Shopping Experience in Retailing: the Case of 2 Food Retailers in Bulgaria

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Abstract: *The study contributes to the examination and conceptualization of the customer shopping experience in food retail chains. The main objectives of the research paper are to conceptualize the shopping experience in retail food chains by developing a list of attributes, to explore the customers' opinions about the importance of the attributes and the differences between the importance assessment and the experience assessment of customers for 2 food retail chains in Bulgaria as well as to draw conclusions about the area of concern in both chains. The technique employed for the analytical purposes of the research was traditional Importance-Performance Analysis and 2 alternative IPA techniques- Alternative IPA representation and IPA with gap between focal performance and competitor's performance. The recent study reveals that from the viewpoint of the experience model of Schmitt (1999), the 5 most important attributes shaping the customers' shopping experience belong to 3 of the experience model components: sensory, emotional and cognitive component. The paper contains findings about the comparison between both food retail chains based on traditional IPA method and alternative IPA techniques and the areas of concern for future improvements of the customer shopping experience in the food retail chains in the country.*

Key Words: *Customer Experience, Shopping Experience, IPA Method, Retail Chains.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Customer experience is a sophisticated phenomenon which is difficult for analyzing and evaluating but it is worth to make such attempts as it is closely related to customer satisfaction and loyalty. In fact, customer experience has become a critical differentiator in today's highly competitive and highly connected global marketplace and the biggest and most difficult task for researchers is to find out the experience attributes to be evaluated. As the customer experience is a kind of qualitative phenomenon, the evaluation and measurement in this case is not an easy job, especially in services and to some extent in retailing. There's tangible added value even in services when there is an effective management of the customer experience. Several authors (Pine and Gilmore, 1998 and 1999; Shaw and Ivens, 2002; Voss, 2003; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Meyer and Schwager, 2007), have made the point that the customer experience may provide a new means of competition.

It is necessary to note that the concept of experience is not new and has been covered by many authors and disciplines. In marketing, Holbrook & Hirschman (1982), Arnould & Price (1993), Ritchins (1997) have theorized early that consumption includes experiential effects. The guru of customer experience and experience marketing B. Schmitt (1999) argued that experience marketers focus on consumption situations such as "grooming in the bathroom" and asked how products and brands can enhance the consumption experience. On his opinion customers do not only engage in rational choice, but are just as frequently driven by emotions (Schmitt, 2010). In contrast to Schmitt some authors apply the experience concept only to interactions, relationships or even contexts. For instance, LaSalle and Britton (2002) define it as "an interaction, or series of interactions, between a customer and a product, a company or its representative that lead to a reaction." Kishka (2003) views experience management as a "systematic approach to measuring and managing customer feedback" and others like Pine and Gilmore (1999) refer to experiences as "events that engage individuals in a personal way". In the past decade, an interest in the customer experience concept has increased predominantly from practitioners and consultants. Some brands like IKEA, Starbucks, Google or The Ritz-Carlton became expensive and powerful brands not only supported by exclusively creative advertising campaigns, but more on the delivery of a superior customer experience. These companies focus on in-depth knowledge about the customer expectations of their experiences and more in detail about the expected components of this experience.

Why is customer experience so important? Answering this question several authors have various opinions and suggestions proved by research. Providing an excellent experience is important because it influences customer satisfaction (Liljander and Strandvik, 1997), increases customer loyalty (Yu and Dean, 2001 ; Pullman and Gross, 2004, Mascarenhas et al., 2006), affects expectations (Johnson and Mathews, 1997 ; Flanagan et al., 2005), supports the brand (Grace and O'Cass, 2004; Berry and Carbone, 2007), builds confidence (Flanagan et al., 2005)and also creates emotional bonds with customers or brings the customer to the other extreme e.g. leads to emotional scarring (Pullman and Gross, 2004). Researchers today state that customer experience is generated through a longer process of company–customer interaction across multiple channels, generated through both functional and emotional clues (Klaus and Maklan, 2013).

The main objectives of this study are:
- to conceptualize the shopping experience in retail chains;
- to explore the customers' opinions about the importance of various attributes which define the experience during shopping in food retailing ;
- to explore the differences between the importance assessment and the experience assessment of customers for 2 big food retail chains operating in Bulgaria;
- to make suggestions for improvement of the overall customer shopping experience of both retailers;
- to draw conclusions about the main area of concern for food retail chains.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

No doubt that there is a big confusion in the literature about the definition of an experience and its difference to a service. Publications and opinions on customer experience can be found in a variety of academic disciplines including on an earlier stage philosophy (Dewey, 1938), marketing and consumer research (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982; Schmitt, 1999, Carù & Cova, 2007), management practice (Pine and Gilmore, 1999), cognitive science (Pinker, 1997) and design sciences (e.g., Forlizzi, 1997; Hekkert & Schifferstein, 2008; Sleeswijk-Visser, 2009).

In fact, the review of the sources reveals that there is no general consensus on the definition of customer experience because the various disciplines ascribe different meanings and add different content to the concept of customer experience (Carù & Cova, 2003; Sleeswijk-Visser, 2009). The extensive literature review reveals that despite of the wide consensus on the importance of customer experience, there are different viewpoints about defining customer expectations and its measurement (Carbone and Haeckel, 1994; Alben, 1996; Pine and Gilmore, 1998; Schmitt, 1999; Forlizzi and Ford, 2000; Gupta and Vajic, 2000; Shaw 2005; Chang & Chieng, 2006; Harris et al., 2003; Kuniavsky 2007; Patricio L., Fisk R., Cunha, J., 2008; Verhoef et al., 2009; Brakus et al., 2009; Palmer, 2010). The majority of definitions focus on the service delivery chain and put attention on the fact that customer expectations is an individual interpretation of the service process and its interactions, that influence customers' feelings (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Ding et al., 2010; Johnston and Clark, 2008; Meyer and Schwager, 2007; Pullman and Gross, 2004; Shaw and Ivens, 2002). According to most of these authors customer experience is considered reasonably as an outcome of interaction between companies and customers. As the customer experience became a critical brand differentiator concepts about experiential marketing evolved. When discussing experiential marketing and developing the experience model concept Schmitt (1999) states that "it is a process that encourages customers to sense, feel, think, act and relate to a subject" and therefore he thinks that more and more marketers are moving away from traditional "features and benefits marketing" toward creating experiences for their customers (opp. cit. 1999). According to LaSalle and Britton (2004) experiential marketing is an interaction or series of interaction between the consumer and the product or the company.
According to Lush et al. (2007) value for the organisation is created from the sale of the service for which the customer or some other agency pays. From a customer's point of view (sometimes referred to as the service-dominant logic perspective, Lusch et al. 2007) value is created for the customer in the service received; their experience of it (value-in-use, Lusch et al., 2007) and the outcomes of the service including the benefits they get from it (Carbone, 2004, Edvardsson and Olsson, 1996). The experience (and value, Vargo and Lusch, 2004) is perceived exclusively from the viewpoint of an individual customer and is inherently personal, existing only in the customer's mind. Thus, no two people can have the same experience (Pine and Gilmore, 1998). Several authors state that these interactions influence not only what the customers think and feel about a brand but also the strength of their relationship with the brand (De Chernatony, L. and Dall' Olmo Riely, F., 1999). The results from research show also that customer experience has a positive relationship with brand image. It means that customers' perception of their interaction with brands can shape the brand image (Sirapracha and Tocquer, 2012). Moreover, the customer experience also has a positive impact on customer loyalty in terms of propensity to switch the brand. A good customer experience reduces significantly the propensity for switching to another brand.

We accept these views and on our opinion customer experience should be defined as an outcome of customers' interactions with the company, including the interaction with the staff, the availability and the technology of self-service and of course the design of the service environment. In the services sector the outcome is usually not tangible but the environment- interior (furniture, colors etc.) and technological equipment are predominantly tangible and provide sensory perceptions. Certainly the live, multi-sensory activity that occurs upon entering any of a number of special interest clubs, parks or other locations (such as the Disney stores, Niketown, IKEA or even a local Starbucks) produces an experience and physical connection that would be difficult to match with even a great print ad, a dazzling direct mail letter...or radio's best attempt to create a "theater of the mind" (Marconi, 2005).

3. METHOD:

3.1. Shopping experience in retailing: conceptualization

As pointed above customer experience strengthens brand preference through differentiated experiences and it is closely related to the customer loyalty, it is important for the companies to know from customer's view point the importance of different experience's attributes in retailing. There is much literature on issues related to the online shopping experience (Puccinelli N.M., Goodstein, R.C., Grewal, D., Price, R., Raghubir,P. and Stewart, D., 2009; Kleinman, S., 2012; Hamza, V.K. and Saidalavi, K., 2014; Dai Bo, Forsythe, S. and Kwon, Wi-Suk, 2014), but there is a lack of research and literature on shopping experience in retail chains and therefore there is a need of studies to uncover from customer's viewpoint the desirable attributes of a pleasant shopping experience in retail chains.

In general, the environment in a physical setting is a tangible asset that is inseparable component of the experiences as the service process occurs in this environment. The same statement is valid also for the retailing experience where the physical setting and the shop environment play the role of tangible asset in addition to the consumer goods bought in the retail premises and must be included in the list of attributes of the shopping experience in retail chains. Petermans, Janssens and Van Cleempoel (2013) reasonably underline that despite the growing recognition of the significance of customer experiences in retail practice; academic literature on this topic often lacks conceptualization of the phenomenon as such. Now a variety of terms is in use for determining experiences in retailing. Caru and Cova (2003) use the terms shopping experiences, consumer experience in retail environments but according to Healy et al. (2007) the most suitable term is retail experience. Despite of differences in defining the shopping experience in retailing one thing is undisputable and namely: the trend in the practice is to differentiate their premises from the competitors by creating conditions for memorable customer experiences through all possible elements. Cachero-Martinez and Vazques-Casielles (2017) distinguish several experience dimensions when exploring the shopping experience and develop a shopping experience scale that includes six dimensions: sensory (tactile, scent, auditory, visual, taste), intellectual (through design and with employees), social, pragmatic and emotional. Analyzing the experiences by sectors of activity, their study indicates that the emotional experience predominates in some sectors. On their opinion, it is important to develop innovations related to emotional experience. As already mentioned, the study of Pine and Gilmore (1999) associated consumer participation in retail services with audience participation in theatre and the authors focused on the importance of joyful customer participation in the service experience. Even not to full extent but shopping experience in retailing can be managed effectively by adding value to the pure shopping process in different ways including by convenient display of the goods, pleasant interior and sound design, convenient parking, providing excellent conditions for children's stay in the premises etc. In this research, customer experience is therefore defined as the outcome of customers' interactions with the retailer and for this reason, one of the goals of the study is to identify components that contribute to consumers' retail experience.

In the study we adopt the approach to conceptualize the shopping experience more practically oriented for the purposes of the research, namely we accept as equal the "shopping experience" and the "perceived company performance". Based on the expert opinions of a panel of 7 experts in FMG marketing- practitioners and academics- a list of 14 attributes playing a role of experience components was constructed. Some of these attributes are connected to the offering of the retailer- "large variety of product groups and brands", the ratio "value-price", "freshness of goods" etc., "attractive and beneficial promotions", "reasonable prices", "offering other non- FMG", others are related to the service staff and some of them are describing the environment of premises (interior and music design, product display, aromatization and hygiene, facilities for children stay etc.) where the shopping occurs. As seen above the attributes belong to various experience components of Schmitt's experience model concept. The meaning of the term "experience" in this study as mentioned above is perceived performance of the retailer.

3.2. Process of data collection and data analysis

The instrument employed in this research is online questionnaire that was uploaded on Google. docs and a sample of 230 respondents from the whole country was realized. The requirement was that they should be customers who have shopped regularly in both retailers on the Bulgarian market – Retail chain A and Retail chain B for the last 2 years and have opinion about their experience in both retail chains. For the purposes of assessment of the attributes' importance and perceived performance, a 5-point Likert scale was employed.

The technique employed for the purposes of the research was traditional Importance-Performance Analysis and Alternative IPA techniques. The authors Martilla and James (1977) first proposed IPA as a useful technique to provide company management a tool for identifying company's strengths and weaknesses when developing a strategy for improvement of company performance. IPA provides management with an useful focus for developing marketing strategies for expectations related to importance and performance (Martilla & James, 1977). With other words, IPA is an useful and relatively easy for implementing method for simultaneously considering the strengths and weaknesses of a business. The key objective of IPA technique is diagnostic in its nature: this technique aims to facilitate identification of attributes for which, given their importance, the product or service underperforms or over performs (Abaloa & Manzano, 2007). The technique has achieved broad acceptance across many research fields and is extensively used in various industries but mostly in the services, in hospitality and tourism industry and in retailing because of its simplicity and attractiveness in producing data for suggesting actions to improve company competitiveness. In addition IPA

method has been used as a tool to evaluate service quality and marketing strategies in the educational sector (O'Neill & Palmer, 2003), in health care and hospital management (Miranda & Chamorro et al., 2010; Chen and Lin, 2013), and in government activities (Wong et al., 2011). In short, this IPA evaluation tool is used to prescribe the prioritization of attributes for improvement and it can also provide guidance for strategic development (Slack, N., 1994). As a matter, many academics and practitioners find the other instruments for measuring the quality perception SERVQUAL and SERVPERF too technical and they argue that information collected from such approaches can be difficult to understand. At the same time IPA is an understandable evaluation tool for researchers and practitioners to find out attributes that are doing well and attributes that need to be improved, which require actions immediately   (M. S. Wong, M.S., Fearon, C. and Philip, G., 2009). In principle if the performance is better than the importance, the consumer has a positive disconfirmation, which means that he or she is satisfied and he or she will be more willing to repeat the purchase in this retail store. If the performance is worse than the importance, the consumer has a negative disconfirmation, which means that he/she is unsatisfied and he/she will look for alternative retail brand for the next purchase.

        In our case of implementation of this graphical tool based on judgments of the importance and experience with each attribute, the importance measure represents the horizontal axis, and the performance measure constitutes the vertical axis of a two-dimensional graph. As a result of this, the two dimensional IPA model is divided into four quadrants namely "Concentrate Here" (Quadrant IV), "Keep up the Good Work" (Quadrant 1), "Low Priority"(Quadrant III), and "Possible Overkill"(Quadrant II) are created.

For the purposes of this research the respondents had to judge their experience with a set of attributes of their overall shopping experience in both retail chains.

Except the traditional IPA method, two other variances of IPA were employed:
1. Alternative IPA representation
2. IPA with gap between focal performance and competitor's performance.

3.2.1. Alternative IPA representation

        Among the alternative partitions of the IPA grid (reviewed by Abalo et al., 2007; Bacon, 2003; Oh, 2001), the most interesting are those that highlight the difference between importance and performance ratings by means of an upward diagonal line that represents points where ratings of importance and performance are exactly equal. This iso-rating line divides the graph in two great areas (Abalo et al., 2007; Bacon, 2003; Hawes and Rao, 1985; Nale et al., 2000; Picón et al., 2001; Sampson and Showalter, 1999; Slack, 1994).

3.2.2. IPA with gap between focal performance and competitors' performance

        Among some modifications of IPA-method is the suggestion of Yavas and Shemwell (2001) which presents an extension of the traditional IPA approach by integrating competitors' performance (gap 2 measures the gap between performance of a focal firm and its competitors). They note that Gap 1 is biased and then they take competitive performance into consideration. This is different from the traditional IPA approach that only considers the performance of the focal firm. The performance difference is measured by focal performance minus the competitor's or bench marker's performance. The analysis was performed through Paired Samples Test because the research design requires paired sample testing used for continuous measurements (Thang & Connie, 2012). This IPA grid helps to identify competitive attributes that need improvement. The attributes with high importance and high performance gap are called "salient factors" by Brooks et al. (2010). Second alternative gives additional information for marketing decisions as It represents the relative performance gaps between one retailer and its competitor(s).

Performance gap = Performance Retail "A" – Performance Retail "B"

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION:

        The survey was conducted in 2016-2017 and the data point out that the highest importance assessment by means has two attributes "freshness of goods - meat, fruits and vegetables", and "good price-value ratio" – 4.73. The next important attributes are "hygiene and aromatisation" (4.63), and "kind and correct service" - 4.55 (see Table 1). Other very important attributes for the overall experience in retailing are the "big variety of product groups and brands" (4.54), "good cashier organisation" (4.48) and the "convenient goods' display" (4.43). The lowest importance of all attributes has "the children's facilities for play"- 3.01 and "pleasant interior and sound design" - 3.51.

Table 4.1. IMPORTANCE AND EXPERIENCE ASSESSMENT BY MEANS*

Attributes of Shopping Experience	Importance		Performance – chain "A"		Performance –chain "B"	
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation

1	Big variety of product groups and brands	4.54	0.79	3.21	1.04	3.77	0.86
2	Convenient display of goods	4.44	0.71	3.45	1.02	3.70	0.99
3	Reasonable prices	4.40	0.72	3.90	0.89	3.41	0.97
4	Kind and correct service	4.55	0.71	3.78	1.02	3.32	1.11
5	Good cashier organisation	4.48	0.78	3.82	1.09	3.09	1.17
6	Pleasant interior and sound design	3.51	1.12	3.26	1.03	3.12	1.03
7	Attractive promotions	4.07	1.01	3.84	0.91	3.33	0.90
8	Good price-value ratio	4.73	0.344	3.89	0.98	3.30	1.03
9	Freshness of goods (meat, fruit etc.)	4.73	0.66	3.87	1.06	3.60	1.08
10	Hygiene and aromatisation	4.63	0.60	3.74	0.94	3.45	0.92
11	Offering of non-FMG	3.74	1.04	3.40	1.20	3.11	1.05
12	Good children facilities for play	3.01	1.32	2.44	1.10	2.28	1.12
13	Convenient parking	4.17	1.00	4.01	1.15	3.43	1.28
14	Excellent location	4.16	0.83	3.95	1.02	3.81	1.00
	Median	*4.42*		*3.80*		*3.37*	

the meaning of experience is perceived performance

From the viewpoint of the experience model of Schmitt (1999) the recent survey reveals that 5 of the most important attributes shaping the customers' shopping experience belong to 3 of the experience model components: sensory component - "freshness of goods - meat, fruits and vegetables", "hygiene and aromatization", cognitive component- "good price-value ratio" and "big variety of product groups and brands" and emotional component-"kind and correct service".

As far as the IPA matrix for both chains – "A" and "B" on the Bulgarian market is concerned, the major weaknesses of food chain "A" are "convenient parking" and "good location" as the mean for importance is one of the highest and the experience assessment is under 4 but at the same time the differences are not big (see figure 1). The experience assessment for chain "B" is similar and the gap between the mean of importance and the mean of experience assessment is even bigger (3.43-4.18 and 3.84-4.18).
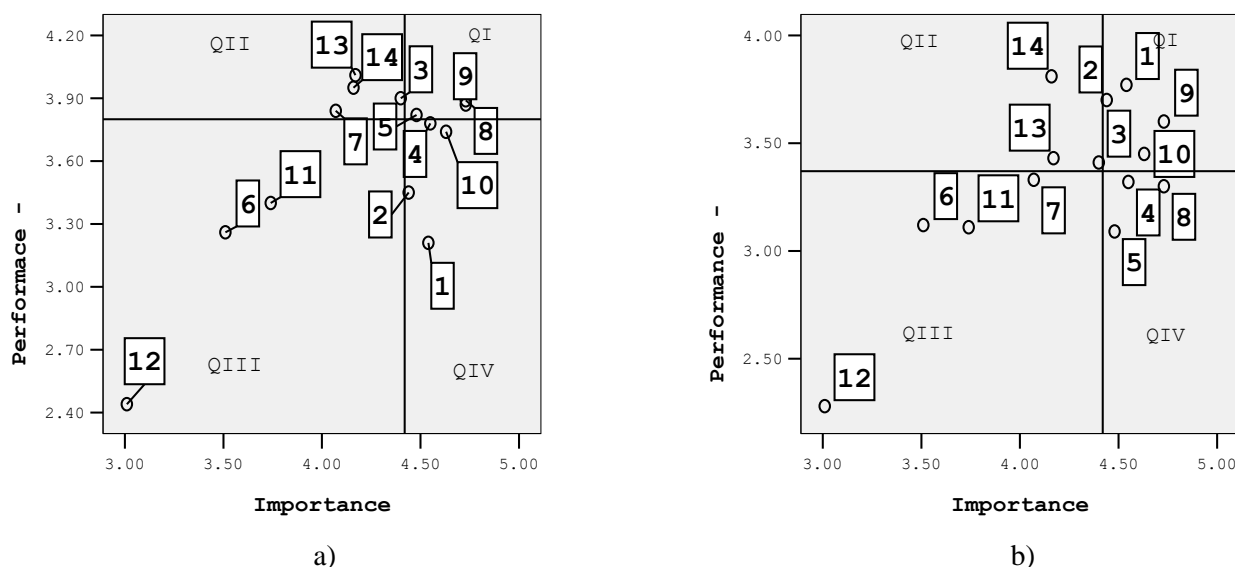

Fig. 4.1. Traditional IPA-matrix of a) Retail chain A, and b) Retail chain B

As the alternative IPA grid represents on a different way the differences between importance and performance ratings and the diagonal line represents points where the ratings of importance and experience (perceived performance) for every attribute of the list are equal, in this particular case this is valid only for "kind and correct service". The attributes "good price-value ratio" and "good cashier organization" are close to the iso-rating line (see Figure 2). As far as "B" chain is concerned, the two attributes with equal importance and experience ratings are "attractive and beneficial promotions" and "good location".

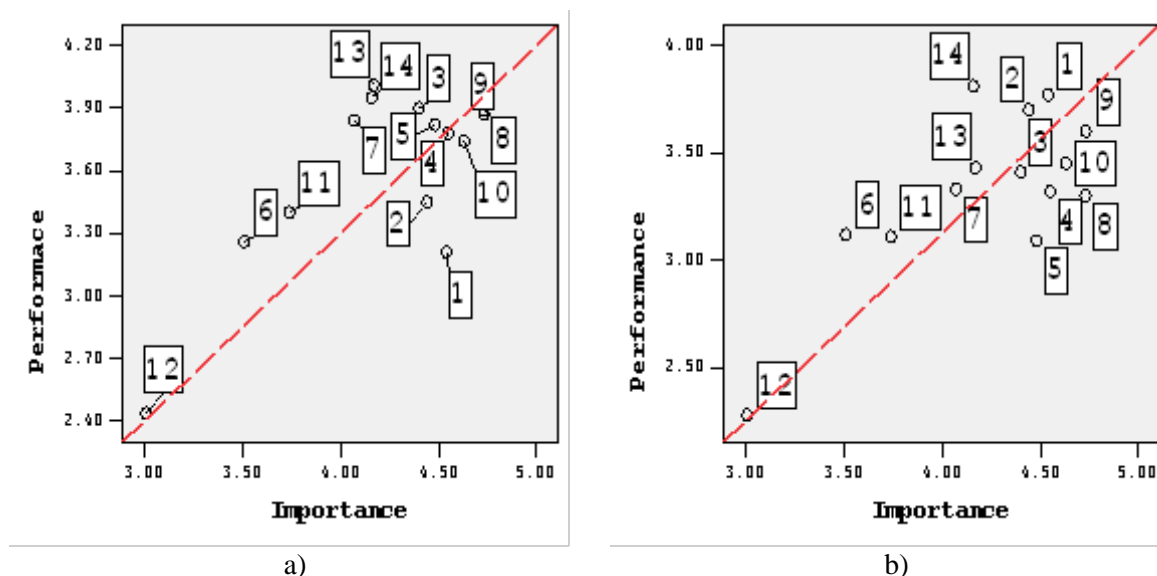a)   b)

Fig. 4.2. Alternative IPA-matrix of a) Retail chain A, and b) Retail chain B

As mentioned in the methodological part of the paper, the other alternative of traditional IPA is the "IPA with gap between focal performance and competitor's performance which is an extension of IPA based on the results of Paired Samples T Test. The comparison between the means of the shopping experiences (perceived performances) in chain "A" and chain "B" reveals that with exception of 2 out of 14 experience attributes - "big variety of product groups and brands"(-0.557) and "convenient display of goods"(-0.248), Retail chain "A" has higher ratings of the experience attributes and they are located in quadrant "Concentrate here" of the alternative IPA grid.

Table 4.2. PERFORMANCE GAPS

	Attributes of Shopping Experience	Paired differences (Performance of retail chain A – Performance of retail chain B)	
		Mean	Std. Deviation
1	Big variety of product groups and brands	-0.557*	1.146
2	Convenient display of goods	-0.248*	1.071
3	Reasonable prices	0.496*	0.992
4	Kind and correct service	0.465*	1.188
5	Good cashier organisation	0.730*	1.199
6	Pleasant interior and sound design	0.139	1.260
7	Attractive promotions	0.517*	1.056
8	Good price-value ratio	0.591*	1.178
9	Freshness of goods (meat, fruit etc.)	0.278*	1.390
10	Hygiene and aromatisation	0.291*	1.196
11	Offering of non-FMG	0.283*	1.461

12	Good children facilities for play	0.161*	0.818
13	Convenient parking	0.583*	1.341
14	Excellent location	0.139*	1.056

differences are statically significant at p<0.05

The test results point out that in the "Low priority" quadrant are placed attributes 6, 12 and 14, where the performance differences are very low (see Figure 2). The attributes with high importance and high experience gap need to carry improvement activities and they are in this study the "reasonable prices", "kind and correct service", "good cashier organization" and "good price-value ratio".
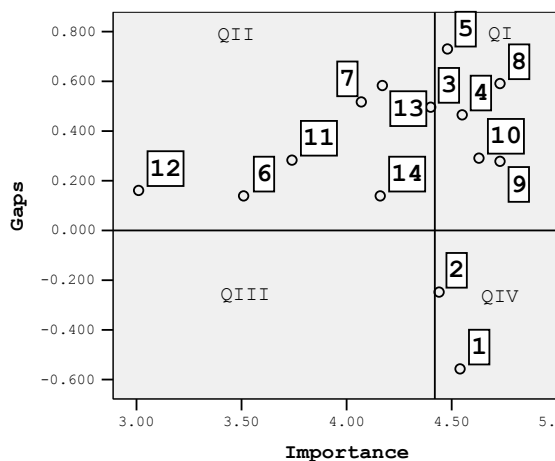

Fig. 4.3. Alternative IPA-matrix – Performance Gaps

Limitations of research

The main limitation of the current research is the sample size as the number of respondents is 230 and this fact does not allow making a generalization for the whole Bulgarian market of the results obtained. There is an opportunity for a future comparative research with a bigger customer sample and more retail chains.

5. CONCLUSION:

As the customer in every industry including retailing becomes through Internet more empowered, it increases the importance of the phenomenon "customer experience". This is a marketing area that needs constant care and consumer research. The traditional IPA analysis was developed as a managerial tool to improve performance but using incorrect IPA for identification of problems and resource allocation for improvement can cause incorrect managerial decisions. The second alternative that we demonstrate in this article gives additional information for marketing decisions. It represents the relative performance gaps between one retailer and its competitor(s). For customers of food retail chains in Bulgaria the five most important attributes shaping their experience at the point of sale- the store, are associated mainly to the retail store management and not to the companies-providers of goods. Surprisingly for the authors the most unimportant attribute of the shopping experience is the "pleasant interior and the sound design". The comparison between both retail chains in Bulgaria points out better results for chain "A"- the food chain has higher ratings of the attributes, but chain "B" delivers better opportunities in the area of 2 important attributes- "big variety of product groups and brands" and "convenient display of goods". The customers of both chains have expectations for more personalized experience, more attractive and beneficial promotions and more in-door events with customer food tasting. The retail chain should put more stress on co-creation of the shopping experience as this turns the customer to important factor in the shopping process design.

From the viewpoint of Schmitt's experience model the recent study reveals that 5 of the most important attributes shaping the shopping experience in retailing belong to 3 of the experience model components: sensory component- "freshness of goods - meat, fruits and vegetables", "hygiene and aromatization", cognitive component- "good price-value ratio" and "big variety of product groups and brands" and emotional component-"kind and correct service".

The conclusion is that there is a need for innovations related to emotional experience which will contribute to better overall experience in food retailing. Retail marketers should investigate how customers experience brands in the retail environment and what influence on their shopping behavior have the various experience attributes.

In order to exceed customer's expectations, retail food chains must try multiple ways of improving customer experience and this can happen only by developing and implementing customer experience management strategies. The shopping experience in food chains can be managed successfully by adding value to the experience in retailing. The competition between the food retail chains will obviously lead to improvement of the customer experience in retailing if the study findings are taken into account but it will lead to experience differentiation as well as one of the important customer loyalty drivers.

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