

**Skills and Knowledge for Merchandising Professionals:  
The Case of the South African Apparel Retail Industry**

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## **Abstract**

This study explored skills and knowledge required for merchandising professionals to fulfill their roles and perform their responsibilities in the South African apparel retail industry. The apparel merchandising competency (AMC) framework was used as a theoretical foundation in this research. A phenomenological approach was followed to explore the perspective of professionals employed by South African retail companies. Semistructured, face-to-face, in-depth individual interviews were conducted with 16 merchandisers who had between 2 and 20 years of experience in the apparel industry. Atlas.ti software was used for data organization and analyses. Following the AMC framework, four topical areas emerged: (a) soft skills, (b) hard skills, (c) explicit knowledge, and (d) tacit knowledge. To fulfill their roles and perform their responsibilities, 8 soft skills, 7 hard skills, 10 explicit knowledge types, and 1 tacit knowledge type were identified as essential. Thick description of the findings using participant quotes and a graphical representation is presented.

## **Keywords**

merchandising, soft skills, hard skills, explicit knowledge, tacit knowledge, South Africa

The South African apparel retail sector employs approximately 230,000 people, almost 57% of the total textile, apparel, and footwear industry workforce (Barnes, 2018). In 2018, it was the best performing retail sector in the country (Koigi, 2018). Despite the economic power of the South African apparel retail industry, major gaps in workers' skills and knowledge (S&K) were identified by the Wholesale and Retail Sector Education and Training Authority (2016). The need for skilled merchandising professionals has been intensifying since the late 2000s due to fast internationalization of the apparel retail landscape. Global apparel retailers (e.g., Cotton On, H&M, Zara, Gap, TopShop) extended their operations into the market, and likewise, South African retailers expanded into

international markets (Hugo et al., 2016). To remain competitive, South African retailers had to strengthen their participation in the global supply chain and develop more effective and efficient operations (Wholesale and Retail Sector Education and Training Authority, 2016).

Within the merchandising function, various positions are directly responsible for developing, buying, planning, sourcing, and distributing apparel products that will satisfy a specific target market's needs and wants, as well as optimize the profitability of the company (Varley, 2014). Therefore, merchandising professionals (i.e., buyers, planners, product developers, and sourcing personnel) require a wide range of skills and knowledge to perform a variety of responsibilities (Howse et al., 2000). Competent merchandisers are the key for retailer success. Recent scholars investigating merchandising S&K have done so in the context of developed economies, like the United States (Frazier & Cheek, 2016; Muhammad & Ha-Brookshire, 2011). While some S&K identified in these studies are likely to be applicable across borders, it is not known if merchandising professionals in emerging economies, such as South Africa, might be employing somewhat different S&K.

The purpose of this study was to explore and describe S&K needed for merchandising professionals in the South African apparel retail industry. Through the outcomes of this study, we hope to advance our understanding of what merchandising S&K are required in a developing economy and how these S&K compare to those identified in extant research. Additionally, we contribute to the limited research focused on what S&K competent merchandisers need to succeed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Insights into why these S&K are essential for merchandising professionals operating in the globalized industry could help educators to better equip and prepare graduates to be successful across local and global apparel retail markets.

## Literature Review

### Skills for Merchandising Professionals

To understand industry requirements for college graduates, scholars distinguish between soft and hard skills (Jackson, 2013). Soft skills consist of: (a) interpersonal (people-related) skills that reflect how well we interact with others; and (b) “intangible, nontechnical, personality-specific skills” that describe personal traits (Robles, 2012, p. 457). Robles (2012) surveyed business executives and found 10 distinct soft skills important for success in the workplace: communication, courtesy, flexibility, integrity, interpersonal skills, positive attitude, professionalism, responsibility, teamwork, and work ethic. In surveying retail managers, Frazier and Cheek (2016) reported six comparable soft skills as essential for entry-level merchandising positions: teamwork, professional behavior, communication (verbal and writing), leadership, self-management, and recognizing ethical issues. Javidan et al. (2010) concluded that, in a global business, diplomacy was an essential skill for professionals. Having good organizational skills, such as multitasking and time management, was found to be required for sourcing professionals (Muhammad & Ha-Brookshire, 2011).

Hard skills encompass technical skills (e.g., numeracy and use of technology) and thinking/conceptual skills that relate to higher-order thinking (e.g., critical thinking and problem-solving) (Jackson, 2013; Robles, 2012). Technical skills entail the mastery of procedures and/or techniques to perform tasks. Among technical skills identified as important for merchandisers were mathematical skills (Howse et al., 2000) and being proficient in technologies that support decision-making (e.g., product lifecycle management software) (Fiorito et al., 2010). Thinking/conceptual skills found to be vital for apparel professionals included problem-solving, decision-making, strategic thinking, critical thinking, and creativity (Danskin et al., 2005). Additionally, Power (2012) identified metacognition (i.e., lifelong learning and self-awareness) as important for professionals in the apparel industry.

## **Knowledge for Merchandising Professionals**

Knowledge consists of two dimensions: explicit and tacit (Nonaka et al., 2000).

Explicit knowledge refers to what is learned through formal studies in a discipline, whereas tacit knowledge includes what is gained through experiences, by either observing or participating in an activity directly. Scholars stress the importance of general apparel subject knowledge (e.g., textile science, construction methods, aesthetics, and consumer behavior) for merchandising professionals (Frazier & Cheek, 2016; Howse et al., 2000). Further, the merchandising function necessitates knowledge in business, sourcing, and marketplace awareness (Danskin et al., 2005; Muhammad & Ha-Brookshire, 2011).

Tacit knowledge entails personal experiences from working in the industry (e.g., internship and on-the-job training). Prior experience in the industry was found to be very important for merchandising professionals (Muhammad & Ha-Brookshire, 2011). Even though explicit knowledge (learned in the classroom) provides a sound foundation for college graduates, tacit knowledge is critical as it allows an almost instinctive and automatic way of functioning in the industry when making business-related decisions (Nonaka et al., 2000).

## **Apparel Merchandising Competency Framework**

Jacobs and Karpova's (2019) apparel merchandising competency (AMC) framework was utilized as a theoretical foundation in this study. The AMC framework was developed from content analysis of extant literature focused on skills and knowledge needed for merchandising graduates. It was based on Pellegrino and Hilton's (2012) competency domain framework. The AMC framework classifies and organizes 140 individual merchandising skills and knowledge into:

1. Four main *constructs*: soft skills, hard skills, explicit knowledge, and tacit knowledge.

2. Seven *categories* within the four constructs: (a) interpersonal and intrapersonal (soft skills); (b) technical and thinking/conceptual (hard skills); (c) general apparel and merchandising (explicit knowledge); (d) professional experience (tacit knowledge).
3. 23 distinct skills and 16 knowledge *types* within the respective categories.

For example, within the soft skill *construct* and interpersonal *category*, seven skill *types* (communication, teamwork, courtesy, professionalism, social, leadership, and diplomacy) were identified, with 28 respective individual S&K. The AMC framework is discipline-specific and provides a comprehensive overview of how each skill and knowledge construct, category, and type contribute to developing competent merchandising professionals. With this theoretical framework, we aim to explore and describe S&K essential for merchandising professionals in the South African apparel retail industry.

## **Method**

### **Research Design and Data Collection**

A phenomenological approach was employed to explore S&K required for apparel merchandising professionals. This approach provided a realistic account of the world individuals “live and work” in (Creswell, 2013, p. 24). After Institutional Review Board approval, the data were collected (December 2017-January 2018) through semi-structured, face-to-face, in-depth individual interviews. Participants were asked to describe their retail employment history, current position, the tasks they were responsible for, daily experiences involved in completing these tasks, and skills and knowledge utilized in the process.

Participants’ descriptive discussion during the individual interviews provided an insider perspective that was true and relevant to merchandisers’ day-to-day experiences.

Semi-structured interviewing allowed participants time and opportunity to reflect on their experiences. An interview protocol ensured systematic data collection (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). For phenomenological studies, a purposive sample of participants with

experience of the situation is recommended (Creswell, 2013). Two conditions directed the purposive sampling: sufficiency and data saturation. Sufficiency ensured that an adequate number of apparel merchandising professionals was included in the study to “reflect the range of participants and sites that make up the target population” (Greeff, 2011, p. 350). Professionals in various merchandising positions, working for diverse types of companies in different regions of South Africa, were recruited to ensure sufficiency. Data collection was completed once data saturation occurred and no new information emerged from interviews.

Participants were recruited with an invitation email, which explained the purpose of the study. Once merchandising professionals agreed to participate, a suitable date and time for the individual interview was scheduled. Interviews lasted between 40 to 70 minutes and were digitally audio-recorded with the permission of the participants. Participants each received a \$15.00 gift card as a token of appreciation for their time.

### **Description of Participants**

Sixteen merchandising professionals employed in the South African apparel retail industry participated in the study (Table 1). Pseudonyms were used to protect participant identity and company names were omitted from the interview transcripts. All participants were female between 27 and 45 years old, with an average age of 34.3 years. Eleven women had apparel-related bachelor’s degrees, four had a Master’s degree, and one had a high school diploma. Participants were employed at department and specialty retailers, discount retailers, a fast fashion retailer, and sourcing companies working for major retailers in South Africa. Companies were dispersed throughout the three regions: Western Cape, Kwa-Zulu-Natal, and Gauteng. Participants’ current positions were: buyer (4), merchandising/buying manager (4), planner (2), product developer (4), and sourcing coordinator (2). Participant experience in the industry ranged between two and 20 years, with an average of 11.8 years.

**Table 1***Description of Participants*

Pseudonym	Degree and academic major	Type of retailer	Region	Position or job title	Total years in retail
Anke	BS Clothing Management	Discount retailer	Western Cape	Buyer	12
Bea	BS Clothing Retail Management	Discount retailer	Western Cape	Senior buyer	19
Betty	BA Fashion Design	Specialty retailer	Kwa-Zulu Natal	Product developer	10
Carie	BA Fashion Design	Specialty retailer	Western Cape	Product developer	6
Claire	BA Fashion and Textiles	Sourcing company	Kwa-Zulu Natal	Sourcing coordinator	2
Danni	BA Fashion Design	National brand	Gauteng	Product developer	20
Denise	MS Clothing Management	Specialty retailer	Kwa-Zulu Natal	Planner	7
Ilse	BA Clothing and Textiles	Specialty retailer	Western Cape	Merchandising manager	12
Janine	BA Fashion Design and Technology	Specialty retailer	Western Cape	Product developer	19
Landi	MS Clothing Management	International brand	Gauteng	Buying manager	13
Liesel	MS Consumer Science	Department store	Western Cape	Buying manager	18
Lisa	No formal education	International brand	Gauteng	Merchandising manager	17
Mariette	BS Consumer Science	Specialty retailer	Kwa-Zulu Natal	Buyer	10
Sonja	BS Clothing Retail Management	Fast fashion retailer	Western Cape	Senior buyer	13
Yanna	BA Fashion	International brand	Gauteng	Planner	4
Zandile	BA Commercial Fashion	Sourcing company	Gauteng	Sourcing coordinator	7

**Data Analysis**

Interviews were transcribed verbatim by one of the authors. Atlas.ti software was used for the analyses. Initial open coding entailed bracketing chunks of text, segments of sentences, or paragraphs and allocating a code (Creswell, 2013). The AMC framework provided deduced (a priori) codes to classify the initial codes for further analyses. Codes that emerged through the open-coding process were further defined to clearly describe emerging categories. Next, the categories were clustered into “meaning units” (Creswell, 2013, p. 193), or common themes. Finally, based on the AMC framework, the themes were merged into four topical areas. The first topical area, *Soft Skills*, described people skills and personal traits and consisted of two themes: *Interpersonal Skills* and *Intrapersonal Skills*. The second topical area, *Hard Skills*, described technical abilities and thinking-related skills; two themes



emerged: *Technical Skills* and *Thinking/Conceptual Skills*. The third topical area, *Explicit Knowledge*, defined book-based knowledge and consisted of two themes: *General Apparel Knowledge* and *Merchandising Knowledge*. The last topical area, *Tacit Knowledge*, captured knowledge obtained through professional experience. Member checks were performed to ensure credibility and trustworthiness of the findings (Creswell, 2013). Three participants reviewed and confirmed that the research findings accurately reflected their experiences.

## **Findings**

### **Soft Skills: People Skills and Personal Traits**

#### ***Interpersonal Skills: People-Related***

Interpersonal skills described essential people-related skills: (a) communication, (b) diplomacy, (c) teamwork, and (d) leadership. These skills are vital for merchandisers, as they rely on daily interaction with multiple people within and outside the company to carry out their tasks.

**Communication Nuances.** All participants emphasized communication within and outside the company as a critical skill necessary to perform their daily responsibilities. The ability to relay information accurately when briefing suppliers was vital for seasonal success and ensured delivery of the right product at the right time: “making sure that it comes through in the right way” (Carien). Communication was especially important when working with suppliers from different countries and speaking different languages:

The wrong message can be sent through. Especially now, working with the rest of the world, the language barrier and things like that. It forms the basis of your everyday job, of what you do. If you don’t communicate, like I said, things get lost. (Anke)

Importance of both written and verbal communication was stressed: “write proper emails that are to the point” (Zandile) and “verbally express yourself and keep an open line of communication with all the departments” (Marianne). Presentation skill was also noted as

essential to “sell” and “justify” ideas: “As a buyer, you stand in front of an auditorium all the time and argue your case and present your range” (Ilse). Listening skills were especially important for product developers because they had to pay attention to and interpret buyers’ requests: “It is to *really* try and understand what the team needs from you and how you can *really* service them, focus on what they need” (Carien).

**“Dealing with Different People.”** Diplomacy described how merchandisers managed relations with different stakeholders. Most participants conceded that negotiation was a vital skill, as every aspect of the merchandising process (e.g., timelines, delivery, costs) had to be negotiated and necessitated a mutual understanding between all parties. At the same time, they needed to “get buy-in” or convince management about the feasibility of proposed plans:

Persuasion and negotiation, and the art of seduction [laughs]. I have to charm a lot of people. I don’t mean that in an unauthentic way but building rapport with people very quickly, because you work with so many key players and you need something from each of them. (Sonja)

To form “strategic partnerships” across the supply chain, relationship building and being respectful were noted as invaluable diplomatic skills. Professionals had to deal with people from all “walks of life,” with different demographic backgrounds and managerial levels. Therefore, being sensitive to the diversity within the retail environment but also across the global supply chain was essential:

The ability to embrace diverse cultures. In South Africa, in particular, but also sitting across [from] someone from Chinese descent or someone who comes from a different background. You wouldn’t be able to partner if you can’t think how that person is. (Lisa)

**“Not a One-Man Show.”** Teamwork was defined as an encompassing skill that related to collaboration, trusting teammates, and providing support. There was agreement

among all participants that the merchandising function heavily relied on a strong collaborative effort to execute company objectives. Ilse emphasized:

You have to be a team player and it is difficult when you butt heads, or you have difficult people on your team. Your product is not the only product in the store. You have to work with all the other buyers and be in line with the company trend, so we all are moving towards the same goal.

Trusting your team to do what is expected was acknowledged as a necessary skill for merchandisers to achieve goals in a timely manner. Zandile pointed out, “Your team, the people that you work with, is very important. You have to trust them. It is such a fast-paced environment; you can’t ask people 50,000 times to do one thing.” Participants agreed that “your team is your support network” (Carien), and caring and helpful teammates make it easier to stay positive in the extremely pressurized retail environment. Denise explained how informal interaction with her team helps her cope with the high demands of the job: “It’s actually the people you work with: you support each other. We have a WhatsApp group, my team. Sometimes it’s just about sharing silly jokes or gossiping about something.”

**“Push Them Forward.”** The leadership skill emerged from participant descriptions of the ability to motivate and mentor people, identify their strengths and weaknesses, and give recognition for achievements. Motivating others and mentoring them by sharing your expertise were noted as essential skills: “You can shine brighter when your staff are doing the right thing. And for them to do the right thing, you got to share yourself, help them, and push them forward” (Danni). Participants believed that leadership entails identifying people’s strengths and weaknesses to ensure that everyone’s talents and potential are utilized and developed. Landi summarized all the important aspects of leadership:

I want to give them [my team] lots of recognition, and I want to spend lots of time training if I notice what they need. It is all about coaching, knowing people’s

strengths and weaknesses, when to push them, when to not push them, when to give them support, when to leave them to do their thing. It is all leadership.

### ***Intrapersonal Skills: Personality-Related***

Intrapersonal skills emerged from participant descriptions of the desirable personal qualities or character traits deemed necessary for merchandisers: (a) flexibility, (b) administrative, (c) positive attitude, and (d) self-management.

**“Adapting to Change.”** Flexibility emerged from participant discussions of being open-minded, adaptable, and thick-skinned. Without exception, professionals asserted that in the retail industry, “change is the only constant” (Lisa). To thrive, merchandisers must be adaptable and open-minded in the ever-evolving industry: “There is more than one way of doing things” (Bea). Carien explained how embracing new ideas contributes to a better result:

I think with the fast-moving industry, like ours, you can’t be stuck on one idea and that’s how it’s going to be through the whole product lifecycle. If you are going to do that, by the time your product comes out, it might be stale. You can flex a little bit this way and flex a little bit that way. And if changes come at you, try to embrace them and see how they can impact the product in a good way, and even your team.

Participants stressed that successful merchandisers are “thick-skinned.” They must be able to “take it [feedback] in a positive way and improve” (Janine) and “brush things off” (Marianne). Bea explained, “A thick skin [laughs]. That I think is the most important thing: don’t take things too personally. I’ve seen a lot of people fail because they are taking things personally.”

**“Cut Yourself into 50 Pieces.”** Administrative skills such as time management, being organized, multitasking, and prioritizing were discussed by professionals as indispensable. Participants remarked that an efficient and effective merchandiser “is somebody who reaches their deadlines” (Landi) and “make[s] the most of their time” (Bea). Because retail is result- and deadline-driven, “you must have some sort of systematic

approach” (Anke) and structure various activities to “pull all the pieces together” (Mariette). Because merchandisers handle many tasks at once, they have to be “be super organized” and multitask: “You have to manage so many different things that are at so many stages of the same process. You really have to keep your head together and be organized and be able to multitask” (Liesel). Merchandisers must be able to prioritize tasks, because they balance a magnitude of responsibilities and work with many deadlines across different time zones:

Sometimes I will work from home up until 9 o’clock to deal with our Chinese suppliers. It helps to prioritize your time. In the mornings, attend to the most important parts and kind of let the rest of the day just be for the chaos. (Zandile)

**“Guys, We Can Do This!”** Positive attitude emerged from participant discussion of the significance of personal traits such as being optimistic, confident, passionate, and driven. Professionals pointed out that working in the retail industry can be hard, and being optimistic helps you cope with the pressure: “You got to be positive. You have to have that energy about yourself” (Danni). Confidence was another important trait: “Just honestly believing you are right. Having confidence in what you are saying but then also having your facts together” (Mariette). Participants highlighted that being passionate about their jobs motivated them to persist in a merchandising career: “You can’t do this job if you don’t like it. Because this job is very demanding, and if you don’t absolutely love what you do, then you are going to absolutely hate it!” (Sonja). It was emphasized that in a merchandising position one must have the drive to succeed in a pressurized environment and have “direction and purpose” (Landi). Yanna explained why these personal traits are needed in merchandising positions:

We are always set against budgets. We are always set against sales targets. We always want to grow, grow, grow the business. You have to be very determined, very driven. Have a passion for it. It can get really crazy and stressful, but just remember why you are doing it.

**“Having True Grit.”** Self-management evolved as participants articulated personal traits related to the ability to cope with the strains and demands of their jobs: hard-working, work-life balance, stress tolerance, and perseverance. Participants emphasized that their jobs demanded long hours and concerted effort. The ability to maintain a work-life balance to absorb all the pressure was essential, as Claire noted: “Hard work with balance will make people rise to the top. There are too many people burning out. I think, to be able to put in the hours but think long-term.” To succeed in this extremely competitive environment, merchandisers must be able to tolerate stress and persevere. Professionals discussed the ability to withstand “harsh conditions” (e.g., working overtime, sleep deprivation, international travels, and negativity). Liezel summarized these views: “You have to have the right sort of temperament to handle the stress. The retailer that I am with is one of the best, so only the really tough ones survive here.”

### **Hard Skills: Technical Skills and Thinking/Conceptual Skills**

#### ***Technical Skills: Numbers and Technology***

This theme described participant views on the proficiency in math and technology needed for merchandising positions.

**“You Have to Be Good at Numbers.”** Math-related skills were defined as proficiencies to understand “business workings” such as costing, pricing, and budgeting. All professionals agreed that math-related skills were absolutely essential for merchandisers. For budgeting, it was vital to calculate margins, mark-ups, and revenues for a given period: “You need to know how to calculate initial mark-up, how to calculate gross margin, how to calculate the differences, the impact on your business, and how to plot it” (Landi). Zandile explained further: “You have to be good at numbers. Some people don’t realize that you need to know your margins, you need to know if this product is worth giving it a shot or not.”

Merchandisers were also responsible for calculating volumes, shipping costs, tariffs,

commissions (the middle man's cut), and final product prices. Therefore, understanding how currency exchange rate impacts your budgeting was highlighted by participants:

An example is the sheer volatility of the rand [South African currency]. You would present something at a certain price and those price points are signed off. Then, when the rand drops, your margins are out, and your costings are too high. (Liesel)

**“It's So Technology-Driven.”** Technology proficiency emerged from merchandisers' heavy reliance on computers to perform their daily tasks: “Everything is computerized” (Betty). All professionals depended on information technology to collect data from online databases for trend, sale, or product analysis: “The internet is key. We get our ideas there” (Danni). Similarly, Anke pointed out, “We trade in more countries. We need to pull the information from these countries.” Proper information management skills were critical to make projections and inform decisions, as well as distribute information to all involved parties throughout the global supply chain. Without exception, participants stressed the importance of having software skills, specifically proficiency in Microsoft Office (e.g., Excel, PowerPoint, Word) to create and use spreadsheets, presentations, etc.: “Excel is important. Word and PowerPoint are very important. You really do need good computer skills” (Sonja). Even product developers used Excel to do fit formulas, product specifications, and grading, as Janine explained: “You use Microsoft Excel. On the specs, we work with formulas. If you have your grading on the system punched in, then when you get a new fit, you use the same grading.” The capability to use product lifecycle management (PLM) software was critical for merchandising positions to track product development and manufacturing: “You need to understand the systems the company offers, like purchase order system, your online system where you brief suppliers, and log all your fittings and comments” (Liesel). Being skilled in CAD software (e.g., Adobe Illustrator, Photoshop, Corel Draw) was especially important for

product developers to create and present product ideas: “If I didn’t learn CAD, I wouldn’t be able to do it [my job]. CAD is key” (Danni).

***Thinking/Conceptual Skills: Making Sense***

Thinking/conceptual skills related to cognitive or higher-order thinking skills needed to make complex business decisions: (a) problem-solving and decision-making, (b) critical thinking, (c) innovation, (d) metacognition, and (e) strategic thinking. These skills were essential for merchandisers to interpret a situation and come up with many “right” answers.

**“There’re Problems Every Day.”** Problem-solving and decision-making skills described abilities to recognize problems, find multiple solutions, and make quick decisions. Participants were constantly in the mode of acknowledging problems and estimating the magnitude thereof: “Sometimes a problem isn’t as big as people make it out to be. OK, we have a problem, let’s look at it. OK, it’s only 200K, it’s not 200 million rand. You quantify it” (Denise). They saw themselves as “professional problem-solvers” (Zandile) as it was part and parcel of their daily tasks: “You actually problem-solve more than you do anything else” (Claire). Claire further emphasized the importance of developing multiple solutions to every problem: “To be able to step back from a situation and to think of multiple options. I can’t tell you how many times a day that’s all we do. Just trying to think of options.” Participants repeatedly referred to the ability to make timely decisions, without hesitation, “make decisions very quickly” (Ilse) and “be on the ball and handle things quickly” (Danni). For them, being able to react to new dynamics in the global industry ensured that the company could capitalize on opportunities and minimize losses. Sonja remarked, “The pie in South Africa is only this big, and we are all fighting for our piece of the pie. For me, it is that reactivity [snapping her fingers] to the market is the biggest skill I’ve learned.”

**“Ask “Why” Questions.”** Critical thinking described the ability to evaluate and interpret information in a systematic way. Participants pointed out that having analytical



skills were essential, as they are involved in examining and scrutinizing loads of information daily: “I think analyzing is really a big part of what we do, what figures or indices or what specific key measures you need to look at” (Yanna). For example, to explain overall performance of a product or a store, “tapping into analytical thinking” (Liesel) is a vital ability. The importance of analyzing and interpreting information to improve products, processes, or sales was highlighted by Bea:

If something doesn’t work, you need to be able to ask “why” every time, until you don’t have an answer anymore. So, why is the product not working? Because of the color. Why? They don’t like the shade. Why else? Maybe the size is a problem.

**“Think Differently.”** Innovation emerged from participant discussion of creative thinking and resourcefulness. Professionals believed that creativity was necessary for merchandisers: “You need a creative individual” (Lisa). Creativity was described as coming up with “newness” and fresh, “great ideas” (Liesel). Zandile shared a common perspective on creativity: “You have to be creative to be able to do product development. You have to be able to think outside the box.” Resourcefulness was discussed as a component of being innovative. Claire explained that resourcefulness is about getting inventive or finding unique ways to fix problems: “There is a hundred ways you rework your garments to try and get your target [price] down.”

**“We Are Constantly Learning.”** Metacognition represented curiosity, lifelong learning, and self-awareness. Participants believed that to grow in the industry, a “curious mindset” and “never stop learning” attitude were prerequisites. Being inquisitive and engaged in lifelong learning were identified as essential traits to keep up with the dynamic industry: “You got to evolve. Whatever new is happening in the market, make yourself available to learn. It doesn’t matter where you are in your life” (Danni). The importance of self-awareness, having a clear perception of your thoughts and emotions, allowed professionals to

realize their strengths and weaknesses and grow further. Sonja asserted, “Self-awareness is a skill that not many people have. We don’t always want to learn how to be self-aware but, unfortunately, you don’t grow if you don’t spend the time doing introspection.”

**“What Is Still to Come.”** Strategic thinking emerged from descriptions of future thinking, planning, and being proactive. Participants pointed out that to stay ahead in the South African retail industry, they constantly had to think of “what the next big thing will be” (Liesel). Bea noted, “With retail evolving and the way it is at the moment, it is an ideal opportunity. The retailers that’re reinventing themselves at the moment, they are the ones that are getting ahead.” To achieve company goals, professionals had to plan well in advance. Betty emphasized the importance of planning to ensure timely development and delivery of products: “You’ve got to think ahead and be able to plan ahead. Because if I am not thinking about the future my deliveries are never going to get here.” Being proactive is vital for merchandisers. According to their perspective, it was better to anticipate situations and act than wait for them to transpire: “If I see that my drop in April is really not selling, I’ve got to pre-empt the fact that they are probably not going to restyle my May and June. So, then I put a hold on my production” (Claire).

### **Explicit Knowledge: Book-Based Comprehension**

#### ***General Apparel Knowledge***

General apparel knowledge perceived as important for merchandisers related to three categories: (a) textiles, (b) forecasting, and (c) manufacturing.

**“Know Your Fabrications.”** Participants strongly argued the importance of sound textiles knowledge, including types of fibers, yarns, and dyes; textile testing; and properties, structures, and performance of fabrics: “It’s not just a matter of textiles science, it is a matter of understanding the entire technology process. It’s standard in the industry to do light fastness, color fastness, griming, roping—all those tests” (Liesel). In addition, understanding

the suitability of different fabrics for particular print applications, finishes, and products was imperative. Product developers emphasized understanding the care and maintenance of fabrics and products made of these fabrics:

The acid wash or a normal basic single stone wash, or an enzyme wash—you have different reactions to that one denim fabric. It won't last too long if you bleach wash something. Because you are destroying the fibers of the fabric. (Danni)

**Forecasting.** Understanding how to recognize and predict trends in fashion and consumer markets was critical for a company's success. Merchandisers should be able to spot, analyze, and interpret a trend for a target market: "It is adapting the latest trends and the latest ideas for your market and for your actual customer" (Bea). Participants conceded merchandisers have to understand their consumers: "When you step into a company, you have to research the customer. Who is the customer?" (Danni). As a merchandiser, being knowledgeable about how fashion trends fit with the taste and preference of South Africa's diverse consumer markets was essential: "We had a men's woven shirt. So, we thought, well, let's try it, the U.S. is doing it. It tanked out completely. We were like, South African guy, no voile!" (Landi)

**"How Things Are Made."** Manufacturing describes knowledge of production processes, garment construction techniques, basic patternmaking, and quality assurance. All participants stressed the importance of understanding the entire apparel manufacturing process: how factories function, machinery used, types of production lines and procedures, and how construction techniques can be adjusted to lower product cost. Claire explained how sound manufacturing knowledge helped her to achieve the desired product cost: "I need to understand the cost of every procedure. Can I eliminate a procedure? My knowledge on construction, on what is a slower process or what is a faster process—all these things are so vital." Participants discussed basic patternmaking knowledge needed to assess garment fit

and fix problems. For Bea, understanding how 2D patterns translate into 3D garments was critical to perform her job: “You need to know what a 3D product is going to look like and how to go from 2D to 3D.” Product developers and buyers agreed that understanding “quality standards” was required to approve samples: “We compare measurements to the specs we produce on the quality assurance side. From there, we would either approve it or not approve it [sample]” (Betty).

### ***Merchandising Knowledge***

Seven categories described merchandising-specific knowledge that was essential for merchandisers: (a) sourcing, (b) marketplace awareness, (c) business, (d) product development, (e) retail operations, (f) assortment management, and (g) marketing.

**“Where to Get Your Product.”** Sourcing emerged from the knowledge related to supply chain management, trade policies and regulations, logistics, and establishing supplier base. Participants conceded that company success depends on how well versed a merchandiser is in supply chain management and, specifically, how each stage contributes to the final product: “I know every single phase that a product goes through: from when it is still a plant growing, being cotton, to where it gets sold. So, to know every single step, and also how to execute it” (Landi). Because most apparel in the South African market is imported, knowledge about trade policies (trade regulations, export and import taxes, tariffs, quotas) and logistics (shipping time and cost, custom clearance, lead times of importing) was required: “The ideal way is to understand the whole chain. Typically, you also want to know logistics. I did my internship at a distribution center. So, I understood the logistics quite well” (Liesel). Professionals agreed that a major factor in the merchandising process was managing their supplier base. To establish reliable suppliers or “strategic partners” (Sonja) required knowledge about factories’ manufacturing capacity, fair labor, and wages practices.

**“World out There.”** Marketplace awareness emphasizes the insights into external factors that influence merchandising processes. Professionals highlighted the need to be on top of what your direct competition is doing and how to react to their offerings: “If you don’t know what’s going on with your competitors, you might as well be blind. Very arrogant to go through life when you don’t know what your competitors are doing” (Sonja). Professionals agreed that apparel is not a “singular industry” but affected by many factors. They highlighted the significance of being informed about political, economic, and social factors and understanding how they influence business. Betty pointed out:

To know what is happening in the world and within the industry [is important]. Because we can’t think that fashion is just a thing on its own. We are impacted by what the government is doing, what people are earning, how the Credit Act will affect stores that are based on credit, etc.

**“Are We Putting Money in the Till?”** The business category summarizes discussion about financial knowledge and commercial mindset. Participants argued that basic financial and accounting knowledge was essential to understand cash flow, profits, and losses: “If you come into the buying area, you need some sort of financial background, even if it is just your entry level of financial information” (Liesel). Similarly, professionals emphasized the importance of a commercial mindset. They asserted that they were “traders” or “sellers” and highlighted the importance of “business acumen” and “know-how of doing business,” as they were there to make profit for their companies. Landi explained, “Traders’ mentality. Commercial mindset. It is all about that.”

**Product Aesthetic and Commercial Appeal.** The product development category materialized from participant discussion of creating products for their target markets that adhere to the right aesthetics, sizing, and fit, and have commercial appeal. Merchandisers agreed that their goal was to develop appealing and profitable products. In the competitive

South African retail industry, offering appealing products that satisfy your target market's needs and wants has become essential for success:

Maybe in Africa we don't have as much competition but in the South African context we do. You can't copy Zara and H&M anymore. That whole thing has changed. There is a lot more design, being a lot more unique, understanding design, understanding the different elements. How it balances, how it is cohesive—to form a beautiful product at the end of the day is important. (Bea)

Sizing and fit knowledge was also important because of different body shapes and fit preferences of the diverse South African population, as Landi noted:

It is all fair and well to see it on a hanger, but how does it translate onto a body? So, you need to understand what fits with what body types. We have a store in Mthatha, they need bigger sizes in "Ladies."

**"The Rules of Retail."** Retail operations covered knowledge about retail principles and quick response. According to participants, retail begins at the store level and builds upwards: "It is to ensure that you have the right product, at the right price, at the right time, you know all those rights in the store" (Landi). Professionals asserted the importance to understand the inner workings of retail: "You have to know the retail principles, because you use them daily. They call it the rules of retail" (Mariette). To respond quickly to changing consumer demand was highlighted as critical knowledge, as Sonja's statement illustrates: "It takes many, many years to get a quick response model up and running because it is incredibly expensive. A big growth point for me was to change that mindset and work in current time."

**"Establish the Racehorses."** Assortment management describes knowledge of range building, product lifecycle management, buying processes, and stock replenishment. Professionals explained that range (line) building is a complicated process. Understanding how various product attributes (e.g., color, style, and fabric) impact assortment is essential for

merchandisers to tap into “what worked and what didn’t work” (Anke) to create a balanced product range for a season. According to Mariette, “Range building is a skill. There are so many variables you have to look at. There’s a lot of balancing that comes into [building] the assortment.” Participants believed knowledge about the buying cycle and product lifecycle management was essential to achieve profitable ranges each season. This involved understanding different aspects of the buying cycle (lead time, volume calculation, and delivery) and the product lifecycle (from concept to stores). Liezel explained: “Every single product has its own critical path and [you need] to keep track of 120 of those every season. You have to do all of those points to be able to deliver it into stores.”

**“Guiding the Brand.”** The marketing category included knowledge about product positioning, branding, market segmentation, and promotions. Participants discussed understanding the essence of your product and brand as important to position and promote to your customer: “You understand what the product is about. Who it is intended for; what it is made of; where it comes from. You would liaise with marketing to come up with the marketing of the product” (Liezel). Participants noted that expertise in market segmentation contributes to shaping various product strategies: “The merchandise team creates an assortment for each one of these boxes. We segment the marketplace to create differentiation between our [consumer] markets” (Lisa). Mariette concluded that having marketing knowledge is important to grow your product/brand and keep up with evolving consumer markets: “You are guiding what the brand should be doing. Because it is fluid it’s not a permanently set thing. Trends change, you know, and with that customer changes as well.”

### **Tacit Knowledge: Real-Life Experience**

Professional experience emerged from participant discussion of the value of “learning by doing” in the work settings (e.g., on-the-job training, internship). Without exception, all merchandisers highly valued their professional experiences, which contributed to their

confidence and equipped them for success in the industry. Various experiences were discussed: exposure to the retail industry early on in their careers, such as in-store retail work; on-the-job-training; and internships. There was a consensus that learning by doing was essential because it was real-life experience, and not just learning facts from a textbook.

Yanna summarized this view:

Retail is such a dynamic industry. Sometimes what you learn in a textbook was written 10 years ago and doesn't apply to what's happening in the industry now. For example, working in stores could give you an understanding of how systems take place from a store level and unfold to head office level. There are so many things you learn on the job. Getting that experience is very important.

### **Discussion of the Findings and Conclusion**

In this study, South African apparel retail industry professionals were interviewed to understand skills and knowledge (S&K) needed to successfully support the merchandising function within their companies. We revealed a comprehensive range of (a) soft and hard skills and (b) explicit and tacit knowledge required for merchandising professionals to perform their responsibilities. Figure 1 illustrates the merchandising S&K identified in the study.



**Figure 1**

*South African Apparel Merchandising Professionals' Perspectives on Required Skills and Knowledge*



The perspectives of merchandising professionals in the South African retail industry corroborated S&K proposed in the AMC framework. The merchandising S&K outlined in the framework were substantiated, as the AMC framework was developed based on extant

research completed in the context of mature economies (e.g., U.S., UK, and Australia). All skills and knowledge types (outer circle) are grouped into one of the seven categories (second circle from the outside), which belong to one of the four constructs (third circle) (Figure 1).

Four *soft interpersonal skills* (communication, diplomacy, teamwork, and leadership) materialized as critical for performing merchandising responsibilities. These people-related skills are indispensable, as merchandising is a team-oriented function that requires linkages between many different players to ensure timely delivery of the right products (Varley, 2014). Diplomatic skills were especially significant for cultivating relationships inside and outside the company. As the South African retail environment consists of culturally diverse workers, who are also active participants in a global supply chain (Wholesale and Retail Sector Education and Training Authority, 2016), being able to respectfully interact and negotiate with people from different managerial levels and diverse demographics is essential. This confirms the findings of Frazier and Cheek (2016) and Javidan et al. (2010).

Four *soft intrapersonal skills* (flexibility, administrative, positive attitude, and self-management) were highly desirable personal traits for merchandisers. Participants noted that the apparel industry is ever-changing and hypercompetitive. Therefore, flexibility (adapting to change, being open-minded and thick-skinned) was highlighted as an important attribute. Merchandisers need to synchronize a magnitude of activities within the company and across countries (Varley, 2014); consequently, being organized, good at time management, and able to prioritize and keep track of the many tasks were highly valued by participants. Additionally, in this harsh, deadline-driven industry, it is crucial to have the ability to handle stress and navigate yourself through daily problems and pitfalls. Specifically, positive attitude was a new finding in this study. Being optimistic, passionate, driven, and confident was emphasized as vital to stay motivated and persist in the apparel industry.

Two *hard technical skills* (math- and technology-related) were in support of professionals' reliance on technology to do their job and an understanding of basic merchandising calculations (e.g., costing, gross margins, exchange rates). Being well versed in information management, Microsoft Office, PML and CAD programs was essential, corroborating the findings of Fiorito et al. (2010). Technological and math-related skills for merchandisers were found to be equally important in an international context (Chi et al., 2018; Muhammad & Ha-Brookshire, 2011).

Five *hard thinking skills* (problem-solving and decision-making, critical thinking, innovation, metacognition, and strategic thinking) reinforced the need for skills to make commercial and strategic decisions (Danskin et al. 2005), solve problems, and come up with multiple solutions (Frazier & Cheek, 2016). Participants stressed how they had to handle problems every day and how being able to solve them in an inventive way was essential. A new finding in this study was the importance of metacognition (lifelong learning and self-awareness) and strategic thinking (future thinking, planning, being proactive). This might be indicative of the evolving industry (e.g., advances in technology and social media) and overall, a more competitive global retail environment (Chi et al., 2018). The ability to keep on learning and update yourself on new developments in the industry has become increasingly imperative for merchandisers. Similarly, South African retailers' drive to keep up and even stay ahead of international fashion retailers in the domestic market and abroad necessitated a more strategic and proactive approach. As one of the participants noted:

Retail has gone through quite hectic shifts, especially in South Africa. Before the international retailers came to the party, it was quite a royal time, because we didn't have all that competition. With the advent of social media and the international retailers, South African companies had to think differently. (Sonja)

Three *general apparel explicit knowledge skills* (textiles, forecasting, and manufacturing) pointed to the importance of having foundational apparel knowledge for merchandising positions. This is in support of Howse et al.'s (2000) study. In addition to expertise in production and textiles, participants referred to being “consumer-centric” and understanding fashion trends, as well as how to apply these to your target market. Particularly in South Africa, with its fragmented and culturally diverse consumer markets (Hugo et al., 2016), it is critical to understand different aesthetics and preferences of apparel consumers.

Seven *merchandising knowledge skills* (sourcing, marketplace awareness, business, product development, retail operations, assortment management, marketing) underscored the extensive range of knowledge merchandisers need to perform their daily task. Sourcing, marketplace awareness, business, and product development were found to be important knowledge for the globalized apparel industry (Chi et al., 2018; Muhammad & Ha-Brookshire 2011). Assortment management and marketing were distinctive knowledge types found in this study. These merchandising knowledge types might be telling of how South African retailers aim to differentiate themselves from other domestic and international retailers to remain competitive. Being knowledgeable in terms of how to create newness and variety in your assortment every season and how to position and differentiate your products were considered essential by merchandisers in this study. Consistent with other studies (Alzahrani & Kozar, 2017; Muhammad & Ha-Brookshire 2011), *tacit knowledge* gained from relevant professional experience (e.g., on-the-job training, internship) was found invaluable for merchandisers. Hands-on exposure to different aspects of the retail industry was perceived as critical, as not everything can be learned from books and in the classroom.

The findings of the study were contextualized within existing literature to provide insights into how merchandising S&K in South Africa compare to the global apparel industry. As discussed above, all interpersonal, intrapersonal (with the exception of positive

attitude), technical, and thinking skills (with the exception of metacognition and strategic thinking) identified in this study are similar to the skills important for merchandisers in developed economies. Similarly, general apparel and merchandising knowledge types (with the exception of assortment management and marketing) have been documented in previous studies. Overall, South African merchandising S&K align with S&K needed by apparel professionals in other countries. This might be because apparel retail across the globe is faced with the same challenges (e.g., rife competition, diverse consumer markets) and transformations (e.g., new technology) (Alzahrani & Kozar, 2017; Chi et al., 2018; Frazier & Cheek, 2016). We confirm that in the apparel retail industry, soft and hard skills are just as important as explicit and tacit knowledge, as concluded in Chi et al. (2018) and Frazier & Cheek (2016). Because the identified merchandising S&K gap is viewed as an immediate priority for South African higher education (Wholesale and Retail Sector Education and Training Authority, 2016), findings from this study can assist educators who are developing curricula to address the industry need. Educators can partner with companies to assist in the development of curricula and training programs to further hone required S&K and foster competent merchandising professionals.

This study was limited to merchandisers working in the South African apparel retail industry, and therefore the findings cannot be generalized to what S&K merchandisers in other countries would need to perform their responsibilities. Based on similarities with extant research, we can speculate that due to the globalized nature of the apparel industry, merchandising S&K might be more similar than different across borders. Because limited current research exists on the S&K required for merchandising professionals, future researchers could focus on comparing different contexts (e.g., developed vs. developing markets). As so many types of S&K appear to be important for merchandising professionals to master, it is important to prioritize the multitude of S&K so educators can focus limited

resources on developing the most critical ones. Further investigation is needed with a larger sample and a quantitative approach to prioritize the identified merchandising S&K.

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