



## ATTRIBUTES THAT INFLUENCE IN THE PERCEPTION OF FUEL STATION CUSTOMERS 'SATISFACTION: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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### SUMMARY

This work aimed to identify the main attributes concerning the satisfaction of gas station customers in the municipality of Santa Cruz do Sul, in the state of Rio Grande do Sul. In a modern and globalized world, the customer is increasingly valued and disputed in the segment, because the competition is increasingly fierce, a fact, regardless of its geographic location. For that, the methodology used in the developed research was a qualitative exploratory study, to identify the attributes that influence the process of choosing and evaluating the quality of customers. In order to identify positive and negative aspects through interviews, using the critical incident technique. The survey was carried out with 100 clients of the service stations, using the content analysis technique in the analysis of the interviews. The final result of the incidents was a number of 750 incidents, which after analyzed generate a list of 9 attributes in the macro dimensions that influence customers in the option of the gas station. The attributes identified in the research may assist and contribute to future research in the segment.

**Key words:** Satisfaction. Marketing. Loyalty. Client.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In an environment totally marked by competition and competitiveness, customer satisfaction is increasingly essential to continue shopping at a gas station. Satisfaction is closely related to the perceived attributes, considered important to customers. For such organizations to remain in the market, they must have quality in their services offered. Thus, it is understood that “quality is the totality of the attributes and characteristics of a product or service that affect its ability to satisfy stated needs” (KOTLER, 2000, p. 79).

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Therefore, in search of meeting the needs of their consumers, companies in the gas station segment are beginning to offer services in addition to fuel supply. This new retail concept has brought more people traffic to the service stations, providing greater economies of scale for sector administrators and time savings for their customers. The current market, in which companies compete, presents changes that result from the rapid integration of new technologies, information, systems and strategies; products circulate and compete for the market (NUNES; GOMES, 2005; COELHO, 2000). The banners that operated and came to operate in the retail fuel trade, in the face of the huge competition arising from the new market rules imposed by the Petroleum Law ANP - National Agency of Petroleum, Natural Gas and Biofuels, had to adapt and adapt to the new models free competition and act within new legal rules of market activity.

With globalization, competitiveness between companies is increasingly necessary to adjust to the needs and demands of the market, in addition to being indispensable for the growth of a company. Thus, it is extremely important that fuel resale companies emphasize the service and the provision of quality services, and meeting the needs of consumers is essential for the growth of organizations (NEVES; COSTA, 2008). Seen like this, the attributes presented by the customers demonstrated which are the essential aspects in the consumer decision process. According to Anderson, Fornell and Lehmann (1994), the attributes represent the consumer's judgment about the excellence or superiority in the delivery of a product and / or service.

According to Froeming (2001, p. 60), "knowing the important attributes in the customer's evaluation is fundamental to provide superior quality to the services, as they indicate the fundamental points in the delivery of the service that can be the target of improvement improvement".

The quality perceived by the customer and / or consumer is important for the organization to identify whether its efforts are satisfying the customer. Kotler and Keller (2012) define that satisfaction is the feeling that an individual has when analyzing the understood performance of a product and / or service, comparing it with their expectations. According to Mello Moyano (2015), consumer satisfaction is the philosophy that companies must meet the needs and desires of consumers, in order to preserve or improve the well-being of customers.

In view of the above, the objective of this article is to identify the main attributes that influence gas station consumers in the municipality of Santa Cruz do Sul, in the state of Rio

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Grande do Sul. In the next chapter, the bibliographic review is presented, describing the topics covered, namely: consumer satisfaction concept, satisfaction measurement, relationship marketing and loyalty. Chapter 3 presents the methodology used to carry out the research, being a qualitative research of an exploratory nature, using the critical incident technique. Chapter 4 presents an analysis of the results and discussions. Finally, Chapter 5 presents the final considerations.

## **2 BIBLIOGRAPHIC REVIEW**

### **2.1 Consumer Satisfaction**

The topic of consumer satisfaction is explored both in the academic context and in the negotiation practices of professionals. Consumer satisfaction is defined as “the consumer's response to an assessment of the perceived discrepancy between expectations and performance after consuming a product / service” (MUNIZ; SILVA; MAFFEZZOLLI, 2014, p. 95).

According to Prado and Santos (2004) and Angnes (2012), with so many options to choose between products and / or services, companies need to use various tools to captivate customers. To achieve a positive level of satisfaction, they need to work and manage their resources, which are more and more limited, in the best possible way. It is also necessary to have a plan to achieve your results. Thus, it is possible to offer the best service, product and / or services in the market, focusing on a good relationship with the customer, seeking to understand him and satisfying his needs.

As presented by the authors Muniz, Silva and Maffezzolli (2014), it is understood that satisfaction triggers a series of evaluations, thus being able to assist in the consumer's choice for a certain product and / or service. It is reinforced that the satisfied individuals, most of them, in addition to valuing their attributes in the product, also maintain a feeling of reward about it and there is a description in the literature of the link between satisfaction and loyalty (MUNIZ; SILVA; MAFFEZZOLLI, 2014).

Rossi and Slongo (1997) conceptualize satisfaction through two dimensions: satisfaction related to a specific transaction and accumulated satisfaction. Regarding the difference between them, they mention that the unique experience of a product is quite different from the accumulated one, being this influenced by the consumption experiences,

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already experienced at other times. The authors point out that the consumer learns from his consumption experiences about a certain product.

According to this, Berry and Parasuraman (1992) cited by Mello Moyano (2015), reinforce that the consumer expectation with the purchase made occurs in two levels: desired level and adequate level. The expected state of service is an adjustment between what can be and what should be. The appropriate level of service, on the other hand, is what the customer understands may occur, more precisely, the service provided. It is noteworthy that between the situations of the two levels there is a zone of tolerance, which is the execution of the service, when the customer considers it to be successfully performed.

### **2.2 Consumer Satisfaction Measures**

The importance of measuring customer satisfaction comes from the need for organizations to stand out in the face of competition, which is quite fierce. Some differentials that lead customers to prioritize one establishment over another are diverse and include mainly quality, price and service. Then, the need arises for the company to know its positive and negative points, so as to outline improvement strategies. These measurements can be performed using the satisfaction survey (SEBRAE, 2015).

Currently, consumer satisfaction is seen as an important assessment for companies, based on surveys that relate consumer satisfaction to their overall performance. Thus, the measurement of satisfaction, used as a mechanism for verifying the company's overall performance, whether aimed at profit or not, has become essential given the competitiveness and greater demand of consumers (MARCHETTI; PRADO, 2001).

In this sense, satisfaction has become an organizational goal (BATESON; HOFFMAN, 2001), since satisfied customers are less likely to change brands, tend to promote positive word of mouth and create an emotional bond with the company. Thus, business success depends directly on the satisfaction of its consumers, (COSTA; FERREIRA, 2009). The main argument is that satisfied customers tend to remain customers, continuing their relationship with the organization both now and in the future. Seen like this, relationship marketing is one of the tools to link credibility, trust and satisfaction, starting from both sides, that is, from the organization to the customer and from the customer to the organization (JONES; TAYLOR, 2007).

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## 2.3 Quality in Retail Services

The higher the quality of service provision, the more customer satisfaction is achieved, thus increasing the possibility of customer loyalty and loyalty to the organization (COSTA; FERREIRA, 2009). Quality is something more and more constant in business relationships, satisfying a need, solving a problem or maximizing value to a customer or other people is essential to continue operating in the market. For example, it is necessary to target differentiated treatment to customers in the branch of gas stations, so that they do not seek another supplier, as this is an increasingly competitive market, but with enormous potential for opportunities, as it offers a basic necessity.

According to Gianesi and Corrêa (1994), the assessment of service quality by the customer can occur at any time during this process and will hardly be carried out before purchase. The service is evaluated by the customer according to his expectations and his perception of the service. It is then understood that the result of a service provided will depend on who provides it, and can also be characterized by the particular attributes of the supplier. However, there are services that the result will depend on the customer's need and desire, being, therefore, personalized and offering identical benefits to any customer, such as at gas stations.

In order to have an understanding of activities that involve the quality of service provision, it is necessary to understand the definition of services. Zeithaml and Bitner (2000, p. 45), define services as "acts, processes and performances, including also all economic activities whose product is not physical or built". According to Kotler and Armstrong (2003), services are defined as an intangible act, which one person can offer to another and which does not result in the possession of even one good.

As for Las Casas (2010, p. 284) "services can be considered as acts, actions and performance", what can change is only the degree of service provision that is included with the product sold. Because the services provided are unique, after doing so, you can leave the customer satisfied or dissatisfied.

According to Kotler and Keller (2006), there are four important characteristics in services: intangibility, inseparability, variability and perishability. These characteristics are defined as follows: a) intangibility: they cannot be seen, tasted, felt, heard or smelled before being purchased; b) Inseparability: they are produced and consumed simultaneously; c)

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variability: they are highly variable, as they depend on who executes them and where they are provided; d) perishability: refers to the impossibility of services being stored.

### 2.4 Relationship Marketing

Relationship marketing identifies opportunities in the relationship between the service provider and / or product and the customer, seeking customer retention benefits, cost reduction and higher profits, which can generate greater profitability for the organization (POSER, 2005; BERRY; PARASURAMAN, 1991).

The concept of relationship marketing is not new, appearing in the literature with Berry and Parasuraman (2001), who recognizes customer loyalty as a way to achieve greater competitiveness of companies and greater customer satisfaction. In addition, one of the advantages that relationship marketing brings is the positioning that the company achieves in the customers' minds, which can become a competitive differential in favor of the company. Kotler and Keller (2006) define positioning as the action of designing the product and the image of the company to occupy a different place in the mind of the target audience, positioning the brand in the minds of consumers in order to maximize the company's potential advantage.

There are several issues that a marketing action can trigger and, therefore, it is perceived that relationship marketing becomes appropriate, since it has a strategic vision, of positioning the company and requires the relationship with other organizations (POSER, 2005; MARCHETTI; PRADO, 2004).

It is observed that the products displayed by the different companies are very similar and are surrounded by services, in order to gather value for the customer and obtain their preference. It is increasingly seen that companies are oriented towards services, contributing to the importance of relationship marketing, even if this direction is not able to ensure the effectiveness of their provision (MORGAN; HUNT, 1994).

Relationships are at the heart of human behavior, because people need to interact with others. Researching relationships and applying this knowledge means improving the company and also the individual responsible for management. (GORDON, 1999). Part of the knowledge in relationship marketing occurred in the areas of Sociology and Psychology. The relationship marketing theory has influences from the information technology and services sector. E-commerce brings tools such as CRM (Customer Relationship Management),

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callcenter, loyalty projects, customers' club and information projects to solve relationship problems (GUMMESSON, 1987).

In general terms, what can be observed is that relationship marketing has been studied and conceptualized since the 1980s. However, with technological and market changes and, above all, changes in consumer behavior, these concepts are constantly updated, in order to better approach the reality of the theme (BERRY; PARASURAMAN, 2001).

Mckenna (1993) lists some fundamentals or necessary prerequisites for consumer satisfaction and closer relationships, such as quality offered in the main service, care in market segmentation, continuous monitoring of the relationship, internal marketing, specialized service, communication, customization and organizational structure. However, Mckenna (1993) reinforces that the involvement of the entire company is fundamental, since relationship marketing is a philosophy that must migrate throughout the company, which requires an organizational culture directed towards the relationship.

### **2.5 Loyalty**

When satisfied customers are considered loyal customers, there is a possibility of misunderstanding in the understanding of people and organizations. In a survey conducted by Reichheld (1993), it was found that between 65% to 85% of customers who switched suppliers claimed to be satisfied with the old supplier. Thus, even though satisfaction may not be understood as the great basis of loyalty, after loyalty is established, it is quite difficult for its maintenance to continue to develop without satisfaction (Oliver, 1999).

Increasingly, researchers in the field are showing interest in components aligned with consumer loyalty. This importance in relation to consumer loyalty is closely linked to competition, as the tools to captivate consumers do not come from all organizations in a healthy way. It is also noted that keeping current customers requires less investment by organizations than winning new customers (SCHIFFMAN; KANUK, 2000).

Schiffman and Kanuk (2000) also emphasize that loyal customers to the brand mean to the organization a certainty regarding participation in the constant and growing market, representing significant importance of intangible assets in the purchase price of a company. The author states that loyal customers may have higher expenses with the company than non-loyal customers, which may be related to the times when the purchase of certain products becomes routine.

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For Schiffman and Kanuk (2000), customer loyalty is a consequence of the organization's profitability. According to them, to assess how loyal the customer is to the organization, it is measured how much the organization is recommended by its customers, since loyal customers have the possibility to bring more customers, often considering the company as its own good.

According to Veloso (2003), loyalty can be presented in two ways, the first by the consumer's feeling about the brand, addressing the consumer's perception and emotional relationship with the brand and the second by the consumer relationship related to the brand, that is that is, to purchase the product again over a period of time.

Some authors, such as Parasuraman (1997) address the importance of retaining the client and the impact on the organization's gain when this retention is achieved. According to the author, customer retention is one of the foundations for building customer relationships. Using the appropriate tools for retention is a task that can present great difficulties, noting the differential of the organization in the competitive capacity to retain customers.

In order to retain customers, keeping them loyal to the company, some institutions end up diversifying their loyalty methods. It can be cited as a method of customer loyalty, the customer loyalty program shows itself as a value to be considered as organizations use such tools (BATESON; HOFFMAN, 2001).

### **3 METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES**

Marconi and Lakatos (1999, p. 32) explain that "the methods and techniques to be used in scientific research can be selected from the proposition of the problem, the formulation of the hypotheses and the delimitation of the universe or the sample". In the present study, the researchers had as a premise to identify the most important and relevant variables for consumer satisfaction and apply a technique to measure it.

The method used in the present research was a qualitative exploratory study and also the use of the critical incident technique. According to Gil (2008), exploratory research aims to provide greater familiarity with the problem. It may involve bibliographic surveys and interviews with people experienced in the researched problem.

Among the techniques available for exploratory studies, we used the critical incident technique, based on the strategic analysis proposal carried out by Mello Moyano (2015), based on the identification of the dimensions that are used by consumers to evaluate the gas



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stations located in the municipality of Santa Cruz do Sul, in the state of Rio Grande do Sul. The survey of critical incidents took place through reports of positive and negative experiences experienced by customers.

The critical incident technique was developed by Flanagan in 1947 at the American Institute for Research, where it was used to determine critical requirements for the work of pilots, scientists, among others (FLANAGAN, 1954). The author described the technique as a set of procedures used to collect observations of human behavior, which would be used to solve problems and generate psychological theories. The technique can be extended to understand human behavior to solve problems and the needs of a system. One incident refers to:

Any observable human activity, which is sufficiently complete in itself to allow inferences and predictions [...] and, to be 'critical', the incident must occur in a situation where the objective or intention of the act is clear to the observer, and where its consequences are sufficiently defined to leave little doubt as to its effects (FLANAGAN, 1954, p. 327).

According to Mello Moyano (2015), who researched techniques for identifying consumer expectations, the critical incident technique is very relevant to identify attributes related to the customer's point of view. The author stresses that the method is not suitable for inexperienced consumers, which is why only gas station customers will be used in the research.

The research aims to generate a list of satisfaction attributes from a sample of 100 individuals who refueled their vehicles at the stations in the municipality of Santa Cruz do Sul, in the state of Rio Grande do Sul. The sample was selected for convenience of the researcher and based on the heterogeneity of age and gender, the sample being composed of a small number of non-representative cases. For this reason, a sample of 100 people was chosen, a number well above the average recommended for studies of this nature. Data collection was carried out from November 22 to December 14, 2015 and was performed using an unstructured questionnaire, using the critical incident technique.

The research subjects were men and women over the age of 18 who used refueling services at gas stations. In the collection of critical incidents, the research was conducted from an unstructured questionnaire. Each respondent answered up to five positive points and five negative points.

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In the tabulation of the survey responses, a computational resource made using an Excel spreadsheet was used, to then identify the attributes and use the SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) system to complete the analysis and tabulation obtained data. The technique consisted of analyzing positive and negative incidents and grouping them by repetition or similarity in the meaning of the words written by the interviewees (content analysis). Being that for each group of similar incidents, it is an attribute. It is also noted that the correct identification of the attributes of choice at gas stations has an important function, for possible construction of a questionnaire in future descriptive research, in addition to providing through the presented attributes,

### 4 ANALYSIS OF RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From a sample of 100 gas station customers, located in the municipality of Santa Cruz do Sul, in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, the attributes that influence the perception of gas station customers' satisfaction were obtained. The sample profile consisted of 68% male respondents and 32% female respondents, aged between 18 and 65 years old.

Since each interviewee in the sample had the possibility to attribute to the critical incident up to five positive points and five negative points (or to be improved) based on their purchases of products and services, which are offered by the respective stations, a number of 445 positive incidents and 305 negative incidents, thus totaling 750 incidents for content analysis. All incidents were grouped by similarity or repetition of words, resulting in a list of attributes, grouped by macro dimensions. The final list, after content analysis, resulted in 9 attributes (Macro dimensions). The results found are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1 - Evaluation attributes at gas stations**

Number of Quotations	Frequency Quotations	Percentage of Interviewed	Attributes (Macro dimensions)
170	22.67%	90%	ATTENDANCE
129	17.20%	73%	PRODUCTS / SERVICES
107	14.27%	70%	PRICE / PAYMENT
95	12.67%	65%	LOCATION
80	10.67%	60%	PROMOTION
70	9.33%	51%	TEAM
61	8.13%	40%	PHYSICAL SPACE / STRUCTURE
20	2.66%	20%	ADVERTISING

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18	2.40%	18%	SCHEDULE
TOTAL 750	100%	487%	

Source: Prepared by the authors (2015)

Service appears as the first most important attribute, with a percentage of 22.67% of responses, and service is perceived by one of the factors of attraction and mainly of consumer loyalty. Quality service is something important for the client to feel that he was served with cordiality and efficiency, making him return to the organization. Reinforcing that after the customer feels satisfied, which is linked to their response to the service, it strengthens consumer confidence in relation to the products and services offered (MELLO MOYANO, 2015; PRADO; SANTOS, 2004; GUMMESSON, 1987).

Customer trust can be understood as the “expectations held by the consumer that the service provider is responsible and can be trusted in delivering their promises” (SIRDESHMUKH; SINGH; SABOL, 2002, p. 17). The service is aligned with relationship marketing and for Brambilla (2009) the function of relationship marketing is a strategy focused on helping companies in the good relationship with their customers, making them realize how special and important they are, aiming at loyalty. The premise of relational marketing, according to Brambilla (2008, p. 110), "consists of maintaining a profitable and loyal customer base".

The product and / or service attribute was mentioned by 17.20% of the respondents and represents the products and services offered by the organizations, being one of the relevant points for the interviewees. This fact is reinforced by Oliver (1997), who states that consumer satisfaction is aligned with the characteristics of a product and / or service that provide pleasure to consumption.

With regard to price, this attribute in the survey corresponds to a percentage of 14.27%, and for Hoffman and Bateson (2003), customers are more willing to pay higher prices if this reduces their level of perceived risk, both quality of service or characteristics of the product offered. Because “the final price, sometimes, is the last information revealed to the customer” (HOFFMAN; BATESON, 2003, p. 196). This reinforces that, despite being a routine purchase, when customers come to the organization, in addition to the price of a liter of fuel, they are attributing the services that are offered, as “they are weighing the benefits arising from the service in relation to their costs” (LOVELOCK; WRIGHT, 2004, p. 273).

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The location is one of the fundamental points for the success of a gas station, considered as an attribute in 12.67% of the answers. It is one of the attractions of ease to the customer, a point that stands out in one of the attributes. However, it is important to find a strategic point that is easily accessible to customers. Along these lines, Ghosh and Craig (1983) state that the location of each company, its location and access to it, are important variables for success, being related to the size, image, structure and level of service offered. The strategic location ends up transposing competitive advantages that the competition can hardly overcome, being the location of a gas station understood as a long-term investment.

It is shown that promotion is one of the attributes, which in percentage added up to 10.67% highlighted by customers, even more in the service segment, where the promotion in the liter of fuel is a strong tool to captivate consumers. In the opinion of Churchill and Peter (2005, p. 20), the element of promotion or communication “refers to how marketers inform, convince and remind customers about products and services”, thus observing that the item promotion is a very useful tool to captivate customers.

With regard to the team, 9.33% of customers understand that well-prepared gas station attendants are a result of customer satisfaction, as the perceived quality of the service is a measure of how much the level of service delivered corresponds to the customer's expectations (PARASURAMAN ; ZEITHAML; BERRY, 1985). Corroborate Kotler and Keller (2006), stating that training and developing people are imperative for organizational success. Another element that was widely mentioned by consumers was the quality of the product, which in Lobos' (1993) view is understood as the condition of perfection when preferring, the exact fulfillment of customer expectations.

Among the attributes reported by the customers, it is noted that the physical space / structure, in a percentage of 8.13% is one of the determining attributes to the customers of the service stations. Accordingly, in an organization its structure seeks to ensure facilities for the client, being also geared towards an environment in which employees feel free to carry out the work proposed to them, where the physical space is one of the main tools for this to happen. with an adequate security level. This occurs with a well-organized layout of machinery on its premises, keeping the environment clean and with a physical structure of the company suitable for work (CHIAVENATO, 2004).

Advertising is an attribute identified by 2.66% of those surveyed, being understood as a very relevant tool in the eyes of both customers and the organization. The advertisement introduces the product to society, emphasizing characteristics related to the product, using

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radio stations, newspapers, television or even the internet in the gas station segment. Advertising means the dissemination of messages through advertisements, in order to influence the public to consume in the organization. It is understood by Silva (1976) as a mass selling process technique, that is, “advertising is the commercial application of the art of human persuasion” (SILVA, 1976). Barbosa and Rabaça (2001) define advertising as a set of techniques for information and persuasion activities, designed to influence feelings,

In conclusion, the hourly attribute, presented by a percentage of 2.40%, has its relevance for the purchase of fuel at the service stations, and the service hours are understood by consumers with one of the points of great value.

### 5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The article proposed to identify the main attributes that are pertinent to the satisfaction of gas station customers, and that each day, changes happen more quickly. It is thus evident that organizations need to be prepared with an excellent product and / or service to market. Noting that more and more customers are audacious and asked for new discoveries that satisfy their needs and desires. In the attributes presented in the survey, it was highlighted that the interviewees emphasize the service, product and / or service, price and payment, location, promotion, team, space and structure, advertising and opening hours.

Considering that knowing the customers' needs and desires is essential for the success of the gas station trade segment, there is a need to captivate their customers, making them remain in the company.

Therefore, service stations need to offer more than a quality product, improve their services and carefully enrich their service skills, in order to be able to conduct a positive sale, making the customer feel well served and with their expected expectations achieved , or even in a degree of enchantment with what is offered. In order to achieve customer satisfaction, the challenge for each gas station organization is to discover the true needs of each customer.

Finally, it is understood that the work achieved the proposed objective, insofar as it demonstrated the dimensions of the evaluation of the attributes considered most relevant to gas station consumers. The results of this research can be used to continue research on the topic or to improve future research in the area. Emphasizing that, for future studies, it is recommended to compare the attributes obtained in this research with results from other studies involving stratified samples. It is also suggested a study of the influence of

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segmentation by type of gas stations, with such attributes of choice, using this research as a reference.

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