

**SWP 19/98 PERSONAL VALUES UNDERLYING WOMEN'S
PERCEPTIONS OF FASHION STORE IMAGES**

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AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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ABSTRACT

Retail store image has been shown to play an important role in store patronage, and it is widely accepted that psychological factors have a significant role in store image formation. Past research has often involved the measurement of tangible attributes, or links between store images and consumers' self-images. This study was undertaken to move to the next stage by exploring the link between perceived store image and the personal values which underlie behavioural choices. Fashion retailing was selected as an appropriate research domain because of the well established associations between clothing choice, personality, self concept, and personal values. Means-end theory and laddering methodology were employed in interviews with 30 female respondents. The hedonic values of 'enjoyment and happiness' and 'quality of life' were found to be the terminal values most sought by consumers in association with store image. These were linked through the consequence 'nice feeling' to the tangible attributes of 'price', 'quality' and reputation'. The study illustrates an application of means-end methodology in a retail environment, and the results provide a platform for fashion store image and positioning strategies. Suggestions for further research are made.

KEYWORDS

Means-end,

Store image,

Women's fashion

Values

Store image is a critical component in store choice and store loyalty (e.g. Lewis and Hawksley 1990; Doyle and Fenwick 1974; Stanley and Sewall 1976; Nevin and Houston 1980; Malhotra 1983, Arons, 1961; Osman, 1993). Many researchers subscribe to the view, originally proposed by Martineau (1958), and later Arons (1961), that store image is a complex combination of tangible and intangible, or functional and psychological attributes, (e.g. Lindquist, 1974-1975; Oxenfeldt, 1974-1975; Zimmer and Golden, 1988; Doyle and Fenwick, 1974-1975; Marks 1976; Keaveney and Hunt 1992; Dichter 1985a, 1985b). But operationalisation of this concept has proved difficult. Consequently, store image has frequently been defined as an attitude, or set of attitudes, based upon evaluation of salient store attributes. (Doyle and Fenwick, 1974-1975; James, Durand and Dreves 1976; Engel and Blackwell, 1982), and its measurement almost always involves the identification of a number of attributes which are assumed to collectively make up a store's image (Hirschman, Greenberg and Robinson, 1978; Keaveney and Hunt, 1992).

When researchers have studied the role played by psychological factors in forming store image the focus has mainly been on self-image, whereby consumers strive to move their real self-concept towards their ideal self by buying (e.g.) garments which they consider will enhance the attainment of their ideal self, or satisfy their real self and attain a desired role in life (Lewis and Hawksley, 1990; Martineau 1957; Sirgy, Samli, Bahn, and Varvoglish, 1989; Sirgy and Danes 1982; Evans 1993; Grubb and Grathwohl, 1967). Several attempts have been made to determine whether a 'matching' mechanism exists between a consumer's self image and store image (Weale, 1961; Doyle and Fenwick, 1974-1975). For instance Hirschman and Stampfl

(1980) suggest that consumers may match themselves with retail stores according to their perceptions of their own and of the stores' innovativeness.

The purpose of this study was to shift attention from the attribute level and to further the investigation of the psychological factors, specifically personal values, that underpin perceptions of store image. However, retail stores meet a wide span of needs ranging from the functional to the exotic, which leads to a lack of consensus in store image definition among researchers (Keaveney & Hunt, 1992). Therefore, it was decided to study a single store type within a product-specific context (Amirani & Gates, 1993). Fashion retailing was selected because of the powerful links that researchers have identified between clothing choice, personality, self concept, and personal values: who we are, what we want to be and the lifestyle we subscribe to, is reinforced and communicated through how we look. Choice of clothing has been described as: a form of communication influenced by social norms, self-expressions and technology (Beck 1985), a personal signature that symbolically communicates the social identity that a person seeks to project (Dichter 1985b; Davis 1985), and as a reflection of the personality of the wearer (Dichter 1985b; Goldsmith, Heitmeyer, and Goldsmith 1990). The association between clothing, personal values (Unger and Raymond 1974; Sharma 1980; Goldsmith, Heitmeyer and Freiden 1992), and social values (Kaiser 1985; Rose, Shoham, Kahle and Batra 1994) is well established. According to Unger and Raymond (1974) conformity in dress is a predictor of values.

Our objective in this research was to assess the role of personal values in the domain of store image by exploring the link between women's personal values and their perceptions of fashion

store images. Specifically, we wanted to explore the content and structure of women's store image knowledge content (What descriptors do consumers use to distinguish between women's fashion chain store images?) and structure (How do consumers use these image descriptors to achieve desired end-states? Can chains of meaning linking the attribute, consequence and value levels be determined?) The theoretical perspective used to investigate these questions was means-end theory (Gutman 1982), which links the concrete attributes of a product or service (the means), to abstract personal values (the ends) via the perceived consequences of these attributes for the consumer.

MEANS-END THEORY

A means-end chain is a model that seeks to explain how product or service attributes facilitate consumers' achievement of desired end-states of being such as happiness, security or enjoyment (Gutman 1982). A means-end chain is a cognitive representation of the connection between a person's knowledge about a product or store and their self-knowledge (Mulvey, Olson, Celsi and Walker, 1994). There are three levels of abstraction or categories of meaning that are typically associated with a concept such as store image:

- Attributes (the means)
- Consequences of store patronage.
- Important psychological and social consequences and values (the ends)

Figure 1 illustrates a means-end chain model based upon a customer's knowledge of self and the store. The model represents store knowledge as structured through perceived linkages between meanings about store attributes and the consumer's self-meanings.

TAKE IN FIGURE 1

Attributes are relatively concrete meanings that represent the physical, observable, or perceived characteristics of a store. Concrete attributes relatively directly reflect the physical features of the store. Abstract attributes are more subjective representations of store characteristics that represent several concrete attributes. Consequences are more abstract meanings that reflect the perceived benefits (or costs) associated with specific attributes. Functional consequences include the direct, tangible outcomes derived from patronage of a store. Psycho-social consequences, on the other hand, include intangible, personal and less direct outcomes. These can be either psychological in nature (e.g., how do I feel when shopping in this store?) or social (e.g., how do others feel about me when I am shopping in this store?) (Peter and Olson, 1987). Finally, personal values are highly abstract meanings that refer to centrally held, enduring beliefs or end-states of existence that customers seek to achieve through their behaviour (figure 1).

PROCEDURES

Elicitation

The study focused on the perceived image of speciality women's fashion store chains among 20 to 45 year old women, as an interest in fashion is characteristic among women within this age range (Evans, 1993). To elicit the basic concepts or distinctions that consumers use to differentiate fashion stores (i.e. to establish the underlying structure of store image) ten subjects were interviewed individually, all were female. The interviews lasted about 25

women's clothing sections of the fashion retail chain stores listed in table 1 were used as the stimuli from which subjects could select fashion chains with which they were familiar.

TAKE IN TABLE 1

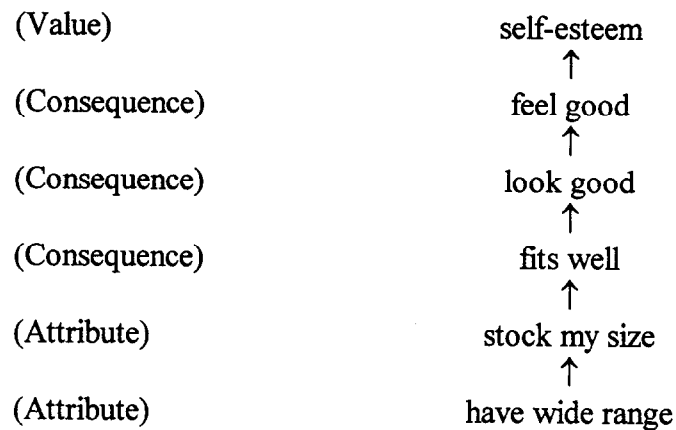
In order to ensure that no key criterion was overlooked two methods were employed to elicit perceived differences between stores. The distinctions used by respondents to discriminate between stores were considered to be the key image categories for women's fashion stores. In the first elicitation method, respondents were asked to rank the listed stores in order of preference, and then asked to explain why they preferred the first to the second, the second to the third, and so on. The second method utilised triadic sorting (Kelly, 1955); after being asked to remove any items with which they were unfamiliar respondents were presented with triples of randomly selected store names printed on cards, and asked to think of any way in which two of the three items were similar to each other but different from the third. The process was repeated until the respondent failed to elicit any new constructs. Following content analysis of the elicited distinctions (see below), a comprehensive list of store image attributes was produced and made bipolar for use in the laddering interviews (table 2).

TAKE IN TABLE 2

Laddering Procedures

Laddering employs a one-to-one interviewing technique in which a series of directed probes are used to reveal how customers link product/service attributes to their own underlying

values. A central premise of this method is that lower levels imply the presence of higher levels, so that product /service Attributes have Consequences that lead to Value satisfaction. The purpose of the laddering interviews was to determine the 'ladder' of linkages between the Attributes, Consequences and Values in relation to fashion store image. An example of a ladder from a single interview, starting with a basic distinction between two stores, is given below:



The laddering interview procedures in this study followed the recommendations made by Reynolds and Gutman, (1988). Care was taken to create a suitable interviewing environment in which respondents were sufficiently relaxed to be introspective, and to relate their underlying motivations to the interviewer. In order to facilitate this the interviewer presented herself as a facilitator following specific guidelines, "even though some of the questions might seem a little silly". Before commencing the interview each respondent was put in the position of expert by assurances that there are no right or wrong answers, and that the purpose of the exercise was to understand the way that they saw the world.

After collecting basic demographic information, 30 female respondents from the staff and students on campus were each presented with the list of store image attributes shown in table 2 and asked to rank the 10 which reflected their most important choice criteria. They were then asked to identify which pole of the distinctions they most preferred, which served as the basis for asking the question, “why is that important to you?”. Repeated applications of this procedure led to still higher-level distinctions until respondents could no longer answer the “why” question. The actual wording of the probe was varied to (e.g.) “Why is that?”, “So that is important to you?” “Why do say that?”. When respondents struggled to articulate an answer it was important not to put words into their mouths. The techniques used to move the interview forward involved asking respondents what they thought the outcome would be if the attribute or consequence was not delivered, and or by evoking a situational context. For example; “When you are going into the store, what is going through your mind?”. Under these conditions respondents were content to talk readily about fashion shopping, and the problem of over-sensitivity identified by Reynolds and Gutman was not encountered. These interviews were tape recorded and lasted for approximately 35 minutes each.

DATA ANALYSIS

Content analysis was used to reduce what Krippendorff, (1980) called, “. . . *subjects’ idiosyncratic responses.*” Each respondents’ ladders were entered onto separate coding forms and classified into attributes, consequences and values. A set of 128 summary codes was then developed to reflect everything mentioned by the respondents. These summary codes were further aggregated into a smaller number of broader categories. Finally, 32 master codes summarising all the attributes, consequences, and values mentioned in the laddering responses

were identified. Four coders, working independently, content-analysed the same set of data. Output from all four coders were compared on a pairwise basis by calculating the number and percentage of themes assigned to the same category, yielding an average intercoder agreement of 90%. Disagreements were resolved jointly between the four coders.

The Implications Matrix

A means-end chain is a sequence of causal implications connecting attributes, consequences and values. These connections were examined next by summarising them in a matrix which represented the number of connections between each attribute, consequence and value. Two types of relations, direct and indirect, may be represented in this 'implications matrix'. For instance, the ladder A(tribute) to C(onsequence)₁ to C(onsequence)₂ to V(alue) represents relations between adjacent elements. The A to C₁ relation is direct, as is C₁ to C₂, C₂ to V. However, there are also indirect relations such as A to C₂, A to V, and C₁ to V. Elements with a high incidence of indirect relations should not be ignored, so both types of relations were considered in determining which paths were dominant (Reynolds and Gutman, 1988; Klenosky, Gengler and Mulvey, 1993).

The Hierarchical Value Map

A Hierarchical Value Map was built up by connecting the chains extracted from the Implications Matrix. In order to find a solution which yielded the most informative and stable set of relations a cut-off level of three relations was established by trial and error. All connections below this level were ignored. In establishing the cut-off level, the total number of linkages (both direct and indirect relations) were counted so as to avoid bias through, “. . .

underweighting the importance of the associations recorded for the more verbose respondents. . .” (Klenosky, Gengler and Mulvey, 1993). The resulting Hierarchical Value Map accounted for 82% of all the direct and indirect relations. For clarity it is presented in the manner proposed by Klenosky, Gengler and Mulvey (1993): each concept is represented by a circle, the size of which is proportional to the percentage of respondents mentioning a concept, white circles represent attributes, light grey circles consequences, and dark grey circles values; the relative strength of association between concepts is represented by the width of the connecting lines (figure 2).

TAKE IN FIGURE 2

RESULTS

Attributes

Of the 10 attributes ultimately used in the aggregated Hierarchical Value Map (figure 2) five were more or less concrete in nature (“price”, “sales promotions”, “location”, “assortment” and “styling”), reflecting physical characteristics that are reasonably straightforward to define and implement. The remaining five were more abstract (“atmosphere & environment”, “global perception”, “reputation”, “quality” and “service”) They represent a subjective amalgam of several, more concrete, attributes and are, consequently, more difficult to define.

Consequences

Most of the 14 consequences in the HVM were psycho-social consequences arising either from shopping in a store (“nice feeling”, “avoid risks”, “guarantee”, “socialise”, “convenient”, and “be respected”), or from ownership of the clothes (“nice feeling”, “enhance appearance”, and “self-expressive”). The rest were functional benefits associated with money, time, products, or the shopping process (“not waste money”, “spend money wisely”, “save time”, “better time allocation”, “durability”, “facilitate shopping”).

Values

The eight values were similar to those uncovered in previous personal values research (e.g. Rokeach 1973; Reynolds and Jolly 1980; Reynolds and Gutman 1988; Klenosky et al. 1993). The largest proportion were hedonistic (“enjoyment & happiness”, “quality of life”, and “sense of well-being”). The rest relate to personality (“self-image” and “self esteem”), internal considerations (“security” and “achievement”) and social life (“sense of belonging”)

Hierarchical Value Map

Inspection of the Hierarchical Value Map in figure 2 showed that the dominant orientation was the chain; *reputation - quality - durability - not waste money - spend money wisely - nice feeling - enjoyment & happiness or quality of life* (figure 3). This indicates a functional path to the achievement of hedonistic end-states.

TAKE IN FIGURE 3

However, “quality” and “reputation” were also linked to the same terminal values via a closely related chain which followed the divergent route; *reputation - quality - durability - enhance appearance - self expressive - nice feeling - enjoyment & happiness or quality of life* (figure 4). An alternative, hedonic, route to the same hedonic end.

TAKE IN FIGURE 4

These two chains accounted for the highest frequency of relations (24.4%). They indicate that the key attributes were “reputation” and “quality” leading to “durability”, and that these were used by consumers to achieve the main end states of “quality of life” and “enjoyment and happiness” through “nice feeling”, via both functional (value for money) and hedonic (aesthetic and self-expressive) consequences.

Of the remaining most frequently mentioned attributes, two, “atmosphere & environment” and “price”, stood out. “Price”, because it was strongly linked to the important chain: *price - -- not waste money - spend money wisely - nice feeling - enjoyment & happiness or quality of life* (figures 2 and 3). “Atmosphere & environment”, because, although it did not commence a single strong path, it was connected to several chains leading through a high proportion of all consequences and ultimately to all of the values except “achievement”. (This also applied to a lesser extent to the attributes “reputation” and “service”, and also “assortment”).

Notably, all of the most important attributes were linked to all but one of the terminal values through the consequence “nice feeling” (figure 2).

DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to explore means-ends knowledge structures associated with fashion store image. The end states most sought by consumers in association with store image were identified as the hedonic values of “enjoyment and happiness” and “quality of life”. These were linked through alternative functional and hedonic chains to the key attributes of “price”, “reputation” and “quality”. Although other attributes were identified their influence was dissipated among several different chains (note that if too high a cut-off point had been applied their contribution would have been lost). Whatever the impact of the attribute “location” on store choice behaviour (and it is usually acknowledged to be critical) its influence on store image was very small indeed.

Inspection of the Hierarchical Value Map in figure 2 reveals that the chains leading to all but one of the eight end states sought by fashion store customers pass through only two consequences; “nice feeling” and “save time”. These consequences (and the values that customers seek through them) can only be delivered via the relevant attributes, three of which, “reputation”, “quality” and “price”, form the foundation of the dominant orientation chains. These might be used as the basis of an effective communications strategy designed to position the store in the minds of customers by linking together entire chains of meaning, rather than presenting unconnected links in the chain. (Mulvey et al, 1994; Reynolds and Rochon, 1990; Young and Feigin, 1975). This has two important benefits; firstly, communications designed in this way take customers along a series of stepping stones leading from the store’s attributes to their desired terminal values by a path that they understand and appreciate; secondly, interpreting the meaning of each step within the context of the chain avoids the possibility of

the meaning of attitudes, consequences or values being distorted by taking them out of context. For example, the attribute “quality” is strongly linked to “durability”. Therefore, it does not mean brand name or “styling” (although styling cannot be ignored, offering an “assortment” of styles in order to save time appears to be more important). Neither does “price” simply mean cheap, as it links to “not waste money” which has to be interpreted in light of its link to “durability” - “quality”. Given its central position in the two dominant orientations the meaning of “durability” is clearly important. It does not mean merely utilitarian, because as well as links to the functional consequence “not wasting money”, it also links to the hedonic consequences of “enhanced appearance” and “self expressive”. All of this suggests that a desirable fashion store image might be defined as, a reputation for offering a wide range of clothes, exuding quality and durability, at an acceptable price. Secondary chains emphasising time and facilitation of the shopping experience may contribute useful differentiating factors.

Yet a communication strategy designed to build an image based upon these attributes is not enough. Customers’ perceptions that the store really possesses the promised attributes must survive, and be reinforced by, actual experiences in the store. That means integrating the key attributes into the store’s Unique Organisation Value Proposition™, and utilising the entire value chain, internal and external, to deliver the key attributes more effectively than competitors (see, Knox and Maklan, 1998).

This study was undertaken among an unsegmented group of female fashion shoppers.

However, it has been suggested that store image perception is significantly age-related (Joyce

and Lambert, 1996), and that different socio-economic groups do not perceive stores in the same way (Doyle and Fenwick, 1974-1975). Further research might address the extent to which the value chains of different segments of the population vary from one another, and the feasibility of designing store images to appeal to specific market segments.

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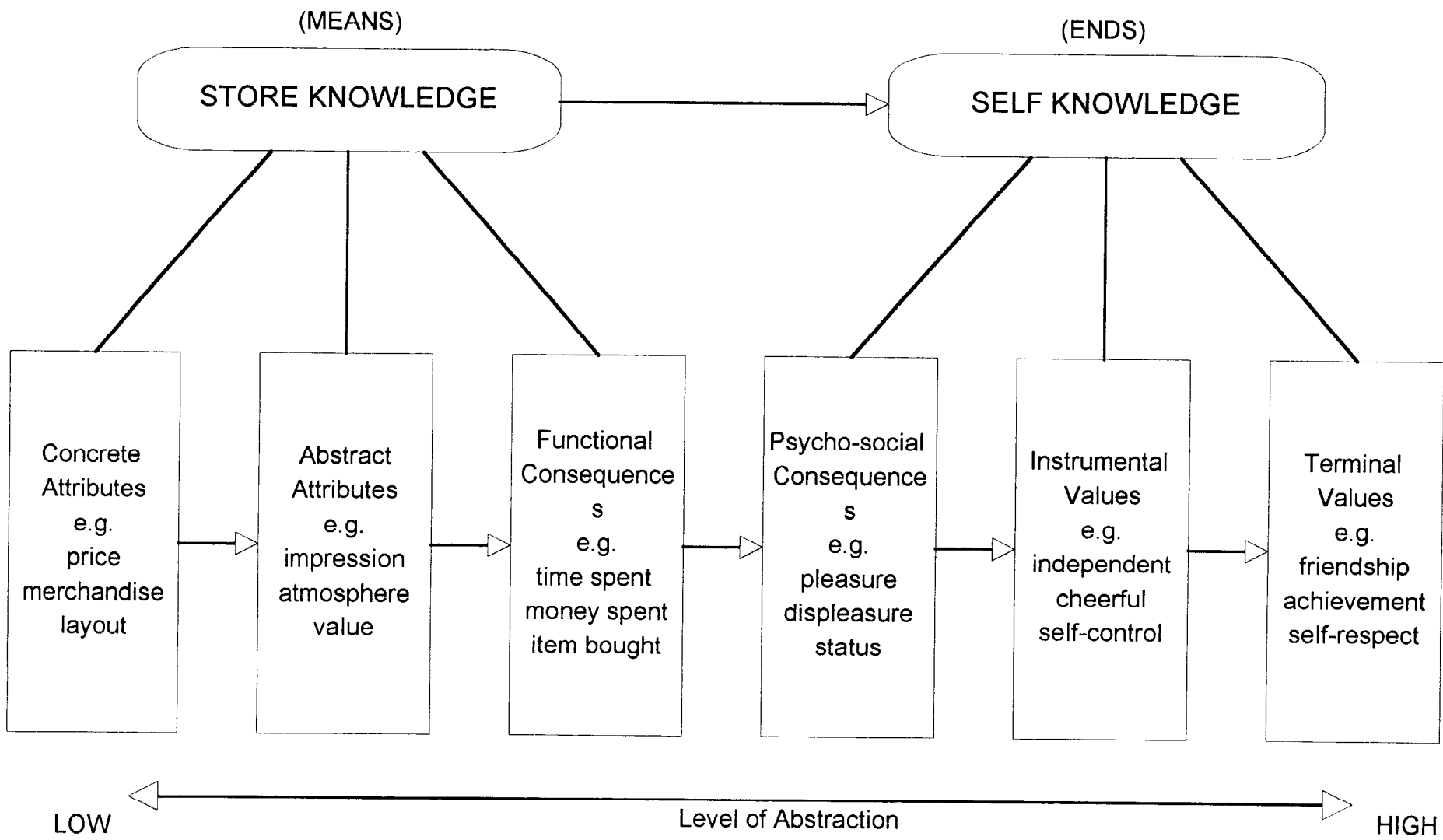
Table 1: STORES USED FOR ELICITATION PHASE

1. Benetton
2. Dorothy Perkins
3. French Connection
4. Gap
5. Laura Ashley
6. Miss Selfridge
7. Next
8. Oasis
9. Principles
10. River Island
11. Top Shop
12. Warehouse

Table 2: STORE IMAGE DESCRIPTORS ELICITED IN PRELIMINARY STUDY

High quality merchandise	Low quality merchandise
Limited assortment of merchandise	Wide assortment of merchandise
Wide / extensified size ranges	Limited size ranges
High price / expensive	Low price / cheap
Reasonable price	Unreasonable price
Bad value for money	Good value for money
Convenient / good location	Inconvenient / poor location
Can find shops everywhere	Fewer shops around
Mainstream / ordinary merchandise	Unique / distinctive merchandise
Casual / basic style clothing	Formal / feminine style clothing
Stylish / trendy merchandise	Old-fashioned / classical merchandise
Less well-known store name	Well-known store name
Good reputation	Bad reputation
Big, spacious store layout	Small, crowded store layout
Unappealing front & window display	Eye catching front & window display
Clean, neat merchandise display	Dirty, crammed merchandise display
Pleasant store atmosphere	Unpleasant store atmosphere
Dull, dark store design	Exciting, bright, cheerful store design
Loud music	Relaxing music
Congested, busy looking environment	Uncongested, empty looking environment
Attractive / interesting advertising	No / unattractive advertising
No / unattractive special sales / promotions	Attractive special sales / promotions
For older customers	For younger customers
Upmarket / high status customers	Tacky / lower status customers
Targeted at a narrow age-group market	Targeted at a broad age-group market
Younger sales personnel	Older sales personnel
Bad overall impression of the store	Good overall impression of the store
Professional / exclusive store	Ordinary / mainstream store
Good service	Poor service
Low staffing level / limited service	High staffing level / one-to-one service
More fitting rooms	Less fitting rooms
Store cards available	Store cards unavailable
Not designer label clothes	Designer label clothes

Figure 1. MEANS-END CHAIN MODEL CONNECTING STORE KNOWLEDGE TO SELF KNOWLEDGE



Adapted from Walker and Olson (1991)

Figure 2: HIERARCHICAL VALUE MAP

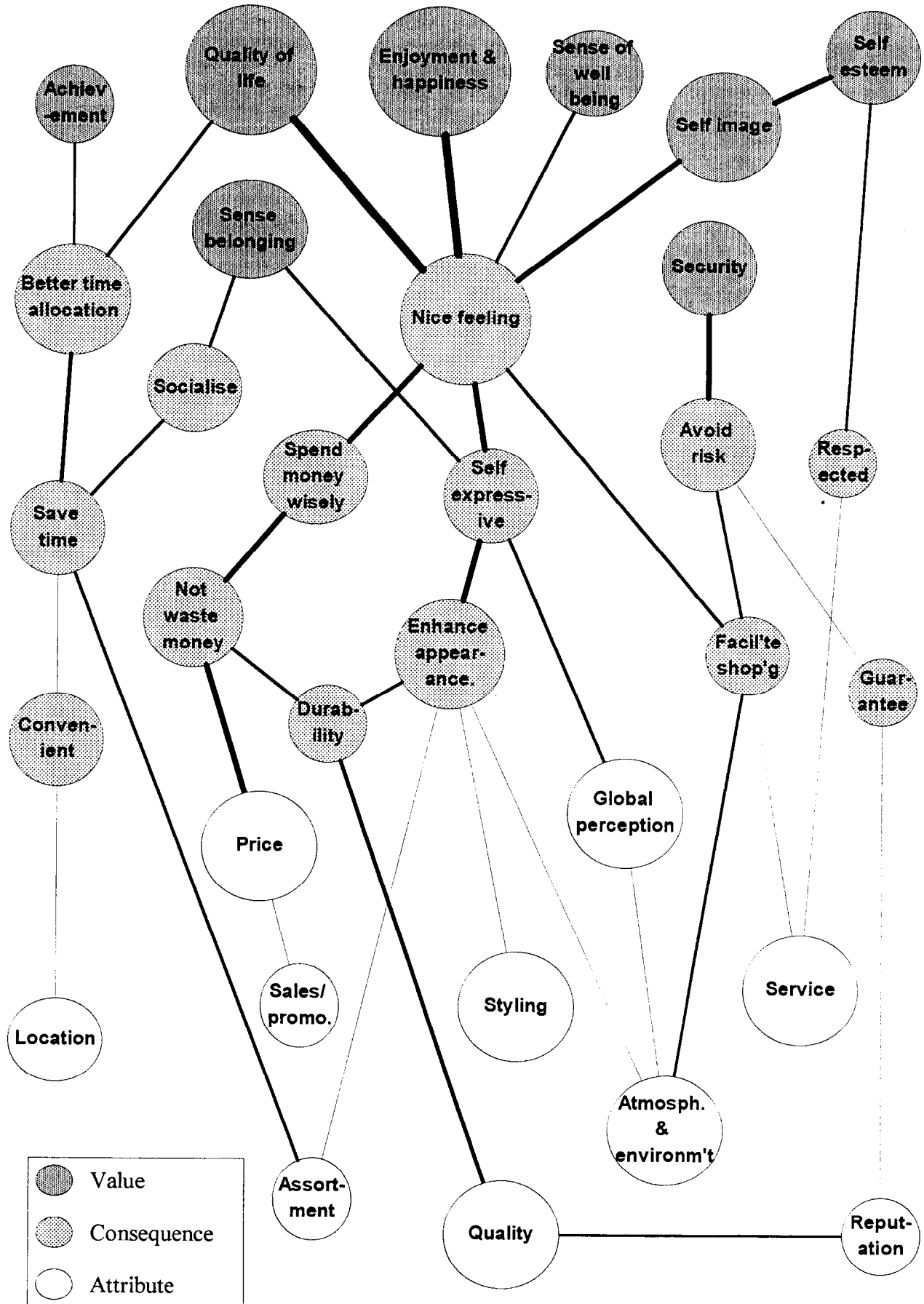


Figure 3. MEANS-END CHAIN - DOMINANT FUNCTIONAL ORIENTATION

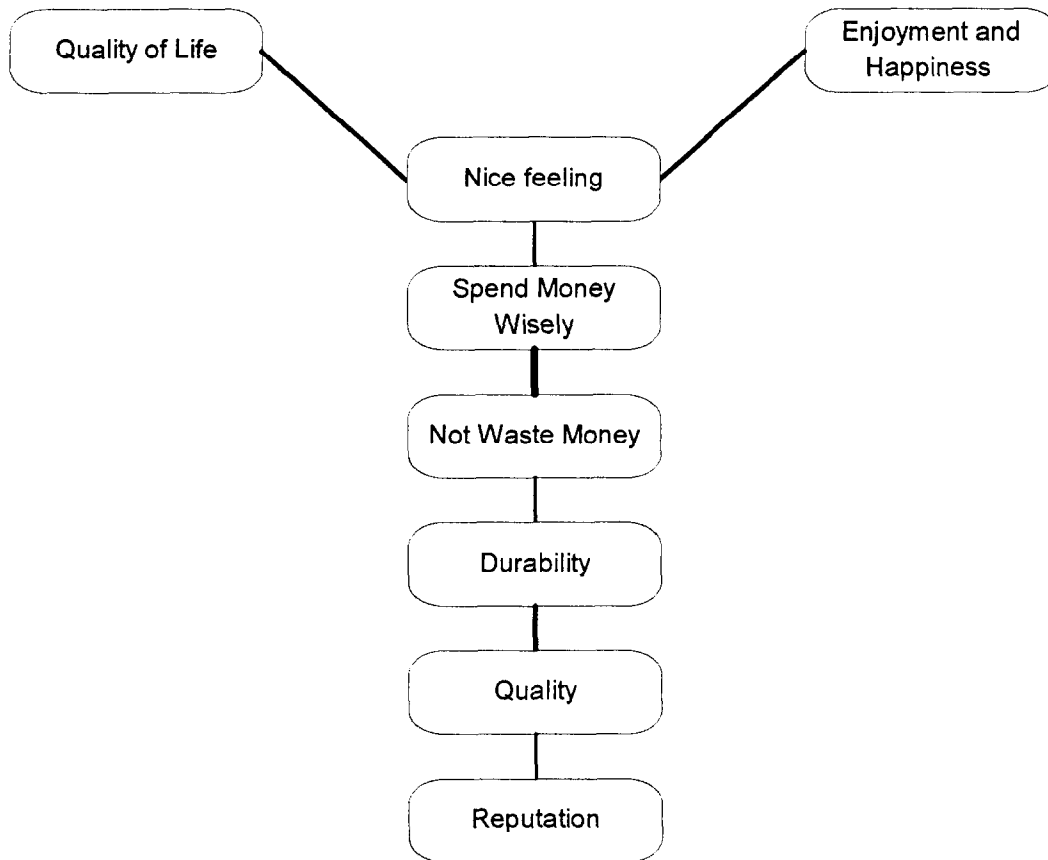
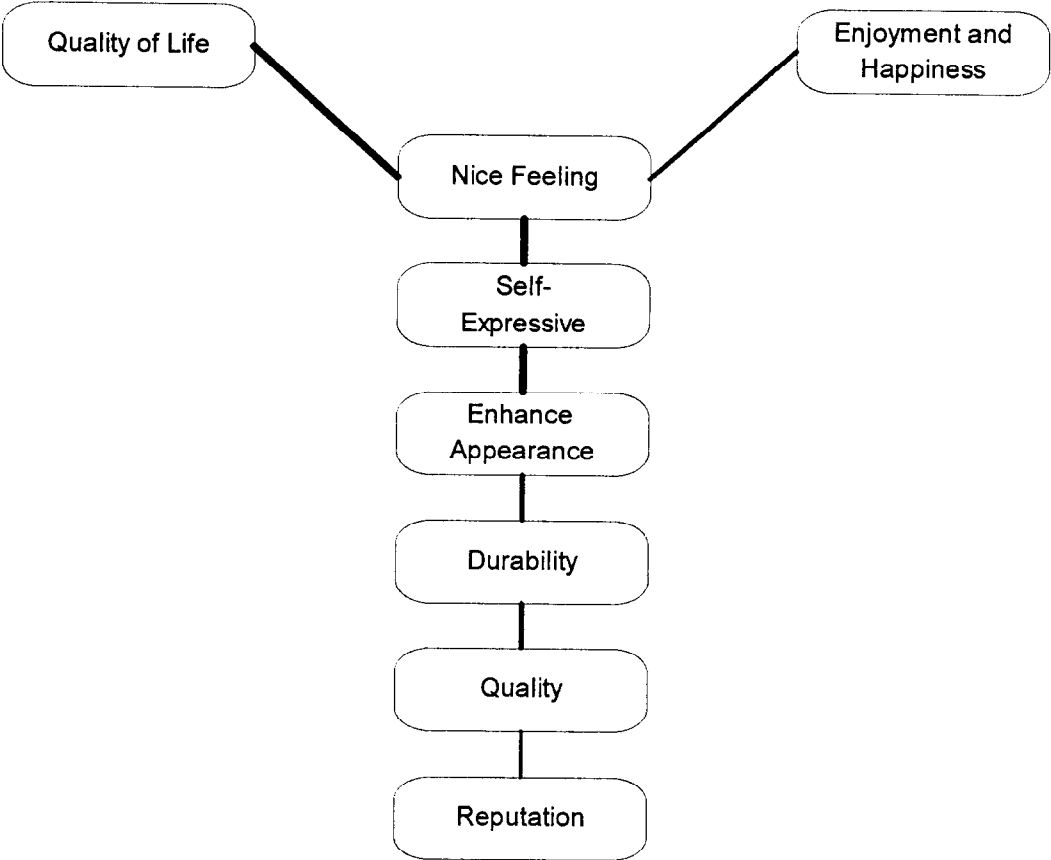


Figure 4. MEANS-END CHAIN - DOMINANT HEDONIC ORIENTATION.



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