering women: A study of unorganized sector in Karnataka"* (PhD Thesis, Sl.No. 032076 submitted in May 2010 awarded on May 09, 2011 Chapter 3.4, Consumer Empowerment, p.no: 112). Jnana Sahyadri, Shankaraghatta : Kuvempu University.

rectangular arrow from the left hand side), providing a blend of retail activities such as a soothing store environment, expansion and control over choice set, convenient service, relevant information, and involving customers in the decision making related to store activities (rectangular arrow box two). In the process of the power shift, the retailer treats the customers not just as passive recipients of the marketing cues, but increasingly as proactive participants in interactive, value-generating, and co-creation processes (Sawhney, Verona, & Prandelli, 2005; Vargo, & Lusch, 2004). In order to engage the customers in the retail activities, retailers are expected to work closely with the consumers seeking mutual cooperation, participation, and involvement in deciding some of the retail activities such as procuring brands/sizes/designs/colours of customer choice, using mode/frequency/ads/promotions/billing systems of consumer preference, expected facilities inside stores, enhancing customer experience, improving customer care, innovative ideas/concepts in designing/layouts/environment for the stores, and so forth.

This engagement makes the consumer feel as a part of the retail system and being emotionally connected to the organization. This enhances the customer relationship as consumers feel respected for their suggestions and motivated for their innovative suggestions/ideas/advices. Furthermore, it is to be noted that the consumer who is entertained, engaged, informed, involved, and given control experiences a subjective state of empowerment while shopping. The outcome of such empowered consumers could be seen in the form of satisfied customers (Brodie & Hollebeek, 2011; Hunter et al., 2008) and loyal customers (Hollebeek, 2011) patronizing the store, resulting in long lasting business to the store. Some of the researchers also opine that it is important to empower the consumers not only in the shop, but wherever they are located (Turnquist , 2004).

Managerial Implications

The conceptual paper aspires to confirm the relationship between the proposed constructs using quantitative research. At present, the observed data points are under the analysis and intend to confirm the proposed model using confirmatory factor analysis using LISREL 8.54 software. From the present stage of the study, it can be understood that the retailers, both organized and unorganized, can focus on these major retail factors, that is, retail environment, service convenience, communication, passing on control to the consumers, and involving them in retail activities in order to captivate their existing consumer base. The very important outcomes of consumer empowerment which are repeatedly mentioned in the prevailing literature are customer satisfaction and store patronizing. Hence, the conceptual model finds grounded applications in the real world scenarios.

Though every retail business has the above mentioned five retail constructs in common, but they vary in degrees depending on the nature of the store, format and consumer segment the retailer is targeting to serve, and so forth. Hence, every retailer can have a distinct strategy according to their capacity to provide service and in serving the customers. This can create a kind of blue ocean strategy (Chan & Mauborgne, 2005) for different players and help every player carve out an uncontested market opportunity.

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