A Study on Grocery Retail Competition in the 'Small Spatial Market' Setting and the Determinants of Different Levels of Customer Satisfaction - A Fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA) Approach -

Nobukazu Azuma
Professor, Department of Marketing School of Business
Aoyama Gakuin University
Narimasa Yokoyama
Professor, Faculty of Business Administration Hosei University
Woonho Kim
Professor, College of Commerce Nihon University

ABSTRACT

This study aims at deepening our understanding of the mechanism through which a retailer's marketing mix impacts upon customer satisfaction via an exploration employing the fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA). It empirically investigates the configurations of retail mix components that determine different levels of customer satisfaction among the consumers who shop at one of the major Japanese mini-supermarket multiples. Some of the results gleaned from the analysis show that the combination of 'good merchandising' and 'desirable store-location', together with 'consumers' perception of these stores as quasi-supermarkets' leads to a very high level of customer satisfaction. On the other hand, two different configurations were identified that lead to a low level of customer satisfaction: the absence of 'good merchandising' and 'excellent service provision' in conjunction with the absence of 'consumers' perception of the stores as quasi-supermarkets' was the first, and the absence of all three retailing mix factors was the second.

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper derives from parts of larger studies that focus on tackling multiple dimensions of retail change, including the issue of retail competition in the spatially small geographical setting. Retail competition constitutes a significant proportion of the influence on the transformation of the retailing and distribution system. This study is intended to investigate the mechanism through which a retailer's marketing mix (retailing mix) impacts upon customer satisfaction via an exploration applying the fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA). It empirically examines the combinations (configuration or conjunctures) of a retailer's marketing mix components that determine different levels of customer satisfaction among grocery shoppers in Japan within a spatially small urban market setting.

A 'spatially small market' in the context of this study is defined as a densely populated geographical area with a radius of approximately one mile or less. Consumers residing in such an area have easy access on foot or by bicycles to multiple grocery stores within the perimeter. It is one of the classic types of urban retail agglomerations in Japan, consisting of a train station at the center, and shopping streets stretching outwards in all directions connecting layers of residential areas. It functions as a frequently visited destination for day-to-day shopping predominantly for the convenience goods and to a lesser extent for the shopping goods.

II. RETAILING MIX (RETAIL MARKETING MIX) AND RETAIL FORMAT

The most familiar type of retail competition that occurs between retail stores normally centers upon variations in the use of prices (Lambert,1979; Meneely et.al.,2009), merchandise assortments (Dawson,2000; Palamountain,1968; Stenier,1985),

promotional activities (Ailawadi and Keller,2004; Grewal et.al.,2011), locations (Clarke,2000; Cotterill,1986; Hallsworth and McLatchey,1994; Marion et.al., 1979), store atmospherics (Ailawadi and Keller,2004; Kumar and Karande,2000), services and so forth (Clarke,2000; Dawson,2000; Grewal et.al, 2011). It is the day-to-day continuous competition that has been given infinitely more thought and attention, together with a more macro aspects of retail competition appearing as the institutional change in retailing. This type of continuous competition normally involves a retailer's effort to combine in optimal proportions the components that make up its retail format in a fine-grained manner. It is the retailing 'mix' that drives this type of competition (Gist,1968). It is therefore worthwhile investigating the mechanism through which such 'mixed' – conjunctural – effects are generated and result in differing levels of customer satisfaction. This, indeed, is the motivation of the authors of this study, which explores it through a set-theoretic, qualitative comparative approach. Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) has drawn academic attention for the past 30 years as a neo-configurative research method.

The extent of satisfaction that a retailer gains from its customers mirrors its appeal to the market through its retailing mix. In this vein, a retailer that realizes a higher standard of satisfaction from a large number of customers is likely to be the winner of the competition with its rivals in a given trading area. Retailing mix, also phrased 'retail marketing mix', is a retailer's expression of its strategy and value proposition toward the (potential) customers in the communities in which it operates. It is designed and implemented with a view to winning the patronage of more consumers than its competition in a given geographical spread.

In other words, it is synonymous with a translation of its strategy, in the form of physical store attributes and intangible elements therein at both the front and back end of its retail format, to better serve the customers. As in the marketing mix (4Ps) in manufacturers' marketing, it is a prerequisite for a retailer to design its retailing mix components so that they are consistent with each other and thus generate synergistic ('mixed') effects.

This has a profound implication on the nucleus of retail competition, in that how a retailer translates its strategy into a well-balanced configuration of retailing mix within its retail format may decide its success or failure. The notion of retail format is a retailing version of the so-called business model. A business model is a well-specified system of interdependent structures, activities and processes that serves as a firm's organizing logic for value creation for its customers and value appropriation for itself and its partners (Burt et al., 2016; Sorescu et al., 2011).

The idea of retail format incorporates several retailing-specific issues into the generic concept of the business model. Consideration of the retailing mix, the need for vertical and horizontal coordination, and numerous daily face-to-face transactions are some examples (Dawson,1994,2007). Horizontal coordination here is associated with activities such as retail headquarters' efforts to orchestrate its networked stores and inter-functional collaboration within a retail organization. A retail format executes the value proposition that is specific to a retailer via a range of activities, relationships and behaviors, and thus encapsulates the competitive advantage of that retailer (Dawson and Mukoyama,2014).

III. RESEARCH IN THE SMALL SPATIAL SETTING

Many of the existing studies in related disciplines approaching the issue of the effects of the retailing mix on customer satisfaction and retail patronage place emphasis primarily on consumers' 'outshopping' behaviors toward relatively larger retail stores outside their localities (Skippari et al.,2017). This study, on the contrary, is intended to shed light on the causal relationship between a grocery retailer's retailing mix offerings and different levels of customer satisfaction within the 'small retailing context'(Runyan and Droge,2008) in the spatial sense. More specifically, configurations of retail mix attributes that lead to different levels of customer satisfaction with one of the major Japanese mini-supermarket multiples, *My Basket*, will be scrutinized in the small market setting. As specified in the preceding section, the 'small retailing context in the spatial sense' means a densely populated geographical area with a radius of approximately one mile or less. Consumers there have several easily accessible options of grocery stores at which to shop within the perimeter.

Retail competition in a local geographical setting represents the most atomistic but intrinsic nature of retailing as historically a domestic industry. However, it is one of the under-studied domains among academics in the face of continuing expansion of major national (or international) grocery supermarket multiples and the resultant upsurge in retail (brand) concentration. The trend toward the growing power of a handful of retail giants, coupled with their international expansion strategies, has become a subject of major concern in academia as well as among retail practitioners. This, in turn, has overshadowed the importance of research into the small spatial settings.

Besides this, the dominance of a handful of retail giants over

a considerable portion of the market makes it likely that local variety in grocery retailing has been vitiated. Consumers are often deprived of their options of grocery shopping destinations and left with insufficient choice. This has become an increasing concern for retail planners and policy makers alike (Clarke et al., 2012; Guy,2009). Wrigley and Dolega (2011) emphasize the salience of retail diversity in town centers and high streets in the face of a decreasing variety of retailers, due partly to the concentration of retail powers to a handful of large scale multiples whose stores are found on the corners of almost every street of shops across the nation or the globe.

Such a widening gap in retail service provision in the small spatial setting, on the other hand, has created opportunities for retailers to improve their retail format, including their retail mix, and respond flexibly to the changing face of consumption.

IV. STRUCTURE OF THE PAPER

In reflection of these recent general structural changes in grocery retailing, this study investigates the causal mechanism through which a particular type of retail store wins more customer patronage than others within the small geographical spread of local markets. The center of concern here is around the so-called mini-supermarket, a modern alternative to the superette. Mini-supermarket have increased their presence in the spatially small markets in response to recent change in demography in the Japanese market.

The remainder of this paper consists of the following sections: First, an overview of the long-term change in the competition in grocery retailing and its surrounding environment will be presented. This is developed into a brief discussion on grocery retailing in Japan from a (retail) structural point of view,

illustrating the impact of longitudinal demographic change upon the nature of retail competition as well as consumers' behaviors in grocery shopping and consumption.

On the basis of these findings, the subsequent section is dedicated to a review of the principal literature that attempts to explain the causal mechanism that exists between retailers' marketing mix components and the level of customer satisfaction or consumer patronage. While majority of existing studies adopt Multivariate Regression Analysis (MRA) based methodology to similar ends, this study applies QCA.

We then elucidate the rationales for using the fsQCA approach, a variant of QCA based on fuzzy-set theory, as the core analytical methodology in this study. This is accompanied by a description of the general procedures of data collection, data handling and analysis. Following this, findings gleaned from the analysis with fsQCA are reported and discussed. Configurational theorizing is the foundation of any QCA analysis to avoid a mechanistic application of its technique (Greckhamer etal., 2018). The final part of the paper discusses both the academic and practical implications of the study, coupled with a projection of the ongoing and future research related to this paper.

V. COMEPTITION IN GROCERY RETAILING – PAST AND PRESENT –

Retail competition in its most primitive form is synonymous with a retailer's continuous efforts to attract more customers than its rivals in a generally small geographic spread of the indigenous market ('spatially small retailing market') in which it operates. With the advent of chain store operation and the concept of self-service respectively in the mid-19th and the early 20th Centuries and their dissemination since then, the landscape

of retail competition has changed drastically, in conjunction with a series of innovations in auxiliary technologies and supporting infrastructures (Nystrom,1919).

Division of labor between the headquarters (HQ) and the individual branch stores in chain store operation eliminated the barriers for retailers to the expansion of their businesses and hence the realization of economies of scale. A considerably high level of HQ's managerial control over the networked stores regarding critical areas of retail operations, such as merchandising, order-placement to suppliers, promotions, and human resource management, is one of the fundamental tenets in chain store operations. Concentration of these functions at the HQ is empowered by the standardization of the majority of retail format components, including the product assortment in-store and the physical features of the individual stores within a given chain.

This facilitates a retailer with opportunities to exert a substantial purchasing power on its upper-stream supply chain members, such as manufacturers and wholesalers, as its store network expands. Besides this, it allows the individual outlet within the chain more resources to allocate to the front-end (in-store) activities to better cater to the demand and expectations of the local customers.

The former dimension of chain store operation has, indeed, contributed throughout the 20th Century to the emergence of national chain retailers worldwide. Internationalization of retailing, especially since the mid-1990s, has accelerated the growth of these retail giants to an extent that endows them with dominant power in the channel of distribution (Dawson and Mukoyama,2014). Now, it is these retail giants that enjoy overall control over the retail and distribution system, as they have

taken over the roles of channel leaders that were once pursued by large-scale consumer goods manufacturers; also known as the traditional 'marketers'. A wider adoption of own brands (private brands) among the principal retail multiples makes it likely that retailers' brands may well exceed the appeal to consumers that manufacturers' brands had conventionally offered (Diallo and Kaswengi, 2014).

With regard to the auxiliary technological and infrastructural dimension of the evolution in retailing, there are a number of anecdotes that vividly illustrate how these factors encouraged drastic as well as incremental changes in the way retail activities are organized and pursued. The invention of cash registers, EPOS (Electronic Point of Sales) system, EOS (Electronic Ordering Systems), business message standards spanning the supply chain, and more recently, the application of Artificial Intelligence and robotics in both the front and back ends of the retail format (retail business model / retail business system) are some of the examples of the supporting technologies.

The advance in logistics and supply chain management (Dobson and Zhou,2014; Fernie and Sparks,2012), together with the sophistication of transactional platforms, has also transformed retailing into a new form, incorporating the worldwide spread of the internet and various types of devices connected to it. The rise of internet retailing (e-tailing) from the late 1990s onwards has been a remarkable phenomenon, as it overcomes the traditional spatiotemporal restraints peculiar to retailing via physical outlets, and thus attracts more customers away from the 'real stores' of various product categories and retail formats (types). In these areas, it offers a superior retail service level (Bucklin,1978) to its "real" predecessors.

Although a series of long-term general trends in retailing is

characterized by increasing drives toward higher levels of retail concentration and growing pressures from e-tailing giants and other types of consumer-oriented online platformers, competition in grocery retailing still possesses some important respects in which retailers are required to be far more flexible and fine-tuned to their local customers in comparison to the original idea of chain store operation.

Consumers' preferences in grocery shopping are more diverse and complex than in the so-called non-food product categories. The variance of consumers' needs between individual localities where a retailer operates its outlets is often found to be considerable in certain grocery product categories. Demand for not only the (semi-)locally sourced fresh produce but also particular groups of processed food reflecting indigenous culinary traditions requires a retail multiple as well as a local independent to flexibly adjust its merchandising activities and other components of the retailing mix to better pinpoint the local preferences in food shopping and consumption.

This is apparently one of the areas where medium-to-small-size indigenous grocery retail multiples, together with local independents with higher social embeddedness to the locality (Granovetter,1985), find their potential sources of excellence vis-à-vis national / international chains and it allows them to survive the competition in the individual trading area in which they operate. In other words, it is a cross section of the modern retailing method driven by chain store operation and the above-mentioned primitive, atomistic mode of retail competition. Individual retailers compete on the basis of their abilities to fine-tune their retailing mix to the variance of consumers' needs and expectations in each small market they cater for through their retail outlets.

Such a local embeddedness of consumers' needs makes the competition in grocery retailing more complex than that in other product categories. Besides this, it has a considerable impact upon the formation of a particular type of retail and distribution structure. This study attempts to shed light on the local embeddedness of grocery shopping and hence the unique nature of retail competition therein.

For this purpose, Japanese grocery retailing is deemed to provide a typical example in which subtlety in retailers' efforts to deliver a bundle of services to the local customers of their outlets through their retailing mix decides whether or not a retailer can overcome the competition of its rivals in a given locality. This study places a particular focus on so-called mini-supermarkets: one of the emerging retail types that reflect well the demographic trends in the Japanese market; namely (1) a rapidly aging population, and (2) an increasing level of time constraint on grocery shopping among many consumers due to the rise in the number of double-career households across the nation.

VI. GROCERY RETAILING IN JAPAN AND THE SCOPE OF THE RESEARCH

Grocery retailing in Japan represents a significant level of fragmentation in comparison with its US and European counterparts. As the figures in **Table-1** demonstrate, the level of concentration in the Japanese supermarket sector is noticeably lower than that of its European counterparts, namely Germany, the UK and France, where approximately three-quarters of the market is accounted for by only a handful of retail multiples. Three retailers in Germany, and four in the UK and France respectively, account for more than half the share of the grocery retailing market of each economy.

Contrary to this, the cumulated market share of the top ten retailers in Japan makes up only 40-plus % of the market. This is even lower than what is observed in the US where there is a 51.2% share with seven retailers. Indeed, retail sales among the top 72 retailers in the Japanese grocery supermarket sector achieve the level of retail concentration (74%) reached by only six retailers in Germany (Yokoyama,2019). These statistics explicate that the structure of Japanese grocery retailing is characterized by a typical low-power distribution where myriads of small-to-medium-size indigenous supermarket chains share some 60 % of the national market. Each of these local supermarket multiples caters for several small spatial markets.

Table-1. Retail Concentration in Japan and Principal Economies
(Source: Diamond Freedman,2018; Yokoyama, 2019)

Country		Market Size (Trillion JPY)	Number of Top Share Retailers	Retail Value of Top Share Retailers (Trillion JPY)	Top Share Retailers Market Share (%)	Retail Concentration (HHI)	Year
Japan	Grocery Supermarket	15.9	10	6.8	42.9	413	FY2016
U.S.A	Grocery Retailing	58.7	7	29.9	51.2	503	2017
Germany	Grocery Retailing	27.1	7	18.4	74.2	1,257	2017
UK	Grocery Retailing	24.8	8	17.9	71.9	910	2017
France	Grocery Retailing	23.7	6	16.1	67.5	825	2017

Source (Yokoyama, 2019, Diamand Chainstore, 2018)

Although we have witnessed a constant increase in retail concentration over the past decade or two, there remains plenty of room for indigenous small-to-medium-size grocery multiples to maintain a competitive edge in the individual market in which they are running retail outlets. This is due predominantly to the culinary tradition among Japanese households to pursue freshness and variety in their foodstuffs in everyday life, which necessitates frequent (often daily) shopping trips (Suzuki et.al., 2016). Proximity to quality grocery stores, whether it is from their

home or work is therefore mandatory for the consumers.

Local variances in consumers' need for fresh groceries and foodstuffs often allow indigenous players to outperform the retail giants in the store-based competition within a given geographical spread. Unlike those for packaged consumer goods, sourcing activities are conducted locally in these product categories, and so retail competition is driven less by their buying power than their ability to pinpoint the expectations of the local customers (Yokoyama,2019).

Recent changes in social structure, such as the dramatic increase in the number of dual-career households and the rapidly aging population across the nation, have indeed fueled the retail competition in a new realm. Now that, the majority of married females have occupations of various forms, and so time pressure in grocery shopping is more evident than ever (Yao and Oppewal, 2016). Elderly consumers often find that the distance they could walk on a grocery shopping trip has shortened to half a mile or so.

Whether a retailer can provide, at the end of this 'half-mile journey', augmented variety, freshness and flexibility has become one of the challenging yet important areas to cultivate, especially in the small spatial market context. With online shopping a partial solution, retail multiples traditionally operating supermarkets (SM) and convenience stores (CVS) have embarked on launching hybrids of their original formats to facilitate consumers with updated access to quality groceries. The mini-supermarket: a modern alternative of the superette, and CVS with perishables and fresh produce are the variants of conventional SM and CVS that have emerged to this end. The advent of these hybrids has accelerated grocery retailers' battle to win customer patronage over the competition in each of the individual markets

in which they operate.

In reflection of these long-term trends observed in Japanese grocery retailing, this study aims at investigating the causal mechanism by which a retailer's marketing mix impacts upon customer satisfaction, employing the fsQCA. It explores empirically the configurations of retail mix components that determine different levels of customer satisfaction; very high, high, and low satisfaction among the consumers who shop at one of the major mini-supermarket multiples *My Basket*. *My Basket* is operated as the mini supermarket arm of the largest Japanese retail conglomerate *Aeon*.

VII. RETAILING MIX (RETAIL MARKETING MIX), CUSTOMER SATISFACTION, AND CUSTOMER LOYALTY

Grocery retailing over the past couple of decades has seen a general trend toward stagnant growth in the phase of market maturity (Willems et al., 2016) and, on the other hand, an increasingly intense level of competition (Fornell,1992). The advance in e-tailing and e-platforms has made wider choices of shopping modes available to consumers (Wallace et al., 2004). Taking into account these circumstances, retail practitioners must bear in mind the importance of retaining customers, as this is by far the least expensive means of defending their stores against their competitors (Christopher and Peck,2003).

Increased customer retention is expected to have two important effects. It can lead to a gradual increase in a retailer's customer base which is vital in an era of low sales growth. Besides this, it tends to generate an effect in which there is a boost in a retailer's profit from each customer, as she / he remains loyal to the retailer for longer (Sirohi et al., 1998). It is now a common

practice for a retailer to utilize a loyalty program (frequent shopper program) in order to nurture a long-term relationship with customers by way of providing regular rewards for purchases (Gable et al., 2008).

In the large body of literature in the areas of marketing and distribution studies, the role of customer loyalty in realizing these goals has been discussed. According to Oliver (1997), customer loyalty is defined as a deeply held commitment to rebuy or repatronize a preferred product or service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same-brand or same brand-set purchasing, despite situational influences and marketing efforts that have the potential to cause switching behavior. Oliver (1999) also contends that customer loyalty develops in a four-stage stepwise sequence, passing from the cognitive, affective, conative, and finally to the action loyalty stage where consumers are characterized by strong patronage of a given entity; e.g. a retailer.

Gaining strong customer loyalty is fundamental to business success. It is recognized as a strategic priority. It is an important asset to a business as well (Aksoy,2013; Sarantidou,2017). Customer loyalty is of prime importance for a retailer to be able to predict future growth (Helgesen,2006; Lam et al., 2013; Sarantidou,2017). In academia, customer satisfaction is agreed to be an antecedent of customer loyalty (Fornell etal., 1996; Martinelli and Bolboni,2012; Oliver,1997; Zeithaml etal., 1996). It has been a major concern of academic research, primarily in the fields of marketing and service sciences, to explore the source of customer satisfaction and to identify the factors, other than perceived customer satisfaction, that would also have a positive impact upon retail customer loyalty, and the alternate paths to customer loyalty in comparison with the conventional ones.

Sirohi etal.(1998) was one of the first studies to approach

the mechanism by which consumers develop store loyalty in the context of grocery retailing. It contends that a good facility design and service provision by customer-contact employees leads to enhanced perceptions of merchandising quality. These perceptions of overall merchandise quality were found to have a significant direct impact on overall customer store loyalty intention. The model proposed emphasizes that service quality (consisting of store operation, store appearance, and personnel service) affects merchandise quality, which in turn influences consumers' perceived value of a given supermarket. Perceived store value, then, leads to the formation of loyalty intention.

As in Sirohi et al. (1998), Martinelli and Balboni(2012) applied the analytical framework that were developed in the area of service science and constructed a hypothetical model that consists of retail service quality, customer satisfaction, conative loyalty and action loyalty. It concluded that customer satisfaction has a mediating role between retail service quality and store loyalty, leading to store traffic and revenue growth.

Sarantidou (2017) took additional factors such as consumer expectations and brand strength into consideration in her hypothetical model using the European Customer Satisfaction Index (ECSI). This is in part owing to the long-term trend in retailing where a large number of retailers have embarked on investing in their own branding (Grewal et al., 2004; Kumar and Youn-Kyung,2014). The findings of the empirical study verify that customer satisfaction is predicted by perceived service quality, perceived product quality, expectation and perceived value. Customer satisfaction not only has a direct impact upon loyalty but also influences it via brand strength. What is conspicuous in this school of research is a separation of the retailing mix components into service quality and merchandising factors.

Although it is straightforward thinking in the service approach, it is likely that the conjunctural and synergistic nature that is embedded in the concept of retailing mix is underestimated in these frameworks.

Blut et al. (2018) is one of the few studies that explicitly uses the phrase 'retailing marketing mix' in the title and attempts to integrate a long list of existing literature on retail marketing mix instruments and their influence on retail patronage through a meta-analysis. The major finding from the analysis implies that most of the retailing mix components directly influence at least one dimension of retail patronage. All these components directly affect customer satisfaction, although some predictors were identified having significantly greater effectiveness in influencing retail patronage than others. Despite the thoroughness of the study, here again, the 'mixed' dimension of the retailing mix is neglected. Such a research gap is, indeed, the motivation of this research.

VIII. PROPOSITIONS AND THE RATIONALES FOR EMPLOYING fsQCA

In order to achieve the research objective mentioned above, fsQCA was employed as the primary analytical technique (Fiss,2007, 2011) in this study. QCA finds its origin in Boolean algebra and is based on set theoretic logic. Its philosophical foundation lies in the comparative tradition in social sciences initiated by the work of John Stuart Mill (Marx etal.,2014), and in particular, the so-called Mill's canons: the *method of agreement* and the *method of difference* (Mill,1843 / 1967). Mill's concepts were further elaborated by leading sociologists and political scientists (Marx et al., 2014; Przeworski and Teune,1970).

QCA was developed by a political scientist and sociologist

Charles C. Ragin who incorporated the essence of Mill's canons into the set theory (Ragin,1987). It builds upon set theoretic logic and uses Boolean algebra to identify the constellation of causal conditions that lead to the outcome of a given phenomenon. QCA is deemed to be a powerful approach for identifying and thinking through the complex patterns of relationships between a set of causes ('conditions') and outcomes. The essential and appealing logic of QCA is that it looks at the conditions and determines which of them work together (either by their presence or absence) as a combination (conjuncture / configuration) to produce an outcome of interest. Groups of conditions in QCA are identified as 'prime implicants', which can combine into 'recipes' to characterize the patterns of relationships among the conditions and the outcome (Drozdova and Gaubatz, 2017; Ragin,1987).

QCA was first introduced in political science, where an analytical scheme appropriate for relatively small-to-medium-N studies was greatly needed (Ragin,1987). This was due to the nature of political phenomena in general. Individual phenomena are rather unusual and consequently collecting a large number of samples is virtually impossible, although researchers can access each case in depth. Thus, the basis of QCA is on emphasizing the case-based nature of comparative research, an emphasis that demands that each case be treated as a complex entity (a whole) and that its integrity as a case be maintained in the course of analysis (Ragin,1987).

QCA has been applied in various disciplines primarily in the arena of social science, for the past three decades, since its conception in the late 1980s. Large-N application of QCA has been becoming increasingly accepted as an analytical technique (Greckhamer and Furnari, 2013) beyond the boundaries of academic disciplines (Roig-Tierno et.al., 2017). In the meantime,

the analytical scope of QCA saw a dramatic increase in sophistication. It evolved from dichotomy-based crisp-set QCA (csQCA) via multi-value QCA (mvQCA), which incorporates the notion of a measurement scale, and then to fuzzy-set QCA (fsQCA). Business and its related subjects, including marketing and distribution studies, are no exceptions to the trend toward emphasizing the potential of QCA as a neo-configurational research method (Ketchen,2013; Miller,2017).

It is now becoming an acknowledged practice to employ mixed research methods in which both QCA and MRA-based techniques are applied to the analyses of the same data set to compare the results gleaned from each. Although these two methodologies are built on viewpoints that are opposed to each other (as is depicted in **Table-2**), it is deemed worthwhile to explore the complementary effects between the two (Fiss,2011; Frösén et.al,2016).

Table-2. Conventional versus Alternate Template for Social Research
(Source: Ragin,1987 / 2014)

Conventional Template (Linear-Regression Based)	Alternate Template (QCA)
Variables	Sets
Measurement	Calibration
Dependent Variables	Qualitative Outcomes
Given Populations	Constructed Populations
Correlations	Set-Theoretic Relations
Correlation Matrices	Truth Tables
Net Effects	Causal Recipes

Fiss (2007) contends that organizations are best understood as clusters of interconnected structures and practices, rather than as modular or loosely coupled entities whose components are perceived in isolation. This innate characteristic of organizations

is likely to be better understood through the configurational approach than through the conventional empirical methodologies that tend to rely heavily on linearity, additive effects of individual independent variables, and unifinality of the model tested. The configurational approaches, on the contrary, are based upon the fundamental premise that patterns of attributes will exhibit different features and lead to different outcomes depending on how they are arranged. These approaches stress the non-linearity, synergistic (mixed / conjunctural / combination) effects of the conditions for certain outcomes, and the equifinality that allows the existence of different paths (conjunctures of conditions) to the same outcome. It is a somewhat common phenomenon in the real-world experience that splendid performances of organizations are attained through multiple routes. Causal asymmetry is another tenet of QCA. It assumes that the configurations of conditions that lead to non-occurrence of an outcome differ from those associated with its occurrence. Put simply, there are different conjunctures of conditions respectively for the presence and the absence of a given outcome.

According to the bibliometrics compiled by Roig-Tierno etal. (2017) , more than a quarter of journal articles that employ QCA as an analytical method were observed in the 'management and organization' and 'business and economy' areas. The '*Journal of Business Research*' is singled out as the scientific journal with the highest number of publications with QCA. There is a list of literature in management, organization and marketing disciplines that are counted as landmark studies applying a variant or variants of QCA; csQCA, mvQCAand fsQCA.

Some of the earlier examples of these are; Chung (2001) ('*Journal of International Business Studies*') , Häge (2007), Kvist (2007), Stokke(2007) ('*Journal of Business Research*'), Fiss(2007) ('*Academy*

of Management Review'), Pajunen(2008) ('*Journal of International Business Studies*'), Grandori et al.(2008) ('*Organization Studies*'), and Fiss(2011) ('*Academy of Management Journal*'). Frösén et al. (2016) on the complex association between market orientation and marketing performance measurement marked the official arrival of QCA in the arena of marketing ('*Journal of Marketing*').

Fiss (2007, 2011) postulates that attempts to look into organizations through configurational approaches are not recent trends. Classic academics in corporate strategy, such as Miles and Snow (1983), Porter (1980) and Mintzberg (1983), all embraced different typologies of configurations, although there was no valid method at that time to pursue configurational analyses in a scientifically sound manner. Ketchen et al. (1997) suggested, through a meta-analysis, that configuration membership does predict organizational performance. Thus, earlier interests in configurational methods in organization studies faced statistical / mathematical difficulty in finding a reliable link between configurations and organizational performance (Fiss,2007). Considering such a background of evolutionary process of configurational approaches to organization studies, it is no wonder QCA quickly became the methodological savior for academics in this field who had long been in search of a vigorous analytical scheme to make their dream come true by doing away with the ambiguity in the conventional typological approaches (such as cluster analyses).

In the context of marketing and distribution studies, a set of perceptual gaps in research methodologies has been witnessed, analogous to what were seen in organization studies. The (social) roles and functions that retailing system and hence retailers are expected to deliver are determined predominantly by the task environment (related to the conditions of the

production and consumption ends of the distribution system) and the constraining environment factors (such as legislations, technologies, infrastructure, labor market, finance and so forth). These environmental forces may interact with novel entrepreneurial behaviors or innovative actions among the players comprising the distribution system. To narrow this down to an individual retailer's marketing actions in a small market setting, it is worthwhile to investigate the orchestrated effects of its retailing mix components upon consumer satisfaction through a fsQCA approach.

The rationales for choosing this particular analytical methodology from the variety of analytical techniques available in social science are that:

(1) It is a powerful and effective method in accommodating the complex interactions; i.e. the 'conjuncture' of the variables ('conditions' in QCA term) into considerations (Furnari et.al, 2017). In other words, it allows capture of the 'mixed' effects of the retailing mix (retail marketing mix).

(2) It stands on the principle of causal asymmetry (Frösén et.al.,2016). This enables researchers to distinguish the configurations of conditions that are associated with one level of customer satisfaction with *My Basket* from others.

(3) It is based on an assumption that there are multiple pathways (configurations) to the same outcome; i.e. the concept of equifinality (Ragin,1987/2014, 2000). Even when a group of customers of *My Basket* show the same level of satisfaction with it, there might exist different conjunctures of retailing mix components by which they have reached this outcome.

and

(4) QCA also permits researchers to generate theoretical implications, taking the specificities in the research context

into consideration (Kahwati and Kane,2020).

These fundamental tenets of fsQCA are apparently attractive, as the issue of customer satisfaction in the retail setting is often found too intricate and interconnected to investigate by way of the conventional 'net-effect thinking' (Ragin,2008) or 'general linear reality' perspective (Abbott,1988; Woodside,2013). fsQCA can incorporate the 'mixture effects' or 'interaction effects' among the retailing mix components upon different levels of CS a retailer can realize. It could also help identify different sets (configurations / conjunctures) of conditions that respectively lead to varied levels of customer satisfaction; i.e. 'very high', 'high' and 'low'.

In this regard, fsQCA may possess an advantage over the conventional MRA-based methodology that is widely accepted in the majority of literature looking into retail patronage and the retailing mix (Blut et al.,2018). Drawing upon these, the following propositions were laid out in line with the research objective stipulated above.

Proposition-1 (P-1) Conjuncture Effect

'Mixture (conjuncture) effect' of retailing mix components plays an important role in determining different levels of customer satisfaction with My Basket.

Proposition-2 (P-2) Causal Asymmetry

Such configurations of retailing mix components are varied when an outcome is present and when it is absent.

In addition to these two propositions, an extra proposition was established, taking the unique position of mini supermarkets

into consideration. As discussed in the preceding section, it is only in recent years that this retail type has emerged and quickly spread its network of stores throughout the myriad of small spatial markets across the nation. Even so, it is still doubtful whether the majority of consumers acknowledge *My Basket* stores smaller versions of supermarkets, mini-supermarkets, since the boundaries between conventional supermarkets, mini supermarkets, and hybrid versions of convenience stores and drugstores with an assortment of grocery products are increasingly blurring. This, in turn, raises the question of whether consumers' retail format perception may well have a joint impact along with retailing mix conditions, upon determining different levels of satisfaction with *My Basket* stores.

Proposition-3 (P-3) Consumers Retail Format Perception

The mini supermarkets being a newly established retail type, consumers' retail format perception of My Basket stores will have a joint effect, along with its retailing mix factors, upon determining different levels of customer satisfaction with it.

IX. METHODOLOGY

An online questionnaire was conducted with the consumers who have shopped at *My Basket*, together with other retail fascia. The total number of responses obtained through this survey were 1030, 842 of which were usable responses. These responses met the criteria set for this study; i.e. consumers who shop at multiple grocery store in a spatially small market and regularly visit *My Basket* stores. Respondents' ages ranged from 15 to 83 years old with a mean of 45.76.

Measurement

For the purpose of the measurement of consumers' perceptions of the retail marketing mix (retailing mix) components of *My Basket* stores, 17 instruments in five retailing mix areas (location, product assortment, price, in-store layout, and services) were identified, following the definitions stipulated by Levy and Weitz (2012). These items were adjusted to better fit into the context of Japanese grocery retailing. **Table-3** summarizes the set of the measurement items used to evaluate the retailing mix aspects

Table-3. Measurement Items for Retailing Mix Evaluation
(Source: the Authors)

INSTRUMENTS FOR MEASUREMENT (Reasons to shop at *My Basket* Stores)

Q Please tick the most appropriate number on the scale for each of the following statements with regard to the reasons you shop at *My Basket*.

#	INSTRUMENT (11-Point Likert Scale)	Retail-Mix Construct	Exploratory Factor Analysis
1	*My Basket*' store is conveniently located and I find it easy to access it.	Location	
2	I have a handy means of transportation to *My Basket*'s store(s).	Location	LOCATION Factor (α =0.932)
3	*My Basket*'s stores are located in good sites for the customers.	Location	
4	*My Basket*'s stores are located in good locations for me.	Location	
5	Prices of products at *My Basket*'s stores are low for the quality I get.	Price	
6	Fresh produces at *My Basket*'s stores are low-priced.	Price	
7	Items with special promotions at *My Basket*'s stores are low-priced.	Price	MERCHANDISING factor (α =0.886)
8	Overall pricing at *My Basket*'s stores is low-cost.	Price	
9	*My Basket*'s stores have a wide range of products in-store.	Product	
10	I can always find what I want at *My Basket*'s Stores.	Product	
11	*My Basket*'s stores offer a depth of products within each category in their offerings.	Product	
12	I find *My Basket*'s stores atmosphere comfortable.	Store	
13	Shopping space at *My Basket*'s stores in general is appropriately designed.	Store	
14	In-store layout of *My Basket*'s stores is east to follow / shop for me.	Store	
15	Sales personnel at *My Basket*'s stores provides with me prompt responses.	Service	
16	Sales personnel at *My Basket*'s stores provides with me services that I ask for.	Service	SERVICE factor (α=0.923)
17	Sales personnel at *My Basket*'s stores provides with me services in a comfortable manner.	Service	

For the measurement of respondents' level of satisfaction with *My Basket* stores, a set of instruments listed in **Table-4** were designed in accordance with the Japanese Customer Satisfaction Index (JCSI) (Ono,2010). JCSI is a Japanese equivalent to ACSI (Fornell, 1992) and ECSI (Sarantidou,2017).

Table-4. Measurement Items for Customer Satisfaction and Intention to Shop (Source: the Authors)

INSTRUMENTS FOR MEASUREMENT (Customer Satisfaction and Intention to shop)

Q Please tick the most appropriate number on the scale for each of the following statements with regard to your evaluation on My Basket.

#	INSTRUMENT (11-Point Likert Scale)	Construct	Exploratory Factor Analysis
1	I am satisfied with *My Basket*'s stores from my shopping experiences for the past year.	CS (JCSI)	
2	*My Basket* has been a good choice as my shopping destination from my experiences for the past year.	CS (JCSI)	
3	*My Basket* helps enrich my everyday life.	CS (JCSI)	
4	I would like to visit *My Basket* stores more frequently from now on.	Intention to shop	CUSTOMER SATISFACTION Factor (α =0.934)
5	I would like to visit *My Basket* stores to pursue more purposes.	Intention to shop	
6	I would like to keep shopping at *My Basket* stores.	Intention to shop	
7	My first choice will be a *My Basket* store when I visit a Mini Supermarket next time.	Intention to shop	

One more instrument was designed (See **Table-5**) in order to measure consumers' perceptions as to what retail type(format) *My Basket* stores are categorized as. Since *My Basket* is a mini-supermarket multiple whose presence in the small spatial market setting is a relatively new phenomenon, together with the advance of other mini-supermarket chains, consumers' perception of its retail format image might well affect the ways they use *My Basket* stores. It is likely that consumers' varied perceptions of *My Basket* stores decide the level of consumer satisfaction in conjunction with its retailing mix components. All items were measured with an 11-point Likert-type scale.

Table-5. Measurement Items for Consumers' Retail Format Perceptions of *My Basket* Stores (Source: the Authors)

INSTRUMENTS FOR MEASUREMENT (Retail Format Perception)	
Q	To what extent *My Basket*'s stores are similar to each of the following retail types? Please tick the most appropriate number on the scale.
#	INSTRUMENT (11-Point Likert Scale)
1	Supermarket : e.g. *Tokyu Store*, *Ozeki*
2	Convenience Store : e.g. *Seven-Eleven*, *Lawson*
3	Drugstore : e.g. *Matsumoto Kiyoshi*, *Sun Drug*

Reliability and Validity

The survey data was first processed with an exploratory factor analysis. It identified three key constructs of the retail marketing mix, namely the location, merchandising (assortment and price) and services (**See Table-3**). To ensure its reliability and validity, confirmatory factor analysis was executed with SPSS-Amos 22, showing that a four-factor model consisting of the three constructs and 'customer satisfaction' (**See Table-4**) had a good fit with χ^2 (113)=705.59, p<0.00, CFI=0.947, SRMR=0.476, RMSEA=0.079 (Hair, et al., 2014).

All items' loading was significant on the predicted latent factors. Besides this, all variables showed high composite reliability (CR) scores that exceed the 0.70 level. CR score on the location factor, the merchandising factor, the service factor, and the customer satisfaction factor accounted for 0.93, 0.89, 0.92, and 0.92 respectively. Average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct was larger than 0.50; 0.88 for the location factor, 0.72 for the merchandising factor, 0.89 for the service factor, and 0.90 for the customer satisfaction factor (Bagozzi and Yi,1988). These are greater than the square correlation with other constructs

(Fornell and Larker, 1981). Therefore, both reliability and validity of each construct proved satisfactory in comparison with the generally accepted standards.

Calibration

In the process of direct calibration, researchers establish three calibration points for the data based upon external knowledge, standards or theory (Kahawati and Kane,2020). In the same fashion, three anchors for set membership values (SMVs) were applied to structure the fuzzy-set. Following the standard fsQCA procedures of direct calibration recommended by Ragin (2008), threshold value (set membership values=SMVs) that determines a case's position between full membership and full non-membership to each set of the three conditions was established (Kahwati and Kane,2020; Ragin,2008). These normally include the thresholds for full membership (1), full non-membership (0), and the cross-over point (0.5).

However, taking the specific context of this study into consideration, some adjustments were made to the standard measure, primarily due to the innate characteristics of the relationship between customer satisfaction and loyalty. When looking at different levels of customer satisfaction with the retailing mix, it is reasonable to delineate those who perceive a 'very high level of satisfaction' and a 'high level of satisfaction' as different entities (Hesckett et al., 1997). It also reflects the considerations for analyzing the dataset from the viewpoint of causal asymmetry through a truth table algorithm (Kahwati and Kane,2020).

With this general trend toward the association between customer satisfaction with a retailer and his /her loyalty to it, the entire sample populations were divided into three segments:

(1) the customers with a very high level of satisfaction, (2) the customers with a high level of satisfaction and (3) the customers with a low level of satisfaction. For the first group of populations, cases within the10th percentile, between the 50th and the 75th percentile, and 75th percentile and beyond were allocated respectively to full membership (0.95), cross-over point (0.5) and full non-membership (0.05). For the second group, 25th, 50th and 75th percentiles were used to draw the lines between the three anchoring points. With regard to the third, low satisfaction group, 75th, 50th and 25th percentiles were set as the points to demarcate the three threshold values. For the individual retailing mix factors (the 'conditions' in QCA analyses); location, merchandising and service, three thresholds were set at the 25th (full membership), 50th (cross-over point) and 75th percentile (full non-membership). Data analyses were conducted with the fsQCA3.0 software package, relying on the fuzzy truth table algorithm.

X. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The results of the analysis are presented in **Table-5**. Causal conditions in this series of analyses include three retailing mix factors: 'desirable location', 'good merchandising' and 'excellent service'. Consumers' retail format perception of *My Basket* stores was added to them as another condition for the outcome. The outcomes for the analyses through fsQCA are established as three different levels of customer satisfaction; 'very high level of satisfaction', 'high level of satisfaction' and 'low level of satisfaction'.

As is depicted in **Table-5**, the consistency scores for all solutions are well above Ragin's recommendation level of 0.75 (Ragin,2008; Tamura,2015). The individual configuration among all those identified here, therefore, has sufficient support

to be interpreted as the causal combination of conditions that determine each of the three different levels of customer satisfaction. Solution coverage scores and solution consistency values of these three models are: 0.40 / 0.49 / 0.60 and 0.89 / 0.87 / 0.86. The former figures are observed well within the scale in between 0.25 and 0.65. This supports that all these conjunctural models are empirically informative (Ragin, 2008; Woodside, 2013).

The causal configuration associated with a 'very high level of satisfaction' accounts for 40% of the membership in this particular segment of the populations, implying that a combination of 'desirable location' and 'good merchandising' coupled with 'consumers' retail format perception of *My Basket* as a supermarket' will lead to a very high level of customer satisfaction. That identified with a 'high level of satisfaction' has a coverage over 49% of the membership among the corresponding segment of the populations. A conjuncture of all retailing mix conditions ('desirable location', 'good merchandising' and 'excellent service') is deemed to be the source of a "high level of satisfaction'.

Finally, two configurations leading to a 'low level of customer satisfaction', put together, have a coverage of as much as 60% of the membership in the low satisfaction group of the populations. The first configuration leading to a low level of satisfaction is represented by the absence of 'good merchandising' ,'excellent service' and 'consumers' retail format perception of *My Basket* as a supermarket. The other type of causal configuration leading to this outcome is represented by the absence of all three positive retailing mix conditions ('desirable location', 'good merchandising' and 'excellent service'). This is the single causal conjuncture that has a symmetrical causal relationship with that

observed in the 'high level of satisfaction' group.

Table-6. The Results of the Analysis with fsQCA (Source: the Authors)

	solution			
	very high CS	high CS	low CS (1)	low CS (2)
location	●	●		⊕
merchandizing	●	●	⊕	⊕
service		●	⊕	⊕
perception of retail format	●		⊕	
consistency	0.89	0.87	0.89	0.88
raw coverage	0.40	0.49	0.49	0.51
unique coverage	0.40	0.49	0.09	0.10
solution coverage	0.40	0.49	0.60	
solution consistency	0.89	0.87	0.86	

Notes: ● indicates the presence of a condition

⊕ indicates the absence of a condition

CS stands for "customer satisfaction"

XI. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION

The purposes of this study as preliminary research investigating retail competition in the spatially small market setting were to verify (1) the occurrences of conjunctural effects among the retailing mix factors (together with consumers' retail format perception) upon determining different levels of customer satisfaction (**Proposition-1**), (2) the existence of causal asymmetry in the mechanism between the conditions and the outcomes being explored in this study (**Proposition-2**) and (3) the joint effect of consumers' retail format perception together with the retailing mix factors upon deciding the differing levels of customer satisfaction (**Proposition-3**).

The results gleaned from this study confirmed the existence of complex and multi-faceted interactions among the components of

the retailing mix upon the mechanism through which different levels of customer satisfaction with a mini-supermarket multiple is determined. **Proposition-1** was supported with these findings. These findings have added some new insights into the roles of the retailing mix upon retailers' performance as well as customers' satisfaction with them (c.f. Blut et.al., 2018).

With regard to **Proposition-2**, the results from the fsQCA analyses verified that the causal configurations that lead to a 'very high customer satisfaction' ('presence' of the outcome) and 'low level of customer satisfaction' ('absence' of the outcome) are represented by asymmetrical relationships. One model associated with the former and two with the latter consist of a unique combination of causal conditions. Although one instance of causal symmetry was observed between the 'high level of customer satisfaction' and one of the models for the 'low level of satisfaction', it is reasonable to conclude that the proposition is upheld, since asymmetrical relationships were identified between both ends of the customer satisfaction scale.

The statement in **Proposition-3** also held true, apparently owing to the emergent nature of the mini-supermarket as a retail type. It is likely that consumers who perceive the *My Basket* store as a variant of a supermarket have a positive image of its merchandising offerings and regard its store location as adequate. Easier access to a compact alternative to traditional supermarkets with augmented shopping efficiency (Bogomolova e al., 2016) might have raised their satisfaction level in comparison with their prior expectation (Saranditou, 2017). On the contrary, those who perceive *My Basket* to belong to a retail type other than a supermarket; e.g. a convenience store, seemingly developed a rather negative image of its retailing mix.

The potential contributions of this study will be (1) the fact

that it was conducted in the small spatial market setting and (2) the findings that verified the 'mixed' effects generated by the interactions among the components of the retailing mix. A rather mediating effect of consumers' retail format perception deciding their satisfaction levels with a retailer in conjunction with retailing mix factors may well suggest one of the subjects for further study in the future. In addition to these academic implications, the findings from this study are deemed to have some practical insight for retail planners as to how they can effectively design the retail marketing mix and hence retail formats in order to deliver and realize the value propositions they pursue.

The limitation of this study lies in several dimensions of retail competition in the small spatial market setting as well as in the mechanism of consumer patronage in grocery retailing. The scope of this study was to investigate the conjunctural effects of retailing mix components upon customer satisfaction. Nevertheless, a retailer's realization of a higher level of customer satisfaction does not necessarily result in strong customer loyalty and hence long-term patronage to it. Future research in this domain may need to incorporate several other constructs, such as retailers' brand power and customer loyalty, in the analytical framework. Another point of possible improvement for future research is that data collection is to be conducted in a specific and representative 'small spatial market' where consumers have easy access to multiple grocery retail outlets. This will help researchers to approach the issues of local competition with enhanced understanding.

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