

Clothing needs and related problems of female social pensioners in Stellenbosch¹

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Abstract

This article reports on a study of the clothing needs and related problems of female social pensioners in Stellenbosch. The sample consisted of 107 coloured women who were 60 years and older, and non-institutionalized. A structured questionnaire was used to gather the data during interviews in the respondents' homes. It was found that most of the respondents buy their clothes at stores in Stellenbosch. They prefer certain stores which sell clothes at affordable prices. Style preferences include cardigans, gathered skirts, loose-fitting jackets, and dresses with front openings. The women value clothes that fit well, are comfortable and are aesthetically pleasing. The respondents felt that their clothes are adequate for their activities but that they lack certain clothing items, such as winter sleepwear and underwear.

According to Miller and Petrich (1986:45) a research interest in elderly consumers has gradually increased since the 1970s. A study by the Alberta Consumer and Corporate Affairs Office in Canada found that clothing, besides products and services such as food, household repairs, insurance and optical care, is a primary consideration for elderly consumers (Miller & Petrich, 1986:46).

The importance of clothing for the elderly is described by Chowdhary (1988:23) as follows: "With aging, appearance becomes more a liability than an asset. Therefore, appropriate clothing selection can improve both appearance and self esteem of the elderly." This description is in accordance with the view of Grobbelaar (1986: 39-40), that clothes contribute to a positive self-image and provide ego support in the face of lost youthfulness and the bodily changes that accompany the ageing process. According to Grobbelaar, the clothing industry should be sensitive to the design, colour and fabric requirements of the elderly.

The elderly therefore have special clothing needs as a result of physiological and physical changes. These changes include skeleton and posture changes, stiff joints, skin changes, and a less effective temperature-regulation mechanism (Wicht, 1982: 51-53). Individual clothing needs and related problems may in some cases be ascribed to such bodily changes (Richards, 1981:263; Smathers & Horridge, 1978/79:273). Rosenblad-Wallin and Karlsson (1986:343) analyzed the clothing problems of the elderly in Sweden; they found that the elderly experienced difficulty in procuring clothes which fitted well and were aesthetically pleasing. The functionality of clothes is also an important consideration; some old people experience difficulty in dressing and undressing. In a study

on the clothing interest and social participation of elderly females in homes for the aged in Stellenbosch, aesthetics were found to play a very important role (Bezuidenhout, 1983:101-102).

Hence as life-styles change, so do the preferences and consumption patterns of products (including clothing) of the elderly change (Shim & Mahoney, 1992:50). The elderly may be regarded as a "vulnerable" consumer group; little attention has been paid to them in the past, and this continues to be the case. Chung and Magrabi (1992:246) and Moon (1990:237) refer to the elderly as a "critical" consumer group.

In the United States fairly substantial research has been conducted on the needs and preferences of elderly clothing consumers. It appears from some of these studies that the elderly in the US experience difficulty in obtaining clothes of the correct size and which fit properly. In general, the clothes do not provide for a decrease in height; elderly subjects have complained that skirts, sleeves and bodices are too long. The hip area of clothes has frequently been found to be too tight. Clothes also tend to fit too loose over the back shoulders. Specific preferences were expressed in the US studies for garments with sleeves, gored skirts, front fasteners (especially zip fasteners) and round necklines. Some subjects have expressed a desire for special clothing for the elderly. The findings suggest a need for an investigation into the standardization of clothing sizes. However investigations of this nature could be complicated because of highly individualistic fitting problems (Hogge & Baer, 1986; Richards, 1981; Smathers & Horridge, 1978/79; Bartley & Warden, 1962).

From the US data it appears that elderly women as a consumer group may have common needs and problems regarding clothes. To date, virtually no research has been done on this topic in South Africa. The study of Bezuidenhout (1983) focussed on sociopsychological needs regarding clothes; the study was conducted only among white female respondents.

A question which arises is whether the clothing needs and related problems of elderly coloured women correspond with the needs and problems of women in the American studies. To seek an answer to this question, a study was conducted among 107 coloured female pensioners who live in the community in Stellenbosch. To contextualize the study, information is given on the coloured population in South Africa.

The South African coloured population group

In South African society, coloured persons are those who were previously classified as such on grounds of being of

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mixed descent stemming from the early intermingling of white settlers, indigenous blacks and immigrant Indians. (The Population Registration Act was repealed in 1989.) In 1991 the coloured population group totalled 3 285 718. The percentage of persons aged 65+ in that population group was 3,4% (a total of 111 900 persons). Elderly coloured persons (aged 65+) constituted 8,4% of the total elderly South African population in 1991 (Central Statistical Services, 1991a:123).

Coloured people have traditionally lived in multigenerational households (cf. Ferreira, Møller, Prinsloo & Gillis, 1992; Steyn, 1993). A shortage of suitable, affordable housing for coloured and black people in South Africa results in overcrowding (cf. Rabie, 1987:94, 110). Coloured communities have historically experienced serious material deprivation, described by Rabie (1987:101) as chronic poverty. The culture of poverty among the coloureds in the past has meant that the majority have lacked financial means and have had limited consumer options.

The coloured population of Stellenbosch

The total population of the greater Stellenbosch area is approximately 54 000 (Central Statistical Services, 1991b). Whites constitute approximately 52% of the population and coloureds approximately 48%. (Only a small number of blacks and Indians live in Stellenbosch.) The number of elderly persons aged 60+ who lived in Stellenbosch in 1991 constituted 7,4% of the total population in that town (Central Statistical Services, 1991b:4). Although the Group Areas Act was repealed in 1988, the majority of coloured inhabitants of Stellenbosch live in one of two townships, namely Ida's Valley and Cloeteville. Ida's Valley is situated about six kilometres north-east of the town centre, while Cloeteville is situated about five kilometres to the north-west of the centre. In both cases, the elderly residents of these townships are mainly dependent on public transport such as buses and taxis, or family members to transport them to stores in the town centre.

Social pensions

The Social Pensions Act of 1973 provides for social pensions to be paid to certain categories of South Africans. The types of pensions provided for under the act include old-age pensions, blind persons' pensions, disability pensions, veterans' pensions and allowances. Old-age pensions are payable to males aged 65+ and females aged 60+, who qualify to receive a pension according to a means test (South Africa (Republic), 1983). At the time of the survey (May-June 1991) the amounts of grants payable to coloured persons who were eligible to receive a pension were as follows: A person with an annual income below R900,00 was eligible to receive a maximum monthly grant of R293,00. The maximum annual income allowed for a person to be eligible to receive a pension was R3 075,00. At this level of income the amount of the grant paid monthly would be R148,00 (South Africa (Republic), 1992:14).

The amounts of grants paid to pensioners in the different population groups have previously differed. Parity in the amounts paid to pensioners in the different groups has since been achieved; as from September 1993 all pensioners receive similar grants.

Research design

Objectives of the study

The aim of the study was to determine the clothing needs and related problems of coloured female social pensioners regard-

ing the acquisition, affordability, fit and comfort, design preferences and care of their clothes, as well as how suitable they perceived the clothes to be for their activities.

The sample

The sample comprised coloured female social pensioners aged 60 years or older who lived in private households in the greater Stellenbosch area. The sampled respondents were therefore non-institutionalized. The sample was drawn at pension pay-out points.

In Stellenbosch old-age pensions are paid monthly to coloured pensioners at four post offices, namely Stellenbosch, Cloeteville, Dennesig and Ida's Valley. On the pension pay-out day in May 1991 a quota of 110 respondents was drawn from a population of about 1 000 female coloured pensioners. Every fourth woman in the queue for pensions was approached. If the woman met the requirements and was willing to participate in the study, her address was noted. The same procedure was followed at all four post offices.

From 110 interviews subsequently conducted in the sampled respondents' homes to gather the data, 107 completed questionnaires were suitable for data analysis. The 107 respondents were predominantly in the age group 60-74 years (71,9%). They were mainly widowed (60,7%), or married and living with their husbands (22,4%). The highest level of education in the majority of cases was primary-school level; 29% of the sample had obtained a high-school education.

The majority of the respondents (79,5%) received a monthly pension of between R201,00 and R300,00 a month. Almost half (47,7%) could not say how much they spent on clothes each month. The respondents who could give an indication of this (43%) estimated that the amount was less than R50,00. The respondents found it difficult to estimate their other expenses, such as food, housing, transport and medical care, as most lived in multigenerational households and expenses were shared.

The elderly included in the study mainly lived in detached, single dwellings (65%) or semi-detached dwellings (25,2%). The respondents (or their husbands) either owned or rented the dwellings (42,1%), or resided with children and/or relatives. In 77% of cases, three to seven persons resided in a dwelling.

Questionnaire

A structured questionnaire was constructed consisting of four sections: Sociodemographic data (17 questions); mealtime and food consumer patterns (23 questions) as well as a food frequency questionnaire; clothing needs (30 questions); and housing needs (69 questions). The items in the questionnaire are described in Senekal and Fourie (1991), van Wyk and Liebenberg (1991), and Visser and Uys (1991).

The 30 items on clothing needs included questions on

- the respondents' acquisition of clothes (including shoes), in terms of who purchased the clothes and the respondents' preferences;
- the affordability of the clothes, in terms of how the clothes were paid for and whether sufficient money was available for the purchases;
- the fit and comfort of the clothes, with reference to fitting problems, ease of dressing and undressing, fasteners and openings, and preferences regarding shoes;
- design preferences regarding dresses, jackets, jerseys, skirts, sleeves, necklines and collars, as well as a comparison of the aesthetic and comfort features of the clothes. Line drawings of styles were used in accordance with Richards' study (1981: 264-65);

- the care of the clothes, with consideration of the adequacy of storage facilities, the type of storage facilities, and cleaning procedures for outer clothes (hand washing, machine washing or dry cleaning); and
- perceptions of the suitability of the available clothes for the respondents' activities.

Data collection

The fieldwork was conducted during the second, third and fourth weeks of June 1991. Half the respondents were interviewed shortly before the monthly pensions were paid out; the remainder were interviewed after the pensions had been paid.

Six fieldworkers administered the questionnaires at the respondents' homes during interviews. The fieldworkers included three graduate home economics students, two qualified nurses and a graduate teacher. A training manual was compiled for the fieldworkers, who were trained over a period of two days. The fieldworkers were whites. It is recommended that where possible, fieldworkers who are coloured should be engaged to interview respondents who are coloured, to remove cultural barriers to understanding.

Results and discussion

The results of the study are presented according to the acquisition, affordability, fit and comfort of the clothes; design preferences; care of the clothes; and the perceived suitability of the clothes for the respondents' activities.

Acquisition

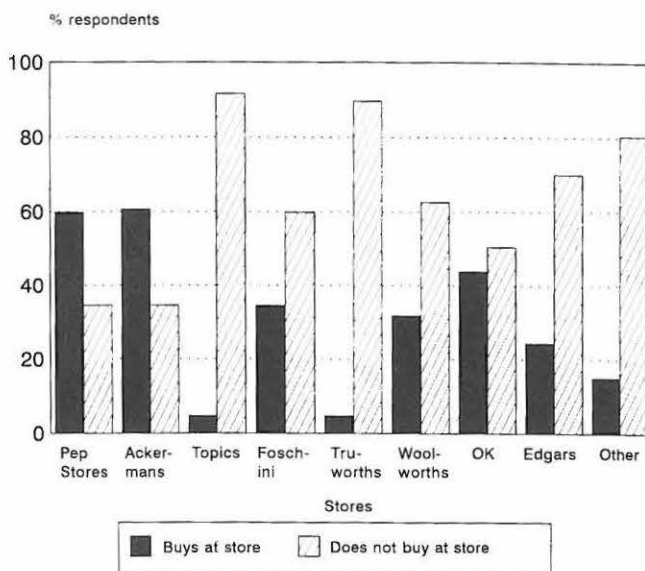
The majority of the respondents (72,9%) purchased their clothes from stores in the town. A study by Hogge and Baer (1986:336) in the US showed a similar trend: 78,3% of their subjects purchased ready-made clothes. In the Stellenbosch study, the respondents mainly bought their clothes themselves (68,2%), or members of their household bought their clothes for them (22,4%). Neighbours, friends or other persons bought the clothes of a few respondents (3,7%).

Preferences for certain stores were evident in the study (see Figure 1). The names of eight stores which sell clothes, namely a supermarket² (the OK) and seven chain stores³ (Pep Stores, Ackermans, Topics, Foschini, Truworthis, Woolworths and Edgars) were presented to the respondents. Pep Stores and Ackermans cater to lower-income groups; Topics, Edgars and the OK cater to middle-income groups; and Foschini, Truworthis and Woolworths cater to upper-middle income groups.

It is evident in Figure 1 that of the stores, Ackermans (60,7%) and Pep Stores (59,8%) were preferred by the sample. According to the respondents the main reason for this preference was the lower prices offered by these stores. Some stores were not widely supported because of high prices; these stores were Topics, Truworthis and Woolworths. The respondents who did buy at these stores did so because the quality of the merchandise is good. Lumpkin, Greenberg & Goldstucker (1985:86,101) found in a study on the importance of different store characteristics that the elderly mainly emphasize quality and price-related characteristics of clothing stores. Although the respondents in the present study mainly fell in the lower socio-economic group, it appears that they still considered price and quality when purchasing clothes.

The stores at which the respondents reported that they mainly purchased their clothes were as follows: Pep Stores (24,3%), Foschini (19,6%), "other" stores (14,0%), Edgars (9,3%), the OK (7,5%), Ackermans (6,5%) and Woolworths (3,7%). (Sixteen respondents (15%) did not reply to this item.)

Figure 1
Store preferences



These data are in a certain sense contradictory to the information on store support shown in Figure 1.

The respondents reported that they both buy shoes from stores (94,4%) and also acquire shoes as gifts (15,9%), or shoes are passed on to them secondhand (10,3%), or purchased secondhand (5,6%). One respondent purchased health shoes. Shoes were also mainly purchased from chain stores in Stellenbosch because the stores are inexpensive. The respondents who did not buy their shoes from a particular store (43,9%), bought them from any store where shoes are available and where they can be obtained cheaply.

Affordability

The majority of the respondents (62,6%) were of the opinion that they were able to purchase enough clothes with their disposable money. This finding corresponds with the finding of Bartley and Warden (1962:717), that their respondents would not have spent more if more money were available for buying clothes. In the Stellenbosch study different methods of payment were used to pay for the clothes. The sample reported that more than one method of payment is used to pay for clothes which the respondents purchase: 68,2% pay cash; 37,4% use a lay-by facility; and 32,7% buy on the store's credit facility.

Fit and comfort

The majority of the respondents (85%) were of the opinion that their clothes fitted well generally. This deduction can be made when considering the low percentages of "yes" responses in Table 1. The findings represent the respondents' opinions on fitting problems – or the absence thereof – experienced in certain areas of garments.

An analysis of the "yes" responses shows that particular fitting problems were experienced with some garments. Garments were frequently felt to be too long – particularly skirts, sleeves and bodices. These fitting problems largely correspond with the results reported by researchers in the US (Hogge & Baer, 1986:337-38; Richards, 1981:265; Smathers & Horridge, 1978/79:275; Bartley & Warden, 1962:716).

Table 1
Perceived fitting problems ("yes" responses)

Specific area	%
Shoulders too tight	11,2
Shoulders too loose	6,5
Neckline too tight	4,7
Neckline too loose	8,4
Chest area too tight	6,5
Chest area too loose	7,5
Bodice front too short	3,7
Bodice front too long	12,1
Bodice back too short	0,9
Bodice back too long	12,1
Waistline too tight	13,1
Waistline too loose	2,8
Sleeves too short	0,9
Sleeves too long	15,0
Armholes too tight	6,5
Sleeves too tight at the upper arm	11,2
Skirts too short	0,9
Skirts too long	24,3
Skirts too tight at hipline	6,5
Skirts too tight at thighs	5,6
Slacks too short	0,0
Slacks too long	10,3
Slacks too tight at hipline	1,9
Slacks too tight at thighs	0,9
Other	0,9
N = 107	

With a few exceptions, all the respondents in the Stellenbosch study were able to dress themselves: of the total of 107 respondents, 86,9% always dressed and undressed themselves. Eight comma four per cent of the respondents who regularly dressed and undressed themselves reported that they sometimes experienced difficulty and needed to be assisted. Only one respondent could only sometimes dress herself. Four respondents were invalids, and never dressed and undressed themselves.

Fasteners and the placing of openings can affect the extent to which elderly women can dress themselves. The needs and problems of the study group in this regard were as follows: Of the total of 107 respondents, 94,4% indicated that openings on the front panel of garments were easy to handle. Openings on the back panel caused difficulties for 64,5%. A preference for openings on the front panel was found by both Smathers and Horridge (1978/79:276) and Bartley and Warden (1962:717).

Responses to a question on whether certain fasteners are easier or more difficult to handle are shown in Table 2.

Table 2
Perceived ease of coping with fasteners ("yes" and "no" responses)*

Fastener	Easy to cope with	
	Yes %	No %
Zip fasteners	70,0	27,1
Buttons and buttonholes	86,0	11,2
Press studs	72,0	23,3
Hooks and eyes	51,4	43,9
N= 107		

* Between 2,8 and 4,7% of the respondents did not respond to the items.

It is seen in Table 2 that buttons are possibly the most suitable fasteners for elderly women. Zip fasteners and press-studs are also suitable if they are conveniently placed (especially zip fasteners) and not too small (especially press-studs).

An analysis of data relating to the fit and comfort of clothes should include shoes. The majority of the respondents (69,2%) experienced no problems with the fit and comfort of shoes. Those who did experience problems (27,0%) referred to the width or size of their feet, and the fact that they needed to wear special shoes. An analysis was made of the types of shoes that the respondents wore and how regularly they wore the shoes. The majority of the respondents reported that they "often" wore flat-heeled shoes (72,9%) and slippers (54,2%); they "seldom" wore high-heeled shoes (59,8%); and they "never" wore sandals (46,7%).

It can be deduced that flat-heeled shoes and slippers are the most comfortable footwear, and are preferred by elderly women. The respondents did not experience problems in obtaining flat-heeled shoes (72,9%), slippers (86,9%), heeled shoes (69,2%) or sandals (84,1%).

Design preferences

Line drawings of three dress styles and three jacket styles were shown to the respondents. A short description of each style and the percentage of respondents who preferred that style are given below:

Dresses

Style 1: A shirt style with a six-panel skirt, a waistband, a front opening, and buttons and buttonholes – 28 %

Style 2: A princess style, with a front opening, and buttons and buttonholes but no waistband – 29%

Style 3: A loose-fitting style which is tied around the waist with a tie band and a shorter front opening with buttons and buttonholes – 38%

The dresses in the sketches were without sleeves and had an ordinary round neckline.

Jackets

Style 1: A loose-fitting, hip-length jacket, with a convertible collar and buttons and buttonholes – 52%

Style 2: A straight jacket (waist-length) with a convertible collar and two buttons and buttonholes – 6%

Style 3: A shaped, hip-length jacket with four buttons and buttonholes, buttoning up higher than Style 1 – 36%

The sketches of all three jackets featured long sleeves.

Jerseys

Sketches of two jerseys, namely a cardigan and a pullover jersey, both with long sleeves, a round neckline and ribbing at the neckline, cuffs and hem, were shown to the respondents. The cardigan was preferred by 78% and the pullover by 16% of the respondents.

Skirts

The respondents preferred the following skirt types from the sketches that were shown to them:

Gathered skirt	48%
Six-panel gored skirt	22%
Tight-fitting pencil skirt	11%
A-line skirt	10%
No preference	8%

A preference for gathered skirts in this study is contrary to the findings of other researchers, who have found that their respondents preferred an A-line or a gored skirt (Richards, 1981:265; Smathers & Horridge, 1978/79: 277; Bartley & Warden, 1962:717).

Sleeves

The respondents' preferences for sleeves were raglan sleeves (36,4%); set-in sleeves (35,5%); and kimono sleeves (23,4%). In their studies, Richards (1981: 265) and Warden (1962:717) found that set-in sleeves were preferred.

Collars

The respondents' preferences for necklines were a jewel neckline (55,1%), a V-shaped neckline (20,6%) and a boat-shaped neckline (18,7%). The majority of the respondents (80,4%) preferred garments which had a collar. Richards (1981:265) and Bartley and Warden (1962:717) found preferences for V-shaped necklines, while Smathers and Horridge (1978-79:277) reported a preference for jewel necklines.

In summary it should be mentioned that the sample expressed special preference for certain garments and designs, such as cardigans, gathered skirts and jewel necklines. Loose, long jackets (Style 1) as well as loose-fitting dresses with a tie band and a centre front opening (Style 3) also enjoyed preference. There was no definite preference between set-in sleeves and raglan sleeves.

Both Hogge and Baer (1986:340) and Bartley and Warden (1962:77) point out that aesthetics and comfort features of garments are important for elderly women. The present study confirms this finding. Regarding how important "beautiful" clothes are, 61,7% of the respondents regarded them as "very important". The importance of comfortable clothes was indicated by 70,1% of the respondents who, in response to this question, regarded comfort as a "very important" feature of clothes. (A three-point scale, "very important", "important" and "unimportant", was used for both questions.)

Care of the clothes

The majority of the respondents (89,7%) felt that they had adequate storage space for their clothes. Those who regarded their storage space as inadequate (9,3%) referred to their rooms being small, or that there was only one wardrobe in the room.

The different cleaning procedures that the respondents used to care for their outer garments, as well as who was responsible for caring for their clothes, were as follows: A large majority (84,1%) washed their clothes themselves; in 66,4% of the cases they washed their clothes by hand and in 14% of the cases they asked members of their household to help them do so. Forty-two comma one per cent of the respondents washed their clothes in a washing machine; few respondents (9,3%) sent clothes to a dry cleaner.

The reasons for the above findings are probably obvious: a number of the respondents neither owned nor had access to a washing machine; the cost of dry cleaning is also very high. The respondents were therefore mainly responsible for hand-washing their clothes themselves.

Suitability of the clothes for activities

The respondents were asked to indicate whether they regarded their clothes as suitable for their activities. The responses are shown in Table 3.

The respondents generally regarded their clothes as suitable for their activities. However a number reported that they did not have winter pyjamas, and elegant or formal shoes. Summer clothes were generally sufficient for their needs.

Table 3
Perceived suitability of clothes for activities ("yes" responses)

Types of clothes/shoes	%
Underwear	78,5
Sleepwear	
– Summer	82,2
– Winter	74,8
Informal clothes	
– Summer	92,5
– Winter	81,2
Semi-formal clothes (for shopping)	
– Summer	87,8
– Winter	81,2
Formal clothes (for church and weddings)	
– Summer	85,0
– Winter	78,5
Shoes	
– Informal	83,1
– Formal	73,8
N = 107	

The respondents were asked what their greatest problems were with summer and winter clothes. The majority replied that they did not experience problems with summer (62,6%) or winter (59,8%) clothes. Those who did experience problems with summer (31,7%) and winter (34,5%) outfits, mentioned the fit (length and width) of the garments; perceived inappropriate fashions; and the high cost of clothes. They also referred to not having enough winter clothes and that their clothes were not warm enough.

In general, many elderly women are possibly unaware of their physical problems and that such problems can make it difficult for them to obtain clothes that fit (Bartley & Warden, 1962:716). The findings of the present study are in accordance with the findings of Hogge and Baer (1986:339), namely that many respondents do not realise that they have fitting problems but nevertheless place a good fit as the first priority.

The following points should be considered when interpreting the data indicating the respondents' preferences: The respondents may not have been equally familiar with the alternatives regarding clothes. Showing respondents line drawings or photographs of garments could partly overcome this problem. The respondents may also not have divulged their true feelings regarding clothing. Some elderly persons may hesitate to wish for something which they have little chance of acquiring.

Conclusions

Elderly women have certain common needs, problems and preferences regarding clothes. These needs, problems and preferences may be partly ascribed to the physical changes which accompany the ageing process.

Garments which fit comfortably and which are aesthetically pleasing are obviously important to all elderly women. The correct choice and position of fasteners can contribute to an elderly person's independence, as the process of getting dressed and undressed will be simplified. Consideration should also be given to the modification of the length and width of clothes to suit figure changes.

Although the elderly involved in the study do not represent a dominant market segment, it should be kept in mind that the elderly section of the population constitutes an ever-growing

market. Clothing manufacturers and retailers could well afford to take cognizance of the clothing needs and preferences of this growing consumer group.

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Notes

1. This article is based on team research conducted by the Department of Home Economics at the University of Stellenbosch. The title of the investigation was "Living circumstances of coloured elderly persons resident in private households in the Stellenbosch community".
2. Van Rooyen (1993:273) defines a supermarket as follows: "Supermarkets operate on a self-service basis and because of this can compete on a price basis... there can be various departments such as hardware, groceries and clothing and they may also do business in various places."
3. Van Rooyen (1993:273) describes chain stores as consisting "... of a number of more or less similar shops in various places all owned by one enterprise and all centrally controlled. Chain stores can include departmental stores, as in the case of Woolworths."
4. Lay-bye means that an article is kept in a store for a customer while down payments are made on the purchase sum.

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