

# COMPARING CONSUMER PERCEPTIONS OF CHAIN AND TRADITIONAL CONVENIENCE STORES

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## ABSTRACT

*Thai traditional grocery stores face increasingly intense competition from modern trade retailers such as discount stores, supermarkets and chain convenience stores. This study explores the supply chains of traditional grocery stores and chain convenience stores, and consumer perceptions of three store attributes and their impact on customer intention to select a store. A business that understands the attributes that customers highly value can gain a competitive advantage.*

*This study used the qualitative method of interviews with store owners or managers, and the quantitative method of a survey questionnaire completed by customers. The result indicates that only store standardization and trust in a store brand have a significant relationship with customer intention to select a retail store, while the other factors of product variety and assortment have no significant relationship.*

*Customers also have a different perception of the two types of operational management. The marketing channel of chain convenience stores is controlled and managed by a structured franchise system, while that of a traditional grocery store is based on the experience of the store owners in dealing with traditional wholesalers and distributors.*

## INTRODUCTION

Thai traditional grocery stores face strong competition from discount stores, supermarkets, hypermarkets, and chain convenience stores. Chain convenience stores now seem to be everywhere. Most chain convenience stores have high capital investments from foreign headquarters or from Thai investors who are big players in the retailing business. Fierce competi-

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\*This is a much reduced version of the project report by Mr. Inthasorn for his MSc in Supply Chain Management at Assumption University. He is the owner of a traditional convenience store (and a Laundromat next door): a true entrepreneur and scholar.

tion leads to their low price strategy and a better service provided to consumers. They are air-conditioned, beautifully decorated, with a layout designed to attract customers. Thai traditional grocery stores still remain as in the past. This leads to a decreasing number of Thai entrepreneurs who run their own traditional grocery stores.

The ABC chain of convenience stores (a pseudonym) was selected for this case study. It began in USA, to serve the convenience of customer who needed some essential products such as bread, milk and eggs when ordinary grocery stores were closed (Vastine, 1991). The chain opened its first store in Bangkok in 1989. Its stores are small, compact self-service outlets. As location is seen as the most crucial factor, the stores target a high customer flow and low value transaction (Kirby, 1986). Convenience stores provide a narrow variety and assortment of merchandise, because space is limited (Levy & Weitz, 2009). Although these stores used to focus on selling basic foods plus household products, they have expanded their range by selling ready meals and offering such services as paying electricity bills or selling car insurance.

In other countries, the emergence of modern trade retailers such as discount stores, supermarkets and chain convenience stores has had a negative impact on the existence of traditional grocery stores, especially in Britain. Traditional grocery stores in India are also poorly perceived, as customers prefer the well-organized pattern of supermarkets and chain convenience stores (Goswami & Mishra, 2009). However, there is a surprising case from a study of Latin America including Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Mexico, Columbia and Costa Rica where traditional grocery stores can better fit local consumers' need than supermarkets or chain convenience stores because traditional grocery stores offer the right assortment and size, despite higher shelf prices and limited service. Customers in Latin America prefer the informality and familiarity, as the owner of a traditional grocery store knows most customers by name, and sometimes gives informal credit.

The convenience store is the modern pattern for the neighborhood mom-and-pop shop or traditional grocery store. Both of them are usually located near houses and sell the same kinds of product, so they are head-to-head in competition. Therefore, it is worth studying whether consumers have different perceptions of these two store types.

A survey study by Maneechot (2002) found a decreasing numbers of Thai traditional grocery stores, as they had been hit by foreign chain discount stores which provide a wide variety and deep assortment of products, a nice atmosphere, one-stop shopping, and attractive sales promotions. The only reason why consumers still shop at Thai traditional grocery stores is when their home stock runs out. Thai traditional grocery stores are close to the consumers' houses, but because of the spread of chains stores, location is no longer a competitive advantage.

If local traditional grocery stores go out of business, then chain stores would be free of their competition, and the market would be under the control of powerful investors who could then increase prices and have total control over suppliers, to the customers' disadvantage.

As these two types of store have different supply chains but supply similar products to the same groups of customers, the fundamental question is: "What are the differences of consumer perceptions between the store attributes of chain convenience stores and traditional grocery stores, and how do these differences impact consumers in their store selection process?" The three specific objectives are stated as follows:

1. To explore and compare the supply chain of the traditional grocery store and the chain convenience store.
2. To compare consumer perception of the store attributes of the two types.
3. To study the impact of store attributes on customers' intention to select a particular retail store.

A survey questionnaire was designed to understand consumer perceptions of ABC chain convenience stores and Thai traditional grocery stores. The data was collected from 400 customers who had experienced both types of stores in Bangkok. The questionnaire studies three store attributes: trust in a store brand; product variety and assortment; and store standardization. Also, interviews were conducted to examine the suppliers of both store types and whether they have similar supply chains.

The study is limited by the following factors. The research focuses only on consumer's perception toward the three store attributes, and may not entirely address the success or failure of the store, because other factors such as efficient operation, location and promotional activities are not included. The target population is limited to Bangkok, so the research findings may be unable to be generalized to all Thailand.

## **SELECT REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

This section takes a selective look at the literature of store attributes and the impact of those attributes on store selection processes by customers, in the context of the supply chain. Mitchell and Harris (2005) supported the idea that gaining and sustaining a strategic competitive advantage in retailing requires knowledge of the attributes which consumers value. It is crucial for retailers to gain a better understanding of the grocery consumer since while convenience of location, price level, product assortment, service and quality appear to be important in all industries, some attributes are much more important in certain sectors (Tigert, 1983). It is a distinct advantage if one supply chain succeeds in effectively capturing the attributes that consumers really value, and the processes to deliver those requirements (Zokaei & Hines, 2007).

Anderson and Mittal (2000) termed behavioral intention as an outcome of satisfaction and it would create repeat purchasing behavior (Szymanski & Henard, 2001). The repeat purchasing would occur when customers are satisfied with particular attributes of the store.

According to Sinha and Banerjee (2004), a store is chosen based on the trust that the customers have regarding the store and the quality of products and service they will receive. Bourlakis et al. (2006) studied grocery shoppers in Greece and found that the most important attributes that Greek shoppers value for selecting a store are store design and product variety, personnel and service, and location.

Brewer (2002) termed perception as a personal knowledge or belief about the existence and nature of the particular matter of fact, and this influences people's intention to perform specific action. Perception is formed from the bases of customers' experience and may differ across cultural settings and be affected by personal and situational characteristics (Munnukka, 2008).

Therefore, a study of consumer perception toward store attributes is needed to understand how consumers perceive one store as different from the others. Ko and Kincade (1997, p. 92) emphasised the importance of store attributes:

*Store attributes are important to consumers when they make the decision where to shop. Store attributes are presented by retailers according to their specific functional strategies to attract their targeted customers. Store attributes must be offered and desired by the targeted customers otherwise they will go to the store that has the attributes that match their needs. The challenge to retailers is to determine which store attributes are relatively more important to the targeted consumer.*

Gundlach and Murphy (1993, p. 41) said that: "the variable most universally accepted basis of any human interaction or exchange is trust". The importance of trust in the service and retailing business has been stressed by Berry (1996, p. 42) who said that "trust is perhaps the single most powerful tool available to a company". As such, a relationship between trust in a store brand and customer intention to select a store should be expected. Thus:

Hypothesis 1a: There is a relationship between trust in a store brand and consumer intention to select the traditional grocery store

Hypothesis 2a: There is a relationship between trust in a store brand and consumer intention to select the chain convenience store

Variety is the number of merchandise categories a retailer offers. Assortment is the number of different items in a merchandise category (Levy & Weitz, 2009). Amine and Cadenat (2003) explained that retailers have to limit the cost resulting from the extent of their product variety and assortment. If consumers want more assortment availability, stores that do not meet this expectation are poorly perceived by customers. This would lead to low trust in that store or

lost sales opportunity. Retailers have to find the right balance between “too many” and “not enough”.

Hence the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1b: There is a relationship between availability of product variety and assortment and consumer intention to select the traditional grocery store.

Hypothesis 2b: There is a relationship between availability of product variety and assortment and consumer intention to select the chain convenience store.

The study of Uusitalo (2001) claimed that retail stores are being increasingly standardized and homogenized. Standardization and homogenization concern both the physical services and the cultural symbols produced by retailers (Hirschman, 1981), and this creates trust among customers. Powers and Loyka (2007) supported the idea that the approach using standardized products/services has been found to positively influence a firms’ performance.

Most of the previous studies focused on factors favoring the drivers of standardization and adaptation, but rarely addressed the performance of standardization from the customers' viewpoint. Therefore, this research aims at understanding how this attribute affects consumer perception and customer intention to select a store. Therefore:

Hypothesis 1c: There is a relationship between the level of store standardization and consumer intention to select the traditional grocery store

Hypothesis 2c: There is a relationship between the level of store standardization and consumer intention to select the chain convenience store

Hypothesis 3: Consumers perceive store attributes of chain convenience stores and traditional grocery stores differently.

## PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

### Shopping by Store Type

Store Type for Shopping		Percent %
Most Frequent Place to Buy Grocery Products	Supermarket	39.4
	Discount Store	34.3
	Convenience Store	14.0
	Traditional Grocery Store	6.5
	Fresh Market	5.8
First Chain Convenience Store in Customer Thinking	7-Eleven	96.4
	V-Shop	2.3
	Family Mart	0.8
	108 Shop	0.5

The data collected from 400 survey questionnaires was analyzed by SPSS Statistics version 17, to produce a descriptive data analysis, regression analysis, and paired t-test analysis.

The above Table presents the preference of customers for shopping places. For example, when buying grocery products, the places that customers most frequently visit are supermarkets (39.4%) and discount stores (34.3%). While chain convenience stores have market penetration in grocery products of 14 percent, traditional grocery stores and fresh markets have a market share of 12.3% in total. In terms of chain convenience stores' retail format, consumers perceive 7-11 domination at 96.4 percent, a substantially higher percentage than other chain convenience stores.

### Customer Buying Behavior

Buying Behavior		Percent %	
		Traditional Grocery Store	Chain Convenience Store
Frequency to Buy at These Stores	Several times a week	23.3	72.2
	Once a week	38.7	20.5
	Once a month	26.0	6.0
	Less than once a month	12.0	1.3
Timing to Buy at These Stores	Hungry	29.8	52.4
	Buying personal care	25.8	28.8
	No stocks at home	43.4	18.3
	Others	1.0	0.5
Money Spent Each Time at These Stores	Less than 50 THB	24.0	13.0
	51-100 THB	51.4	46.5
	101-200 THB	12.8	27.0
	More than 200 THB	11.8	13.5

In the above Table, while 62% of customers visit traditional grocery stores at least once a week, unsurprisingly 92.7% visit chain convenience stores at the same frequency. It must be highlighted that 72.2% of respondents visit chain convenience stores several times a week, and only 1.3% rarely visit chain convenience stores less than once a month.

The following two Tables report the relationship between three store attributes on customer intention to select which type of store.

## Effects of Store Attributes on Customer Intention at Traditional Grocery Stores

Variables	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	0.797	0.128		6.215	.000**
Trust in Store Brand	0.480	0.061	0.447	7.859	.000**
Product Variety and Assortment	-0.029	0.059	-0.028	-0.482	.630
Store Standardization	0.218	0.072	0.189	3.041	.003**

**Remarks:** Dependent Variable: Customer Intention to Select Store

F = 63.596; p < 0.05; R = .570; Adjusted R<sup>2</sup> = .320 \*\*indicates p < 0.05

The F score is 63.596 and its significance value is also less than 0.0. This indicates significant relationships between trust in store brand, product variety and assortment, and store standardization and customer intention to select a store. A moderate relationship exists between store attributes and intention to select traditional grocery stores, as the R value for traditional grocery store is 0.570. Since the adjusted R<sup>2</sup> for traditional grocery stores is 0.320, customer intention to select traditional grocery stores could be explained by three store attributes at 32 percent.

There are partial relationships between store standardization and trust in store brand on customer intention to select traditional grocery stores, as significance values are less than 0.05. The standardization of traditional grocery stores and trust in traditional grocery is 0.189 and 0.447 respectively, which means that a change of one standard deviation on those variables would produce a change of 0.189 and 0.447 standard deviations on customer intention to select traditional grocery stores. However, the coefficient beta of product variety of -0.028 is very small.

As a result, the null hypotheses of Hypothesis H1a and Hypothesis H1c were rejected, while a null hypothesis of Hypothesis H1b cannot be rejected. Thus, trust in brand and store standardization is significantly related to customer intention to select a traditional grocery store while the significant relationship between product variety & assortment and customer intention is not found. Hence, H1a and H1c are supported and H1b is not supported.

### Effects of Store Attributes on Customer Intention at Chain Convenience Store

Variables	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	0.096	0.209	0.461	.645	
Trust in Store Brand	0.674	0.067	0.504	10.118	.000**
Product Variety and Assortment	0.083	0.055	0.075	1.505	.133
Store Standardization	0.224	0.070	0.158	3.207	.001**

**Remarks:** Dependent Variable: Customer Intention to Select Store

F = 100.825; p < 0.05; R = .658; Adjusted R<sup>2</sup> = .429      \*\*indicates p < 0.05

In the above Table, the F score is 100.825 and its significance value is less than 0.05. This indicates significant relationships between trust in store brand, product variety and assortment, and store standardization and customer intention to select a chain convenience store. Customer intention to select the chain convenience store could be explained by three store attributes by the adjusted R<sup>2</sup> of 0.429 or 42.9 percent, and its R value is 0.658. At 95% significance level, since beta coefficient of store standardization and trust in store brand are 0.158 and 0.504 respectively, these coefficients mean that a change of one standard deviation in those independent variables would produce a change of 0.158 and 0.504 standard deviations on customer intention to select an ABC chain convenience store. However, the significance level of product variety and assortment is higher than 0.05, together with beta coefficient of 0.075; so it can be concluded that this store attribute has no significant impact on customer intention to select a chain convenience store when buying grocery products.

Therefore, it leads to the conclusion that the null hypotheses of Hypothesis H2a and Hypothesis H2c were rejected, but the null hypothesis of Hypothesis H2b cannot be rejected. Thus, consistent with the traditional grocery store, trust in brand and store standardization is significantly related to customer intention to select a chain convenience store, while a significant relationship between product variety & assortment and customer intention is not found. Hence, H2a and H2c are supported and H2b is not supported.

To compare traditional with chain convenience stores, the data was collected by a survey questionnaire. Its Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree), measures consumer perception toward three store attributes and customer intention to select a store. The mid-point of the scale is 2.5. The statistical data of variables in this study are presented in the following Table.



### One Sample t-test

Constructs	t	Sig.	Mean (2-tailed)	Standard deviation
Trust in Traditional Grocery Store	-1.030	.304	2.4606	.76456
Product Variety at Traditional Grocery Store	-2.110	.035	2.4149	.80659
Standardization of Traditional Grocery Store	-4.108	.000**	2.3543	.70927
Intention to Select Traditional Grocery Store	-1.910	.057	2.4217	.81990
Trust in Chain Convenience Store	42.822	.000**	3.5230	.47782
Product Variety at Chain Convenience Store	26.992	.000**	3.2788	.57702
Standardization of Chain Convenience Store	45.338	.000**	3.5244	.45190
Intention to Select Chain Convenience Store	32.323	.000**	3.5334	.63940

**Remarks:** Test value is 2.5 (mid-point)                      \*\* indicates  $p < 0.05$

The score for each variable for traditional grocery stores range from 2.3543 to 2.4606, whereas the score for chain convenience stores are between 3.2788 and 3.5334. Also, the standard deviations for variables of chain convenience stores varied from 0.45190 to 0.63940, but the deviations of variables of traditional grocery stores are higher than chain convenience stores, ranging from 0.70927 to 0.81990.

The respondents perceived a low level of store standardization, availability of product variety and assortment, trust in traditional grocery store and intention to select the traditional grocery store, because the scores are significantly not greater than the mid-point 2.5. At 95% confidence level, the scores for traditional grocery stores are not significantly different from the mid-point as p-value is greater than 0.05 ( $t = -1.030$ ,  $p > 0.05$  for trust in store;  $t = -2.110$ ,  $p > 0.05$  for product variety; and  $t = -1.910$ ,  $p > 0.05$  for customer intention to select the traditional grocery store). In contrast, the t-score of standardization of traditional grocery stores is -4.108 while its p-value is less than 0.05. This indicated that the standardization of traditional grocery store is perceived as significantly low.

Meanwhile, trust in store, product variety, and level of store standardization of ABC chain convenience stores are perceived as high, while intention to select ABC chain convenience stores is high as well ( $t = 42.822$ ,  $p < 0.05$  for trust in store;  $t = 26.992$ ,  $p < 0.05$  for product variety;  $t = 45.338$ ,  $p < 0.05$  for store standardization; and  $t = 32.323$ ,  $p < 0.05$  for customer intention to select the chain convenience store.

### Comparing Major Variables between Chain and Traditional Stores

Variables	Paired Differences			t-score	p-value
	Mean	SD	SE		
Trust in Store Brand	-1.062	0.856	0.043	-24.836	.000
Product Variety and Assortment	-0.864	0.925	0.046	-18.680	.000
Store Standardization	-1.170	0.791	0.040	-29.600	.000
Customer Intention to Select Store	-1.112	0.952	0.048	-23.353	.000

The above Table compares the scores between the two store types by paired t-test analysis, using SPSS. The column "Mean" represents the mean difference of scores between traditional grocery stores and chain convenience stores, and column. "Std. Deviation" indicates the standard deviation of the differences between pairs of values.

At 95% confidence interval of the difference, the differences between the two groups are not zero, so the conclusion can be drawn that differences which exist between the two groups are significant. Also, as p-values for all variables in "Sig". column are 0.000 which is less than 0.05, that significantly supports the fact that consumers differently perceive store attributes and different intentions to select stores between traditional grocery stores and chain convenience stores.

Since significance values of all variables are less than 0.05; hence, null hypotheses of Hypothesis H3a, Hypothesis H3b and Hypothesis H3c were rejected. Therefore, trust in chain convenience store brand, product variety and assortment of the chain convenience store, standardization of the chain convenience store, and customer intention to select the chain convenience store were significantly higher than those of traditional grocery stores. Thus, Hypotheses 3a, 3b and 3c were supported.

From the proposed variables, trust in store brand is the attribute that can impact customer intention to select both traditional grocery stores and chain convenience stores, and the runner-up is store standardization, while availability of product variety and assortment does not significantly impact customer intention to select a store. Therefore, the higher score of trust in chain convenience stores over traditional grocery stores also unsurprisingly proves that customers prefer to shop at chain convenience stores.

### Summary of Alternative Hypotheses Testing

Hypotheses	Result
H1: There is a relationship between store attributes of the traditional grocery store and consumer intention to select the store	Partially Supported
H1a: There is a relationship between trust in store brand and consumer intention to select the traditional grocery store	Supported
H1b: There is a relationship between availability of product variety and assortment and consumer intention to select the traditional grocery store	Not Supported
H1c: There is a relationship between the level of store standardization and consumer intention to select the traditional grocery store	Supported
H2: There is a relationship between store attributes of the chain convenience store and consumer intention to select the store	Partially Supported
H2a: There is a relationship between trust on store brand and consumer intention to select the chain convenience store	Supported
H2b: There is a relationship between availability of product variety and assortment and consumer intention to select the chain convenience store	Not Supported
H2c: There is a relationship between the level of store standardization and consumer intention to select the chain convenience store	Supported
H3: Consumers perceive store attributes of chain convenience stores and traditional grocery stores differently	Supported

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The regression analysis results indicated that two independent variables - the standardization of retail store and trust in the store brand - could explain customer intention to select which type of store. The other variable in this study - product variety and assortment - does not have a significant effect on the customer's selection of a store, even though supported in the literature review. This can be explained, as customers shop at both types when they need some products urgently. Thus, the limitation of product variety and assortment at these stores is not the major concern from the customers' point of view. Because both store types provided narrow product variety and assortment, compared to supermarkets and discount stores, due to having limited space, customers do not expect a wide variety and deep assortment of merchandise at these stores. Furthermore, both traditional grocery stores and chain convenience stores are not the first choice of customers when deciding to purchase grocery merchandise. 43.5% of respondents think of a traditional grocery store when there is no stock at home or need some merchandise urgently, so a variety in selection of goods available is not the first priority. This is consistent with the findings from the descriptive data analysis in that 52.5%

of customers always think of chain convenience stores when hungry or buying some particular products/service such as a phone card or paying bills, not limited only to grocery products. This also explains the reason why chain convenience stores focus on selling food items and expanding the scope of providing such services.

The t-test analysis also proved that there are significant differences in store attributes, between the two types, recognized by consumers. The existence of this different perception toward both store types influences customers to visit chain convenience stores more often than traditional grocery stores. The underlying reason for the change of customer behavioral intention is that these two store types possess different pattern of supply chain despite selling similar products.

Chain convenience stores have a structured/organized store management, product distribution, and staff training to provide standardized services to customers so that customers have higher trust in goods and services at this store type. On the other hand, untrustworthy traditional grocery stores, including unreliable opening hours, and goods and services poorly perceived by customers, have a negative impact on customer intention to shop at them. Usually, these traditional stores do not have store names, or customers cannot even remember the name. This confirmed the findings that traditional stores cannot gain recognition, nor create perceived store trust, from customers.

Nevertheless, when comparing consumer perception and intention to select a store in Hypotheses 3, respondents rated significantly higher scores of all variables for chain stores over traditional, and the respondents prefer chain stores more than traditional. The mean of variables for traditional stores is significantly lower than for chain stores, especially in store standardization and trust in store brands, because opening hours of traditional grocery store are quite unreliable, and there is no price label attached to products or on the store shelf. Different perceptions of store attributes between the two store types lead to varying behavioral intentions to select a store type. This is also confirmed by the questionnaire, as 72.2% of respondents regularly visit chain stores several times a week whereas only 23.3% shop at the same frequency in traditional stores. Therefore, Hypotheses 3 is strongly supported - that consumers have different perceptions of these two store types.

The findings of the study indicated that product variety has no significant impact on customer intention to select either store type; thus, the store managers or store owners should select only the items that customers expect to see or buy. This can lead to future research into the type of product acquisition by customers, for both types. Also, as trust in store brands plays a significant role in influencing customers to select a store, it would entail that the concerned parties should proceed to retain or improve the survival of the traditional grocery store. This could be supported by the government in providing training to the owners of traditional grocery stores in order to improve the trust perceived by customers. Otherwise, traditional grocery stores owned

by local Thai entrepreneur will be replaced by chain convenience stores, and the market come under the total control of foreign and Thai investors in the foreseeable future, to the overall detriment of customers.

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