The semiotics of retail space: An application of the repertory grid methodology

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The physical appearance of the retail outlet has consistently proven to be a determinant of retail patronage (Bearden 1977; Hansen and Deutscher 1977; Arnold et al. 1983). Yet the existent literature is virtually silent concerning consumer perceptions of retail environments (Scott 1985). At least in part, this void in the literature may be the result of marketing's lack of an established methodology for addressing human perceptions of physical environments. Accordingly, I will attempt to address two topics. First, I present a method for eliciting consumer perceptions of retail environments. Second, I will present preliminary results concerning consumer perceptions of department store entrances. Before these two may be presented, a certain amount of background is in order. This background concerns the Repertory Grid Test, which is at the heart of the methodology employed.

Repertory grid test

The Repertory Grid Test is based upon George Kelly's Personal Construct Theory. Kelly (1955) developed both his theory and the attendant methodology simultaneously, yielding a pair that fit one another hand-in-glove. While a full description of Kelly's thesis is beyond the scope of this paper, a brief introduction to some of his ideas may aid the appreciation of his technique.

Kelly's theory revolves around the notion of the Personal Construct System. This system acts as the individual's perceptual mechanism, the tool she uses to understand and structure the surrounding world. We might think of the System as the prism which splits light into colors. White light is incoming stimuli. As we cannot see unrefracted light, so we are unable to directly know the 'real' world. We first must interpret the incoming information; the Personal Construct System does just this. It splits the