

# Image transfer from malls to stores and its influence on shopping values and mall patronage: The role of self-congruity



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## ABSTRACT

Little research attention has been paid to the image transference from a shopping mall to its stores. The study reported in this article proposes an integrative model dealing with the image transference phenomenon from malls to stores and its implications in terms of creating value for shoppers and enticing mall patronage. Structural equation modeling is applied to data collected from shoppers in two urban North-American shopping malls. The findings are broadly supportive of the proposed model. Mall image spills over the image of the stores located in the mall, and this occurs through a shopper's self-congruity mechanism. Furthermore, the mall's image dimensions influence hedonic shopping value through self-congruity. The stores' image dimensions differentially influence utilitarian and hedonic shopping values assessments. Both types of shopping values are strong drivers of mall patronage. The study also discusses the implications of the findings as well as its limitations and directions for future research.

## 1. Introduction

Malls and the stores located within them have a mutual interest in building positive and coherent images. In fact, mall image and store image are interrelated and main drivers of shoppers' patronage decisions (Sit et al., 2003; Finn and Louvievre, 1996). For instance, mall renovations and improvements are found to contribute to the growth of the stores' sales and visit rates (Anselmsson, 2016). Image transfer from one entity to another one is well-established in the branding and retailing literatures (e.g., Swoboda and Pennemann, 2013; Cornelius et al., 2010; Helgesen et al., 2010; Chebat et al., 2006; Berens et al., 2005; Gwinner and Eaton, 1999). However, little research attention has been paid to the transference of image from a shopping mall to its stores. The literature review identifies only one study explicitly dealing with image transfer from a shopping mall to its stores, namely the study of Chebat et al. (2006). Further understanding of how the mall image spills over its stores' image<sup>1</sup> may help mall managers and retailers craft retail strategies in ways that encourage retail patronage.

The current study aims to extend the limited research on mall image transfer and fill the gaps identified in the literature. Particularly, the study contributes to the scarce research on the transference of image

from a shopping mall to its corresponding stores in several ways. First, our conceptual development contributes to the extant literature by offering an integrative synthesis of insights from previous retailing research dealing with mall image transfer, self-congruity, shopping values, and mall patronage. Second, Chebat et al. (2006) examine the mall image transfer to specific types of stores (i.e., department and secondary<sup>2</sup> stores) located in the mall. In contrast, our study focuses on broader and holistic perceptions of all the stores housed in the mall (rather than a specific store per se) inasmuch as the mall management efforts and resources are directed towards all the tenants and not towards a particular store. In other words, the focus of this study is on how the mall image could be transferred to the general image for a group of stores operating under the same roof and sharing the same mall environmental elements. Third, this study explores the differential effects of the mall image dimensions in the transference process. In fact, prior research has overlooked the contribution of each mall image dimension (e.g., atmospherics, design, employees) in the transference process since aggregated measurements of mall image have been used. A piecemeal (rather than a holistic) approach to investigating the mall image transfer phenomenon is indeed called for by retailing researchers given its worthwhile implications for retailers (Chebat et al., 2010). For

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<sup>1</sup> This study labels the general image of a group of stores located in the same mall as "stores' image" (rather than store image) to deliberately distinguish it from the image of a specific store housed in the mall.

<sup>2</sup> Chebat et al. (2006) use the term "secondary stores" to distinguish small-scale stores (e.g., hair dresser) from anchor stores.

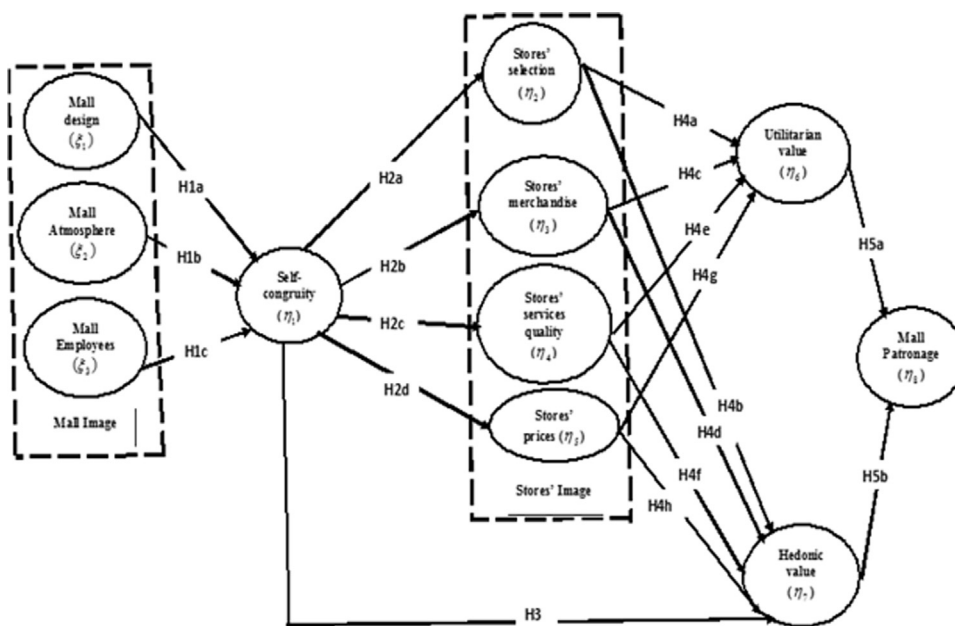


Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

example, one can argue that a shoppers' self-congruity is likely to be more influenced by the mall design cues and employees' behaviors than by the mall atmosphere cues (i.e., ambient cues). In fact, the mall employees and design cues are more visual in nature and shoppers are likely to pay conscious attention to these cues as opposed to the mall atmosphere cues that are intangible and affect shoppers subconsciously (cf., Baker et al., 2002). In the same vein, the relative impact of self-congruity on the different stores' image dimensions is unknown. In other words, the question whether self-congruity has the same or differential effects on the different stores' attributes still unexplored. This study attempts thus to empirically explore the differential effects of the mall image dimensions on self-congruity as well as the relative effects of self-congruity on the various stores' image attributes. Fourth, previous research on mall image transfer (i.e., Chebat et al., 2006) does not account for the implications or consequences of the image transfer as it precludes important outcomes for shoppers and retailers, which put into question the explanatory power of previous mall image transfer models. This study proposes a more integrative model that takes into account the consequences of the mall image transfer in terms of value creation for shoppers and retail patronage enticement. Fifth, from a methodological standpoint, existing research (i.e., Chebat et al., 2006) adopted the experiment method, via the use of videotapes in laboratory conditions, to investigate the image transfer phenomenon in the context of shopping malls and stores. This study adopts a survey-based research design likely to enhance the generalizability of previous research findings on mall image transference. Also, the natural setting, as opposed to stimulated environments in previous research, is likely to increase the external or ecological validity of the mall image transfer insights.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. First, we propose a conceptual model and advance research hypotheses. We then describe the research methodology employed in this study. Next, we report the empirical results of our tested model. Finally, we discuss the findings and provide a general discussion of the major implications of the study as well as limitations inherent in this research along with directions for future research.

## 2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

### 2.1. Conceptual model

The study's conceptual model (see Fig. 1) proposes that shoppers

draw a mall image from various mall environmental-related cues (i.e., mall design, mall atmosphere and mall employees). Shoppers are likely to use the constructed mall image to inherently make inferences as to which extent there is a congruence between their own self-images and the mall image. When shoppers experience a sense of self-congruity (incongruity) within the mall, they are likely to ultimately evaluate the stores' image (i.e., stores' selection, stores' merchandise assortments, stores' services quality, stores' prices) housed in the mall in a positive (negative) light. Such an image transfer effect would increase both the perceived utilitarian and hedonic values of shopping, which in turn encourages shoppers to patronize the mall. Particularly, the study proposes that hedonic value is mainly derived from the mall image via self-congruity. Also, it proposes that the inferred stores' image generates both types of shopping values, namely utilitarian and hedonic values.

The accessibility-diagnostics theory (Feldman and Lynch, 1988) as well as the inference theory (Nisbett and Ross, 1980) provide theoretical underpinnings for the image transference from a mall to its stores (rather than the reverse<sup>3</sup>). Shoppers are primarily immersed in the mall's physical environment, and are likely to select salient cues (e.g., design, atmosphere, ambiance, etc.) from the mall environment in order to make prior judgements about, for example, the kind of the shopping experience and type of stores within the mall (Chebat et al., 2009; Sirgy et al., 2000). This is due to the fact that information about the mall is more salient and accessible to retrieve (Chebat et al., 2005) due to its contextual nature and experiential content compared to information about stores with more specific and complex content. This line of reasoning is consistent with the accessibility-diagnostics theory (Feldman and Lynch, 1988), which suggests that highly accessible and easy to process information is to be considered and processed first. The inference theory (Nisbett and Ross, 1980) is also in line with this line of reasoning. The inference theory implies that shoppers rely on accessible and salient information cues (such as mall design and atmospherics), to evaluate unavailable, missing or complex information such as stores' attributes (e.g., Baker et al., 2002). Furthermore, empirical evidence suggests that the transfer from one entity to another is likely to occur from the larger entity (e.g., the mall) to the relatively smaller one (i.e., the store). For instance, previous retailing research shows that image

<sup>3</sup> Notwithstanding, in the future research section of this paper, we will speculatively discuss the alternative possibility of image transference from the stores to the mall.

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