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## **Differentiation through Corporate Image** **- A comparison between Hemköp and Ica-Maxi-**

**C- dissertation in marketing**

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## **Foreword**

We would like to say it was really interesting to work on that dissertation during 4 months. We learnt a lot on a professional and personal ways, by working in-group and solving internal tensions.

We want to thank Gabriel Awuah for his guidance in this paper, and also Sebastia Verger, who helped us to create our online survey.

Then, we want to thank all the survey's respondents, because without them, we would not have any available information.

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## **Introduction**

“The corporate image is the perception that any audience has of an organization through the accumulation of received messages” (Ind, Nicolas, 1992, p21).

Since companies exist, every audience has a different image from a company.

Corporate image is a result of everything a company does (or does not). This image will be determined by all the company’s actions and is formed from four areas (products and services, behaviours and attitudes, environments, and communications). Thus, it will create a perception of what a company is, in the mind of any audience (Smith and Taylor, 2004, p666).

Nowadays, in the epoch of the globalization, where major companies will become more competitive, only the firms, which are really competitive and differentiated, will survive. Being differentiated means being perceived as a unique and the tendency is that competing companies around the world will become more similar (Olins, 1989, p9). For this reason, it is very important to have a “good image”. It implies a competitive advantage.

New environmental trends, most of them related with the increasing competition, have modified and blurred the image of many companies. Therefore it is of special importance a clear image that reflects a positive identity of the company and leads to a good reputation (Balmer and Gray, 1999). Positive perceived images in the mind of any audience may help companies in a lot of aspects such as to improve sales, support new product developments and recruit skilled personnel (Smith and Taylor, 2006, p667).

## **Problem**

Why do companies differentiate through corporate image in the mind of the consumers from its competitors? How do consumers perceive those messages that companies create to communicate their identity?

## **Purpose**

In order to have a clear answer for our problem, our purpose is to understand and analyze deeply what are the reasons that make a company use a strategy of differentiation through the image. Thus, image is pointed out as one of the differentiation tools to create a competitive advantage.

Moreover and with the aim to understand how consumers perceive the messages that companies create to communicate their identity, an empirical study of the perception of two groceries companies is analyzed.

## **Delimitation**

In this paper, we want to focus on the importance of differentiation in the mind of the consumers through corporate image as a strategic tool. A brief explanation of the three generic strategies that a company can follow is discussed, stressing the importance of the strategy of differentiation as a form of being perceived as a unique. Indeed, one of the elements of differentiation is the image. Again, an explanation of all the aspects of the image is presented pointing out its areas of perception and its strategic importance. Finally, we will analyze, assess, and compare how this image is perceived in the mind of the customers according the empirical results of two important retailer Swedish companies in the area of groceries: Hemköp and Ica-Maxi.

Since each Stakeholder of a company has different wants and wishes, all the audiences perceive corporate image differently. Indeed, this dissertation is focused on the consumer perception of corporate image. The main reason is because marketing is based on meeting the needs of the consumers. However, it is clear that all the others stakeholders are also important if a company pretends to survive in the long run. Thus, we leave an open door to analyze the others perspectives.

The two companies studied are Hemköp and Ica-Maxi in the area of Halmstad. Both companies were chosen because from the consumer perspective it is rather easy to have a perception of them. Almost everyone in Halmstad has bought products and therefore has had a real contact, essential for the formation of a mental picture of a company.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Next pages, the different theories related to the issues of differentiation and corporate image will be exposed. Firstly, three definitions and their inseparability are presented in order to avoid misinterpretations. Secondly, it will be discussed the three generic competitive strategies of Porter. Then, we will analyze deeply the strategy of differentiation and how one of the elements of differentiation is the image. Finally, the theoretical background about corporate image, which this paper is mostly based, will be showed.

### **Definitions: Corporate identity, corporate image and corporate communications**

When reading about corporate image, one can observe that image is closely linked with the identity of a company. Moreover, identity has been a term that has created confusion in the business world and in the media due to the fact that has been used just as a graphic idea of creating logos during the 1960s (Ind, 1992, p27). Corporate identity and corporate image have to be strategically interpreted. Therefore, in order to avoid misinterpretations we will use the following definitions in our dissertation to characterize these three concepts.

**Corporate identity** is formed by a company's history, its belief and philosophy, the nature of its technology, its ownership, its people, ethical and cultural values (Ind.N, 1992). It is the sum of the values and purposes of a company, its corporate strategy, its organizational structure as well as its organizational culture (Balmer, J. Gray, E, 1999). Each company has its own corporate identity. Corporate identity is more than creation of logos (Inden, 1992).

**Corporate image** is perception (Smith, Taylor, 2006). It is the mental picture of an organization in the mind of the audiences (Balmer.J. Gray, E, 1999). Corporate image will be created by all the intentional or unintentional actions of an organization (Ind, N, 1992).

**Corporate communications** is the process that translates an identity into an image (Ind, N, 1992). It is a very important process because it conveys the identity to all the audiences. Then, audiences perceive it and create an image of a company.

Balmer and Gray stress the inseparability of the three concepts as well as the importance of corporate communication as a connector between corporate identity and corporate image. Corporate identity and corporate communications are of strategic importance and if they are well managed, can imbue to a competitive advantage through the corporate image. Thus, if a company conveys properly their corporate identity, costumers might perceive a positive mental picture of the company. Due to the inseparability of the three elements, any change in corporate identity can affect the perception of the corporate image of the company, critical in the achievement of a competitive advantage (Balmer, J. Gray, E, 1999).

Once the three concepts have been defined and the linkage has been stressed, the main theoretical part is discussed. Next section, deals with the three successful general strategies that companies can adopt in order to be competitive into the marketplace. Indeed, differentiation is one of them, and image is a way to differentiate.

## **The Three Generic Strategies**

As Michael Porter says, there are 3 different generic strategies that a company can use to be successful (Porter, 1998):

1. Overall cost leadership: a company reduces its expenses as much as possible to offer the cheapest prices to consumers
2. Differentiation: a company will create products or services, which are perceived as “unique” by consumers
3. Focus: a company concentrates its competencies on a narrow market

After these brief explanations of the three generic strategies, we are going to develop the differentiation strategy. To do that, we will give information about all the major criteria that a company can use to differentiate its offer.

### **Differentiation**

Generally, greatest value explains why consumers buy or not products and services. The aim of marketing is to offer what consumers want: also, if you want to catch and retain them, you will have “to understand these needs and the buying processes better than competitors do, and deliver more value”. Companies can create superior value for its markets (Kotler, 2005, p421):

- With lower prices than competitors
- Offer more advantages which explains higher prices

This superior value will be at the origin of a “competitive advantage” (Kotler, 2005, p421).

Nevertheless, if a company says that its products have the best quality and service, it must give a whole satisfaction to consumers. It means that the company must differentiate its marketing offer; this will offer more value than competitors to consumers. “It is not a matter of being different: success comes from being different in a way that customers want” (Kotler, 2005).



In this part, we will see the different ways where a company can differentiate its offer. These points are:

- a) Product differentiation: by offering features to standardized products or higher performance
- b) Service differentiation: it will be a differentiation of services “around” products, which will create a higher value and also a competitive advantage (notably speedy, reliable and careful delivery)
- c) Personnel differentiation: hire and train better their employees than competitors; choose carefully its “customer-contact people” in order that they have good attitudes and knowledge
- d) Image differentiation: if different companies offer the same products and features, customers will perceive their images differently. It has to be unique and distinctive.

### **The necessity of managing a corporate identity**

Both Ind, Nicolas (1992) and Balmer, J (1992) report that changes in the environment have caused the necessity of an effective management of corporate identity and communications. Balmer, J and Grey, R (1999) declare that these factors, have modified the image of companies, and warn that they represent a threat to the strategic position of companies. However, they also consider that it is an opportunity for companies to present a clear image that reflects a positive identity. Both authors have identified a number of factors:

- a) **Acceleration of product life cycles.** Mainly it is referred to consumer electronics goods where companies need to reposition constantly in their markets. Therefore the ones with high visibility and reputation have a differential factor that reduce the uncertainty in the mind of the audiences
- b) **Competition increase** and it is difficult for companies to differentiate themselves from each other. By communicating a unique corporate identity, companies reach a differential factor that adds value in the mind of the organization’s publics.
- c) **Integrations of companies** like mergers, acquisitions, divestments, privatizations, deregulations and recessions cause that a company has to redefine its identity.

- d) **Globalization.** As markets become globalized, companies have had to create good images that can be a competitive factor to expand internationally and differentiate from competitors.
- e) **The cost of communication.** As the cost of communication has been increased steadily, it is very difficult to support a large number of brands. Therefore, a corporate communication campaign seems to be an economic way to embrace all the products.
- f) **Shortage of high-qualified personnel.** In order to be competitive, firms need to attract and retain the best employees. Thus, by being well perceived it is easy to retain and attract the best skilled employees.
- g) **Public expectations for corporate social responsiveness.** Increasingly, society is more aware of the environmental problems and is demanding high levels of corporate social responsiveness to companies. Companies should try to communicate and carry out social actions to create a good image.

To sum up, due to the factors exposed above, companies need to review their identities and how they communicate them in order to create an image that is relevant to the corporate strategy (Ind, N, 1999, p43).

## **Image**

In this section, the main theoretical framework of corporate image is discussed. A wide explanation about all the aspects of corporate image will be exposed. Firstly, we will discuss how image creates value by giving customers confidence in the product. Secondly, an explanation of the areas from which the image is formed in the mind of the consumer and the advantages of a good image is discussed. This section is of special importance for the research and in order to give a clear answer to our research question. Finally, the innovative concept of stereotype image is presented.

### **Image as a differential advantage. Creating value**

Doyle, P and Stern, P (2006, p81) stress the importance of corporate image as element of differential advantage. According to them “a strong image gives the customer confidence in the product”. Firms can create value through image in two ways:

- I. Reality. Customers will have more or less confidence depending superior product performance, better services, and top-quality personnel. Without a real contact with the company it is impossible for the customers to create an image of the organization.
- II. Advertising and related media is used to articulate, clarify and reinforce the desirable image.

Then, customers by interacting with the physical elements of a company and by the received messages will adopt a level of confidence with the company’s products or services. This confidence is in the mind of the consumers as a mental picture of the company. In the next section is discussed the four areas from which the corporate image is created in the mind of the customers.

## Forming the corporate image in the mind of the audiences

Smith and Taylor (2006, p666) have a similar point of view from the areas where the image is formed and create value. Smith and Taylor (2006, p666) declare: “images and perceptions are created through all senses (sight, sound, smell, touch, taste) and feeling experienced through product usage, customer service, the commercial environment and corporate communications”. According to them a corporate image is formed from four areas:

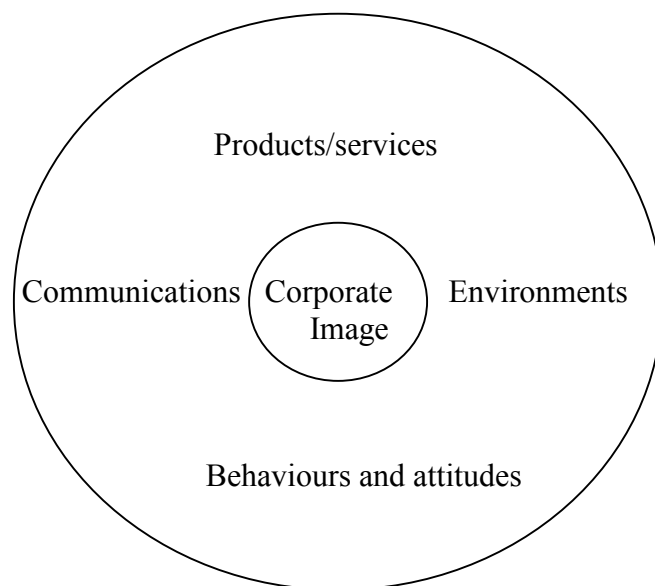


Figure 1: Corporate image-mix, (Smith and Taylor, 2006, p666)

Product and services are everything related to the physical product as well as the added services (the quality of the products, its design, its guaranty, and so on, for example).

Environments refer to the commercial environment. How offices, factories, receptions, meeting rooms, stores, showrooms and so on are built, designed, decorated, and presented.

Behaviours and attitudes are issues like social responsibility, corporate citizenship, ethical behaviour and community affairs.

Communications include advertising, personal relationships, personnel communications, brochures, etc. Usually, organizations tend to think that corporate image is formed only by communications, but as Ind, N (1992, p21) declare ” intentional and unintentional messages get through to audiences all the time, undermining forms of communications more controllable (PR, Advertising), designed to create the right sort of picture of the organization”. Because organizations send messages in all their actions all the time, creating the effective image is a process that never ends.

Since an image has been formed day-by-day, companies can be perceived positively, which is one of the ways to differentiate from the others competitors, and thus lead to several advantages discussed below:

### **Advantages of a good corporate image**

Smith and Taylor (2006, p667) declare that corporate image can lead to competitive advantage, mostly, when there are no big differences among competitors. Especially, it can help to:

- a) **Improve sales.** Customers will prefer a well-known company, with a good reputation, instead of one that they do not have any information or have a bad reputation.
- b) **Support new product development.** A well-known company will have fewer problems to launch and introduce a new product. From the beginning, customers will have confidence with the new products.
- c) **Strengthen financial relations.** Positive communicated corporate identity will help to make the organization's presence known to influential players. It might increase awareness, understanding and support.
- d) **Harmonize employee relations.** Effectively managed corporate identity will create a sense of common purpose within organizations. According to Ind, N (1992, p26) "the most important audience and communicators are the employees". Employees are the ones who are in contact with the other audiences. The better they will perceive a positive image and perception of the company, the better communication of the company will be sent out to the rest of the audiences.
- e) **Boost recruitment.** A positive image helps the company to attract and maintain skilled personnel.
- f) **Manage crises.** In times of crisis, a company with a good image enjoys a presumption of innocence.

## **The stereotype image**

An important aspect is that not all the publics have the same image of the company. Audiences perceive the image differently because of their interests and wishes. For example, a shareholder can have a different image than a consumer or a supplier. They have different wishes (Matieu, 1958).

An innovative and original concept that Matieu (1958) refers to is Stereotype image. According to him, “stereotype image is what everybody knows about the company”.

Thus, although perceptions vary among the different publics, there are important stereotype elements that are similar across them. Perhaps, from our point of view symbols and logos are these important elements that are similar across the different publics, however they are just the tip of the iceberg (Smith and Taylor, 2006, p666).

## **Methodology:**

In this part of our thesis, we are going to explain what kinds of data we can find, how can we get them and how we are going to use and exploit them, in order to give answers to our problem.

### **The three different marketing research projects:**

As Kotler says, there are three different marketing research projects (Kotler, 2005, p345):

- **Exploratory research:** it gathers preliminary information that will help to define problems better and suggest hypotheses
- **Descriptive research:** it describes marketing problems, situation markets, such as the market potential for a product or the demographics and attitudes of consumers
- **Causal research:** it tests hypotheses about cause-and-effect relationships

The aim of a survey is to get clear information about the market, about the attitudes, beliefs and thoughts of consumers towards hypermarkets. Also, we will do a descriptive research that will analyse, summary and exploit all the answers to obtain essential conclusions.

### **The primary and secondary data:**

To analyse and find solutions to our problematic we must find and collect data. There are different ways to define data:

- **Primary data:** these are new data gathered by ourselves
- **Secondary data:** they have already been collected by researchers, and we can use them again for another work, if they are still valid.

Actually, there are different techniques to gather information: desk research, company sales records, company financial records, salespersons' reports, journals, trade associations, government agencies and/or statistics, external research, questionnaires (face to face, postal,

telephone, Internet etc.), depth interviews, experiment, observation, retail audits, consumer panels, use consultants (McDonald, 2007).

## **How do we collect our data?**

### **I. Secondary data:**

Our main technique to gain secondary data is to do desk research. It means to use information that has already been published. Also, we have already used literature, studies related to brand image and the hypermarket industry, Internet articles and other thesis done by students.

### **II. Primary data:**

To get primary data, we sent a questionnaire on the Internet, and we also had interviews face-to-face with people we met in the streets:

- **Internet:** thanks to a friend of us, we launched a questionnaire that has been sent to the database of all the Exchange Students: 116 people received the questionnaire; we received 49 answers from them, so we had a response rate of 43,2%. We do not think that a higher response rate would have deeply changed these statistics; it explains why we did not send any reminder. Also, with the software that we used, we received directly the answers in our email box.
- **Face-to-face interviews:** to do these interviews, we asked people in the area between the university (near the Ica-Maxi) and the Hemköp. We have chosen this area because there is almost an equal distance between these two hypermarkets. Also, it should not have influenced the kinds of customers we interviewed. We have chosen one person, every 4 people that we met. We did not do any selection concerning the age, sex or nationality. We did these interviews on April the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>. We printed sixty questionnaires while we received fifty answers for Hemköp and fifty-one for Ica-Maxi.



Concerning the total of answers, we decided to reach a total of one hundred answers (Internet and face-to-face interviews added), in order to have a good idea of the people's points of view.

So, these answers gave us lots of information about their point of view. Then, we summarized their answers and had conclusions about our main problematic. In the following part, we will explain how we built our questionnaire.

We have chosen to combine the face-to-face interviews and Internet ones to obtain more pertinent, faithful and richer results. We have seen that lots of poll companies propose to combine at least two ways of collecting information ([www.qualiquanti.com](http://www.qualiquanti.com) for example). Indeed you need to use two kinds of interviews, because it will imply the advantages of each method.

### **Why and how did we build our questionnaire?**

To obtain answers to our questions, we decided to launch a quantitative questionnaire on the Internet. Here we give details about the processes that implied this action.

#### a) Qualitative and quantitative questionnaires:

The difference between these questionnaires is that qualitative researchers try to seek answers to the questions like “how” and “why” (feelings, attitudes and values); quantitative focuses more on “how many” and “which of the following” (quantifiable data) (Rudenstam and Newton, 1992).

On the qualitative point of view, marketers try to understand deeply motivations, phenomena or what implies the product's purchase. To understand it, people have to answer to the question deeply, and consecrate a long time on a person. Also, this approach is quite expensive and long, and marketers can ask only to few people. Also, marketers will understand what kinds of people are represented on the market they are working on. The different methods are the individual interviews or group interviews. In these cases, you can do interviews with unstructured debate, but you can also add some defined themes.

On the other side, quantitative point of view provides statistics that have not been done next to consumers. This kind of approach tries to verify hypothesis, measure attitudes and other points that can be more precise. You can ask questions to people with open or closed questions (with telephone, face to face, or postal interviews for example).

In our case, we opted for a desk research, which provided us different closed questions and their answers; these data finally helped us to build our quantitative questionnaire.

b) The questionnaire's content and the questions' explanation

To build our questionnaire, we used our "Theoretical framework" part. In the "Image" part, we saw that to form the corporate image in the mind of the audiences, there are four main criteria:

- Products and services
- Environment
- Behaviours and attitudes
- Communication

Also, we divided our questionnaire with these four different parts. Inside these parts, we integrated different questions that helped us to obtain conclusions and answers for our dissertation.

In the "product and services", we wanted to know how do people perceive prices, quality and variety of products, but also the easiness to find them, if they do not waste time when they pay and the attitudes of the employees.

Then, our questions were based on the "environment" of the hypermarkets. It means how are their locations in the city, is it easy to park his/her car, are the stores clean, and is there a good atmosphere in the hypermarket (by atmosphere, we mean light, space and so on).

For the "behaviours and attitudes", we asked to people if they were aware of the hypermarkets' involvement for the ecology and for the city. Then, we wanted to know if they think that their commitments are important.

To conclude our questionnaire, we talked about the hypermarkets' communication. Also, if people have already seen communication action; if yes, what do they think about television, which is the biggest mass media; then, what is their point of view if a hypermarket's manager comes to sell some products; and finally, how do respondent perceive the communication about discounts or attractive offers.

After having the subjects that we wanted to deepen, we needed to build a questionnaire that can be easily filled by respondents.

#### c) Methodology for the questions' formulation

To formulate our questions, there are basic rules, which are defined by Lundhal and Skärvad (1999). We also used them to be as clear as possible. These rules are:

- Formulate the question distinctly so that it is fully comprehensible for the respondent
- Avoid rare, strange and long words
- Specify carefully the concepts in the question
- Specify the question in time and space
- Avoid emotionally charged words and leading questions
- Strive to use short questions
- Ask for only one thing at a time

When this step has been done, we had to find what should be the best way to collect data, and so, what kind of answers can we give to respondents.

#### d) Questions' answers

The most part of our questions are closed questions where people can answer from "very bad" to "very good"; or by "yes" or "no". Then, we have deliberately chosen to give no neutral positions to the questioned person, because we wanted people to take position, even if it is "quite good" or "quite bad".

Then, we also asked two open questions. First, we wanted the respondent to define both hypermarkets television's commercial campaigns in only one adjective or characteristic; and with the same kind of question, we wanted to have a definition of both hypermarkets. With these questions, we had a qualitative question, which can give us more information about people's thoughts.

We did not want to always use these qualitative questions, because with quantitative questions, conclusions are done faster, and still, these conclusions can be found with this kind of questionnaire. On the other side, it is impossible for a respondent to give an explication or more details, even if he would like to. Furthermore, our answers' average has been higher, because our quantitative survey was short, and could be filled on the Internet.

e) Why do we choose to launch our questionnaire on the Internet?

There are many factors, which made us think that it will be a good experiment to launch our survey on the Internet. First, a friend of us, who studies informatics, proposed us to put the survey on the Internet, and then we would collect answers. Also, we had to think about the different advantages and disadvantages of using this kind of data collection; Helfer and Orsoni (2007, p54) explain these advantages:

- The first of the advantages is that we would not have to give money to have these data.
- Answers are fast and quite easy to analyse
- Respondents are free and more honest (because they are totally anonymous)

On the other side, there are some disadvantages in our case, which we tried to fix, but others that you cannot:

- Misunderstanding of questions for respondents
- Hard to reach all the categories, by age notably

Finally, to complete the Internet questionnaire, we also print out a sixty questionnaires in order to reach our objective of hundred answers. Thus, almost 50% of the answers come from these printed out questionnaires. The questionnaire is attached in the Appendix I.

## Quality of research

We know that a survey has to be trustworthy and reliable, in order to be correctly used. According to Jacobsen (2002), the empirical data must be:

- Valid
- Reliable

That is why the researcher has to be critical on his work, and asks himself critical questions about his choices, and what will it imply.

In the next part, we will also talk about the validity and the reliability of our survey.

### a) Validity

The validity of a survey means if the legitimacy of the survey is true, or not. This point can be enhanced, if the number of respondents is weak. Validity is important, because it shows if you can use your new data to affirm conclusions.

Also, we know that there are two kinds of validity:

- **Internal validity:** it means if the study was carried out in a way that really measures the intended values. Kidder and Judd informs us that if the internal validity is high, also the relationship will be causal; at the opposite, if studies have a low internal validity, causality will not be obvious (Kidder and Judd, 1986).
- **External validity:** this means if the results of the study can be accepted for a bigger group (Merriam, 1994). It can justify that a study can be applied to another population.

In our survey, we have used a methodology that allowed us to think that we reached a high internal validity. Respondents were chosen by hazard, and most part of them had enough

knowledge about both hypermarkets. Also, we obtained interesting conclusions, which have helped us a lot to answer to questions of our dissertation.

Nevertheless, our methodology was created for Halmstad's inhabitants. Also, we believe that it will not be possible to give these conclusions for older people from Gothenburg or Stockholm. It implies that the external validity is nearly non-existing.

#### b) Reliability

According to Svenning (2000), "reliability is a concept that decides if the results are reliable". It means that if you do two times the same survey (with the same method and the same purpose, and with a non-changing population), you will get the same results.

We think that if somebody does the same survey that we did, with the same questionnaire's structure, questions, and the same population, they will almost have the same results. Except if one or both hypermarkets change their policies, or another important event (crisis) occur.

## **Empirical findings**

In this part, it will be shown all the empirical findings that have been taken from the questionnaires. Firstly, it will be exposed each company separately and finally a comparison of both firms. All the data gathered from the questionnaires was treated using the Microsoft Excel.

In order to show synthetically within a graphic all the data, we have chosen to explain each company in several histograms with the medium average of the attributes of the corporate image. Kinnear and Taylor (1996, p253) declare that “an image can be defined as an average of many separate attitudes toward a company, brand or a concept”. Hence, by calculating the medium average, it can be seen clearly the positive and negative points of the firm. In the questionnaire people graded a number of fourteen attributes among very bad (1), quite bad (2), bad (3), quite good (4), good (5) and very good (6). Then, the medium average of all the attributes was processed and presented in the histograms.

### **Hemköp’s corporate Image**

We gathered an exact number of one hundred Hemköp’s answered questionnaires. Concerning the sex of the respondents 40% of them were males and 60% females. In ages, most of the questioned people were between 18 and 24 years old, concretely, 73% between 18 and 24; 24% between 25 and 34; 3% between 35 and 49; and 1% more than 49 years old. Finally, half of the respondents was Swedish whereas the other half was constituted of foreigners.

Firstly, we considered pertinent present all the data without distinctions, then according to the sex, and finally according to the nationality. We avoided presenting the data according to the age of the respondents because there were a majority of people between 18 and 24 years old. Therefore, the others age groups are not big enough to be representative and reliable.

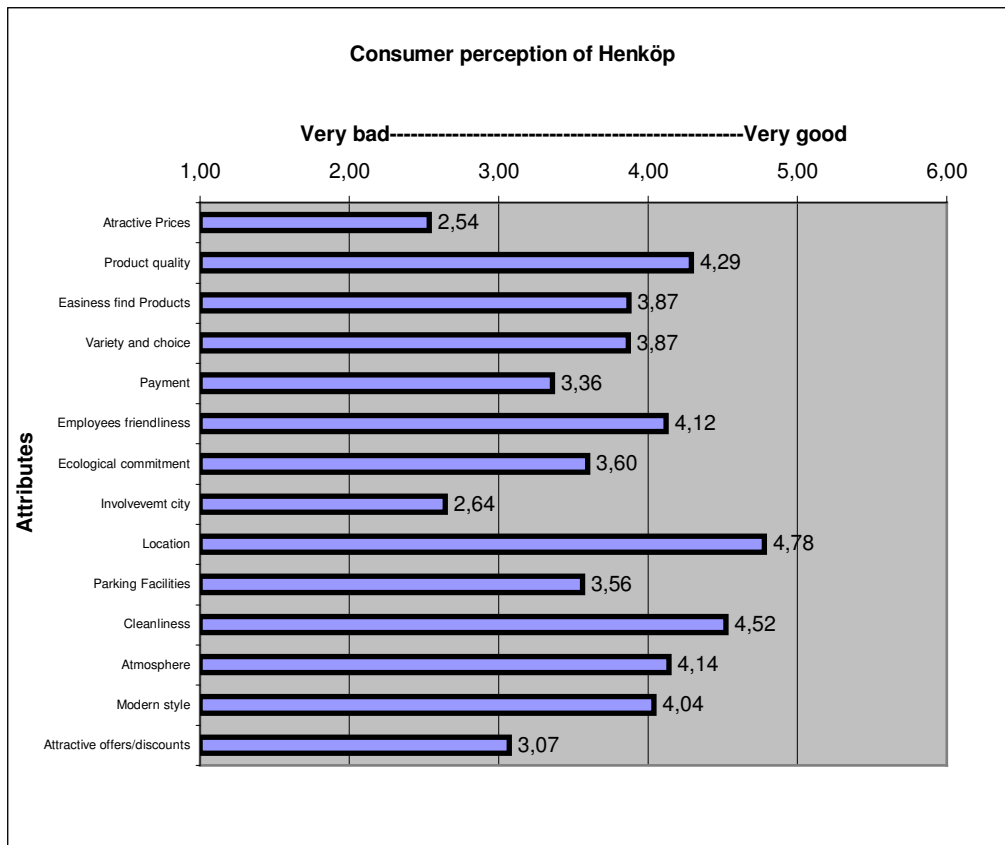


Figure 2: Consumer perception of Hemköp

As we can see from the above figure, Hemköp is perceived by the customers positively in six of the fourteen attributes concerning its products quality (4,29), employee attitudes toward the customer (4,12), location (4,78), cleanliness (4,52), atmosphere (4,14), and modern style (4,04). Easiness to find products (3,87), variety and choice (3,87), payment (3,36), ecological commitment (3,60), parking facilities (3,56) and attractive offers and discounts (3,07) have been graded between 3 and 4. It means that in average, consumers perceive them as a standard, neither good nor bad. Finally, Attractive prices (2,54) and involvement in the city (2,64) are perceived as negatives aspects of this company.

It can be assumed that Hemköp is perceived as an expensive supermarket where to buy. However Hemköp is seen as a well-located place, clean and with suitable quality of its products.



Next figure, possible differences in perception according to the sex of the respondents are discussed.

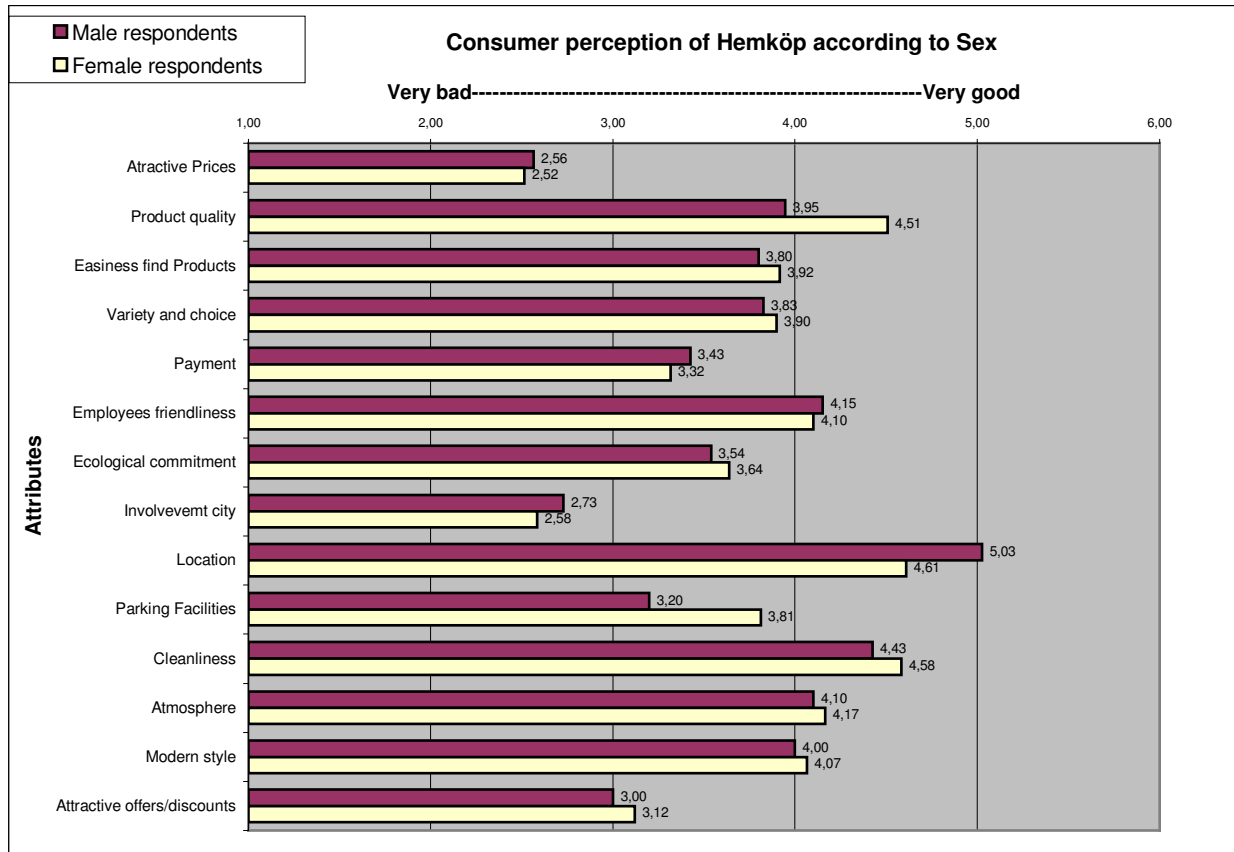


Figure 3: Consumer perception of Hemköp according to Sex.

In the graphic above, a comparison is represented concerning the sex of the respondents. As we can observe, there are not significant differences in most of the attributes between the perceptions of both groups. Nevertheless, product quality is perceived quite different as well as its location and its parking facilities.

Product quality is better perceived by females (4,51) than males (3,95). There is a gap of 0,56 point, which is quite representative since we are dealing with medium averages.

Concerning the location of Hemköp’s supermarkets the order is inverse. Males perceive better the location (5,03) whereas females perceive location 0,42 point less (4,61).

Finally, parking facilities are better seen by females (3,81) than males (3,20). Concretely there is a gap of 0,61 point. However, it is not seen clearly as positive aspect of the company. Males are quite dissatisfied for this service.

Next figure will present the different responses between Swedish and foreigners.

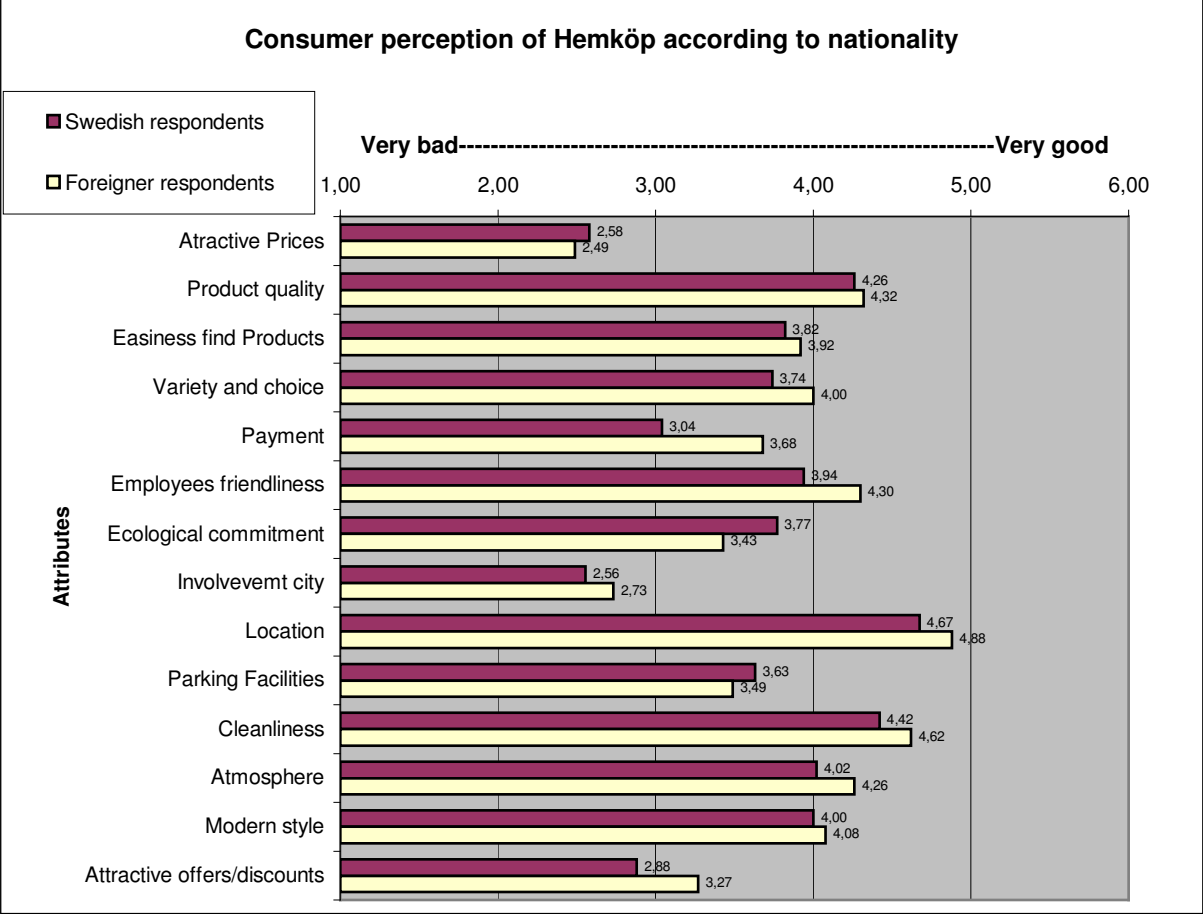


Figure 4: Consumer perception of Hemköp according to nationality

In the graphic above, again a comparison is presented. In this case, also, it can be observed some significant differences among some of the attributes. None of the attributes, which had gaps when comparing between sexes, have in this case any significant difference between Swedish and Foreigners.

Indeed, there are significant gaps in perceptions between Swedish and Foreigners in Payment as well as in Attractive offers and discounts.

The gap of the perception of payment is about 0,64. Swedish perceive the payment process (3,04) as a “quiet bad”, whereas Foreigners perceive it better (3,68).

Attractive offers and discounts are perceived better by Foreigners (3,27) than Swedish (2,88). However this quality is not seen as a positive aspect by any of the groups. There is a gap of 0,39 point.

Besides, other differences, which are smaller but big enough to be considered (+0,25), are in variety and choice, employee attitudes toward customers and ecological commitment.

**Ica-Maxi corporate image**

For Ica-Maxi we gather a number of 102 responses from the questionnaires. Concerning the sex of the respondents 39% of them were males and 61% females. Again, in ages, most of the respondents were between 18 and 24 years old. 71% of them between 18 and 24; 25% between 25 and 34; 3% between 35 and 49; and 1% more than 49 years old. Finally, 51% of the respondents were Swedish whereas 49% of the respondents were foreigners.

The same order of presentation will be shown. Firstly, a histogram without distinctions with the medium average of all the attributes of corporate image will be examined, pointing out the positive and negative aspects of the Ica-Maxi corporate image. Secondly, a comparison according to the sex, and finally a comparison according to the nationality are presented.

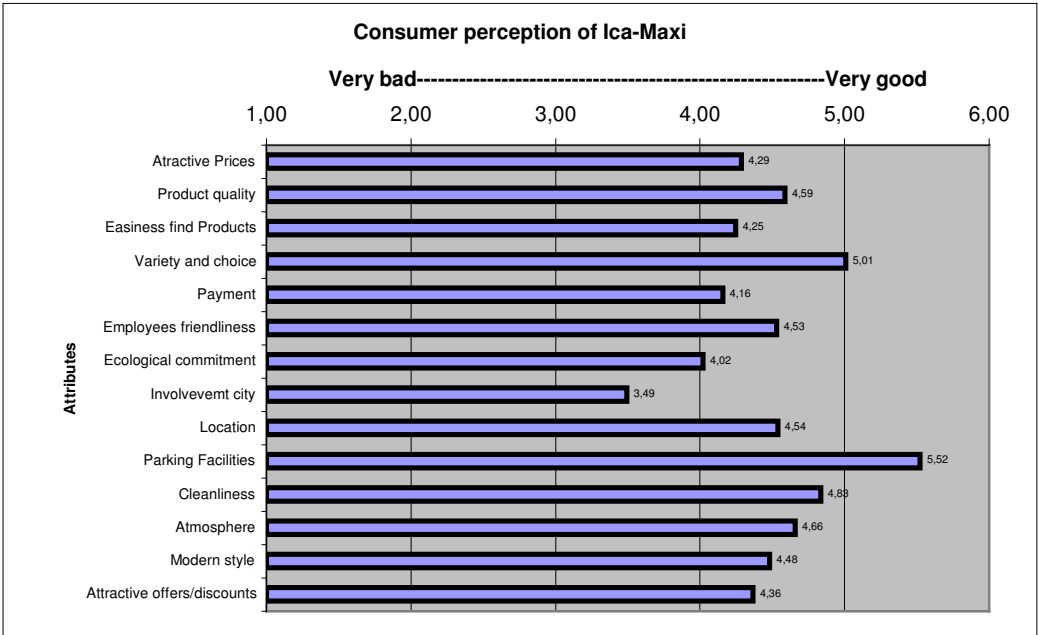


Figure 5: Consumer perception of Ica-Maxi

In this graphic it can be observed that costumers see most of the attributes positively. Only the involvement in the city (3,49), which contain activities like sponsoring events and sport

teams, as well as, helping in aspects like schools, universities, and so on is perceived neither negatively nor positively.

The best three perceived attributes, where Ica-Maxi is different, are the variety and choice of products (5,01), Parking facilities (5,52) and Cleanliness (4,85).

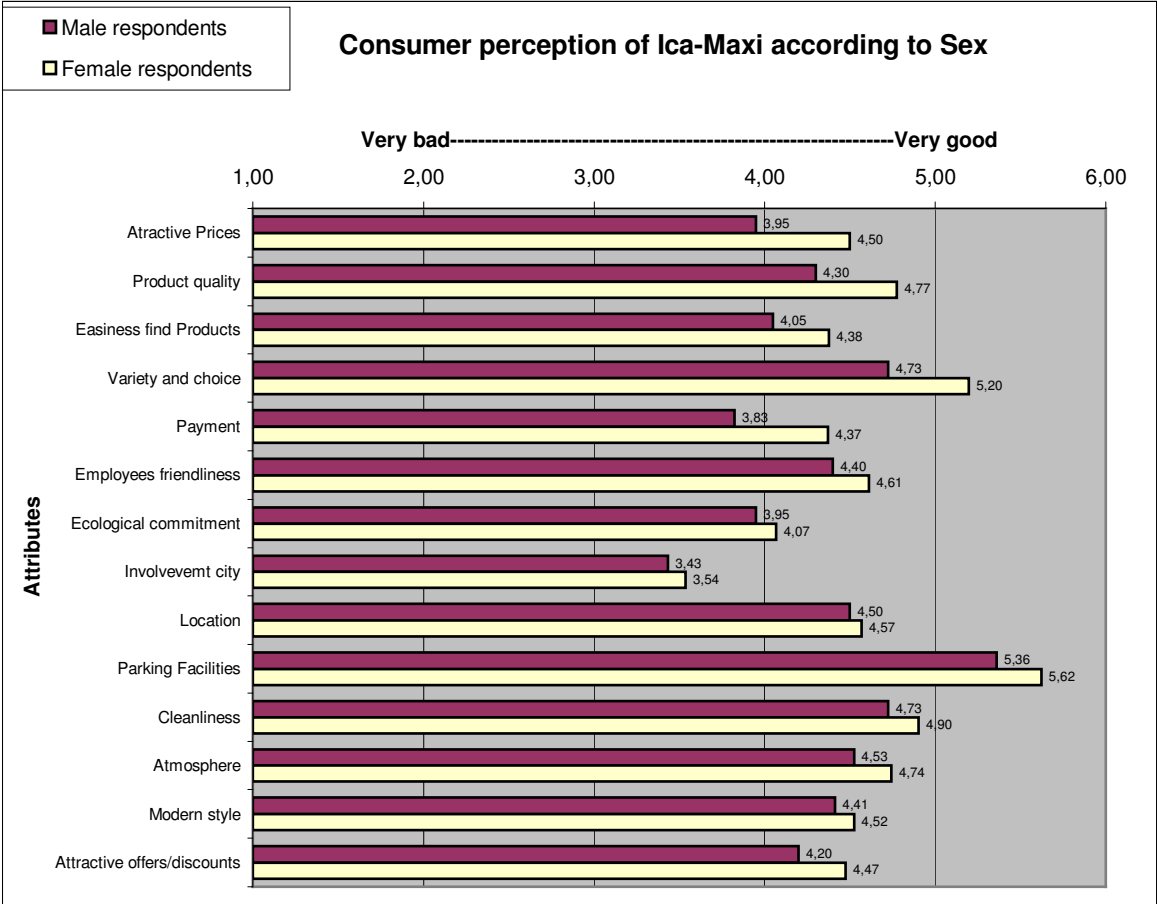


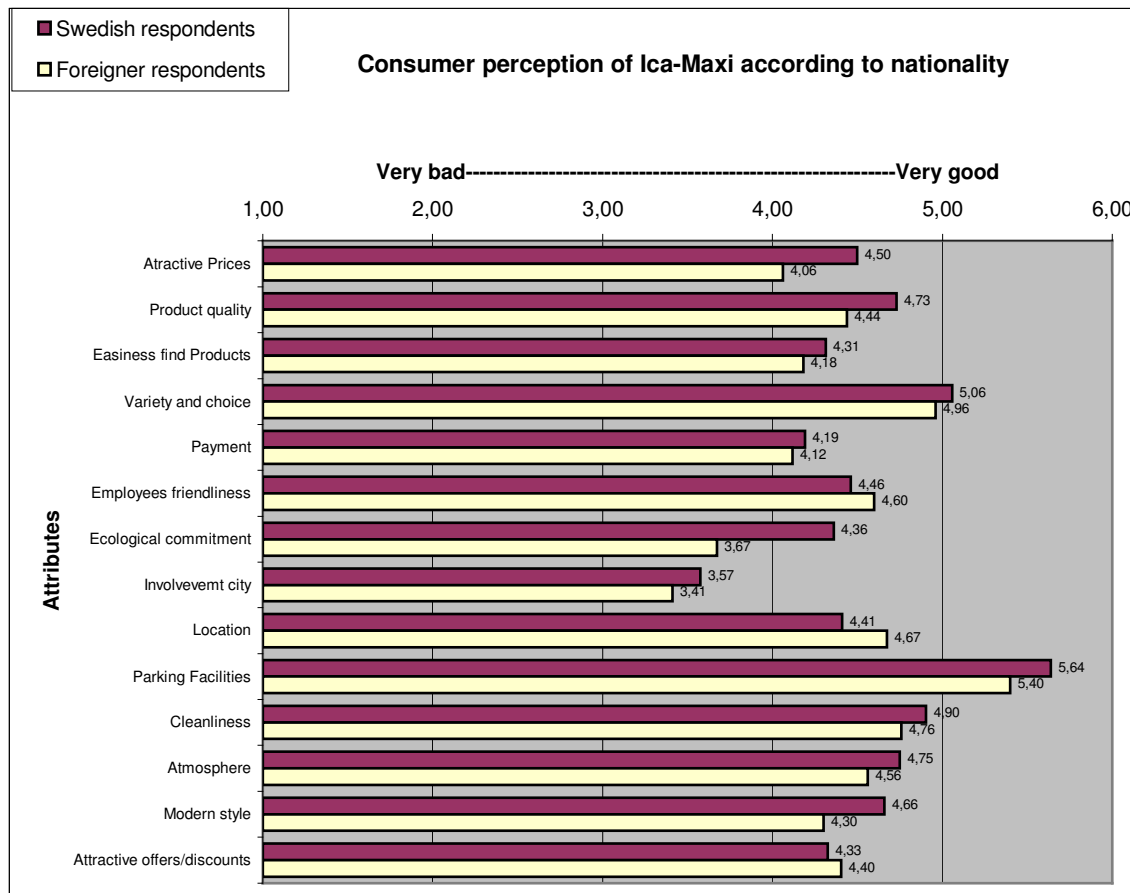
Figure 6: Consumer perception of Ica-Maxi according to sex

As we can see from the Figure above, male and female perceptions have been compared. There are five attributes where there is a significant gap between males and females perceptions.

Indeed, “Attractive prices” are better perceived by females (4,5) than males (3,95). The same is observed in “Product quality”: males (4,30) and females (4,77), “Easiness to find the product”: males (4,05) and females (4,38), “Variety and choice”: males (4,73) and females

(5,20), and “Payment process”: males (3,83) and females (4,37). Furthermore, curiously, in none of the attributes males perceive more positively Ica-Maxi than females.

Next Figure, it will be exposed the possible differences in the perceptions between Swedish and foreigners.



Figure

7: Consumer perception of Ica-Maxi according to nationality

In this histogram it can be observed some significant differences again. Mostly, the main gaps are in attractive prices, product quality, ecological commitment and modern style. Not so significant, but also important are the differences in location and parking facilities.

Where the differences are significant, Swedish people always perceive those attributes more positively.

To be precise, in attractive prices Swedish respondents graded 4,50 points whereas Foreigners 4,06.

Then in Product quality, Swedish graded 4,73 points and Foreigners 4,44 points.

Ecological commitment is seen very different. There is a gap of almost 0,7 point. It can be interpreted that perhaps foreigners are not well informed of what Ica-Maxi is doing for the environment and the ecological products due to language problems.

Finally, concerning the modern style, Swedish graded 4,66 points in average whereas Foreigners 4,30.

### Corporate image Comparison

In this section, a comparison between Hemköp and Ica-Maxi will be discussed deeply. The aim is to observe and interpret their strengths and weaknesses in the mind of consumers. Those strengths or weaknesses can play an important role when choosing between both companies. In this case we chose a line chart because with a histogram the data were a bit confusing.

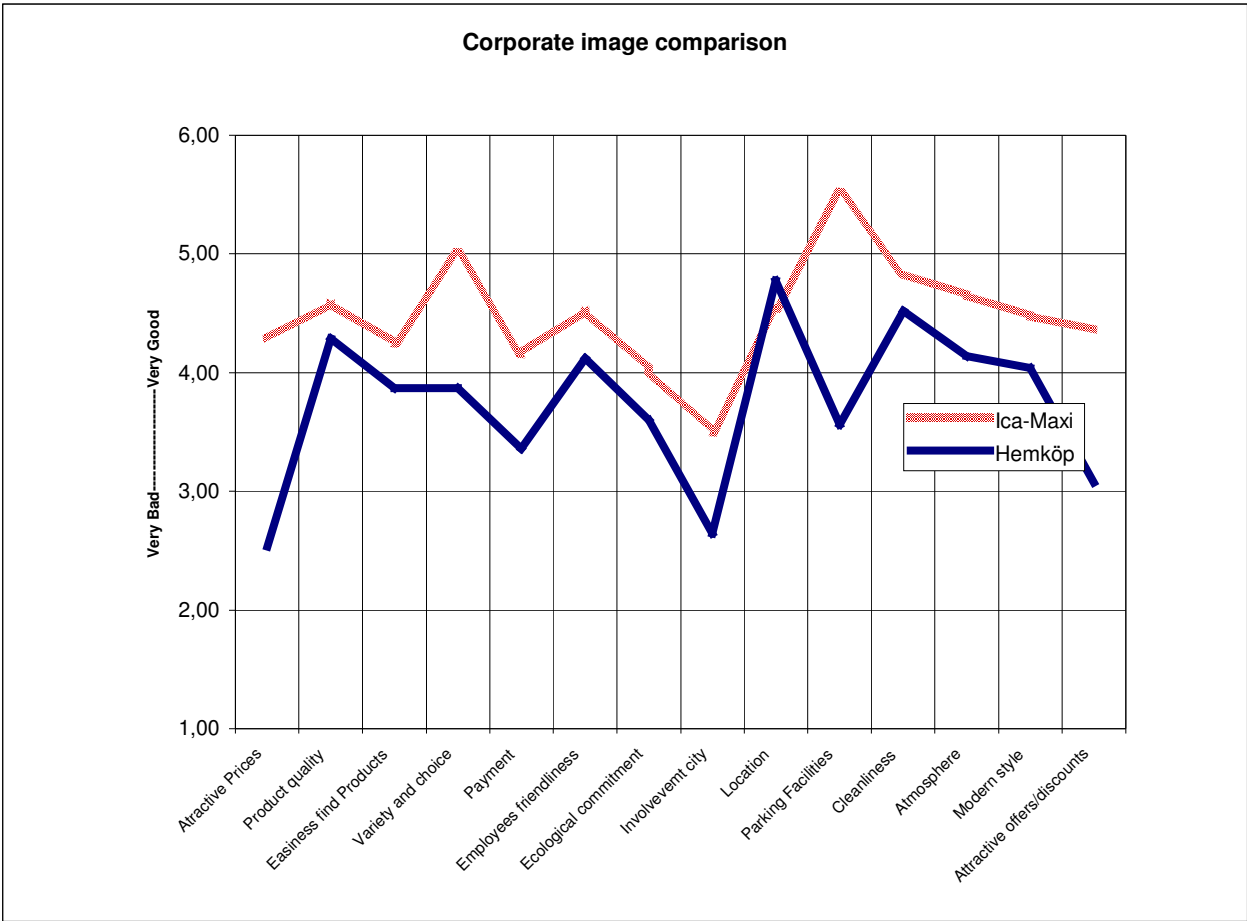


Figure 8: A corporate image comparison between Hemköp and Ica-Maxi

As it can be observed from the figure 9, Ica-Maxi outperforms Hemköp clearly in all the attributes except in Location. Ica-Maxi then is better positioned in the mind of the respondents than Hemköp.

There are similarities to the attributes of both companies. For instance, Product quality and employees friendliness and niceness is perceived quite good for both companies. Also, both companies have positive opinions and quite similar in cleanliness and location, which is the only area where Hemköp has advantage. On the other hand, Ecological commitment and Involvement in Cities, which are two attributes related with social responsiveness, are not perceived so well. People demand more social actions to both companies.

There are some notable differences in the attributes of the companies as well: In Attractive prices, variety and choice, payment facilities, and attractive offers and discounts there is an enormous difference in perception. Indeed, there is more than one point, therefore, in this areas companies are seen very distant from one to each other.

**Opinions in social commitments and communications**

As it was said in the methodology, we did two kind of closed questions: Questions where you have to choose form very bad to very god, and questions where you have to chose simply yes or no. In this section it will be discussed the second kind of questions. Those questions are referred to the issues of social responsiveness and mainly about communications.

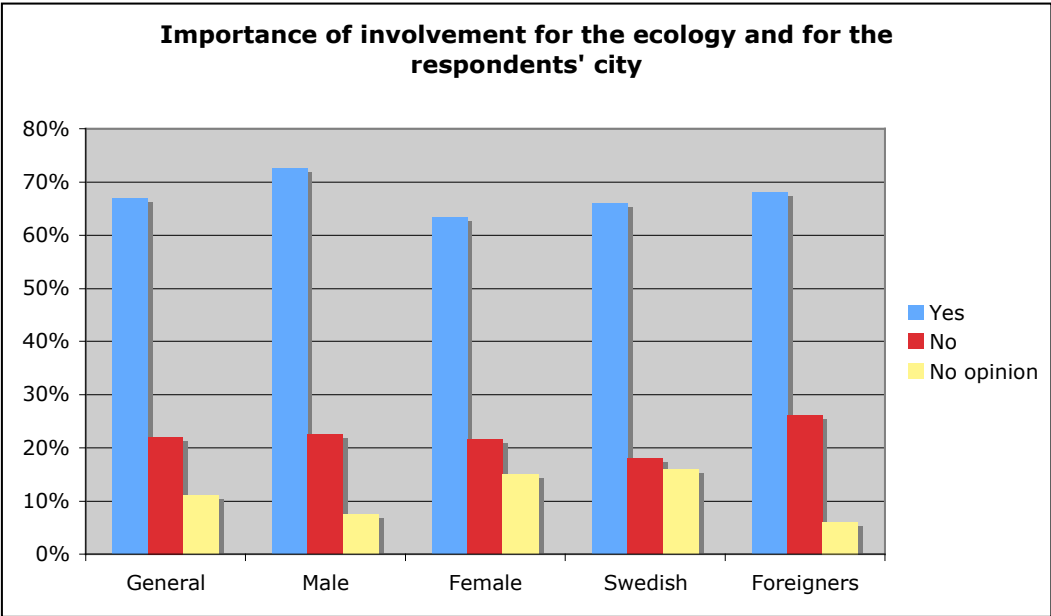


Figure 9: Involvement for the city

Now, we will explain the different answers we received for Hemköp first, and then for Ica-Maxi. We will also give some comments following these answers.

### 1. Answers for Hemköp

First of all, we asked people if they have already seen any communication action. To be as efficient as possible, we only selected answers from Swedish people. Indeed, a huge part of foreigners did not answer to this question because they certainly did not know any Hemköp's communication action; it explains why we did not want to take these few answers in account. So, we perceive that 76% of Swedish have seen at least one action. We can also notice that men have remarked more actions than women.

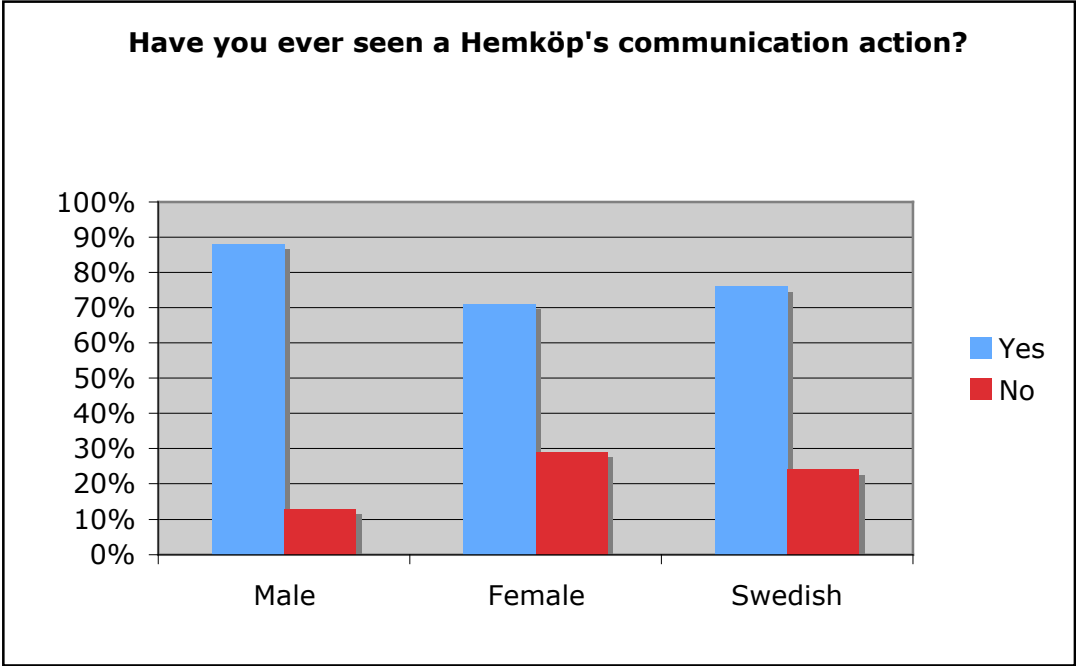


Figure 10: Impact of the Hemköp's communication action

Then, to follow the last question, we needed to know if they think that their communication is useful. When we summarized all the answers, we can think that Swedish know this hypermarket for a long time, and they certainly think that it is less necessary to make any communication. Finally, one more time, we see that men like to have information, because 48% of them think that their communication is useful, and only 36% of women think it. Here



again, foreigners did not give their point of view. That is why we did not take their answers in account.

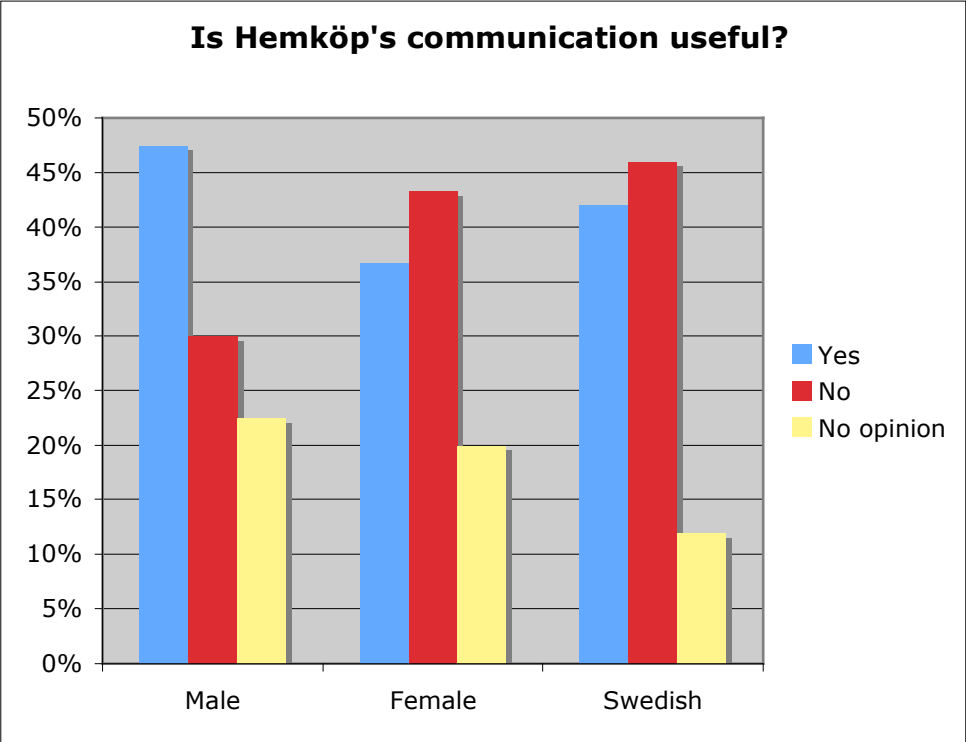


Figure 11: perception of Hemköp's communication

After this question, we continued by asking if respondents appreciate the Hemköp's television campaigns. In the results, we can see that they are not really appreciated. Indeed, 70% of the Swedish say that they do not appreciate them.

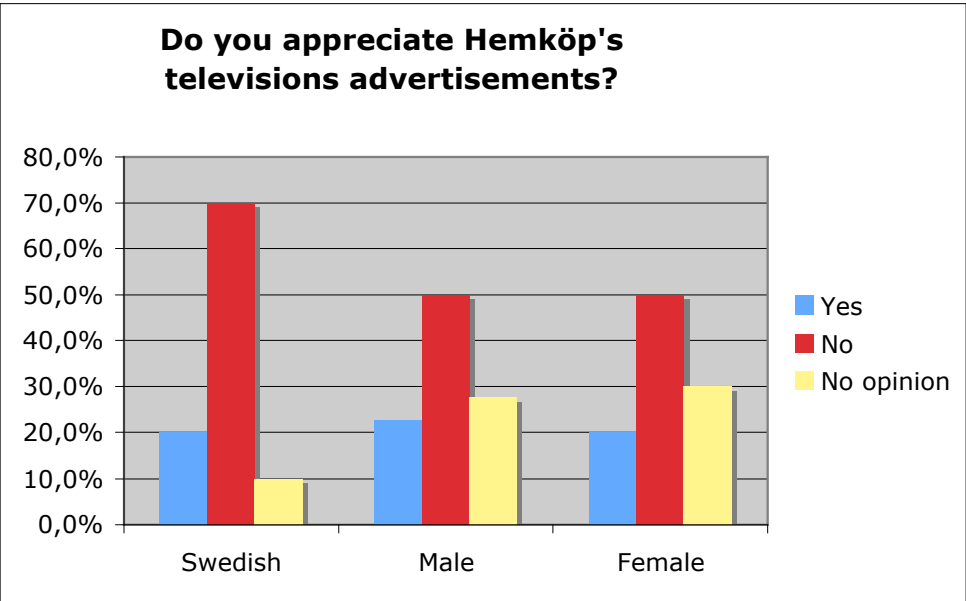


Figure 13: Attractivity of the television campaigns

Finally, we wanted to know what were the respondents' points of view concerning the Hemköp's sales managers that come directly at your home: it means if one of them already came, and if they like this kind of action.

We can remark that women (58% of them) are more targeted by the sales managers than men (35%). Then, we also understand why they target more women instead of men. Indeed, 74% of the female think that it is a good approach, while only 40% of men think that it is a good approach.

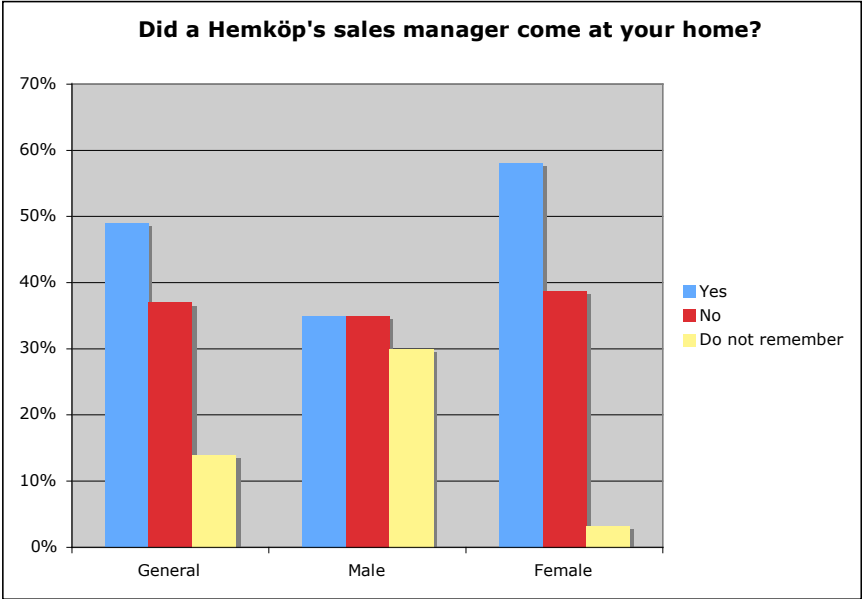


Figure 12: Home selling

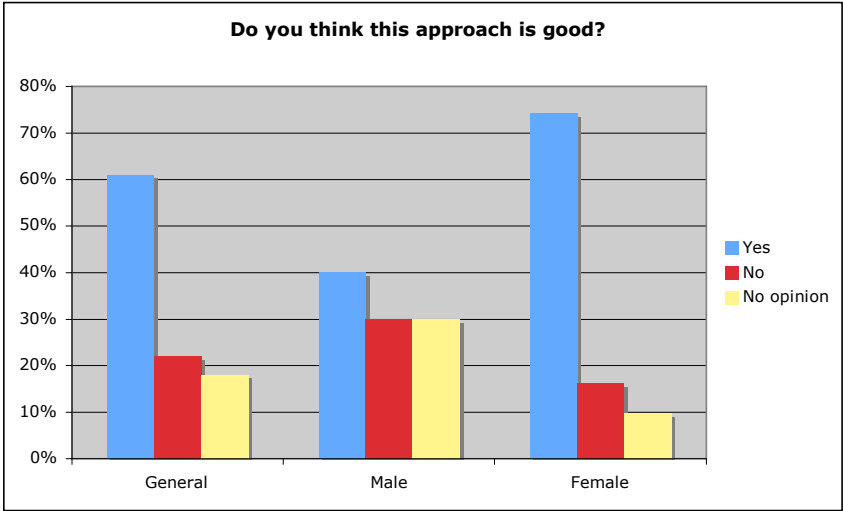


Figure 14: Appreciation of the home-selling

## 2. Ica-Maxi

First of all, we asked people if they have already seen any communication action. To be as precise as possible, we selected only answers from Swedish people; like for the Hemköp statistics, we did not receive enough foreigners' answers to take them in account.

As for Hemköp, we asked people if they have already seen any communication action. It seems that Ica-Maxi is more efficient, because 94% of Swedish respondents said that they did.

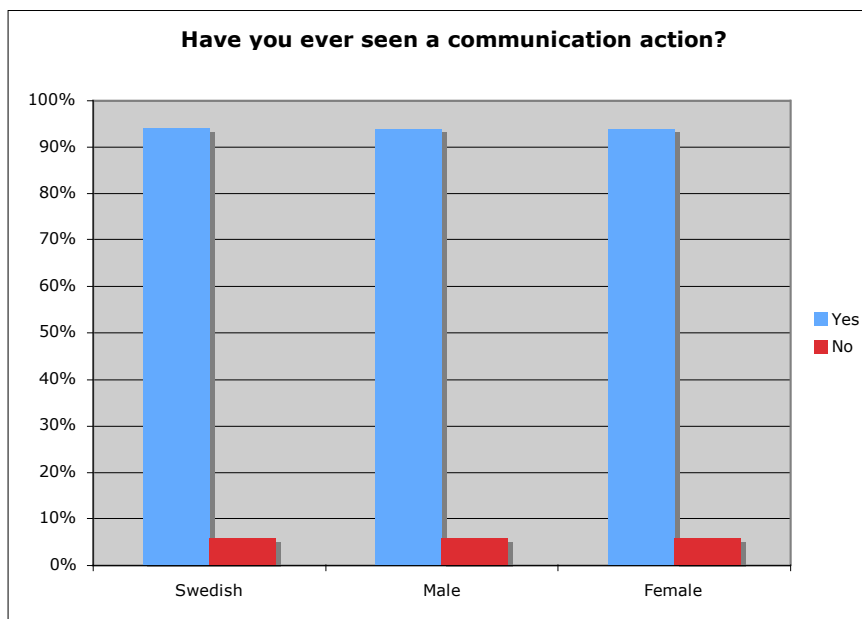


Figure 15: Communication actions

Then, we asked if people think that their communication is useful or not. Thanks to the graphic, we can say that it is useful, because 56% answered “yes”. This rate is even higher for Swedish women, because their rate is of 60%.

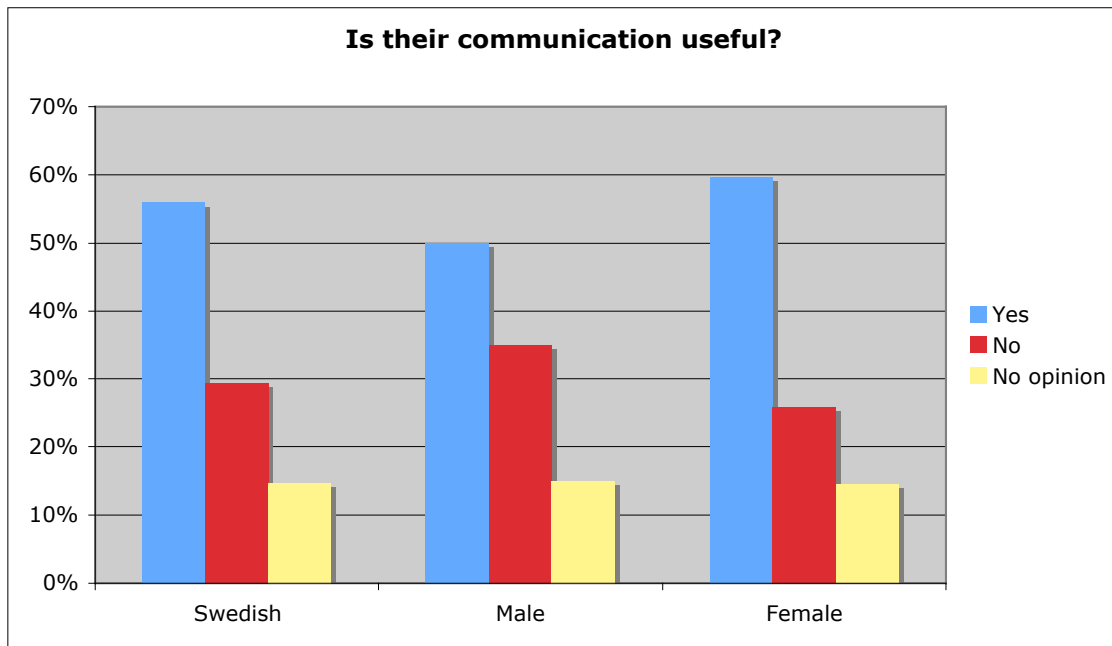


Figure 16: Utility of the communication

Then, we perceive that Ica-Maxi’s television advertisements are more or less appreciated, because 36% of the whole population answered “yes”, and 36% “no”. We have to add that there is a high rate of “no opinion”, with 26%.

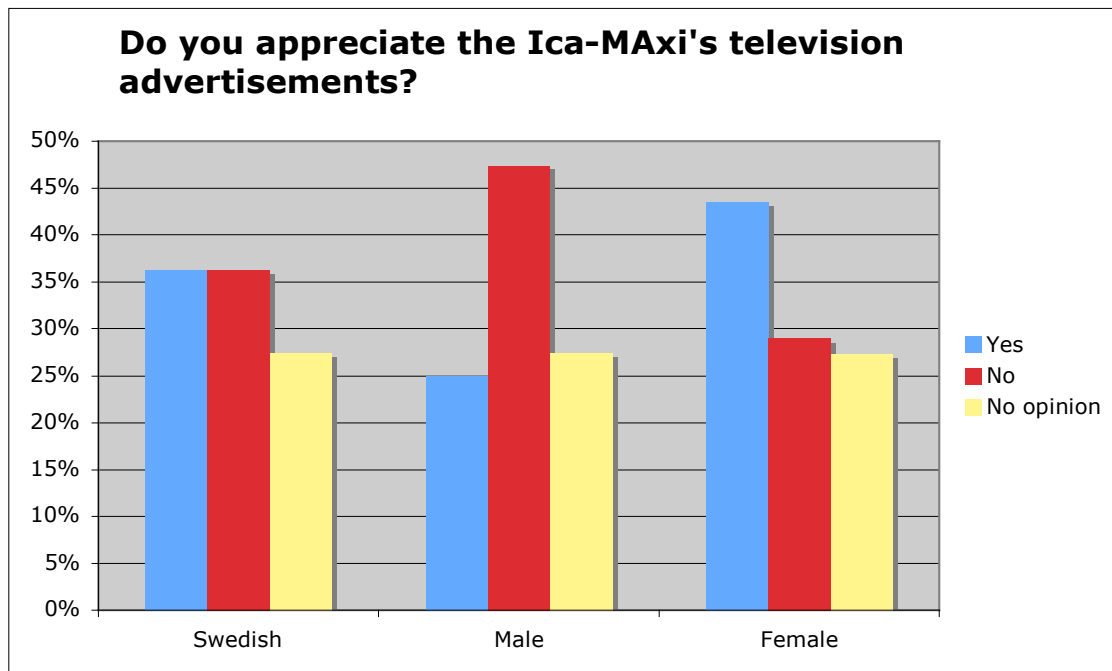


Figure 17: Appreciation of television campaigns

Finally, concerning the points of view of people of Ica-Maxi's sales managers coming at their home, we see that the hypermarket is efficient, because 60% of Swedish already received one of them. Here again, we perceive that women are more targeted (72% of them, and 44% for men).

Also, it is logical when we notice that 75% of women consider it as a good approach, while 39% of men think it.

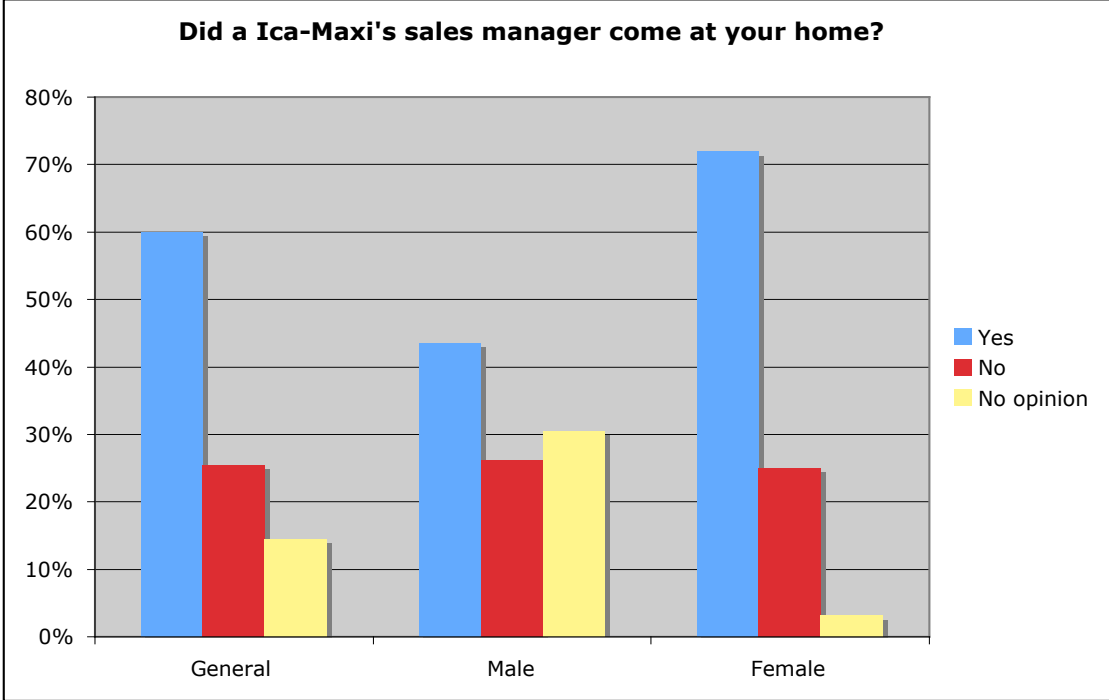


Figure 18: Home-selling

## **Analysis**

In this section, an analysis of the empirical findings is conducted. The information gathered in the questionnaires about all the perceptions of the attributes is analyzed and interpreted by applying the theories presented in the theoretical framework.

The analysis of the corporate images is presented according to the model of the four areas of corporate image developed by Smith and Taylor (2006, see figure 3). According to them, corporate image is formed from four areas: Product/services, environments, behaviours and attitudes, and communications. Indeed, the questionnaire was formulated taking into account these areas (see questionnaire annex I) for this purpose. It can be observed a clear different perception of both companies. In this case, the different perception, widely discussed in the empirical part (see figure 7), is an approximation of the mental picture of an organization in the mind of the consumers (Balmer, J and Gray, E, 1999). Then, if most of the consumers have a similar perception, it may exist what called Matieu (1958): the stereotype image.

### **Hemköp and Ica-Maxi corporate image.**

#### **A) Product and Services**

Thus, in product and services we have the attributes of: attractive prices, products' quality, and easiness to find products, variety and choice of products, payment system and employee attitudes toward the customer. All these elements are in contact with all the human senses which through all the experiences by buying in either Hemköp or Ica-Maxi will help to form the corporate image. Most managers tend to think that corporate image is only the creation of logos and communication, but the reality of companies plays a critical role in the formation of a clear corporate image. No perception can be made without a real contact with companies (Doyle and Stern, 2006).

In this case study, Hemköp is perceived differently than Ica-Maxi due to all these contacts with all the product's attributes. To be more precise, Ica-Maxi has a better position in all the aspects of this area. Where the advantage is bigger is in attractive prices, variety and choice.

The price level is an important point since a potential customer, who is about to make a purchase choice, can be mostly affected by the price. However, when the customer is already satisfied with a certain firm, price might not be the determinant point. Attributes as the employee attitudes or the variety of goods, can then retain customers and create loyalty. Therefore, and only comparing both companies, in the area of products and services, the perceptions of the costumers is that Ica-Maxi is preferred against Hemköp. In this area of perception a good image leads Ica-Maxi to a competitive advantage comparing to Hemköp.

To sum up, both companies are perceived quite different in all the product and services attributes. The empirical data shows how Ica-Maxi due to better performance in this area, conveys a better perception of its corporate identity by giving to the customers mainly better prices and better quality.

## **B) Behaviour and attitudes**

In this point, we want to see the different perceptions that people have of issues related to social responsibility. Thus, we ask about the ecological commitment and the involvement in the city. Also, it was questioned if this commitment is important for the society.

Indeed, society is demanding increasingly that companies should take into account all the aspects related with the environment, the availability of ecological products, the sponsorship of events or sport clubs and so on. Therefore, day-by-day the more investments in this aspect by the companies are done, the better image is perceived. Companies should try to communicate and carry out actions to create a desirable image (Balmer, J and Grey, R, 1990).

In this case study, both companies are not seen quite different in this area. However, this area is not perceived positively. This can be interpreted as a lack of investment or the customers' demand for more efforts in social and environmental issues. Neither of both companies enjoys a privileged position, but again, Ica-Maxi is perceived slightly better. We have notice that Ica-Maxi is sponsoring football clubs like the one in Halmstad, and therefore it can be a reason to be perceived slightly better.

### **C) Environments**

How companies present their products, the atmosphere into the shops, the facility of parking the car when buying a lot of goods and so on, can add value to the customer depending on its characteristics. It is a very important area for the image. Customer is more likely to purchase if the store is perceived and felt in a pleasant way.

In this case study, Hemköp seems to be privileged in location, this feature is the only one that has been perceived more positively than Ica-Maxi. This attribute is interpreted as a relevant for all the customers and it is therefore strength for Hemköp. Hemköp also is perceived positively as a clean place. Despite Hemköp outperform Ica-Maxi in location, in all the others environments' attributes Ica-Maxi wins. It has to be underlined the big difference in parking facilities where clearly Ica-Maxi has a competitive advantage since offer a large number of parking places. Only taking into account location and parking facilities, we interpret that people use to buy quite often basics goods in Hemköp since is better located, whereas, they go to buy to Ica-Maxi in big since they can park without any problems and enjoy of the variety of products. Hence, these companies are adopting different strategies and are positioning the way they want to be perceived.

### **D) Communications**

In order to analyze the last area that forms the image, we ask for issues related to the appreciation of the communication actions. Moreover we ask for grading the quality of the sales promotions in order to see how these companies use those tools and assess their effectiveness. Also, respondents were asked about how they perceive the activities of personal selling of both companies.

Nowadays, there are fewer differences among companies and competition is increasing in most of the industries. Thus, it is more difficult for companies to differentiate form each other. By communicating a clear an unique corporate identity that differentiate a company among the others, companies can add value in the mind of the organization publics (Balmer and Grey 1990). Indeed, Advertising and related media is used to articulate, clarify and reinforce the desirable image (Doyle and Stern, 2006). However, as it has been said



previously, managers tend to think that corporate image is only constituted of issues related with communication actions. We have seen how corporate image is more than the creation of logos and how the image is formed from four areas and not only one.

In this case study, Ica-Maxi's advertisements have more impact on the consumers. The advertisements of Ica-Maxi try to be funny and entertaining. Therefore, people find the Ica-Maxi's advertisements entertaining and that contributes to the creation and the reinforcement of a positive image.

Thanks to some Swedish contacts, we find out that both companies are making personal selling activities. Salesmen go to the Swedish homes to offer products and give a good image for the company. If customers are not satisfied or have any problem with the salesman, the whole company is affected (Kotler, 2005). Mainly Swedish respondents had this experience, and in general this kind of activity is well accepted and perceived by the customers.

Finally, customers perceive the attractiveness of the offers and discounts rather different between both companies. It seems that Ica-Maxi communicate better their offers, and obviously are cheaper. Again, ICA-Maxi is better perceived. In fact, Hemköp's offers and discounts are perceived as a quite bad element.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude and in order to give an answer to our research questions, “Why do companies differentiate in the mind of the consumers from its competitors through corporate image? How do consumers perceive those messages that companies create to communicate their identity?”

The aim of this case has been a research on the perception of Ica-Maxi and Hemköp according to the four areas of the corporate image. By interpreting and analyzing the data, it can be observed how consumers perceived both companies, and how Ica-Maxi is better positioned in the mind of the consumers in the four areas of corporate image. Moreover, it has been observed how the area of products and services is of special importance in the creation of corporate image. Finally, the area of the perception in issues of behaviours and attitudes is perceived rather weak for both companies.

To sum up, we have observed how differently the consumers perceive both companies, since their corporate identity is different. Furthermore, it is communicated differently through the real contact company’s products, the promotion tools and the word of mouth. Thus, costumers perceived a mental picture of the company that is formed from four areas called corporate image.

Clearly Ica-Maxi creates more value for the customers than Hemköp. It is perceived much better in all the areas of corporate image. Ica-Maxi then, outperforms clearly in the perception of the attractive prices, in payment process, in modern style and the attractiveness of their offers and discounts. Only in location Hemköp is perceived better than Ica-Maxi. Therefore, in terms of image, Ica-Maxi has a competitive advantage over Hemköp.

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## Annex

### Questionnaire

Appendix I

Hej!!

We are international students from the Halmstad's Högskolan who are making a survey about the hypermarkets' images. Also, we want to know your point of view about the image of two Swedish hypermarkets, which are Hemköp and Ica-Maxi

Your answers will be very important for us, because they will give us lots of information to find solutions for our study.

This questionnaire is quite small and you will need just few minutes to complete it.

Thank you for your answers in advance.

Guillem Riera Monroig & Pierre Pomaret.

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## QUESTIONNAIRE

First, we will need some information about you.

Sex: male – female

Age: 18-24; 25-34; 35-49; +49

Swedish – foreigner

Status:

Have you already bought things in:

- Hemköp: yes-no
- Ica-Maxi: yes-no

If you have never bought in both hypermarkets, you do not need to answer.

If you have bought only in one of them, please just answer to the concerned hypermarket.

First, we would like to know your point of view about products and services that both hypermarkets offer. **You can grade your answers among: very bad (1), bad (2), quite bad (3) quite good (4), good (5) and very good (6).**

### Attractive prices

Hemköp

Ica-Maxi

1	2	3	4	5	6
1	2	3	4	5	6

### **Product's quality**

Hemköp	1	2	3	4	5	6
Ica-Maxi	1	2	3	4	5	6

### **Easiness to find products**

Hemköp	1	2	3	4	5	6
Ica-Maxi	1	2	3	4	5	6

### **Variety and choice of products**

Hemköp	1	2	3	4	5	6
Ica-Maxi	1	2	3	4	5	6

### **Payment** (waiting time in queues and system of payment)

Hemköp	1	2	3	4	5	6
Ica-Maxi	1	2	3	4	5	6

### **Friendliness and niceness of employees**

Hemköp	1	2	3	4	5	6
Ica-Maxi	1	2	3	4	5	6

Here, we want to know if you are aware of some of the hypermarkets' behaviours and attitudes.

### **Ecological commitment** (ecologic products, respect for the environment)

Hemköp	1	2	3	4	5	6
Ica-Maxi	1	2	3	4	5	6

### **Involvement in your city** (for example for sport events, concerts etc.)

Hemköp	1	2	3	4	5	6
Ica-Maxi	1	2	3	4	5	6

To your mind, are these commitments important?

Yes

No

Then, we would like to know what you think about the environment of both hypermarkets.

**Location of the supermarkets**

Hemköp	1	2	3	4	5	6
Ica-Maxi	1	2	3	4	5	6

**Parking facilities**

Hemköp	1	2	3	4	5	6
Ica-Maxi	1	2	3	4	5	6

**Cleanliness**

Hemköp	1	2	3	4	5	6
Ica-Maxi	1	2	3	4	5	6

**Atmosphere** (well lighted, spaciousness etc.)

Hemköp	1	2	3	4	5	6
Ica-Maxi	1	2	3	4	5	6

**Modern style**

Hemköp	1	2	3	4	5	6
Ica-Maxi	1	2	3	4	5	6

In this part, we want to know how do you perceive the hypermarkets' communications:

Have you ever seen one communication action (television, radio, newspapers, "home selling") of the hypermarkets?

Hemköp:

- Yes
- No

Ica-Maxi:

- Yes
- No

*Notice:* If you have not seen any communication action of both firms, please go directly to the last two points of the questionnaire: Attractive offers and discounts and an adjective for both companies.

Is their communication useful?

Hemköp:

- Yes
- No

Ica-Maxi:

- Yes
- No

In one word, how would you define the television advertisements?

Hemköp:

Ica-Maxi:

Do you appreciate them?

Hemköp:

- Yes
- No

Ica-Maxi:

- Yes
- No

Did a commercial of the hypermarket come once at your home?

Hemköp:

- Yes
- No

Ica-Maxi:

- Yes
- No

You think this approach is good:

Yes

No

### **Attractive offers and discounts**

Hemköp

Ica-Maxi

1	2	3	4	5	6
1	2	3	4	5	6

To conclude, can you give an adjective to describe each hypermarket?

Hemköp:

Ica-Maxi:

**We thank you a lot for your attention.**



