

# **Female consumers' perceptions of garment fit, personal values and emotions considering their body shapes.**

**Josephine Kasambala**

*Department of Life and Consumer Sciences,  
University of South Africa  
E-mail: [kasamj@unisa.ac.za](mailto:kasamj@unisa.ac.za)*

**Elizabeth Kempen**

*Department of Life and Consumer Sciences,  
University of South Africa  
E-mail: [kempeel@unisa.ac.za](mailto:kempeel@unisa.ac.za)*

**Reena Pandarum**

*Department of Life and Consumer Sciences,  
University of South Africa  
E-mail: [Pandak@unisa.ac.za](mailto:Pandak@unisa.ac.za)*

**Corresponding author:** Professor E. Kempen ([kempeel@unisa.ac.za](mailto:kempeel@unisa.ac.za))

## **Abstract**

When female consumers encounter garment fit problems as a result of their body shape, an emotional experience may result due to the failure to attain the personal values they are aiming to achieve. Very little research has been conducted in South Africa focusing on the emotional impact on female consumers or the role personal values play in their shopping experience of ready-to-wear garment fit. This study was conducted to determine the female consumers' personal values attributed to garment fit and to identify the emotions resulting from the perceptions of garment fit in relation to their perceived body shape. This study used the Means-ends chain theory approach through the application of the hard laddering technique. The findings from the data collected from a purposeful and convenient sample of 62 female consumers showed that the majority of the participants in this study failed to attain their personal values through the proper fitting of the garments which are currently available in the clothing retailer stores due to their varied body shapes. This resulted in mainly negative emotions being expressed by the participants. It is, therefore, extremely important for South African clothing manufacturers and retailers to consider the various body shapes in their garment design and attempt to understand the specific needs of their target market if they want to be successful.

**KEYWORDS:** garment fit, clothing retail, personal values, emotions, body shape, cognitive appraisal theory, means-ends chain theory, hierarchical value maps

## **Introduction**

According to Cant (2013:69) clothing retailers today require a lot of preparation, not only in terms of selecting merchandise, but also in researching the needs of their customers. Spinks (2014:1) further adds that in South Africa's current clothing retail environment, where demand promotes high levels of differentiation, clothing retailers need to be ahead of their competitors in terms of their offerings to the consumers. To compound the problem, in recent years the challenge in the South African retail environment has been the arrival of a number of international retailer brands such as the Australian Cotton On Group, the United States retailer, Gap in 2012, Forever 21 in 2014, which is also the group's fast-fashion rivals of Topshop and the Spanish retailer, Zara which has already set up shops in South Africa among others (Moorat, 2014:1). The introduction of the latter brands to the South African fashion consumer may in particular have pressured the local retailers with its "fast fashion" approach, which introduces the latest styles on a continuous basis (South Africa retail and Consumer Products Outlook 2012-2016, 2012:5) ensuring that the latest fashion look, styles and trends quickly reach the consumer (Jackson & Shaw 2001:3; Moorat, 2014:1).

The competitive intensity within the clothing sector has provided an unprecedented variety of retailers for clothing consumers (Carpenter & Moore, 2010:1), which has created a major challenge for clothing retailers to understand the drivers that influence women clothing purchasing. This has resulted in a struggle for retailers to find the correct market positioning and in creating a differentiation between the local clothing products offered with those of their competitors (Carpenter & Moore, 2010:1). In addition, with more international fashion brands being made available to the South African retail markets, and with the emergence of online shopping, the South African consumer is developing an even stronger desire for clothing styles and preferences which are in line with global trends (Kaplan, 2014:1). Thus retailers and marketers are compelled to continually examine the needs or requirements of the fashion consumer (Bickle, 2011:7) as well as buy merchandise that reflects the demands of their customers (Cant, 2014:69). Furthermore, in the local context, South African clothing retailers should be mindful of and be guided by local preferences (Kaplan, 2014:1) as this may give local retailers the competitive edge over international retailers. A best practice for the local South Africa retailer would be

to interpret global trends in such a way that it will be relevant to the local fashion market which may include providing well-fitting clothing sizes for the various body shapes and proportions, adherence to fit preferences, and fashionable styles.

Clothing in general is a highly symbolic and visible product resulting in assumptions to be made about individuals, purely on the basis of their clothing (Banister & Hogg, 2007:218). Moreover, for the consumer, the clothing shopping experience is about making decisions concerning their appearance which is influenced by the attitudes towards stores and clothing as well as their personal values (Otieno, Harrow & Lea-Greenwood, 2005:298). According to Kim (2005:210) and Kaiser (1998:290) personal values are representations of goals or standards that individuals use to guide their actions and thoughts as well as evaluations of the appropriateness of the garment. Therefore, garment fit and the subsequent individual's appearance serves as a personal expression, communicating personal values to others (Kaiser 1998:290; Kim, Forsythe, Gu & Moon, 2002:481). Thus in an attempt to elevate the consumer both physically and psychologically (Jackson & Shaw, 2001:3), clothing obtains an emotional connotation (Doshi, 2006:1).

According to Lopatovska and Arapakis (2010:1), all human interaction including our material world involves expressions of emotions. Hence an individual's personal experiences with the fit or misfit of a garment may elicit either positive or negative emotions. Naturally when female consumers feel uncomfortable with the fit of the garment that they purchased, in relation to their personal values, negative emotions such as frustration may be experienced (Doshi, 2006:1). This frustration is not only consumer based, but garment manufacturers and retailers also bear the consequences when consumers face issues with the fitting of the garment, such as lost sales, damage to merchandise due to over handling of the garment when trying it on as well as returned garments as a result of poor fits (DesMarteau, 2000:1).

There are several theories that attempt to understand why people experience emotions, of which the cognitive appraisal theory of emotions is one. This theory is used in an attempt to understand the emotional expression caused by garment fit when consumers' personal values are either challenged or maintained.

### *Cognitive appraisal theory of emotions*

According to Lazarus (2001:55) the cognitive appraisal theory of emotions is defined as a quick evaluation of a situation with respect to a person's wellbeing of which answers to the evaluations are what cause the emotions a person experiences. In other words, the process that precedes the emotional response is the evaluation process (Desmet, Overbeeke & Tax, 2001:32). As an example, an ill-fitting garment does not produce emotions, but the evaluation of what is at stake for the consumer gives rise to a particular emotional response. Underlying this response are the personal values an individual seeks to achieve through the clothing they purchase from clothing retailers and wear, which in the case of an ill-fitting garment may be challenged because of the lack of proper fit or style of the garment (Desmet et al., 2001:32). Specifically one approach used in describing and differentiating between and among the evaluations are the dimensional processes which refer to the process of answering evaluative questions (Demir, Desmet & Hekkert, 2009:42). One of the evaluative questions most likely to be asked of the consumer when faced with an ill-fitting garment is whether this negatively perceived situation affects the female consumer's personal values. Demir et al. (2009:42) mentions that these evaluative questions which differentiate emotions are named appraisal dimensions. Furthermore, garments and appearance are closely related to our social environment according to Kaiser (1998:95), and the emotions this study intends to identify are those elicited when personal values are either challenged or maintained through garment fit. Therefore this study explored the social standards dimension as the appropriate dimension to use when evaluating personal values through the fit of garments and the resulting emotions.

In South Africa very little research has been conducted where the social standards dimension of appraisal has been applied to uncover the underlying emotions of female consumers when faced with an ill-fitting garment. Furthermore, fewer studies have reported on the deeper personal values that may contribute to emotions that consumers experience as a result of ill-fitting garments found in the South African clothing retail environment. Therefore this study was conducted to establish the emotional impact ill-fitting garments have on the female consumer when they evaluate the fitting of the garment against their personal value system. This can be explored by determining female consumers' personal values and emotions related to

their self-perceived body shapes in terms of the important criteria used when choosing ready-to-wear garments and the problems encountered thereof. The study applied the Means ends chain theory approach that allowed the researcher to determine female consumers' personal values and the resulting emotions through the application of the laddering interview technique. The study also aims to provide some valuable recommendations to address garment fit problems related to self-perceived body shape from the perspective of the South African female consumers.

## **Literature review**

A well-fitting garment contributes to the confidence and comfort (Alexander, Connell & Presley, 2005:52) as well as to the attractive and desired appearance of the wearer (Moody, Kinderman & Sinha, 2010:162). Moreover, the differences in body shapes will often determine the way the garment will drape on the body, how comfortable the garment will feel, and how the female consumer will perceive the fit of the garment (Pisut & Connell, 2007). Since clothing is about self-expression, emotions and personal identity (Hines & Bruce, 2007:xxi), female consumers are unlikely to purchase a garment solely as a means of ensuring warmth and to cover the body. Kim et al. (2002:481) are of the opinion that consumer behaviour in the clothing market is greatly influenced by their personal values and that garment fit is a key element of any garment that is able to support the consumer's personal values.

### *Defining garment fit*

The definition of a well-fitting garment, and thus what good fit represents in ready-to-wear clothing, depends on several factors which may include among others: the current fashion in fit that is found within clothing retailers, the existing industrial norm such as styles or function of the garment as well as the fit preferences of individuals (Yu, 2004:32). Apart from these aspects a well-fitting garment is achieved when the wearer feels comfortable and is able to move freely without any restraint from the clothing item (Laitala, Klepp & Hauge, 2011). Equally, a good fit is supposed to be flattering and enhance the appearance of the wearer by making the body look well-proportioned and smart (Rasband & Liechty, 2006). Rasband and Liechty (2006) also suggest that by wearing poor fitting garments negative attention is drawn to the body shape that varies from a well-proportioned or "ideal", which is said to be similar

in width in the shoulders and hips, with a medium bust, small waist, flat to slightly curved abdomen, moderately curved bottom and slim thighs that is well balanced with no exaggerated area present. Equally so a South African study by Pandarum et al. (2009) reported that there is no “average person” hence the prevalence of garment fit problems, compounded by the fact there is no readily accessible garment sizing system on a public domain available to the South African consumer or manufacturer. This is propriety priority to the manufacturers.

#### *Impact of body shape on garment fit*

Researchers Horwaton and Lee (2010:22); Barona-McRoberts (2005:2) and Otieno et al. (2005:307) concur that female consumers find it difficult to locate well-fitting garments. The authors attributed this to the varying female body shapes and proportions that may also change over the years as a result of age, changes in nutrition, lifestyle and an increase or loss in body weight (Howard & Lee, 2010:220); (Bougourd, 2007:108); (Pisut & Connell, 2007:370); (Pechoux & Ghosh, 2002:3) or ethnicity (Lee et al., 2007:375) and other influencing factors. This problem can also apply to the South African female clothing consumer for which very little research evidence is able to validate this occurrence. Researchers, Connell, Ulrich, Knox, Hutton, Bruner and Ashdown (2003:1) and Simmons, Istook and Devarajan (2004a:1) suggest that most garment manufacturers and retailers in the United States of America (USA) still base their body measurements on studies conducted in the 1940s and the hourglass or slightly pear-shaped female figure is used as the basis for manufacturing garments. The problem of different body shapes and the lack of realistic body measurements of the population and the problem of garment fit were also highlighted in that “South African clothing manufacturers and retailers have no idea of the body shape of South Africans as a detailed survey of the shape and size of the South African consumer has never been done before. As a result the local garment industry in South Africa has been forced to rely on charts devised in the United States of America and United Kingdom to design and manufacture clothing for South African consumers” (Kahn, 2008). It is therefore assumed that the sizing systems used in South Africa for the production of ready-to-wear garments found in retail stores in South Africa are also outdated. This type of practice does not accommodate the diversity of the female body shapes in South Africa. This implies that the majority of female consumers who do not have a body shape that meets the

standardised ready-to-wear garment sizing system, may experience problems with garment fit (Park, Nam, Choi, Lee & Lee, 2009:374).

### *The relationship between body shape and garment fit*

Research provides several insights into the relationship between female body shapes and garment fit. For example, Alexander et al. (2005:52) studied the garment fit of females using four different body shapes – pear, hourglass, rectangular and inverted triangle – in trying to find the relationship between body shape and garment fit preferences. The researchers observed that the participants who identified their bodies as rectangular, pear and hourglass shapes were more likely to express fit problems in the bust area than those who perceived themselves to be an inverted triangular shape. Fit problems at the waist, hip and thighs were more likely to be reported by the pear and hourglass body shapes than the rectangular and inverted body shapes. Hence these findings also revealed that respondents who reported fit problems at the bust did not prefer wearing fitted tops. Similarly, respondents who had fit problems at the hip did not prefer purchasing fitted jackets and respondents who had fit problems at the waist preferred more fitted pants. This implies that different female body shapes can experience different types of fitting problems, and fit problems due to body shape may influence garment fit preferences among female consumers.

In another study, Schofield, Ashdown, Hethron, Labat and Salusso (2006:158) explored body shape as a contributing factor to garment fit and sizing problems for a specific target market. The study was limited to differentiating two seat shapes. This study found that two women with identical seat shapes and hip circumference may have different degrees of abdominal protrusion, yet another woman still with a flat seat shape may have a full high hip circumference and thin thighs. The researchers concluded that the differences in body measurements identified within each garment size suggested that these relationships affected the garment fit. Therefore, clothing retailers that succeed in providing the female consumers' needs and expectations, with all the criteria deemed relevant by the shopper (Easey, 2002:3), such as garments that focus on the customers' preferences, and body shape variations and proportions, are rewarded with continued loyalty and profitability (Newman & Patel, 2004:770).

Furthermore, Bickle (2011:8) states that marketers must also understand their target markets' clothing retailer demands such as the quality of the merchandise or services through which the shopping experience is enhanced. Female consumers may identify with the retailer and their offerings to build up their own personal values manifested through what they wear.

#### *Personal values and emotions related to garment fit*

Personal values can be regarded as the points of reference in the evaluation processes. If for instance body shape is contributing to the problems of garment fit, emotions may be elicited depending on the perceptions of whether the fitting of the garment matches or mismatches the personal values which the female consumer may seek through clothing. Hence an emotional state will not be elicited by the garment fit problem as such, but by the evaluation significance of this problem to an individual's personal values (Desmet et al., 2002:3).

The personal values that consumers attach to products such as garments can be broken down into two types, namely instrumental and terminal values (Chema, Marks, Parcell & Bredahl, 2004:2). According to Chema et al. (2004:2) and Karve (2011:1), instrumental values are core values that act like tools or methods in achieving the desirable end-state, while terminal values are desirable end-states that individuals work towards achieving through garments. These personal values have a large influence on the cognitive processes of consumers (Chema et al., 2004:2) in their evaluation of garment fit.

Moreover, emotions and personal values are closely related to each other. According to Frijda (2007) cited in Nurkka ('n.d':3), every emotion hides a concern and in Frijda's vocabulary, concern is a synonym for motive, a need, a desire, a goal as well as the personal values, referring to all things that people care for and are important to them. In this regard, a personal value is the concern which is also the terminal personal value that gives the situation (for instance improper fitting garment) its emotional meaning and the emotions point to the presence of some concern in the mind of the consumer. Hence the elicited emotion by the female consumers indicate the presence of a concern, which is also the terminal personal value for garment fit. Thus in this study, the emotional responses are regarded as the outcome of an

appraisal or evaluation process in which the problems of garment fit are linked to the underlying concerns or terminal personal values.

#### *Laddering instrument design*

The laddering exercise normally involves a tailored interviewing format which primarily uses a series of directed probes to uncover the underlying reasons why an attribute or consequence is important to an individual (Reynolds & Gutman, 1988:12). There are two different types of approaches that can be used to conduct the laddering interview. These are the *hard laddering* and *soft laddering* approaches. The *hard laddering* approach does not involve face to face or personal interviews, but is instead based on a structured, self-administered questionnaire that participants are asked to complete on either a computer or with pencil and paper (Miele & Parisi, 2000:16). On the other hand, the *soft laddering* approach is the traditional method of interviewing in which the natural and unrestricted flow of speech is encouraged during the interviews (Costa, Dekker & Jongen, 2004:407). Since hard laddering can minimise the influence of an interviewer resulting in increasing the objectivity of the results (Zanoli & Naspetti, 2002:647), this was considered to be the most appropriate approach to uncover female consumers' personal values and the resulting emotions caused by garment fit problems for this study.

The purpose of this study was to establish the emotional impact and perceptions of garment fit on female consumers when evaluating the ill-fitting garment against their personal values that they aspire to achieve through clothing. This was explored by using two laddering exercises. The first laddering exercise was to determine female consumers' personal values and emotions related to body shapes in terms of important evaluative criteria female consumers use when choosing ready-to-wear garments in relation to their body shape. The hard laddering procedure initially identified the attributes or characteristics (positive or negative) based on the question, "*Considering your body shape, write down the three most important criteria you always apply when choosing any ready-to-wear clothing items in store.*" This was followed with a prompt by the researcher to reflect on the attributes listed by the participant through a probing question such as, "Why is the attribute important to you?" which may lead to a consequence, and a further prompt to determine why the consequence identified was important that lead to the personal values associated

with the consequence. Through this technique the participant was allowed to continue revealing the importance of a particular answer which is what the laddering technique essentially aims to achieve (Veludo-de-Oliveira, Ikeda & Campomar, 2006:631). The second laddering exercise was aimed at uncovering the emotional impact resulting from the problems female consumers encounter when purchasing ready-to-wear garments from South African retailers. The hard laddering exercise was conducted through the question, “*When considering your body shape (referring to the body shape they had associated themselves with), what are the three main problems you mostly encounter when buying ready-to-wear clothing?*” The same procedure was followed to elicit the ladders.

#### *Analysis of the hard laddering data*

The Means-ends chain theory through the hard laddering interviews provided data for the emotions relating to the underlying personal values with regard to body shapes. The hard laddering data were first analysed and coded according to the procedure suggested by Reynolds and Gutman (1988:18). The content codes were entered into the Mecalyst V 9.1 software program which tabulated an implication matrix portraying the degree of connection between the various attributes, consequences and values. Furthermore, a hierarchical value map (HVM) was constructed from the implication matrix which graphically represented the most frequently mentioned links gathered across all the participants and presented the findings.

### **Findings and Discussion**

The HVM (figures 1 and 2) features the rectangle blocks; each rectangle block contains the code label and the percentage of participants who named or mentioned that particular code. Personal values which are at the top of the map are linked by arrows coming from the middle levels, which are the consumer consequences, while consequences are linked by arrows coming from the attributes which are at the bottom of the maps or form the first row at the bottom of the map. The thickness of each line represents the number of occurrences of a particular link between two codes. Thus, the thicker lines refer to links mentioned by a larger number of

participants. With regard to the derived HVMs, even though different attributes, consequences and personal values resulting from the emotional connotation with the attribute and the consequence are mentioned by many different participants, it does not necessarily mean that it is represented in the HVM. Deciding which code labels should be represented was accomplished by selecting a cut-off level to indicate which links or associations between the code label should be represented or omitted in the HVM. For example, a cut-off of 2 means that all links or associations mentioned by at least two participants is represented in the HVM. The chosen cut-off for each of the maps in this study is based on the balance of meaningful information retained and clarity of the map created as indicated by Reynolds and Gutman (1988:20). The findings are structured to reflect the purpose of this study which is to establish the emotional impact ill-fitting garments have on the female consumer when they evaluate the fitting of the garment against their personal value system. This was explored by determining female consumers' personal values and emotions related to body shapes in terms of important criteria female consumers use when choosing ready-to-wear garments in relation to their body shape and the problems encountered when purchasing ready-to-wear garments from South African clothing retailers.

#### *Criteria for choosing ready-to-wear garments*

Findings from the first laddering question resulted in the HVM presented in figure 1 with the chosen cut-off of 3. Figure 1 illustrates that "fit" (36%) of the garment is the most important attribute female consumers consider when purchasing ready-to-wear garments in the retail store. "Fit" refers to the way a garment conforms to the body as well as the appearance of it. "Style" (34%) of the garment is the second most important attribute considered after "fit" and the third attribute mentioned by the participants in this study is "length" (15%) of the garment representing the lengths of trousers, skirts and sleeves.

Place Figure 1 approximately here

The HVM also suggests that the most mentioned attribute, "fit", is linked to two consequences which are "comfortable" and "cover up", with the link between "fit" and

“comfortable” being the strongest on the map indicated by the thicker link on the map. Comfort of garments is a psychological feeling or judgment of the wearer under certain conditions (You, Wang, Luo, Li & Zhang, 2002:307). The comfortable feeling or sensation associated with the “fit” of the garment mentioned by the participants is regarded as a psycho-social consequence. Participants explained while referring to the “fit” option of garments, *“I feel comfortable in tight-fitting garments as it makes me look younger.”* Few participants mentioned that they are comfortable in semi-fitting garments as they *“...enjoy the functional aspect of easiness in their movements, and feeling presentable”*. Very few indicated comfort in a loose-fitting fit option because *“it is an appropriate look”*. The findings suggest that the comfort a consumer seeks in a garment is subjective. It is interesting to note that through different kinds of fit (tight, semi and loose fitting), female consumers seek the psycho-social consequence “comfortable” and hence the strongest link with a high mentioning of 21% on the HVM. At the highest level of abstraction, the consequence of “comfortable” leads to a personal value of “confidence”, an instrumental value which is emotional in nature, with a fairly strong link. Emotions are the fundamental process which underlies every expression of the evaluation (Hannula, 2002:29). While female consumers consider the criteria for choosing ready-to-wear garments in the clothing retail environment, there is a continuous unconscious evaluation of the different alternatives and consequences with respect towards the terminal values or desired end goals (Nurkka, ([n.d]:2). This evaluation which is proceeding towards the terminal value is represented as a positive emotion.

A fairly strong link between the attribute “fit” and the functional consequence “cover up”, is also illustrated. “Cover up” refers to the preference of the kind of fit which does not reveal the body shape. According to the participants in this study, tight-fitting garments which define the body structure were regarded negatively as they do not want to reveal their body shapes as illustration in this comment, *“I consider loose-fitting garments so that I don’t show my body; I avoid tight-fitting garments.”* Thus the attribute “fit” is driven by the instrumental personal value “confidence”, which is also a positive emotion and also the functional consequence “cover up” of the body shape.

The second most mentioned attribute female consumers consider when purchasing ready-to-wear garments in the retail stores is the “style”, also referred to as the

design of the garment which is linked to three consequences namely, “comfortable”, “accentuate body shape” and “accommodate body shape”. A fairly strong link is suggested with the psycho-social consequence, “accentuate body shape”. The psycho-social consequence “accentuate body shape” is linked to the instrumental personal values and emotional connection of “look good” as well as “confidence”. Another psycho-social consequence linked to “confidence” is “flattering”. Thus, some female consumers are seeking to “look good” when the style of the garment accentuates their body shape. Meanwhile others associate it with “confidence”.

Female consumers are also driven by a terminal personal value and emotional expression of “freedom”, which is regarded as the terminal value when considering “style”. The terminal personal value of “freedom” is derived from the functional consequence of “accommodate body shape”. This can be explained by some female consumers’ responses, *“I prefer styles with elasticated waist, flared skirts or A-line dresses which flare out to fit over hips, stomach or the back.”* Yet others consider the high cut pants or jeans which they also mention will accommodate the big stomach or the back, *“I go for high cut jeans or trousers which can accommodate my stomach and the back.”* “Style”, however, is also connected to the psycho-social consequence “comfortable” which is related to the instrumental personal value of “confidence”. Hence, the attribute “styles” is also related to the instrumental personal value and emotional experience of providing these female consumers with “confidence”.

“Length” is the third most mentioned attribute for choosing a ready-to-wear garment which is linked to two consequences of “presentable” and “cover up”. Concerning the psycho-social consequence “presentable”, some participants considered longer lengths of pants or sleeves as important when purchasing certain garments. According to one participant, *“Normal or shorter lengths of pants or sleeves look awkward on me as I am tall.”* It is understandable for these women to consider the length of garments in order to be “presentable”. The psycho-social consequence “presentable” was further explained by another participant, *“I usually considering longer skirts so as to dress appropriately for my age.”* On the other hand the psycho-social consequence “presentable” was also explained by a few participants for considering shorter length skirts, *“I consider shorter skirts; they look presentable.”* These responses suggest that the perception of presentability in the choice of garments is also subjective. One may assume that the contradiction in preferences

could be connected to age differences; older females may want to dress age appropriately, while the younger females may feel “presentable” in shorter skirts or dresses. Regarding the link between the attribute “length” and the functional consequence “cover up”, the responses pointed out the fact that some female consumers feel the need to purchase longer tops so as to “cover up”, “ *I go for longer tops so as to cover my behind.*”

The HVM suggests that the attribute “length” did not resolve in a personal value or an emotional experience and that these ladders remained short. An explanation for this occurrence is because of the cut-off level of 3 that was applied to achieve a more meaningful representation. The lower cut-offs show the personal values which were omitted, meaning they did not have a mentioning of at least three participants. However, it is clear through the psycho-social consequences “presentability” and functional consequence “cover up” why the attribute “length” was important to the female consumers in this study. The idea behind Means-end chain theory is that consumers’ decision-making is about evaluating (Nurkka, [n.d]:2) and selecting ready-to-wear garments which will enable them to reach their personal values. Furthermore, it is also evident that the criteria “fit” and “style” of the garment are centered around the achievement of three personal values, namely “confidence” (31%) followed by “look good” (15%) and “freedom” (11%) which are all emotional . In this regard it can be said that personal value is a type of concern that is guiding the consumers in the evaluations of products or situations in order to reach their desired end states. Furthermore, the consequences point out that the psycho-social consequences “comfortable”, “presentable” and “flattering”, reveal the positive (beneficial) emotional aspects of the female consumer when they evaluate the criteria (attributes) for choosing garments.

#### *Problems encountered when purchasing ready-to-wear garments*

To illustrate the problems with garment fit when female consumers purchase ready-to-wear garments in relation to the body shape, the second laddering exercise was performed. Findings resulted in the HVM presented in figure 2 with the chosen cut-off of 2.

Place Figure 2 approximately here

Although female consumers appear to mention different problematic aspects, the findings reveal that “tight-fitting” (40%) seems to be the common problem when purchasing ready-to-wear garments. This is followed by “loose-fitting” (23%), and the “length of the pants” (21%). To a lesser extent “length of the tops” (8%) and the “styles” (3%) were also considered to be problematic when purchasing ready-to-wear garments.

The problem of “tight-fitting” is linked to three negative consequences of “improper fit”, “uncomfortable” and “restrictive” with the link between “tight-fitting” and “improper fit” being the strongest. “Tight-fitting” in this regard refers to the tight feeling female consumers experience in certain areas of their bodies, while fitting well in others when they purchase different types of garments. The HVM clearly shows that all the problems encountered with ready-to-wear garments lead to the negative functional consequence, “improper fit”. Not surprising is a properly fitting garment as this may mean that when a consumer buys a garment, they above all want the garment that fits their body shape well. This negative functional consequence, “improper fit”, is connected to all the negative instrumental personal values expressed by female consumers resulting in mainly feeling “frustrated” (16%) with “improper fit”. “Miserable” (11%), and “embarrassed” (11%), were the other feelings expressed, with the link between “improper fit” and “embarrassed” being the third strongest on the map. Some participants mentioned feeling “depressed” (10%), while others mentioned “hesitant” (10%) to wear a garment that does not fit properly. According to Frijda (1986) cited in Desmet (2003:3) every emotion hides a concern (terminal personal value) and concerns can be regarded as a point of reference in the evaluation process. The significance of the negative consequence, “improper fit”, in relation to the consumers’ well-being is determined by an evaluated concern also regarded as the terminal value. In this regard, the consequence of “improper fit” did not match the concerns of the consumers. Hence the instrumental values which have been expressed through different negative emotions point to some affected underlying concerns (terminal personal values) (Desmet et al., 2001:3).

The second strongest link in the HVM is from the problem, “loose-fitting”, also associated with the negative consequence of “improper fit”, which, as already

illustrated, is central in the HVM. Female consumers stated that the looseness of garments in certain parts of their bodies was caused by the unbalanced measurements of the garments for different body shapes, as comment by one of the participants, *“For dresses I experience loose fitting around the neck area while fitting well in the bottom part.”* “Length of the pants”, which is the third mentioned problem with garment fit, is linked to two negative consequences of “improper fit” and “alterations”. “Length of pants” represents lengths of pants which do not correspond to the various heights of the consumers. Both these links are the third strongest as well as the link between attribute “tight-fitting” and consequence “uncomfortable”. Although the length of the pants is problematic, some female consumers seem to turn the problem into a challenge by altering the garment to fit properly, however this ladder stops at the consequence level without attaining the personal value level which may suggest that female consumers feel that fixing the garment is more important than dwelling on the effects of the problem and that some female consumers are also able to alter garments which are loose in some parts of the body.

The HVM also suggests that the instrumental value, “frustrated”, is reached in a different way by some participants. Female consumers answered that they feel “uncomfortable” with “tight-fitting” garments in some areas of their bodies such as the hips, waist and bust as expressed in this comment, *“It is uncomfortable wearing garments which are fitting tightly around the hips.”* The negative psycho-social consequence “uncomfortable” is associated with the emotion “frustrated”. The link between the problem “tight-fitting” and the undesirable consequence “uncomfortable” is also the third strongest link on the map. The problem “tight-fitting” is also shown to link to the negative consequence, “restrictive”, as illustrated in this comment, *“I feel restricted in my movement when I wear “tight-fitting” garments.”* With regard to the remaining problems encountered when purchasing ready-to-wear garments, “length of tops” and “styles” are also related to the negative consequence, “improper fit”. Some of the participants responded in terms of “styles” that, *“The tops are not long enough to cover the bottom”* and another participant commented, *“Styles of the garments are too youthful, which makes them wrong for the mature bodies.”*

In addition, the undesirable consequences “improper fit”, “uncomfortable” and “restrictive” also describe the negative emotional aspects expressed resulting from the evaluations of the problems they encounter with ready-to-wear garments. This

corresponds well with what different researcher have pointed out, in that women find it difficult to find a garment that fits well, which makes them unhappy consumers (Horwaton & Lee, 2010:22; Barona-McRoberts, 2005:2; Otieno, et al., 2005:307).

## **Conclusion**

Garments and their outward appearance that individuals wear greatly influence the way they think, feel and behave (Rasband & Lichty, 2006:3) and as such the criteria for choosing ready-to-wear garments could be considered an important step in what the consumer aspires to achieve through clothing. Through garments the body becomes a form of self-expression of personal values to others (Kaiser, 1998:146); the study suggests that the criteria for choosing ready-to-wear garments rests upon whether the garment provides desirable consequences contributing to the achievement of the personal values of a consumer also expressed as positive emotions.

Furthermore, female consumers seek out certain personal values through garment fit, however, the personal values that these participants aspire to achieve through clothing seems to be affected by various problems: tight-fitting, loose-fitting, lengths of tops or pants as well as the styles of garments which do not conform to various body shapes of women. As already stated, emotions and personal values are closely related in that the emotions hide a concern which is important to the consumer. In this regard, personal value is the concern which is also the terminal personal value that gives the situation (for instance improper fitting garment) its emotional meaning. This study, therefore, suggests that the expressed negative instrumental personal values (emotions) point to the unnamed concern or a terminal personal value which is hindered by the problems the participants in this study have identified with ready-to-wear garments found in current South African clothing retailers.

The findings from this study are useful to clothing manufacturers and retailers to reiterate the effect that variations of South African female consumers' body shapes have on the experience of garment fit which has been illustrated as directly link to the personal values of the consumers and related emotions captured in the perception of the fit of the garment. It is recommended that manufactures and retailers consider the body shape requirements of the female clothing consumer in order to provide styles and designs that address the ill-fitting state of ready-to-wear

clothing South African consumers have to select from. A study that quantifies and relates body shape to personal values and resulting emotions will allow a more precise understanding of the body shapes that are particular to South Africa and the values that drive the purchase of certain garment design preferences in South Africa.

### **Managerial applications**

Garment fit problems related to ready-to-wear clothing have highlighted that there are several significant steps which clothing manufacturers and retailers need to take in order for them to produce and provide garments which will satisfy the needs of female consumers. Based on the findings of this study, it is worthwhile for clothing manufacturers and retailers to focus on providing garments that target a specific market, bearing in mind the various body shapes of the purchasing South African female consumers. When the target market is too wide, it is difficult to adapt the fashionable designs to meet various body shapes. Managerial approaches in this regard should be that all their marketing efforts and all that they entail should focus on the target market. This is because according to Bickle (2011:165) the primary target market represents the majority of the clothing retailer's sales and profits. This group is the retailer's primary reason for doing business.

Furthermore, it would also be beneficial for management to take an interest in uncovering the unique needs of their target market. A greater understanding of female consumers' personal values and knowledge about the criteria when choosing garments identified with different body shapes and the emotional impact female consumers endure when they experience garment fit problems is vital, rather than concentrating solely on the fashionable product selection, more specifically while being influenced by the international trends, they must also consider the local preferences. The information can be used in decision-making right the way through the supply chain, from design and merchandising through to the formulation of effective marketing strategies.

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Figure 1: HVM of the criteria for choosing ready-to-wear garments

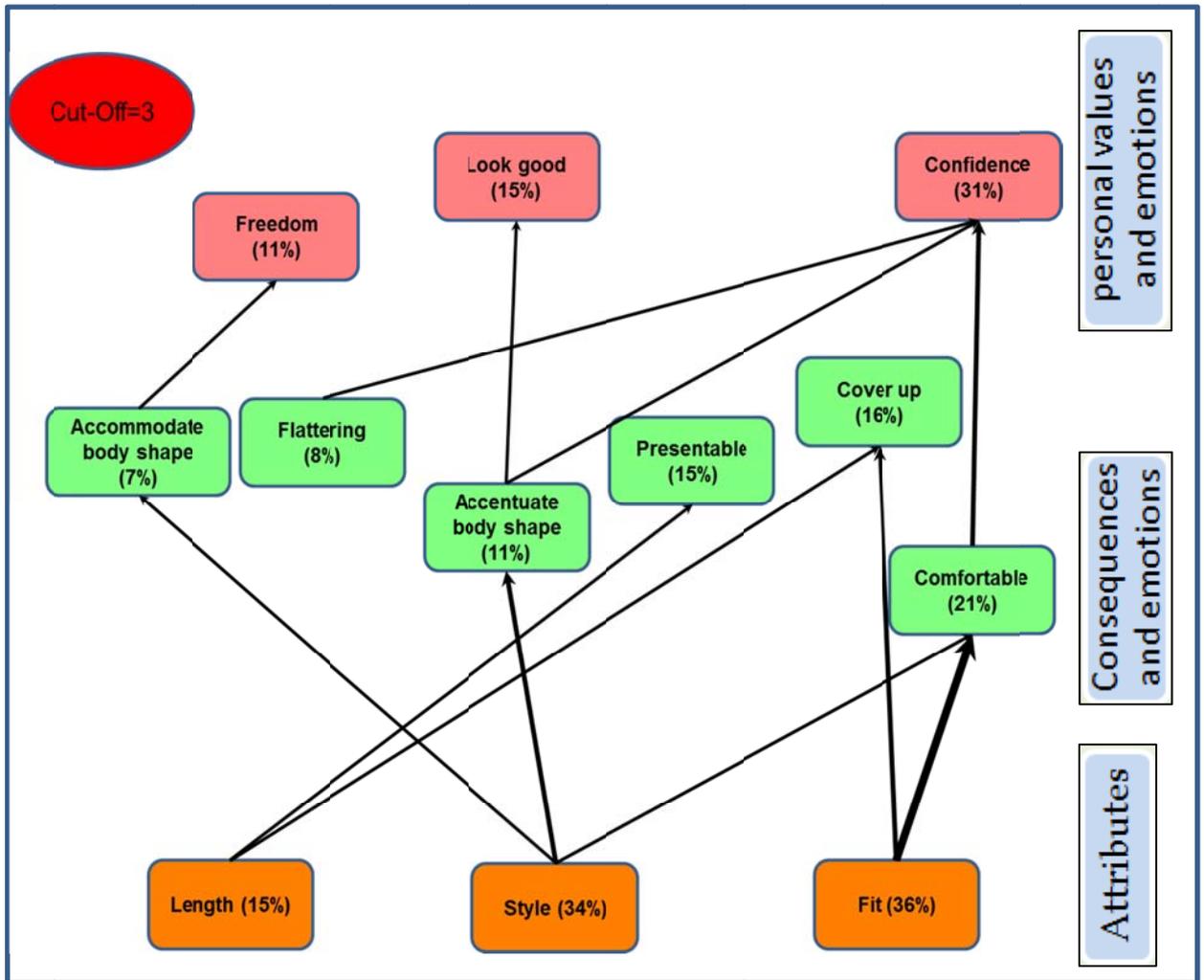


Figure 2: Hierarchical value map of the problems encountered when purchasing ready-to-wear garments

