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Assessing the maximum level of customer satisfaction in grocery stores

A comparison between Spain and the USA

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to establish the main factors that underlie store attributes, to examine which exert the greatest influences on the achievement of a maximum level of customer satisfaction. This study seeks to determine if there are significant differences not only in the factor compositions but also in their influence on customer satisfaction, depending on the country of residence of focal customers.

Design/methodology/approach – The test of the proposed framework consists of analyses of two samples of customers that purchased in grocery stores in Spain and the USA. Following a factor analysis of the principal components, a binary logistic regression analysis tests the influence of the identified factors on customer satisfaction.

Findings – This work contributes to extant literature by assessing differences in the main factors that contribute to satisfaction with food stores, depending on the location of the customer.

Practical implications – This work is especially useful to grocery retailers that operate, or plan to operate, in different countries; it outlines key factors to consider to achieve upper-bounded customer satisfaction scores.

Originality/value – The proposed classification of attributes and factors, according to their importance for customers' evaluations in different countries, includes three main factors. The first-order factor includes the most valued attributes by all customers, independent of the country of residence. The second-order factors include attributes with lesser importance though still valued by customers; the importance depends on the country of residence. Finally, the third-order factor attributes are valued relatively less.

Keywords Customer satisfaction, Grocery stores, Store attribute perceptions, Different countries, Spain, United States of America

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Grocery retailers today face more dynamic and competitive environments than ever before. From the supply side, the processes of fusion and acquisition during the past

two decades have resulted in strongly concentrated, very competitive and highly international company structures (Arnold and Fernie, 2000; Burt *et al.*, 2002; Dupuis and Prime, 1996). European food retailers such as Tesco and US retailers such as Walmart even operate in multiple countries. Thus, it is not surprising that grocery retailing topics related to entry strategies, motivations and obstacles to retail internationalisation have received considerable attention from both practitioners and academics (Alexander, 1990; Treagold and Davies, 1988; Uusitalo and Röckman, 2004; Williams, 1992; Wrigley, 1989).

Changes in the retail landscape have been accompanied by simultaneous and significant changes on the demand side. For example, modern consumers exhibit new purchase behaviours and consumption habits; as Berné (2006) shows, certain socio-demographic factors (e.g. growing immigration, more single-person homes, increasing numbers of women working outside the home, smaller households, progressive aging of the population) mean that grocery store customers differ greatly from those who existed only a decade ago.

Accordingly, food retailers must look constantly for resources and internal capabilities on which to base their strategies to remain competitive (Davis *et al.*, 2008; González-Benito, 2002). They also need to identify how customers perceive them to establish the correct combination of unique elements that will enable the retailers to generate synergies (Betancourt *et al.*, 2007). This goal has even greater relevance for food retailers that aim to compete in countries different from their original home country (Arnold and Fernie, 2000; Johnson and Allen, 1994).

In this sense several key attributes, as identified in prior literature, enable grocery retailers to differentiate themselves from competitors in the market. Therefore, this study aims to identify the underlying factors of these attributes and determine the relationship that exists between:

- customer perceptions of these focal factors; and
- customer satisfaction with their purchases.

This latter goal is especially relevant because food retailers are conscious of the importance of customer satisfaction on the success of their commercial strategies and achieved results (Gómez *et al.*, 2004; Martínez-Ruiz *et al.*, 2010). The limited margins in grocery retailing also mean long-term customer satisfaction is a critical success factor. Moreover, we focus on the maximum level of customer satisfaction, because as service providers, food retailers must determine whether their main objective is simply to satisfy consumers with their performance or to deliver a maximum level of perceived service quality (Spreng and MacKoy, 1996). This study shows retail managers which attributes and factors they should emphasise to achieve the maximum level of customer satisfaction, taking into account the notion that customer satisfaction, among other aspects, represents an important antecedent of loyalty (Fornell, 1992; Sivadas and Baker-Prewitt, 2000; Yu and Dean, 2001).

In recognition of the international structure of grocery retail groups worldwide, this research also aims to assess differences in customer satisfaction factors and their varying impacts on the maximum level of customer satisfaction according to customers' national residence. This research offers a useful contribution to food retailers that intend to operate (or currently operate) in different countries, because it reveals key factors to take into consideration to launch a grocery retail operation that appeals to different cultural characteristics. Bearing this goal in mind, we examine two different customer samples from two continents – North America and Europe – such that we collect data

about not only the store factors that contribute most to the maximum level of customer satisfaction but also the differences in customer satisfaction that reflect where customers reside.

In the next section, we therefore review characteristic attributes of food stores identified in relevant literature. In Section 3, we detail our data, obtained from two samples of customers gathered in food stores in two different countries (Spain and USA). After identifying the store factors that underlie these attributes, we propose a series of hypotheses relating to the influence of these factors on the maximum level of customer satisfaction with the purchase experience. In Section 4, we test the proposed hypotheses, using a binary logistic regression analysis that identifies which factors exert the greatest influence on the maximum level of customer satisfaction, across the two customer samples. In turn, the study reveals several interesting conclusions and managerial guidelines relative to retail grocery establishments in different continents, as we detail in Section 5, including the attributes that customers value most, their underlying factors, and sources of differentiation for retailers.

2. Characteristic grocery attributes: literature review

According to prior literature (Berné, 2006; Davis *et al.*, 2008; Ganesh *et al.*, 2007; Gómez *et al.*, 2004; Martínez-Ruiz *et al.*, 2010), it is possible to identify a series of attributes of retail establishments that, when used properly by retail distributors, establishes strategic methods of differentiation that customers value positively and that thus are highly likely to influence the degree of customer satisfaction.

2.1 Quality

Diverse works demonstrate that the quality of merchandise sold influences the value perceived by customers. This essential component determines how consumers evaluate the establishment (Levy *et al.*, 2005) and makes it possible for retailers to differentiate themselves (Binninger, 2007; Pan and Zinkhan, 2006). The merchandise the establishment offers influences a retail distributor's reputation, as well as the purchase levels and patterns of consumers (Baker *et al.*, 2002). Some researchers also measure how consumers perceive the quality of the product in various different ways, depending on the type of establishment in which the purchase takes place (Darden and Schwinghammer, 1985; Pan and Zinkhan, 2006).

2.2 Assortment

A large assortment, defined as a vast variety of products and many different items offered by a retail distributor (Levy and Weitz, 1995), constitutes a key descriptor of a retail strategy that helps the retail distributors serve the different tastes and preferences of clients (Dhar *et al.*, 2001). Greater variety not only helps retail distributors attract more consumers but also can stimulate them to increase their purchase volume and frequency. In particular, a retail distributor that offers a greater assortment can increase purchase convenience, which should enhance consumer satisfaction (Dellaert *et al.*, 1998).

In this regard, store brands constitute strategic assets for retailers, because they increase the stock variety and support objectives related to value-providing services, the strategic positioning of the store brand (Ailawadi and Bari, 2000; Gómez-Suarez, 2005) and flexibility in relation to segmented pricing or promotion strategies (Binninger, 2007; Gómez and Rubio, 2006). Likewise, a store brand is a powerful tool that can create

a favourable store image, because it offers customers information about products, as well as an alternative, appealing quality – price relationship (Corstjens and Lal, 2000).

2.3 Customer attention

Customer attention is an attribute of the retail establishment that influences customer satisfaction. The desire for human interaction draws some consumers to establishments in which they find amiable and communicative personnel. Some studies show that certain consumer groups enjoy speaking and socializing with other customers when purchasing, because it offers a social experience outside the home (Tauber, 1972). Generally such consumer groups experience great motivation to associate with similar others, because doing so reduces their feelings of boredom and solitude. A shopping experience thus offers an activity that consumers perform to alleviate loneliness (Rubenstein and Shaver, 1980).

2.4 Additional services

Convenience is a key benefit for buyers in a modern, fast-paced world; customer perceptions of convenience, including operating hours and the availability of free, ample parking, can exert a positive influence on satisfaction (Berry *et al.*, 2002; González-Benito and González-Benito, 2005), such that they should draw new customers and encourage frequent return visits to an establishment (Hansen and Deutscher, 1977-1978).

2.5 Store location

Prior literature shows that ease of access is highly correlated with consumers' selection of a commercial establishment (Bellenger *et al.*, 1977). For example, a location nearer a customer's home reduces transaction costs associated with the purchase (e.g. transportation, time expended, locating the establishment). Consumers' perceptions of the time and effort required to complete a shopping act influence their perceptions of service convenience (Berry *et al.*, 2002), so retail managers must locate retail facilities in such a way that they positively affect the greatest number of potential customer perceptions regarding time and effort.

2.6 Store atmosphere

The atmosphere of a store constitutes a distinct element of retail establishments. Kotler (1973) observes that the atmosphere of a commercial establishment, as experienced by people's senses (i.e. sight, sound and smell), has a strong influence on the decision to buy. Some investigations, carried out with information on shopping centres, show that many consumers are prone to make purchases on the basis of their attitudes toward the atmosphere of the shopping establishment (Bigné and Andreu, 2004; Finn and Louviere, 1990, 1996; Gentry and Burns, 1977; Haynes and Talpade, 1996). For example, excitement provoked by the ambience of the establishment might result in pleasure or displeasure; both time and spending diminish in disagreeable environments but increase in pleasant environments (Donovan *et al.*, 1994).

2.7 Pricing and discounts

Retail distributors frequently use price as a key component of their marketing strategy, with the purpose of obtaining a certain image in the market. For instance, to obtain a low-price image, retailers might set reduced prices for product categories that

are particularly valued by consumers (i.e. loss leaders). This conscious strategy is particularly applied to customers who exhibit greater sensitivity to price variations (Dunne and Kahn, 1997).

Despite its importance, marketing literature has not established a consistent position regarding customers' perceptions of price; rather the findings are mixed. Lichtenstein *et al.* (1993) show for example that higher prices offer a positive cue, because they indicate quality, prestige and status to the consumer. In contrast, Dodds (1995) suggests that consumers perceive higher prices negatively and purely as an economic sacrifice. In both positive and negative respects though, price perception acts as a marketplace cue that aids consumers in their decision-making processes in complex market situations (Dodds, 1995).

In addition to price, another influence on the value proposition is discounts, such as specials or sales promotions. These perceived savings can create certain beneficial effects for the retailer (Blattberg *et al.*, 1995; Martínez-Ruiz and Mollá-Descals, 2008; Martínez-Ruiz *et al.*, 2006, 2008; Tigert, 1983; Walters and Rinne, 1986), such as increasing sales in the product category, accelerating purchases in the retail store or encouraging customer traffic.

3. Data description and hypotheses development
In this section, we describe the data collection process, as well as the statistical information obtained from these data. The data enabled us to analyse customer perceptions of different attributes of the commercial establishment and understand which factors underlie these attributes. Using these factors, we evaluate our research hypotheses, which refer to the influence of various factors on consumer purchase satisfaction.

3.1 Sample and data collection
A questionnaire was administered in two countries (Spain and the USA) on two different continents. It first was administered in Spain during March 17-31, 2008, using personal interviews conducted with customers in diverse retail grocery establishments that represented different formats across the city of Cuenca. The population of this city is representative, in size, of most cities in Spain, and its commercial structure is similar to the "average Spanish city" (La Caixa, 2008). According to the data provided by La Caixa (2008), Cuenca has 316 grocery stores, 758 non-grocery retail stores and 77 mixed commerce/other types of retailers. Two shopping centres cover a total area of 38,505 square metres (m^2), and in each, a hypermarket acts as the anchor. The oldest shopping centre, created in 1992, has a gross leasable area of 5,800 m^2, 22 shops, 530 parking places and the hypermarket Alcampo (owned by the French hypermarket chain Auchan) as an anchor. The newer shopping centre, created in 2002, has a gross leasable area of 32,705 m^2, 71 shops, 1,200 parking places and an anchor in the form of the hypermarket Eroski (owned by the Spanish hypermarket chain Eroski).

The sampling method was non-probabilistic (convenience sampling). The buyers were contacted by interviewers during morning and evening sessions as they left retail outlets. The interviews spanned different types of grocery stores, including hypermarkets, supermarkets, discount stores and convenience stores. We obtained 422 valid questionnaires, as specified in Table I.

The questionnaire was administered in the USA during February 10-13, 2009, in Orlando, FL. Respondents were asked to recall their last shopping experience

Research conducted in Spain	
Universe	52,980 residents of the city of Cuenca (Spain)[a]
Unit sample	Consumers older than 18 years of age (40,075)
Method of information collection	Personal survey
Place for carrying out the survey	Retail grocery store establishments located in the selected metropolitan area
Sample size	422 questionnaires
Sample procedure	Non-probabilistic: convenience
Date of field work	March 17-31, 2008
Research conducted in the USA	
Universe	220,186 residents of the city of Orlando, FL[b]
Unit sample	Consumers older than 18 years of age (171,745 people)
Method of information collection	Personal survey
Place for carrying out the survey	University of Central Florida
Sample size	400 questionnaires
Sample procedure	Non-probabilistic: convenience
Date of field work	February 10-13, 2009

Source: According to [a]La Caixa (2008) and [b]City-Data.com (2009)

Table I.
Technical specifications

carried out in a retail grocery establishment. This city contains a population of a size representative of the many cities in the USA and a retailing structure similar to the "average US city" (City-Data.com, 2009). According to data provided by Manta.com (2009), Orlando hosts 155 stores, of which 105 belong to chains, 27 are independent, two are co-operative food stores and 12 are delicatessens. There is one supermarket with a shopping area of 55,000-65,000 square feet (i.e. a superstore), 37 supermarkets belonging to a single chain and one independent supermarket. The sampling method again was non-probabilistic (convenience sampling).

3.2 Questionnaire and variable measurement
The questionnaire included questions designed to obtain general information about customer satisfaction, purchase experiences and overall customer profile information. The first question thus inquired about overall satisfaction, and questions 2-11 measured store attribute perceptions. Respondents rated the store from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent). Because our research interest is to explain the maximum level of customer satisfaction, we obtained a dichotomous variable from the overall satisfaction measure to determine the maximum level of customer satisfaction. This latter variable equals 1 if the customer was totally satisfied with the purchase and 0 otherwise. To elaborate on the focal questions, we addressed the main attributes identified in previous studies (Al-Awadi, 2002; Gómez *et al.*, 2004; Spiller *et al.*, 2006). Table II summarises these variables and indicates their types, scales and denominations.

Considering the relationship between the different explanatory variables in the second group of questions, as well as the high degree of correlation among them, we follow the methodology proposed by Gómez *et al.* (2004). A factor analysis of the principal components reveals a reduced set of factors that, without being correlated, explain the greatest degree of variability in the responses.

Following this analysis, we verified the reliability of the scales using Cronbach's alpha. For the Spanish customer sample, the Cronbach's alpha achieves a value

Name of variable	Measurement scale	Type of variable	Definition
Overall satisfaction	Metric	Endogenous	Satisfaction after shopping (5-point scale) poor(1) – excellent (5)
Reduced price	Metric	Explanatory	Price perception of the shopping experience (5-point scale) poor (1) – excellent (5)
Sales promotions	Metric	Explanatory	Sales promotion perception of the shopping experience (5-point scale) poor (1) – excellent (5)
Quality of the offer	Metric	Explanatory	Quality perception of the shopping experience (S-point scale) poor (1 > – excellent (5)
Commercialized brands	Metric	Explanatory	Brand perception of the shopping experience (S-point scale) poor (1 > – excellent (5)
Proximity to the home	Metric	Explanatory	Proximity perception of the shopping experience (S-point scale) poor (1 > – excellent (5)
Assortment	Metric	Explanatory	Assortment perception of the shopping experience (S-point scale) poor (1) – excellent (5)
Customer attention	Metric	Explanatory	Customer service perception of the shopping experience (S-point scale) poor (1) – excellent (5)
Additional services	Metric	Explanatory	Additional services perception of the shopping experience (S-point scale) poor) – excellent (5)
Store atmospherics	Metric	Explanatory	Store atmospherics perception of the shopping experience (S-point scale) poor (1) – excellent (5)
Opening times	Metric	Explanatory	Opening times perception of the shopping experience (5-point scale) poor (1) – excellent (5)

Table II.
Variables used
in the study

Note: Because our interest is the maximum level of customer satisfaction, we obtained a dichotomous variable from overall satisfaction, equal to 1 if the customer was totally satisfied with the purchase and 0 otherwise

of 0.713, and in the US sample it is 0.675. These values indicate the considerable internal consistency of the measurement scale (Nunnally, 1978). Using Varimax rotation, we confirmed the statistical suitability according to the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measurement. In both samples, Bartlett's sphericity test (level of 0.000) rejects the hypothesis of no significant correlation, so factor analysis is appropriate. In addition, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin index values of 0.760 and 0.734 for the Spanish and US samples, respectively, are well above the established minimum of 0.5 (George and Mallery, 1995).

As we show in Table III, there are only slight differences in the composition of the first identified factor depending on the considered sample; the second factor changes completely; the third factor remains the same. We show the factor loadings for all three factor solutions in Table III.

Identified factor	Survey elements: specific attributes	Factor loading	Cronbach's alpha
Spanish sample			
CSC	Assortment	0.540	0.713
	Proximity to the home	0.564	
	Customer attention	0.604	
	Additional services	0.661	
	Store atmospherics	0.823	
	Opening times	0.742	
QI	Quality of offer	0.650	
	Commercialised brands	0.772	
EV	Reduced price	0.849	
	Sales promotion	0.837	
US Sample			
CSQ	Quality of the offer	0.592	0.675
	Commercialised brands	0.485	
	Customer attention	0.673	
	Additional services	0.723	
	Store atmospherics	0.712	
Convenience	Proximity to the home	0.733	
	Assortment	0.591	
	Opening times	0.710	
EV	Reduced price	0.749	
	Sales promotion	0.723	

Table III.
Establishment factors
valued by consumers

In the Spanish customer sample, the three factors account for 56.45 per cent of the variation in the ten attributes. We define the three factors as follows: Customer services and convenience (CSC) accounts for 24 per cent of the variance and is related to the variables "assortment", "proximity to the home", "customer attention", "additional services", "store atmospherics" and "opening times". The second factor, quality image (QI), accounts for 17.8 per cent of the variance and is associated with "quality of the offer" and "commercialised brands". Finally, the third factor, economic value of the purchase (EV), accounts for 14.7 per cent of the variance and is associated with the "reduced price" and "sales promotions" variables.

In the US customer sample, the three factors account for 52.10 per cent of the variation in the ten attributes. We define the three factors as follows: Customer services and quality (CSQ), which accounts for 26.84 per cent of the variance, is related to the variables "quality of offer", "commercialised brands", "customer attention", "additional services" and "store atmospherics". The second factor, convenience (C), accounts for 13.96 per cent for the variance and is associated with "proximity to the home", "assortment" and "opening times". Finally, EV accounts for 11.19 per cent of the variance and is associated with the variables "reduced price" and "sales promotions".

We note some differences in the underlying preference structures across the two countries. Whilst Spanish consumers value the attributes related to the quality of the merchandise and brands within the same factor, US consumers value the quality of the merchandise attribute together with other services attributes.

These results are coincident with the preference for quality products observed among Spanish consumers. A study published by Mercasa (2008) – a national public company related to the Agriculture, Fisheries, Food and Economy Ministries that governs

the wholesale trade of fresh food and has its own retail distribution structures – and based on telephone interviews with 2001 Spanish consumers revealed that though grocery consumption had remained stable in the previous five years, Spanish consumers tended to increase their consumption of fruit, vegetables and fish while also decreasing consumption of alcohol and pre-cooked food. The majority of consumers also affirmed that they considered a Mediterranean diet one of the healthiest food practices in Spain, and they valued quality products and home-made foods. This tendency among Spanish consumers to opt for food products with higher quality and flavour seems to be growing. Even with innovations in the food products consumed, consumers prefer products with "Mediterranean traditional flavours" and high nutritional value. Thus, the main features Spanish consumers value in food products are flavour and quality, unlike a few years ago, when companies emphasised production efficiency and lower costs versus quality, without taking into account the quality and flavours of the food products (Freshplaza, 2009).

Although a similar pattern, in terms of the search for quality and healthy products, appears in the USA, it is also important to note that US consumers want food retailers to offer complete and detailed information about product features. This desire might be the reason US consumers value the quality of the merchandise as aligned with other convenience attributes. For example, according to the data provided by a telephone survey by the US Food and Drug Administration (2008), including more than 2,500 adults in every state, consumers increasingly are aware of the link between diet and certain diseases, such as heart disease. Furthermore, more than half of consumers in the USA read food labels when buying a product for the first time; about 66 per cent use the label to check how high or low a food is in calories and other important ingredients such as salt, vitamins and fat; 55 per cent read the label to get a general idea of the food's nutritional content; and 46 per cent read the calorie information on the label.

These variables are consistent with those obtained in previous works (Berné and Martinez, 2007; Binninger, 2006; Gómez et al., 2004; Grace and O'Cass, 2005b; Szymanski and Henard, 2001), indicating the presence of certain customer satisfaction factors as elements of differentiation for the establishment. It is also consistent with the impact of the customer's purchase perceptions on global satisfaction.

For example, Grace and O'Cass (2005a) establish a relationship between the economic dimension of the purchase and individual consumer satisfaction. In addition, Zeithaml (1988) and McDougall and Levesque (1994) observe that the monetary value of the purchase is an antecedent of satisfaction, because customers who perceive that they have received value for their money are more satisfied than customers who do not. This claim implies that though customers may re-patronise a retail store to replicate previous satisfying encounters, their decision to return also may be based on prior perceptions of the perceived value for money.

To analyse the foreseeable influence of these identified factors on the attainment of a maximum level of customer satisfaction with purchases, we propose the following hypotheses, in relation to the Spanish sample:

H1. Customers' superior perceptions of the services and convenience offered by a food retailer enhance customers' maximum satisfaction.

H2. Customers' superior perceptions of the QI offered by a food retailer enhance customers' maximum satisfaction.

H3. Customers' superior perceptions of the economic value offered by a food
retailer enhance customers' maximum satisfaction.

For the US sample we predict:

H4. Customers' superior perceptions of the services and quality offered by a food
retailer enhance customers' maximum satisfaction.

H5. Customers' superior perceptions of the convenience offered by a food retailer
enhance customers' maximum satisfaction.

H6. Customers' superior perceptions of the economic value offered by a food
retailer enhance customers' maximum satisfaction.

4. Model and results

We carried out a binary logistic regression analysis of the customer databases to
assess how the identified factors affect maximum levels of customer satisfaction. In our
model, the factors provide predictor variables that exert an influence on maximum
customer satisfaction.

Cox-Snell's and Nagelkerke's statistical pseudo-R^2 quantify the proportion of
variation explained by the model of logistic regression, similar to R^2 in a linear
regression model. Table IV below presents the values of the pseudo-R^2. As seen on this
Table, the values of Nagelkerke's and Cox and Snell's pseudo-R^2 are reasonable, such
that the model explains between 9.9 per cent and 14.7 per cent of the variability of the
endogenous variable in the Spanish sample, and between 8.7 per cent and 12.5 per cent in
the US sample. These statistics must be interpreted with caution though because they do
not explain variance as the R^2 coefficient does in a linear regression.

Table V shows the results of the analysis for the two samples. For the Spanish
sample, the factor that contributes most to the maximum level of customer satisfaction is
services and convenience, followed by the QI. However, the economic factor does not
influence maximum customer satisfaction. A similar trend appears for the US sample:
The factor that contributes most to the maximum level of customer satisfaction is
services and quality, followed by convenience. Again, the economic factor does not
influence the maximum level of customer satisfaction.

The results for the maximum levels of customer satisfaction indicate that customers
are totally satisfied with factors related to the services offered by the grocery retailer.
In particular, the customer attention, additional services and store atmosphere attributes
are commonly valued most by consumers in both samples. The attributes of quality of
merchandise, store brand, proximity, assortment variety and opening times are also
valued to varying extents, depending on the country. Specifically, US consumers most
value quality and store brand, but Spanish consumers value them to a lesser extent.
Conversely, the attributes of proximity, assortment variety and opening times are

Cox and Snell	Nagelkerke
Spanish sample	
0.099	0.147
US sample	
0.087	0.125

Table IV.
Model summary –total
sample of consumers

514

	Estimated parameters
Spanish sample	
Constant	1.223 ***
CSC	0.711 ***
QI	0.288 **
EV	0.24
US sample	
Constant	−1.030 ***
CSQ	0.648 ***
C	0.277 **
EV	0.135
Note: Significance at: $^*p < 0.10$, $^{**}p < 0.05$ and $^{***}p < 0.01$	

Table V.
Explanatory variables
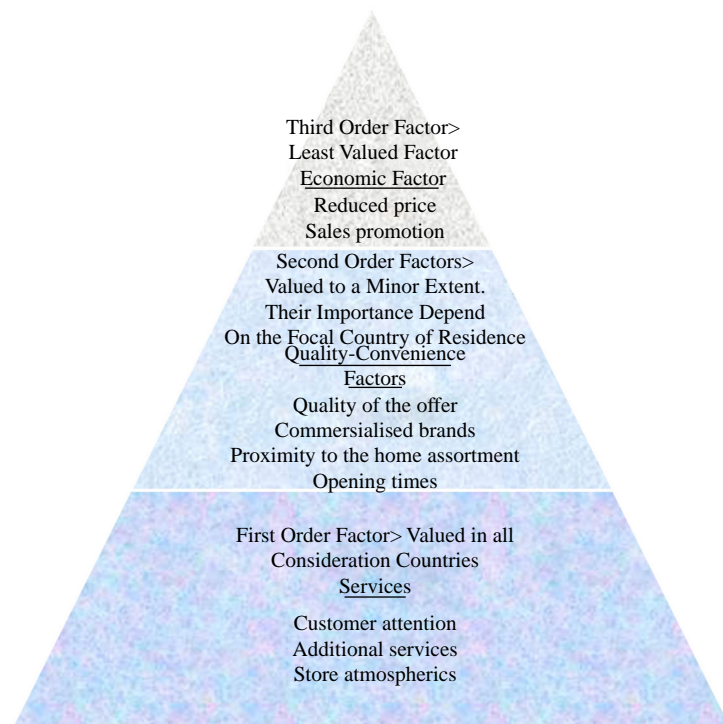and maximum customer
satisfaction (DV)

considered by Spanish consumers elements of the most valued factors, whereas US consumers regard these attributes as part of the second most valued factors. Finally, it is important to highlight that the attributes of price and promotions, which make up the economic factor, are not significantly valued by either sample and therefore do not influence the maximum level of customer satisfaction.

Accordingly, we find support for *H1*, *H2*, *H4* and *H5*, pertaining to the influence of services and convenience, QI, services and quality and convenience on maximal customer satisfaction. The hypotheses regarding perceptions of economic value did not receive support. In Table VI, we summarize these results.

These results make it possible to distinguish three types of attributes that represent different factors with varying levels of importance, according to their valuation by customers in different countries. These important research findings prompt us to propose a classification of attributes and factors, according to their importance in terms of customer evaluations in different countries of residence. The first-order factor includes the most valued attributes by all customers, independent of the country of residence. The second-order factor includes attributes whose importance is lesser than those of the first-order factor but still critical for reaching a maximal level of customer satisfaction, though they vary depending on the country of residence. Finally, the third-order factor contains remaining attributes that are valued relatively less by consumers but still have some influence on customer satisfaction. It is important that grocery retailers operating in various countries take into account not only these attribute classifications, but also their importance weighting according to customer perceptions. Figure 1 illustrates the different attributes and factors to which grocery retailers should pay particular attention, in order of implementation priority.

Sample	Customers	Hypotheses
Spanish sample	422	*H1* supported
		H2 supported
		H3 not supported
US sample	400	*H4* supported
		H5 supported
		H6 not supported

Table VI.
Summary of
hypotheses results

Third Order Factor>
Least Valued Factor
Economic Factor
Reduced price
Sales promotion

Second Order Factors>
Valued to a Minor Extent.
Their Importance Depend
On the Focal Country of Residence
Quality-Convenience
Factors
Quality of the offer
Commersialised brands
Proximity to the home assortment
Opening times

First Order Factor> Valued in all
Consideration Countries
Services

Customer attention
Additional services
Store atmospherics

Source: *Own elaboration*

Figure 1.
Classification of attributes
and corresponding factors

5. Discussion
In the dynamic, competitive environment that grocery retailers face today, a study of store attributes and factors that enable retailers to differentiate themselves from other competitors and achieve a strong competitive position in the industry offers an important contribution to marketing literature. Therefore, this study recognises the influence of customer satisfaction, especially satisfaction due to customers' perceptions of certain store attributes, on food retailers' ability to differentiate themselves from competitors and thereby obtain a stronger position in the minds of consumers, which in turn supports firm survival and repeat-purchase activity. In this respect, we have determined the influence of factors that underlie store attribute perceptions on the maximum level of customer satisfaction, which is often a primary goal of grocery store managers – and arguably of any retail operation.

The findings have great relevance because they reveal which factors customers value most as the means to differentiate food retailers, as well as their relationship to maximum satisfaction level. We have conducted a descriptive investigation that includes key attributes identified by prior literature and obtained main factors that underlie these attributes, according to a factorial analysis of the main components. Our overall objective has been to analyse which factors display the greatest influence on the maximum level of customer satisfaction, a topic of great interest to marketing researchers and managers alike.

We analysed two samples of 422 and 400 consumers who purchased from different types of self-service food establishments in two representative Spanish and US cities. The results confirm that for the Spanish sample, perceptions of service and convenience, along with a QI, have positive and significant influences on the maximum level of customer satisfaction. The findings are similar for the US sample: Perceptions of service and quality, along with convenience, positively and significantly influence maximum customer satisfaction. Finally, the EV does not have a significant influence on the maximum level of customer satisfaction in either country.

An in-depth assessment of these results evinces how, on the whole, consumers achieve maximum levels of satisfaction according to factors related to the services offered by the retail managers. Specifically, the attributes of customer attention, additional services and store atmosphere are commonly and primarily valued by both Spanish and US consumers. In addition the attributes related to the quality of the merchandise, commercialised brands, proximity, assortment variety and opening times are valued to certain extents, depending on the country. However, the price and promotions attributes, which make up the economic factor, are not significantly valued by either sample and therefore do not influence the maximum level of customer satisfaction.

Although our use of convenience sampling means we cannot generalise our results, it also allowed us to identify a certain factor structure that contributes to customer satisfaction in food stores and that differs depending on the country. Regarding the different valuation of convenience in the two cultures, it is important to take into account differences in not only the retailing structure but also the population structure. Although some convergence may have occurred lately, a clear divide remains between Western European countries and Northern Europe and the USA. For example, the Spanish population is characterised by an increased number of households but fewer people per household, which probably has contributed greatly to changes in traditional Spanish spending and consumption habits (CES, 2008). However, the age at which young people leave their parents' home to establish their own household and the prevalence of elderly persons living with their children remain remarkable features (Bover, 2008).

This study offers three key recommendations for managing establishments, especially for retailers that intend to operate (or are currently operating) in different countries. First, we identify factors that customers value most. These particular factors can facilitate managers' ability to define their strong and weak customer touch-points and determine the areas they may need to improve to maintain their competitive position in the market. Second, our study reveals a group of underlying factors and determines the influence of each on the maximum level of customer satisfaction. Managers thus can better design and implement marketing strategies that support an amplitude and range of products, brands, services and convenience offered, as well as their QI and the monetary value of purchases, as appropriate for their customers. Third, because this study considers different customer samples gathered in different countries, it offers additional value. It reveals elements that can help retailers construct a sustainable competitive advantage though differentiation and suggests the elements of marketing strategies that may increase client satisfaction, depending on customer profiles. Therefore, these results are especially relevant to grocery retailers operating on different continents, because they indicate main factors to take into consideration before attempting an expansion into different nations or continents.

The present study also has some limitations though. For example, we did not test for measurement equivalence across the different countries, which could result in a flawed understanding of the consumer behaviour patterns. Furthermore, it is important for companies to consider more than just the maximum level of satisfaction, especially if they focus on the transition of satisfaction into a long-term loyalty relationship. As some research has indicated (e.g. Anderson and Sullivan, 1993; Mittal and Kamakura, 2001; Oliver, 1997), satisfaction can be linked to loyalty, but its impact may depend on diverse elements of prior relational experiences (Rust *et al.*, 2004). In this respect, Chandrashekaran *et al.* (2007) note the relevance of measuring satisfaction strength and its influence on the translation of satisfaction into loyalty.

Many open questions thus remain. Further research should determine the impact of the detected factors on the degree of customer loyalty toward certain commercial formats and specific establishments. We also propose using confirmatory factor analysis, as proposed by Steenkamp and Baumgartner (1998), to test for cross-national invariance. In addition we suggest replications of our study that take into account overall customer satisfaction instead of maximal customer satisfaction.

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