

Managerial and consumer perceptions of apparel store image: A congruity analysis

R. du Preez*

J. van der Vyver

Stellenbosch University

ABSTRACT

The objectives of the study were to investigate the levels of congruity and incongruity existing between the consumer and managerial perceptions of store image. The store intercept method was used to collect data on the perceptions of a consumer sample ($n = 200$), while the data from the sample of managers ($n = 14$) were collected by means of personal interviews. An adapted version of the Apparel Store Image Scale (ASIS) was used in this study. The data analysis included the use of descriptive statistics and an ANOVA analysis. The congruence/incongruence classification was performed using Samli's six-type classification system. The empirical results revealed higher overall importance ratings by consumers when compared to managerial ratings. Managerial and consumer ratings on the importance of store image sub-dimensions differed significantly across 26 sub-dimensions. Proposals for rectifying the incongruence are suggested.

INTRODUCTION

The multi-million-rand apparel industry (R42.75 billion in 2007) is one of the most profitable and largest industries in South Africa and, as such, is characterised by competitiveness, complexity and dynamism (Datamonitor, 2009:7). The industry is currently under increased pressure given the prevailing economic circumstances and undesirable developments such as illegal imports. Despite these negative influences, the industry is forecast to reach a value of R62.32 billion in 2013 (\$8.2 billion at R7.60) (Datamonitor, 2009: 7). Harpes-Logan (1997) emphasised the importance of research of various stakeholders in the apparel industry, stating that because apparel is a non-durable commodity, it

would be purchased consistently by consumers regardless of prevailing economic circumstances. Taking into account the character of the industry, as well as the wide spectrum of stakeholders involved in it, one would expect there to be an extensive body of knowledge concerning South African apparel consumers, who contribute to the industry's profitability. However, the limited published research available points to the need for more scientific knowledge regarding the variables that influence apparel-shopping behaviour, and, specifically, store image.

Consumer and managerial perceptions of store image

Thang and Tan (2003) highlighted the ability of store image dimensions to attract consumers. However, store image can only be beneficial to a retailer if the store image expectations of consumers are met. Retailers thus need to focus on the store image dimension expectations of their selected target market if they wish to become leading stores that adequately differentiate themselves in terms of store image from other stores (Visser, du Preez and Janse van Noordwyk, 2006). As a prerequisite for superior business performance, both Newman and Cullen (2002), and Newman and Patel (2004), highlighted the importance of effective positioning and differentiation in the mind of the consumer. Markwick and Fill (1997) emphasised the fact that, if image studies are designed to disclose the consumers' perceptions of key attributes of a firm, it can then feed the information obtained about their consumers into their strategic management. Such information enables managers to align the perceptions held by its consumer target market with its strategy that is designed to communicate the desired image. Store image should, consequently, be viewed from both the consumer's and the retailer's perspective. Consumers' perceptions of stores are a combination of the messages and cues that they receive from the store, as well as of the importance that they place

on the store image dimensions. The managerial perception of their store's image is based on the strategic management and representation of the corporate identity and, consequently, of those sub-dimensions they perceive to be important to their consumers. Image dimensions should thus be managed and manipulated in marketing strategy to translate identity in order for them to be able to enhance and maintain patronage (Stuart, 1999; Osman, 1993).

Management cannot afford merely to assume and hope that the store image dimensions they view as important for their consumers are, in fact, important to the selected target market. The fit between consumer and managerial perceptions is therefore critical for success, and warrants an appropriate amount of research.

Congruency between managerial and consumer perceptions of store image

Consumers' expectations of a store develop from an ideal perception of what they want to experience in a store. Similarly, the congruence between management's and consumers' perceptions of store image should be based on the ideal. The store management should strive to create a store image that is congruent with the consumers' ideal. Against this background, Santala and Parvinen (2007) have advocated a shift from strategic fit to consumer fit, in order to learn how consumer perceptions could be conceptualised for practical implementation.

The relevance of image congruity research thus revolves around the feedback that it provides on the effectiveness of management's retailing strategy. Image congruity tests the accuracy of management's prediction of the consumers' perception of the importance of the store image dimensions (Osman, 1993). If the consumer's experiences and perceptions are those intended by management, then such congruity is likely to lead to greater store patronage and store loyalty - assuming that the marketing communication strategy is based on the target market's needs.

The contribution of the current study is grounded in the congruity between management's and consumers' perceptions of store image dimensions and sub-dimensions. Consumers' expectations change constantly, but retailers are expected to deliver consistently on consumer demands, while distinguishing themselves from others and creating value for consumers by offering a satisfactory experience and thereby building brand equity (Janse van Noordwyk, 2008; Miranda, Konya and Havrila, 2005). Building brand equity parallels building consumer store-based equity, and entails that consumers have an

approving, unique and strong association with the store (Hartman and Spiro, 2005).

Although store image has been investigated in commissioned market research, such research has tended not to be scrutinised according to scientific standards, and the results are not available in the public domain. This limited access has reduced and hampered the expansion of store image research in South Africa. Rather than focusing on the aggregate of the perceptions of store image alone, the current study includes perceptions of individual store image dimensions as well as an assessment of the importance of each sub-dimension in the formation of such an image. The results of the study offer feedback on the consumer and management perceptions of the importance of store image dimensions. An assessment of this nature can help to ensure that store expenditure is targeted towards those store image dimensions that consumers consider to be important, thereby eliminating the need for management to make thumb-suck assumptions. The primary question is thus: How congruent are managerial and consumer perceptions regarding the importance of apparel store image dimensions and sub-dimensions?

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the current study are:

- to investigate the importance of store image dimensions and sub-dimensions for consumers in an ideal apparel store;
- to investigate management's perception of what their consumers' views of the most important store image dimensions in an ideal apparel store are;
- to determine the acceptability of the current apparel store image as perceived by consumers;
- to assess any congruency between consumers' ideal concerning the importance of apparel store image dimensions, and what management perceive it to be;
- to classify congruence/incongruence according to six store image-type combinations; and
- to offer recommendations regarding the strategic rectification of a possible poor fit between management's and consumers' perceptions of store image dimensions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Store image and the contextualisation of the construct have been methodically presented in previous publications by Visser, Du Preez and Janse van Noordwyk (2006) and Du Preez, Visser and Janse van Noordwyk (2008a, 2008b,

2008c). For the purposes of this study the following definition of store image is offered:

Store image is defined as a complex, multidimensional construct based on the perception of tangible and intangible store attributes associated with eight dimensions, namely Atmosphere, Convenience, Facilities, Institutional, Merchandise, Promotion, Sales personnel, and Service. These dimensions are further delineated into sub-dimensions which are underpinned by specific store attributes. Store image has a gestalt nature that is represented by the interaction between the salient tangible and intangible store attributes. The formation of store image relies on the perception of a store which varies by retailer, product and target market. By implication, store image is influenced by (1) the consumer's perception of a set of salient store attributes, (2) the importance the consumer places on the various store image dimensions, sub-dimensions and the associated store attributes, as well as (3) the retailer's manipulation of these store attributes through strategic management (Du Preez *et al.*, 2008a:39).

Two existing models dealing with store image have been integrated in this study to serve as the conceptual framework (see Figure 1), namely Osman's (1993) model of retail image influences on loyalty patronage behaviour, and the paradigm of perceived image conflicts diagnostics proposed by Samli and Lincoln (1989).

Congruity analysis

“Congruity” can be regarded as a matching paradigm, reflecting a match or mismatch between two objects. Congruity theory is of a socio-psychological nature. The universal proposition is that if an individual has two related thoughts or perceptions that are somehow inconsistent with each other, psychological tension arises, aimed at restoring the desired consistency/congruity (Jacoby and Mazursky, 1984). Congruity theory focuses on how a source associates with, or disassociates itself from, some object. If both the source and the object are linked positively and valued equally by the consumer, congruity should exist, resulting in lack of tension in restoring consistency. Hence, if congruity is interpreted in terms of store image, what a consumer expects and wants in a store must be consistent with what is experienced. If not, the consumer will attempt to find that consistency elsewhere. Incongruity, therefore, undermines the role and performance of the store image (Osman, 1993; Samli and Lincoln, 1989). The key to influencing consumer behaviour, thus lies in not only communicating a store image that is attractive, but in addressing the consumers' perceptions of the actual store image (Thompson and Chen, 1998). To attain certainty regarding the holding of such a “true” perception by the consumers, and in order to establish a significant advantage, a store's image must not only be designed to fit the consumers' perceptions, but also to be perceived as doing so.

Retailers often tend to spend their scarce resources of time and money in creating a store image that offers a competitive advantage (Joyce and Lambert, 1996). However, such resources cannot be randomly allocated among different marketing and communication tactics (Miranda *et al.*, 2005). Newman and Patel (2004) suggest that retail management often lacks expertise and market awareness, despite maintaining a market-oriented policy. When congruity analysis is used as a strategic management tool, store image can become a differential advantage. Despite congruity analysis being a somewhat under-utilised tool for managerial decisions, it can be very helpful for manipulating action (Samli, Kelly and Hunt, 1998).

The paradigm of perceived image conflicts diagnostics (refer to the different stages shown in Figure 1) describes the process of assessing and attaining store image congruity. Samli *et al.* (1998) and Mo (2002) refer to this congruity analysis model as the GAP model.

According to Mo (2002: 5):

[T]he general idea of the GAP model is reinforced in three different ways. First, differences can occur between the actual and the perceived characteristics or performance of the store. Second, the idea of the GAP model that multiple publics can be involved in such analyses is reinforced. Finally, making it clear that management's perception of [store image] and [its] performance can be evaluated using image factors extends the GAP model.

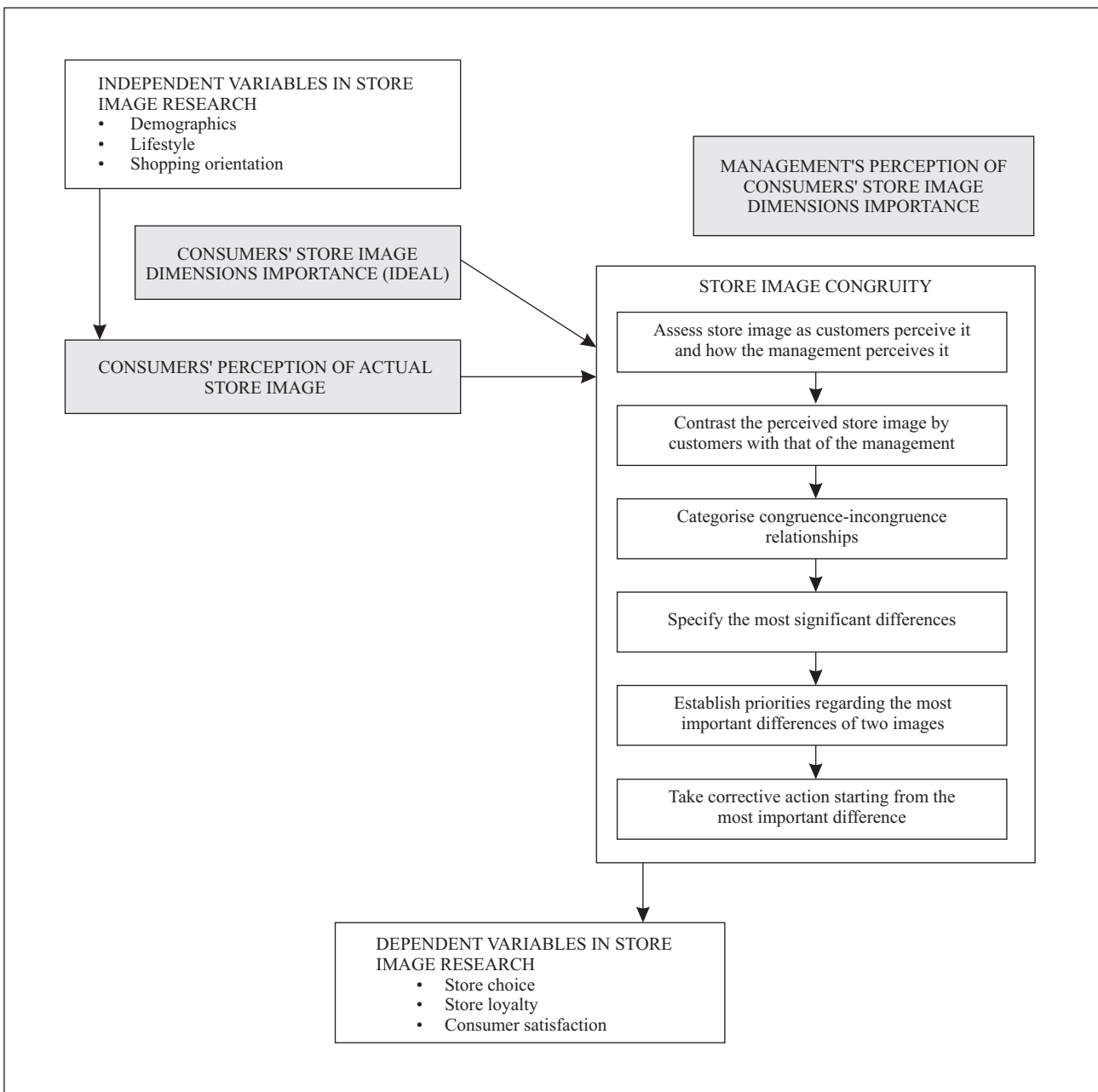
A store tends to be designed in accordance with what its management has decided its envisaged target market perceives to be important store dimensions. The management's perception of the image that their store portrays is often based solely on the dimensions and sub-dimensions that *they* perceive to be important to their consumers. Accordingly, the consumers' perceptions of the store image dimensions, unfortunately, often tend to remain unclear to most retailers, owing to a lack of measurement. A retailer's success or failure relates to the level of understanding that managers have of the consumers' perception of their store image. Samli *et al.* (1998: 27) described such an understanding as leading to the following performance: “Managerial action can be taken when image components are measured as unfavourable and can be used as advantages when found to be favourable”. According to Birtwistle, Clarke and Freathy (1999:245), “The indication is that when management display[s] a greater awareness, the store is more successful.” If the management's perception of the importance of the store image dimensions differs from the perceptions of the consumers concerned, their decisions regarding store design may be ineffective. “Management's misconceptions can influence decisions that meet its perceived consumer image expectations, but are, in fact,

different or the opposite of consumers actual image” (Samli *et al.*, 1998: 28). Steps should, therefore, be taken to identify such conflicts in perception. If inconsistencies are found between the perceptions of store image held by management and consumers, corrective action should be taken in order to achieve such congruence. If no discrepancies are found, the store image perceptions of management and consumers are similar. Such sub-

dimensions will then serve as a major strength, which should be capitalised on as a differential advantage.

Samli *et al.* (1998), building on research findings of Samli and Lincoln (1989), suggested six different types of image analysis combinations. Such a diagnostic orientation enables management to focus its attention on the areas of incongruence that are most critical (Mo, 2002).

**FIGURE 1
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**



Source: Adapted from Osman (1993:136) and Samli and Lincoln (1989:199)

TABLE 1
TYPOLGY OF IMAGE ANALYSIS COMBINATIONS¹⁾

Type	Description
1	Image congruence: above average*, with no statistical differences existing between how consumers and managers <i>perceive</i> an image dimension
2	Image congruence: below average, with no statistical differences existing between how the consumers and management <i>perceive</i> the dimension
3	Image incongruence: above average, with management higher, with both groups rating the dimension as positive, though statistical differences of <i>perception</i> between consumers and management do exist
4	Image incongruence: below average, with management rating the dimension higher than do the consumers, with statistical differences between the two groups
5	Image incongruence: above average, with the consumers rating the dimension higher than does management, with statistical differences between the two groups
6	Image incongruence: below average, with the consumers rating the dimension higher than does management, with statistical differences between the two groups. This reflects general weaknesses in the store that should be taken more seriously by management

¹⁾ Table 1 should be referred to when reading Table 8

* Average per dimension is a combined mean score for both managerial and consumer groups (refer to Table 8)

The diagnostic types are used to assess and group the significance of discrepancies and to classify the congruence level (Mo, 2002:8; Samli *et al.*, 1998:33).

METHODOLOGY

Design

Exploratory research, using a non-experimental (*ex post facto*) research design, was selected to explore the variance between the management's and consumers' perceptions of the consumers' ideal regarding the importance of the store image dimensions.

Sample

The sample was drawn from the consumers of a leading apparel retailer, consisting of one of the largest female apparel chains, with 13 trading divisions. The group trades in over 1 200 stores, having an average total turnover of R3 billion. Eight stores were chosen in Cape Town and surrounding Western Cape towns, five of which are situated in shopping malls and three of which are street-front stores. The managerial sample (n = 14) was drawn from the store design, marketing, brand and merchandise departments of the apparel retailer. The stratified quota consumer sample (n = 200) closely resembled the target profile presented by the retailer.

Measuring instrument and statistical analysis

The store-intercept method of data collection was used, employing trained fieldworkers. The adapted version (55 items) of the Apparel Store Image Scale (ASIS), developed by Janse van Noordwyk (2008), was used in this

study. The questionnaire was deemed appropriate owing to its inclusion of both quantitative and qualitative phases in its development, as well as because it had been specifically developed for the South African context. In previous studies that utilised the ASIS instrument, acceptable levels of reliability (α ranging from 0.691 to 0.812) were reported (Du Preez, Visser and Janse van Noordwyk (2008b, 2008c); Visser, Du Preez and Janse van Noordwyk, 2006). The instrument included three sections: demographics, apparel store sub-dimensions, and apparel store dimensions. A 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *unimportant* to 5 = *very important*) measured levels of importance. The original ASIS scale was supplemented with a scale measuring acceptability (1 = *unacceptable* to 5 = *acceptable*) of store image dimensions. The data were subjected to various analyses, including a descriptive analysis, a reliability analysis, and an analysis of variance (ANOVA). The store image dimensions' congruence/incongruence, were classified according to Samli *et al.*'s (1998) 6-type classification system, by ranking the means of the items (the sub-dimensions of each dimension) from the highest to lowest. A combined mean score (for both groups) in terms of each dimension was calculated for the following: atmosphere (\bar{x} = 4.39); convenience (\bar{x} = 4.24); facilities (\bar{x} = 4.31); institutional (\bar{x} = 4.21); merchandise (\bar{x} = 4.11); promotions (\bar{x} = 4.24); sales personnel (\bar{x} = 3.67) and service (\bar{x} = 3.78).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Sample profile and reliability

The consumer sample (n = 200) included white (28%), black (35%), coloured (35%) and Indian (1%) respondents. Most of the respondents were between 20 and

TABLE 2
RELIABILITY OF STORE IMAGE DIMENSIONS

Dimensions	Number of items	Consumers' perceptions of the importance of store image dimensions (n=200)	Consumers' perceptions of the acceptability of store image dimensions (n=200)	Management's perception of how consumers view the importance of store image dimensions (n=14)
Store Image	55	0.85	0.89	0.84
Atmosphere	6	0.91	0.88	0.73
Convenience	7	0.88	0.81	0.69
Merchandise	7	0.88	0.87	0.75
Promotions	6	0.88	0.85	0.67
Service	8	0.89	0.92	0.84
Facilities	8	0.88	0.87	0.78
Institutional	5	0.86	0.82	0.85
Sales Personnel	8	0.84	0.91	0.83

TABLE 3
CONSUMERS' AND MANAGERIAL PERCEPTIONS OF THE IDEAL APPAREL STORE

Dimensions	Sub-dimensions (items)	Consumer rating (% as very important)	Managerial rating* (% as very important)
Atmosphere	Shopping experience	79	57
	Attractiveness of décor in store	74	79
	Fashionability of store interior	73	
		71	
Convenience	Ease of finding merchandise items	74	50
	Flow of people in mall where store is situated	71	79
	Store-opening hours		50
			50
Merchandise	Quality of merchandise in store	79	79
	Availability of styles suited to my age	83	64
	Variety of merchandise categories	82	
	Availability of fashion merchandise	79	57
Promotions	Availability of special offers		64
	Sales with marked-down prices	69	57
	Timely announcement of sales	74	
	Ideas for wearing merchandise given in displays	72	75
	Credibility of store advertising	72	50
Service	Courteousness of sales personnel	76	57
	Expertise of sales personnel	82	71
	Number of sales personnel	75	
		70	
Facilities	Lighting in fitting-rooms	67	29
Institutional		65	29
Sales Personnel		65	36

* Managers indicated what they believed consumers viewed as important dimensions and sub-dimensions

29 years old (50%), employed (95%) and unmarried (52%). Most bought clothing on a monthly basis (45%), spending between R300 - R600 per month on such purchases (65%). The managerial sample (n = 14) included predominantly white managers (79%). The managers tended to be English-speaking (86%), 30-39 years old

(72%) and holding middle and senior management positions in the store design, marketing, brand and merchandise departments. The reliability results indicated acceptable Cronbach alpha values of the store image dimensions, ranging between 0.67 and 0.92 (refer to Table 2).

Importance of store image dimensions and sub-dimensions: Consumers' and managerial perceptions of the ideal apparel store

Table 3 identifies the dimensions and sub-dimensions of the ideal apparel store as perceived by consumers and management. The values indicate only the highest percentage of consumers and management positive ratings (very important).

No sub-dimension items in the institutional and sales personnel dimensions received high ratings from either group. The tendency of consumers toward high ratings (reflecting a high degree of importance) on all dimensions could be attributed to the Gestalt nature of the store image, in terms of which the store image is viewed (and evaluated) as a whole rather than in parts. Having such a nature could show that the general consumer is unable to differentiate adequately between the store image as a whole and its various components (Feeley, 2002; Wu and Petroschius, 1987). Such an inability to differentiate resulted in either inflated or deflated ratings, based on the rater's overall perception. Consumers, therefore, were seen to view all the dimensions of the store image as important, supporting the notion that, even though dimensions of the store image can be manipulated, with the atmosphere and merchandise being deemed most important (highest ratings as seen in Table 3), all the dimensions should be managed in order to create a positive store image.

The finding supports the significance of the store image dimensions and sub-dimensions for consumers of the apparel retailer under investigation. Such high ratings may further indicate that consumers are tending to become more informed and discerning with regard to what apparel stores can offer, as well as about what they want. Their increased knowledge of the importance of store image has increased their expectations of the ideal apparel retailer. Managerial ratings were generally lower and more diverse across the scale than were the consumer ratings (refer to Table 3).

A comparison of the managerial ratings with those of the consumers shows noticeable differences (for example the institutional and facilities dimensions in Table 3). Although various rater effects might have influenced the results, the results also might have been due to management being unaware of the importance that consumers place on certain dimensions, to the level of sophistication of the consumers concerned, and to the importance of an overall positive shopping experience for consumers.

Both managers and consumers rated the dimensions of merchandise (79%) and atmosphere (79%) most important

(refer to Table 3). The high rating of merchandise may indicate the particular target market's specific need to be fashionable within an affordable budget (Vahie and Paswan, 2006). For consumers who are fashion-conscious, fashionable merchandise is a priority, as their fashion-consciousness reflects their personal image (Newman and Patel, 2004). Therefore, such a dimension is important to the expression of the consumers' self-image, resulting in the high rating.

The high rating given to the dimension of atmosphere (79% of consumers viewed this sub-dimension as very important) might be attributed to consumers' need to experience satisfaction during their shopping and purchasing experiences. Such a finding is further supported by the third-place ranking of service (76%). Such a ranking might be caused by services being included in the current study which are not rendered by the stores involved in the research, while the consumers are aware of the fact that such services are available at other retailers. However, the difference between the sub-dimensions and dimensions perceived to be most and least important was relatively smaller for consumers than it was for management. The importance ratings of management indicated a clearer perception of what was most and least important. Their ratings could be ascribed to their involvement with the different sub-dimensions, as well as with their more intimate knowledge of what the store intended through the design of its store image.

Acceptability of the current store image: Consumers' perceptions

The results concerning what consumers viewed to be important in an ideal store are not regarded as adequate evidence for recommending which store image dimensions and sub-dimensions need to be altered. Thompson and Chen (1998) believed that the solution was to address consumers' perception of the actual store image, because perception is subjective and relies on personal experience. Therefore, even if the congruency between management and consumers' perceptions of store image is high, the perceived image may not be that intended by management.

The results of the current study indicate that the acceptability ratings (refer to Table 4) were moderately high, ranging between 41% and 59%, showing that the consumers found the store image to be acceptable. Such a commendable result signifies that the retailer used in this study understood the expectations and needs of the consumers. However, the acceptability ratings, which were comparatively lower than consumers' importance ratings, show that there was room for improvement. Only the most acceptable sub-dimensions are depicted in Table 4.

TABLE 4
CONSUMER'S PERCEPTION OF THE ACCEPTABILITY OF THE
CURRENT STORE IMAGE

Dimensions	Sub-dimensions (items)	Consumer rating (% very acceptable)
Atmosphere	Colours used in store	46 50
Convenience	Store-opening hours Accessibility of store Flow of people in mall where store is situated	46 59 52 51
Facilities	Ease of shopping with family in mall where the store is situated Accessibility of store entrance/exit	42 51 50
Merchandise	Quality of merchandise in store Variety of merchandise categories	47 58 54
Promotions	Ideas for wearing merchandise given in displays	41 50
Sales personnel	Similarity in gender	41 51
Service		43
Institutional		41

TABLE 5
CONSUMER PERCEPTIONS COMPARISON:
CURRENT AND IDEAL STORE IMAGE

Dimension	Current and ideal store image	
	F-value	Sig.
Atmosphere	33.32	0.00*
Convenience	1.69	0.19
Facilities	24.64	0.00*
Institutional	2.69	0.10
Merchandise	57.14	0.00*
Promotion	17.25	0.00*
Sales personnel	0.69	0.41
Service	14.44	0.00*

*p < 0.05

Merchandise (47%), atmosphere (46%), and convenience (46%) were viewed as the most satisfactory dimensions of the store under review. The acceptability of the remaining dimensions was found to be as follows: service (43%); facilities (42%); promotions (41%); sales personnel (41%); and institutional (41%). No sub-dimensions under the service and institutional dimensions were rated as very acceptable. However, when examining the store image dimensions holistically, it becomes clear that the respondents perceived the *status quo* of the retailer's current store image as moderately acceptable. Such a finding might indicate that the management group had a relatively accurate perception of the consumers' actual perception of store image. Although the consumers and management had similar perceptions of the dimensions,

the actual store design still differed regarding the sub-dimensions.

Comparison between consumers' ideal store image perception and the acceptability of current store image

The dimensions which consumers regard as important should have the greatest effect on their shopping behaviour, and these dimensions would therefore be worth altering, if found inadequate or not acceptable (Patterson and Spreng, 1997; Osman, 1993;). The one-way repeated measures ANOVA results (with the store image dimensions as dependent variables and the consumers' perceptions as independent variables) indicating differences between groups, are presented in Table 5.

Statistically significant differences were revealed in respect of the dimensions merchandise (F = 57.14), atmosphere (F = 33.32), facilities (F = 24.64), promotion (F = 17.25) and service (F = 14.44). The merchandise, atmosphere and facilities dimensions showed a rather large degree of incongruence between the current and the ideal perceptions of consumers, which could be problematic because of the importance of these dimensions (refer to Table 3). The dimensions Institutional (F = 2.69), Convenience (F = 1.69) and Sales personnel (F = 0.69) did not show any statistically significant differences. The acceptability of these dimensions was not very high but neither is their importance. These dimensions therefore corresponded with consumer expectations.

Comparing the importance of the ideal ratings and the current state of store image dimensions is difficult, because

of the high importance ratings on all dimensions. It is exceptional to find such high ratings for current acceptability of store image. If, however, consumers experienced any major dissatisfaction with store image attributes, a definite indication of lower ratings would have been prevalent. The acceptability ratings were moderately high, revealing high acceptability with regard to store image as a whole.

Congruity analysis: A comparison of consumers' and management's perceptions of the importance of ideal store image dimensions

The results of the congruity and ANOVA analysis are depicted in Table 6. The classification type is based on the congruity types explained in Table 1.

TABLE 6
THE IMPORTANCE OF IDEAL STORE IMAGE DIMENSIONS:
MANAGEMENT AND CONSUMER COMPARISON

Dimensions and sub-dimensions (items)	Management mean	SD	Consumer mean	SD	Average combined mean	Significance of compared management and consumer means		
						F-value	Sig.	Classification type**
Atmosphere	4.14		4.64		4.39	6.82	0.009*	
1 Fashionability of store interior	4.21	0.57	4.62	0.66		5.01	0.03*	6
2 Style of décor in store	4.07	0.73	4.60	0.64		8.89	0.003*	6
3 Attractiveness of décor in store	4.21	0.69	4.64	0.65		5.61	0.02*	6
4 Colours used in store	3.92	0.73	4.52	0.83		6.87	0.009*	6
5 Suitable finishing materials used in store	3.64	0.74	4.42	0.91		9.59	0.002*	6
6 Shopping experience	4.78	0.42	4.64	0.70		0.53	0.47	1
Convenience	4.10		4.38		4.24	1.64	0.20	
7 Time it takes to travel to store	3.71	0.82	4.26	0.98		4.15	0.04*	6
8 Proximity of store to variety of other stores	3.85	0.86	4.23	1.00		1.94	0.17	2
9 Accessibility of store	4.33	0.59	4.33	0.93		0.00	1.00	1
10 Flow of people in mall where store is situated	4.35	0.74	4.24	0.93		0.19	0.66	1
11 Amount of walking required within store	3.28	0.91	4.25	1.05		11.17	0.001*	6
12 Ease of finding merchandise items	4.78	0.42	4.59	0.74		0.87	0.35	1
13 Store-opening hours	4.42	0.64	4.43	0.86		0.00	0.99	1
Facilities	4.13		4.48		4.31	3.23	0.07	
14 Accessibility of store entrance/exit	4.28	0.72	4.41	0.82		0.35	0.56	1
15 Position of aisles in store	3.71	0.82	4.33	0.84		6.98	0.009*	6
16 Width of aisles in store	3.76	0.79	4.32	0.85		3.49	0.02*	6
17 Accessibility of merchandise rails	4.28	0.72	4.55	0.68		2.08	0.15	2
18 Number of fitting-rooms	4.28	0.72	4.49	0.72		1.05	0.31	2
19 Lighting in fitting-rooms	4.57	0.64	4.51	0.78		0.08	0.78	1
20 Ease of shopping with family in mall where the store is situated	4.00	0.87	4.42	0.90		2.94	0.09	2
Institutional	4.08		4.33		4.21	1.03	0.31	
21 Social class appeal of store	3.84	0.76	4.24	0.83		3.00	0.08	2
22 Store's appeal to friends	3.92	0.82	4.20	0.90		1.24	0.27	2
23 Similarity in appearance between sales personnel and consumers	3.71	0.61	4.07	0.96		1.92	0.17	2
24 Ability to identify with store	4.42	0.51	4.37	0.79		0.07	0.79	1
25 Similarity between store image and self-image	4.46	0.49	4.30	0.83		0.46	0.50	1
26 Store's effort to build personal relationship with consumers	4.14	0.94	4.45	0.84		1.77	0.19	2

TABLE 6
THE IMPORTANCE OF IDEAL STORE IMAGE DIMENSIONS:
MANAGEMENT AND CONSUMER COMPARISON (cont.)

Dimensions and sub-dimensions (items)	Management mean	SD	Consumer mean	SD	Average combined mean	Significance of compared management and consumer means		
						F-value	Sig.	Classification type**
Merchandise	3.68		4.53		4.11	24.4	<0.001*	
27 Variety of merchandise categories	4.57	0.51	4.70	0.63		0.57	0.45	1
28 Availability of imported merchandise	2.57	1.08	4.15	1.03		30.49	<0.001*	6
29 Availability of unique merchandise	3.42	1.08	4.36	0.89		13.89	<0.001*	6
30 Availability of exclusive merchandise	2.78	0.89	4.33	0.98		32.52	<0.001*	6
31 Availability of designer-label merchandise	2.42	0.85	4.14	1.03		36.35	<0.001*	6
32 Availability of fashion merchandise	4.64	0.49	4.59	0.66		0.08	0.78	1
33 Availability of styles suited to my age	4.42	0.64	4.74	0.62		3.37	0.07	1
34 Quality of merchandise in store	4.64	0.49	4.77	0.55		0.74	0.39	1
Promotions	3.94		4.54		4.24	10.88	0.001*	
35 Credibility of store advertising	4.35	0.74	4.55	0.78		0.86	0.36	1
36 Models used in store advertising	3.71	0.82	4.32	0.94		5.61	0.02*	6
37 Inclusion of brochures in mailed store card account	4.28	0.61	4.36	0.98		0.08	0.78	1
38 Spaciousness of in-store displays	3.35	1.00	4.28	0.98		11.54	0.001*	6
39 Ideas for wearing merchandise given in displays	4.42	0.85	4.55	0.75		0.36	0.55	1
40 Sales with marked-down prices	4.00	0.87	4.57	0.80		6.55	0.01*	6
41 Timely announcement of sales	3.53	0.84	4.56	0.83		19.43	<0.001*	6
42 Availability of special offers	3.85	1.02	4.53	0.96		6.26	0.01*	6
Sales personnel	3.28		4.05		3.67	8.94	0.003*	
43 Fashionability of sales personnel	3.57	0.93	4.35	0.87		10.21	0.002*	6
44 Attractiveness of sales personnel	3.21	0.97	4.15	0.93		12.99	<0.001*	6
45 Similarity in body type between sales personnel and self	3.35	1.00	3.82	1.10		2.34	0.13	2
46 Similarity in age	3.21	1.18	3.81	1.13		3.61	0.06	2
47 Similarity in gender	3.07	0.91	3.80	1.18		5.09	0.03*	6
Service	3.28		4.27		3.78	22.56	<0.001*	
48 Expertise of sales personnel	4.42	0.51	4.62	0.80		0.79	0.38	1
49 Courteousness of sales personnel	4.71	0.46	4.71	0.70		0.00	0.98	1
50 Number of sales personnel	3.78	0.89	4.59	0.72		15.99	<0.001*	5
51 Availability of gift vouchers	3.42	1.15	4.17	1.04		6.48	0.01*	6
52 Availability of gift registry	1.84	1.16	3.90	1.26		34.84	<0.001*	6
53 Availability of inter-store transfers	4.00	0.96	4.29	0.98		1.19	0.28	1
54 Availability of mail-order	2.00	1.24	3.57	1.39		16.62	<0.001*	6
55 Availability of alteration services	2.07	1.20	3.95	1.24		29.72	<0.001*	6

* p < 0.05

** Refer to Table 1 for classification type

Image congruence - above-average ratings by both groups (Type 1)

Nineteen sub-dimensions were classified as Type 1. The ratings of these sub-dimensions served to indicate the strengths in this apparel retailer's store image, as both management and consumers rated them high, although not equally high in all cases. The following sub-dimensions received exceptionally high importance ratings:

- *variety of merchandise categories* (consumer \bar{x} = 4.70)
- *shopping experience* (management \bar{x} = 4.78)
- *quality of merchandise in store* (consumer \bar{x} = 4.77)

- *ease of finding merchandise items* (management \bar{x} = 4.78)
- *courteousness of sales personnel* (consumer and management \bar{x} = 4.71) and
- *availability of styles suited to my age* (consumer \bar{x} = 4.74)

These results partly concur with Visser *et al.*'s (2006) findings that consumers view merchandise, followed by convenience, as being very important store image dimensions. The importance of service quality was thus confirmed, in line with the results of Swoboda, Haelsig, Morschett and Schramm-Klein (2007), who argued that, even in self-service sectors, the importance of service

quality and friendly and competent staff was evident. Hu and Jasper (2006) rephrased the importance of skilled staff as part of in-store social cues that impact on consumers' perception of store image and patronage intention. Such dimensions should be enhanced through continuous communication and strategic marketing initiatives.

Image congruence: below-average ratings by both groups (Type 2)

Ten sub-dimensions representative of the institutional (4 items); sales personnel (2 items); facilities (3 items) and convenience (1 item) dimensions were classified as Type 2, as management and consumers rated these as below average. Thus, no additional resources needed to be spent on these items (Samli *et al.*, 1998).

Image incongruence: above-average ratings with management higher (Type 3); below-average ratings with management higher (Type 4)

The fact that no Type 3 or Type 4 classifications were made confirms that consumers' perceptions were comparatively higher than those of management. Such ratings might be due to management being closely involved with the store image, and therefore being more critical of it. It might also indicate a misperception on the part of management about how significant store image is for their customers.

Image incongruence: above-average ratings with consumers higher (Type 5)

Only one sub-dimension was classified as Type 5, namely the *number of sales personnel*. Such a classification might be regarded as problematic, as the service dimension was rated important. Managers underestimated consumer perceptions of the importance of this sub-dimension. Furthermore, some additional discrepancies in service ratings were apparent because of the services that the apparel retailer under review did not offer.

Image incongruence: below-average ratings with consumers higher (Type 6)

Twenty-five sub-dimensions were classified as Type 6 that represent seven dimensions: atmosphere (5 items); convenience (2 items); facilities (2 items); promotions (5 items); merchandise (4 items); sales personnel (3 items); and service (4 items). Consumers perceived these sub-dimensions as more important than management, indicating a general weakness of the store. When management perceives a sub-dimension to be more important than do the consumers, such a rating will have a smaller negative effect, as it will reflect that the consumers' expectations have been surpassed. In the case of

management perceiving the sub-dimensions to be less important, the consumers' expectations will not have been met, and the ratings will reflect their disappointment. The store in question should give serious consideration to these 25 sub-dimensions, as they are viewed as inhibitors of a positive store image. Atmosphere affects consumers' experience and mood which will affect the way in which they evaluate the store and the merchandise offered (Koo, 2003). Service and atmosphere are viewed as critical to the overall shopping experience. Therefore, Type 6 incongruence should be considered as the most pressing factors in this management's rectification plan, as this can result in poor consumer experience, avoidance behaviour, and negative word-of-mouth.

The statistically significant differences ($p < 0.001$) between managerial and consumer perceptions of the importance of ideal store image dimensions were as follows (see Table 6): merchandise ($F = 24.4$) and service ($F = 22.56$) revealed the largest discrepancy between the consumers' and management's perceptions, followed by promotions ($F = 10.88$), sales personnel ($F = 8.94$) and atmosphere ($F = 6.82$). Possible reasons for the disparity between the F values are, firstly, that some services described in the questionnaire were not offered by the apparel retailer under review, because they were perceived as relatively unimportant. Secondly, merchandise is very closely connected to style, with opinions about labels, imported goods and unique items reflecting individual preference. Statistically insignificant differences between the dimensions of convenience and institutional were supported by the findings, which indicated that congruency existed between all the sub-dimensions within the institutional dimension, while only two sub-dimensions were not congruent on the convenience dimension.

To summarise the main findings: Atmosphere, merchandise and service were rated as the most important dimensions according to consumer perceptions of the ideal, while merchandise, atmosphere, promotion and service were the most important dimensions according to management. Merchandise, atmosphere and convenience were rated as the most acceptable by consumers. The congruency classifications indicated that 29 of the 55 sub-dimensions classified as Type 1 and Type 2 were perceived fairly similarly by both the management and consumers, indicating their congruence. The sub-dimensions related to facilities, convenience and institutional dimensions clearly showed the most congruence. Merchandise, service, promotions and atmosphere showed the highest levels of incongruence (according to the number of sub-dimensions showing a lack of congruence). Such a finding may indicate that areas exist in which the apparel retailer does not correctly judge consumers' perceptions.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Implications for the apparel retailer

Consumers view all store image dimensions as important, supporting the notion that, even though the dimensions of store image can be manipulated and the atmosphere and merchandise deemed most important, all dimensions should be managed to establish a positive store image. With consumers becoming more discerning, they attach greater importance to store image than any retailer might realise. Store image contributes to the overall consumer experience, and therefore should receive the appropriate amount of attention. The practical implications of the findings of this exploratory study include:

The Type 1 image congruence should be treated as strengths of the retailer, and be suitably promoted and maintained. Such enhancement could be achieved by way of continuous communication and the use of strategic marketing initiatives, such as advertising and promotional messages. The retailer might strive to maintain even higher levels of quality of a greater variety of merchandise in an attempt to improve on this dimension. The sub-dimensions of convenience related to ease of shopping, such as store-opening hours and the ease of finding merchandise items, might be focused on, to try to achieve even higher levels of acceptability.

Though the image congruency of the Type 2 sub-dimensions might be improved, the cost of such enhancement might not equal the benefit to be gained from such improvement. Guiding sales personnel in respect of appearance management and the rearranging of rails to improve accessibility could be more economically and readily achieved. Doing so would be unproblematic, considering that consumers already appear to find such items acceptable.

Store image is influenced negatively by Type 6 incongruity, and should therefore be viewed as the most serious challenges. Thus, the following detailed recommendations are offered:

- Improve the interior design of the store (*style of décor in store; colours used in store; attractiveness of décor in store; and suitable finishing materials used in store*) to enhance the consumers' shopping experience.
- Reduce the *amount of walking required within the store*. Amount of walking could be minimised by assuring that the products that comprise complementary purchases are displayed alongside one another.
- Management should attend to the *width and position of aisles in store*. Owing to the

perception that too much stock is presented on the floor, resulting in the store seeming to be congested, careful consideration should be paid to the amount of stock kept on the floor and to arranging the rails for best possible access by consumers.

- The store management should continue to focus on styles that fit specific age and body types, within the variety of quality apparel on offer. However, *availability of imported, unique, exclusive and designer-label merchandise* should be considered carefully, as they are likely to increase the cost of the merchandise and might alienate some clients (given the demographic profile of the current consumer base).
- Consumers view promotional sales as very important. While the retailer cannot be expected to have more promotional sales, other sub-dimensions could be improved on, such as special offers and informing consumers of upcoming sales. Given the current economic climate, skilfully targeted promotions might stimulate sales.
- Sales personnel should be coached on the importance of *fashionability and attractiveness of sales personnel* because the way they present themselves impacts on how the consumers perceive the store.
- The provision of additional services should be considered, such as mail-order services, alteration services and a gift registry. The sales personnel service was identified as being of paramount importance to the consumers. The retailer would benefit by investing in training sales personnel in fashion-related skills, specific merchandise and product knowledge, and general interaction with consumers.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

As perception was the cornerstone of the research described in this study, the halo effect (response bias) might impact on the accurate measurement of the perception of store image dimensions. The presence of response biases and the principles of Gestalt theory might have contributed to the habitual positive (or negative) evaluations made by the participants involved in this study. The inability to differentiate between dimensions and sub-dimensions when evaluating a construct, as reflected in the study, is typical of the holistic experience of consumers. Other possible shortcomings include the inclusion of only current consumers, the type of store chosen, and the size and nature of the managerial sample involved.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research should focus on determining the valence of the various dimensions of store image. Such values could indicate to what extent a change in the importance score is expected to impact on the perception of store image. A small change in a dimension with a high valence score might significantly impact on the perception of store image. The interaction effect of the various dimensions of store image would, therefore, provide rich opportunities for future research. The inclusion of a competing store and other store formats could add value through comparative investigation.

CONCLUSION

Companies often differentiate themselves from their competitors on the basis of their corporate identity, and its projection depends on the total corporate communication mix. The image is enhanced by the variety of cues and deliberately planned messages that interplay and support one another to form the corporate identity. Store image is a vital part of marketing communication and corporate identity representation, as it affects consumers' perception of a store and its identity. Retailers should consciously manage store image to secure an optimal investment. As the maintenance of an appropriate store image has the potential to increase sales, an awareness of the importance of the store image dimensions is fundamental to building a significant market share in the highly competitive apparel retail environment. The current study contributes to the body of knowledge available to both retailers and academia, as it serves as an example of the usability of congruity analysis in apparel retailing.

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*To whom all correspondence should be addressed: Prof Ronel du Preez, Department of Industrial Psychology, Stellenbosch University, rdp@sun.ac.za

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