The Contribution of Salient Mall Attributes to Customer Satisfaction: An Importance - Performance Analysis Across Nations

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Abstract

By employing an importance-performance analysis technique, this paper first compares the similarities and differences in mall attributes that are important to mall shoppers in China and Thailand. The performance of all attributes in each country are then evaluated to gain further understanding about consumers' satisfaction level toward malls' overall performance. It is found that while Thai shoppers place more importance on both functional and experiential aspects of mall attributes, Chinese shoppers place more importance on functional aspects of mall attributes alone, likely due to their differences in shopping motives. The results of this study provide useful insights for international mall managers in terms of customer retention and attraction. The results can also help mall managers to prioritize their scarce resources with higher efficiency and effectiveness to maximize customer satisfaction.

Keywords: Importance-performance analysis, customer satisfaction, mall attributes, cross national

1. Introduction

With the allure of China's huge consumer base, together with potential purchasing power, retailers in Thailand are expanding their businesses into the Chinese market (Hua, 2009; Setboonsarng, 2018). However, expansion to Chinese market without fully understanding the local customers could be risky. For instance, Thai retail conglomerate Central Group was failed in their recent expansion in China. Within a few years of their expansion, the company had closed all of its three department stores located in Shenyang, Hangzhou, and Chengdu city, likely neglected the difference in shopping behavior among Chinese and Thai consumers (Inside Retail Asia, 2014). Therefore, to avoid duplicating such failure in Chinese market, it would be beneficial to Thai retailers to understand what factors contribute to customer satisfaction across the two countries.

On the other hand, Thailand has been ranked as the top overseas travel destination for Chinese tourists (China Travel News, 2017). More and more Chinese people are visiting Thailand, which contribute to a new yet sizable segment of the Thai retail market. According to Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), there were 9 million Chinese tourists visited Thailand in 2017, which represents 30% of total inbound travelers. Based on their recent survey, TAT reported that Chinese allocate 41% of their traveling budget to shopping (Tungsirisurp & Athigapanich, 2017). Indeed, as the senior director of partnerships of TripAdvisor Asia Pacific Aaron Hung says "Bangkok is one of the leading shopping capitals of the world and continues to be a top destination for the Chinese" (Inside Retail Asia, 2017).

However, given the difference in Chinese and Thai consumers' mall shopping behavior (Cai & Shannon, 2012), it is not likely that local shopping malls can effectively attract Chinese shoppers by providing them offerings that designed for Thai shoppers. Thus, by understanding the underlying factors that contribute to customer satisfactions across the two countries may provide Thai mall retailers useful insights about how to re-position their shopping centers to satisfy both of Chinese and Thai shoppers.

Customer satisfaction has become increasingly important for mall retailers, as it may increase customer loyalty, cross-buying, positive word of mouth, reduce price sensitivity (Szymanski & Henard, 2001; Matzler, Bailom, Hinterhuber, Renzl & Pichler 2004; Venkatesh & Goyal, 2010). Satisfaction is viewed as a result of a preference for an object or service and judgments of its performance (Myers & Alpert 1968). Built on this concept, an importance-performance analysis (IPA) technique was first developed as a market tool for researchers (Martilla & James 1977).

IPA has been applied in understanding critical performance factors in customer satisfaction for products and services in various disciplines (e.g., O'Neill and Palmer 2004; Chen 2014; Sheng, Simpson & Siguaw, 2014; Chen, Murphy & Knecht, 2016). However, the application of IPA in mall research has been limited. During the past decades, although tremendous efforts have been spent towards identifying preferences of mall attributes to different shopper segments, the evaluation of the actual "performance" of these attributes in terms of satisfying shoppers has been neglected (Yavas, 2003). The "performance" of these attributes is important, as they reveal the ability of the retailers to satisfy consumers' motives (Yavas, 2003; Michon, Chebat & Turley, 2005; Fiore & Kim, 2007; Morin, Dube & Chebat, 2007; Michon, Smith & Chebat, 2008). By employing an IPA approach, this study aims to compare differences in customer satisfaction levels through assessing importance and performance of salient mall attributes in China and Thailand. Specifically, this study seeks to address three research questions as follows:

(1) What are underlying mall attributes that attract Chinese and Thai shoppers' mall visit, respectively?
(2) How important are these mall attributes to Chinese and Thai shoppers' mall visit satisfaction, respectively?
(3) How do Chinese and Thai shoppers perceive the importance and performance of these attributes, use the IPA framework?

Conceptual Background

A widely accepted method to measure customer satisfaction is to compare the gap between the product's perceived performance and a buyer's expectations. A customer is more likely to be satisfied, if the product's performance exceeds their expectations, whereas a customer is more likely to be dissatisfied, if the product's performance lags behind their expectations (Armstrong & Kolter, 2014). The strong predictive power of this comparison process on customer satisfaction has been evidenced by empirical meta-analysis (Szymanski & Henard, 2001), and it can be further explained by Expectation Disconfirmation Theory (EDT) (Oliver, 1980). According to EDT, satisfaction is determined by a customer's disconfirmation experience which result from a comparison between product performance and customer expectations (Oliver, 1980).

Consistent with EDT, in the setting of this study, we expect that consumers' satisfaction toward their mall shopping patronage will be determined by the disconfirmation experience that they gain by comparing their expectations toward salient mall attributes and their perception toward the actual performance of the mall on those attributes. Moreover, driven by their differences in cultural and social economic background, we expect that consumers from China and Thailand might form different expectations toward mall performance.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses

Importance-performance Analysis

Three steps are involved in the IPA process. In the first step, a set of product features or attributes is identified through a literature review, focus group interviews and the use of managerial judgment (Martilla and James 1977). After that, consumers are asked two questions about each attribute: "How important is it?" and "How well did the provided product or service perform?" Last, the importance and performance scores are calculated for each attribute. These values provide x and y coordinates which are then placed on a two-dimensional plot called the Action Grid (Blake, Schrader and James 1978) (See Figure 1).
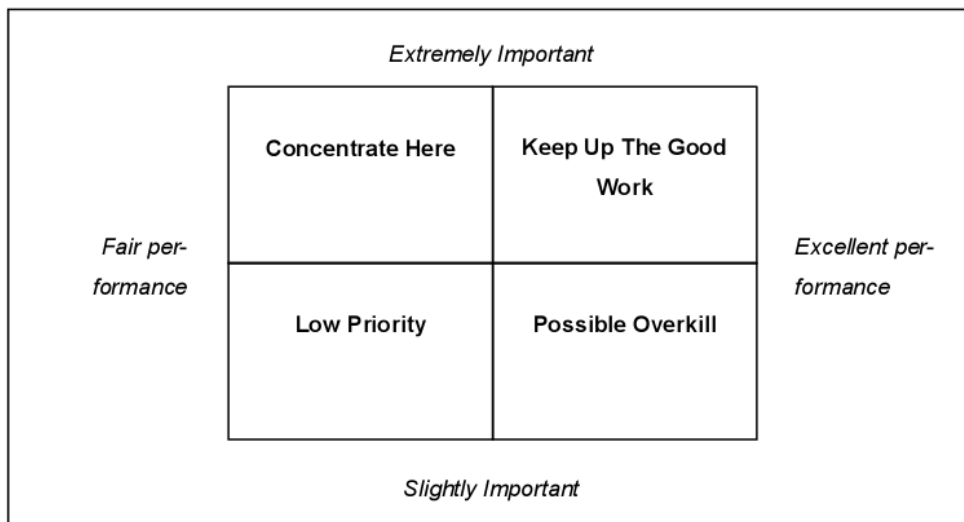

Figure 1: Importance-performance matrix
(Adopted from Martilla & James 1977, p.78)

As can be seen from Figure 1, attributes located in Quadrant I (both performance and importance are high) are major strengths of the mall, thus should be maintained, leveraged, and heavily promoted (Lambert & Sharma 1990). What mall managers need to do here is to "keep up the good work". Attributes located in Quadrant II (high importance yet fair performance) reveal that they need immediate attention for the improvement (Martilla & James 1977). The omitting of them may result in losing current patrons and failure in attracting potential shoppers (Yavas 2003). Therefore, these attributes are major weaknesses, which require "concentrate here". The attributes in Quadrant III (both performance and importance are low) signal no immediate attention, thus are labeled as "low priority". Attributes in Quadrant IV (high performance and low importance) implies that a "overkill" has occurred, thus managers should deploy the business resources elsewhere.

Salient mall attributes

Over the years, different authors have identified different underlying mall attributes by adopting a multi-attribute approach. In general, an overview of existing literature suggests that salient mall attributes could be classified into "big four" categories, namely merchandising, accessibility, service, and atmospherics (for a comprehensive review, see Sit et al., 2003). For instance, Bloch, Ridgway and Nelson (1991) propose that size and assortment of stores may encourage shopper's browsing behavior; while a weatherproof environment may make malls comfortable places to spend free time. In addition, safe, low cost of entry, the availability of stimuli and social variables all attract consumers to shop at malls to fulfil their leisure needs. Reynolds, Ganesh and Luckett (2002) identify four critical mall attributes which include mall essentials, entertainment, brand-name merchandise and convenience. Sit et al., (2003) conclude eleven salient mall attributes in Australia, namely: merchandising, macro-accessibility, micro-accessibility, personal services, amenities, ambulance, atmospherics, specialty entertainment, special event entertainment, food and security.

Anselmsson (2006) lists out attributes that correlated to customer satisfaction and mall visit frequency in Sweden. It is found that eight salient mall attributes, namely selection, atmosphere, convenience, sales people, refreshments, location, promotional activities and merchandising policy are correlated to customer satisfaction; whereas convenience, location, promotional activities and merchandise policy are attributes that correlated to visit frequency. El-Adly (2007) report six salient mall attributes in UAE as: comfort, entertainment, diversity, mall essence, convenience, and luxury. More recently, Kushwaha, Ubeja & Chatterjee (2017) investigate Indian consumers' mall shopping behavior. They find that service experience, internal environment, convenience, utilitarian factors, acoustics, proximity, and demonstration are key factors that induce consumers to visit a shopping mall.

While salient mall attributes have been well documented in the literature, nonetheless, these attributes are mostly based on the results from Western studies. Arguably, the transplanting of such results directly to a non-Western context may be risky. Wong et al., (2001) contends that culture plays a role in shaping consumer's attitudes towards salient mall attributes in China. By applying a SCATTER instrument that consists of 21 attributes, they find that quality and variety of the product are considered the most salient attribute that influence shoppers' patronage decision. Unexpectedly, location, which was proposed by Huff (1962) as one of the most important factors that influences retail patronage, is not the most critical consideration for Chinese shoppers.

Differences between Chinese and Thai Shoppers

According to Hofstede (1980), both Chinese and Thai cultures are collectivist in orientation. However, while there are many similarities between the cultures, some behavioral differences may be expected due to differing values. A comparison between Chinese and Thai core cultural values indicates that although majority of values more or less overlap between the two countries, three values are specific to Thais, namely 'mai pen rai' (never mind), *present oriented* and '*sanuk*' (fun) values. It is believed that these values are specifically shaped by the Buddhist teachings, thus are represented as values unique to Thai society (Ovatsatit 2007). Given their hedonic oritentaion, Phillips (1966) proposes that mai pen rai and sanuk values have made Thais more individualistic than they are widely assumed. In addition, Chetthamrongchai and Davies (2000) suggest that hedonic shoppers are likely to be present

oriented. All of these findings suggest that the likelihood for Thais to be hedonic shoppers is high. Accordingly, they are supposed to place more importance on experiential aspects of mall attributes. In contrast, the notion that Chinese mall shoppers are more likely to be utilitarian driven has been well documented in the literature (Li et al. 2004; Tse et al. 1989; Tse 1996). Therefore, it is proposed that:

H1: Thai consumers place more importance on experiential aspect of mall attributes than Chinese consumers do.

H2: Chinese consumers place more importance on functional aspect of mall attributes than Thai consumers do.

3. Research Methodology

Measurement

Based on the survey by the Institute for Marketing Information of China (IMI) in four metropolitan cities in China, namely, Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Chongqing in 1997 (Wong et al. 2001), together with works from the literature, (such as Bellenger et al. 1977; Sit et al. 2003; Wong et al. 2001), an initial item pool was developed, which was then modified based upon the result of a focus group interview in China. At the beginning of the focus group interview, 27 mall attributes under five categories (See Table 1) were presented to participants. The participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they perceived the importance of each potential mall attribute, that is, how each attribute will contribute to their mall selection decision. After that, individual attributes that were considered least attractive to the respondents were eliminated.

Extra attributes were reported important during the interview by some participants and were then added to the pool after getting the consensus of all participants.
According to the result, *late closing hour, availability of imported goods, delivery service of goods, occasional entertainment, availability of supermarket, merchandising styling/fashion, courtesy of personnel* were attributes that considered not or much less important, therefore they were removed from the list. On the other hand, *crowdedness* and *security* (no theft loss) were additional attributes that considered important to participants, thus they were included in the list. Due to space constraints, attributes that related to mall atmosphere, such as the background music, fashionable color scheme and modern decor were all combined into one item under the name "mall atmosphere".

Rather than listing them out as independent item, they were listed as the examples to describe the term "mall atmosphere" in a parenthesis. The final items were then examined for clarity, conciseness, and relevance (DeVellis, 1991) by other academic researcher not involved in the research. The reviewer was fully briefed on the purpose of the scale, previous research in this area, and the ideas that had come from the focus groups. Finally, a list of 22 mall attributes used by mall shoppers in their selection decision was identified.

Table 1: List of Potential Mall Attributes

Category	Attributes
Merchandising	Merchandising variety
	Merchandising pricing
	~~Merchandise styling/fashion*~~
	~~Availability of supermarket*~~
	~~Availability of imported goods*~~
	Merchandise quality
	Sales promotion
Accessibility	Convenient location
	Ease of parking
	Vertical transportation
Services	Assistance at information desk
	Knowledge of employees at information desk
	~~Courtesy of personnel*~~
	Return of goods
	~~Delivery service of goods*~~
Atmospherics	Pleasant background music
	Fashionable color scheme
	Modern decor
	Air-conditioned
	Cleanliness
	Resting seat
	Lay out
	Adequate and well-designed entrance
	~~Late closing hour*~~
Entertainment	Availability of entertainment facilities (i.e. cinemas and game zones)
	~~Occasional entertainment (i.e. fashion shows and lucky draws) *~~
	Availability of food court/restaurant

*eliminated item after the focus group

Respondents were first asked to indicate the importance of each mall attribute, using a six-point Likert-like scale (1 = Extremely Unimportant; 6 = Extremely Important), they were then asked to indicate the extent to which the mall that they shop the most frequently was perceived to be similar or different for each of these characteristics along another six-point scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 6 = Strongly Agree). The reason to adopt a six-point scale is because of the potential problem of courtesy-bias on the part of Asian respondents (Ayer 1970), who tend to select the middle path to maintain the harmony, which can result in a high number of neutral responses.

Sample

As street survey is prohibited in China, therefore, a self-administered web-based survey with convenience sampling was used to collect the data in both countries. The website of the

questionnaire was posted to several big online communities, where a large number of potential respondents could be accessed. In order to encourage participation, a cash drawing was provided. In addition, a smaller number of hard-copy surveys were conducted at the same period of time in order to minimize potential sampling bias that derived from online survey (Schaefer and Dillman 1998; Illieva et al. 2002). Screening questions are provided in the questionnaire, so the qualified respondents are those who have ever been to a shopping mall in the past two months and are at least 20 years old.

The total number of usable returned questionnaires was 643, with 320 in China, and 323 in Thailand, with a response rate of 30-40% in each country. Fewer usable surveys were obtained in China because many respondents did not understand what a shopping mall is, confusing it with other shopping venues such as department store, great merchandiser or anchor supermarket within a shopping mall, likely because the format is relatively new. After the data editing and cleaning, the final number of questionnaires with no missing values in all variables under analysis was 305 in China, and 308 in Thailand.

In terms of overall demographics, 90% were aged between 20 to 38, 69% were female, 71.6% were single and 82.7% had no children, 57.4% had a bachelor's degree 65.7% were white collar, and 45.1% had monthly income between 2000 to 6000 Yuan (or 10,000 to 30,000 Baht).   Compared with Chinese respondents, Thai respondents were older, better educated and more affluent (p=.000).

Analysis & Findings

In the present study, among a variety of approaches, such as index mid-point, grand mean, mid-rank, and median (Crompton & Duray 1985; Huan et al. 2002; Nitse & Rushing 1996; Oh 2001), grand mean scores were used as a benchmark to identify the importance of the 22 attributes. The grand mean scores for both importance and performance were summed across all attributes then divided by 22. The mean of each attribute was then compared to this grand mean.   The attributes whose averages exceeded the grand mean were designated as "high importance" or "excellent performance", and those which had lower means compared with the grand mean were labeled as "low importance" or "poor performance" attributes.

Importance of Mall Attributes

The result of one-way ANOVA (see Table 2) indicates that compared with Chinese shoppers, Thai shoppers placed more importance on merchandise variety (mean=5.35 vs. 5.10, p=.000), close to home (mean=4.96 vs. 4.37, p=.000), ease of parking (mean=5.31 vs. 3.95, p=.000), adequate layout (mean=5.12 vs. 4.88, p=.001), knowledgeable salesperson (mean=4.83 vs. 4.49, p=.000), uncrowded store (mean=5.01 vs. 4.71, p=.000), availability of food court (mean=4.67 vs. 4.19, p=.000), availability of entertainment zone (mean=4.31 vs. 3.88, p=.000) and clean (mean=5.60 vs. 5.43, p=.003). Therefore, hypothesis 1 suggests that Thai consumers place more importance on experiential aspect of mall attributes than Chinese consumers do is partially supported.   Thai consumers not only place importance on experiential aspect of mall attributes (such as availability of food court, availability of entertainment zone), but also place importance on functional aspect of mall attributes. The finding may be explained by some plausible reasons.

As mentioned earlier, Thai respondents were found relatively older than their Chinese counterparts. While it is a conventional wisdom that young people tend to be hedonic oriented, it is thus possible that when people getting older, they may be more utilitarian driven, likely because of the different life stage they getting into. The result of the analysis suggests that on one hand, Thais may shop for fulfilling their hedonic needs which influenced by their 'sanuk' (fun) values; on the other hand, for those relatively older shoppers, they may seek for satisfying their utilitarian needs simultaneously which resulted from their different social role plays in their life stage.

The result of ANOVA analysis also indicates that compared with Thai shoppers, Chinese shoppers placed significantly more importance on good reputation of the mall (mean=4.74 vs. 3.74, p=.000), resting seat (mean=4.09 vs. 3.80, p=.003), merchandise quality (mean=5.65 vs. 5.00, p=.000), prompt help at information desk (mean=4.55 vs. 4.32, p=.02), return policy (mean=5.32 vs. 4.97, p=.000), air conditioning (mean=5.19 vs. 4.80, p=.000), and vertical transportation (mean=4.92 vs. 4.62, p=.002).   As all of these attributes are function driven, therefore, hypothesis 2, which proposes that Chinese consumers place more importance on functional aspect of mall attributes than Thai consumers do is fully supported.   The finding lends support to the previous findings that Chinese consumers tend to be utilitarian driven (Li et al. 2004; Tse et al. 1989; Tse 1996).

Table 2: Differences in Mall Attributes Importance between Chinese & Thai Shoppers (n_{China}=305, n_{Thai}=308)

Item	Country	Mean	Std. Deviation	F Value	Sig.
Reasonable price level	China	5.28	0.90	0.601	0.439
	Thailand	5.33	0.88		
Good reputation of the mall	China	4.74	1.09	102.395	0.000
	Thailand	3.74	1.34		
Resting seats	China	4.09	1.22	8.645	0.003
	Thailand	3.80	1.19		
Merchandise variety	China	5.10	1.00	13.151	0.000
	Thailand	5.35	0.70		
Close to home	China	4.37	1.34	33.656	0.000
	Thailand	4.96	1.16		
Atmosphere	China	4.89	1.05	0.804	0.370
	Thailand	4.81	0.98		
Merchandise quality	China	5.65	0.61	103.627	0.000
	Thailand	5.00	0.94		
Ease of parking	China	3.95	1.48	186.063	0.000
	Thailand	5.31	0.91		
Adequate layout	China	4.88	0.98	11.501	0.001
	Thailand	5.12	0.83		
Prompt help at information desk	China	4.55	1.17	5.411	0.020
	Thailand	4.32	1.27		
Knowledgeable salesperson	China	4.49	1.14	14.764	0.000
	Thailand	4.83	1.09		
Return policy	China	5.32	0.84	19.718	0.000
	Thailand	4.97	1.06		
Fast checkout	China	5.14	0.90	0.012	0.913
	Thailand	5.14	0.90		
Air conditioning	China	5.19	0.96	25.946	0.000
	Thailand	4.80	0.92		
Adequate and well-designed entrance	China	4.71	1.00	0.757	0.385
	Thailand	4.78	1.02		
Uncrowded store	China	4.71	1.05	14.282	0.000
	Thailand	5.01	0.87		
Security in the mall	China	5.40	0.83	0.581	0.446
	Thailand	5.45	0.83		

Table 2: Differences in Mall Attributes Importance between Chinese & Thai Shoppers (n_{China}=305, n_{Thai} =308) (continued)

Item	Country	Mean	Std. Deviation	F Value	Sig.
Availability of food court	China	4.19	1.25	25.388	0.000
	Thailand	4.67	1.06		
Vertical transportation	China	4.92	1.14	9.501	0.002
	Thailand	4.62	1.28		
Availability of entertainment zone	China	3.88	1.28	18.879	0.000
	Thailand	4.31	1.17		
Clean	China	5.43	0.79	9.058	0.003
	Thailand	5.60	0.64		
Frequent sales promotion	China	4.86	1.21	2.673	0.103
	Thailand	4.70	1.18		

Customer Satisfaction

Table 3 presents the results of simultaneously considering each attribute's importance and performance in both countries. Seven attributes in both countries fell into the "keep up the good work" quadrant. These attributes are strengths of the malls, thus should be highly emphasize when developing marketing strategies for both attraction and retention of customers. Merchandise quality, clean, air-conditioning, fast checkout, merchandise variety, vertical transportation and atmosphere are attributes that Chinese shoppers satisfied with, whereas merchandise quality, clean, security in the mall, merchandise variety, adequate layout, uncrowded stores and close to home are attributes with which Thai shoppers are satisfied. While air-conditioning, vertical transportation and atmosphere are important attributes to attract Chinese shoppers, they have less value in attracting Thai shoppers. While fast check out is considered strength for the Chinese malls, it is considered weakness for the Thai malls, thus requires immediate improvement.

In contrast, while security in the mall and adequate layout are strengths for the Thai malls, they are weaknesses for the Chinese malls to improve. Although uncrowded stores and close to home are critical factors that attract Thai shoppers, but they are likely have no value for Chinese shoppers. Five and four attributes in China and Thailand respectively fell into the "concentrate here" quadrant. These attributes require immediate improvement with greatest efforts, since they are the key reasons that make malls lose their current shoppers to their competitors and fail to attract new shoppers. Return policy and reasonable price level are universal attributes that require immediate improvement in both countries. While frequent sales promotion needs immediate improvement for Chinese malls, Thai malls already do well on it. Perhaps due to their differences in car ownership, while ease of parking requires immediate improvement for Thai malls, it should not be a focus for Chinese malls. Good reputation of the mall, adequate and well-designed entrance, availability of food court, and availability of entertainment zone are attributes that have over developed across nations. Similarly, prompt help at information desk, knowledgeable salesperson and resting seats are attributes where no immediate attention should be paid on.

Table 3: Summary of Results

Item	Chinese Malls			Thai Malls		
	Imp.	Perform.	Quad.	Imp.	Perform.	Quad.
Merchandise quality	5.65	4.99	K	5.00	4.75	K
Clean	5.43	5.34	K	5.60	5.02	K
Security in the mall	**5.40**	**4.62**	C	5.45	4.75	K
Return policy	**5.32**	**4.30**	C	**4.97**	**4.02**	C
Reasonable price level	**5.28**	**4.35**	C	**5.33**	**4.58**	C
Air conditioning	5.19	5.45	K	4.80	4.74	O
Fast checkout	5.14	4.69	K	**5.14**	**4.54**	C
Merchandise variety	5.10	5.07	K	5.35	5.06	K
Vertical transportation	4.92	5.13	K	4.62	4.83	O
Atmosphere	4.89	4.93	K	4.81	4.61	L
Adequate layout	**4.88**	**4.50**	C	5.12	4.64	K
Frequent sales promotion	**4.86**	**4.48**	C	4.70	4.64	O
Good reputation of the mall	4.74	4.86	O	3.74	4.65	O
Uncrowded store	4.71	4.45	L	5.01	4.71	K
Adequate and well-designed entrance	4.71	4.99	O	4.78	4.68	O
Prompt help at information desk	4.55	4.22	L	4.32	4.09	L
Knowledgeable salesperson	4.49	4.16	L	4.83	4.31	L
Close to home	4.37	3.96	L	4.96	4.88	K
Availability of food court	4.19	5.10	O	4.67	4.90	O
Resting seats	4.09	4.24	L	3.80	4.10	L
Ease of parking	3.95	4.24	L	**5.31**	**4.53**	C
Availability of entertainment zone	3.88	4.80	O	4.31	4.65	O
Grand mean	*4.81*	*4.68*	-	*4.85*	*4.62*	-

K stands for: Keep up the good work; C: Concentrate here; L: Low priority; O: Overkill.

4. Conclusions

The results of present study provide some useful insights for Thai managers. First, while Thai shoppers' satisfaction level are more likely to be determined by their evaluation on both functional and experiential aspects of mall attributes, Chinese mall shoppers' satisfaction level are more likely to be determined by their evaluation on functional aspects of mall attributes alone, likely a result from their shopping motives. Second, a further IPA analysis indicates that despite their similarities, Chinese and Thai malls also share differences in their strengths and weaknesses. Interestingly, what considered as strengths for Chinese malls may be considered as weaknesses for Thai malls, vice versa. The findings imply that international mall retailers should not simply transplant those strengths from one country to another without understanding local consumers' needs and wants. Last, in addition to identifying criteria that consumers use to select a mall, the results of this study also indicate the actual performance of these criteria.

Therefore, mall managers will be able to identify improvement priorities for salient attributes and direct quality-based marketing strategies (Hansen and Bush 1999). By doing so, mall managers can allocate their scarce resources more effectively and efficiently to attain the highest degree of customer satisfaction.

5. Limitations & Future Research

Like any of other research, this study has some limitations too. First of all, due to some constraints, the data were collected online rather than in the shopping malls. Technically, it would be better to do the survey in the shopping malls, as the perception of the respondents towards the mall attributes is still fresh. By doing so, less bias due to difficulties in recalling will generate. This may be especially true when collecting the data that measure the performance of the malls. However, in spite of its drawbacks, the online survey also provides a number of benefits, such as easier access to a wider range of customers (Illieva et al. 2002), avoid incomplete responses (Byrne 2001), allows for the use of uncomplicated directions (e.g., through automatic routing), as well as richer and more interesting question formats to help respondents complete the survey effectively. Online surveys may reduce field costs by 50-80%, lower response and data processing times substantially, and enable the centralization of research project management (Dillman 2000; Illieva et al. 2002).

Secondly, the generlizability of the findings may be limited to consumers who aged between 20 to 38 in both countries. It is possible that different attitudes towards mall attributes may be found for consumers who younger than 20 or older than 38.

Last, given the differences in the demographic background (that is age, education and income) of the respondents in the two countries, it would be hard to distinguish whether the results of this study are derived from these differences or other proposed factors. Therefore, the findings need to be interpreted with cautions.

Future research could employ different sampling techniques, such as mall intercept method to reduce the sampling bias. Future research should also try to avoid the differences in the demographic background of respondents from two countries to reduce the "noise" in the comparison. However, on the other hand, it would be interesting to examine the moderating effect of some demographic variables in this study. For instance, mall attributes that are important to female might be different from attributes that are important to male. Attributes that considered important for young shoppers may not be important for old shoppers. Given the dominance of Confucianism in a number of Asian countries, such as Japan, South Korea and Singapore, it would be interesting for future researchers to replicate this study in these countries to see if similar findings from Chinese consumers can be found when comparing to Thai consumers.

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