

Customer Attachment as the Key Factor for the Sustainability and Growth of Unorganized Indian Kirana Shops

Pradeep Alex¹, Danish Hussain¹ and Mohd Danish Kirmani²

¹CHRIST (Deemed-to-be University), Lavasa, Pune, India

²Paari School of Business, SRM University-AP, Guntur, Andhra Pradesh, India

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Abstract: The Indian grocery retail ecosystem is multi-layered and complex. The vast geography and varying infrastructure levels in different parts of the country demand different distribution models. The Indian retail ecosystem is capable enough to ensure product availability even in the interior parts of the country, and we could call the Kirana shops its backbone. The recent past has witnessed the growth of modern retail shops and e-commerce, and they are posing challenges to Kiranas. However, Kirana stores continue to represent a large part of total consumer goods sales in India. Since the competition is intensifying, Kirana shops have to move upward in retail maturity instead of playing defensively. Kiranas offer distinct advantages to customers, and some strengths are unique to these shops. Through this study, researchers identified 'customer attachment' as a major differentiator for Kirana shops. A methodology for measuring the same was developed by employing due procedure. Also, the impact of sub-dimensions of customer attachment on intentions to purchase from Kirana shops was also confirmed. The study concludes that customers have a special bond with local Kirana stores in terms of their atmosphere and staff, positively impacting the purchase intent.


1 INTRODUCTION


The retail market is evolving rapidly. The changes in this sector are driven by multiple factors such as digitalization, emerging consumer needs, advancements in supply chain models, etc. In India, the government has been gradually liberalizing the retail sector for foreign direct investments, which is also a reason for the ongoing transformation in this sector (Bagaria & Santra, 2014). Kirana shops are the basic level store format in India, which are numerous and present in every town class as well as rural parts of the country. In other words, Kiranas are the small shops (Mom and Pop Shops) that contribute to the majority of India's \$932 billion retail market (CB Insights, 2022). They can also be described as traditional grocery retailers or general stores. According to estimates, there are more than 12 million Kirana shops in India (Malhotra, et al., 2022). While there have been discussions about the future dominance of large organized retailers and e-

commerce in the Indian retail market, Kiranas continue to contribute more than 75% of India's consumer goods sales. That being said, with the growth of modern retail formats, the share of these small mom-and-pop shops has reduced over time. This is a trend observed in other developed economies as well (CB Insights, 2022).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Kirana stores played a vital role. Approximately 90% of fast-moving consumer goods sales in India occur through them, engaging 8% of India's labor force and contributing 10% to the gross domestic product (CB Insights, 2022). This underscores the economic importance of Kirana shops, ensuring better income distribution and economic equality. In the local neighborhood, the crucial role played by Kirana shops during the Covid-19 pandemic highlights customer dependency on these stores to meet their daily requirements. However, the need to upgrade or modernize Kirana shops persists. Large retail companies like Amazon, Reliance, etc., and

^a <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5308-9473>

^b <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7617-3280>

^c <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9641-8326>

renowned startups backed by top-tier investors are attempting to onboard or form tie-ups with Kiranas. Consequently, fast-moving consumer goods companies are closely monitoring the actions of these large retailers and seeking to partner with them through strategic alliances, acquisitions, collaborations, etc., to secure their space in Kirana shops (CB Insights, 2022).

1.1 Small Is Big, How to Make It Bigger?

Kirana shops, despite being unorganized, play a vital role in the social and economic ecosystem of India. Typically owned and managed by lower or middle-income groups in society, the sustainability of these shops is crucial for social equilibrium. These small shops conduct a significant volume of business. With the establishment of large retail chains and the rise of online commerce in India, many researchers suggested that Mom and Pop shops should integrate with large online retailers for their survival. However, it is essential to approach this situation from the perspective of Kiranas. Are the 12 million-plus Indian Kirana shops in a vulnerable position with the entry of organized retailers and e-commerce? Or is it a necessity for e-commerce giants to onboard Kirana shops for their expansion and growth? In this study, researchers aim to answer these questions through the lens of Kirana shops. The objective of this study is to identify the unique strengths and differentiators of Kirana stores in India.

1.2 The Changing Paradigm

One change observed in the recent past is that, due to the Corona pandemic, people engaged in pantry loading and bulk buying products, resulting in the scarcity of national brands in stores. Consumers were consequently forced to purchase private label brands. Throughout this process, consumers recognized that private label brands are economical, and due to their ready availability, they continued to favor these brands. This shift also helped consumers alleviate financial stress during the unpredictable Covid-19 period (Palea, A., 2020).

Availability challenges led to brand switching, and in the United States of America, approximately 75% of consumers explored new brands or products due to the unavailability of their regular choices (Charm, T. et al., 2020). Additionally, e-grocery has emerged as a new trend. During the Covid-19 days, many consumers started buying groceries from online channels, and they intend to continue this practice

even after returning to normalcy (TjonPianGi and Spielvogel, 2021). Moreover, with the Covid-19 pandemic, the use of digital payments and digital wallets has increased, and customers have experienced the convenience of such transactions. This positive experience has led them to continue embracing cashless transactions (Talwar, et al., 2020).

It is a fact that Covid-19 has transformed the mode of purchasing for consumers. The changes in consumer buying behaviour can be summarized under three points:

In urban domiciles, local retailers began delivering basic grocery items to customers' homes due to lockdowns, people in quarantine, etc. Customers felt more secure, and they realized the value of the local ecosystem (Charm, T. et al., 2020).

Growth of private label brands can be attributed to two reasons:

In developed and emerging markets, customers felt insecure about their future income streams, prompting a shift towards cost-effective products and services.

During the lockdown, due to the shortage of national brands, customers tried private label brands and discovered that they are not inferior to the expensive national brands (Begley & McOuat, A., 2020).

Growth of online buying and digital payments - New customers are engaging in online purchases. Once they get used to it, they may continue the behaviour due to its convenience (Talwar, S. et al., 2020).

These changing trends are creating a more favourable situation for the growth of e-commerce. Studies confirm synergies between Kirana and e-commerce, suggesting the integration of these small shops into a large e-commerce ecosystem, benefiting both (Sinha, P. K., Gokhale, S., & Rawal, S., 2015). Onboarding the unorganized 12 million retailers could enhance the efficiency of the e-commerce giants' supply chains. However, a potential threat is the consolidation of the Indian retail industry into a few hands. For this reason, instead of solely focusing on synergies between e-commerce and Kiranas, efforts should be directed towards identifying areas where Kiranas can improve to meet future customer expectations and become more competitive.

There are several factors that are considered specific to Kirana stores such as ease of access, the ability to sell the most locally relevant assortment of goods, free delivery, and credit facilities for regular customers etc. (The Hindu Business Line, 2021). While these capabilities can be developed by other retail formats, one unique strength that Kirana shops

possess, which is challenging for other retail formats to replicate, is the 'personal connect.'

Nowadays, discussions mainly revolve around automation, artificial intelligence, robotics, chatbots, etc., and implementing these technological enablers in our businesses can lead to a reduction in operating costs. However, the missing element in this transformation is the 'Personal Connect.' The 'Human Connect' is anticipated to become rare and costly in the coming years. Numerous examples illustrate that brands focusing on emotions in their communication experienced increased customer response and sales growth, particularly among millennials (Magids, S., Zorfas, A., & Leemon, D. 2015). Looking ahead, the cost of a personal connection is expected to be much higher compared to a technology-enabled connection. For instance, when a customer service executive handles a customer query, the communication involved is likely to be more costly than handling the query through a chatbot. As the cost of human connection rises, its uniqueness and value will also increase. This personal connection could serve as a differentiator for Kirana shops, as most of these shops are managed by the shop owner, who is a familiar face for the customer. In this study, researchers aim to understand the impact of human connections in Kirana shops.

1.3 Need for a Dedicated Study Around Customer Attachment with Kirana Shops

A notion extensively deliberated by both practitioners and academicians revolves around the synergies between Kirana shops and e-commerce. The discussion often centers on how these two formats can complement each other. However, a crucial aspect lacking in these studies is whether, when these two formats come together, both will derive the same level of benefits in the short and long term. Initial assessments suggest that organized players may possess better negotiation power, potentially tipping decisions in their favor. Therefore, in addition to discussing synergies between Kiranas and e-commerce, it is equally important to consider how Kiranas can compete with e-commerce. This involves exploring the competencies that these small mom-and-pop shops should possess.

Attachment is one element that can provide a differentiated advantage to Kiranas. However, there should be data-based evidence of this attachment, and currently, this area of study is lacking. Confirming the level of attachment with Kirana shops will help to

determine whether attachment can be a differentiator for these small retail shops.

Many studies have validated that affordability and availability are the key differentiators of Kirana shops (Atul, K., & Sanjoy, R., 2013; The Hindu Business Line, 2021). However, these advantages can potentially be eroded, as any other retail format can develop them by strategically investing in these areas. Simultaneously, the social and personal connection that Kirana shops have with their customers could provide them with a distinct advantage. In the case of modern retail and e-commerce formats, the personal connection is often absent. A dedicated study on customer attachment to Kirana shops can offer more insights into the relationship customers have with these retail shops. Furthermore, depending on the level of customer attachment, these mom-and-pop shops can formulate strategies and enhance core competencies to remain relevant in the evolving retail environment.

2 MATERIALS AND METHODS

Qualitative methods were employed in the initial phase of the study. Employing an ethnographic approach, the researchers visited various Kirana shops to observe the interactions between customers and various elements within the stores, including employees, other customers, and the shop owner. This approach was instrumental in confirming the high and noticeable level of interaction that customers have with different aspects of the store. Based on these observations, the researchers identified important benefits and value additions that Kirana stores offer to their customers, including comfort, convenience, trust, credit, product knowledge, product recommendations, and, most importantly, the interaction between customers and other individuals present in the store. These interactions can be hypothesized to form a robust emotional connection between the customer and the Kirana shop, potentially materializing in the form of an attachment to the shop. In the second phase of the study, researchers collected primary data and utilized Exploratory Factor Analysis, Confirmatory Factor Analysis, and regression methods to confirm customer attachment with the Kiranas.

2.1 Item Generation

As discussed in the previous section, researchers identified 'Attachment' as a key potential differentiator of the Kirana shops. The objective of

this study was to confirm the same. However, no standard scale was available in the existing literature to measure these factors. Therefore, it was decided to develop a scale adopted from similar studies and qualify the items. Most of the 'Attachment factors' were adopted from Brocato, E. D., Baker, J., & Voorhees, C. M. (2015). It was also important to review the questionnaire for question wording, ease of understanding, and other inconsistencies. Based on feedback from colleagues who are experts in the field of consumer research, some of the items were rephrased to make them more relevant. Researchers included the following factors as the lead indicators of attachment.

2.1.1 Nostalgia

Nostalgia is defined as a subset of autobiographical memories involving reflections on past objects, persons, or experiences that are positive (Hirsch 1992). These memories connect an individual's life path to the places in which these experiences occur and are primarily concerned with a need for attachment (Braun-LaTour et al. 2007). Since nostalgia involves recollecting past incidents and events in an individual's life, if a customer has nostalgic feelings about Kirana shops, it indicates a certain level of attachment with the store.

2.1.2 Place Dependence

Place dependence is defined as an individual's evaluation of the environment in terms of its functionality in satisfying unfulfilled needs (Backlund and Williams 2003). Stokols and Shumaker (1981) argue that the greater the number and range of needs met by a place, the more positive individuals' feelings will be toward that place. Therefore, researchers considered place dependence as a measure of attachment with the store.

2.1.3 Social Bonds with Employees

A social bond with employees, while significant, is considered the least important driver of place attachment. However, service quality is a significant driver of place attachment (Brocato, E. D., Baker, J., & Voorhees, C. M., 2015). Since a bond with employees is an indicator of service quality, which, in turn, leads to place attachment, researchers included items to measure social bonds with employees.

2.1.4 Social Bonds with Customers

When retail store managers aim to create place attachment, focusing on improving the physical aspects of a location is not sufficient. They must consider the entire "place," including social elements that can enhance the strength of attachment customers feel toward a firm (Brocato, E. D., Baker, J., & Voorhees, C. M., 2015). While designing the physical environment may often be a focus for service firms, intentionally designing the social experience, involving both employees and other customers, may represent a new perspective for many firms (Brocato, E. D., Baker, J., & Voorhees, C. M., 2015). The overall social connection happening at a store may lead to attachment with that shop, and if this holds true, Kirana shops can leverage it the most because the customers of Kirana shops are mostly from the same locality. However, space constraints for better social interactions may be a bottleneck for Kiranas.

2.1.5 Strength of Social Attachment

Place attachment differs from attachments to tangible goods brands because it encompasses social relationships that can form within a place. To enhance social bonds, which are crucial to the strength of social attachment, a shift in service orientation may be necessary (Brocato, E. D., Baker, J., & Voorhees, C. M., 2015). In atmosphere-dominant service firms, where applicable, managers should strive to encourage interaction between customers. One way to achieve this may be to create events in which customers participate together in activities (Brocato, E. D., Baker, J., & Voorhees, C. M., 2015). Although Kirana shops may not be classified as atmosphere-dominant service firms, if social connection plays a role in creating attachment with a store, it needs to be considered for Kiranas as well, even if its impact is relatively low in the case of these mom-and-pop shops.

2.1.6 Place attachment

In addition to social attachment, place attachment incorporates the feeling of connection to the physical dimensions of places (Hidalgo and Hernandez 2002). The place attachment concept serves as a theoretical foundation to evaluate critical aspects of place because it is rooted in individuals' cumulative experiences with both the physical and social aspects of an environment, resulting in a strong emotional bond with that place (Low and Altman 1992; Relph 1985; Tuan 1990, 1997). Therefore, place attachment

was also included to understand the overall customer attachment to Kirana shops.

2.2 Scale Development

A pilot survey was initially conducted with the factors of 'Attachment' mentioned above. Later, the items were consolidated based on exploratory factor analysis (EFA), and a scale for the final consumer survey was established.

Initially, the researchers included items to measure Social Bonds with Customers, Strength of Social Attachment, and Place Attachment. However, in EFA, all these items loaded under the same factor, providing insight to the researchers that the customer's overall experience, including the place, people involved, and other environmental factors of the store, is creating an impact on attachment. Therefore, researchers merged these three factors into one and named it 'Social Connect.'

The items under four independent variables qualified as per the EFA are Nostalgia (NS), Place Dependence (PD), Social Bond with Employees (BE), and Social Connect (SC). The final survey was conducted using the qualified items, and regression analysis was performed to assess the impact of the independent variables on the dependent variable, which is Purchase Intent (PI). A total of 307 samples were collected during the final survey.

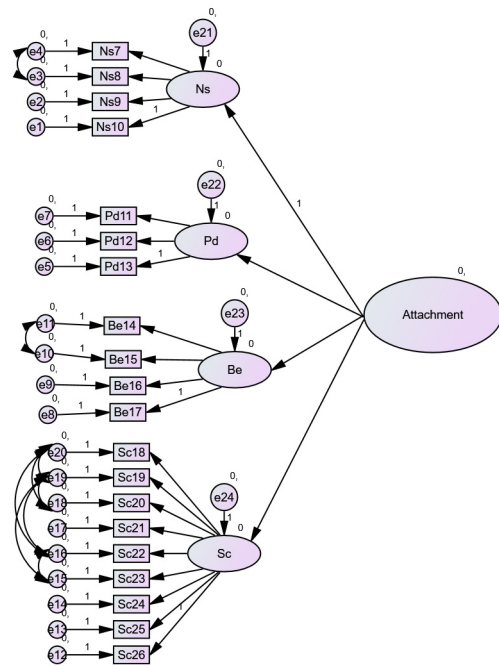


Figure 1: Confirmatory factor analysis for developing Second order construct

2.3 Model Development

In this study, researchers developed a model that links Nostalgia, Place Dependence, Social Bonds with Employees, and Social Connect to 'Attachment'. The Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) diagram in Figure 1 illustrates the relationships between these variables.

The RMSEA results of the model fall within the acceptable range (RMSEA is 0.071). Researchers have confirmed the validity of the model, as the Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) results are consistent and qualifying.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

While this study primarily focuses on customer attachment, it also encompasses other factors that support Kirana shops. Analysis of the primary data confirms that customer attachment with Kirana shops can indeed enhance purchase intent.

3.1 Viewing Kirana Shops Through the Lens of Attachment Theory

Psychiatrist and psychoanalyst John Bowlby formulated the attachment theory, explaining the enduring psychological connectedness between humans, initially focusing on young children but later extending to attachment in adults. This theory considers factors such as romantic and sexual attraction, peer relationships at all ages, and responses to the care needs of the sick, elderly, or infants (Suomi, S. J., 1995). Understanding the extent to which attachment theory can impact retailing, especially in the socio-economic context of developing countries, is crucial. If it does have an impact, Kirana shops could leverage it the most, potentially becoming a core strength that sets them apart.

Table 1: CFA Results of the model

Model	RMSEA	LO 90	HI 90	PCLOSE
Default model	.071	.062	.079	.000
Independence model	.306	.299	.313	.000

Thomas, T. C et al., (2020) applied social practice theory in their research, which conceptualizes a series

of practices guided by culture and performed individually or collectively. Such social practices may lead to stronger bonding between individuals or social groups, and customers may develop such bonding with their local Kirana shop. Identifying the level of this attachment is essential to confirm whether customer attachment is a key differentiator for Kiranas.

In this study, researchers validated the level of customer attachment to the Kirana shop through primary data. Different factors of attachment were identified and validated through quantitative techniques. The analysis of primary data confirms the level of influence of attachment factors - Nostalgia (NS), Place Dependence (PD), Social Bond with Employees (BE), and Social Connect (SC) on the dependent variable Purchase Intent (PI).

In Table 2, regression analysis confirms a 58.1% (R Square .581) change in purchase intent that can be accounted for by the independent variables of attachment.

Table 2: Regression Model Summary

Model Summary				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.762 ^a	.581	.576	.5544256

a. Predictors: (Constant), SC, PD, NS, BE

The model fit is confirmed by the ANOVA in Table 3, with a significance level (sig) of .000, which is well within the acceptable range (less than the acceptable level of .05). Additionally, the F value of 104.750 indicates that the model is considered good.

Table 3: ANOVA results

ANOVA ^a						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	128.795	4	32.199	104.750	.000 ^b
	Residual	92.831	302	.307		
	Total	221.626	306			

a. Dependent Variable: PI
b. Predictors: (Constant), SC, PD, NS, BE

Upon reviewing the significance level of each independent variable, as shown in Table 4, it is

confirmed that Nostalgia is an independent variable that does not fall within the level of significance (Sig. .249). However, all other independent variables' significance levels fall within the acceptable range. This suggests that Nostalgia has no significant impact on the Purchase Intent.

Table 4: Coefficients of variables

Coefficients ^a						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error			
1	(Constant)	1.322	.157		8.399	.000
	NS	-.071	.061	-.070	-1.154	.249
	PD	.285	.057	.305	5.002	.000
	BE	.311	.063	.348	4.927	.000
	SC	.196	.048	.246	4.115	.000

a. Dependent Variable: PI

3.1.1 Nostalgia

Kirana shop customers are typically local, and there is often a familiarity between the shop owner and customers. The primary study included statements to assess the level of nostalgia customers have with the Kirana shop and its correlation with Purchase Intent. Data analysis indicates that nostalgia is not impacting purchase intent (Sig. value is .249, which is higher than >0.05). While customers may have nostalgic memories associated with Kirana shops, it does not necessarily translate into purchase intention. When making purchasing decisions, customers tend to be practical and look for clear advantages. Nostalgia alone is not powerful enough to influence customers' purchase decisions.

3.1.2 Place Dependence

Place dependence explains the importance of the Kirana shop to customers in comparison to other store formats (Goswami, P., & Mishra, M. S., 2009). Customers endorse that they experience greater satisfaction when purchasing grocery items from Kirana shops, and they consider Kirana shops the best among all available grocery retail formats to patronize. Many factors may contribute to this place

dependence, including the proximity of the store, the credibility of the shopkeeper, and the quality of products. The high place dependence and customers' willingness to patronize Kirana shops indicate its strength, which may be unique. Primary data analysis confirms that place dependence impacts purchase intent (Sig. value is .000, which is lower than <0.05).

3.1.3 Social Bond with Employees

In the case of modern retail and e-commerce formats, there is often a lack of personal connection. Automation addresses various customer issues, and large retail formats are adopting new customer handling and grievance management solutions through technology. However, this shift may result in customers missing personal connections. The fundamental strength of Kirana shops lies in the personal connections the shop staff have with the customers. Primary data analysis indicates that the customer bond with the store staff has a strong correlation with purchase intent (Sig. value is .000, which is lower than <0.05).

3.1.4 Social Connect

Social connect reflects the customer bonding with the store atmosphere, elements of the store, and the people working there. Customer responses indicate a clear sense of belongingness with the store, and customers feel that the store staff and other customers visiting the store are like them (Johnson et al., 2015). The social element emerges as a significant factor, positioning Kirana shops as part of the social environment. In contrast to other retail shops establishing their identity as a 'business entity,' the identity of Kirana shops is perceived as 'more of an integral part of the society.' Therefore, maintaining this identity is crucial for Kirana shops to differentiate themselves from others. Based on the primary data analysis, researchers confirm that 'Social Connect' can positively influence Purchase Intent (Sig. value is .000, which is lower than <0.05).

When researchers inquired about the frequency of their visits to Kirana shops, 83% of the customers responded that they visit nearby Kirana shops 1 to 3 times a week, while 17% of the respondents visit more than 3 times a week. This indicates that Kirana shops are part of the daily activity of most customers in India.

All the factors mentioned above reflect the level of customer attachment to Kirana shops. The crucial point here is that these factors of customer attachment are leading to purchase intent. This implies that these mom-and-pop shops can leverage customer bonding

to grow their business. However, many Kirana shop owners may not be aware of their strength or may not realize it. It is important to create awareness about the strength of Kirana shops so that this community of small retailers will be better equipped to harness their strength for business growth.

4 CONCLUSION

Understanding customer attachment begins with identifying different touchpoints in the customer journey. In this study, researchers mapped various customer touchpoints and attempted to measure the level of attachment customers have with different store elements and people. The key insight from the primary data analysis is that customers have a strong personal attachment to the people working in the Kirana shop, as well as to the place itself. This attachment leads to more purchases. Importantly, Kirana shops occupy a unique position in the social system, and they should strive to maintain it as their unique selling proposition.

It is challenging for any other retail store format to achieve this position by replicating the elements of Kirana shops, mainly because one major factor is that the shop owner is typically from the society it serves. Indian Kirana shop owners may not be forward-looking in terms of a business growth roadmap, and they might not be fully aware of their strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, supporting Kirana shops to strengthen their business by leveraging the customer attachment factor is crucial.

This research is unique in that it brings clarity to a key strength of Kirana shops, which is 'Attachment.' This understanding can help the Kirana shop community focus on its strength and leverage it. At the same time, this study leaves an opportunity for new researchers to explore how Kirana shops can further leverage 'Attachment' to grow their businesses.

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APPENDIX

Qualified items are given below:

Variable	Items
Nostalgia	Ns7: Visiting the Kirana Shop makes me feel sentimental or nostalgic
	Ns8: The Kirana shop reminds me of important events in my life.
	Ns9: When I think about the Kirana shop I visit regularly, I am reminded about the good things that have happened in my life.
	Ns10: When I am at the Kirana shop, I reminisce about good events from my past.
Place dependence	Pd11: I get more satisfaction going to the Kirana Shop than I get from any other shop
	Pd12: No other shop provides the type of experience I have at the Kirana Shop
	Pd13: For me the Kirana shop is the best of all available grocery retail formats to patronize
Social Bonds with employees	Be14: I feel a social connection with the Kirana shop owner and the staff
	Be15: I have a bond with the owner and the staff of the Kirana shop I visit
	Be16: I am not willing to consider any other option for purchasing because of the relationship I have with the Kirana shop
	Be17: The relationship that I have with the owner and the staff of the Kirana shop is important to me.

Social Connect	Sc18: I am not willing to go to another Kirana Shop because of the relationship I have with the customers visiting this Kirana shop
	Sc19: I have a special relationship with the customers that visit the Kirana Shop
	Sc20: I can't imagine living without the people that come to the Kirana Shop
	Sc21: I feel better if I am not away from the people in the Kirana shop for long period of time
	Sc22: If the people in the Kirana shop were permanently gone from my life, I'd be upset
	Sc23: Never being able to interact with the people visiting the Kirana shop would be distressing to me
	Sc24: I really miss the Kirana shop I visit when I am away for long period
	Sc25: The Kirana shop reminds me of memories and experiences.
	Sc26: I can't imagine living without the Kirana shop I visit

