

IMPORTANCE OF APPAREL STORE IMAGE ATTRIBUTES: PERCEPTIONS OF FEMALE CONSUMERS

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative research focused on identifying those store image attributes perceived as important by a selected group of female apparel consumers. In addition, their perception of Lindquist's proposed dimensions of store image attributes was examined. Data were collected by means of eight focus groups. The non-verbal quali-quantive Schutte Visual Scale was employed to quantify responses. Results indicated that Merchandise and Clientele were perceived as the most important dimensions, followed by Service. The dimension Physical facilities was perceived as the least important. Differences between age and population groups were investigated. The store image attribute dimensions generated by the respondents differed slightly from those proposed by Lindquist. Implications for retailers and for further research were formulated.

Key words

Store image, female consumers, store attributes

The importance of store image for apparel retailers cannot be disputed. In the highly competitive and dynamic apparel market, organisations endeavour to use all possible resources to gain market share. One way of differentiating one store from another is the unique store image offered to clientele. Consumers use store image as an evaluative criterion in the decision making process concerning retail outlet selection. Varley (2005, p. 19) summarised this situation as follows: "In concentrated and relatively saturated retail markets, the position that a retailer etches out in the consumer mind is a vital element of its strategy. Customers must be given a good reason to shop with one retailer rather than another." According to Osman (2001), retailers decide what image their stores should project to specific target markets. This requires information about the target market but also on those store attributes the market perceives as important when selecting stores.

At first, it may seem redundant to investigate store image as this construct has received considerable attention in the literature since the seminal work of Martineau in 1958. However, when reviewing the literature, further investigation seems not only viable but also imperative to fully understand and manage this complex phenomenon. Although so many scholars (e.g. Birtwistle & Shearer, 2001; Birtwistle & Siddiqui, 1995; Chowdhary, 1999; De Klerk, Velleman & Malherbe, 1998; Kim & Han, 2000; Lee, Hwang & Kang, 1996; Lennon & Burns, 2000; Lindquist, 1974 1975; Summers & Herbert, 1998) have published on this construct, there is, for example, no universally accepted definition of store image or a classification of store image attributes. Researchers who investigated store image reported a wide variety of store attributes, but no consensus has been reached on those attributes that should be prioritised by retailers to maintain consumer satisfaction. In addition, store image is related to various other consumer behaviours, such as store loyalty, patronage decisions, brand perceptions and brand image perceptions (Assael, 1992; Collins Dodd & Lindley, 2003; Hawkins, Best & Coney, 2004; Jacoby & Mazursky, 1984; Peter & Olson, 1990; Wong & Yu, 2003).

It can be argued that retailer strategies cannot be managed successfully to positively impact on store image if the construct of store image is vaguely defined or merely seen as too complex to define. It is extremely risky to develop retailer strategies focused on influencing store image, without a thorough understanding of what store image is. Retailers stand to lose their

customer base and competitive advantage if they lack an understanding of the importance of strategic management of the various store image dimensions. To complicate matters further, all store image dimensions are not viewed by consumers as equally important. Researchers and academia can only assist in this process if they have in depth knowledge of store image as a phenomenon within the theoretical context of consumer behaviour.

For the purposes of this paper, the following sections will deliberate on (a) contextualisation of store image, (b) defining store image, (c) providing a theoretical framework of store image and (d) research findings regarding store image and related variables emphasising the ranked importance of apparel store image dimensions.

Contextualisation of store image

Store image should be contextualised within the scope of corporate personality, corporate identity and corporate image. Scholars, such as Kennedy (1977), Dowling (1986), Abratt (1989) and Marwick and Fill (1997), developed conceptual models of corporate image formation and corporate identity management. Stuart (1999, p. 206) identified elements of the corporate management process and proposed a Definitive model of the corporate identity management process. This model depicts the differences between, but also the interrelatedness of corporate personality, corporate strategy and corporate identity within the organisational culture. It also indicates how communication with stakeholders leads to corporate image and corporate reputation.

Each company has a corporate personality. This personality is the sum total of the characteristics of the organisation, including the corporate philosophy, core values and corporate mission and is projected by various visual cues (physical and behavioural) to constitute the identity of the company. Through interpersonal communication, as well as with marketing and management communication, stakeholders receive certain messages and cues from the company. The company can be recognised by these cues and can as such be differentiated from others. Stakeholders' perceptions of these messages and cues constitute corporate image and in the long run lead to corporate reputation (Abratt, 1989; Kennedy, 1977; Stuart, 1999; Varley, 2005). According to Varley (2005), the store and its environment play a major role in the formation and maintenance of corporate image. The

perceived image should reflect reality. Thus, consistency and congruency are essential to communicating corporate identity successfully (Abratt, 1989; Varley, 2005).

Store image should be viewed from both the consumer's and the retailer's perspective. Consumers' perceptions of stores are determined by the messages and cues they receive from the store as well as their perceived importance of store attributes moderated by previous experiences. The retailers' perception of their store's image is based on the company's personality and identity and consequently, those attributes they perceive as important to their customers. These attributes should be managed in their retailing strategy to build and maintain patronage (Osman, 2001). This is especially critical for retail internationalisation as consumers of different countries hold different views on the importance of store image attributes and dimensions (Burt & Carralero Encinas, 2000).

Defining store image

It has already been pointed out that store image is complex in nature. This could be one of the reasons why about as many definitions of store image as scholarly publications can be cited. Early scholars, such as Martineau (1958), described store image as a store's personality and the way in which the store is defined in the shoppers' mind, partly by its functional qualities and psychological attributes. Minshall (1994) recognised the cognitive and affective dimensions of store image. According to Lindquist (1974 1975) store image constitutes a combination of tangible or functional and intangible or psychological factors that consumers perceive to be present in retail stores. Another perspective is that store image is a set of attitudes based on the evaluation of those store attributes deemed important by consumers (James, Durand & Dreeves, 1976). Dichter (1985, p.75) followed a more holistic/gestalt approach stating that store image is "...the total impression an entity makes on the minds of others". Store image definitions have some communalities, in that they include tangible and intangible aspects of perceptual processes together with cognitive and affective dimensions that contribute to (and vary in importance in their contribution to) the formation of store image.

Various store image dimensions have been proposed. Martineau (1958) was the first researcher who indicated that store image consists of the following components: layout and architecture, symbols and colours, advertising and sales personnel. Lindquist (1974 1975) developed nine store image attribute dimensions (Lindquist referred to "groupings"), including merchandise, service, clientele, physical facilities, convenience, promotion, store atmosphere, institutional factors and post transaction satisfaction, which incorporated but also expanded Martineau's components. James et al. (1976) derived six dimensions from their study, namely assortment, personnel, atmosphere, service, quality and price, supporting Lindquist's dimensions. According to O'Connor (1990), the primary factual elements or attributes determining a retailer's image, include price, variety, assortment within product categories, quality, products, service (or lack thereof) and location. Type of customer, shop location, price levels, services offered, merchandise mix, advertising and the characteristics of the physical facilities are listed by Terblanché (1998) as some of the factors determining store image. Peter and Olson (1990) observed that the most commonly studied store image dimensions are merchandise, service, clientele, physical facilities, promotion, convenience and store atmosphere, which closely resemble Lindquist's proposed dimensions. Sheth and Mittal (2004, p. 414) stated that: "Store image, the sum total of perceptions customers have about a store, is determined by these merchandise, service, and price factors; it is also determined by atmospherics, advertising, and store personnel."

However, as with the definition of store image, no consensus has been reached on a set of universal store image dimensions.

Inconsistency also occurs with regard to terminology used for these groupings or categorising of attributes, namely elements, attributes, dimensions, groups/groupings, categories, attribute areas, factors and classifications. For the purpose of this study, Lindquist's framework of store image was selected as a viable point of departure for identifying store image dimensions and descriptions (incorporating the relevant attributes for each dimension), since it proves to be the most comprehensive in store image literature. Cognitive, affective and physical components of store image are included in the proposed nine store image attribute dimensions. Therefore, in building on the foundation established by Lindquist (1974 1975), as well as taking into account what other researchers have identified, the following nine store image dimensions were used to define store image in this study (see Table 1).

TABLE 1
DESCRIPTIONS OF STORE IMAGE DIMENSIONS

Store image dimension	Description of dimensions (attributes)	References
Merchandise	Quality, selection or assortment, styling or fashion, guarantees, pricing	James et al., 1976; O'Connor, 1990; Terblanché, 1998; Peter & Olson, 1990
Service	Service general, sales clerk service, self-service, ease of merchandise return, delivery service, credit policies of store	James et al., 1976; O'Connor, 1990; Terblanché, 1998; Peter & Olson, 1990
Clientele	Social class appeal, self-image congruency, store personnel	Martineau, 1958; James et al., 1976; Terblanché, 1998; Peter & Olson, 1990
Physical facilities	Elevators, lighting, air-conditioning, washrooms, store layout, aisle placement and width, carpeting, architecture	Martineau, 1958; Terblanché, 1998; Peter & Olson, 1990
Convenience	Convenience general, location convenience, parking	O'Connor, 1990; Peter & Olson, 1990
Promotion	Sales promotions, advertising, displays, trading stamps, symbols, colours	Martineau, 1958; Terblanché, 1998; Peter & Olson, 1990
Store atmosphere	Atmosphere-congeniality	James et al., 1976; Peter & Olson, 1990
Institutional factors	Conservative/modern, reputation, reliability	
Post-transaction satisfaction	Merchandise in use, returns, adjustments	

For the purposes of this study, store image is defined as the sum total of cognitive, affective and physical components that consumers hold regarding the following store image dimensions: a store's merchandise, service, clientele, physical facilities, convenience, promotion, store atmosphere, institutional factors and post transaction satisfaction. Store image dimensions refer to the broadly defined constructs that constitute store image, whereas store image attributes refer to the underlying components of a store image dimension.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

When investigating any construct, a theoretical framework should serve as point of departure to identify the related variables. Although these variables cannot be included in the research design, it assists in understanding the phenomenon under investigation and contributes to the interpretation of results. A review of literature on store image indicates that this construct has been studied in conjunction with a variety of consumer behaviours, as well as with marketing and retailing related variables. Monroe and Guiltinan's model of store choice (in Assael, 1992, p. 630) positions store image as a critical variable in the determination of attitude toward store and store choice (Refer to shaded areas in Figure 1).

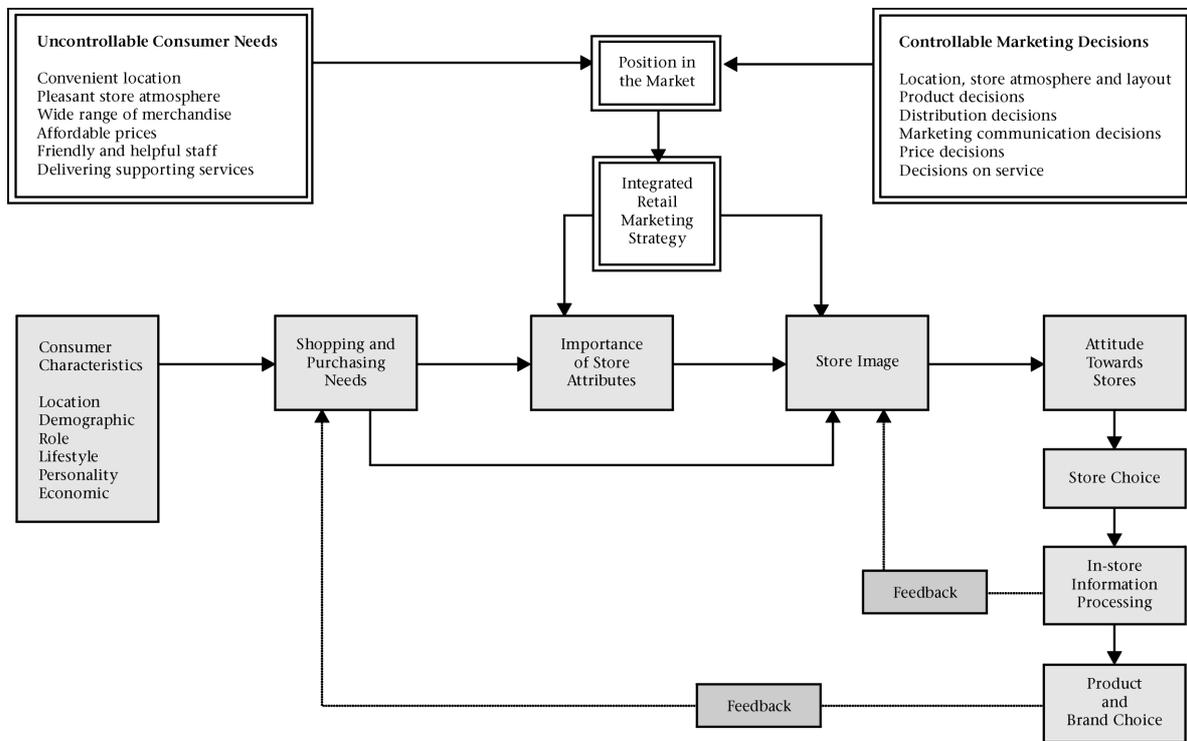


Figure 1: Integrated model of store choice and retail marketing strategy (Adapted from Monroe & Gultinan in Assael, 1992, p.630; Davidson, Sweeney & Stampfl in Terblanché, 1998, p.106)

Consumer characteristics, shopping and purchasing needs as well as the importance of store attributes are shown to impact on store image. Retailer strategies serve as interventions in the ultimate formation of consumers' perceptions of store image. Assael (1992) and Osman (2001) stated the importance of a good fit (congruence) between a store's image and a consumer's needs as this would impact on the attitude toward the store and consequently store patronage. Recognition is also given to the varying importance of store image dimensions and the necessity to determine a consumer's perception of store image. Positioning and re positioning of stores are often done in accordance with these perceptions again emphasising the role that a store's image can play in differentiating one retailer from another. Store image further influences the attitude toward store, store choice, in store information processing as well as product and brand choice. Feedback on the outcomes of information processing and product and brand choice is evident from the model.

In retail marketing strategy models, such as the Davidson, Sweeney and Stampfl model (in Terblanché, 1998, p. 106) retail store image attributes (e.g. products, store atmosphere, layout) are shown to influence the store's position in the market (Refer to the double lined area in Figure 1). These store image attributes, as part of controllable marketing decisions, together with the uncontrollable consumer needs (e.g. affordable prices and supporting services), will impact on the retailer's position in the market and the integrated retail marketing strategy employed (Terblanché, 1998). Once again, the need for a good fit between the needs of consumers and what retailers offer in terms of controllable marketing decision making (culminating in strategy) is obvious. It is inevitable that strategic marketing strategy decision making regarding store image attributes will influence store image and attitude toward the store.

Combining the above mentioned two models provides a holistic view of the construct under investigation in relation to related variables. It depicts the retail strategy components and their impact on store image and store choice. In addition, the role of consumer characteristics, needs and perception of the importance of store image attributes in the formation of store image are indicated, revealing clearly the close relationship between all these variables.

RESEARCH ON STORE IMAGE AND RELATED VARIABLES

In the following paragraphs, a short overview will be given of research on store image and some of the related variables identified in the previous section (as well as in Figure 1). The authors do not imply that this overview is exhaustive, as store image dimensions (and the underlying attributes) have been linked to numerous psychological and marketing constructs. It should further be taken into consideration that most of the research findings could be discussed under more than one of the headings used below.

Consumer characteristics and profiling

Various studies employed apparel store image attributes as bases for describing and differentiating between **consumer groups**. These studies yielded isolated findings that could not be generalised without further testing. Birtwistle, Clarke and Freathy (1999) identified product price, product selection, product quality and service by sales personnel as store image attributes used as trade offs in male apparel store choice decisions. Four consumer segments (Quality oriented, Service and quality oriented, Choice oriented and Value for money) were identified on the basis of the respondents' perceptions of the importance of these attributes. The researchers emphasised how a combination of key choice attributes could be used to further define a specific consumer group.

A study on short, average height as well as big and tall male apparel consumers identified differences in their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with apparel store image attributes (Shim, Kotsiopoulos & Knoll, 1990). In another study, female apparel shoppers were segmented into three distinct groups according to apparel shopping orientations (Highly involved shoppers, Apathetic shoppers and Convenience oriented catalogue shoppers). Supporting previous research, these segments differed significantly with respect to the importance attached to store attributes (Shim & Kotsiopoulos, 1993). Osman (2001) confirms these results and state that shopping orientation, together with lifestyle, will significantly influence the evaluation of store attributes.

Shopping orientation groups differed with regard to the importance placed on store attributes (Moye & Giddings, 2002). These results were confirmed in a study by Kim and Chen Yu (2005).

Ethnic, culture and age groups have been studied in relation to apparel store image attributes. Van de Velde, Pelton, Turnbull Caton and Byrne (1996) investigated the influence that a shared root culture has on clothing value hierarchies. Based on the findings that store image attributes, used by Canadian and English respondents as store selection criteria, were similar in ranking, Van de Velde et al. (1996) concluded that similar clothing value hierarchies exist amongst different cultural groups sharing a root culture. Moye and Giddings (2002) found no differences between the age of older consumers (65 and older) and the importance of store attributes.

In contrast, Burt and Carralero Encinas (2000) conducted a survey on the perceptions of store image attributes in Spain and the UK. Results revealed differences and similarities between these two groups of consumers regarding apparel choice, personal values as well as personality and self concept. Kim and Han (2000) found that blacks, Koreans and whites differed considerably with regard to their perceptions of the social class orientations of retail stores and the attributes of selected apparel brands (Polo, Kelvin Klein, Levi's). Miller, Van Aardt, Visser and Joung (2000) reported significant differences between United States and South African college age consumers regarding preference of store image, specifically on dressing room design, aisle design and importance of general services. Other demographic variables, for example income and education, were found to have influenced customer perceptions of store image in a study by Paulins and Geistfeld (2003).

Shopping and purchasing needs

Situational influences and particular purchasing needs are important factors in consumer behaviour and have shown to impact on store image attribute ratings. For example, when shopping for gifts, sales personnel attention, return policies, prestige brand and product selections became more important store image attributes. However, when consumers shop for themselves, prices and apparel size carried by the store would be perceived as more important. Time pressured consumers viewed store familiarity and immediate sales personnel attention as salient store image attributes (Mattson, 1982). Van Kenhove, De Wulf and Van Waterschoot (1999) confirmed that store attribute saliencies differed according to the shopping task, such as urgent purchases versus regular purchases or browsing activities. For urgent purchases, availability of stock, service and proximity of the store were important.

Patronage behaviour

Consumers face **store patronage** decisions daily. Thang and Tan (2003) emphasised the role of consumer perceptions of store image dimensions in store preferences. They proposed the use of a comparative consideration of stores (similar to what consumers are exposed to daily) to determine patronage of stores. Results indicated that merchandising, accessibility, reputation, in store service and atmosphere of stores significantly influenced store preference. This reiterates the importance of store image dimension's ability to attract consumers to a store as well as the responsibility of retailers to emphasise these dimensions in order to be the retailer of choice and to differentiate themselves from other stores. Both Paulins and Geistfeld (2003) as well as Shim and Kotsiopoulos (1992) supported the relationship between store image attributes and patronage behaviour.

Kim and Chen Yu (2005) investigated the similarities and differences between South Korean and United States customers with respect to consumer behaviour related to discount store patronage. Results indicated significant differences in

importance of store attributes, store evaluation and store satisfaction. However, no significant differences in shopping orientation and store patronage intention were reported. These results supported the notion of Burt and Carralero Encinas (2000) that consumer cultural groups differ with regard to perceptions of the importance of store image dimensions. These insights are critical in retail internationalisation.

Store image research extended into shopping malls and mall preference exerted by customers. Wong and Yu (2003) developed a multi attribute model, consisting of 21 attributes, to analyse the image of joint venture shopping centers in China. These attributes were grouped into six dimensions, namely location, merchandise, service, popularity, facilities and sales and incentives. The significance of knowledge of shopping centre patronage, and the impact of store image and shopping centre image on patronage decisions are emphasised.

Grace and Cass (2005) investigated the extent to which **repatronage decisions** were affected by customer satisfaction, consumption feelings, store service provision and perceived value for money, thus also focusing on the elements of experience customers have of a retail store. These variables were presented in a model and were expected to differ in importance over discount and department stores. Results of the path analysis indicated that perceived value for money was viewed as more important in the discount store model and that significant relationships existed with satisfaction and patronage intentions. In the department store model, store service provision had a strong effect on feelings and satisfaction that further affected repatronage intentions. The results emphasised the importance of knowledge of consumers' needs as well as how they influence the importance of various dimensions of store image and the impact thereof on repatronage intentions. In a study examining Korean discount shoppers' shopping motives, Jin and Kim (2003) identified four cluster groups. These groups differed in their appraisals of store attributes and repatronage intention. For example, Leisurely motivated shoppers rated service convenience, neat/spacious atmosphere and fashion goods of the patronised store positively while Shopping apathetic shoppers rated most store attributes unfavourably with the exception of shopping convenience. The Utilitarian shoppers showed the strongest intentions to revisit the store they patronised.

In store information processing

The ISE scale as proposed by Terblanché and Boshoff (2002) measures how consumers perceive the in store shopping experience (ISE). In this scale the authors excluded store image and store location, but argued that store image consists of three general factors, namely merchandise related aspects, service related aspects and pleasantness of the shopping experience. They further postulated that these dimensions are captured in in store shopping experience, and thus focused their efforts on the development of the ISE scale that measures customer satisfaction within the controllable elements of the in store shopping experience. Loyalty is seen as an outcome of positive in store shopping experience rather than an underlying dimension (Terblanché & Boshoff, 2002).

In store store image dimensions and attributes such as colour (Harrison, 1992), merchandise (Baker, Grewal & Parasuraman, 1994), music (Baker et al., 1994; Harrison, 1992) and smell (Harrison, 1992) were also high on the list of reported research. These variables impact on the information processing that takes place during a store visit and subsequently influence the consumers' judgements regarding the quality of the store and the store's image (Baker et al., 1994). Lee and Johnson (1997) generated service expectations from respondents, resulting in three main themes related to service, namely store amenities, store facilities and sales associates' attributes. Each of these was further defined into more specific attributes. Summers and Hebert (1998) studied the influence of merchandise display light

levels on approach avoidance behaviour of consumers. Results indicated that supplemental lighting had a statistically significant effect on the number of items picked up and the number of items touched in a store.

Newman and Foxall (2003) confirmed the importance of **store layout** as a determinant of consumer behaviour. They stated the importance of predicting fashion consumer behaviour and the role that the mapping of customer movement can play in determining optimal store layout. The strategic management of layout and merchandise arrangement can consequently influence customers' in store experience as well as their perceptions of brand image and store image.

Product and brand choice

Jacoby and Mazurksy (1984) investigated the relationship between brand and retailer images. A store with a relatively low store image could improve its image by carrying brands with a high image. A store with a very favourable image, however, will damage its image if it carried brands with a lower image. This opens up the opportunity to differentiate one retail store from another through the store's own brands, but only if the brand is considered by the consumers as part of the store image, according to Collins Dodd and Lindley (2003). Their results indicated a positive relationship between a consumer's perceptions of store image and store brand image, emphasising the importance of building a positive store image as this can impact on the stores' brand evaluations and assist consumers to differentiate stores. It was further postulated that store brands may also contribute to store image, implying a different causal direction.

Importance of apparel store image attributes and dimensions

The importance of the various dimensions for an apparel retail store received much attention in research (Birtwistle & Siddiqui, 1995; Birtwistle & Shearer, 2001; Chowdhary, 1989; James et al., 1976; Lumpkin, Greenberg & Goldstucker, 1985; Van de Velde, et al., 1996) due to the importance of congruency between consumer needs and market offering. In some instances, the reviewed studies presented their findings by giving a ranking of the importance of the store image dimensions (and attributes). Birtwistle and Siddiqui (1995) studied male apparel consumers and found that they ranked the following store image attributes in order of descending importance: Merchandise (e.g. quality, price, selection); refund policy; reputation; professional and friendly sales personnel; layout and design. James et al.'s (1976) study, which also focused on male apparel consumers, partially supported these findings. According to Birtwistle and Shearer (2001), female apparel consumers perceived price, followed by selection, refund, store personnel, quality, reputation, fashion and layout, in this order, as important. In a study employing both male and female respondents, the quality and price of merchandise as well as the range of merchandise were perceived as the most important apparel store image attributes (Van de Velde et al., 1996). In the studies listed above, those attributes relating to merchandise clearly ranked as most important.

Two studies investigated the ranked importance of apparel store image attributes by elderly consumers (Chowdhary, 1989; Lumpkin, et al., 1985). These studies, however, did not yield comparable results because the ranked importance of the attributes investigated (pricing, store reputation, variety, shopping ease, sales personnel) showed no similarity apart from store personnel, which received a relatively low ranking in both studies. Erdem, Oumlil and Tuncalp (1999) reported that consumers' sets of values, especially terminal (versus instrumental) values, influenced their importance judgements of store attributes. They found that status, merchandise and price were important store attributes for apparel shopping. Status was the most important. According to these researchers store attributes should be matched to consumers' shopping motives.

Comparing the dimensions of store image as proposed by Lindquist to the Integrated model of store choice and retail marketing strategy (refer to Figure 1), similarities in constructs are evident. Lindquist's store image dimensions are, by implication, also reflected in Controllable marketing decisions. Merchandise is represented by Product, Price and Distribution decisions, whereas Service and Post transaction satisfaction are represented by Decisions on service. Physical facilities show similarities to Layout, Convenience to Location, Promotion to Marketing communication decisions and Store atmosphere to Store atmosphere. Institutional factors and Clientele are two dimensions not explicitly mentioned in the model. These similarities underscore the need for retailers to recognise that store image can and should be managed strategically.

It is deduced that store image is not solely dependent on the physical attributes of the store or on the objective reality. Store image is based instead on the consumer's perception of that reality. Minshall (1994) underscored this observation and pointed out that apparel preferences relate preference to the perceptual process. Terblanché's (1998) adaptation from Davidson, Sweeney and Stampfl's model of the retail marketing strategy indicates that store image attributes, relating to both Uncontrollable consumer needs and Controllable marketing decisions, influence store positioning, which is an important determinant of an Integrated retail marketing strategy.

Reaching any definitive conclusion based on findings of previously discussed research studies proves to be problematic. This could be ascribed to the lack of a definition and framework for the study of retail store image attributes, as well as the abundance of isolated findings that cannot be related to other studies. Therefore, researchers who investigate retail store image should attempt to develop a research framework that could be used consistently, yielding comparable results. In building store image, budget allocations should be in accordance with consumer perceptions of the importance of the various store image dimensions. Very often retailers decide on these allocations based on gut feeling alone, leading to capital spent on store image dimensions that are not considered important by consumers (Osman, 2001). This strengthens the argument for the necessity of scientifically sound research to guide management of store image dimensions.

PROBLEM STATEMENT AND OBJECTIVES

Based on the literature reviewed, the following can be surmised: firstly, consumers perceive store image attributes as varying in their degree of importance; secondly, consumer behaviour is related to their perception of the importance of store image attributes; and thirdly, different consumer groups (e.g. gender groups) may vary in their perception of the importance of store image attributes. One of the weaknesses in existing research is the extensive implementation of self developed and self administered questionnaires and the fact that researchers generated the attributes included in these questionnaires. These issues gave rise to the following research questions:

- Which retail store image attributes do female apparel consumers in the South African consumer society perceive as important?
- What are the differences in the perceptions of these attributes based on membership of a population group and an age group?

The objectives formulated for this exploratory study were threefold:

- 1) To generate and describe store image attributes perceived as important by a selected group of female apparel shoppers

- 2) To determine whether any differences exist with regard to the perceived importance of store image dimensions based on the population group and the age of the respondents
- 3) To rank order Lindquist's proposed store image dimensions based on the respondents' perceptions of the importance of these dimensions.

For the purpose of this study, it was decided that a qualitative approach would be adopted. This approach will be discussed in the following section.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Research approach

The set objectives of this study determined to a large extent the choice of a qualitative method for data collection. According to Krueger and Casey (2000) focus groups have distinct features, namely involving people who possess certain characteristics and provide qualitative data through a focused discussion, culminating in a better understanding of the research problem. Focus groups were used to generate impressions of products, programmes, services, institutions or other objects of interest and to collect information on participants' attributes and opinions of the phenomenon of interest (Morgan, 1997; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Other features of focus groups include the following: it is a socially oriented research procedure allowing for flexibility (probing and exploring unanticipated issues). When compared with other qualitative research methods, focus groups are cost and time efficient. Large amounts of rich and concentrated data with high face validity can be collected through focus groups (Krueger, 1988; Morgan, 1997 & Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990).

TABLE 2
POPULATION AND AGE DISTRIBUTION OF EIGHT FOCUS GROUPS

Focus group	Population group	Age group	n
1	White	20-29	5
2	White	30-39	5
3	White	40-54	6
4	Coloured	20-29	3
5	Coloured	30-39	6
6	Coloured	40-54	5
7	Black	n. a.	3
8	Black	n. a.	4

Selecting focus groups as a specific research technique was based on the above mentioned characteristics of focus groups. The study aimed at generating impressions of products, services and female apparel consumers' perceptions of the importance of store image attributes. In addition, focus groups could be used to familiarise the researcher with the terminology used to discuss this phenomenon. Apparel is a high involvement product; therefore focus groups provided insight into participants' attitudes and opinions regarding the research topic, yielding self contained results.

Participants

Focus groups are typically conducted using purposely selected samples where participants are recruited from a limited number of sources, often only one (Morgan, 1997). In this study, the sample was drawn from a single list of account holders who purchased from a single apparel store for a period of one year. Consequently, the data should be interpreted as not being representative of a full spectrum of experiences and opinions.

The respondents who partook in the focus groups were large size female apparel consumers. They included black, coloured and

white individuals in the age group 20 to 54 years (see Table 2). The rationale for this decision was based on the following: stores catering for large size female consumers are relatively new in the apparel retail market. In the past, retailers offered merchandise for the larger sizes in a separate department of apparel specialty stores. It was decided to focus on large size females' perceptions of the importance of store image attributes due to the sensitivity regarding labelling them as large size consumers when they shop at these new apparel stores catering exclusively for this segment. The South African population comprises four groups, but the Asians are in the minority and, in addition, difficult to locate in the Western Cape. Furthermore, it was decided that teenagers and the mature consumer would be excluded from the sample population because both these groups have specific preferences and needs regarding apparel.

When considering the sampling for focus groups, it is more useful to think in terms of minimising sample bias than in terms of achieving generalisations. Consequently, sample selection was done considering the following important factors influencing focus groups, namely the composition, size and number of focus groups as well as the recruitment of participants.

The most important considerations in the *composition* of focus groups for this study were reasonable homogeneity (large size female apparel consumers, specific age and population groups) and unfamiliarity with each other, as this could influence group dynamics. However, enough variation among individual participants ensured contrasting opinions. This is in line with recommendations by Krueger (1988), Morgan (1997) and Stewart and Shamdasani (1990). The composition of the first six focus groups was based on population and age group. The final sample list proved to be inadequate for recruiting black participants for focus groups based on age. Therefore, one focus group, consisting of mixed ages, was composed by following the same procedure as for the previous focus groups. However, due to further constraints, the retail store involved in the study was asked to provide contact details of Black customers who purchased from the retail store in a given time period of one week. These customers were contacted and a second black focus group, also consisting of mixed ages, was composed.

It was decided to include eight participants in each focus group (*size of focus group*). This decision is supported by literature suggesting that the ideal focus group size be between seven and ten (Krueger, 1988, p. 93). Ten participants were recruited for each focus group, thereby over recruiting by 25% as suggested in literature to ensure that the need to cancel a group because of too few participants did not arise (Krueger, 1988, p. 99; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990, p. 57). Table 2 depicts the final focus group sizes, ranging from three to eight respondents. In the case of focus groups 4 and 7 it was decided that the sessions would be continued and the data used, as there is a tendency towards mini focus groups, consisting of four to six participants (Krueger, 1988, p. 93; Morgan, 1997, p. 42). These groups are easier to recruit and host and they are more comfortable for participants.

The possibility of a limited total range of experiences was addressed in this study by conducting a large *number of focus groups*. Eight focus groups were conducted. Krueger (1988, p. 97) and Morgan (1997, p. 43) recommend three to five focus groups based on the notion that more groups seldom provide meaningful new insights. Therefore, data collection should be terminated when the goal of saturation has been reached, that is the point at which additional data collection will not yield new understanding. Although the number of focus groups conducted in this investigation constituted more than what has been recommended in literature, the objectives of the study, specifically regarding the investigation of possible differences and/or similarities between population and age groups, were considered and the set objectives necessitated the number of focus groups held.

Recruitment of focus group participants was done as follows: the apparel retailer identified to co operate in this study is part of a large national and leading retail chain including stores specialising in female apparel, male apparel, sportswear and jewellery. Due to practical considerations, the sample population was drawn from one specific apparel retail outlet situated within a popular shopping centre near Stellenbosch in the Western Cape. This retail outlet draws customers from a wide area surrounding the shopping mall, including different age and population groups.

A list of account holders was obtained from the retailer to identify a final sample population comprising large size female apparel consumers in three age and three population groups. Potential participants were contacted personally via telephone approximately 10 to 14 days before the scheduled meeting to invite them to the group discussion. The telephonic invitation included a short screening interview to determine whether the specific participant fitted the recruitment category and was willing to and interested in participating. Where an identified participant was unable to attend a focus group, the next participant on the sample list who met the criteria of population and age group was selected for participation. The telephone interview was followed by a personal letter of invitation, with the relevant information (venue, date, time and transportation), to the potential respondents one week prior to the focus group session. Lastly, each individual was phoned one day before the focus group session to remind her of the session and to determine whether she intended to attend. This procedure is in accordance with recommendations by Krueger (1988), Morgan (1997) as well as Stewart and Shamdasani (1990).

The final sample consisted of 37 respondents. They were mainly white (43%) and coloured (38%) with a small percentage of blacks (19%). The majority (45%) of the respondents fell in the 40 to 54 age group, followed by 36% in the 30 to 39 age group. The respondents indicated that they spoke mostly Afrikaans at home (56%). Xhosa (16%) was the second most frequently spoken language at home, which could be attributed to the geographical area selected for the study. The number of respondents who spoke English at home (14%) was the same as those who were bilingual (14%). The educational level for this sample was relatively high, with 82% having achieved at least grade 12, and 48% having had tertiary education. The largest number of respondents (24%) had a monthly income of R10 001 to R20 000, followed by 22% with a monthly income of R7 001 to R10 000. An equal number of respondents (19%) fell in the categories of R5 001 to R7 000 and R3 001 to R5 000. Of the total sample, 60% were married, 16% divorced, 16% never married and 8% were widows.

Measuring instruments

A focus group schedule, including a questioning route and potential probes, was developed. The first phase of the discussion was less structured, starting with the generation of store image attributes deemed important by the participants themselves. The perceived importance of each of these generated store image attributes was measured by means of the Schutte Visual Scale (Schutte, 2000). This scale is calibrated from 1 to 11 on the one side and colour coded on the side facing the respondent. Respondents used a moveable pointer on the colour coded side of the scale to indicate their response. Although the individual responses were visible to all focus group members, they concentrated on the colour coded side of the scale. They were requested to make their own decisions and to keep the pointer at the specific place they had chosen until the fieldworkers had recorded all the numerical values as shown on the facilitator's side of the scale. When tested for validity the Schutte Visual scale compared favourably to the 9 point hedonic scale and the 9 point category scale (Webb, 2001, p. 90).

The second phase of the focus group discussion was more structured and the participants generated descriptions for each

of Lindquist's nine store image dimensions. Once again, the perceived importance of each of these categories was measured using the Schutte Visual Scale as described above.

Procedure

The advantages of focus groups were incorporated in the research design to realise their full potential. Groups were allowed to interact freely in a natural setting. A facilitator (moderator) conducted the eight focus groups in either Afrikaans or English or in both languages. This was achieved by determining the language understood by the majority of participants, which was the language used by the facilitator. Participants were encouraged to participate in the group discussion in the language that they felt most comfortable using. In some instances both languages were used to accommodate respondents. The atmosphere of the focus groups was relaxed. This was conducive to discussion and eliminated any ambiguity.

Although a schedule was followed, the facilitator allowed the exploration of unanticipated issues by probing into them. A tape recorder was used with permission of the focus group members and two fieldworkers took notes of the discussions. Each focus group lasted from one and a half to two hours and started with a short, informal introductory session. The discussion started by welcoming the participants and giving them an overview of the study, followed by establishing the ground rules for the session. The focus group discussion proceeded by following the focus group schedule. After completing this first part of the focus group discussions, the researchers grouped the generated attributes according to Lindquist's proposed nine store image dimensions. The aggregate ratings for each of these categories were calculated, as well as the aggregate ratings for the different population and age groups. During the second part of the focus group discussion, the participants generated descriptions for Lindquist's store image dimensions. They were also requested to rank order these dimensions according to the perceived importance. Aggregate ratings were calculated for each of the dimensions. After the discussion had been concluded, participants were requested to fill out a questionnaire to collect demographic information, such as age, language, employment and marital status, money spent on apparel per month and monthly income before tax and deductions. Data was collected within a two week period, except for the last focus group, which was conducted two weeks after the initial group sessions, because of recruitment complications.

The primary means of data capturing was through tape recording, ensuring that the quality of the recorded data was controlled throughout all the focus group sessions. Two researchers acted as scribes and recorded the discussions and ratings. Consequently, field notes supplemented the recordings. After each focus group, the tape recordings were used to compile typed transcriptions of each focus group. Data provided by the participants concentrated on the topic of perceived importance of store image attributes and was provided by a very narrowly defined sample, making the data even more precise. Interaction occurred between the researcher and participants, which allowed the researcher to gain further insight into the sample population. The study provided a large amount of data, exhausting the topic under investigation.

Careful consideration was given to establishing validity of this focus group study. Focus groups typically have high face validity due to the believability of comments and participants (Krueger, 1988). The researcher, participants, measuring instrument, and the research context are variables influencing the reliability of observations or data (Mouton & Marais, 1990). The research was designed to prevent possible bias regarding these variables. The research design attempted to restrict the effects of the disadvantages associated with focus groups. The study employed an experienced facilitator and a structured focus group schedule to ensure that the group discussions remained under control, without restricting free responses. The facilitator was skilled in

conducting focus group interviews, familiar with the field of apparel retailing and experienced in conducting focus groups in multi cultural environments. The location was chosen to ensure an informal, neutral setting conducive to conversation consistency. All the focus group interviews were held at the same venue. Care was taken to give an accurate interpretation of the results so as not to lead to overgeneralisation or bias. A systematic approach to the data analysis process was followed to minimise difficulties with the summary and interpretation of results.

Treatment of data

The data analysis procedure was conducted in accordance with recommendations by Krueger (1988). Data analysis commenced with a debriefing after each focus group discussion. The facilitator and the two researchers compared notes and ascertained whether the field notes captured all the relevant information. From this, a brief summary was compiled on the findings and interpretations of each group discussion. Transcriptions of the focus group discussions together with the brief summaries, focus group schedule, as well as the facilitator's and the scribes' summaries were scrutinised to note potential trends and patterns between the different focus groups, focusing on one section of the focus group schedule at a time. This was done while considering the words used by participants, the context and internal consistency. Comments worthy of quotation were also identified. From the raw data, content analysis was done to reach statements that are more descriptive.

The researchers compiled composite lists of store image attributes as generated by the respondents in the first part of the focus group discussion. This was done for each population and age group, as well as for the whole group. Each participant's rating for a specific attribute was recorded in the focus group discussion, and the aggregate numerical value for each of these attributes was calculated by adding the figures and dividing the sum by the number of respondents, as described by Schutte (2000, p. 15). The aggregates for each focus group were used to calculate the aggregates for each population and age group. These store image attributes were grouped together using Lindquist's proposed nine dimensions as a framework.

Data obtained from the second part of the focus group discussion was compiled into composite lists of how each focus group described Lindquist's nine store image dimensions. A list for the whole group was compiled based on these lists. The frequencies with which each attribute was mentioned within each focus group to describe a specific dimension were also determined. The aggregate rating for each of Lindquist's nine store image attribute dimensions were calculated for each focus group, as well as for the whole group.

To determine reliability, an independent individual served as referee following the same procedure for analysing the data as discussed above. The results of the referee's analysis were compared with the results of the researchers. The two analyses showed a level of agreement of 87%.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Although it was a qualitative study, the data were quantified and will be reported as such. The results will be discussed according to the set objectives formulated in a previous section.

Generated store image attributes and perceived importance

The respondents generated attributes during the first part of the focus group discussion. These attributes were grouped according to Lindquist's nine store image dimensions (see Figure 2). Only eight of these dimensions were applicable. In all the figures to follow, the scale values are given on the horizontal axis while store image attributes are depicted on the vertical axis. The most important dimensions were Merchandise (10.4) and Clientele

(10.4), followed by Service (10.1) and Store atmosphere (10.0). The dimension Physical facilities (9) was perceived to be of least importance. The respondents did not mention Convenience, one of the dimensions proposed by Lindquist. Each of the above mentioned eight dimensions will be analysed according to the descriptive attributes generated by the respondents:

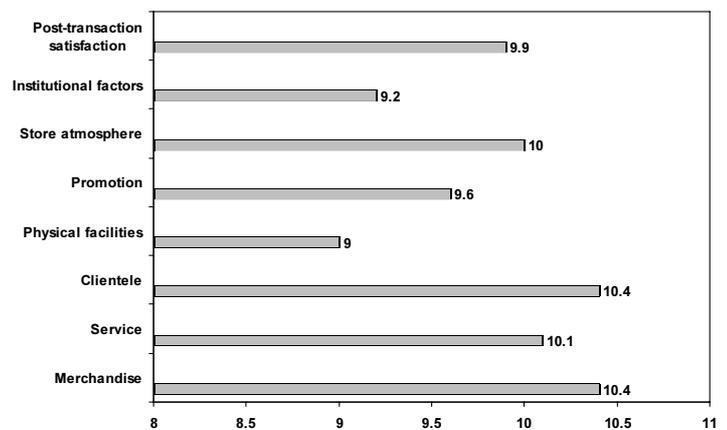


Figure 2: Perceived importance of dimensions

In the dimension Merchandise (Figure 3), quality rated highest, followed by availability, accessories, styling and assortment. The specific Merchandise attributes generated in this study correspond with other research on apparel store image attributes, for example quality, styling/fashion, selection/assortment and pricing (e.g. Birtwistle et al., 1999; Birtwistle & Shearer, 2001; Birtwistle & Siddiqui, 1995; Chowdhary, 1999; Erdem et al., 1999; Lumpkin et al., 1985; Paulins & Geistfeld, 2003; Shim & Kotsiopoulos, 1992; Van de Velde et al., 1996). However, availability, accessories, and specialised clothing were specific attributes generated in this study:

- One problem is the unavailability of the smaller sizes in this range (Focus group 1).
- The bags, the shoes ... they should have everything ... hats ... accessories like jewellery (Focus group 8).
- If you've got in your head I'm going to a dance, or I'm going to a Christmas party ... what can I have ... something to look special (Focus group 3).

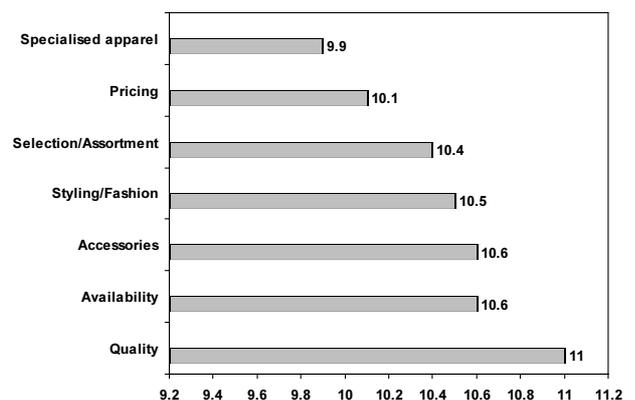


Figure 3: Merchandise

Clientele was perceived as the most important store image dimension, as was Merchandise (see Figure 1). Cross cultural communication received the highest rating, while No discrimination was perceived as equally important (see Figure 4):

- The communication of the sales assistant ... Sometimes the wrong information is conveyed because of different cultures. The language used might be wrong (Focus group 6).
- I don't like it when I walk into the shop and someone comes to me or walks behind me the whole time. I don't like that because I am not walking in there with the intention of stealing or maybe it is because of my colour (Focus group 7).

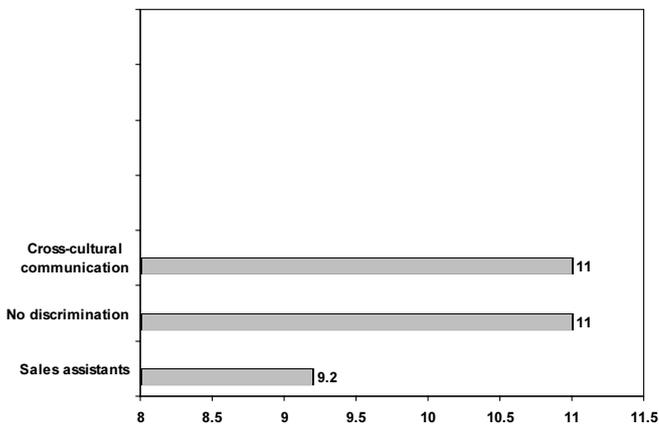


Figure 4: Clientele

Sales assistants as an attribute has been included in previous research on apparel store image attributes (Chowdhary, 1999; Lumpkin et al., 1985). Another attribute related to Clientele that has been included in the reviewed research, but not generated in this study, is social class appeal (Jacoby & Mazursky, 1984; Joyce & Lambert, 1996; Kim & Han, 2000).

In store transfers, consultants and accounts were the three most important attributes in the Service dimension (see Figure 5).

- If you look for something and they don't have your size, they should get it for you from another branch (Focus group 4).
- They can sit down with you and make suggestions of clothing items that will fit you (Focus group 5).
- When you've got a special function, you need at least someone who can assist you (Focus group 8).
- Sometimes you pay club fees (as an account holder), they put your name in the credit bureau (Focus group 8).

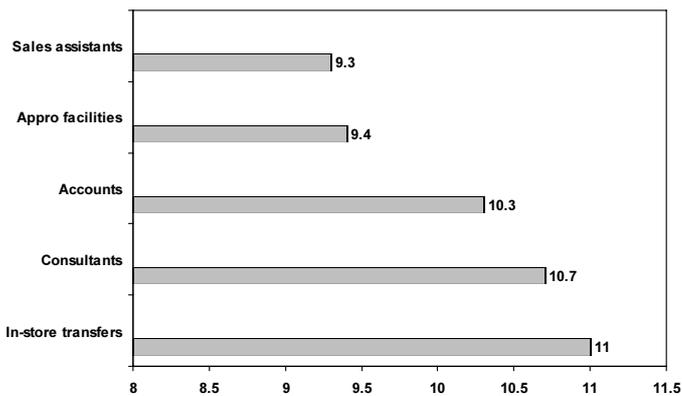


Figure 5: Service

The attribute Sales assistants has frequently been included in apparel store image research (Birtwistle et al., 1999; Birtwistle & Shearer, 2001; Birtwistle & Siddiqui, 1995; Chowdhary, 1989; James et al., 1976; Shim & Kotsiopoulos, 1992; Van de Velde et al., 1996). Shim and Kotsiopoulos' (1993) study was the only other study in the reviewed literature to include consultants. Lee and Johnson's (1997) study generated attributes relating to customer expectations of Service, including returns, refunds, layaways, alterations, in store credit, helpful suggestions and honest sales assistants. Sales assistants was the only attribute also generated in the present study, whilst none of the other reviewed literature included inter store transfers and appro facilities. Both Clientele and Service include Sales assistants as specific attributes included in these dimensions.

Although Physical facilities was rated lowest, numerous attributes were generated by the respondents (see Figure 6). Hangers, lighting and layout were perceived as the most important attributes. Mirrors were also considered important:

- The hangers are a pain (Focus group 2).
- Lighting is very important. Light can make a garment look good or bad (Focus group 1).
- I think the layout of the store is also important (Focus group 2).
- And they must have enough mirrors of all shapes and sizes (Focus group 3).

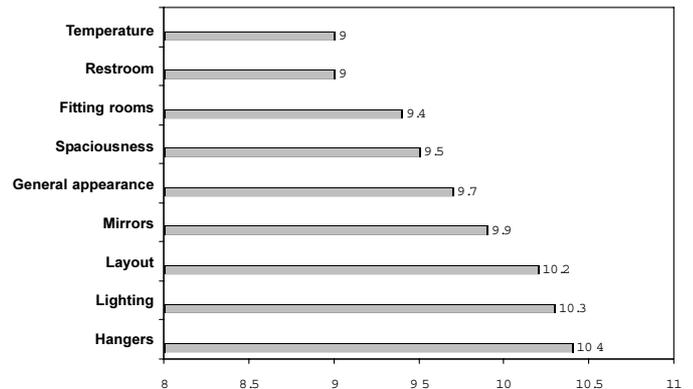


Figure 6: Physical facilities

Attributes, such as layout, general appearance, spacious fitting rooms, the portal (outside appearance), purchase points and a couch or sitting area are attributes generated in this study which correspond with other research on apparel store image (Birtwistle et al., 1999; Birtwistle & Siddiqui, 1995; Chowdhary, 1999; De Klerk et al., 1998; Lumpkin et al., 1985; Paulins & Geistfeld, 2003; Shim & Kotsiopoulos, 1993). Hangers, lighting, mirrors, restrooms, temperature, floors and a playpen were Physical facilities attributes not included in the reviewed literature, and it could be an indication that these are unique to this study.

With regard to Promotion (see Figure 7), respondents generated nine attributes. Sales promotion and Advertising were perceived as important sources of information. Another concern was that merchandise should be available in stores when it was advertised in the media:

- They should not have limited stock ... you [account holder] are a customer in that shop, at least you deserve to get some letter to say a sale is on ... we as customers must have our day for sale (Focus group 7).
- If you see it advertised ... then it is more attractive (Focus group 4).
- They advertise garments that are not in stores ... or only specific ones (Focus group 6).

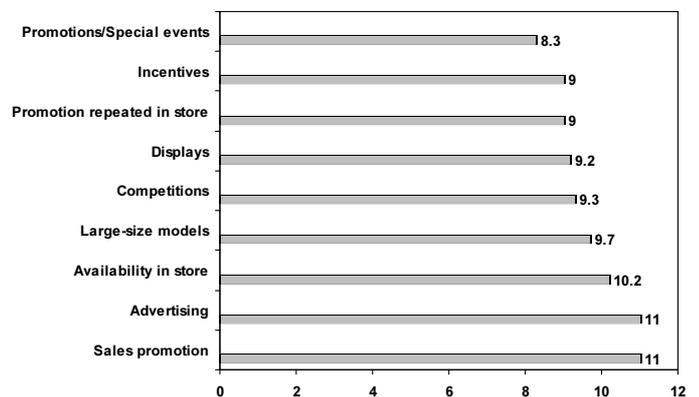


Figure 7: Promotion

Huddleston, Ford and Mahoney (1990) and Lumpkin et al. (1985) reported sales promotion as one of the attributes listed under Promotion. Advertising, availability in store of what was on promotion, displays and incentives were other attributes

mentioned in connection with Promotion as a store image dimension by previous research (Birtwistle & Siddiqui, 1995; Chowdhary, 1999; Joyce & Lambert, 1996; Lumpkin et al., 1985; Paulins & Geistfeld, 2003; Shim & Kotsiopoulos, 1993; Van de Velde et al., 1996). Having a large size model, competitions, promotions repeated in store and promotions/special events were attributes generated specific to this study.

When discussing Store atmosphere (see Figure 8), the importance of friendly sales assistants rated highest. The respondents also considered a good feeling about the store together with colour and a neutral smell as important:

- For me the most important when I go shopping ... I must feel worthy, feel special (Focus group 1).
- The colour combinations should be right (Focus group 2).
- I think they must also have air freshener (Focus group 7).

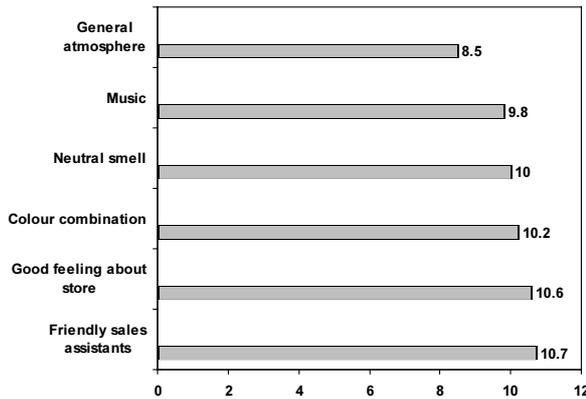


Figure 8: Store atmosphere

Store atmosphere is a dimension included in previous research on apparel store image (Birtwistle & Siddiqui, 1995; James et al., 1976; Paulins & Geistfeld, 2003; Shim & Kotsiopoulos, 1993). However, Chowdhary's (1999) research was the only study in the reviewed literature to include a specific attribute relating to Store atmosphere, namely sales assistants. This attribute was listed under Clientele and Service underscoring the notion that the dimensions are interrelated and also overlap to a certain extent.

Only two attributes were mentioned with regard to the dimension Institutional factors (see Figure 9), namely visibility of the manager on the floor and store bags:

- You see, the manager ... I think the manager should manage by walking around and interacting with customers (Focus group 7).
- The store bags ... it feels like you've been to a boutique. It is a strong plastic ... it is pretty, it makes you feel special (Focus group 1).

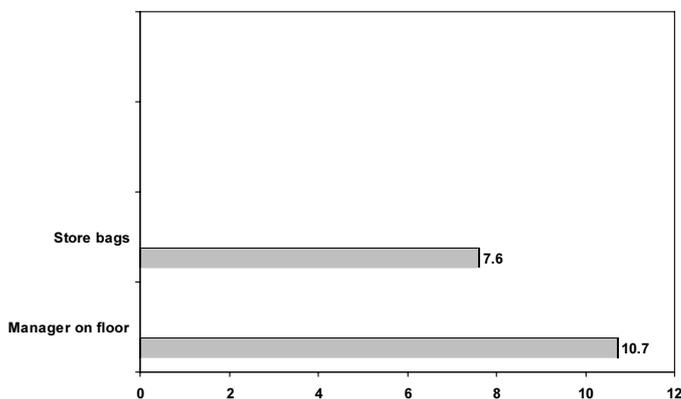


Figure 9: Institutional factors

Institutional factors, as a store image dimension, found much support in research on apparel store image attributes. The specific attributes included related mostly to store reputation

(Birtwistle et al., 1999; Birtwistle & Shearer, 2001; Chowdhary, 1999; Chowdhary, 1989; Huddleston et al., 1990; Jacoby & Mazursky, 1984; Joyce & Lambert, 1996; Lumpkin et al., 1985). Store reputation was not generated in this study.

The respondents could only generate two attributes in the dimension Post transaction satisfaction (see Figure 10). The ability to communicate with the company (report back) and the availability of a service that adjusts apparel were considered important features:

- Sometimes you get home and then it [the garment] is too wide, you have to adjust it, and after you have adjusted it, it is not the way you wanted it. There should be someone to make adjustments (Focus group 6).

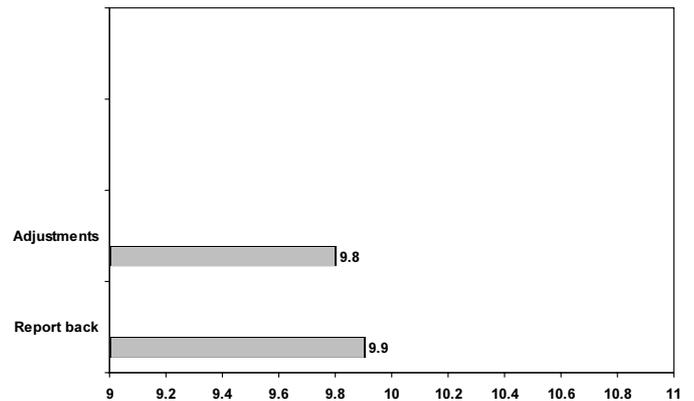


Figure 10: Post transaction satisfaction

Various studies included ease of return, which could relate to Post transaction satisfaction (Birtwistle et al., 1999; Birtwistle & Shearer, 2001; Birtwistle & Siddiqui, 1995; Chowdhary, 1999; Hirschman, Greenberg & Robertson, 1978; Huddleston et al., 1990; Lumpkin et al., 1985; Shim & Kotsiopoulos, 1992). The ability to report back to communicate satisfaction or dissatisfaction with a purchase was not included as an attribute of Post transaction satisfaction in the reviewed literature.

All the above mentioned attributes and dimensions received relatively high ratings on the Schutte Visual Scale. This could be because the respondents generated these attributes themselves. Furthermore, through the quali quantitative measure of the Schutte Visual Scale, the respondents' perceived importance of retail store image attributes was also determined. Thus, the first objective of the study was achieved.

Differences and similarities between the perceived importance of store image dimensions based on population group

For the purposes of this paper, only the perceived importance of the different store image dimensions are reported and not all the individual attributes (see Table 3).

**TABLE 3
PERCEIVED IMPORTANCE OF STORAGE IMAGE DIMENSIONS
BY POPULATION GROUP**

Dimensions	Population group		
	White	Coloured	Black
Merchandise	10,2	10,4	10,5
Service	9,9	10,2	10,8
Clientele	9,2	9,6	10,5
Physical facilities	8,8	9,9	8,6
Promotion	8,8	10,1	9,5
Store atmosphere	9,8	9,2	10,7
Institutional factors	7,6	-	10,7
Post-transaction satisfaction	-	9,8	-

Both the white and coloured respondents perceived *Merchandise* and *Service* as the two most important dimensions. Coloured respondents perceived *Merchandise* as more important (10,4) compared with white respondents (10,2). The same is true for *Service*. The black participants perceived *Service* as most important (10,8), which is higher than both the white and coloured participants' rating of the importance of *Merchandise* and *Service*. White participants perceived *Store atmosphere* as third most important (9,8), whilst black respondents perceived *Store atmosphere* as second most important together with *Institutional factors* (10,7). Once again, the black respondents' ratings are higher. The coloured participants' third most important store image dimension is *Promotion* (10,1), which is higher than their white counterparts' rating for both *Service* and *Store atmosphere*. Although the present study focused on the inclusion of population groups and did not measure cultural differences as such, other store image research supports findings that culture influences the perceived importance of store image dimensions and specific attributes (Kim & Han, 2000; Van de Velde et al., 1996).

Differences and similarities between the perceived importance of store image attributes based on age

Table 4 presents the ratings of each of the store image dimensions by age group. Distinct similarities and differences can be observed between the different age groups.

TABLE 4
PERCEIVED IMPORTANCE OF STORE IMAGE
DIMENSIONS BY AGE GROUPS

Dimensions	Age groups		
	20-29	30-39	40-54
Merchandise	10,4	10,2	10,6
Service	7,2	10,7	10,1
Clientele	7,7	9,9	9,7
Physical facilities	9,3	9,1	9,2
Promotion	9,9	9,6	9,9
Store atmosphere	9,5	10	9,5
Institutional factors	7,6	-	-
Post-transaction satisfaction	-	9,5	10,6

The most important similarity amongst age groups is the high rating of *Merchandise*. Both the 20 to 29 years and the 30 to 39 years age groups considered *Store Atmosphere* as important, and both the 30 to 39 years and 40 to 54 years age groups considered *Service* as important. However, the ratings for these dimensions are different. It is interesting to note that, although the respondents as a group rated *Service* highly, this dimension received the lowest rating by the 20 to 29 years group. It could be that this age group is used to low service levels as encountered at discount and/or self service stores. Only the 20 to 29 years group rated *Promotion* amongst the three most important dimensions. However, *Promotion* received comparable ratings from the other two age groups (9,6 for the 30 to 39 years age group and 9,9 for the 40 to 54 years age group). *Post transaction satisfaction* was only rated as one of the three highest perceived dimensions by the 40 to 54 years age group (10,6). This dimension received a much lower rating from the 30 to 39 years age group (9,5) and was not mentioned at all by the 20 to 29 years age group. It could be argued that older consumers are mature and value post purchase satisfaction because they buy apparel with the intention of wearing it for a longer time. Lastly, *Institutional factors* (7,6) was mentioned only by the 20 to 29 years age group and not at all by the respondents in the two other age groups. Overall, the 20 to 29 years age group rated store image dimensions lower than the other two age groups. Only one rating is above 10 and three below 8. The ratings of the other two age groups are much

higher. Three store image dimensions received ratings of 10 or more, and the rest fall between 9 and 10 for both age groups. These findings are in accordance with Paulins and Geistfeld (2003), who reported that the influence of age on perceptions of store attributes is less clear.

In summary: The study showed that *Merchandise* and *Service* were perceived as the most important store image dimensions by most of the different groups employed in this study (namely 4 age and 3 population groups), as well as by the whole group. *Store atmosphere* and *Promotion* were also perceived as the most important dimensions by more than one population and age group. Whilst *Institutional factors* and *Post transaction satisfaction* were only mentioned by three of the population and age groups respectively, these dimensions were perceived as one of the most important dimensions by the black respondents (*Institutional factors*) and the age group 40 to 54 years (*Post transaction satisfaction*). *Promotion* was not perceived as one of the most important dimensions by any of the population or age groups, or by the whole group. Three of the population and age groups, as well as the whole group, perceived this store image dimension as the least important. On the basis of these findings, it could be concluded that the second objective of the study was achieved.

Rank ordering of dimensions: Lindquist's versus generated dimensions

The third objective of this study was to rank order Lindquist's proposed nine store image dimensions based on the respondents' perceptions. In the first part of this study, the generated attributes perceived as important in store image were grouped on the basis of Lindquist's nine store image dimensions. In the second part of the study, the respondents were requested to rate Lindquist's nine dimensions. In both cases, the Schutte Visual Scale was used to quantify the perceived importance. A comparison of these two sets of ratings is presented in Table 5.

TABLE 5
COMPARISON OF RATINGS: CONSUMER PERCEPTION OF LINDQUIST'S
DIMENSIONS VERSUS OWN RESPONSES

Lindquist's dimensions	Own responses (First part of focus group)	Lindquist (Second part of focus group)
Merchandise	10,4	10,6
Service	10,1	10,5
Clientele	10,4	5,4
Physical facilities	9	9,2
Convenience	-	9,8
Promotion	9,6	10
Store atmosphere	10	10,1
Institutional factors	9,2	9,9
Post-transaction satisfaction	9,9	9,9

Respondents' ratings for Lindquist's proposed nine dimensions (second part of the study) differ from the ratings based on the generated store image attributes and dimensions (first part of the study). The rank order of dimensions based on these two sets of ratings also shows differences. *Merchandise* was rated as most important in both measurements (10,6 second part and 10,4 first part of the study). *Clientele*, however, was rated equally important in the first part of the study (10,4), but of least importance in the second part of the study (5,4). *Service* was perceived as next most important (10,5; 10,1) in both measurements, followed by *Store Atmosphere* (10,1; 10). *Promotion* (10) was also considered important in the second part of the study, followed by *Institutional factors* (9,9) and *Post transaction satisfaction* (9,9), *Convenience* (9,8) and *Physical facilities* (9,2). In the first part of the study, *Post transaction*

satisfaction (9,9), *Promotion* (9,6), *Institutional factors* (9,2) and *Physical facilities* (9) followed *Store atmosphere* (10). None of the generated attributes and dimensions (first part of the study) was grouped under *Convenience*, therefore resulting in no rating for this dimension in the first part of the study. It should be noted that *Clientele* was considered to be as important as *Merchandise* when the respondents generated store image attributes, but of least importance when they rated Lindquist's proposed dimensions. This could be considered as contradictory and difficult to explain. Respondents could be considered as being not consistent in their responses when rank ordering store image dimensions. However, certain trends regarding the importance of store image dimensions could be deduced from the findings.

CONCLUSION

Merchandise and *Clientele* were the two most important store image dimensions according to the respondents who partook in this exploratory study. The dimensions *Service*, *Store atmosphere*, *Post transaction satisfaction*, *Promotion*, *Institutional factors* and *Physical facilities*, in this order, followed in perceived importance. However, the difference between the store image dimensions perceived as most and least important is relatively small, emphasising the importance of all the store image dimensions. The store image attributes generated in this study received relatively high ratings, and the mere fact that they were mentioned proves their significance to the specific apparel consumers. This study generated specific store image attributes that were not included in any of the studies in the reviewed literature. It could be attributed to the fact that respondents generated store image attributes (qualitative study) versus researcher based store image attributes listed in the literature (quantitative studies). Differences and similarities exist in the perceived importance of retail store image dimensions based on population and age group. Black respondents generally gave higher ratings, while white respondents and the 20 to 29 year age group gave the lowest ratings. These findings should not be generalised due to the exploratory nature of the study and the fact that a selected group of apparel consumers were included in the study. The notion that the importance of store image dimensions should be linked to a specific product category and specific consumer groups are to a certain extent underscored by this research. The results did not yield definitive conclusions with regard to population and age groups other than to show that differences as well as similarities exist, which emphasises the need for further research.

Conclusions should be drawn with circumspection due to the complex nature of the phenomenon "store image". In this study, Lindquist's proposed nine store image attribute dimensions were used as point of departure as well as for data analysis. These dimensions are not necessarily mutually exclusive. In addition, Lindquist did not list some of the attributes perceived as important by the female apparel consumers included in this study. The names of the different store image dimensions proved to be problematic. *Clientele* and *Services*, for example, overlap. Respondents also had trouble in defining concepts, such as *Store atmosphere* and *Institutional factors*.

Recommendations

The findings of this study hold specific recommendations for female large size apparel retailers. These recommendations are summarised below.

- *Merchandise*: Styling should be specific and sensitive to the large size female consumer taking into account fashion ability and uniqueness.
- *Service*: Sales assistants should be trained and knowledgeable about apparel needs and should provide focussed attention.
- *Clientele*: Sales assistants should be familiar with consumer needs and show empathy.

- *Physical facilities*: Quite a number of specific requests were mentioned, such as spaciousness; enough fitting rooms that are comfortable and have sufficient lighting and mirrors; attractiveness of store portal and availability of enough purchase points.
- *Convenience*: Free, enclosed parking, location of store were important. Convenience should be an underlying dimension in all aspects of a store.
- *Promotion*: Retailers should send brochures and other promotional materials to customers together with their account. Media used for promotion should include television, magazines, newspapers and radio.
- *Store atmosphere*: Recommendations regarding the following features should be taken into account: Music (soft, relaxing), lighting (not too bright, allow for true colours to be seen), colours (soft, neutral), interior decoration (attractive, creating a warm feeling), carpets (soft, plush, luxurious) and no discrimination or prejudice.
- Institutional factors: The new and separate store catering for this segment of the market was well accepted. The respondents felt that it is important for customers to identify with a store
- Post transaction satisfaction: Merchandise should be easy to return, refund or credit options are important as well as a service to make garment adjustments. The store should build a personal relationship with customers through personal contact and feedback from customers.

Limitations

The limitations of this study relate mostly to the nature of focus groups as a research method and include the following:

- The sample employed in this study was relatively small, partly due to the qualitative nature of the study.
- The sample list, from which the respondents were selected, was representative of a very specific group of female apparel consumers, namely account holders who purchased from a specific retailer within a specific geographical area and time.
- The representation of black participants was inadequate for purposes of segmenting them into different age groups. Results based on age group excluded black respondents, limiting the conclusions based on age.

Suggestions for further research

Based on the results of this study, the following recommendations could be considered in future research:

Researchers should consider developing a theoretical model to serve as a point of departure when planning research on store image attributes. In addition, they should develop a measuring instrument (that means compile and test) based on this theoretical framework. It is imperative that researchers unite their endeavours instead of investigating randomly selected store image dimensions and attributes.

Lindquist's proposed nine store image attribute dimensions could be implemented as point of departure in future research. However, researchers should endeavour to refine and/or expand on the description and categorisation of the nine store image attribute dimensions. Some of the attributes could even be regrouped and definitions could be extended to provide a more comprehensive framework for research purposes. To design mutually exclusive dimensions of store image attributes might be an extremely difficult task.

The tentative findings on differences between population and age groups regarding the perceived importance of store image attributes could be further explored in future research. Demographic variables other than population group and age group could also be considered for inclusion in future research, as well as other consumer characteristics, such as the psychographic variables of lifestyle and personality.

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