

Customer satisfaction and relationship intention within the South African clothing retail industry

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ABSTRACT

Despite criticism of the effective use of relationship marketing in mass consumer markets, retailers are increasingly investing in relationship marketing tactics to retain customers, thereby necessitating a thorough understanding of the successful development of retailer-customer relationships. While studies posit the existence of a positive, bi-directional, relationship between strong customer relationships and customer satisfaction, the role of customer-related antecedents, such as relationship intentions, remains largely unexplored in the retail context. The purpose of this study was to determine customers' satisfaction, as well as the influence of relationship intentions on customers' satisfaction in the South African clothing retail industry. Through convenience sampling, 511 questionnaires were collected from clothing retail customers in the greater Pretoria metropolitan area. Results indicate that customers' satisfaction with selected store attributes (namely price, the assortment offered, perceived product quality and employee service), significantly predict clothing retail customers' cumulative satisfaction. Findings show further that clothing retail customers' relationship intentions significantly influence their satisfaction with selected store attributes, as well as their cumulative satisfaction. More specifically, customers' satisfaction increased as their relationship intention levels increased. Clothing retailers could therefore benefit from identifying and targeting customers with higher relationship intentions, as these customers display greater satisfaction.

Keywords: Relationship marketing, relationship intention, satisfaction, price, assortment, quality, service clothing retailers

Aggressive price competition and the relatively low influence of switching barriers have resulted in more clothing retailers pursuing relationship marketing tactics to retain customers (De Cannière, De Pelsmacker & Geuens, 2010:87; MarketLine, 2014:13). As a first step in building relationships with customers, clothing retailers usually focus on ensuring customer satisfaction as a precursor to the initial development of customer-retailer relationships (Aurier &

N'Goala, 2010:309; Ashley, Noble, Donthu & Lemon, 2011:752). However, determining retail customers' satisfaction is complex, and is often based on an accumulation of all customer experiences with a particular retailer and its products (Bettencourt, 1997; Westbrook, 1981).

In an effort to capture the intricacy of retail customers' satisfaction, scholars often tend to measure this according to various store

attributes, such as price, the assortment offered, perceived product quality and employee service (Huddleston, Whipple, Mattick & Lee, 2009:63; Olsen & Skallerud, 2011:532). Despite the advantages offered by measuring customers' satisfaction across various attributes, determining customer satisfaction in this manner often proves cumbersome owing to lengthy measuring instruments (Sahlqvist *et al.*, 2011:1). Retailers could therefore benefit more from determining customers' cumulative satisfaction by using a shorter measuring instrument (Westbrook & Oliver, 1991:85).

While customer satisfaction features in the formation of retailer-customer relationships, satisfaction alone does not guarantee that customers will respond to costly relationship-building efforts (Ashley *et al.*, 2011:749). Researchers have thus advocated that relationship marketing strategies should be focused on those customers who are willing to reciprocate such efforts, that is, customers with relationship intentions (Bloemer & Odekerken-Schröder, 2002:69; Kumar, Bohling & Ladda, 2003:669). Moreover, it is believed that customers with relationship intentions are not only more likely to pursue relationships with retailers, but may also experience greater satisfaction (Kumar *et al.*, 2003:669; Raciti *et al.*, 2013:616). Despite this belief, no research studies have considered the influence of customers' relationship intentions on their satisfaction in the clothing retail environment, particularly in South Africa.

The purpose of this study is to first determine customer satisfaction (in terms of both selected store attributes and cumulatively) and second, to establish the influence of relationship intention on customers' satisfaction in the South African clothing retail industry.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Customer satisfaction in a retail context

When exploring customer satisfaction, it becomes evident that Oliver's (1980) expectancy disconfirmation paradigm (EDP) is prominent in

its conceptualisation. According to the EDP, satisfaction is a post-consumption evaluation, during which customers compare expectations relating to their needs, desires and consumption experience with perceived performance (Arnould *et al.*, 2005; Esbjerg *et al.*, 2012:445). Customers tend to experience satisfaction when their expectations are confirmed, that is, the perceived performance met their expectations (Bloemer & Odekerken-Schröder, 2002:69-70; Fournier & Mick, 1999:5). Given this, this study regards customer satisfaction as customers' post-consumption evaluation of how well a clothing retailer and its products met or exceeded their expectations.

Achieving customer satisfaction is integral to retailers' strategic objectives, as high levels of customer satisfaction are positively associated with favourable word-of-mouth, higher levels of store patronage and loyalty, and increased profitability (Anderson & Sullivan, 1993:125; Churchill & Surprenant, 1982:491; Johnson, Kim, Mun & Lee, 2015:20; Matzler *et al.*, 2004:271). In an effort to assist retail managers with the measurement and improvement of customer satisfaction, studies have focused on determining the antecedents of customer satisfaction, as well as the best approach to be followed in measuring it (Noyan & Simsek, 2011:2134; Olsen & Skallerud, 2011:532; Pradhan & Roy, 2012:78).

Literature presents two approaches to determining retail customers' satisfaction, namely measuring satisfaction by various store attributes or measuring cumulative satisfaction (Olsen & Skallerud, 2011:532; Vesel & Zabkar, 2009:398; Westbrook & Oliver, 1991:85). The first approach regards customer satisfaction as complex and reflective of customers' assessment of numerous store attributes (Olsen & Skallerud, 2011:532). These store attributes are normally related to individual customer experiences in the store itself, or their experiences with products bought from the retailer (Chang *et al.*, 2015:136; Westbrook, 1981:71). The rationale behind a store attribute approach to measuring customer satisfaction is that it captures the complexity of retail customers' satisfaction, and provides

retailers with better insight into which store attributes specifically affect customers' satisfaction, thereby providing richer managerial insight (Helgesen & Nettet, 2010:118; Hsu, Huang and Swanson, 2010:115). The second approach views retail customers' satisfaction cumulatively, based on an aggregation of all the experiences with a particular retailer (Vesel & Zabkar, 2009:398). Although this is not reflective of the specific store attributes that affect retail customers' satisfaction, scholars argue that cumulative satisfaction is a better predictor of desired relationship marketing outcomes like customer loyalty and repurchase intent, as it is based on customers' aggregated assessment of their satisfaction over time (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999:71; Oliver, 1999:33).

In this study, retail customers' satisfaction will be measured by using both the store attribute and the cumulative approaches for three reasons. First, this study draws from both retailing and relationship marketing fields of study, requiring different approaches in the conceptualisation and measurement of customer satisfaction (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999:71; Giese & Cote, 2000:11). Secondly, including both the store attribute and cumulative approaches allows the researchers to obtain different perspectives concerning retail customers' satisfaction. Thirdly, in quantifying both approaches, it is possible to ascertain whether using the cumulative approach (which is a shortened satisfaction measurement) would provide retailers with an adequate overview of retail customers' satisfaction as opposed to measuring it according to various attributes (i.e. a longer satisfaction measurement). Both approaches to measuring customer satisfaction are subsequently discussed.

Customers' satisfaction with store attributes

The way in which different store attributes can be changed to have an effect on retail customers' satisfaction constitutes a fruitful stream of research among scholars and practitioners

(Olsen & Skallerud, 2011:232; Vázquez *et al.*, 2001:9). Westbrook (1981:81) identified store salespersons, the retailer's service orientation, the store environment, merchandise policies, and value versus price as store attributes that influence retail customers' satisfaction. Many research studies have expanded on Westbrook's (1981) research to determine whether other store attributes influence customer satisfaction across different retailer types, including store image, store location, service quality and the assortment offered (Helgesen & Nettet, 2010:118; Hsu *et al.*, 2010:115; Nettet, Nervik & Helgesen, 2011:267).

While it remains undisputed that numerous store attributes affect customers' satisfaction, studies have suggested that price, the assortment offered, perceived product quality and employee service are more salient in determining retail customers' satisfaction (Clotey, Collier & Stodnick, 2008:35; Dellaert *et al.*, 1998:177; Martínez-Ruiz, Jiménez-Zarco & Izquierdo-Yusta, 2010:278; Matzler, Würtele & Renzl, 2006:216). Moreover, retailers can alter strategies related to these with greater ease, as opposed to other store attributes (e.g. store image and location) (Huddleston *et al.*, 2009). This study will accordingly consider customers' satisfaction with four store attributes applicable within a retail context, namely retailers' price, the perceived product quality, the assortment offered and, in particular, employee service (Huddleston *et al.*, 2009:63).

Price

Price refers to the monetary amount a customer has to pay to obtain a product or service (Varki & Colgate, 2001:233; Voss, Parasuraman & Grewal, 1998). Customers' price perceptions often prove to be more important than the actual price paid, as customers tend to encode and remember the unique meanings they assign to perceived prices (fair, affordable, expensive) better than they do the actual price paid (Han & Ryu, 2009; Zeithaml, 1988). Price is consequently salient in customers' decision-making, not only because it acts as a purchasing consideration, but also because it makes an

impact on customers' store perceptions, value perceptions and satisfaction (Martínez-Ruiz *et al.*, 2010:279; Matzler *et al.*, 2006:217).

Because price is readily observable, customers use it as an extrinsic cue in shaping their pre-purchase expectations of a product or a service (Bolton & Lemon, 1999:171). Price can thus signal the level of quality customers can expect from a product or a service (Martínez-Ruiz *et al.*, 2010:279). During their post-purchase evaluations, customers normally make a trade-off between what was sacrificed (the price paid) versus what they received (product quality), which directly influences their value perceptions (Varki & Colgate 2001:233; Zeithaml, 1988). Understanding customers' value perceptions is important, as it is thought that positive value perceptions influence not only customer satisfaction, but also their intention to continue patronising a certain retailer (Matzler *et al.*, 2006:216; Voss *et al.*, 1998:48). Consequently, price plays a central role in determining customer satisfaction with a particular retailer (Matzler *et al.*, 2006:218).

Perceived product quality

Perceived quality constitutes customers' judgment on a product's overall superiority or excellence (Tsiotsou, 2006:210; Zeithaml, 1988:3). Perceived quality differs from objective quality in that the latter is related to a product's technical excellence, which can be measured and verified objectively, normally against industrial standards (Garvin, 1984). Perceived quality, on the other hand, is subjective, and pertains to a specific consumption situation (Zeithaml, 1988:3).

Customers usually use a product's intrinsic or extrinsic attributes to make inferences about its quality and its ability to satisfy their needs and wants (Dodds, Monroe & Grewal, 1991:307; Olson 1977). According to Olson (1977) and Olson and Jacoby (1972) intrinsic product attributes refer to the physical composition of a product, which cannot be altered without changing the nature of the product itself. For example, the intrinsic attributes of clothing include the physical characteristics inherent in

the garment itself, such as fabric, construction technique (design and style) and fit (Swinker & Hines, 2006:218). In contrast, extrinsic attributes are product-related, but are not inherently part of the actual physical product (Zeithaml, 1988:6), for example, the price paid for an article of clothing, its brand label and the store where it was bought (Dawar & Parker, 1994:84; Zeithaml, 1988:6).

Understanding how customers perceive product quality is important for retailers, as gaining insight into this perception offers them the opportunity of differentiating themselves from their competitors (Swinker & Hines, 2006:218). This perceived product quality directly influences customers' satisfaction with, and loyalty to, the retailer (Cronin, Brady & Hult, 2000:198; Martínez-Ruiz *et al.*, 2010:278). Subsequently, perceived product quality often forms part of clothing retailers' strategic objectives in increasing customer satisfaction.

The assortment offered

The assortment offered refers to the depth of a retailer's product mix, that is, the number of different brands or stock-keeping units (SKU's) in different product categories (Bauer, Koutouc & Rudolph, 2012:12). Offering a greater assortment of merchandise is likely to attract more customers with different tastes and preferences, stimulate cross-selling and increase sales (Huffman & Kahn, 1998:491; Martínez-Ruiz *et al.*, 2010:279; Oppewal & Koelemeijer, 2005:45). Decisions on the assortment offered form an important aspect of retailers' retail mix strategies, as they affect both their strategic positioning and their store image (Lindquist, 1974; Mantrala *et al.*, 2009:78).

Hoch, Bradlow and Wansink (1999:527) explain that customers place value on the variety of the assortment offered, because it increases their chances of finding merchandise that suits their preferences. Similarly, offering a greater assortment of merchandise decreases the time customers spend frequenting different retailers, thereby satisfying customers through greater shopping efficiency and convenience (Dellaert *et*

al., 1998:177; Martínez-Ruiz *et al.*, 2010:280). Understanding customers' perceptions of the assortment offered is therefore beneficial to retailers, as it is thought that customers' perceptions of the retailers' offered assortment influence their satisfaction and store preference (Bauer *et al.*, 2012:11; Gagliano & Hathcote, 1994:67; van Herpen & Pieters, 2002).

Employee service

Retail employees are often responsible for assisting customers, answering their queries, and processing payment, with the consequent frequent interactions between individual employees and customers (Jayawardhena & Farrell, 2011:208). Esbjerg *et al.* (2012:451) maintain that, because retail employees have direct contact with customers, they are in a position to respond to, and satisfy, customers' specific needs and requests. Moreover, retail employees' responses to customers' needs and requests are highly visible to customers' scrutiny and evaluation, which results in customers making inferences about retailers' overall service orientation based on service received from individual retail employees (Jayawardhena & Farrell, 2011:212; O'Cass & Grace, 2008:522). As a result, the level of service provided by retail employees to customers is an important determinant of their satisfaction and store patronage (Huddleston *et al.*, 2009:68). Realising the key role that individual retail employees play in the creation of customer satisfaction, more retailers place emphasis on training their employees to be friendly, polite, knowledgeable and helpful (Dabholkar, Thorpe & Rentz, 1996:3; Gagliano & Hathcote, 1994:62; Gremler & Gwinner, 2008:309).

Cumulative customer satisfaction

As opposed to considering customer satisfaction in terms of a variety of store attributes, retailers are also interested in customers' cumulative satisfaction, as it is based on a holistic evaluation of their total experiences with a retailer over time (Loureiro, Miranda & Breazeale, 2014:105; Szymanski & Henard, 2001). Dabholkar and Thorpe (1994:163) and

Vesel and Zabkar (2009:397) argue that customers tend to aggregate their evaluations of, and experiences with, various store attributes to form a cumulative impression of their satisfaction with a particular retailer. Cumulative satisfaction thus provides retailers with an overview of customers' general level of satisfaction, which can be a better predictor of customers' loyalty and repurchase intent in relationship marketing studies (Curtis *et al.*, 2011:1). Customers also consider their cumulative satisfaction with retailers to distinguish among the array of organisational relationships on offer (Raciti *et al.*, 2013:615).

Relationship marketing and relationship intention

Relationship marketing is a paradigm shift in customer management, whereby the organisational focus changes from acquiring new customers to retaining existing customers and maximising their lifetime value (Gummesson, 2002:51). Customer lifetime value is maximised by establishing and maintaining long-term relationships that are mutually beneficial to both customers and organisations (Egan, 2011:38). While customers enjoy confidence, social and special treatment benefits from their relationships with organisations (Gwinner, Gremler & Bitner, 1998:101), organisations benefit from greater profitability, lower acquisition costs, increased cross-selling, customer referrals and a better understanding of customer needs (Agariya & Singh, 2011:228; Mark *et al.*, 2013:233).

The increased difficulty experienced in reaching customers by following traditional marketing approaches has prompted retailers to invest in long-term relationships with customers (Ashley *et al.*, 2011:749; De Cannière *et al.*, 2010:87). De Wulf and Odekerken-Schröder (2003:106) expressed similar views, explaining that, as retailers find it more challenging to differentiate themselves according to merchandise and price promotions alone, they are directing more attention towards the development and

implementation of relational efforts to foster customer loyalty.

Although retailers are increasingly using relationship marketing because of the various advantages such an approach offers (Adjei & Clark, 2010:73), its strategic application in mass consumer markets has not been without criticism. Leahy (2011:651) and O'Malley and Tynan (2000:800) point out that the size of consumer markets limits the number of meaningful interactions retailers can have with customers. Likewise, some customers are more transaction-orientated and are therefore indifferent to a retailer's relationship-building efforts (Adjei & Clark, 2010:73; Danaher et al., 2008:43). These valid concerns necessitate the need to understand how relationships develop between customers and retailers, specifically from the customer's perspective (Mark et al., 2013:233; O'Malley & Prothero, 2004:1293). Raciti et al. (2013:616) state that the customer's conscious, intentional desire to participate in a relationship is a necessary starting point for successful relationship marketing. Customers' relationship intentions are, therefore, central to the effectiveness of retailers' relationship marketing efforts, and should thus be understood (De Wulf & Odekerken-Schröder, 2003; Mende, Bolton & Bitner, 2013:126). Kumar et al. (2003:669) propose that five sub-constructs should be measured when establishing customers' relationship intentions: customers' involvement, feedback, forgiveness, fear of relationship loss and expectations.

Involvement

Involvement can be viewed as the importance, interest and attachment that a customer displays for an object (Laroche, Nepomuceno & Richard, 2010:203). Customers who are involved with an object, be it a specific product, a brand or a relationship with an organisation, voluntarily collect and process information and engage in activities associated with that object (Baker, Cronin & Hopkins, 2009:116; Dagger & David, 2012:450). One can therefore surmise that involvement determines the importance customers place on their relationships with organisations (Varki & Wong, 2003:84), as well

as their willingness to participate in relational marketing efforts undertaken by organisations (Ashley et al., 2011:751). Subsequently, Kumar et al. (2003:670) propose that customers who are extensively involved with an organisation and its products reveal relationship intentions. Involved customers also perceive greater relational benefits from their relationships with organisations (Kiniard & Capella, 2006:336; Vázquez-Carrasco & Foxall, 2006:216), and demonstrate concern about losing these benefits should the relationship end (Jones et al., 2007:337; Kumar et al., 2003:670).

Fear of relationship loss

The formation of relationships requires customers to invest effort and time, thereby increasing perceived switching costs when customers compare the cost of establishing a new relationship with the relational benefits (i.e. confidence, social and special treatment) received in their current organisational relationship (Spake & Megehee, 2010:316; Vázquez-Casielles, Suárez-Álvarez & Belén Del Río-Lanza (2009:2293). Relational benefits, together with satisfactory organisational interactions, encourage customers to form relational bonds with organisations, which, in turn, increase customers' commitment to an organisation (Liang & Wang, 2006:123; Spake & Megehee, 2010:316). As customers with relationship intentions feel emotionally attached to an organisation, they demonstrate fear of the possible consequences of losing their relationship with the organisation, including perceived switching costs as well as lost relational benefits and bonds (Kumar et al., 2003:667, 670).

Forgiveness

Organisations invest in long-term relationships with customers to safeguard against the detrimental consequences of poor service delivery, such as customers terminating the relationship (Tsarenko & Tojib, 2011:383; Yu & Xie, 2011:1). As customers in strong organisational relationships expect to maintain the relationship, they are more likely to forgive an organisation for not meeting their expectations than end the relationship

(Beverland, Chung & Kates, 2009:438; Kim, Ok & Canter, 2012:59). Customers who are committed to building relationships are therefore not only willing to forgive organisations when their expectations are unmet, but also to voice their dissatisfaction to the organisation in order to restore the relationship (Kumar *et al.*, 2003:670).

Feedback

Positive and negative feedback provided voluntarily by customers constitute an essential source of managerial information (Voss *et al.*, 2004:212). While positive feedback allows organisations to identify strengths that should be reinforced during customer interactions (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2007:410; 412; Voss *et al.*, 2004:216), negative feedback gives organisations the opportunity of forestalling customer defection by identifying and rectifying flaws present during service delivery (Lacey, 2012:137). Feedback is also an important relational driver in customer-organisational relationships (Lacey, 2012:137), because customers feel appreciated when organisations incorporate their feedback in service delivery strategies (Grönroos, 2004:107). Customers in strong relationships would furthermore rather provide feedback to enable an organisation to rectify problems experienced than terminate the relationship and defect to competitors (Bodey & Grace, 2007:579; Lacey, 2012:138; Rothenburger, Grewal & Iyer, 2008:359). Kumar *et al.* (2003:670) therefore postulate that customers with relationship intentions are willing to provide positive and negative feedback to organisations concerning their expectations without expecting any reward for doing so.

Expectations

Expectations denote customers' beliefs about products, services or organisations, which form reference points against which actual performance is judged (Oliver, 1980:460; Wilson *et al.*, 2012:51). During such judgements, perceived actual performance can either be below customers' expectations (i.e. disconfirmation of expectations), thereby

leading to dissatisfaction, or exceed customer expectations (i.e. confirmation of expectations), resulting in satisfaction (Egan, 2011:127; Giese & Cote, 2000; Srivastava & Sharma, 2013:274).

A number of factors go towards shaping customers' expectations, including advertisements, word-of-mouth communications, own past experience, and service-related cues, such as price and other tangibles (Zeithaml, Berry & Parasuraman, 1993:2-3; Wilson *et al.*, 2012:51). The strength of the relationships that customers have with organisations also influences expectations: customers with strong organisational relationships often hold higher expectations than those of transactional customers (Mason & Simmons, 2012:231). De Wulf *et al.* (2001:34) and Liang and Wang (2006:120-121) explain that higher expectations result from customers' investment of considerable irretrievable resources (including time and effort) in relationship formation. Consequently, customers with higher expectations of an organisation will demonstrate concern for the enhancement of products and services they buy, which, in turn, signals their intention to build a relationship with that particular organisation (Kumar *et al.*, 2003:670).

PROBLEM STATEMENT, PURPOSE AND HYPOTHESES

The importance of establishing customer satisfaction is founded on the belief that a positive, bi-directional relationship exists between customers' satisfaction and their relationships with organisations (Danahar, Conroy & McColl-Kennedy, 2008:55; Raciti *et al.*, 2013:615). This implies that customers in strong relationships tend to experience increased satisfaction, whereas satisfaction, in turn, is considered to be a pre-requisite if customers are to enter into relationships with organisations (Aurier & N'Goala, 2010:309, Raciti *et al.*, 2013:615). As not all customers want to form relationships with organisations, Bloemer and Odekerken-Schröder (2002:69) and Kumar *et al.* (2003:669) advocate that relationship marketing

strategies should focus on customers with relationship intentions, as they will be retained more easily. Moreover, studies either consider relationship intention as an antecedent to customers' satisfaction, or postulate that customers with relationship intentions tend to be more satisfied, as they are more involved and experience greater affiliation with an organisation (Bloemer & Odekerken-Schröder, 2002:69; Kumar *et al.*, 2003:669; Raciti *et al.*, 2013:616). Retailers could therefore, benefit from identifying those customers with relationship intentions, as these are more likely to be satisfied, which, in turn, could lead to increased loyalty as well as repurchasing intentions (Anderson, Fornell & Lehmann, 1994:53; Baumann, Elliot & Burton, 2012:148; Hallowell, 1996:27).

When measuring customer satisfaction, retailers have to decide whether to use either appropriate store attributes or an aggregate measurement of customers' cumulative experiences with the organisation (Bettencourt, 1997; Olsen & Skallerud, 2011:532). Although some authors caution that cumulative satisfaction may not reflect the complex nature of retail customers' satisfaction (Olsen & Skallerud, 2011:532; Westbrook, 1981), retailers often prefer to measure customer satisfaction by means of significantly reduced measuring scales to gauge overall satisfaction (Loureiro *et al.*, 2014:105; Szymanski & Henard, 2001). Following Huddleston *et al.* (2009:63) and Olsen and Skallerud's (2011:532) approach, this study will first determine retail customers' satisfaction in terms of certain store attributes, namely price, the assortment offered, perceived product quality and employee service, before measuring their cumulative satisfaction (Bettencourt, 1997). As it could be easier for retailers to determine customers' cumulative satisfaction (i.e. using a shorter satisfaction measure), this study will also consider the extent to which customers' satisfaction with the various retail attributes (i.e. using a lengthy satisfaction measure) predicts their cumulative satisfaction.

No previous research studies have been carried out to determine the influence of relationship

intention on customers' satisfaction in the South African clothing retail industry. This study will address this issue and will also establish the relationship between retail customers' intrinsic satisfaction, and relationship intention. The clothing retail customer satisfaction (in terms of both various store attributes and cumulatively) will be established, and will determine the extent to which satisfaction with various store attributes predicts their cumulative satisfaction. The following alternative hypotheses are accordingly posited for the study:

- H1: Clothing retailer customers' satisfaction with the retailers' price, the assortment offered, perceived product quality and employee service significantly predict their cumulative satisfaction with the retailer.
- H2: There is a significant positive correlation between clothing retail customers' relationship intentions and their satisfaction with clothing retailers' price, assortment offered, perceived product quality and employee service.
- H3: There is a significant positive correlation between clothing retail customers' relationship intentions and their cumulative satisfaction with the retailer.
- H4: Clothing retail customer varying in relationship intention levels significantly differ in their satisfaction with clothing retailers' prices, assortment offered, perceived product quality and employee service respectively.
- H5: Clothing retail customers varying in relationship intention levels significantly differ in their cumulative satisfaction with the retailer.

METHOD

Research design, target population and sampling

This was a quantitative study, which followed a descriptive research design to allow the researchers to test the hypotheses formulated for the study (Feinberg, Kinnear & Taylor, 2013:58). The target population comprised

clothing retail customers aged 18 years and older, who reside in the greater Pretoria metropolitan area. Respondents were selected from the target population by means of non-probability convenience sampling, as no sample frame could be obtained (Iacobucci & Churchill, 2010:287).

Questionnaire, data collection and pilot study

An interviewer-administered survey approach and structured questionnaire were used to collect data from the respondents (Burns & Bush, 2014:175). Similar to previous studies focusing on relationship marketing in retail settings, the questionnaire included screening questions to ensure that respondents had bought from a clothing retailer in the last three months, and that they had been the decision-makers when choosing a clothing retailer from whom to purchase clothing (Buckinix & Van den Poel, 2005:255; De Wulf & Odekerken-Schröder, 2003:101).

The questionnaire comprised of four sections. Section A established respondents' clothing retail patronage habits. Respondents' relationship intentions were measured in Section B by adapting the measurement scale used by Kruger and Mostert (2012:45). Section C measured the respondents' satisfaction with the clothing retailer where they shop most often. Sixteen items, adapted from Huddleston *et al.* (2009), were used to measure the respondents' satisfaction with the store attributes associated with determining customers' satisfaction with a retailer (price, assortment offered, perceived product quality and employee service), whereas respondents' cumulative satisfaction was measured with three items adapted from Bettencourt (1997). The researchers used five-point unlabelled Likert scales, where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree, to measure the respondents' relationship intentions as well as their satisfaction. The last section in the questionnaire determined the respondents' demographics, specifically gender, their highest level of education and their population group.

A pilot study was conducted among 60 respondents from the target population to identify and correct possible misunderstandings caused by the wording of the questionnaire (Iacobucci & Churchill, 2010:224). After the questionnaire was finalised, fieldworkers were selected and trained to approach potential respondents on the basis of convenience, qualify them according to the screening questions and proceed with administering the questionnaire. In total, 511 usable questionnaires were collected for data analysis.

Data analysis

Data were captured, cleaned and analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) (Version 22). The data analysis commenced with computing overall mean scores for all constructs in the study, after which the normality of distribution for each construct was assessed. Specifically, the distribution of results can be deemed normal if the skewness of distribution is less than ± 2.00 and the kurtosis is less than ± 7.00 (Curran, West & Finch, 1996:16). The results indicated that all constructs in the current study fell within these limits and, consequently, parametric tests for hypotheses testing were suitable for this study. Descriptive statistics were done to compile the sample profile as well as respondents' clothing retail patronage habits.

Exploratory factor analyses were performed to reduce the dimensionality of the data to form an understanding of the underlying structure of latent variables in the study (i.e. relationship intention, satisfaction with store attributes, and cumulative satisfaction) (Hair *et al.*, 2014:92). Exploratory factor analyses also enabled the researchers to evaluate the construct validity of the measurement scales used in the study (Field, 2013:628), whereas their reliability was determined by calculating Cronbach's alpha coefficient, a measure of internal consistency, values (Field, 2013:679). For hypotheses testing, a confidence level of 95% and a level of 0.05

were used to determine statistical significance (Hair *et al.*, 2013:281).

To determine the strength of statistically significant results, practical significance by means of effect size was calculated (Steyn, 1999:3). Specifically, *r*-values of Cohen for Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients, and *d*-values of Cohen for Anovas were calculated (Field, 2013:79, 270). According to Field (2013:270), the practical significance in terms of *r*-values is considered small at 0.1, medium at 0.3 and large at 0.5. Practical significance in terms of *d*-values is considered small at 0.2, medium at 0.5 and large at 0.8 (Cohen, 1988:25-26). As medium-effect sizes imply that differences between respondent groups can be observed with the naked eye, both medium and large effect sizes were regarded as practically significant when interpreting the results (Cohen, 1988:20).

Further, the researchers conducted a multiple regression analysis to determine whether respondents' satisfaction with store attributes (price, the assortment offered, the perceived product quality and employee service) significantly predict their cumulative satisfaction (Hair *et al.*, 2014:157).

RESULTS

Sample profile and clothing retail patronage habits

Table 1 depicts the sample profile of the respondents who participated in the study, as well as their clothing retail patronage habits.

Table 1 shows that, in terms of population groups, respondents were either white (51.3%), black (32.0%), Indian/Asian (10.6%) or coloured (6.1%). Concerning gender, more females (61.8%) than males (38.2%) participated in the study, while the majority of the respondents had completed Matric/Grade 12

(56.4%), a degree (18.4%) or a diploma (18.4%).

When it came to clothing retail patronage habits, most of the respondents shopped at Mr Price (27.2%) most often, followed by Edgars (22.7%) and Woolworths (15.1%). The majority of the respondents indicated that they purchased clothing less than once a month but more than once every three months (42.1%) or once every three months or less frequently (32.5%). With reference to the time period during which the respondents had supported the clothing retailer where they shopped most often, the majority indicated a period of ten years and longer (35.6%), one year or more but less than five years (34.1%), or five years or more but less than ten years (30.3%).

Validity and reliability

Exploratory factor analyses, using maximum likelihood extraction with varimax rotation, were undertaken to assess the construct validity of each of the constructs used in this study (Field, 2013:642, 644; Hair *et al.*, 2014:94), including relationship intention, satisfaction with the store attributes (price, assortment offered, perceived product quality and employee service) as well as cumulative satisfaction. In order for the data to be considered appropriate for exploratory factor analyses, the Bartlett's test of sphericity should be significant ($p < 0.0001$) and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy (MSA) should be greater than 0.5 (Field, 2013:684-686). The Bartlett's test of sphericity yielded significant results ($p < 0.0001$) for all the constructs and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy (MSA) had acceptable values for relationship intention (0.791), satisfaction with the store attributes (0.887), and cumulative satisfaction (0.778). The data was therefore considered appropriate for factor analysis (Field, 2013:684-686; Pallant, 2013:199).

TABLE 1
Sample profile and clothing retail patronage habits

Variable	Response categories	n	%
Population group	Black	164	32.0
	Coloured	31	6.1
	Indian / Asian	54	10.6
	White	262	51.3
Gender	Female	316	61.8
	Male	195	38.2
Highest level of education	High school not completed	16	3.1
	Matric / Grade 12 completed	288	56.4
	Diploma completed	79	15.5
	Degree completed	94	18.4
	Post-graduate degree completed	34	6.7
Clothing retailer shopped at most often	Ackermans	3	0.6
	Cotton On	16	3.1
	Donna Claire	5	0.9
	Edgars	116	22.7
	Factorie	11	2.1
	Foschini	9	1.8
	Identity	3	0.6
	Jet	10	2.0
	Legit	8	1.6
	Markhams	30	5.9
	Mr Price	139	27.2
	Pep Stores	7	1.4
	Queenspark	6	1.2
	Sportscene	5	0.9
	Truworths	29	5.7
	Woolworths	77	15.1
Other	37	7.2	
How often clothing is purchased	More than once a week	6	1.2
	Once a week	15	2.9
	Less than once a week but more than once a month	109	21.3
	Less than once a month but more than once every three months	215	42.1
	Once every three months or less frequently	166	32.5
Length supporting clothing retailer shopped at most often	Less than once a year	8	1.6
	1 year or more, but less than 5 years	166	32.5
	5 years or more, but less than 10 years	155	30.3
	10 years and longer	182	35.6

For relationship intention, five factors were extracted based on the eigenvalue (>1) criterion and labelled *Involvement*, *Expectations*, *Feedback*, *Forgiveness* and *Fear of relationship loss* after inspecting the items that loaded onto each factor, thus corresponding with the five factors proposed in the literature (Kruger & Mostert, 2012:45; Kumar *et al.*, 2003:670). In total, the five factors explained 75.40% of the total variance in the data. As all items yielded factor loadings ≥ 0.5 , and no cross loading of items occurred, all 15 items measuring relationship intention were retained (Hair *et al.*, 2014:116).

Four factors were extracted based on the eigenvalue (>1) criterion, explaining 74.90% of the total variance in the data on satisfaction with the store attributes. Based on the factor loadings, the factors were labelled *Price*, *Product assortment*, *Perceived product quality* and *Employee service*, similar to the original factors proposed by Huddleston *et al.* (2009:71). Because all the factor loadings were ≥ 0.5 and

no items cross loaded, all the items measuring satisfaction with the store attributes were retained (Hair *et al.*, 2014:103). Lastly, the items measuring cumulative satisfaction extracted one factor that explained 79.47% of the total variance in the data and exhibited factor loadings ≥ 0.5 . Subsequently, all the items that measured cumulative satisfaction were retained and the factor was labelled *Cumulative satisfaction*. It can thus be concluded that the measuring scales used in this study exhibit construct validity.

Table 2 shows the Cronbach Alpha's coefficient values that were used to determine the internal consistency (reliability) for the study's constructs and underlying factors (Hair *et al.*, 2013:166).

Table 2 shows that all Cronbach Alpha's coefficient values were greater than the 0.7 threshold value, indicating that the scales used to measure relationship intention, satisfaction with the store attributes and cumulative satisfaction were reliable (Hair *et al.*, 2014:166).

TABLE 2
Cronbach Alpha coefficient values for constructs used in the study

Constructs, factors and underlying factors		Number of items	Cronbach's alpha value
Relationship intention		15	0.79
Underlying factors of relationship intention	Involvement	3	0.74
	Expectations	3	0.70
	Feedback	3	0.83
	Forgiveness	3	0.85
	Fear of relationship loss	3	0.91
Satisfaction with store attributes	Price	3	0.81
	Assortment offered	4	0.86
	Product quality	3	0.82
	Employee service	5	0.88
Cumulative satisfaction		3	0.87

Respondents' satisfaction

Table 3 illustrates the overall mean scores and standard deviation (SD) values calculated for customers' satisfaction with the store attributes

(namely, price, the assortment offered, perceived product quality and employee service) as well as their cumulative satisfaction with the particular clothing retailer.

TABLE 3

Overall mean scores for satisfaction with store attributes and cumulative satisfaction

Construct	Mean	SD
Price	3.88	0.776
Assortment offered	3.93	0.712
Perceived product quality	3.80	0.833
Employee service	3.60	0.869
Cumulative satisfaction	3.79	0.778

Given that a five-point scale was used to measure items that constituted the constructs, it is evident from Table 3 that the respondents agreed more with the items measuring their satisfaction with the clothing retailer's offered assortment (mean = 3.93), price (mean = 3.88) and perceived product quality (mean = 3.80) than with the retailer's employee service (mean = 3.60). The respondents also agreed with the items measuring their cumulative satisfaction with a particular clothing retailer (mean = 3.79). It can therefore be concluded that the respondents who participated in this study tend to be satisfied with the price, assortment offered, the perceived product quality and employee service at the clothing retailer where they shopped most often. Cumulatively, the respondents tend to be satisfied with the clothing retailer.

As the respondents' satisfaction was measured cumulatively as well as for store attributes (namely price, the assortment offered, perceived product quality and employee service), a standard multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine whether satisfaction with the different store attributes significantly predicted the respondents' cumulative satisfaction with the clothing retailer from whom they most often purchase. Before the multiple regression was conducted, the researchers ensured that the assumptions related to the sample size, the degree to which independent variables correlated with one another, the presence of outliers in the data, the linearity of the relationships between pairs of variables, and the equality of variances between groups were met (Hair *et al.*, 2014:178); Pallant, 2013:156-157; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2014:666-667). Table 4 presents summary of the multiple regression model.

It is evident from Table 4 that the respondents' satisfaction with price, the assortment offered, the perceived product quality and the employee service explain 63.8% of the variance in their cumulative satisfaction with the clothing retailer from whom they most often purchased. Table 5 depicts the ANOVA table of the regression model.

TABLE 4

Multiple regression model summary^b

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Standard error of the estimate
1	0.801 ^a	0.641	0.638	0.468

a Predictor variables: (Constant), Price, Assortment offered, Perceived product quality, Employee service

b Outcome variable: Cumulative satisfaction.

TABLE 5

ANOVA^a

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean square	f- value	p-value*
1	Regression	197.879	4	49.470	225.920	0.000 ^b
	Residual	110.799	506	0.219		
	Total	308.678	510			

* p-value < 0.05 is statistically significant.

a Outcome variable: Cumulative satisfaction.

b Predictor variables: (Constant), Price, Assortment offered, Perceived product quality, Employee service.

It is evident from Table 5 that the regression model is significant ($p < 0.0005$) Table 6 shows the coefficient table for the model with the standardised beta coefficient values.

TABLE 6
Coefficient table

Model	Standardised coefficient β -value	t	p-value
(Constant)		3.265	0.001*
Price	0.086	2.877	0.004*
Assortment offered	0.072	2.159	0.031*
1 Perceived product quality	0.269	7.653	0.000*
Employee service	0.539	15.723	0.000*

* p-value < 0.05 is statistically significant

From Table 6 it can be derived that each of the satisfaction attributes are statistically significantly predictors of respondents' cumulative satisfaction (with p-values < 0.05 and β -values ranging between 0.072 and 0.539). Employee service has the largest beta value (β -value = 0.539), thus implying that it has the biggest effect on cumulative satisfaction (given that all other variables in the model are held constant) followed by perceived product quality (β -value = 0.269). Hypothesis 1 is therefore *supported* since satisfaction with price, assortment offered, perceived product quality and employee service are statistically significant predictors of respondents' cumulative satisfaction.

Relationship intention and the respondents' satisfaction

Once an overall mean score had been calculated for the respondents' relationship intentions, the researchers determined whether relationships existed between the respondents' relationship intentions and their satisfaction with price, the assortment offered, perceived product quality and employee service, as well as relationship intention and cumulative satisfaction with the clothing retailer. Table 7 presents the p-values and corresponding r -values of Pearson product

moment correlation coefficients conducted to uncover relationships, the respondents' relationship intentions, their satisfaction with various store attributes, and their cumulative satisfaction.

From Table 7 it is evident that practically significant correlations exist between respondents' relationship intentions and their satisfaction with the perceived product quality and employee service ($r = 0.4$), as well as price and the assortment offered ($r = 0.3$). Consequently, the respondents' satisfaction with employee service, perceived product quality, price and the assortment offered by the clothing retailer increased as their relationship intentions increased. Hypothesis 2 is therefore *supported*. Similarly, a practically significant correlation exists between respondents' relationship intentions and their cumulative satisfaction with

TABLE 7

Relationship intention and the respondents' satisfaction

Correlation between relationship intention with:	r -value
Price	0.3*
Assortment offered	0.3*
Perceived product quality	0.4*
Employee service	0.4*
Cumulative satisfaction	0.4*

*Correlation significant at the 0.05 level

the clothing retailer ($r = 0.4$). Hypothesis 3, stating that there is a significant correlation between clothing retail customers' relationship intentions and their cumulative satisfaction with the retailer is thus *supported*.

Next, respondents were categorised according to their relationship intention scores (by using the 33.3 and 66.6 percentiles as cut-off points), in order to identify respondents with low, moderate, and high relationship intentions. It was subsequently decided to perform one-way Anovas to determine whether there were any significant differences between respondents with different relationship intention levels in terms of their satisfaction with store attributes, as well as

TABLE 8
Relationship intention levels and respondents' satisfaction

Factor	Mean	SD	n*	p-value**	RI levels***	d-value		
						Low	Moderate	High
Price	3.62	0.812	154	1-2	Low	-	0.3	0.7
	3.85	0.722	202	1-3	Moderate	0.3	-	0.4
	4.17	0.712	155	2-3	High	0.7	0.4	-
Assortment offered	3.72	0.790	154	1-2	Low	-	0.2	0.6
	3.89	0.672	202	1-3	Moderate	0.2	-	0.5
	4.20	0.592	155	2-3	High	0.6	0.5	-
Perceived product quality	3.43	0.886	154	1-2	Low	-	0.4	0.9
	3.80	0.769	202	1-3	Moderate	0.4	-	0.5
	4.18	0.681	155	2-3	High	0.9	0.5	-
Employee service	3.24	0.908	154	1-2	Low	-	0.4	0.8
	3.60	0.780	202	1-3	Moderate	0.4	-	0.5
	3.96	0.791	155	2-3	High	0.8	0.5	-
Cumulative satisfaction	3.49	0.801	154	1-2	Low	-	0.3	0.8
	3.75	0.728	202	1-3	Moderate	0.3	-	0.6
	4.15	0.671	155	2-3	High	0.8	0.6	-

Notes: * The number of respondents per relationship intention group differed due to ties in the continuous data

**Tukey's comparison significant at the 0.05 level

***RI = Relationship intention

their cumulative satisfaction with the clothing retailer. Table 8 shows the descriptive statistics, Tukey's comparison (statistically significant at the 0.05 level) and *d*-values (effect sizes) for respondents with different relationship intention levels, satisfaction with store attributes (price, assortment offered, perceived product quality and employee service), as well as their cumulative satisfaction with the clothing retailer.

Table 8 shows that there are statistically significant differences between respondents with different relationship intention levels in terms of their satisfaction with clothing retailers' price, the assortment offered, the perceived product quality and the employee service, as well as their cumulative satisfaction with the clothing retailer.

From the effect sizes shown in Table 8, it can be concluded that respondents with high relationship intentions are practically significantly more satisfied with the clothing retailers' price, assortment offered, the perceived product quality and the employee service than those respondents with low relationship intention levels (*d* values ≥ 0.6). Respondents with high relationship intentions were also practically significantly more satisfied with the assortment offered, the perceived product quality and the employee service than were respondents with moderate relationship intention levels (*d* values ≥ 0.5). When interpreting the mean scores, it can be deduced that customers with high relationship intention levels were more satisfied with the price, the assortment

offered, the perceived product quality and the employee service of the clothing retailer than were respondents with low relationship intention levels. Customers with high relationship intention levels were, furthermore, also more satisfied with the assortment offered, the perceived product quality and the employee service than were respondents with moderate relationship intention levels. Hypothesis 4 is therefore *supported*.

Similarly, respondents with high relationship intention levels differed practically significantly from those with moderate ($d = 0.6$) and low ($d = 0.8$) relationship intention levels in terms of their cumulative satisfaction with the clothing retailers shopped at most often. The respondents with high relationship intention levels were cumulatively more satisfied with the clothing retailer (mean = 4.15) compared with respondents with moderate (mean = 3.75) or low (mean = 3.49) relationship intention levels. It can therefore be concluded that respondents with varying relationship intention levels differ significantly in their cumulative satisfaction with the retailer, thereby providing *support* for hypothesis 5.

DISCUSSION

Literature shows two approaches to measuring retail customers' satisfaction, namely, satisfaction with store attributes and satisfaction as a cumulative construct (Olsen & Skallerud, 2011:532; Bettencourt, 1997). This study accordingly determined respondents' satisfaction with a clothing retailer by considering satisfaction with a number of store attributes as well as cumulative satisfaction. As the customer satisfaction measuring scales used in this study were valid and reliable, it is recommended that clothing retailers could use either scale to determine their customers' satisfaction. Results from this study further indicate that the respondents' satisfaction with a clothing retailer's price, the assortment offered, the perceived product quality and the employee service significantly predict their cumulative satisfaction with the clothing retailer from whom they most often purchase. This finding therefore

suggests that retailers can confidently determine customers' overall satisfaction by considering their cumulative satisfaction (thus using a shortened satisfaction measurement), as opposed to measuring satisfaction by using multiple dimensions (thus a lengthy satisfaction measure). It is therefore recommended that clothing retailers use the shortened, cumulative satisfaction measure to establish customer satisfaction owing to the time constraints experienced by retailers, thereby determining customer satisfaction in a retail environment.

However, if clothing retailers wish to identify particular store attributes on which to focus in order to improve overall customer satisfaction, results from this study suggest that particular emphasis should be placed on employee service and product quality, as these store attributes were the best predictors of respondents' cumulative satisfaction. This finding accordingly supports Jayawardhena and Farrell's (2011:211) view that interactions with retail employees influence customers' service evaluation and satisfaction. It is thus recommended that clothing retailers should in particular ensure that their employees always offer satisfactory service to customers by investing in continuous training programmes that emphasise the importance of being polite, helpful and friendly during customer interactions. Considering the long hours retail employees often work, retailers should also consider, where possible, allowing employees frequent breaks to reduce the risk of offering less satisfactory service owing to employee fatigue.

Results indicate practically significant positive relationships between respondents' relationship intentions and their cumulative satisfaction with clothing retailers as well as their satisfaction with the price, the assortment offered, the perceived product quality and the employee service of the clothing retailer from whom they most often purchase. In particular, it was found that, as the respondents' relationship intentions increased, their cumulative satisfaction with the retailer increased, as well as their satisfaction with their clothing retailers' price, assortment offered, perceived product quality and employee

service. Customers with higher relationship intentions therefore showed greater satisfaction with the retailer from whom they most often purchase than did the respondents with moderate or low relationship intention levels. These findings support the view that customers with greater relationship intentions tended to experience greater satisfaction arising from a feeling of increased affiliation and greater involvement with an organisation (Bloemer & Odekerken-Schröder, 2002:69; Kumar *et al.*, 2003:669; Raciti *et al.*, 2013:616; Siddiquei *et al.*, 2015:410). It is therefore recommended that clothing retailers determine customers' relationship intentions and focus their relationship marketing resources on those customers with higher relationship intentions as these customers will, in all probability, display greater customer satisfaction, which is a prerequisite for forming long-term relationships (Bloemer & Odekerken-Schröder, 2002:69; Kumar *et al.*, 2003:669). This can be achieved by administering a survey with the scaled items used by Kruger and Mostert (2012:45) to measure relationship intention.

In addition to creating greater satisfaction, retailers could benefit from establishing long-term relationships with customers with higher relationship intentions, as these customers could develop greater loyalty to the retailer, thereby increasing the probability of the retailer's retaining these customers (Ashley *et al.*, 2011:749; Kumar *et al.*, 2003:667).

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The geographical demarcation of the study pertained to one metropolitan area and retail setting (i.e. clothing retailers) only, thereby limiting the generalisability of the results. The use of non-probability convenience sampling suggests that the results are applicable only to the respondents who participated in the study. Although the researchers highlighted the reasons for focusing exclusively on specific satisfaction dimensions (price, assortment offered, perceived product quality and employee service), other dimensions, including location, convenience, service quality and store name could also exert

an influence on clothing retail customers' satisfaction (Nesset *et al.*, 2011:267). Lastly, the findings in this study are based on cross-sectional data, which lacks the dynamic changes that may occur over time in customers' relationship intentions, dimension satisfaction and cumulative satisfaction.

Future studies could focus on replicating the current study across different metropolitan areas and retailer types to cross validate the results here. Comparative studies internationally could also be included. Future studies could also consider the influence of customers' relationship intentions regarding other constructs believed to influence the formation of relationships in a clothing retail environment, including customers' trust in, and commitment and loyalty to a retailer (Pritchard, Havitz & Howard, 1999:333).

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