

# Online complaint intention and service recovery expectations of clothing retail customers

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## ABSTRACT

It is important for clothing retailers to be aware of customer complaint behaviour, and to take such complaints seriously when they occur, since service failures within the highly competitive clothing retail industry are inevitable. Given that the resolution of a customer complaint is critical, in order to restore customer satisfaction, retailers are providing customers with a variety of complaint channels, such as online complaining. Due to the limited literature and research available, the purpose of this study was to determine the interrelationships between the constructs attitude towards complaining, service failure severity, online complaint intention, and the strength of service recovery expectation. Non-probability sampling – in the form of quota and convenience sampling – was used to collect the data from 397 clothing retail customers residing in Gauteng. Results of the structural equation modelling indicate that respondents' perceptions of the severity of the service failure experienced significantly and positively influence their strength of service recovery expectations, while no further significant positive influences were uncovered between any of the other constructs, including online complaint intention, as hypothesised in the proposed model for the study.

**Keywords:** Clothing retailers; attitude towards complaining; service failure; service recovery; service failure severity; online complaint intention; strength of service recovery expectation

Globalisation, together with increasing competition, has exerted pressure on retailers to become more customer-orientated (Forbes, Kelley & Hoffman, 2005:280; Hansen, Wilke & Zaichkowsky, 2010:6). More retailers are, therefore, trying to distinguish their offerings by means of providing improved services to their customers, since it is becoming ever more difficult to create a competitive advantage,

because of the undifferentiated nature of merchandise offered, as well as the increasing number of competing retailers (Gazquez-Abad, De Cannière & Martinez-Lopez, 2011:166; Vesel & Zakbar, 2010:1335).

Unfortunately, due to the innate unpredictability of services, the occurrence of service failures has become inevitable

(Hoffman & Bateson, 2006:361; Little & Marandi, 2003:155). Service failures occur whenever customer expectations are not met (Bateson & Hoffman, 2011:352). These incidents could vary in seriousness, with some service failures being perceived as minor irritations, while others may be viewed as serious problems that could have a profound effect on customer complaint behaviour (McQuilken & Robertson, 2011:953,955).

Consequently, service failure severity has a significant influence on customers' attitudes towards complaining and complaint behaviours. It is important for organisations to afford customers the opportunity to complain – whenever a service failure occurs, since, depending on the severity thereof, service failures could lead to dissatisfaction, negative word-of-mouth, anger and resentment on the part of customers, customers switching to competitors, or even retaliation (Bateson & Hoffman, 2011:352; Tsarenko & Tojib, 2011:382).

For retailers to re-establish the balance in their relationships with customers following a service failure, they must execute service recovery (Smith, Bolton & Wagner, 1999:356). Since customers generally have high recovery expectations when they ultimately decide to complain (Wilson, Zeithaml, Bitner & Gremler, 2012:346), recovery efforts should be equally strong and effective relative to the severity of the service failure, thereby providing an adequate gain to cover the loss (Smith et al., 1999:360). By providing service recovery, organisations attempt to restore customer satisfaction and re-establish the relationship with the customer (Bateson & Hoffman, 2011:352; Lovelock & Wirtz, 2011:376).

Although extensive research has been undertaken with respect to customer complaint behaviour, a small number of researchers have studied the variety of complaint channel choices made possible by the arrival of the

Internet (Cho, Im, Hiltz & Fjermestad, 2002:318; Lee & Cude, 2012:91). Results pertaining to online complaint behaviour are, therefore, inconclusive as online complaint behaviour has received limited attention and an in-depth understanding of customers' online complaint intention is still lacking (Zaugg, 2009:2).

Given that customer complaint behaviour and the subsequent resolution of a complaint play such a critical role in customer satisfaction and retention, retailers are increasingly expanding their customers' opportunities to complain, by offering innovative channels to voice their complaints, such as online complaining (Robertson, 2012:146). Knowledge concerning retail customers' online complaint behaviour would enable retail managers to develop strategies to deliver the expected service recovery efforts, and to thereby increase retail customers' satisfaction and subsequent retention after experiencing a service failure.

This study specifically focuses on in-store employee-related service failures experienced by clothing retail customers, in order to determine the effect thereof on customers' online complaint intentions.

## LITERATURE BACKGROUND

### *Customer complaint behaviour*

Singh (1988:94) defines customer complaint behaviour as a variety of behavioural and non-behavioural responses, which are activated by feelings of perceived dissatisfaction relating to a purchase incident. McColl-Kennedy and Sparks (2003:252), furthermore, explain that when customers experience negative emotions after a service failure, they react by engaging in complaint behaviour.

Customers' complaint action can be categorised into three response behaviours, namely: to take public action by means of voicing their complaint directly to the organisation, or to a third party; to take private

action in the form of negative word-of-mouth, or by switching to a competitor; or finally by taking no action at all (Bateson & Hoffman, 2011:360-361; Lovelock & Wirtz, 2011:372-373).

Of concern to organisations should be that only as few as five to ten per cent of customers, who are dissatisfied with a service, take the trouble to complain to organisations (Tax, Brown & Chandrashekar, 1998:77). The majority of dissatisfied customers choose to rather take other actions when dissatisfied with a service, which could have a more damaging effect in the long-term (Stephens & Gwinner, 1998:172). It is, therefore, essential that organisations form a greater understanding of customer complaint behaviour.

According to Halstead and Dröge (1991:211; 215), it is important to specifically study the impact of attitudes on customer complaint behaviour, because attitudes related to the actual action of complaining have a stronger link to complaining behaviours than general attitudes towards an organisation.

### ***Attitude towards complaining and complaint intentions***

The literature pertaining to psychology and customer behaviour has accepted the strong correlation between customer behaviour and attitudes, and that attitude towards complaining is relevant in understanding customer complaint behaviour (Richins, 1982:502). It is contended that attitude towards complaining, whether positive or negative (Yuksel, Kilinc & Yuksel, 2006:22) plays a significant role in forecasting complaint behaviour of dissatisfied customers (Bodey & Grace, 2007:579).

Customers' attitudes toward complaining, and the probability of achieving a successful outcome through complaining, have therefore, been the main focus of research relating to customer-complaint behaviour (Velázquez,

Contri, Saura, & Blasco, 2006:496). Research results by De Matos, Rossi, Veiga and Veira (2009:417), and those of Kim and Chen (2010:96), for example, indicate that the expected benefits resulting from complaints, complaint convenience and attitude towards complaining have a direct effect on the likelihood of customers complaining.

These findings are supported by Kim and Boo (2011:217), who found that attitude towards complaining and customers' prior complaint experience were the most prominent factors affecting the extent to which customers are likely to complain. Studying customers' attitudes towards complaining is, therefore, relevant as this is one of the most significant determining factors of complaint behaviour intentions (Bodey & Grace, 2007:580; Singh, 1989:334; Velázquez, Blasco, Saura, & Contri, 2010:540).

### ***Online customer complaint behaviour***

Customers need to know how – and to whom – they can complain as their tendency to complain decreases when they are unsure of suitable complaint channels (Ford, Scheffman & Weiskopf, 2004:131). Robertson (2012:146) agrees, and states that customer satisfaction will increase when organisations offer efficient complaint-facilitation channels. Robertson (2012:146) is, furthermore, of the opinion that research pertaining to the communication medium (for example, letter, fax, e-mail or telephone), which customers prefer in the process of voicing their complaints, is an aspect not studied to the extent needed within the field of customer complaint behaviour literature. This information is vital, as customers' complaint channel choices impact their evaluation of the recovery process following a service failure (Mattila & Mount, 2003:142).

Technology has made a variety of complaint channels available to dissatisfied customers in the form of e-mails, blogs, web-forms and

online forums (Robertson, 2012:149). The Internet is, therefore, fast becoming a platform for unhappy customers to vent their dissatisfaction (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2011:373). However, there appears to be uncertainty regarding customers' feeling towards e-complaining, and whether value is added during online complaining (Zaugg, 2006:1). This view is supported when considering that previous research indicate that customers typically refrain from using online complaint channels (Robertson, 2012:149) as they prefer complaining face-to-face (Walker, Craig-Lees, Hecker & Francis, 2002:103). This preference is based on the belief that an instant solution to problems would be obtained in a face-to-face situation (Zaugg, 2006:5). This study will thus consider clothing customers' intentions to complain online.

### ***Service failures and the severity of service failures***

A service failure refers to a breakdown in service delivery, which often results in customer dissatisfaction (Singhal, Krishna & Lazarus, 2013:192; Suh, Greene, Rho & Qi, 2013:192). Service failures vary in severity; some service failures are minor irritations, while others are major stressors that can have a profound effect on customer complaint behaviour (McQuilken, McDonald & Vocino, 2013:42; McQuilken & Robertson, 2011:953,955).

Consequently, service failure severity has a significant influence on customers' attitudes toward complaining and voicing behaviours. Findings by Singh and Wilkes (1996:363) indicate that the effect on attitude towards complaining and voicing behaviours is more influential in a low service failure severity and dissatisfaction level than that of a high service failure severity level. Singh and Wilkes (1996:362) further declare that customers' voicing behaviour increases when service

failure severity and customer dissatisfaction increase.

Weun, Beatty and Jones (2004:135) stress that service failure severity significantly impacts a customer's evaluation of an organisation after the occurrence of a service failure. It is, therefore, vital for organisations to implement effective complaint-management systems, in order to address service failures since effective complaint channels have a positive impact on customer satisfaction (Strauss & Hill, 2001:63).

### ***Service recovery***

Customers experience a loss during a service failure which could be in the form of an economic loss or a social-resource loss (Yi & Lee, 2005:3). Organisations' response to restore the loss that customers experience is referred to as service recovery, more formally defined as the systematic action taken by organisations to correct a service failure – with the objective of reducing the possible negative effects of service failures, and to retain customers by preventing future failures (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2011:376; Suh et al., 2013:192; Wilson et al., 2012:340). Effective service recovery would thus identify and resolve problems, avoid customer dissatisfaction, and promote customer complaints (Komunda & Osarenkhoe, 2012:86).

For organisations to re-establish the balance in relationships following service failure, they must execute service recovery actions relative to the type of service failure – thereby providing an adequate gain to cover the loss (Smith et al., 1999:360; Yi & Lee, 2005:6). Service recovery levels should, accordingly, differ depending on the service failure severity and every situation should receive customised recovery efforts (Tyrrell & Woods, 2004:188).

The service recovery efforts that organisations offer following a service failure could include presenting an economic resource, such as offering a discount, coupons, or free upgrades, offering restoration in the form of presenting the customer with a new product, correcting the product, or delivering a substitute product, or simply offering an apology, or explaining why the service failure occurred (Bateson & Hoffman, 2011:368, Lin, Wang & Chang, 2011: 511; Lovelock & Wirtz, 2011:372).

### **Strength of service recovery expectation**

Service recovery expectation as defined by Harris, Grewal, Mohr and Bernhardt (2006:427), refers to the manner in which the customer believes the service failure should be resolved. Since some customers have a strong reaction to service failures, the recovery efforts of the organisation should be equally strong and effective (Smith et al., 1999:356). It is thus important to first take the nature of the service failure into account, in order to determine the correct level of service recovery efforts that would be required in such a situation (Yi & Lee, 2005:14).

Service recovery strategies can, therefore, differ considerably in strength, and it is likely that those customers who take the time and effort to complain, generally have high (or strong) recovery expectations (Wilson et al., 2012:346). It is thus not surprising that a positive correlation exists between complaint intention and the amount at stake, thereby indicating that complaint intention increases as the amount at stake (for the purpose of this study, the strength of service recovery expected) increases (Grønhaug & Gilly, 1991:177).

Research findings by Priluck and Lala (2009:53) indicate that a weak service recovery lowers the original levels of customer satisfaction, while a moderate or strong recovery reinstates customers' original level of

satisfaction. Priluck and Lala (2009:53), consequently conclude that any recovery effort beyond a moderate recovery effort does not regain any more than the original level of customer satisfaction.

However, Yi and Lee's (2005:13) research findings seem to disagree with this view. They found that organisations' performing a strong recovery effort can never be overstated, seeing that 70% of customers provided with a strong recovery indicated that their repurchase intention remains, or that they would spread positive word-of-mouth of the service organisation, weighed against the 30% of customers who received a low recovery level, saying they would do the same. This view is supported by research findings indicating that customers' strength of service recovery expectations is positively influenced by customers' service failure severity perceptions (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2011:377,380; McQuilken, 2010:218; Weun et al., 2004:139).

### **Hypotheses and model development**

Several empirical studies have identified a positive relationship between attitudes and intentions (Richins, 1982:505; Singh, 1989:334; Velázquez et al., 2010:540). According to Bodey and Grace (2007:580), a customer's attitude towards complaining has substantial value in predicting customer complaint behaviour. Therefore, it is no surprise that attitude towards complaining is found to be one of the most significant determining factors of complaint behaviour intentions (Bodey & Grace, 2007:580; De Matos et al., 2009:471; Kim & Boo, 2011:217; Singh, 1989:334; Velázquez et al., 2010:540) as customers with a positive attitude towards complaining are more likely to complain – despite their level of satisfaction (De Matos et al., 2009:417). Therefore, H<sub>1</sub> is formulated: *Attitude towards complaining has a significant positive influence on online complaint intention.*

The interrelationship between service failure severity and customer complaint intention has been established (De Matos et al., 2009:470). Richins (1983:76) explains that service failure severity has an influential impact on the effort of customers to respond to dissatisfaction. Singh and Wilkes (1996:362) agree that customers' voicing behaviour increases when service failure severity and customer dissatisfaction increase, while McQuilken and Robertson (2011:955) assert that a minor service failure can discourage customers from voicing their negative experiences. Consequently, the greater the severity of a service failure, the more likely will be customers' intentions to complain (De Matos & Leis, 2013:333; Levesque & McDougall, 2000:21). Zaugg (2008:222), furthermore, affirms that in the case of severe service failures, customers' intentions to complain online are higher. Therefore, H<sub>2</sub> is formulated: *Service failure severity has a significant positive influence on online complaint intention.*

Wilson et al. (2012:346) state that when customers ultimately decide to lodge a complaint after an unsatisfactory service experience, they generally have high service recovery expectations. Grønhaug and Gilly (1991:177) found that customers' complaint intentions increase as the strength of service recovery expectation increases. Therefore, H<sub>3</sub> is formulated: *Online complaint intention has a significant positive influence on the strength of service recovery expected.*

Some customers are more likely to complain, as they believe that a positive outcome could occur, whilst other customers refrain from taking any action, as they hold the opposite belief (Wilson et al., 2012:347). As a result, customers choose to complain in order to recover their economic loss through a refund, compensation or additional product or services as potential service recovery strategies (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2011:373). It is, therefore,

clear that outcome and process elements play a vital role in the formation of customers' attitude towards complaining (Andreassen & Streukens, 2013:18). These outcome and process elements can differ considerably in strength, and it is likely that customers who take the time and effort to complain generally have high (or strong) service recovery expectations (Wilson et al., 2012:346). Therefore, H<sub>4</sub> is formulated: *Attitude towards complaining has a significant positive influence on the strength of service recovery expected.*

As the perceived severity of service failures vary, customers' expectations relating to service recovery fluctuate accordingly (Betts, Wood & Tadisina, 2011:367). The more severe a service failure, the larger the customer's apparent loss would be (Weun et al., 2004:135). Smith et al. (1999:360) and Walster et al. (1973:174) explain that as soon as a service failure arises, the relationship between the customer and the organisation is thrown out of balance, as the costs extend beyond the benefits experienced by the customer.

For organisations to re-establish the balance in relationships, they must execute service recovery relative to the type of service failure, thereby providing an adequate gain to cover the loss (Smith et al., 1999:360). The findings by Smith et al. (1999:356) suggest that customers expect service recovery to be equivalent to the type of service failure experienced. Yi and Lee (2005:6) agree that organisations should present customers with a gain or recovery to cover the loss customers have experienced. As a result, the service recovery expectations of customers are less during a minor service failure than they would be in the case of a major service failure where the damage in terms of time, effort, annoyance, or anxiety was larger (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2011:377). This is an important factor

to measure, as the literature indicates that service recovery levels (or the strength thereof) should differ, depending on the service failure severity and every situation should receive customised recovery efforts accordingly (Tyrrell & Woods, 2004:188). Therefore, H<sub>5</sub> is formulated: *Service failure severity has a significant positive influence on the strength of service recovery expected.*

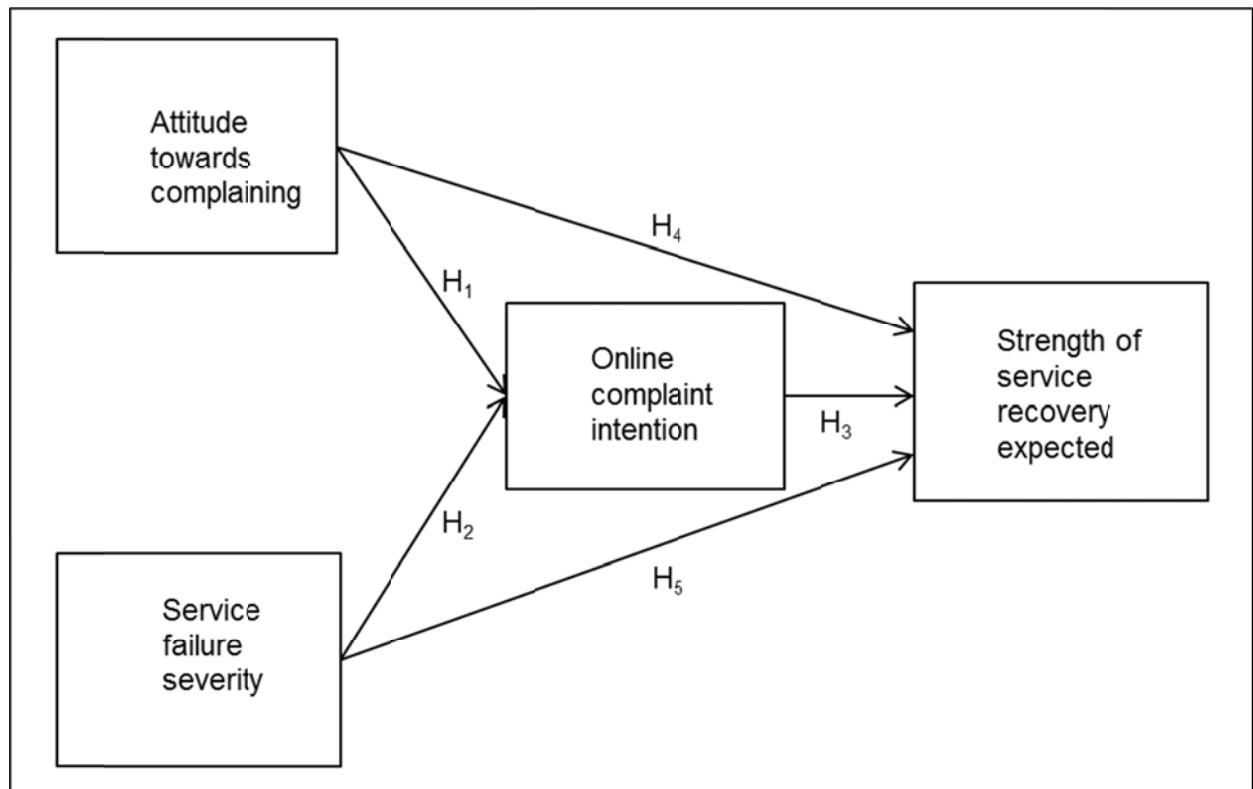
The following online complaint intention and service recovery expectations model is proposed in Figure 1, in order to illustrate the hypothesised interrelationships between the various constructs.

## PROBLEM STATEMENT AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Since service failures within the highly competitive clothing retail industry are inevitable, it is important for clothing retailers to be aware of customer complaint behaviour and complaint intention, and to react to complaints when they are received. Given that customer complaint behaviour and the subsequent resolution of a complaint play such a critical role in customer satisfaction and retention, clothing retailers are increasingly expanding their customers' opportunities to complain – by offering innovative channels to voice their complaints, such as online complaining.

FIGURE 1

### An online complaint intention and service recovery expectations model



Despite the findings of previous studies, a number of researchers (Cho et al., 2002:318; Mattila & Wirtz, 2004:147; Tyrrell & Woods, 2004:185; Zaugg, 2006; Zaugg, 2008:215) have expressed the opinion that research pertaining to complaint channel choice and online complaining behaviour has not yet received sufficient attention by practitioners and scholars. Knowledge concerning retail customers' online complaint behaviour might enable retail managers to develop strategies to deliver customers' expected service recovery efforts, and thereby increase customers' satisfaction and subsequent retention after experiencing a service failure.

To the authors' knowledge, no previous studies in the South African clothing retail environment have been documented that focus on the interrelationships between the various constructs concerning customer complaint behaviour. The primary objective of this study was thus to determine the interrelationship between customers' attitudes toward complaining, service failure severity, online complaint intention and strength of service recovery expectation in the clothing retail environment.

In order to achieve the primary objective of the study, the following secondary objectives were formulated:

- Measure the perceived service failure severity clothing retail customers experience when presented with a fictional employee-related service failure scenario.
- Measure the strength of service recovery expected by clothing retail customers after they have been presented with a fictional employee-related service failure scenario.
- Measure the intention of clothing retail customers to complain online when presented with a fictional employee-related service failure scenario.

- Determine whether interrelationships exist between the constructs, as presented in the proposed model for the study.

## METHOD

### *Population and sample*

The study population for this study includes all those who are 18 years and older, residing in the Gauteng province of South Africa, who are customers in the clothing retail industry, and who have access to the Internet. Gauteng province has been selected as the focus for this study, because this province, which is located on only 1.4 per cent of South Africa's land area, is responsible for over 34.8 per cent of South Africa's total GDP (SouthAfrica.info, 2013).

Gauteng is, furthermore, viewed as a prime retail hub in South Africa with rapid development taking place in the retail environment (Gauteng Province: Provincial Treasury, 2012:28).

Since a sampling frame of sampling elements was not available, a two-stage non-probability sampling technique was employed to select the sample for the study. The study population was divided into quotas, based upon gender, and these quotas were subsequently filled by using convenience sampling (Zikmund & Babin, 2010:424). The researchers decided on a sample size of 400 respondents, which falls within the parameters suggested by Malhotra (2010:375).

### *Questionnaire design*

The questionnaire commenced with two screening questions with the aim of identifying qualified prospective respondents, and to avoid those who do not qualify for inclusion in the study (Hair, Celsi, Ortinau & Bush, 2013:194). Only closed-ended questions were used in the questionnaire, as they are easy to answer, lead to lowered levels of interviewer bias, and



increase the ease of tabulation and analysis (Malhotra, Birks & Willis, 2012:464).

The questionnaire was divided into several sections. The first section was dedicated to respondents' demographic information while a second section focused on respondents' online behaviour. The remaining sections of the questionnaire measured the constructs of the study, as presented in Figure 1, using multi-item, unlabelled, Likert-type scale questions, upon which respondents had to indicate their level of agreement, with anchors 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree. The questionnaire was compiled by adopting or adapting measuring scales found to be valid and reliable by other researchers, including Yuksel et al. (2006:22), Wang, Wu, Lin and Wang (2011:351), Grégoire, Tripp and Legoux (2009:30); Maxham and Netemeyer (2002:69), Liñán, Rodríguez and Rueda-Cantuche (2005:7), Young, Hong and Heeseok (2009:121) and Gursoy, McCleary and Lepsito (2003:32).

Apart from the attitude towards complaining construct, respondents had to assess the statements contained in the questionnaire, based on a fictional service failure scenario (Annexure A). The use of scenarios is justifiable, as it decreases any bias from memory lapse and it eliminates problems, which occur during the observation and portrayal of service failure or recovery incidents in the field (Smith et al., 1999:362).

#### **Data collection and pretesting**

The data were collected by means of a survey in the form of self-administered questionnaires. After pre-testing the questionnaire among 30 respondents closely resembling members of the study population, the researchers interviewed the respondents, in order to gain a first-hand understanding of any possible problems experienced with the questionnaire. Based on this feedback, a number of small adjustments were made to the

questionnaire before fielding the final questionnaire among the study population.

Trained fieldworkers screened potential respondents by first asking them the two screening questions, in order to ensure that they met the criteria for taking part in the study (they buy their own clothing; and they have access to the Internet). When a prospective respondent qualified, a fieldworker presented such respondents with a self-administered questionnaire, and collected the questionnaires once they had been completed.

#### **Data analysis**

The SPSS statistical programme (SPSS Inc., version 21, 2012) was used to capture and clean the data collected. The statistical analysis was, furthermore, executed by means of the SAS statistical programme (SAS Inc., version 9.3, 2011). Frequencies and descriptive statistics were calculated for the variables concerned, and overall mean scores were calculated for the constructs of the study once the validity of the measurement scales had been confirmed and internal consistency reliability was assessed.

Structural equation modelling (SEM) was, furthermore, used to determine the hypothesised interrelationships among the constructs of the study (Pallant, 2010:105). Multiple regression and factor-analytical techniques were used to evaluate the prominence of the independent variable, and to determine the overall fit of the model with the collected data (Pallant, 2010:105). The measurement model is assessed by means of several fit indices and a correlation matrix of the variables concerned is furthermore presented (Meyers, Garnst & Guarino, 2006:614). The relationship estimates between the variables in the model were determined by the use of the maximum likelihood estimation procedure (Meyers et al., 2006:614). SEM then evaluates how the predicted

interrelationships between the variables match the interrelationships between the observed variables (Meyers et al., 2006:614).

## RESULTS

### *Sample*

A total sample of 397 respondents was realised, with 47% male and 53% female participants. Concerning respondents' age groups, 31% were between 18 and 26 years, 23% between 27 and 35 years, 20% between 36 and 47 years, 17% between 48 and 66 years, and 9% were older than 66 years. The home language distribution of the respondents was English-speaking (41%), Afrikaans (19%), Sotho (15%), Nguni (13%), Venda/Tsongo (7%), and other groupings (5%).

### *Construct validity*

The validity of the measurement scales (construct validity) measuring the constructs of the study was determined by means of confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs). The CFA conducted on the attitude towards complaining construct uncovered two factors underlying the construct. The first factor (propensity to complain) realised a Measure of Sampling Adequacy (MSA) of 0.68, which is above the cut-off point of 0.5 (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson & Tatham, 2010:93) and commonalities between 0.42 and 0.62. Four statements explain 54.31% of the variance. The results obtained for the second factor (sense of complaining) realised an MSA of 0.74, and commonalities between 0.63 and 0.45. Furthermore, the four statements explain 54.53% of the variance.

The statements used to measure the online complaint intention construct were also subjected to a CFA. An MSA of 0.92 was realised with commonalities between 0.63 and 0.81. Two factors were uncovered explaining 73.56% of the variance. It was decided to eliminate the second factor (containing three items), because the first factor sufficiently measures online complaint intention. The results of the CFA for the remaining statements realised an MSA of 0.91, and commonalities between 0.64 and 0.81. One factor was confirmed that explained 71.12% of the variance.

The results of the CFA of the service failure severity construct realised an MSA of 0.89, and commonalities between 0.33 and 0.66. Only one factor was confirmed explaining 56.67% of the variance. The results of the CFA for the strength of the service recovery expectation construct realised an MSA of 0.82, and commonalities between 0.64 and 0.73. Only one factor was confirmed explaining 69.77% of the variance. The validity of the measurement scales measuring the constructs of the study was, therefore, confirmed – as described above.

### *Reliability*

The reliability of the measurement scales measuring the constructs of the study was assessed by calculating Cronbach's alpha values, in order to uncover the internal consistency reliability of the measurement scales. Table 1 presents the Cronbach's alpha values for the measurement scales for each of the constructs of the study.

**TABLE 1**  
**Cronbach's alpha values and overall mean scores**

Measurement scale/Construct	Cronbach's alpha values	Overall mean score
Propensity to complain (four items)	0.714	4.09
Sense of complaining (four items)	0.717	3.74
Service failure severity (eight items)	0.881	4.37
Strength of service recovery expected (four items)	0.853	4.44
Online complaint intention (seven items)	0.932	3.43

From the above table, it may be concluded that measurement scales measuring the constructs of the study are reliable, since the Cronbach's alpha values for all measurements exceed 0.7 (Hair et al., 2013:118).

From Table 1, it may, furthermore, be observed that the subsequent overall mean scores calculated for the constructs of the study range from 3.43 for online-complaint intention to 4.44 for the strength of service recovery expected on a five-point scale. For all the constructs measured in the study fairly favourable overall mean scores were realised. Only two of the five constructs, namely sense of complaining and online complaint intention realised overall mean scores below 4 on the five-point scale.

## TESTING THE MODEL

Based on the results of the CFA presented in the previous section, hypothesis  $H_1$  was refined to  $H_{1a}$  and  $H_{1b}$ . The reason for this being was to consider the influence of both the dimensions of attitude towards complaining (propensity to complain and sense of complaining), via online complaint intention, on the strength of service recovery expected.  $H_4$  was also refined to  $H_{4a}$  and  $H_{4b}$  in order to consider the direct influence of both the

dimensions of attitude towards complaining (propensity to complain and sense of complaining) on the strength of service recovery expected. The model (Figure 1) was subsequently altered by the inclusion of the two dimensions of attitude towards complaining, and their subsequent hypothesised interrelationships with the other constructs in the model, before it was empirically tested.

The model was tested by means of Structural Equation Modelling (SEM)(Meyers et al., 2006:585,590). The estimates of the relationships among the model's five latent constructs, namely, propensity to complain, sense of complaining, service failure severity, online complaint intention and strength of service recovery expectation were calculated. The fit indices for the measurement model are subsequently presented in Table 2.

From Table 2, it can be observed that the  $\chi^2/df$  value of 3.002 is indicative of an adequate model fit, since the value is well below the suggested cut-off point of 5, as proposed by Wheaton et al. (1977:99). The CFI value of 0.890 is just below the cut-off point and the RMSEA value of 0.071 [0.066 – 0.076], indicates an acceptable overall fit for the model (Hoe, 2008:78).

**TABLE 2**  
**Fit indices**  
**for the measurement model**

Fit indices*	Source for suggested cut-off point	Suggested cut-off point	Fit indices value
Relative Chi-square ratio ( $\chi^2/df$ ) (Chi square/ degrees of freedom)	Wheaton, Muthen, Alwin and Summers (1977:99)	$\leq 5.00$	$\chi^2/df = 942.499/314 = 3.002$
CFI	Hoe (2008:78); Hu and Bentler (1999:27)	$\geq 0.90$	0.890
RMSEA	Hoe (2008:78); McDonald and Ho (2002:72); Meyers et al. (2006:559)	$< 0.05 = \text{good fit}$ $\leq 0.08 = \text{acceptable fit}$ $\leq 0.10 = \text{average fit}$	0.071 [0.066 – 0.076]

\* The fit indices represent the overall fit of the model for this study's data

**TABLE 3**  
**Critical ratios and statistical significance of paths in the measurement model**

Paths	Critical ratio	p-value
Propensity to complain → Online complaint intention (H <sub>1a</sub> )	1.075	0.282
Sense of complaining → Online complaint intention (H <sub>1b</sub> )	-0.678	0.798
Service failure severity → Online complaint intention (H <sub>2</sub> )	1.582	0.114
Propensity to complain → Strength of service recovery expectation (H <sub>4a</sub> )	-0.525	0.595
Sense of complaining → Strength of service recovery expectation (H <sub>4b</sub> )	0.803	0.422
Service failure severity → Strength of service recovery expectation (H <sub>5</sub> )	5.775	<0.05***
Online complaint intention → Strength of service recovery expectation (H <sub>3</sub> )	0.744	0.457

\*\*\* Statistically significant p-value ≤ 0.05

SEM also determines the significance of the paths among the constructs, where a p-value of equal to, or less than, 0.05 is indicative of statistical significance (Ellis & Steyn, 2003:51). Table 3 presents the subsequent results.

The results in Table 3 reveal that only the path between service failure severity and the strength of service recovery expectation is statistically significant. The strength of the significant path between these two variables is indicated by a standardised regression weight ( $\beta$  weight) that ranges between -1 and 1 (Hoe, 2008:79). In this instance a large effect (p-value ≤ 0.05 and  $\beta$  weight > 0.50 = 0.518) is observed. H<sub>5</sub> can therefore not be rejected while the other hypotheses (H<sub>1a</sub>, H<sub>1b</sub>, H<sub>2</sub>, H<sub>3</sub>, H<sub>4a</sub> and H<sub>4b</sub>) can be rejected, since none of the hypothesised paths proved to be statistically significant.

Table 4 presents the correlation coefficients for pairs of variables in order to provide a

numerical summary of the strength and direction of the linear relationships between these variables (Pallant, 2010:123).

From Table 4 it is evident that a statistically significant correlation exists between propensity to complain and sense of complaining (large effect,  $r \geq 0.5$ ); service failure severity and propensity to complain (large effect,  $r \geq 0.5$ ) and service failure severity and sense of complaining (medium effect,  $r \geq 0.3$ ).

Fit indices only measure the average fit of the model to the data, and although the general fit is good, the possibility could exist that the model has a bad fit in confined instances (Blunch, 2011:118). Fit indices should, therefore, be cautiously interpreted, as it could happen that the overall fit to the data may be acceptable, but some relationships in the model may not be supported by the data (Meyers et al., 2006:615).

**TABLE 4**  
**Correlation coefficients of the paths**

Paths	Correlation	p-value
Propensity to complain ↔ Sense of complaining	0.959 <sup>ΔΔ</sup>	<0.05***
Service failure severity ↔ Propensity to complain	0.518 <sup>ΔΔ</sup>	<0.05***
Service failure severity ↔ Sense of complaining	0.464 <sup>Δ</sup>	<0.05***

\*\*\* Statistically significant p-value ≤ 0.05)

Δ Medium effect size in practice ( $|r| = 0.3$ )

ΔΔ Large effect size in practice ( $|r| = 0.5$ )

Therefore, the possibility of omitting a construct increases in order to modify the model for a better fit (Kline, 2011:8). Schreiber, Stage, King, Nora and Barlow (2006:330) also contend that models are often modified by researchers when the parameter estimates are not statistically significant and subsequently to improve the model fit to the data, while caution has to be taken that the modification makes theoretical sense.

It was shown in Table 4 that large significant correlations exist between propensity to complain, sense of complaining, and service failure severity. It was, therefore, decided to retain these for further analysis. Furthermore, there were no significant paths linking online complaint intention with any other construct in the measurement model. Online complaint intention was, therefore, omitted from the structural model.

Table 5 presents the fit indices for both measurement and structural models. Doing so allows researchers to compare the models in order to identify the model that best represents the observed data (Bagozzi & Yi, 2012:15).

It can be seen in Table 5 that the fit indices remain virtually unchanged between the measurement model (with online complaint

intention included) and the structural model (with online complaint intention omitted) albeit a slight improvement in the fit of the structural model. The structural model fit indices represent an acceptable model fit with a CFI value of 0.892 which is slightly higher than that of the measurement model, but still very close to the cut-off point of 0.90 ( $CFI \geq 0.90$ ). The RMSEA value of 0.076 [0.069 – 0.083] is somewhat higher than that of the measurement model (Hoe, 2008:78). The  $\chi^2/df$  value of 3.301 for the structural model indicates adequate model fit with a small increase visible over that of the measurement model.

The statistical significance and the strength of the paths between the variables were, furthermore, investigated. The results (not shown) indicate that only one path among the variables proves statistically significant, namely the path between service failure severity and the strength of service recovery expectation with a  $p$ -value  $< 0.05$ . The significant path, between service failure severity and the strength of service recovery expectation furthermore exhibits a large effect ( $\beta$  weight  $> 0.50 = 0.525$ ) (Suhr, 2006:5), slightly larger effect than the same path in the measurement model ( $\beta$  weight  $> 0.50 = 0.518$ ).

**TABLE 5**  
**A comparison of the fit indices between the measurement and structural models**

Measurement model	Fit indices*	Structural model
$\chi^2/df = 942.499/ 314 = 3.002$	Relative Chi-square ratio ( $\chi^2/df$ ) (Chi square/ degrees of freedom) Suggested cut-off point: $\leq 5.00$	$\chi^2/df = 541.427/ 164 = 3.301$
0.890	CFI Suggested cut-off point: $\geq 0.90$	0.892
0.071 [0.066 – 0.076]	RMSEA Suggested cut-off point: $\leq 0.10$	0.076 [0.069 – 0.083]

**TABLE 6**  
**Correlation coefficients of the paths of the structural model**

Paths	Correlation	p-value
Propensity to complain ↔ Sense of complaining	0.959 <sup>ΔΔ</sup>	<0.05 <sup>***</sup>
Service failure severity ↔ Propensity to complain	0.518 <sup>ΔΔ</sup>	<0.05 <sup>***</sup>
Service failure severity ↔ Sense of complaining	0.464 <sup>Δ</sup>	<0.05 <sup>***</sup>

\*\*\* Statistically significant p-value  $\leq 0.05$

<sup>Δ</sup> Medium effect size in practice ( $|r| = 0.3$ )

<sup>ΔΔ</sup> Large effect size in practice ( $|r| = 0.5$ )

Table 6 presents the correlation coefficients for pairs of variables considered in the structural model, indicating the strength and direction of the linear relationship between these variables (Pallant, 2010:123).

From Table 6 it is evident that a statistically significant correlation exists between 'propensity to complain' and 'sense of complaining' (large effect,  $r \geq 0.5$ ); service failure severity and propensity to complain (large effect,  $r \geq 0.5$ ) and service failure severity and sense of complaining (medium effect,  $r \geq 0.3$ ) for the structural model. Based on these findings, it is concluded that the structural model illustrates an acceptable fit to the data, with at least one path significantly supported by the data obtained.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the results it can be seen that the respondents participating in this study have a relatively favourable attitude towards complaining, as seen from the overall mean scores of the constructs propensity to complain and sense of complaining. It could, therefore, be argued that clothing retail customers in general are very likely to seek redress after the occurrence of a service failure. It is thus important that clothing retailers ensure that all their complaint channels are managed effectively, in order to maintain their customers' positive attitude towards complaining.

Although online complaining is a convenient and beneficial complaint method (Holloway & Beatty, 2003:94), the literature suggests that customers prefer face-to-face complaint channels (Walker et al., 2002:103) and they typically refrain from using online complaint channels (Robertson, 2012:149), as they would be more likely to gain an instant solution to their problem in a face-to-face situation (Zaugg, 2006:5). Customers' unfavourable idea of technology-based complaining could also be ascribed to the low level of human interaction within an online environment (Holloway & Beatty, 2003:92).

Various authors, therefore, agree that online complaining will not replace traditional complaint channels, and that online complaining should rather serve as a complementary complaint channel (Tyrrell & Woods, 2004:189; Van Dijk, Minocha & Laing, 2007:16; Zaugg, 2008:1). The findings from this study are aligned with these views, since the intention to complain online construct realised the lowest overall mean score of all the constructs measured in the study considering the particular scenario presented to respondents.

It is thus recommended that clothing retailers should conduct in-depth research to gain a better understanding of customers' intention formation, specifically regarding online complaint intention. It is recommended that clothing retailers gauge clothing retail

customers' technology readiness and skills when planning online complaint channels. This would assist in determining customers' readiness to adopt technology in the clothing retail context.

The empirical results obtained from testing the measurement model proposed for the study indicate that the observed variables of this study, namely attitude towards complaining (propensity to complain and sense of complaining), service failure severity, online complaint intention and strength of service recovery expectation, effectively serve as multiple indicators of a smaller set of latent variables (constructs). The empirical results, furthermore, dictated that online complaint intention be removed from the model due to the lack of statistical significance and adequate path strength of paths linking this construct with other constructs, as hypothesised and presented in the measurement model. This finding, therefore, supports the literature suggesting that customers still refrain from using an online complaint channel – regardless of the benefits that it offers (Robertson, 2012:149; Zaugg, 2006:5).

If clothing retailers want to promote the online complaint channel among their customers, several strategies could be implemented. Clothing retailers should provide easy and accessible complaint links on their websites' home pages. They should communicate the benefits of online complaining by means of in-store advertising, such as fliers and posters to their customers.

Clothing retailers should also avoid complex procedures during the online complaint process. They should, furthermore, reply promptly to online complaints, confirm via e-mail that the complaint has been received, and that feedback can be expected within a particular time frame. Query numbers could

also be allocated to different complaints, in order to track the complaint, when needed.

Clothing retailers should also ensure that online complaining is a fast and simple procedure. They should provide a personal touch to the experience by introducing the complaint manager, the customer-care team, and the relevant contact information to customers on their website. The online complaint channel could be positioned as being more personal, thereby motivating customers to rather choose the online channel.

The results from this study, furthermore, indicate that the paths linking propensity to complain and the sense of complaining, with strength of service recovery expectation, also failed to present statistical significance and adequate path strength. However, the path linking service failure severity and the strength of service recovery expectation is significant and service failure severity has a positive influence (large effect) on the strength of service recovery expectation. This finding is aligned with the literature indicating that different service recovery levels should be applied to different service failure severity encounters (Tyrrell & Woods, 2004:188).

Finally, it is recommended that clothing retailers should provide the appropriate strength of service recovery for particular levels of service failure severity in order to reinforce and maintain customers' positive attitude towards complaining. Clothing retailers should also focus on developing and refining their service offerings, so as to enhance customers' service experiences, and decrease the service failure severity levels. Clothing retailers can, furthermore, improve customers' service experience by ensuring that service employees are friendly, courteous and helpful at all times. In addition, clothing retailers should ensure services are delivered

as promised – fast, effectively, and in a caring manner.

## LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Limited research has been undertaken to measure online complaint intention in the retail clothing industry. Therefore, the literature presented in this article was largely drawn from research that focused on industries other than the retail clothing industry. The study involved a relatively small sample of the study population located in the Johannesburg metropolitan area of South Africa. The representativeness of the sample could be improved in the future, by including respondents from other metropolitan areas in South Africa. The research could similarly be extended to include clothing retail customers in other countries.

Future research could include requesting specific clothing retailers to participate in a research project. Such an endeavour would enable researchers to use the clothing retailer's customer database as a sampling frame, to draw a more representative probability sample from the customer database, and to exercise more control in the data-collection process.

Another dimension that could be added to the research is an examination of clothing retail customers' technology readiness and skills by using the Parasuraman' Technology Readiness Index (TLI) (Parasuraman, 2000). The reason for this is that clothing retail customers who exhibit higher levels of technology readiness and skills could perhaps be more willing to complain online than those who are less technologically inclined. The model, as proposed in this study, could possibly also realise a better fit, where clothing retail customers with high levels of technology readiness and skills are concerned.

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## ANNEXURE A

### Fictional service failure scenario

When buying clothing with your bank card at a well-known clothing retailer, you learn that the cashier is unable to process the transaction with your card. The cashier calls her supervisor and the fact that your card has been declined is discussed between the two of them for all queuing behind you to hear. You are referred to customer services without any explanation.

After waiting in the queue for quite a while at the customer services desk, the employee motions you to come to the desk and mumbles: "What is the problem?" Before you are able to explain your problem, the employee rudely demands to see your identification and bank card. Whilst looking very irritated, he stands up from his desk and disappears for a while. After a couple of minutes, he returns and rudely declares that he cannot rectify your problem, and advises you to contact your bank, without providing any further explanation.