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ABSTRACT
This exploratory study conducted in the developing context of South Africa describes the role of extrinsic cues relating to the retailer’s image and store brand in young urban consumers’ choice of interior textile products. In adopting a phenomenological approach, rich descriptive data reveals the significance of store atmosphere, price and quality perceptions, product selections and value added services as extrinsic cues. The study also provides clarity on the symbolic expressive roles of retail store brands and illustrates the importance of reference groups as basis for retail brand associations.

INTRODUCTION
Various disciplines have investigated the importance of interior surroundings in contributing to individuals’ sense of well-being. Within the body of consumer research, the value of possessions displayed in these surroundings, both at home and in the workplace, has come under scrutiny. As explained by Belk (1988) the house is a symbolic body for the family and possessions such as furnishings and decorations are used to define the family self for its members. In more recent studies, Tian and Belk (2005) further illustrate the importance of objects displayed in office environments as an expression of self. Although such research is limited in the South African context, several emerging interior furnishing and decorating retail outlets offer some confirmation of an increased awareness among South African consumers of interior surroundings and the possessions displayed in these environments.

At present the South African interior retail market is characterized by store formats that range from smaller specialty outlets to larger department stores that sell national (manufacturer) brands as well as their own private-label merchandise. In certain product categories such as interior textiles (e.g., toweling and bed linen), retail store brands and/or private labels seem to dominate with only a few manufacturer brands included in merchandise assortments. Critical aspects highlighted in this regard for both retailers and manufacturers are the impact of private labels, the role of manufacturer brands as well as the influence of the store itself (as a brand) on consumers’ choice of products (Ailawadi and Keller 2004; Chan, Choi, and Coughlan 2006; Grewal et al. 2004). Of particular interest is the role of these products and the brands under which they are sold on symbolic consumption and social identity (Solomon and Englis 1998).

Research conducted by Escalas and Bettman (2005) demonstrate that consumers would purchase particular brands, in part, to construct their self-concepts, and to convey meanings about their identity to others. Reference groups are said to fulfill a pivotal role in this regard. The question posed is whether such findings are relevant in the South African context and more specifically whether those of competitors. The authors go on to explain that a retailer’s brand equity is very much dependant on the image of the specific retailer in the minds of consumers. In their review of relevant literature, they identify five key dimensions associated with a retailer’s image. These include access, in-store atmosphere, price and promotion, cross category product/service assortment as well as within category brand/item assortment. In a meta-analysis, Pan and Zinkhan (2006) include these dimensions into three broad antecedent categories for retail patronage, namely product-relevant factors (such as product quality, price, and product assortment),
market-relevant factors (such as store atmosphere, store image, service quality and convenience) and personal factors (such as demographic variables). Ailawadi and Keller (2004) as well as Pan and Zinkman (2006) provide an extensive review of literature on these factors and dimensions. For the purposes of this review only a few aspects are highlighted that carry particular significance for the interior retailing sphere.

Several authors confirm the importance of physical aspects pertaining to the store-atmosphere (Ailawadi and Keller 2004; Barnes and Ward 1995; Grewal, Baker, Levy and Voss 2003) in contributing to patronage intentions and consumer inferences about a store’s merchandise, service, prices and the like. Pan and Zinkman (2006) differentiates store image from store atmosphere, by explaining that whereas the latter primarily accounts for the physical attributes in a store environment, store image is more closely related to the shopper’s perception of the store environment. It is argued that both constructs are of particular importance for interior retail outlets. Furnishings and decorations were found to exert a strong symbolic and expressive influence in interior environments (Belk 1988; Solomon and Englis 1998). Consumers might thus not merely buy in a passive manner what retailers offer them, but instead, actively select and use products and brands that would shape their own realities and express themselves visually. It is therefore argued that the visual stimuli and physical display of merchandise in an interior retail outlet may be of fundamental importance in convincing consumers of the offering’s ability to reinforce social identity and membership in specific “taste cultures” (Solomon and Englis 1998) as well as its relevance in the personalization of interior space.

To acknowledge in this regard is that interior retail merchants may become the purveyors of expressive symbols. Merchandise such as interior textile products may exist in physical form, but they may also become social objects when given meaning through social interaction with others such as reference groups (Charon 2001). Escalas and Bettmann (2005) investigated the role of reference groups as a source of brand meaning. They conclude that if reference groups use and become associated with particular brands (including retail brands), such meaning may be appropriated by consumers to construct their self-concepts. The effect is however moderated by the degree to which the brand is symbolic and communicate something about the user, as well as the degree to which it is socially visible, consumed publicly and considered less of a necessity (Batra and Homer 2004; Escalas and Bettmam 2005).

Taking all of the above into account, retailers’ ability to use emotional appeals and desired images embodied by their brands can form an important competitive advantage. As explained by Gad (2001), until the 1950s, the perceived benefit or functional dimension of a product in terms of intrinsic quality and efficiency was mostly what was communicated about the brand. In an attempt to differentiate products, the social dimension became important. This dimension reflects the relationship between consumers and groups of people to which they want to belong and the use of brands as symbols to gain membership in such groups. The third brand quality proposed by Gad (2001) is the mental dimension, which relates to how consumers perceive brands as extensions of their own personalities. It is however debatable whether South African interior retail merchants have succeeded in differentiating themselves to such an extent and whether consumers in a developing Third World context such as South Africa are influenced by extrinsic cues surrounding the retailers’ image and brand of interior merchandise. Moreover, the extent to which they use such brands to establish their identities and convey messages regarding the self to others remains, to date, questionable.

**RESEARCH METHOD**

A limited understanding and lack of empirical findings pertaining to consumers’ choice of interior textile products inspired a qualitative research design with the intention of exploring and describing the phenomenon (Leedy and Ormrod 2005). A phenomenological approach was adopted, as it was considered the most appropriate method of providing an in-depth understanding of the consumer’s viewpoint on retailers’ images and brands. Purposive sampling was used to recruit a carefully selected sample of participants in Gauteng. This region is predominantly urban, has a high percentage of new housing developments (Du Plessis and Rousseau 2003) and is characterized by a high concentration of interior retail outlets.

**Sample**

As explained by Leedy and Ormrod (2005) phenomenological studies depend on lengthy discussions and consequently the typical sample size would range from five to 25 individuals. A group of nine females and six males voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. Observation of individuals in interior retail outlets ensured that potential participants had some experience in the selection and purchasing of interior textile products. Potential participants were approached and requested to fill in a short questionnaire to establish demographic data and contact details to enable the selection of a homogenous group in a purposeful manner.

The focus remained on financially independent consumers between the ages of 25 and 35 (irrespective of marital status and cultural background), who were either in the process of acquiring their own living quarters in more affluent residential areas or have done so within recent years. As pointed out by Belk (1988), the more recently dwellings are acquired and furnished, the more strongly it is valued by the inhabitants. An assumption underlying the recruitment of individuals in this geographical location is that they would fall within a higher social strata, have regular access to wider scope of interior retail outlets and could afford to choose from a wider range of products and stores to meet aspirational needs, if any.

**Data collection**

Three data collection sessions were scheduled, each extending between two to three hours and involving various qualitative techniques:

*Session one:* A focus group session following a phenomenological approach was used to stimulate active discussions. Focus group discussions were considered ideal for the purpose of discussing, debating and sharing opinions and ideas on the phenomenon in group context (Babbie and Mouton 2001). Carefully pre-mediated questions based upon the objectives of the study were used to direct discussions (Macun and Posel 1998). Data collection procedures were successful in prompting spontaneous discussions to generate relevant, rich data. Participants co-operated enthusiastically and the role of the researcher was reduced to initiating discussions and to explain specific tasks.

*Session two:* For the purpose of triangulation the same participants were subjected to a projective technique in conjunction with a second focus group discussion. Through a projective technique the “position of the product in the mind, in terms of its value to the consumer, can be detected” (Du Plessis and Rousseau 2003; Maison, Greenwald and Bruin, 2004). An insurance claim scenario was sketched and participants had to describe in written form how they would go about to replace lost towels and bed linen with certain conditions stipulated: a specific amount of money was allowed and participants had to select a preferred retail outlet/s, motivating their
decisions. Afterwards, the group was asked to discuss the task. The discussion was recorded for transcription to verify data obtained in session one.

Session three: During the third engagement participants took part in blind- and branded product testing. As noted by Maison et al (2004), perceptions of intrinsic product features can depend on whether a product test is blind. The tests thus reflect the manner in which brand images can influence perceptions of otherwise near-identical products. Limited details concerning the purpose of the exercise were provided initially to improve the scientific quality of the data gathered. Participants were however properly debriefed afterwards. The group was confronted with actual products sourced from various retail outlets. During the blind test the brands, trademarks and packaging were removed. Having debated and discussed the options, they had to indicate and motivate the items they preferred. The task was then repeated in the form of a brand test with the identical items of which the packaging, brand names and trademarks were left intact. Certain key questions were asked based on participants’ responses in this test to ensure that data saturation was reached. Concluding questions were asked to bring closure to the group discussions and to enable participants to reflect on previous comments and whether discussions were interpreted correctly.

Data analysis

Extensive notes and recordings of discussions produced a large amount of raw data which needed to be analyzed in such a manner that it would remain true to the phenomenological nature of the study. Thus, all recordings were firstly transcribed verbatim to text and statements communicated in languages other than English were carefully translated to ensure the original meaning was preserved. Where possible the guidelines of De Vos, Strydom, Fouché and Delport (2005) were followed that emphasize the use of Lincoln and Guba’s criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability in addition to criteria advocated by Strauss and Corbin to test the soundness of qualitative data analysis. As an example the use of three data collection techniques produced multiple sets of data which were analyzed separately and then compared for the purposes of triangulation and transferability. During open coding, the researchers continuously suspended prior knowledge on the subject in order to enter the participants’ phenomenological world and understand their ideas, perceptions and experiences. All of the available data was used and at this stage content analysis was applied to scrutinize and organize data within the aims of the study. The next step was to identify the ideas or topics, which appeared repeatedly throughout the transcriptions as general themes. For purposes of analyses, each theme was color-coded and named according to the describing verbatim data. The themes were then listed in tables accompanied by verbatim quotations. All the identified themes were supported by literature and reviewed by a team of experienced researchers. All records including field notes and transcripts were kept for the purposes of conformability.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As explained by Leedy and Ormrod (2005): “The actual implementation of a phenomenological study is as much in the hands of the participants as in the hands of the researcher” and “... involves informal conversation, with the participant doing most of the talking and the researcher doing most of the listening.” In following this approach, participants were allowed to communicate and respond spontaneously. Several themes emerged of which most focused on extrinsic cues linked to the retailer brand and store image. A few statements conveying intrinsic features also surfaced and were accommodated to objectively reflect on the collective influence of all attributes and whether extrinsic cues dominate choice behavior or not.

Intrinsic attributes related to the core benefits of interior textile products

Based on prior experiences, participants discussed certain intrinsic features that contribute to the functional purpose of the product, although no mention was made of fiber, yarn or finish that comprise major intrinsic components of textile products (Elsasser 2004). Limited space prevents full disclosure of all transcripts, but in a category such as towels, absorbency was emphasized (“Absorbency is important. You look for a towel that can dry properly”) as well as texture and tactile perception (“If the towel is dense, you get the feeling that it is thick and soft. If it is a thin towel it is not going to draw all the water. You are able to identify the quality there”). Tactile qualities were also noted for bed linen: “In my work I often travel and sleep over at five star hotels. The linen has a certain feel to it which I have not yet come across in the linen they sell in stores”. In a recent study conducted in a more developed market, Grohmann et al (2007) report on the evaluation of products for which tactile input is diagnostic (i.e., indicative of material properties relevant to the product’s performance) and surmised that retailers can benefit from allowing customers to touch products (especially high quality goods) as it reassures them of the accuracy of their product evaluations. Seemingly, this may also be relevant in the local context.

Tactile input may be of particular value in assessing intrinsically diverse assortments in one particular setting, which may not be as dependant on memory recall. Even so, as exemplified in the blind test it may still not be adequate in comparing and differentiating products from competing offerings that have a high degree of intrinsic parity. When participants were forced to rely on intrinsic cues such as tactile quality to evaluate unmarked products that were sourced from various outlets, but near-identical in terms of thread count, size, fiber content and color, they could not unequivocally agree on specific intrinsic features that differentiated the products. Moreover, those who based their choice on tactile quality could not agree on one superior option.

When the exercise was repeated with branded products, participants were more confident in their evaluation, which was executed in a shorter timeframe, mostly contradicted their choices in the preceding blind test and without fail reverted to the brand as raison d’être: “Most sheets look alike, so I trust Woolworths’ [retailer’s] products for quality”; “When comparing Edgars [retailer] to Woolworths, the ones from Woolworths is definitely better quality” and “I choose the Edgars towel, because, of course, it is from Edgars”. These statements reflect Roggeveen et al’s (2006) view–expressed within the realm of more developed markets–that with store brand products, the retailer is the brand, and hence the retailer’s reputation is an extrinsic cue that influences consumers’ perceptions of product quality and performance.

Other intrinsic attributes mentioned included physical dimensions (“Size matters... Sheets should fit properly over a mattress”) as well as aesthetic design features, which may be construed as intrinsic properties as they are inherently linked to the physical product (Veryzer, 1995). Features such as color and style (“I look at what it looks like. The color must match with the color scheme in my house”) may be interpreted in an aesthetic and/ or utilitarian manner depending on situational influences (Veryzer, 1995). Yet, regardless of interpretation these aspects were repeatedly linked to retailers’ assortments (“Loads of Living’s [retailer] selection is appealing in terms of color, style, and they also stock extra length sheeting”). Product assortments are extensively cited in the litera-
tured pertaining to more developed markets as important dimensions of retailer image (Areni, Sparks, and Dunne 1996; Keller and Ailawadi 2004) and key determinant of retailer patronage (Chernev 2006; Pan and Zinkman 2006). These aspects form part of the next dominant theme that emerged from the analyses.

**Extrinsic cues related to the retailer image and store brand**

Data derived from all three techniques provide evidence with regard to the role of extrinsic, intangible product attributes related to the retailer image and store brand in participants’ selection of interior textile products. The following statement serve as a typical example: “When you think of items such as towels and linen, you’re immediate thought is to go to Woolworths [retailer] or Edgars [retailer]”. This suggests strong signature associations between the retailer and the product category in question. Although store brands which carry the retailer’s name featured more prominently, certain private label brands of which the name differed from that of the retailer, also gained recognition (even though they did not engender loyalty to the retailer): “There is only one towel for me. I am not an Edgars [retailer] fan. I don’t generally buy there, but for some reason their Private Collection [private label] range stands out. I only go to Edgars for their Private Collection towels”. Apart from private labels, it appears that participants’ store brand preferences are influenced by three dimensions associated with a retailer’s image (store atmosphere, product assortments as well as price and quality perceptions) in addition to certain value added services offered by the retailer.

Physical elements (e.g., design and layout) of a retailer’s in-store atmosphere (Grewal et al. 2003; Keller and Ailawadi 2004; Pan and Zinkman 2006) as well as social aspects such as the type of clientele (Keller and Ailawadi 2004) proved to influence participants’ evaluation of the retailer and its products: “If I think of Ackermans [retailer], just by looking into the store, it seems so bright and it is too busy. It has very bright colors. It is too much and it is cluttered. It is as if a certain type of person who has such bright colors in their home shop there. I don’t know who it is…lower income, bargain hunters…personally I would not buy linen there”. Of particular significance in the analyses of these statements is the social identity appeal connected to the retailer’s store atmosphere. Clearly, visual stimuli and physical display in an interior retail outlet is important in convincing consumers of the offering’s ability to reinforce social identity and membership in specific taste cultures. Ailawadi and Keller’s (2004) commendations with regard to the crafting of appealing in-store atmospheres and unique store images seem relevant in the local context, especially in terms of socially communicative products.

However, caution should be exercised in such an endeavor as participants also recognized that efforts made by retailers to enhance in-store atmosphere can inflate their pricing format: “We can all see that Woolworths [retailer] definitely spend more money in presenting their stores as quality stores…they have to pay for all of that as well, so they have to increase their prices”. Again, these findings substantiate Keller and Ailawadi’s (2004) view that even though store atmosphere improve consumers’ perceptions of the quality of merchandise in a store, they also tend to associate it with higher prices.

For the most part, participants’ perceptions about price and quality were linked to a particular retail store brand as illustrated in the following statement: “I would say Woolworths [retailer] is more expensive, because they have the image of quality”; “Obviously it’s connected to price. I mean you are not going to get the same quality towel at Mr Price [retailer] than what you are going to get at Woolworths or Edgars [retailers]”. As noted by Miyazaki et al. (2005) one of the most commonly studied relationships in developed markets is that of price and perceived quality with recent efforts focused on the effect of additional extrinsic cues, including brand and store name, on this price-quality relationship. Of particular relevance in this study is their conclusion that when intrinsic information is limited or deemed ineffectual, extrinsic cues are more likely to be used to assess product quality, thus resulting in more heuristic decision making as illustrated in the following statement: “Brands exist because they are known for quality. Everybody shopping at Woolworths [retailer] mentions quality. They know they are going to get quality. It doesn’t matter how much they pay. They buy because of the brand”.

Apart from store atmosphere and the brand-price-quality perceptions, participants placed particular emphasis on the depth of retailers’ assortments, perhaps more so since the aims of this study were focused on one product category in particular as opposed to a broader assortment of products. Prior research in developed markets has found ample support for the common sense expectation that larger assortments allow consumers more flexibility in their choices and afford variety seeking consumers greater utility with the increased possibility of finding the items they desire (Ailawadi and Keller 2004, Chernev 2006). This is noted in the following statement: “…these stores carry full ranges of all styles. You might not find what you are looking for in smaller outlets”. The findings of this study also underpin the uniqueness of a retailer’s product offering as an important differentiating criterion: “Loads of Living [retailer] has something to offer which the other retailers don’t have. I like buying gifts there. I think they are highly over priced, but if I buy there I know that there is a good chance that the person won’t have it. I can’t say the same for Mr Price [retailer]”.

Although the breadth of assortments did not feature as significantly as the depth of retailers’ offerings, a few statements such as “You buy linen where it is convenient and accessible and where you buy other things” acknowledge the perceived benefits of a wide assortment. In conjunction with accessibility and convenient location of an outlet, broad product assortments enable one-stop shopping convenience that is becoming increasingly important for time constrained consumers in developed marketplaces (Ailawadi and Keller 2004, Pan and Zinkman 2006). The relevance of convenience within the South African developing context also seem evident in participants’ recognition of retailers’ service offerings such as in-store credit and account facilities (“I will go to Edgars [retailer], because I have an account there and it is convenient to buy on credit”) as well as liberal return policies that reduce perceived risk (“At least if you go to Woolworths [retailer] or Edgars [retailer], you know that if something goes wrong it will be refunded”). In this regard Risch (1987) explains that whatever contributes to consumers’ personal comfort, preventing frustration and friction as well as financial, physical and mental expenditures, may be construed as convenient.

Similar to empirical research in more developed marketplaces, these findings provide impetus for the contention that store brands have an advantage over manufacturer brands in that they are more multi-faceted in nature (Ailawadi and Keller 2004) and can rely on rich consumer experiences and associations (such as those provided by store atmosphere, price-quality relationships, product assortments, and other value added services) to create strong brand images. In relation to the multitude of retail store brands referred to by participants during the entire course of discussions, only two manufacturer brands were mentioned. Though participants’ attitudes towards both brands were positive, the hegemony of retail store brands manifest in the following statements: “Colibri [manufacturer] is a good name, but even if it is Colibri, you are not going
to get the same quality Colibri at Mr Price [retailer] as you would get at Edgars [retailer] or Woolworths [retailer]; Perhaps Mr Price buys Colibri’s rejects”; “Edgars and Stuttafords [retailers] sell Colibri [manufacturer], but also Mr Price [retailer]. So you don’t know if the quality is that good anymore”. The apparent ascendency of retailer images and brand associations in this context may be attributed to local retailers’ enhanced ability to position their products on the basis of more intangible extrinsic cues that transcend mere product performance. Clearly, the factors that contribute to these circumstances may prove fruitful ground for further empirical investigation, especially for those retailing and manufacturing firms interested in expanding and establishing operations in developing marketplaces such as South Africa.

User imagery and psychological benefits derived from retailer image and store brands

Escalas and Bettman (2003), in referring to the work of Keller and Aaker, emphasize user imagery (i.e., suppositions regarding the brand user, including demographic and psychographic associations) and the related psychological benefits (e.g., social approval and personal expression) that are derived from brand images. The following statement may serve as an example in this regard:

“People who buy at Loads of Living [retailer] are focused on trends. For them it is important to buy things with the right image…they are trendy people, people who can afford to have a house with furnishings and decorations to show off. Only people with money can follow that lifestyle, because it costs money to be trendy. I know someone who shops at Loads of Living. He is a bachelor, 34 years of age, has a high income and buys all his things at Loads of Living. He does not waste money on little pieces of junk sold at Pep [retailer]. He spends large amounts at a time, R5000 or so. That is who he is.”

Participants agreed that consumers can be typified by the retail outlet they patron. User imagery was evident in that patrons of various outlets could be described in terms of demographic and socio-economic variables as well as spending patterns, trend consciousness and a host of other personality traits. A relationship between the self-image, store brand and retailer image is therefore plausible, which may in turn lead to certain psychological benefits such as social approval and personal expression. Belk’s (1988) clarification of the symbolic significance of the home and its decorations is however important in this regard. He explains that the expressive imagery of the house and its furnishing is only fully acquired during consumption, thus implying that at the point of acquisition only a portion of the ultimate meaning is acquired. The point made is that to enjoy the psychological benefits (such as social approval and personal expression) derived from a particular brand of interior product, it has to be incorporated and used in an interior environment to acquire its full symbolic and expressive meaning.

Social context and the influence of reference groups on retailer image and store brand associations

According to the symbolic interactionist perspective, objects such as interior furnishings and decorations (including textile products) may exist in physical form, but they may also become social objects when given meaning through social interaction with others such as reference groups (Charon 2001). Escalas and Bettmann (2005) investigated the role of reference groups as a source of brand meaning. They conclude that if reference groups use and become associated with particular brands, such meaning may be appropriated by consumers to construct their self-concepts “If people see Woolworths [retail store brand], they know it is good. If they see Mr Price [retail store brand], they know it is cheap stuff”; “I would also go to Woolworths because they have a name .”. However, in accordance with findings derived from more developed markets (Batra and Homer 2004; Escalas and Bettman 2005) this effect is moderated by the degree to which the brand is symbolic, that is, communicate something about the user (“I think it says a lot about you, if you only buy a certain brand of towels…’It’s a bit of yourself in your bathroom. I mean your choice of colors, design, pattern…it reflects whether you have good taste or bad taste”) and is especially true for products that are socially visible (“Forget about the sheets, nobody sees it anyway, but a towel is different, there you buy the best”) and consumed publicly (“I put out my best towels for my guests, friends and other people. I think if it is good towels especially put out for you, it is going to make an impression”).

CONCLUSION

As with any qualitative research involving a restricted number of participants, the limitations of this study is clear in that the findings are not generalizable. Notwithstanding its limitations, the study does provide preliminary insights into the role of retailer images and store brands as extrinsic cues in young urban consumers’ selection of interior textile products in a developing urban context, which may prove useful as a basis from which to embark on future quantitative research projects involving larger samples. In addressing the question whether young urban consumers are influenced by extrinsic cues surrounding the retailer image and store brand, the findings of the study suggest a strong association between various store brands and the interior textile product category. Similar to findings derived from more developed markets, store brand preferences are based on three dimensions associated with the retailer’s image. These include the store’s atmosphere, product assortments as well as price and quality perceptions. In addition, the perceived convenience of certain value added service offerings such as in-store credit also serve as discriminating factors.

Physical elements of a retailer’s in-store atmosphere prove particularly important in evaluating the retail offering’s ability to reinforce social identity and membership in specific taste cultures. As in the case of developed markets, the value of attractive in-store atmospheres and unique store images should therefore not be underestimated, although it may inflate price perceptions. Overall, perceptions about price and quality are mostly associated with a particular retail brand. Apart from store atmosphere and brand-price-quality perceptions, the exclusivity and depth of retailers’ assortments is also emphasized as it allows for more flexibility in product choices and affords variety seeking individuals the increased possibility of finding items they desire. Although some intrinsic performance features and design attributes are recognized, these aspects do not necessarily form the basis of differentiation among competing offerings. These findings have significant implications for manufacturers focused on the developing urban context of South Africa, and provide impetus for the contention that store brands have an advantage over manufacturer brands in establishing strong images and associations based on the fact that they are more multi-faceted in nature and can rely on more extrinsic attributes.

The study also provides clarity on the symbolic expressive roles of retailer images and store brands in a developing market context. It seems evident that consumers do not simply patronize a retail store, but patronize the image of that store. User imagery is apparent and a relationship between the self-image, store brand and retailer image is likely to occur, offering certain psychological benefits such as social approval and personal expression. More-
over, reference groups represent a source for brand associations depending on the degree to which the brand is symbolic, (i.e. communicate something about the user) and is especially relevant for products that are socially visible and consumed publicly.

It should be emphasized that this study merely served an exploratory and descriptive purpose. Although it succeeds in establishing the relevance of various concepts from a wide array of existing retailing and consumer behavior research, it only did so within the frame of a very limited sample. As such, it does not highlight differences that may exist among consumers of various cultural, demographic and socio-economic backgrounds. It is recommended that future research should focus on a larger sample, encompassing a wider geographical scope that could provide more representative data. Attention could be focused on other interior product categories and/or usage occasions as these may impact on the salience of functional/utilitarian as well as symbolic/expressive qualities. Such research should be of interest and value to retailers, manufacturers and various other distributors of interior-related products that operate within developing consumer markets such as South Africa.

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