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## Full Length Research Paper

# Business strategy- youth subculture relationship: An investigation of free gift combinations

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**Adolescents easily shift their attentions to popular goods on the market; therefore marketers are used to providing lovely free gifts as their marketing tools to attract the adolescents' attentions. This study based on the means-end chain (MEC) methodology tends to reveal adolescent perceptions toward the "dollar-quantity" combinations of free-gifts provided by the convenience stores. Applying the variables obtained from three surveys, factor analysis and MEC methodology were used to derive the factor hierarchical value map. The new map can provide marketers with information of adolescents' perceptions for developing effective promotion activities.**

**Keywords:** Free gift, laddering, hierarchical value map, means-end chain.

## INTRODUCTION

Since 1979, the 7-Eleven Franchise System introduced to Taiwan has provided consumers with a variety of product choices and 24-hour service. The convenience stores become the primary source for consumers to purchase groceries in the metro locations. Along with increasing national income and changing consumption patterns, the retail channels are increasing phenomenally. In the densely populated Formosa Island, over 8000 convenience stores, today, are facing a fierce competitive environment. Thus, to survive in such intense competitions, many convenience store chains adopt across promotion to attract more customers with less efforts for sustainable development.

In 2005, 7-Eleven' Ads made a flash debut in Taiwan that "NT\$ 77 (US\$:NT\$=1:33) per consumption earns one of free series Hello Kitty magnet". The Kitty magnet collection craze not only made 7-Eleven's revenue hit a new high but also become a communication topic in the adolescent society. In 2006, another convenience store chain, Hi-Life, promoted that "NT\$ 69 per consumption in store earns one of free series "sakura momoko (a main character of Japanese cartoon) picture frame" and its

revenue increased 15% immediately. Obviously, the promotion activity that consumption reaching a certain amount per store-visit can earn one of free series gift portfolio has great impact on the revenue of a convenience store chain.

In view of the gift portfolio efficacy, this study aims to understand what kinds of gift portfolio is the most effective to the adolescent and how the collections of different gift portfolio can be coalesced into an youth subculture. This study based on the means-end chain theory try to reveal the differentiations of adolescent's perceptions upon different gift portfolios, in order to provide marketers with valuable information for developing effective promotion strategies in adolescent segments.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Promotion and free gifts

Blattberg (1990) indicate that promotion has significant impact on short-term sales, whereas there are no evidences to show the relation between promotion and consumer purchase behavior. Promotion activities usually are providing extra value or incentives to attract target customers, in order to activate consumer's purchase

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willing (Luick and William, 1968). Such incentives provided by a short-term basis can stimulate consumer's interests to try a certain product or service or even can cause customer's advance purchase (Kotler, 1991).

Kotler (1991) states that sales promotion is composed of free sample, coupon, rebate, free gifts and etc. In the marketing literature, most of researches focus on the effects of product discount or coupon utilities; rarely did they emphasize the combinations of free gifts. Usually free gift promotion adopts with-pack premium, free in-the-mail premium or self-liquidating premium (Kotler, 2000).

Seipel (1971) adopting social exchange theory discusses the issues of premium and believes that the value of free gift is not necessarily equivalent to its cost. The free gift should be chosen as an echo of the main product without reducing the value and utility of the gift itself; otherwise, the free gift can not promote the main product but discount the value of the main product (Raghbir, 2004). Strang (1976) believes that free gifts with purchase directly increase the volume of sales and enforce purchase behavior of customers. Oppositely, Rothschild and Gaidis (1981) emphasize that free gift is not helpful to establish long-term customer relationship and the enforcement effect of purchase is not significant on free-gift with purchase. Chandon et al. (2000) indicate that promotion activities provide customers with functional and entertainment benefits rather than monetary benefits. The free gifts can yield higher entertainment effects than economy effects; therefore, the value added by a free gift is easier to assess the hedonic value than the utilitarian value.

## MEANS-END CHAINS

In the marketing literature, the means-end chain (MEC) theory emphasizes that a product' attributes preferred by consumers can yield benefits of the product use, leading to consumers' value satisfaction. Such benefits perceived by consumers are the consequences of positive feelings upon product consumption. Through a laddering technique, inner feelings and thoughts of consumers toward a particular product or service can be revealed and expressed by a series of hierarchical value chains. The hierarchical value chains assume that a reasonable aggregated chain can be constructed given data from a set of respondents, even if the set includes individual respondents who are able to articulate only some of the steps in a chain (Olson and Reynolds, 1983; Reynolds and Guman, 1988; Velette-Florence and Rapacchi, 1991).

In MEC theory, product attributes are means to obtain desired ends, namely, values through the consequences of those attributes (Gutman, 1982; Reynolds and Olson, 1998). Thus, product attributes (A), consequences (C) and values (V) can be concrete or abstract (Gengler et al., 1995). Product attributes have relatively concrete and

tangible characteristics whereas consequences upon consumption and personal values are abstract representing the feelings and perceptions of consumers (Kahle, 1983; Rokeach, 1973). Gutman (1997) indicates that it is difficult to understand real inner feelings of consumers. The hierarchical value chains can be considered as an effective approach to explore the inner cognitive structures of consumers.

In order to retrieve the abstraction of consumers' product knowledge, Reynolds and Gutman (1988) propose the MEC analysis involving three key methodologies: the laddering technique, the content analysis and the hierarchical value map (HVM). By interviewing consumers singly and in-depth, all data were put into the summary implication matrix. The attribute-consequence-value (A-C-V) linkages are elicited from consumers through the laddering technique, leading to the development of the HVM. The HVM, which graphically represents a set of MECs, can be thought of as an aggregate cognitive structure map. Such a map can be used to deduce effective marketing strategies (Reynolds and Guman, 1988).

## METHODOLOGY

This study were conducted by three surveys to understanding adolescent's preferences of the relations between per consumption amount in store and the free-gift within a series of promotion theme provided by the convenience stores. The first survey aimed to reveal the minimum consumption amount to get a free gift and the quantity within a set of promotion theme series that preferred by the adolescents. The second survey tried to gather the combination contents of "per consumption amount" and "the quantity within a series" and variables for MEC analysis. Based on the results of the first and the second surveys, the third survey provided the collected data to construct the hierarchical value map regarding the adolescents' preferences of free-gift portfolio through the laddering technique. Followings are detailed descriptions for each survey:

(1) The first survey: In Taiwan, "purchase certain dollar amount of products can obtain one free-gift from a set of promotion theme series" is quite popular for the convenience stores to attract customers purchasing more. The base dollar amount purchase is determined by the convenience store. While the purchase amount is higher than the base dollar amount, the clerk in a convenience store would calculate how many free gifts should give to the customer depending on the integer ratio of purchase amount and the base dollar amount. For example, 7-Eleven in 2005 launched a new promotion activity. Once the purchase amount per store visit reaches \$77 dollars, customers can get one free Hello Kitty magnet in a set of 34 different styles. Each Hello Kitty magnet is sealed in an invisible bag, so customers can not choose which they do not have. Furthermore, 7-Eleven adopted the celebrity appeal strategy to influence the adolescents that the Hello Kitty magnet can be used as an exchange gift between lovers and friends. The adolescents started to imitate the behavior of exchanging the Hello Kitty magnets; the collection of Hello Kitty magnets become an adolescent social activity in 2005, making the sales revenue of 7-Eleven reaches the highest than ever. Thus, this study interviewed the adolescents by asking them to state what the minimum dollars per consumption in the convenience stores they can accept to get a free gift is and which quantity in a set of the

**Table 1.** Profiles and variables.

Dollar/Quantity	Attribute (A) variable	Consequence (C) variable	Value (V) variable
(A) \$29/19 in a set	(A1) color	(C13) beautiful	(V29) sense of belonging
(B) \$66/38 in a set	(A2) quality	(C14) fun	(V30) excitement
(C) \$29/48 in a set	(A3) size	(C15) economy	(V31) security
(D) \$25/103 in a set	(A4) appearance	(C16) practicability	(V32) self-respect
(E) \$91/62 in a set	(A5) usage	(C17) new	(V33) sense of accomplishment
(F) \$68/15 in a set	(A6) protagonist	(C18) fashion	(V34) self-fulfillment
	(A7) consumption amount	(C19) vanity	(V35) being well respected
	(A8) advertisement	(C20) self-satisfaction	(V36) fun and enjoyment of life
	(A9) shape	(C21) place landscaping	(V37) warm relationships with others
	(A10) material	(C22) comfortable	
	(A11) coupon	(C23) well-known	
	(A12) limited edition	(C24) facilitate collection	
		(C25) over value	
		(C26) enviable	
		(C27) treasure	
		(C28) auction exchange	

Notes: US\$:NT\$P1:33.

promotion theme series they can collect and make a complete set is preferred by them. In order to reveal the "dollar-quantity" combination preferred by the adolescents, an open-ended questionnaire was designed. A total 103 out of 125 valid samples were gathered and 131 "dollar-quantity" combinations were obtained. Adopting twice the standard deviation to reduce the deviation of "dollar-quantity" combinations, this study found that the minimum dollars per consumption preferred by the adolescents are from NT\$ 15 to NT\$ 101 and the quantities within a collection series are between 12 and 111.

(2) The second survey: Through the open-ended questionnaire, each respondent was requested to state:

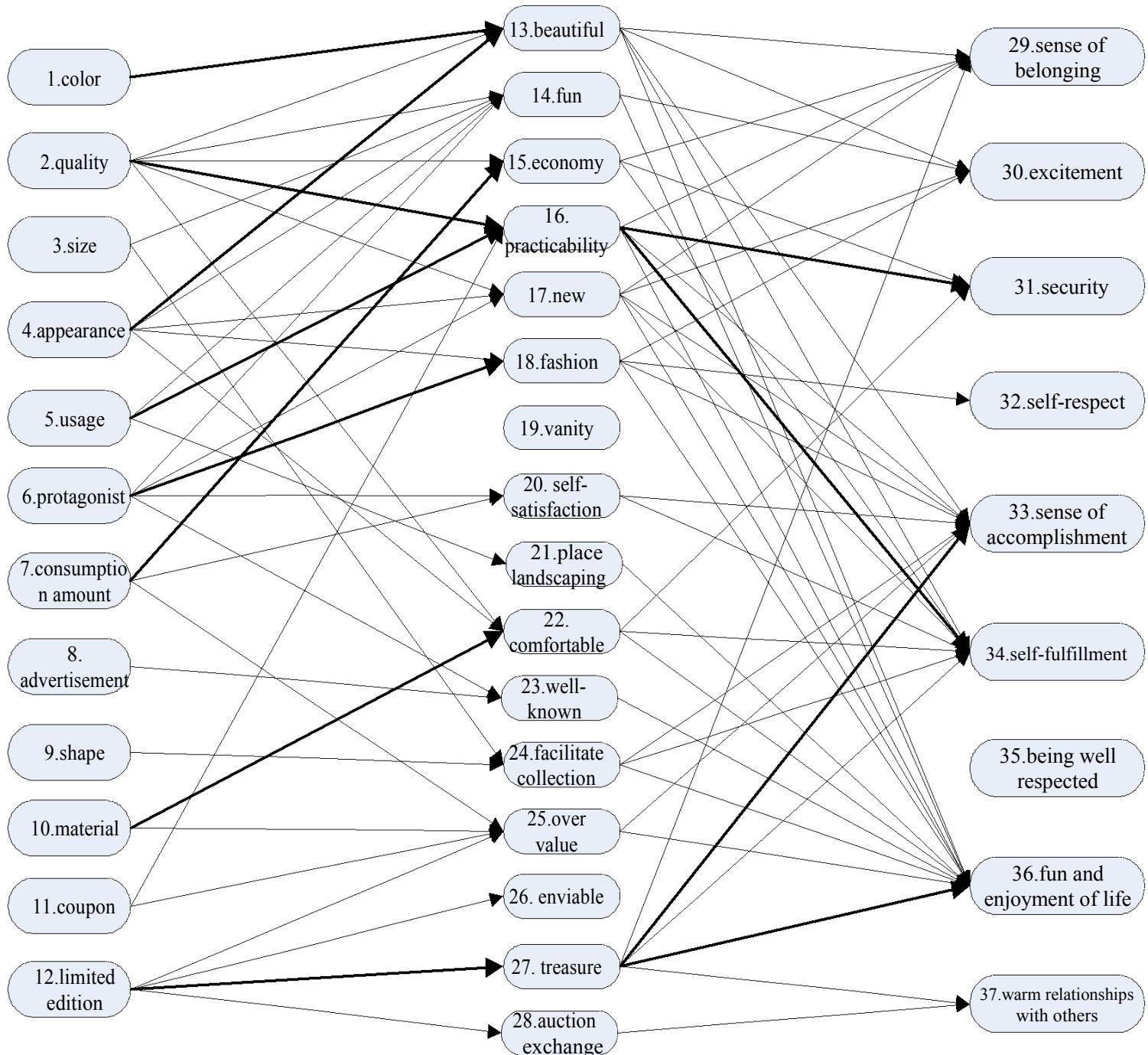
- 1) What attributes of a free gift did the respondent prefer when he/she spends money in the convenience stores?
- 2) What are the consequences for the respondent of having the free gift?
- 3) What personal values can the respondent satisfy upon considering the attributes or experiencing the consequences?
- 4) What the combination of "minimum dollars per consumption" and "the quantity in a set of collection series" that the respondent prefers the most? A total of 186 completed and usable questionnaires were received from 200 interviewing respondents. Cluster analysis was employed in this study and resulted in six "dollar-quantity" combinations and the discriminant rate is 0.99. Furthermore, content analysis with reliability 0.946 was used to obtain 12 attribute variables and 16 consequence variables. The nine value variables are directly adopted from the list of value (LOV) developed by Kahle (1983). The profiles of "dollar-quantity" combinations and the variables (attributes, consequences and values) for MEC analysis are listed in Table 1.

(3) The third survey: Based on the profiles of six "dollar-quantity" combinations and the attribute/consequence/value (A/C/V) variables as shown in Table 1, the questionnaire was designed to understand the adolescent preference levels of six "dollar-quantity" combinations and the linkage contents of attribute-consequence-value (A-C-V) hierarchies. Through the laddering technique

developed by Reynolds and Gutman (1988), 158 valid samples of data collected by interviewing 173 adolescents and all data related to A-C-V connections are put into the summary implication matrix for constructing a hierarchical value map.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To construct a hierarchical value map, the researchers should refer to the A-C-V linkage frequencies of the summary implication matrix and then determine a cutoff value. The determination of cutoff value followed the criteria of "analyses of aggregated hierarchy of objectives" proposed by Pieters et al. (1995). If the number of active cells as a proportion of active cells at cutoff point one is low and the number of active linkages as a proportion of all linkages is high, then the researchers can construct a hierarchical value map by using fewer A-C-V linkages to present the majority perspectives of respondents. In this study, while the cutoff value is six, the hierarchical value map can present 70% of respondents' perspectives by using only 30% of all A-C-V connections. As shown in Figure 1, all A-C-V connections derived from the summary implication matrix using the data of 158 adolescent interviews. Only top 33 percentile of all A-C-V connections are marked bold lines, which represent the importance of the A-C-V linkages. For example, the adolescents believe that "quality" and "usage" attributes of a particular free gift can yield "practicability" consequence upon the free gift consumption, leading to their "security" and "self-fulfillment" value satisfaction. The "limited edition" attribute can provide the adolescents with "treasure" consequence of having the free gift for satisfying "fun and enjoyment of life" and "sense of



**Figure 1.** The Hierarchical Value Map of Adolescents toward a Free Gift.

accomplishment" values (Figure 1).

In MEC analysis, the more the A, C and V variables are, the more complicated the hierarchical value map will be. In Figure 1, a total of 37 A/C/V variables made the hierarchical value map complicated to read. Thus, this study adopted factor analysis to reduce the number of variables for providing an easy and understandable HVM. Factor analysis with Varimax rotation was used to

uncover the latent dimensions of a set of A, C or V variables. Adopting factor loading greater than 0.4 and eigenvalue greater than one (Rabenheimer, 2004), five attribute factors, seven consequence factors and five value factors were obtained and the cumulative variances explained are 56.408, 58.146 and 67.12, representatively (Table 2).

Owing to the results of factor analysis, the original A-C-

**Table 2.** Factor analysis.

A/C/V	Factor	Variable	Factor loading	Eigenvalue	% of variance	Cumulative %
Attribute	FA1 Theme	(A4) appearance	0.776			
		(A5) usage	0.690	1.807	15.056	
		(A6) protagonist	0.529			
	FA2 Unique	(A7) consumption amount	0.769			
		(A9) shape	0.596	1.489	12.410	
		(A12) limited edition	0.456			
	FA3 Texture	(A2) quality	0.725			56.408
		(A3) size	0.701	1.265	10.541	
	FA4 Style	(A1) color	0.751			
		(A10) material	0.635	1.135	9.457	
	FA5 Promotion	(A8) advertisement	0.743			
		(A11) coupon	0.576	1.073	8.945	
Consequence	FC1 Benefit	(C15) economy	0.711			
		(C16) practicability	0.634	1.662	10.389	
		(C18) fashion	0.543			
	FC2 Sharing feelings	(C13) beautiful	0.774			
		(C26) enviable	0.535	1.527	9.543	
		(C17) new exchange	0.691			
		(C28) auction exchange	0.643	1.392	8.700	
	FC4 Distinctive	(C19) vanity	0.767			58.146
		(C27) treasure	0.603	1.347	8.420	
	FC5 Entertainment	(C14) fun	0.697			
		(C22) comfortable	0.682	1.255	7.846	
		(C24) facilitate collection	0.453			
	FC6 Pleased	(C20) self-satisfaction	0.794			
		(C21) place landscaping	0.513	1.086	6.786	
	FC7 Price concessions	(C23) well-known	0.682			
		(C25) over value	0.565	1.034	6.462	
Value	FV1 Demand respected	(V32) self-respect	0.793			
		(V36) fun and enjoyment of life	0.740	1.336	14.840	
	FV2 Self improvement	(V30) excitement	0.731			
		(V33) sense of accomplishment	0.617	1.296	14.403	
		(V34) self-fulfillment	0.554			
	FV3					
	Sense of belonging	(V29) sense of belonging	0.862	1.173	13.029	67.120
	FV4 Harmony	(V35) being well respected	0.887			
		(V37) warm relationships with others	0.517	1.154	12.818	
	FV5 Security	(V31) security	0.857	1.083	12.031	

**Table 3.** Summary implication matrix of factor dimensions.

Factor variable	FC1 (FV1)		FC2 (FV2)		FC3 (FV3)		FC4 (FV4)		FC5 (FV5)		FC6		FC7	
	CD		CD		CDCD				C	DCDC	D			
FA1	44	45	25	22	11	14	8	14	20	20	16	15	5	5
FA2	23	27	6	10	9	14	44	48	12	18	7	9	13	18
FA3	14	18	5	8	5	7	1	1	14	23	8	7	2	1
FA4	5	5	17	25	3	4	3	3	15	17	5	9	4	5
FA5	10	16	1	1	2	3	--	1	1	1	1	1	11	12
FC1	(18)	(17)	(41)	(54)	(12)	(11)	(7)	(7)	(20)	(21)				
FC2	(11)	(13)	(25)	(26)	(7)	(7)	(7)	(8)	(1)	(4)				
FC3	(8)	(11)	(12)	(18)	(5)	(6)	(6)	(7)	(1)	(1)				
FC4	(23)	(26)	(23)	(28)	(4)	(6)	(5)	(7)	(1)	(1)				
FC5	(19)	(21)	(18)	(26)	(6)	(9)	(2)	(3)	(5)	(5)				
FC6	(13)	(16)	(11)	(12)	(6)	(5)	(2)	(3)	(3)	(3)				
FC7	(6)	(8)	(14)	(21)	(2)	(2)	(7)	(7)	(2)	(2)				

Note: the number in the ( ) represents the linkage frequency between consequence and value variables.

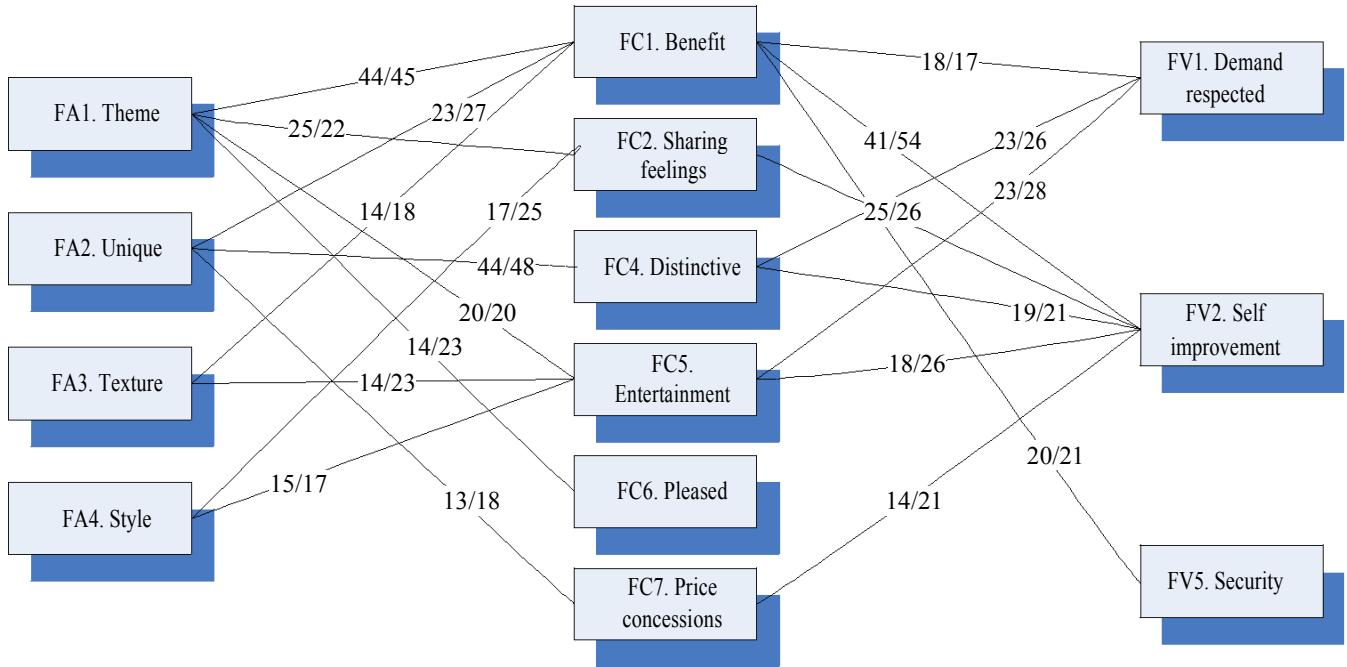
**Table 4.** Analyses of aggregated hierarchy of factor objectives.

Cutoff point	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	
(1). No. of active cells	C	69	62	56	53	51	43	38	33	30	29	28	24	21	19	16
	D	70	62	59	55	53	48	46	39	36	33	32	30	28	27	24
(2). No. of active linkages	C	723	716	704	695	687	647	617	582	558	549	539	495	459	433	391
	D	868	860	854	842	834	809	797	748	724	697	687	665	641	628	586
(3). No. of active cells as a proportion of all active cells	C	99%	89%	80%	76%	73%	61%	54%	47%	43%	41%	40%	34%	30%	27%	23%
	D	100%	89%	84%	79%	76%	69%	66%	56%	51%	47%	46%	43%	40%	39%	34%
(4). No. of active cells as a proportion of all active cells at cutoff point 1	C	100%	90%	81%	77%	74%	62%	55%	48%	43%	42%	41%	35%	30%	28%	23%
	D	100%	89%	84%	79%	76%	69%	66%	56%	51%	47%	46%	43%	40%	39%	34%
(5). No. of active linkages as a proportion of all active linkages	C	100%	99%	97%	96%	95%	89%	85%	80%	77%	76%	75%	68%	63%	60%	54%
	D	100%	99%	98%	97%	96%	93%	92%	86%	83%	80%	79%	77%	74%	72%	68%

V summary implication matrix was summarized into the summary implication matrix of factor dimensions as shown in Table 3. For example, A4, A5 and A6 belong to FA1 dimension while C15, C16 and C18 constitute FC1. Consequently, the linkage frequencies between FA1 and FC1 are the sum of the linkage frequencies among A4, A5, A6, C15, C16 and C18. In the factor summary implication matrix, the higher the linkage frequencies exhibit, the stronger the relation between two factors should be. The researchers also find that, in the six "dollar-quantity" combinations, 36% of the adolescents prefer combination C (\$29 minimum consumption and total 48 collections in

a set) and 42% of them prefer combination D (\$25 minimum consumption and total 103 in a set). Thus, we can assume that the adolescents are expecting a low threshold per consumption amount in the convenience store to get a free gift but the free gifts should not be easy to form a complete set of promotion series. Ultimately, this study summarized the factor linkage frequencies (e.g. FA, FC and FV) within C and D combinations preferred by the majority of adolescents and exhibited in Table 3.

According to the selection rule of cutoff value (Pieters et al., 1995), this study prepared the analyses of



**Figure 2.** Factor hierarchical value map for the “dollar-quantity” combinations of free gifts.

aggregated hierarchy of factor objectives (Table 4) for constructing the factor hierarchical value map. As shown in Table 4, when the cutoff value equals to 14, the numbers of active cells as a proportion of all active cells at cutoff point one are 28 and 39% for C and D “dollar-quantity” combinations, representatively. The numbers of active linkages as a proportion of all active linkages are 60 and 72%, representatively. This study, hence, adopted the cutoff value 14 to construct the factor hierarchical value map exhibited in Figure 2.

In Figure 2, “theme (FA1)” attribute produces “benefit (FC1)” consequence and further yields “self improvement (FV2)” value satisfaction. In fact, “theme (FA1)” attribute is composed of “appearance (A4)”, “usage (A5)” and “protagonist (A6)” attributes. The adolescent respondents expect such attributes to provide concrete benefits such as “economy (C15)” and “practicability (C16)”. Thus, while marketers design free-gift promotion activities, they should consider what kinds of real benefits a free gift can provide rather than focus only on the decorative or treasure effects of the free gift. Furthermore, “unique (FA2)” includes “consumption amount (A7)”, “shape (A9)” and “limited edition (A12)” attributes preferred by the adolescents. Such attributes can make them feel “distinctive (FC4)”, leading to “demand respected (FV1)” and “self improvement (FV2)” value achievement.

## Conclusion and suggestions

The MEC model can help marketers to understand

consumers’ expectations of product consumption. Through the laddering technique to reveal consumers’ cognitive structures toward a particular product or service, marketers can use the analytical results of cognitive structures to develop marketing strategies. The empirical results of this study indicate that the consumption perceptions and cognitions of adolescents can be elicited through the HVM construction. The contents of A-C-V linkages describe what the adolescent desire and demand toward a free gift provided by the convenience store’s promotion could be. According to the illustration of HVM, “usage” and “consumption amount” attributes are the major considerations for the adolescents to participate the free-gift promotion activity of the convenience stores. Thus, marketers of the convenience stores should take these two attributes into their promotion design. Although 7-Eleven in 2005 has been successful in the promotion activity, “NT\$ 77 per consumption earns one of free series Hello Kitty magnet”, similar promotion activity has been imitated by other convenience stores. Today, how to attract consumers and how to provide “distinctive” gift contents become an important issue for marketers to designing their free-gift promotion activities.

Obviously, the means-end hierarchy links a product’s attributes, consequences and values in consumers’ cognitive structures. In MEC analysis, free-gift attributes can be thought of as means to achieve desired ends, namely, values through the consequences of those attributes (Gutman, 1982). Future researches may need to confirm the attribute contents of free gifts for eliciting

the decisive benefits upon consumption to achieving adolescents' value satisfaction, in order to find out the mutual influence among attribute, consequence and value variables. Furthermore, understanding the abstractness differentiation of A-C-V linkages, marketers can design differentiated free gifts tailored especially for their target customers. Owing to the prevalence of free-gift exchange websites in Taiwan, future researchers may focus on the free-gift exchange behaviors on web and reveal adolescents' perceptions of free-gift web exchange for providing marketers with invaluable information in developing effective web advertising strategies.

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