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Master Degree Project in Marketing and Consumption

**The Discount Store as Scapegoat:  
Understanding Store Image among Students**

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## Introduction

The Swedish grocery store industry is defined by an oligopoly market with few large actors. In 2002-2003 international discount chains entered the Swedish market, offering the consumers an alternative to the traditional grocery stores. The discount store has been a strong format in US for many years with Wal-Mart as an example. During 2002, when most of the retailers in Germany were suffering from a severe sales drop, the discount store concepts Lidl and Aldi grew remarkably. Since then the stores concepts have entered other European countries as well. The favorable position for discount stores has led to new discount concepts emerged all over Europe and consequently taking over market shares from traditional retailers (Deleersyder et al 2007). The development is evident in the Swedish grocery store market as well, where Lidl has 3, 2 % of market shares and Netto has 2, 2 %. The Swedish grocery store market is however dominated by the traditional store concepts Ica (49, 4%) and Coop (21, 4%) (DELFI, Friköpenkap and DLF. (2012).

The attributes of discount stores are the competitive prices and focus on own brands. The low prices have been made possible by minimizing costs through stripped store interior, limited promotion and restricted number of products available. The observed growth among discount stores has led to a pressure among traditional retailers to increase their efficiency and lower the prices (Deleersyder et al 2007). The development has led to traditional store formats in Sweden enhancing the promotion of their own discount brands e.g. Ica-Ica Basic, Coop- Coop Extra.

In times of recession people have a tendency to buy low price alternatives and change their food consumption towards buying more private label products (Lamey et al 2007; Jordbruksverket 2010). When the trade organization for the food industry in Sweden made their annual survey in 2011 asking the members, of which consumer trend they perceived to be the strongest, fifty percent stated that the demand for discount products was perceived to be the strongest trend in the food industry (Livsmedelsföretagen 2011). The recession and the increased interest for private labels may indicate a more favorable position for discount stores. Traditional stores generally invest in promotion of their private labels in times of economic downturn making them an option for consumers that are looking to saving money. Briesch et al (2009) have studied how location, low price as well as assortment affect the consumer grocery store choice. McNeil and

Wyeth (2011) have studied private label grocery choice and suggest that the risk associated with buying private label products is diminishing. While the research about private label products is increasing, the discount grocery store is not as well studied. There is a tradition of quantitative studies regarding grocery stores, leaving a void of indebt understanding which is made possible with a qualitative perspective.

Apart from economy, lifestyle is one of the factors that are known to affect consumption behavior. Some consumers take pride in being economical while some want to preserve a picture of themselves as only buying expensive products. This may have implications on food consumption and how consumers perceive discount grocery stores. Already in 1975 Prasad argued that discount stores are not only limited in their attraction when it comes to “blue collar workers” but are attracting “higher occupational groups” as well. The study however suggests that different socioeconomic groups differ in what kind of products they buy at discount stores. The study investigates what kind of purchases one can assume have a relationship between social class and attitude towards discount stores. The findings suggest that there is no difference between different socioeconomic groups in the attitudes towards products with low social risk. The study suggests that there is a difference in attitudes towards products with high social risk between different socioeconomic groups (Prasad 1975). Food was not included among the products that were investigated, as the study was mostly focusing on kitchen appliances and clothes etc that were available to buy in the discount stores, which makes one wonder whether food is to be considered a low or high social risk product or whether some food products are considered associated with high social risk and others not.

Young consumers and their consumption from an identity perspective have traditionally been focusing on high involvement consumption such as fashion, cars etc which are considered to be products with high sign values. Even though grocery consumption can be considered to be mundane, the public arena in which it is bought makes it an interesting area to study from a social perspective. Berger and Heath (2007) argues that in cases of public consumption people want to be perceived in a positive way, why they don't want to be perceived as either extreme or as a follower. The study will focus on everyday grocery consumption among young consumers from a social identity perspective. Students are considered to be an interesting group to study as they are

somewhere in-between adolescence and adulthood. They often live on their own and have to manage the grocery shopping with a restricted economy, which makes low cost alternatives relevant. The importance of the social group and self image is however still significant in this age, why it is interesting to study how students related to discount stores. Furthermore studying consumer behavior among students can give valuable insight as it may have implications for this generation's future behavior.

The aim of the study is to understand what discount grocery stores represent for young consumers. The purpose of the study is to move beyond the perceived difference between store brands versus national brands and enhance the focus on the discount store image. Young consumption in relation to social context and identity formation is an area traditionally associated with affluent consumption and products with high sign value properties. Grocery consumption is relevant for everyone and the importance of the social group for consumers in general and young consumers in particular makes the social importance in everyday consumption among young consumers an area of interest. In the light of this, it is highly pertinent to understand what the discount store represents for young consumers.

Research Question:

*What does the discount grocery store stand for in the words of young consumers?*

In the quest to understand what the discount store represent focus groups are used to approach what the discount store represent by analyzing how young consumers talk about discount stores. The implications of this method in relation to the aim of the study will be discussed further in the methodology section.

### Social image as theoretical framework

The purpose of this study is to understand the image of the discount store and to comprehend the social importance for how it is perceived.

The study is a intersect between the field of discount store image, social groups and social identity, where the discount store is understood from how students express themselves about grocery stores. The notion of understanding what the discount store represent by investigating how students talk about discount stores will be discussed further in the methodology section.

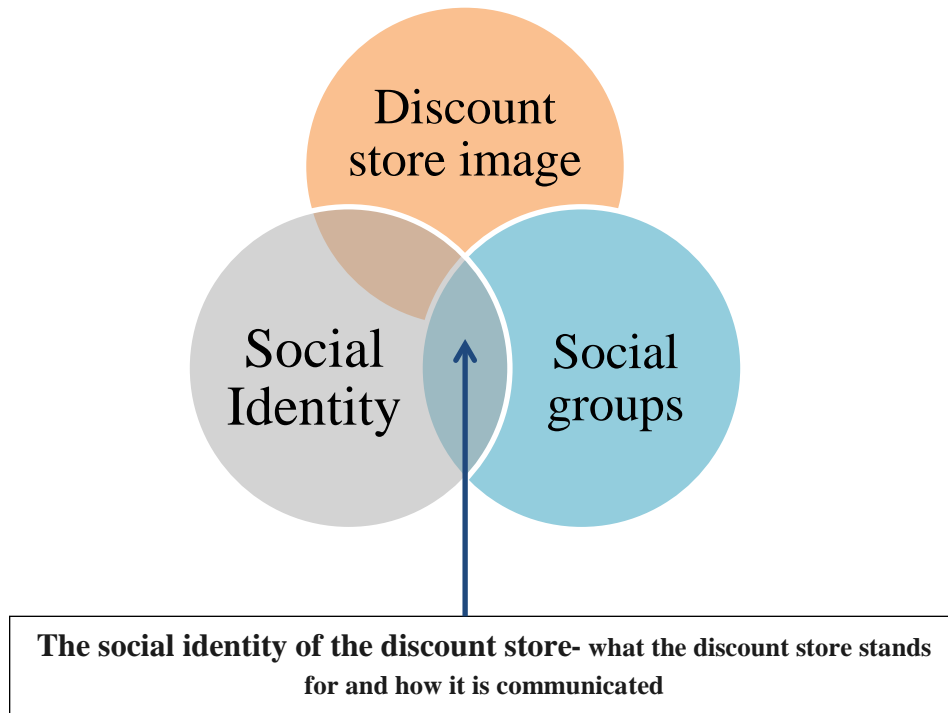


Figure 1: Venn chart research perspective

## Store image

When studying the area of grocery consumption the store image is a central concept describing the consumer from a psychological perspective. The store image is considered to affect grocery store patronage and be the result of a cognitive process where impressions from a store are assimilated together with impressions from the past, forming assumptions about product and service quality, which in turn affect the perceived store image (Kent 2009). Contrary to previous research, Baker et al (1994), argues that store environment, product and service quality are not all building stones forming the store image, but imply that the store environment affects the assumption of the product and service quality which affects the store image (Baker et al 1994). Previous researchers have stressed that characteristics of a store environment can be regarded as factors that together with product and service quality form the store image (Baker et al 1994). With this perspective one can assume that the retailer has the capacity to affect the consumer inclination to repeatedly patronage a particular store by well designed store environment and change the assortment and service (Jacobs et al 2010).

The changed store image perspective however implies a shift towards a more cognitive and subjective approach. The subjective point of view emphasize that the perceived store image is formed by present and past experience that together affect how a consumer experience and value the quality of what is being offered and in extension the store image (Kent and Kirby 2009). Lindquist already in 1975 argued that store image is something that is learned and reinforced through experiences and is a result of tangible and intangible factors. The tangible attributes that are considered to affect the store image are characteristics such as product quality, service, other costumers, facilities, store atmosphere, convenience etc. The intangible attributes that are related to how consumers perceive the store image can be e.g. positive and negative feelings associated with a store, perceived friendliness and feelings of belonging etc. Lindquist (1975) argues that the human mind is limited in its capacity to handle large amounts of information and in order to make sense of the world around us people oversimplify it by using characteristics that are considered to be prominent. The simplified images and the values and meanings connected to them are important in the interaction with the world. By comprising the characteristics of objects a person can choose to continue to like or dislike the objects similar to how people relate to other

people. Govers and Schoormans (2005) states that people also have a tendency to assign person like characteristics to brands. The use of images is relevant in the consumer interaction with products, services and stores (Lindquist 1975). Likewise, Fournier (1998) argues that the personalization of brands indicates that brands are to be considered as relationships partners and not only a part of a “narrowly cognitive utilitarian decision making”.

When studying the discount grocery store and what it stands for, the store image is considered to be arelevant theoretical field. The assumption of causality in relations to store attributes in forming the store image is well represented in earlier research but not considered to be the focus of this study. Instead, the notion of store image as a relationship partner and as a carrier of identification properties is considered to be interesting when studying what the discount store stands for. In line with research within consumer culture theory which will be discussed below, the result from Fourniers (1998) study suggests that the perceived image of a brand is not necessary the same as what is intended by a company which may indicate that store image is not always predictable and easily manageable. Even though the assumption of a deterministic relationship between stores attributes and perceived store image is considered to be limiting, it is still interesting to linger on the dimensions of the store environment as they are relevant in the way consumers talk about grocery stores, why the theory within this subject will be further discussed in the following section.

## Store Environment

The environment of the grocery store can give cues on what kind of product quality and service that can be expected at the store (Baker et al 1994).

The environment, as part of the total shopping experience, has an effect on the consumer that can have implications on store patronage (Sinha and Banerjee 2004).

Russel and Pratt (1980) offer a psychological perspective to store environment and how it affects consumers. The environment can affect the emotions of the consumer which in turn have the possibility to influence how the consumers react. Features of the environment such as lightning, design or cleanliness gives consumers positive feelings such as feelings of inspiration or the environment can give the consumers negative feelings such as boredom (Russel and Pratt 1980). The positive experience from the store environment can make the consumers feel good and the negative experience have the power to make

the consumer feel disappointed which in turn can affect how consumers act (Russel and Pratt 1980).

Richardson et al (1996) suggest that the store environment is more important in how consumers experience store brands compared to national brands. If consumers experience the store environment to be unattractive they are inclined to transfer these negative feelings towards the store brand and it may in turn affect the product quality inference (Richardson et al 1996). The same is not considered to be true for national brands, they are not considered to be as affected by an unattractive store environment. National brands generally have the benefit of attractive brand associations which affect how consumers perceive the product quality. Offering store brands can be a good business for grocery stores as the margins are higher than for traditional brands making the findings interesting for stores in general (Richardson et al (1996). The findings are relevant when studying discount grocery stores in particular as discount grocery stores mainly offer store brands thus suggesting that they are more sensitive to how the store environment is perceived than traditional stores. The store environment has the possibility to affect emotions and may not only affect how the store is perceived but also how it is talked about which in extension can influence the store image.

### **Social identity and social groups**

The study is concerned with the social aspects of grocery store patronage and how this is related to what the discount store stands for, which is in line with discussions within consumer culture theory. Arnold and Thompson (2005) argue that the field of consumer culture theory emphasizes the experiential, cultural and social aspects of consumption. The consumer is constantly seeking to define him or herself and make sense of the surrounding environment by relating to symbols and perceived meanings. The market is an arena where the consumer constructs and transforms the self image, through consumption by adopting and transforming multiple meanings connected to different products and brands. Arnold and Thompson (2005) stress the symbolic and socio-cultural complexity of consumption and that the market has an important role in facilitating identity narrative construction. The quest to define oneself and fulfill life goals through consumption is intricate in many ways, e.g. the fact that people often have conflicting goals and the identity concept as such can encompass multiple properties which is a subject that will be discussed further on.

Gabriel and Lang (2006) argue that the identity is constantly developed through lifestyle choices and a way of defining oneself in terms of similarities and differences in relation to others. The group as a source for identity is dependent on exclusivity, implying that the group has boundaries and that the members are distanced from others outside of the group. The identity is a story of who a person is and it is constantly rewritten. The products and the symbols attached to them are important narrators and that by consuming new products people can adopt and communicate new self images. The search for a unique identity through consumption is the reason why people will never be happy with their identity and why they are constantly seeking new products and new symbols (Gabriel and Lang 2006). Within this perspective the symbolism of consumption is highlighted as well as the possibility for the consumer to form and reinforce an identity through consumption (Rintamäki et al 2006). Belk (1988) and Gabriel and Lang (2006) share the belief of a strong connection between consumption and identity, arguing that possessions and what is consumed have an impact on self image. Belk (1988) stress that a single brand which is consumed does not form an identity, but the combination of different consumer goods can communicate the complexity of a person's identity. Identity communication in relation to consumption can be brand oriented but also more generally in terms of type of products (Belk 1988).

### **The discount store as alterity object**

Berger and Heath (2007) emphasize the social aspect of the identity concept in relation to consumption to a greater extent than Arnold and Thompson (2005). Consumers differ in their choice of products in order to communicate their identity to others and avoid certain products to make sure that other people don't make undesired identity assumptions about them. Berger and Heath (2007) however argue that if a consumer alone holds a preference, the consumption of this product will not be efficient in communicating identity, why a level of convergence in consumption is needed. The notion of avoidance and convergence is considered to be interesting when studying grocery store patronage and when aiming to understanding the image of discount stores in a social context.

The aim to enhance the social aspect of identity is shared by Brewer (1991) who criticizes the previous established discipline within social psychology at this time which emphasizes the internal processes rather than the interaction with the environments in defining self concept. Brewer (1991) proposes an identity concept that enhances the social importance in

identity construction and suggests that social identity is formed on the basis of conflict between the need for differentiation and a need for belonging. Brewer (1991) stresses that group membership and social identity is not to be equalized as social identity is chosen and can vary dependent on the situation.

The emphasis on situational specific aspects of identity construction is shared by Sirgy (1982) who argues that consumers have multiple self images and that depending on the situation the consumer chooses to act in a certain way that supports the self concept considered to be most appropriate. Beyond the assumption that people act in a way that enhances their self image and take them closer to their goal self, people tend to behave in line with their perception of their actual self. Sirgy (1982) suggest a more complex explanation to identity construction in relation to consumer behavior, with the notion of multiple self images, based on the theory that self concept is constructed influenced by more dimensions than the actual self image and the goal self image. When a person has decided which self image to express the person seeks ways to express it by seeking products with an image inference that assimilate with the desired image in a specific situation (Sirgy 1982). Even with the possibility of multiple self images affecting identity formation, the importance of the actual self image and the goal self image should not be underestimated as it is supported by the theory that people relate to member groups (groups that a person belongs to) and aspiration groups (social groups a person wishes to belong to). Escalas and Bettman (2003) suggest that a consumers brand connections are affected by the relation between the groups a person relate to and the brands associations related to these groups. A person can have different identity goals, either one is most concerned with self verification, meaning one behaves in a way that enhances the current self image, or one is more concerned with self enhancement, leading to a behavior that increase the self esteem. Escalas and Bettman (2003) argue that consumers that are primarily motivated by self verification are influenced by member groups brand associations in forming their own brand connections and in extension their self image, while consumers primarily motivated by self enhancement are more influenced by aspiring groups in their brand connections.

The categorization of people as either being motivated by self verification or self enhancement may be restrictive if considering the by Sirgy (1982) suggested situational importance in identity communication and when making image inference.

Considering both the notion of situational importance and the implications of self goals in connection to forming self image and making brand connections, it is possible that people are motivated by both self goals but depending on the situation one of the motivations is stronger and thus more influential. The social importance suggested can have implications on how the discount store image is perceived.

Miranda et al (2004) shares the belief that consumer value is more than a functional solution to problems and argue that consumer motives can be personal as well as social. The store is described as one of the places where people interact and adopt social roles (Rintamäki et al 2006). Brocato et al (2012) argues that consumers tend to feel more comfortable in a store where the other consumers are perceived as similar to themselves. How well the consumers perceive to identify with other consumers in a store is dependent on how they perceive the other consumers physical appearance. The appearance of the other consumers is something the consumers use in order to evaluate a store alongside other environmental cues. People are inclined to make assumptions of the unknown based on how they experience the environment. The importance of environment when consumers make inference of the unknown (Brocato et al 2012) and the indication of store environment dimensions importance in evaluations of store brands (Richardson et al 1996) may suggest that other consumers are essential when consumers make assumptions of the quality of discount grocery stores.

The need for differentiation and belonging is believed to have an effect on how consumers relate and talk about discount stores. The tension between how people perceive themselves and how they wish to be in relation to brand associations is interesting in the context of discount store image. The social value of consumption and the aesthetic influences on consumer emotions are interesting in the context of how grocery stores are perceived and talked about which aid in the pursuit of understanding what the discount store stands for.

## Methodology

The aim of the study is to understand what the discount stores represent for young consumers. A qualitative approach is suitable when studying a phenomena and when the aim is to gain an indebt understanding. The study will explore issues that will encompass the complexity of grocery store patronage and will have a foundation in the assumptions of subjectivity and social construction

(Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008). Even though the assumption that theory is objective is not embraced in this study, the research is still assumed to have the possibility to suggest phenomena in reality. In the quest to understand what the discount store represent a focus group method is chosen as it offers a possibility to investigate how students talk about discount stores. Even though the focus group discussion is considered to have limitations in encompassing the full meaning of discount stores, the way students talk about discount stores can help to understand what discount stores represent. The image of discount stores represented in the focus group is affected by the social situation which can imply a divergence in how individuals perceive the stores if alone. It is however interesting to use a focus group as it offers a possibility to gain insight in the social interplay which is assumed to affect how discount stores are perceived.

### **Focus group**

Choosing to use a focus group has the advantage of generating a broad set of ideas that are reappraised through social interaction and generates a discussion of a topic that is not much discussed in everyday life (Wibeck 2010). An interview guide with prepared questions was used and all participants were encouraged to express their opinions in line with the structural approach. The role of the interviewer was however in the background, with the benefit of facilitating an open discussion and empowering the participants to introduce new subjects (Wibeck 2010).

The interview guide was used as a support and a way to keep the respondents to stay within the subject. The first questions were about grocery stores in general in order to get the respondents to talk freely about the subject. Follow up questions and probing was used to encourage the participants to elaborate on the subject. The respondents were mainly asked open ended questions but were also asked a few closed ones later in the interview in order to get a clearer understanding of who of the respondents had what experience regarding the different discount grocery stores they mentioned. During the focus group discussion the participants were asked a combination of what and how questions. The aim was to get information, understand the respondent's experiences as well as to understand how the opinions are formed in a social context (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008). The respondents were asked to describe the typical customers of discount stores in order to get an understanding of how the discount store is perceived. The participants were also asked to

choose an animal to describe a discount store and then describe the characteristics which generated interesting answers.

### **Respondents**

The respondents were selected on the basis of being students and the aim was to create a group with individuals with similar background and experiences. The motivation for this selection is that that people similar socioeconomic background and age have a tendency to be more open with each other (Wibeck 2010). The participants in the focus group were all studying the same program at Gothenburg School of business, economics and law. The benefit of recruiting people from a group that already exists is that the social roles are already known and the participants are already comfortable with each other (Wibeck 2010). Furthermore an existing group allows the researcher to gain a front row seat in how ideas are expressed and formed in a social context (Wibeck 2010). The participants had all experience with discount grocery stores and had different attitudes towards the subject. By having participants with different attitudes one can generate an atmosphere that encouraged the participants to develop and formulate their opinions (Wibeck 2010). The total number of participants was six and all in their twenties. This number of participants was considered to be favorable considering that a higher number could lead to that the participants formed subgroups within the focus group (Wibeck 2010). The participants lived in a household with one or two people and all of them were female with the exception of one male.

### **Interviews**

As a compliment to the focus group, two interviews were conducted. The interviews were conducted after the focus group, with the aim of getting a more inclusive perspective of discount grocery stores among students. One of the respondents is a dentist student while the other one is a medicine student and they both have left home indicating regular grocery shopping. The respondents were targeted on the basis of being students from other fields than business and the fact that they were known to frequent patronize discount grocery stores. The interview situation can be affected by the respondents feeling that they have to say the "right" thing, however the social pressure generally is considered to be more affective in focus group discussions, why it was interesting to use interviews as an additional methodology and thus gain complimentary insight.

## Analysis and interpretation

In this study grounded theory is used as an analytical tool to structure the analysis rather than a perspective guiding the whole research process. Grounded theory as a method can be regarded as contradicting the assumption of subjectivity (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008), why grounded theory primarily is used as an analytical tool. Charmaz (2006) suggests that by a formalized data analytical process which stresses comparing data in order to find similarities and differences, concept and code generation, the researcher can gain useful insight in the material.

Initially the audio from the focus group discussion was transcribed and was read through in order to get an overview of the material. The material was coded through line by line coding which is suggested as part of the structural approach (Charmaz 2006, Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008). The codes were compared in order to see if there were similarities and differences in the material in line with the ideas of grounded theory (Charmaz 2006). Codes were singled out on the basis of relevance to the research question. The codes were then clustered together in code categories. The material was at this stage reread in order to find new support to the categories. The analysis of the empirical material was not a linear process and the definitions of the code categories were at times redefined as new observations were made.

## Trustworthiness

When evaluating research with a grounded theory approach it is relevant to assess how familiar the researcher is with the subject, amount of data collected in related to claims and analysis process to assess credibility (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008). The research process started with a literature study in order to create familiarity and background to the subject and research fields related to the subject. Previous research was something that was revisited during the entire process. The data collected was not excessive, however considering the purpose of the study and that grounded theory was mainly used as a guide to structure the analysis without assuming to reveal existing theory it is considered to be of acceptable magnitude. Based on the social constructivist approach and assumptions of subjectivity it is not possible to make wide generalizations about the findings, it is however reasonable to believe that the findings can suggest some phenomena's related to how students, foremost business students relate to discount stores from a social perspective. Further studies have to be done in order to establish if similar meanings can be associated with how other students relate to discount

stores. The categories were created and redefined by continuously revisiting the empirical material which enhances the trustworthiness. Previous research from the fields of store image, social groups and social identity were combined in order to analyze the findings, which implied a possibility to get close to understanding the social identity of the discount store. The theories were combined and used attempting to generate new meanings in understanding the social image of discount stores.

## Findings

In this section the findings from the focus group and interviews will be presented. The first themes paint a negative picture of discount stores which is representative for the general findings of this study. First the subject of how the typical discount grocery store consumer is portrayed will be addressed. The unattractive store design experienced by the respondents, the lack of trustworthiness associated with discount stores, how first impression lasts a long time and unfamiliarity connected to discount grocery stores will then be presented. In addition, the lack of inspiration expressed when talking about discount grocery stores will be addressed. At the end of the section some positive aspects of discount grocery stores expressed by the respondents will be presented.

### Unattractive consumers

During the focus group the respondents expressed a negative picture of consumers at discount grocery stores. When discussing what kind of people that patronize Lidl the typical consumers were equalized with people that frequent the shopping center Ullared.<sup>1</sup>

*-What is there to say? Sweatpants, a bit overweight. (Anders)*

*- Yes. (Emma)*

*-Poor hair. (Anders)*

*-Poor hair? (Interviewer)*

*-Yes bad hair, it is like if they are men they are bald and if there are women, they have a bit greasy hair. (Anders)*

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<sup>1</sup>Gekås Ullared AB is a discount shopping center located in Ullared, Halland and was founded in 1963. With 35 000 m<sup>2</sup> it is the largest department store in Scandinavia. In 2009 channel five started to air a documentary series following some of the costumers frequently patronizing the store (Gekås Ullared AB. (2013).



*-No respect for others. I have some prejudices from the beginning so of course it will not get better. Although I like Lidl, I still see it like they are part of a bit lower social classes those who go there compared to Ica Maxi. Then I see Coop as higher than Ica. The people that go to Coop are even more upper class (laughs). But it's probably also because I have no experience of Coop. (Emma)*

When discussing what kind of people that goes to the different grocery stores there seemed to be a difference between how the different discount stores where experienced. The group agreed that the usual customers at Willys where families and students. When discussing what kind of people that goes to the discount grocery stores the group expressed a low opinion of the usual customer. According to what they expressed they believed the typical consumer to be of low socioeconomic status.

*-Who are the typical Lidl customers, for example(Interviewer)  
-Now it will sound very prejudiced, but I imagine an unemployed person with five children and ...(Anna)  
-and discount coupons. (Emma)*

The respondents seem to want to distance themselves to other people that shop at the discount grocery stores a behavior that is to be considered reasonable as the group members expressed several low opinions of people that patronize the discount grocery stores such as e.g Lidl.

*-Actually when I go into Lidl, even when I'm at Lidll do not think that I'm the typical Lidl shopper. I care very much about what products I buy and the content. When I am at Lidl, I like to buy things that are very expensive at Ica like walnuts because I eat a lot of nuts for breakfast and stuff. I do not think the typical Lidlshoppers go around looking fora bit more expensive goods. So I do not feel I fit in really, even if I go there. (Emma)*

When distinguishing between discount grocery store consumers and consumers that go to regular grocery stores the discussion indicates that the respondents believe there to be a difference in involvement and food consciousness.

*-A prejudice that might be wrong is that, I would think that if one is a bit food interested one goes to Ica Maxi and those that do not care about food and just stuff themselves because they need to, go to the Lidl or Willys. (Lisa)*

Even though groceries are not perceived as products with high sign value the publicity related to the consumption can be argued as having a social significance. Berger and Heath (2007) argue that people aim at differ in their choice of products compared to the masses in categories that are suggested to affect identity assumptions. The vocal and in many cases controversial opinions about discount store consumers indicate that even though grocery consumption in itself is mundane it is not free from generalization and identity inference properties. In terms of public consumption people generally want to consume similar to other people without being perceived as conformists (Berger and Heath 2007) which can explain the unwillingness to be associated with the image of discount store consumers and the propensity for the students to emphasize their food involvement as something that distinguish them from the typical discount store consumer. The situational significance in self image and consumption (Sirgy 2013) can have an effect on the discount store both in terms of consumption and how it is talked about.

In some cases other consumers are regarded as part of the environment of which consumers form their perception of the store ( Brocato et al 2012). The in many cases controversial statements in regards to the discount store consumers, suggest that the image of discount stores can be said to be related to that students want to differentiate themselves from the image of discount store consumers. Brocato et al (2012) suggest that consumers are affected by other consumers in the store when making assumptions about the store. Consumers base their assumptions of the store and how well they expect to fit in by cues from the appearance and behavior of other consumers in a retail environment. Consumers tend to feel more comfortable if they feel that consumers patronizing a store are similar to themselves.

The alterity between the students and other consumers at discount stores can be understood from the perspective of member- and aspirational groups (Escala and Bettman 2003). Business students are part of the larger group students while they aspire to belong to a high occupational group which may affect how they perceive discount stores. The student lifestyle is in many cases very different from the lifestyle associated with successful business people. Shopping at discount store may be accepted by other student, but the image associated with these stores and the perceived image of people patronizing them may not be in line with the associations connected to the aspirational groups, successful business people. It is possible that the in many cases contrary

associations connected to the member group and aspirational group creates a propensity for the business students to distance themselves from other students in some aspects in order to better assimilate with the aspirational group. The divergence may lead to that the group “students” is perceived as an alterity group rather than member group for business students, which would affect their attitude towards the associations connected to students. As the business students expressed themselves very strongly about other consumers patronizing discount stores, it is possible that the associations connected to this group is perceived as very much divergent in relation to the associations they have in connection to their aspirational groups in general, which may affect their image of the discount store. The discount stores image is understood from a social perspective emphasizing the social interplay and how the students express themselves regarding discount stores which indicate that one can’t say if the opinions expressed are what the students think independently but one may suggest that that this is how opinions are formed to some extent. The line between what a person independently believes and what the group believes is not clear. It is in the context of tension between wanting to belong and being unique that the social identity (Brewer 1991) and in extension social image of the discount store is formed to some extent.

The negativity associated with the image of the typical discount store consumer was a subject the students had strong opinions about. When discussing the discount store the store environment was another subject where the students expressed discontent.

### **Unattractive store design**

When shopping for some specific groceries the respondents expressed a need to easily find the products that they wanted. But if they go for a trip to buy more groceries they don’t mind being sided tract. Bäckström (2011) argue that some consumers ascribe high value to being able to find specific objects when shopping.

*-When I go to Ica Maxi I don’t find things very easily. I can find better on my Ica, but I do not think it is any problem when I’m at Ica Maxi because then I find just lots of other fun stuff.*

Apart from the wider assortment that was important in terms of inspiration the consumers seemed to value the space associated with larger stores such as Ica Maxi. The respondents used one Willys store as an example of a failure regarding store design and aisle space. The respondents seemed to appreciate the larger stores with a wider selection and much space.

From what was said during the discussion the discount stores seemed to be experienced as uncomfortable compared to the ideal store. Even though this observation can be relevant for both regular and discount stores as one can find large stores within both spectra, the respondents unanimously expressed annoyance over the discount store Willys and the store design.

*-If you go to Ica in Olskroken you can find like apple, pear and banana. Then you go to Ica Maxi and find Kiwi, Sharon, pineapple and fun stuff like that. That's what is most important to me, really, to get inspiration.(Emma)*

*-I think that a good store should be quite large and it should be airy, bright and fresh. (Eva)*

*-You should not need to take a step aside because someone comes towards you in the aisle. I think that is a pain. (Lisa)*

*-As it is at Willys, the one at the other way from Chalmers, the other side ...(Johanna)*

*- Utlandagatan?(Anders)*

*-Yes, there it is like a maze warning. (Johanna)*

*- If one has to go back, when you want to have something that is at the entrance one does not do that because it is impossible (laughter). (Anders)*

The negativity that was expressed was related to the environment of the store in terms of cleanness, store layout and overall aesthetics. The importance associated with environmental properties can be understood from the notion that in terms of unfamiliarity consumers make quality inference based on cues from the environment in the store (Brocato et al 2012). The nature of the discount stores can in many cases be experienced as something unfamiliar as they often hold brands that are not well known in Sweden.

The students were not pleased with the environment of the discount stores which was recurring in the way they talked about discount stores. Richardsson et al (1996) argues that store environment is more important in how consumers form impression of the quality of store brands compared to national brands which may indicate that the poor impression of the discount store environment affects the quality inference of the store brands and the overall store image a great deal.

### **Not trustworthy**

When discussing food and discount grocery stores the respondents seemed to lack trust in the discount stores. The fears related to product quality was

associated with the food being produced outside of Sweden and therefore perceived as lower quality and less controlled in terms of product contents.

*-I have nothing against foreign food but much of the food produced in some countries contains strange things. It contains very little of what it should contain. You get so damn pissed. (Johanna)*

*- I would agree with you. Then when it's so cheap as well, one thinks that it's probably not good quality. (Lisa)*

*-Then there are some things that I would never buy in a discount store, such as meat. (Johanna)*

*-Me neither.(Anna)*

*-Not over my dead body. (Johanna)*

The discussion continued with a discussion about Swedish meat and that it is not always Swedish even if it says that it is on the package. The respondents were agreeing on that even if one buys at a regular grocery store as Ica one cannot trust that meat labeled as Swedish actually has domestic origin. After coming to this conclusion one of the respondents expressed that she trusted Ica more than the discount stores.

*-But if it says Swedish pork in Ica is it guaranteed Swedish then?(Eva)*

*- No it is not, but I trust Ica more than I trust Lidl and Netto. (Johanna)*

The lack of trust towards discount grocery stores where manifested when discussing the kind of animal Lidl would be if it was an animal.

*-Rat maybe. (Laughter) (Anders)*

*-I was just thinking the same. Like Sewage. (Lisa)*

*- Describe the rat. (Interviewer)*

*-Like a bit sloppy. It may not have a high work ethic. Personnel policy is pretty bad, like a rat, a bit sneaky as well. (Anders)*

*- I changed my mind. I see Lidl as a mixed breed dog that is a bit manner less while Ica Maxi is a pedigree dog which like, participates in shows. (Lisa)*

In this part of the discussion it was evident that the respondents did not hold high regard of Lid and that the characteristics associated with the store was not favorable. It is unclear if the respondents based there expressed opinion about poor work ethic etc on information from some friend that works at Lidl or if these characteristics where based on how the respondents expected Lidl to be based on their overall picture of the store.

It is possible that social situation influenced the students to be extreme in their statements about discount stores. Telling ones worst stories of discount stores and thus distance oneself from them can be perceived as a part of a narrative construction of identity ( Arnold & Thompson 2005) and a indicator of self verification behavior (Escalas and Bettman 2003). Aiming negativity at a shared object, in this case the discount store can create a sense of belonging in the group and create stronger barriers between the group and the people outside of the group (Gabriel and Lang 2006). The discount stores social identity is in this case seemingly affected by the need for a common object to pick on. It is not possible to know from the findings in this study if the discount store has a similar role for other groups in society but it is possible as the discount store has a position that makes it easily criticized.

It appears that the students in the discussion where not averse to buy discount brands but preferred to buy the discount brand or the stores own brand at Ica rather than to go to the discount grocery stores.

*- Ica basic is very fresh in my opinion. (Lisa)*

*- It is the best discount brand. If you buy Ica basic one thinks that it is still ica, but if it would have been Lidl basic, one would probably not have thought the same way (Laughter). (Anders)*

The more favorable impression of Ica basic compared to the brands held by the discount stores can possibly be explained by the fact that the respondents expressed a theory where they assume that the content of Ica Basic products is the same as the premium brand but with another label. The expressed theory was that the reason was for Ica to reach another segment with the basic products but that the quality was the same as the premium brand. This can offer one explanation as to why the quality of the Ica basic was considered to be higher than the brands from the discount stores.

*-My friend works at Ica Maxi and she works in the meat section.*

*In the case of minced meat, you can choose Ica Basic or Ica Egna and it differs at least ten SEK/ KG on them. It's the exact same thing. She says that it is exactly the same thing. It's the same meat that they pack with different markings. It's just that they charge for the brand. After that I have become a bit....that it might not ....(Anna)*

Even though the group considered Willys to be a discount grocery store along with Lidl and Netto, the

respondents expressed a more positive picture of Willys. The way in which the respondents were expressing themselves regarding stores indicate that consumers are inclined to talk about grocery stores in relation to other ones.

*-It feels like Lidl and Netto has the potential to be a Willys if they keep it tidy and clean.(Lisa)*

*-I have not been in your Lidl store Emma but the Lidl stores I've been to, the floor is dirty and there are boxes everywhere. Then there may be a pallet here and there with goods. (Laughter) This is not how Willys is structured. (Johanna)*

The traditional stores have a strong foothold in the student community, with an established image of quality, even if some of them have experienced bad press and scandals that may people question the quality. The categorization of discount stores as bad quality and traditional stores as good quality may be an effect of people having a tendency to simplify circumstances in order to easily relate to things in everyday life. Lindquist (1975) early argued that consumers comprising characteristics related to an object in order to be able to decide once and for all if one likes it or not thus facilitating future relationship with the object or brand.

The lack of trust associated with discount stores can be related to a bad first impression that never went away despite possible new positive experiences.

### **First impression lasts**

There seem to be little room for second chances when it comes to discount grocery stores. When discussing Willys one of the respondents expressed that she had a bad experience and even if she knew that the store had gone through major changes she still did not go there even if the store has a favorable location.

*-There is a Willys store just maybe one hundred meters away, but I never go there. I think it is because I am so used to go to Coop. (Eva)*

*- Have you been to the Willys close to you? (Interviewer)*

*- Yes, and it is really nice now that they have changed it. It was really disgusting before, when I first.....I think that the impression I got then is still in my mind. It used to be really disgusting but now it is really nice but I still don't go there. (Eva)*

The respondents express a dislike for discount stores that they often have little or no experience of. The reason can be that they have had a bad experience and never returned after that. How the respondents

express themselves when talking about discount stores indicate that the opinion of discount stores are not only formed by their own experiences from shopping there but may be affected by what they have heard and read about the discount stores.

*- I think that due to the fact that I have experience with Lidl I do not think it's that bad, but I hate Netto just because I've never been there ..almost. (Emma)*

*Do you hate Netto?(Anders)*

*I have been there on occasion but I thought it was really unfresh, strange and unfamiliar. (Emma)*

The first impression may not be formed the first time the consumers visit the store but the consumers may have an opinion before they even sat there foot in the store. How the store is perceived depends on memories that are formed based on previous experiences as well as current ones (Kent and Kirby 2009). It is plausible that rumors and media affect how the store is perceived as well. The discount store Lidl has suffered a bad reputation and in many cases this is what the consumers have in mind when visiting the store for the first time. Some consumers however express that even though their opinion has been affected by bad reputation their impression of Lidl has changed after that they visited a store. People are generally suspicious of unfamiliar things which may suggest a connection between the impression of the discount store as both not trustworthy and unfamiliar.

### **Unfamiliarity**

The discount stores were considered to be unfamiliar as they offer other brands and the fact that the respondents did not know entirely what to expect. The respondents expressed a need for knowing not only what brands and products that they could find at the grocery store but also that they found reassurance in knowing where all the products were placed in the store in order to be able to know the order of the products as they walked in the store. The reason for this was the possibility to write the shopping list in the right order and thus increase the effectiveness of shopping.

*-The store that I feel is most relevant to me is actually one Willys shop from when I lived in Växjö and made my bachelor degree. There I knew exactly in what order things came. I like to write my shopping list in the same order as the products are placed in the store.(Johanna)*

*-I usually shop at the Ica Maxi in Högsbo and it's probably the one that I think is best. There is probably a bit like Emma says, they have high*

*ceilings and it's fresh and clean, not many things on the floor and so on. I think that is why I am ....And I find things easily there, so that I can do as Johanna, I usually write my list in the order as the products are placed in the store (Laughter). One saves some time I think. (Anna)*

The subject of unfamiliarity was reoccurring as it was used to describe not only the products offered but generally used to describe the discount stores.

*-I hate Netto just because I've never been there..almost. (Emma)*

*- Do you hate Netto? (Anders)*

*-I have been there on occasion but I thought it was really unfresh, strange and unfamiliar.(Emma)*

The discount stores were portrayed as different from the regular stores. Many of the respondents expressed this feature as a bad one but the uniqueness of the discount stores Netto and Lidl seemed to be experienced as exciting for some.

*-Netto is a bit strange, but the fun thing about visiting Netto is that it is like going on a treasure hunt, because they have that kind of shelving ... It is total chaos on Netto and you never know what you will find. One goes into the dairy section and may find a toaster. (Laughter). You can make small findings. One might have gone there to buy coffee and end up leaving with something completely different. The things one finds there is really low-priced. Then one thinks "That is really cheap". Maybe one doesn't go there to shop a lot but some singular thing.*

Even though the discount stores were considered to be interesting as they were different in many ways the unfamiliarity was mostly portrayed as amusement and the discount stores were still expressed to be only relevant for a limited number of products. The discount stores were not considered to be relevant as a store where one can buy the entire grocery demand for the week but were just considered to be relevant for some items.

*-Actually I like Lidl. Not for everything but for some products.....Some fruit because it is much cheaper. But then also, they have a pretty damn good yogurt.(Emma)*

Still the difference in products were for many considered to be exotic and exciting.

*-I'm a little two- folded because spontaneously I do not like the discount food grocery stores. Because I*

*think it is dirty and it is often plastic on the floor of the vegetable section and things like that. It bothers me. It just feels dirty. But at the same time when I get there, I go there so seldom, so ... Last time when I was at Lidl ... I feel like a little kid because I want everything because it's new. I do not recognize things. I want to try it because it looks exotic. I want to try it anyway. (Anna)*

The citation shows that even though the difference in products seems to be interesting for some of the respondents this is not enough reason to patronize the stores. Even though the respondents may have expressed some interest in the products offered by the discount stores they still had strong opinions about the hygiene and environment in the stores which they often used in order to explain what they did not like about discount stores. The findings suggest that the interest in the unusual products offered by the discounters is overshadowed by the lack of trust in the discount stores.

### **Uninspiring**

Many of the respondents said that they wanted to be inspired when shopping for food. When asking why she liked Ica Maxi so much one of the participants expressed the importance of wide selection and the need to feel inspired when shopping for food.

*-Because it's great and they have friendly staff and they have a huge and fresh "fruit and vegetable" sections. This is where I spend all my time and just pick all the fun vegetables. Yeah I do not know, I get some inspiration when I go around and check. (Emma)*

Even if convenience was expressed to be one of the factors that affected where the respondents usually shopped for groceries the subject of quality was recurrent. During the discussion fruit and vegetable freshness was expressed as being very important and something that affected the respondent's perception of grocery stores. One of the respondents expressed warm feelings towards both Ica Focus and Ica Maxi but also explained that she usually was not able to shop there because of the distance, why she patronize Ica Supermarket. After pointing out that freshness is very important she still expressed that she was happy with her local Ica store even after saying that the stores fruit was un fresh. The positive opinion of the Ica brand in general seem to affect the opinion of the local store, making her positive towards the store even though it does not fulfill her requirements.

*-I put the quality stamp depending on how the fruit & vegetable section is. But I seldom shop at Ica Maxi*

*because I live nearby Ica Supermarket. So that's where I always shop but I'm not completely satisfied, but I shop there because it's on my way home. But often the fruits are not fresh and yes ....but I'm still happy with it. (Lisa)*

When discussing shopping for groceries the respondents expressed that going to a discount store didn't give them the satisfaction a regular store would. One of the joys of shopping for food seemed to be the possibility to buy something spontaneously. Some consumers appreciate the stimulation associated with browsing around the store, taking in the scenery of the store. For consumers that value shopping as a stimulation of senses are often interested in specific products and enjoy spending time dreaming about these products (Bäckström 2011). Even though grocery shopping generally is associated with utilitarian value the focus group discussion indicated that the respondents valued being inspired while shopping for groceries.

During the discussion the respondents indicated that they were averted to replacing national brands with the stores own brand. This may offer an explanation as to why they experience that the choice of products and the possibility to buy something spontaneous is limited at discount stores. The perceived small selection of products and the perception that one only can buy certain products at discount stores may affect the lack of inspiration when shopping at discount grocery stores.

*-I feel a bit like you that if a good Ica was located beside Lidl I wouldn't set my foot in Lidl. In that case I would only go to Ica. I like Ica more as well, but now I don't have that option. I think that some things are good at Lidl but the problem is that I think that few persons think that they can go to Lidl and buy everything that they need because Lidl doesn't have everything. Then you have to replace some brands with labels they have at Lidl. I know others who just buy some things that are cheaper in Lidl because it is a bit more economical. But for me it's a bit sad, because I think it's fun to shop for groceries. I go not only to the store to buy milk, but it is an experience for me. I would always pick up something extra. But it's hard to do that when you go to Lidl, because you know that there are these things you can buy. You never get the whole set of needs satisfied when one goes to Lidl I think. (Emma)*

*- You do not get so inspired there. (Lisa)*

*- No you really don't. (Emma)*

The findings suggest that consumers value a store that stimulates and give inspiration; similar to what is found in other retail formats (Bäckström 2011) This suggest that the expectations on grocery retailers is high in terms of delivering experiential values, not only functional ones, which can have an implication on how the discount store is perceived considering the expressed opinions that the discount store lacks inspiring qualities.

### **Glimmer of light**

Even though the general tone during the focus group was negative in the way the respondents talked about discount grocery stores there were some positive aspects as well. One of the participants pointed out that she believed Lidl to be price worthy when it comes to fruit and vegetables. She said that the reason for her shopping there was that other store in the area didn't have better quality but still had higher prices.

The possibility to try new things was also considered to be exiting and shopping at a discount store was portrayed as exotic and different. Even though some where suspicious of the store brands at the discount stores there were still respondents that expressed a curiosity towards them. The attitudes towards store brands in general was positive and the respondents argued that there was no need to pay extra for something that they perceived to be the same in many cases as budget brands. The discount stores where considered to be a good option in terms of certain products. One of the respondents was very positive and emphasized the good taste of Lidl yogurt.

During the interviews with other students the tone towards discount stores where more positive than during the focus group. The two students that were interviewed both frequently shopped at Willys and appreciated the assortment available at the store. They expressed a possibility to find what one search for when going to the store.

*-They have a good assortment. They have what one needs. (Sanna, dentist student)*

The picture of Willys was in many cases different from what had been expressed during the focus group discussion. The store was considered to be relevant for everyone and the word "medelvensson" was used to describe the typical consumer, further supporting the opinion of general appeal associated with the store. Even though the general image of discount stores and people going there was negative, the focus group participants perceived the store as relevant for students and families and they expressed

a higher regard towards Willys than the other discount stores.

During the focus group the respondents talked about the discount store as attracting an unattractive consumer segment and the discount store being not trustworthy. The notion of the discount store as unfamiliar, having unattractive store design and being uninspiring are other themes discussed alongside with the notion of the strong hold of the first impression associated with discount stores. The findings suggest that the discount store represent an object of alterity and that it has a generally negative image among business students. It is not clear if the negative image of discount store is true for students in general, possibly the image is perceived to hurt the self image of business students more than others.

Some of these aspects will be further discussed as they are considered to be salient when understanding the image of the discount store.

## Discussion

In the quest to understanding what the discount store represent it is interesting to consider the expressed significant aspects of the grocery store experience. The findings suggest that students value familiarity, inspiration, attractive store environment and an attractive group of fellow consumers. The notion of first impression as important in the overall impression of the discount store was an additional theme discussed. In the following section the subjects of need for inspiration and attractiveness will be discussed further as they are considered to be most salient in this study.

### The need for inspiration

Osborne(1977) defines inspiration as “guidance from sources outside ourselves” and argues that the word can be applied when talking about work of art as well as innovative accomplishment in different fields such as science etc. The word that is considered to be salient in this statement is “innovative accomplishment” which can be transferred to everyday life and something sought after not by artists alone but by everyone. Some would say that people are creatures of habit and that may be true to some extent but the routine of everyday life can become boring and the route to escape this is inspiration. We need “guidance from something outside ourselves” (Osborne 1977). The guidance can come from supernatural sources such as belief in a higher power or from natural sources such as other people etc. Gabriel and Lang (2006) argue that

consumption has taken a place in society that in many cases replace the previous role of religion and work as sources of solace and identity. In Sweden, as part of western society, where many people exclaims to be atheists and where people consume conspicuously, the statement that consumerism in some aspects can be perceived as the new religion does not seem unreasonable. Osborne (1977) argues that analytical thinking can be perceived as the enemy of creativity. People spend so much time everyday analyzing and solving problems which can make it difficult to be creative when wanting to. The need for escape in everyday life, the urge to reach “strong emotional excitement” associated with inspiration (Osborne 1977) and difficulty to obtain creativity may leads to consumers turning to retailers as one source of inspiration. This can offer an explanation as to why inspiration was a salient theme when students discussed grocery shopping. The students did not feel that the discount store inspired them in the same way other stores did. Inspiration is dependent on the person’s ability to lose control to something outside of oneself (Osborne 1977) which demands a level of trust. If the retailers are to be considered a viable source of inspiration it is important for the consumers to feel that they can trust them. The difficulty of handing over control to someone else and the importance of trust in letting go in the quest for inspiration, can offer an explanation to the negative image of discount stores. The suspicions of the discount store in general, the perceived unfamiliarity and the questioned product quality, was salient issues associated with discount stores which can be understood from the notion of the need for inspiration and trust.

### The search for attractiveness

Attractive store environment and attractive consumers was recurring themes when discussing grocery stores and how they are experienced. Gabriel and Lang (2006) argue that everything in everyday life has become artistic, meaning that objects are evaluated based on their similarities to art rather than functional value. Attractiveness is something that can be considered to be inspirational and can generate positive feelings and excitement. Experiencing attractiveness can be part of exploring new things. Gabriel and Lang (2006) argue that the consumer can be regarded as an explorer and that the retail store can offer a safe and controlled environment of exploration of new things and that exploration is part of what is exiting with shopping. Consumption is often driven by a curiosity and a search for new experiences. The grocery store has transformed from being a place where choice is based on habit and

rationality to being a place where consumers are exposed to numerous options where the design and content of products is constantly changing which makes the store a place for exploration (Gabriel and Lang 2006). The excitement associated with exploration and the possibility to satisfy curiosity and need for exploration in the safe environment of a retailer can lead to consumers demand more and more retailers to fulfill them by offering a place for easily experiencing new things. The increased number of options of products which enables exploration also requires structure which increases the requirements for a good store layout .An attractive environment can be inspiring, facilitate exploration and search for new ideas which can explain why attractiveness is a salient topic when discussing grocery stores.

The need to be inspired and the importance of visual stimulation in the store are not equal for all people. It is possible that the need for inspiration and attractiveness hold different importance for different people. For some, aesthetic properties are important in generating feelings of pleasure and they may not feel much need for inspiration, while for others the need for inspiration is not necessary linked to aesthetic pleasure. The need for guidance from the store is most likely situation dependent, if a customer is planning a dinner party or just wants to buy a snack the need for inspiration is most likely different.

Gabriel and Lang (2006) state that bargaining can evoke positive feelings and boost self esteem. There is a difference in how bargaining is experienced in relation to experiencing buying something that has high value for money. Bargaining is like discovering a secret, consumers feel special and it invokes a sense of accomplishment. Even though value for money is something sought after by consumers it does not inflict the same strong feelings as bargaining does. Bargaining is about opportunity recognition and taking advantage of the opportunity that arises which can make people feel good about themselves. Gabriel and Lang (2006) argue that buying an expensive designer suit on sale, is not the same as buying a cheap suit, using this analogy the discount store can be perceived as a cheap suit. There is no secret with buying groceries at the discount store and it does not invoke much sense of accomplishment as the possibility to buy low price products is known to everyone. The discount store is in some product categories perceived as good value for money but generally misses to invoke positive feelings of excitement. This difference between bargaining and value for money can offer an explanation as to why discount stores are not experienced as attractive and

exciting. Curiosity and the yearning for new ideas are important in inspiring consumer behavior which could be an advantage for discount stores as their products often are perceived as exotic and different. However patronizing a discount store is rather associated with the possibility to get value for money rather than satisfying curiosity. Being able to plant new ideas and inspire is valuable which can explain why consumers disregard the store environment of discount stores and prefer a well-designed environment, designed to facilitate exploration and the development of new ideas.

## **Conclusion**

The study suggests that the discount store is used as a Scapegoat. This can be understood from the discount store failing to fulfill the consumers need for inspiration and attractiveness which in relation to the lack of trust towards the discount store makes the students perceive the discount stores as not only irrelevant but unsympathetic. The study indicates that the students perceive the discount stores an object of alterity and indicates the image to contradict possible identity goals among students, which can explain the role of the discount store as a Scapegoat. The importance of inspiration indicate an expectation on the grocery store to not only supplying solutions to basic needs but to be a source of inspiration and exploration. The negative image of discount stores among students can be understood from the high expectations of the grocery store in relation to the incapability of the discount store to create emotional excitement and encourage creativity.

## **Limitations**

The study was limited in terms of only having one focus group discussion with business students. It would have been interesting to have the students from other fields of study to participate in additional focus group discussions to get their opinion. The participants mentioned specific stores, why it would be interesting to study the marketing communication of these stores in relation to how consumers talk about them. Furthermore the study suggest that there is a difference between how the different discount stores represent, why it would be interesting to study this more to get a better understanding of the variation.



## **Implications for theory**

The study offers a possibility to expand the research within the field of retail image in general and discount stores in particular. The focus on the discount store may contribute to how the store is perceived not only as a carrier of store brands but in terms of store image. The study is an intersection between the field of discount store image, social groups and social identity, where the discount store is understood from how students express themselves about grocery stores. The purpose of this study was to understand the positioning of the discount store and to comprehend the social importance for how it is perceived. Focusing on students makes it possible, to an extent, to express how young consumers relate to consumption in connection to self image and the social context. The scope of this study is however mainly focused on the discount store image and the study is limited, why the implications for this field are restricted.

## **Implications for marketers**

The findings are considered to be useful as the study shed light on the image of discount store. It is important to be aware of the image in order to be able to manage the brand. The propensity to use the

discount store as a scapegoat can have implications on discount store patronage which is something to consider when managing how the brand is communicated. The increased interest in private brands and low price alternatives makes the social importance, as well as self image related to grocery shopping something to be considered for traditional grocery stores as well. The importance of inspiration and attractiveness are notions the discount store managers could benefit to reflect on, considering the potential of the exotic properties associated with some of the products held by discounters. The study can furthermore offer insight in how students communicate about grocery shopping which can help grocery stores to position themselves in a positive way.

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