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Upscale image transfer from malls to stores: A self-image congruence explanation

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Abstract

The social class image of a mall influences the quality perception of stores housed within the mall; this effect is explainable using self-congruity theory. A $3 \times 2 \times 2$ factorial design experiment tests this explanation. The independent variables are store type (department store versus chain store versus secondary store), mall image (upscale mall versus downscale mall), and shoppers' socio-economic status (high SES shoppers versus low SES shoppers). The dependent measures include store image (two dimensions: look and "services") and self-image congruence. Some 200 shoppers were exposed to their randomly assigned experimental treatment conditions that involve a video presentation of mall image and a store type. The study includes measuring informants socio-economic status. The findings confirm the mediating effect of self-congruity. The article discusses managerial implications of the self-congruity effect.

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Mall managers and retailing research tradition converge on the opinion that shopping malls have no intrinsic image, whereas stores are supposed to have a "personality" or image and that image transfers to the mall. Could it be that shopping malls have an image of their own? If yes, can this image be transferred to the stores within the mall?

Store image is a key concept in the retailing literature (e.g., Martineau, 1958; Mazursky and Jacoby, 1986) that reflects shoppers' perception of a store in terms of functional and psychological attributes. Functional attributes are concrete, tangible, and observable (e.g., type and quality of the store's merchandising, the hours of operation, or the location convenience of the store), whereas psychological attributes are abstract, intangible, and not directly observable (e.g., the store's ambience and the

type of people shopping at the store). Some studies have focused on the impact of store image on product perception (e.g., D'Astous and Gargouri, 2001), store satisfaction, store commitment, word-of-mouth, purchase intentions, and price insensitivity (e.g., Bloemer and Oderkerken-Schroder, 2002), and store loyalty (e.g., D'Astous and Levesque, 2003). Other studies (e.g., Bearden, 1977; Downs, 1970; Finn and Louviere, 1996; Hauser and Koppelman 1979; Lindquist, 1974–75) have shown that shopping malls have an image. However, the literature is silent about the influence of mall image on store image. Our study makes an attempt to address this issue.

Traditionally, mall managers strive to enhance the mall image through substantial advertising (e.g., Cardona, 2003) to increase mall patronage (e.g., Parsons, 2003; Parsons and Ballantine, 2004). Mall image captures shoppers' perception of the mall along a variety of dimensions such as price, layout, ease of reaching the mall and parking, visual appearance, reputation, merchandise, services, hours of operation, and atmosphere (Downs, 1970). Several studies have identified different dimensions of mall image. For example, Hauser and Koppelman

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(1979) identified five dimensions (variety, quality, satisfaction, value, and parking), and Finn and Louviere (1996) identified six dimensions (quality, selection, services, price, and trendiness).

Does the social class image of a mall influence the quality image of a store within that mall? This report is the first to address this question. Only two retailing studies on image transfer are indirectly relevant, namely Burns (1992) and Kirkup and Rafiq (1994). Burns (1992) conducted a study demonstrating that the images of major stores affect the image of smaller stores-positively by department stores and negatively by discount stores. Thus, image transference of anchor department stores may occur sometimes in malls to secondary stores. Malls perceived to have stores with quality merchandise and service likely attract shoppers. Conversely, discount stores, perceived to have low quality merchandise and service, are likely to transfer their image to the malls housing them and other secondary stores within those malls. This explanation illustrates image transfer.

Kirkup and Rafiq (1994), who analyzed how the tenants' mix affecting the occupancy rate in shopping malls, have shown that the lowest occupancy levels were observed for malls with no major anchor stores. Malls with anchor stores tend to absorb the image of the anchor stores. Malls with department stores as anchor stores are likely to reflect an image of quality merchandise and service—an image that appeals to shoppers seeking high quality merchandise and service. Conversely, malls with discount stores as anchor stores are likely to reflect an image of bargains, value, and savings. This image is likely to appeal to bargain hunters. That is, a mall with a highly defined image is likely to be successful in attracting shoppers that may identify themselves with the kind of shoppers that patronize the mall and its stores. They see themselves as being the kind of person that the mall is designed to cater to, and therefore feel attracted to that mall. One can explain this finding using the concept of self-image congruence (or "self-congruity" for short).

Based on the concepts of image transfer and self-congruity, this article develops a model positing social class image of a mall interacts with shoppers' socio-economic status (specifically, the extent to which shoppers see themselves as upscale or down-scale), and store type (department store versus chain store versus secondary store) to create a self-congruity experience. The self-congruity experience affects store image. This article describes the logic of the self-congruity explanation in the context of our hypotheses coming up shortly.

The marketing and consumer behavior literatures demonstrate the effects of self-congruity on brand preference, choice, satisfaction, and loyalty (e.g., Ericksen and Sirgy, 1989, 1992; Sirgy, 1982, 1985a,b; Sirgy et al., 1991, 1997, 2000; Sirgy and Johar, 1999). Studies show that congruence between self-image and store image affects store preference and loyalty (e.g., Bellenger et al., 1976; Sirgy and Samli, 1985; Sirgy et al., 2000). Shoppers select cues from a store environment (e.g., quality of the neighborhood) and infer from these cues the personal characteristics of the typical shoppers (e.g., shoppers' social class). Shoppers then compare store image with their own self-images. Thus, the selected cues help the shoppers experience self-congruity. In turn, self-congruity influences shopper's attitude toward a store.

The theoretical model this paper proposes offers a self-congruity explanation to the research question—does the social class image of the mall influence the quality image of a store located within the mall? This article reports an empirical test of the model. The article articulates three sets of hypotheses, each set having a competing hypothesis building from a self-congruity explanation.

Hypothesis 1. Hypothesis 1a versus 1b

H_{1a}: store image (or perceived store quality) is a direct function of the social class image of the mall. Specifically, stores in upscale malls are more likely to be perceived to have high quality than stores in downscale malls (see Fig. 1).

An alternative hypothesis is that store image (or perceived store quality) is an indirect function of the social class image of the mall mediated by self-congruity. This alternative hypothesis (H_{1b}) deals with the mediating effect of self-congruity. In other words, we explain the effect of mall image on store image using self-congruity theory (Sirgy, 1986). Shoppers have a tendency to see themselves as more upscale compared to reality (e.g., Centers, 1949; Coleman, 1983; Fisher, 1987; Jain, 1974). This bias stems from the need for self-esteem. People like to see themselves in a more positive light than actuality. Doing so boosts their self-esteem. Therefore, shoppers (irrespective of their socio-economic status) are likely to experience higher levels of self-congruity with upscale malls than downscale malls. This self-congruity bias makes shoppers not only evaluate upscale malls more positively than downscale malls but also the stores within.

Hypothesis 2. Hypothesis 2a versus 2b

 $\rm H_{2a}$: Store image (perceived store quality) is a direct function of the interaction between the social class image of the mall and the socio-economic status of shoppers. High socio-economic shoppers are likely to perceive stores housed within an upscale mall to have high quality than low socio-economic shoppers. Similarly, high socio-economic shoppers are likely to perceive stores housed within a downscale mall to have low quality than low socio-economic shoppers.

 H_{2b} addresses the alternative hypothesis—the mediating effect of self-congruity (see Fig. 1). H_{2b} : Store image (perceived store quality) is an indirect function of the interaction between

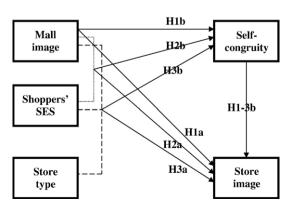


Fig. 1. The conceptual model.

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