

MINDING THE COMPETITION: THE DRIVERS FOR MULTICHANNEL SERVICE QUALITY IN FASHION RETAILING

Elena Patten, Wilson Ozuem, Kerry Howell and Geoff Lancaster

Abstract

Purpose: Consumer purchasing behaviour has changed substantially in the light of recent developments in E-Commerce. So-called ‘multichannel customers’ tend to switch retail channels during the purchasing process. In order to address changing consumer behaviours, multichannel fashion retailing companies must continue to learn how to provide excellent service to such customers. Drawing on expectation confirmation theory, this paper aims to investigate the drivers for service quality from the perspective of multichannel fashion customers.

Design/methodology: This paper approaches the topic of multichannel service quality by adopting a social constructionist research paradigm, utilising an abductive approach and an embedded case study research strategy. It aims to explore the lived experiences and perspectives of individuals in the context of an evolving complex and multidimensional phenomenon. The paper seeks information-rich cases and therefore views service quality through the eyes of experienced German multichannel customers. A customer perspective helps to explain the phenomenon of multichannel service quality and helps to disclose the meaning that these customers give to it. The sample size for this research consisted of 18 in-depth interviews and two focus groups including ten focus group participants. As such, a process of methodological triangulation was followed.

Findings: Integration quality is identified as the essence of competitive advantage for multichannel retailers. The paper conceptualises integration quality as a catalyst, which plays a supporting role in reinforcing the reactions of the physical and electronic service quality in order to provide an optimised service quality experience.

Originality/value: This paper looks at retailer/customer interactions in the context of purchases of a fashion product at a retailer using different retail channels. It highlights the distinctive requirements of multiple-channel systems within which the focus should not only be to enhance and improve physical and/or electronic service quality, but must also be about the integration of the service offers of each channel. The paper contributes to the interpretation of multichannel service quality with a new concept that explains the phenomenon from the perspective of customers.

Introduction

The evaluation and understanding of customer service quality perceptions has been a topic of major interest for academics and practitioners since the 1980s (Akter et al., 2018; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988; Patten, 2017). Despite this intense research focus, there is a gap in the literature when it comes to understanding service quality in multichannel settings. This is surprising since multichannel service systems have become increasingly important with the rise of E-commerce. Rezaei and Valaei (2017) empirically found that retailers influenced by convergence of technology, customer expectations, and competition, now consider the fact that the ability to offer their products through multiple channels is becoming indispensable (p. 854)

The overall aim of this paper, therefore, is to contribute to the interpretation of multichannel service quality by explaining it from the perspective of so-called ‘multichannel customers’ (Avery, Steenburgh, Deighton, & Caravella, 2012; Heitz-Spahn, 2013; Kumar, 2010; Neslin & Shankar, 2009; Zhang et al., 2010). The paper looks at interactions when purchasing fashion products from a multichannel retailer with the aim of conceptualising service quality in a multichannel fashion retail context. Therefore, the paper considers extant service quality research with a focus on traditional, electronic, and multichannel settings. The perspective of this paper is different from mainstream positivist service quality research, which sees service quality as static, objectively measurable and dualistic. As an alternative, this paper acknowledges service quality as a dynamic, subjective and pluralistic phenomenon. Following this line of argument, the paper argues for the existence of multiple realities as consistent with social constructivism. Therefore, the paper investigates the service quality perceptions of experienced multichannel customers. Perceptions are considered to be the meaning that these customers give to their service experiences (Barlow, 1990; Helmholtz, 1925; Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987; Zeithaml, 1988). Drawing on the work of Sousa and Voss (2006), the paper indicates that customer perceptions of service quality in multichannel settings are fundamentally unique. We propose a holistic framework for conceptualising multichannel customer service quality perceptions by considering (1) the heterogeneity of multichannel customers,

and (2) all moments of contact between customer and retailer. The proposed framework contributes to research into service quality by offering a theoretical interpretation of the phenomenon.

As a ‘bounded system’ within a unique border and research context, Germany was selected as a fitting case for this paper (Stake, 1978, p. 7). Such a restriction was chosen to situate the paper within a well-defined setting, and to provide a clear research focus (Stake, 2000). Germany was chosen for three reasons: (1) Germany is ranked as the fourth largest economy in the world, (2) German online retailing accounts for the second largest such sector in Europe, and it experienced the second highest growth rate in 2015 (Retailresearch.org, 2016), and (3) the current paper yields experiential knowledge about the German retailing market. Social constructivism embraces the researcher’s own personal experience (Crotty, 1998). Experiential knowledge enhances accession towards the researched subject (Maxwell, 2013) and shared cultural values facilitate a holistic understanding of a social phenomenon (Alarcon del Amo, Lorenzo Romero, & Gomez Borja, 2016; Azemi, 2016). The current paper aims to contribute to this recent stream of studies by explicitly taking into account the level of multichannel service quality in the fashion industry within the particular localised context of Germany.

Theoretical context

Multichannel Retailing

Engagement with a combination of different retail channels during the purchasing process has become the predominant purchasing pattern for customers (Huan, Lobschat, & Verhoef, 2019; Ozuem, Patel, Howell, & Lancaster, 2017; Reinartz, Wiegand, & Imschloss, 2019; Rezaei & Valaei, 2017). However, with very few exceptions (Chou, Shen, Chiu, & Chou, 2016; Saghiri, Wilding, Mena, & Bourlakis, 2017), researchers have failed to conceptualise the complex and discrete purchasing patterns of multichannel customers when they switch channels several times during a single purchasing process. These customers have been hitherto conceptualised as a homogeneous group exhibiting a generally linear purchasing behaviour (Akter et al., 2018; Frasquet, Ieva, & Ziliani, 2019; Hult, Tomas, & Zhang, 2019). As Lobschat and Verhoef (2018) suggest, there is a continued need to conduct research into multichannel settings with respect to customer behaviour across channels, and

of particular value is behaviourally oriented research that concerns retail-mix issues across channels.

In the context of multichannel retailing, evaluating and understanding service quality has become increasingly popular and valued by both academics and practitioners (Akter et al., 2018; Badrinarayanan, Becerra, & Madhavaram, 2014; Banerjee, 2014; Seck & Philippe, 2013; Swaid & Wigand, 2012). As processes, the literature identifies five common features of services among different industries. Specifically, services are: (1) intangible (Shostack, 1977), (2) perishable (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Berry, 1985), (3) simultaneous in production and consumption (Grönroos, 1984), (4) heterogeneous (Zeithaml et al., 1985), and (5) embossed by the customer's involvement and experience (Grönroos, 1995).

Customer experience in multichannel retailing

The majority of service quality research can be considered customer-centred (Brady, Cronin Jr, & Brand, 2002; Grönroos, 1984; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Malhorta, 2005; Van Birgelen, De Jong, & Ruyter, 2006). These studies mainly focus on investigating the perceived quality of various services amongst customers. According to Zeithaml (1988), 'Perceived quality is different from objective or actual quality, a higher level abstraction rather than a specific attribute of a product, a global assessment that in some cases resembles attitude, and a judgment usually made within a consumer's evoked set' (Zeithaml, 1988, pp. 3-4).

The SERVQUAL model can be considered the most important customer-centred service quality concept in the literature (Parasuraman et al., 1988). It conceptualises service quality as a gap between the customer's prior service expectation and the customer's service perception. The level of service quality can be considered to be negative as soon as the customer's prior expectation level is assumed to be higher than the actual service perception (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1994).

In terms of service settings, it has been argued that the concept of service quality in the context of online environments can be studied in isolation from traditional service quality (Parasuraman et al., 2005). Electronic service quality should be considered as an extension of traditional service quality. This extension mainly speaks to aspects of the Internet, since the location of service provision and the Information Technology (IT) via the service provider are important factors (Tshin, Tanakinjal, & Sondoh Jr., 2014).

Sousa and Voss (2006) were the first researchers to conceptualise service quality in a multichannel service setting. They suggested that multichannel service quality concerns all moments of contact between a service deliverer and its customers. Multichannel service quality therefore refers to the different physical and electronic components that are delivered through two or more channels (Akter et al., 2018; Santos, 2003). Customers using electronic and physical channels might evaluate their service quality perceptions based on all of the channels they have encountered during the purchasing process (Seck & Philippe, 2013; Sousa & Amorim, 2018). According to Sousa and Voss (2006), the distinctive component of multichannel service quality can be considered to be a function of integration quality. They defined integration quality as providing a ‘seamless service experience across channels’ (Sousa & Voss, 2006, p. 359). They further surmised that in a multichannel service system, even when the service quality of each channel is very high, the overall perception of service could be very low when integration quality is perceived as low. Sousa and Amorim (2018) called for a separate examination of physical, virtual and integration quality. First of all, they emphasised the contrasting nature of each of the three quality components. Secondly, they forecast a rapid technological development for the virtual component, and they saw advantages to examining it separately from the other two more constant components of physical and integration quality. They developed a sound foundation of research about multichannel service quality, but their work is based on a literature review and therefore lacks empirical integrity.

Drawing on extant literature about multichannel retailing and perceived service quality, the following conceptualisation of an integrated service quality system synthesises the existing theory and research findings:

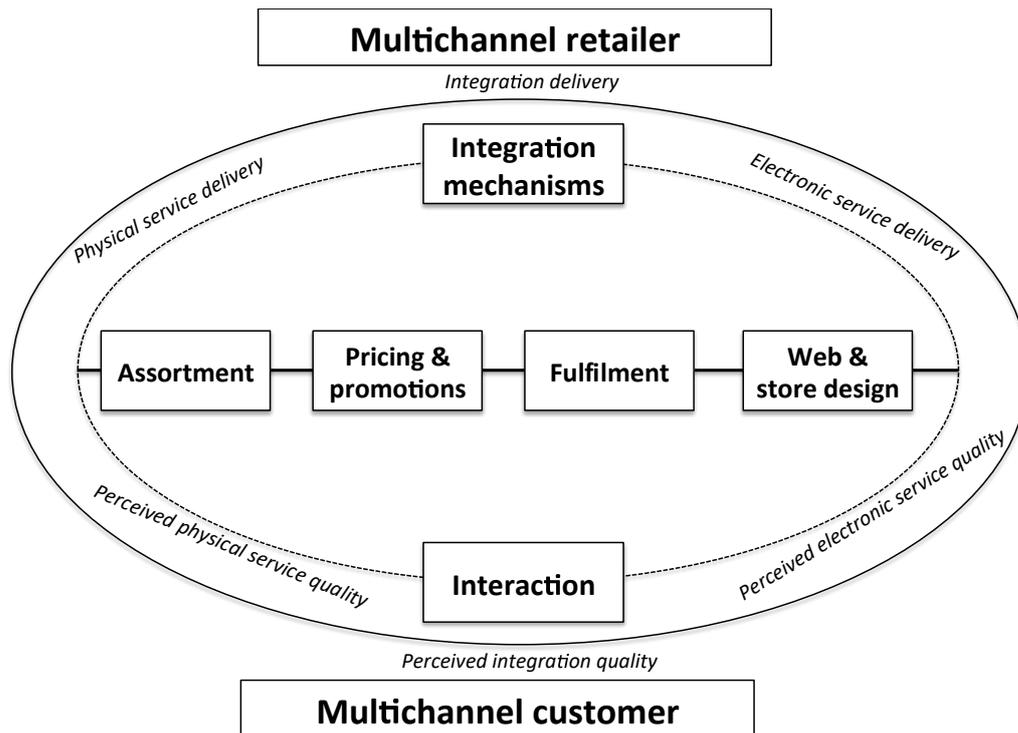


Figure 1: Integrated service quality system

As Figure 1 illustrates, multichannel service quality consists of several distinctive elements. Multichannel customers have several expectations of multichannel retailers in terms of the quality of service delivery. These expectations are distinguished by the three elements of multichannel service quality: physical, electronic, and integration quality. In an integrated multichannel service system, the service supplier adopts integration mechanisms in order to provide a seamless interaction with customers.

The customer, however, is the recipient of the multichannel retailer’s service quality. The customer thus experiences service quality as part of a ‘journey’. This experience comprises the various retail-mix elements including assortment, price and promotions, fulfilment, and web and store design. The customer’s shopping experience is formed across all moments of contact with the retailer. In some cases, the customer uses only one channel. Under such circumstances the customer will exclusively perceive the service quality they receive from a particular channel. However, customers often switch channels during the purchase process if the expected benefits are higher than the expected costs (Gensler, Neslin, & Verhoef, 2017; Hsieh & Tseng, 2018). Moreover, multichannel customers experience the integration of all utilised channels as part of their perception of service. This means that a poorly integrated service quality system can lead to negative overall service perceptions,

even when the service quality of each individual channel has been considered positive. Thus, this paper approaches multichannel service quality as an interplay between the customer's interaction with the retailer and the multichannel retailer's integration of the different channels, to incorporate the different elements of the retail mix.

Expectation confirmation theory

The current study maintained that the higher order implications of multichannel fashion service quality can be most clearly appreciated from the perspective of expectation confirmation theory (ECT). According to this theory, expectations and perceived performance of a service can predict the satisfaction level with that service (Oliver, 1977). Hence, positive and also negative disconfirmation due to a better or worse performance respectively, can moderate the degree of satisfaction (Bohler, Weigel, & Hall, 2009). Oliver (1980) states, that 'customers are posited to perceptually distort expectation-discrepant performance so as to coincide with their prior expectation level' and 'post-exposure ratings are primarily a function of the expectation level because the task of recognising disconfirmation is believed to be psychologically uncomfortable' (Oliver, 1980, p. 460). Some researchers argue that ECT theorises expectation as an additional determinant of satisfaction, because expectation provides the baseline or reference level for consumers to form evaluative judgments about the focal product or service (Bhattacharjee, 2001). The multisensory input of physical storefront has been transitioned to online fashion retail environment in several ways. Computer-mediated marketing environments, particularly the emerging Internet environment is creating different customer's experiences and expectations in the fashion industry_(Ozuem et al., 2017). The interactive marketplace is increasingly empowering customers to higher order expectations and customer satisfaction. Internet and digital technology are changing multichannel retailing experiences and consumers' expectations are becoming more complex to manage due to access to multifaceted digital devices in generating value perceptions. In service research, service quality has been conceptualised as a gap between expected (desired) service and perceived service (Carr, 2007; Dabholkar, Thorpe, & Rentz, 1996; Grönroos, 1984; Parasuraman et al., 1988). Parasuraman et al. (1988) were the first researchers to introduce a gap-based service quality model. They identified four gaps in the customer-company relationship affecting service quality perceptions (the consumer expectation vs. management perception gap, the management perception vs. service quality specification gap, the service quality

specifications vs. service delivery gap, and the service delivery vs. external communications gap). Other researchers use a performance-only approach to evaluate service quality (Boulding, Kalra, Staelin, & Zeithaml, 1993; Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Teas, 1993). The concepts of the gap and performance-only approaches are, in fact, not as contradictory as alleged. Performance-only approaches postulate an 'ideal standard' of services. It can be argued that if customers rate a service below this ideal standard and if it can be at all defined, from that point the customers' service quality perception is negative.

Methodology and Methods

In contrast with the dominant existence of dualistic and objectivistic studies, this paper acknowledges the apparent characteristics of the service quality phenomenon from a twofold perspective: (1) it represents a pluralistic ideology, which permits diverse customer service quality perceptions, and (2) it considers the dynamic nature of service experiences and thus perceptions as important characteristics of services. This way of seeing the world resonates with social constructivism, which was selected as the basic paradigmatic choice for this paper and rejects a "naïve realist view of representation" (i.e. "meanings are fixed entities that can be discovered"; instead, it viewed "facts" as socially constructed while acknowledging that there still are better and worse interpretations (Ozuem, Howell, & Lancaster, 2008).

This constructivist epistemology fundamentally guides the current paper towards a qualitative research approach (Barnham, 2015; Holstein & Gubrium, 2007; Thoma, 2011). Toma (2011) noted that constructivists focus more on how individuals construct their lives, arguing that reality is more relative and locally situated and constructed than positivist study would contend. According to the constructivists, 'the theoretical position of the researchers not only guides their basic position, but determines what get constructed as a research problem, what theoretical procedures are used and what constitute observation and evidence', and they bring to the foreground that researchers are actors rather than mere processors of information (Mir & Watson, 2000, p. 941). Qualitative research is considered a valuable methodological approach to adopt for the current paper, since it is best suited to addressing the research aim of exploring the lived experiences and perspectives of individuals in the context of the complex and evolving multidimensional phenomenon of service quality in a German multichannel fashion retail environment. Therefore, an explanatory case study design was chosen to refine the existing theory and to extend knowledge about service quality in a multichannel retail setting (Roworth-Stokes,

2006). Case studies do not look at phenomena in isolation from specific contexts. Rather, they ‘emphasise the rich, real-world context in which the phenomenon occurs’ (Eisenhardt, 2007, p. 25). In a naturalistic sense, objects of case studies are given situations, which cannot be created or manipulated. They can simply be observed (Kemmis, 1980). Based on this argument, the in-depth observation of multichannel customers can be viewed as an attempt to develop theory.

Methods and Data gathering

The technique applied to the sample selection was *purposeful sampling* (Patton, 1990), as participants were selected on the basis of their experience of purchasing fashion products by accessing the various channels of one retailer. Patton (1990) emphasises that the value of a sample in a qualitative study lies in the richness of information about the selected sample. For this paper, ‘combination, or mixed purposeful sampling’ was applied, as participants were selected on the basis of their experience of purchasing fashion products by accessing the various channels of one retailer (‘homogeneous sampling’). Furthermore, a sample of sales people and managers of different fashion department stores in three major German cities (Stuttgart, Essen and Düsseldorf) was asked to suggest customers who might agree to participate in this research (‘snowball sampling’), and people were chosen based on predetermined criteria (‘criterion sampling’). First, only people older than 18 years, who had obtained full capacity to make contracts, were included in this research. Secondly, the customers who were included were specifically those who were experienced in searching for, and purchasing, clothing through different channels during a single purchase. This is in keeping with Verhoef’s (2015) definition of multichannel customers as those who use different channels for searching and purchasing. The inclusion of ‘experienced’ multichannel customers who had made at least three purchases in the last 12 months enhances the information-richness of the sample of customers. Thirdly, it was crucial for the outcome of this research that the participating customers had had multichannel experiences with at least two multichannel retailers.

The sample size for this research consisted of 18 in-depth interviews and two focus groups including ten focus group participants. As such, a process of methodological triangulation was followed. The phenomena of multichannel service quality in general, and the German fashion retailing setting in particular, have not yet been fully conceptualised (Verhoef, Kannan, &

Inman, 2015). This limited understanding of multichannel service quality justifies the selection of a relatively small sample. Several researchers have identified a significant issue on sampling criteria in a qualitative study (Bowen, 2008; Francis et al., 2010; Ozuem, Howell, & Lancaster, 2008). Others have argued that the contextual nature in tandem with the vantage point of the researcher is representative of the whole (Creswell, 2009; Morse, 2008). As Morse (2015) articulated, the size of the sample depends on the nature of the phenomenon, its concrete versus subjective nature, the amount of complexity and scope of the phenomenon (p. 1214). Bowen (2008) argues that adequacy of sampling size relates to whether the depth and breadth of the phenomenon of interest have been reached as well as achieved. Agreeing with both Morse (2015) and Bowen (2008), the emergent patterns and the rich data are representative of the phenomenon of the interest.

This study emphasises theoretical sampling, which bases data collection on ‘concepts that emerged from analysis ... that appear to have relevance to the evolving theory’ (Howell, 2013, p. 202). Theoretical sampling facilitates a process by which each sample adds to, and informs, the previous data and analysis; theoretical sampling becomes targeted and more specific as the theory emerges and evolves. Charmaz (2006) argued that theoretical sampling provides a different logic to traditional research design. ‘The purpose of theoretical sampling is to obtain data to help ... explicate ... categories. When categories are full they reflect quality of respondent experiences and provide useful analytic handles for understanding them’ (Charmaz, 2006, p. 100). Theoretical sampling is purposeful on the basis of the categories developed as the research programme progresses; it is based on theoretical concerns in relation to previous data collection and leads to data saturation of the area under analysis.

The interviews

The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes each. The average duration time was 42 minutes. This corresponds with the recommended duration of interviews as more than 30 minutes but less than one hour, in order to capitalise on concentration level (Robson, 2007).

In-depth interviews and focus groups were executed iteratively. First, the 18 in-depth interviews were conducted and analysed. Their focus was to receive the lived purchase experiences of several participants in depth. For the study’s outcome it was valuable to gather these individual service quality perceptions from experienced multichannel customers. The major outcome from the in-depth interviews was the six themes

representing the vivid perceptions of the empirical reality of German multichannel fashion customers.

After completing the in-depth interviews and carrying out some preliminary data analysis, two focus group interviews took place with a total of ten participants. The aim of the focus groups was to discuss relevant in-depth interview statements and emerging concepts in order to receive further insights. During the focus groups, lively debates arose. The most valuable outcome of the focus groups was the finding that participants had different perceptions and thus multichannel customers cannot be considered a 'homogeneous group of customers' as the extant literature suggests (Verhoef et al., 2015). This built the foundation for the multichannel customer typology.

The interviews and focus groups were semi-structured in nature, comprising a number of predetermined questions (Ozuem, Thomas and Lancaster, 2016; (Robson, 2007). The interviews were recorded with the permission of participants. Furthermore, notes were taken to summarise key statements. The body language of participants was also observed during the undertaking of interviews as the literature suggests this is an important source of data in qualitative research (Silverman, 2010). The direct involvement of the researcher in this process enhanced experiential knowledge about the topic under investigation. Moreover, due to the semi-structured nature of the interviews, questions could be adjusted and new questions could be added in the course of the interviews where such an intervention was felt beneficial in order to enhance the quality of discussions.

Analysis and Findings

Based on a constructivist epistemology, the theory building followed an abductive approach, going back and forth between extant theoretical concepts and literature, empirical data and the analytical framework in order to better understand the phenomenon of multichannel service quality 'using the participants' own words within context' (Ozuem, Thomas, & Lancaster, 2016, p. 6). For constructivists, concepts, models, theories, data analysis and so on are viable if they prove adequate within the context for which they were created rather than the detached, value-neutral subjects, who seek to uncover clearly discernible objects or phenomena (Mir and Watson, 2000). Field research was conducted exclusively for the purpose of this paper (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The themes identified bear little relationship to the questions that were asked during the interviews (Braun &

Clarke, 2006). However, the themes were inextricably connected to the data themselves (Patton, 1990). Thus, the applied thematic approach for this paper is data-driven (Boyatzis, 1998).

Ultimately, interpretations of respondents' perceptions of multichannel service quality generated six major themes as follows: (1) physical stimulation, (2) affiliation, (3) value for physical service quality, (4) electronic stimulation, (5) utility for electronic service quality, and (6) choice optimisation for the integration service quality.

The major themes that relate to the physical channel imply some emotional involvement on the part of multichannel customers. Such emotional involvement is expressed directly in the interview data through positive and negative emotions in relation to perceptions of physical service channels. Therefore, multichannel customers seek physical stimulation from offline-mediated environments and, in particular, from store design, visual merchandising and haptics. A 29-year-old senior project manager of a marketing department stated:

It's the whole sideshow: the colours and the lighting. That is what really matters.

This respondent referred to the experiential features of store design. He considered lighting, colours, room climate, smell and music as service determinants. These determinants were part of the customer's sensory experience. As the interviews suggest, the majority of fashion enthusiasts could be considered aesthetes. Hence, many of the interview respondents mentioned aesthetics as an important criterion in regard to perceptions of in-store service quality.

Moreover, multichannel customers tend to use offline-mediated environments to affiliate with others. This includes human relations, status, and advice. The first term expresses that multichannel customers value meeting like-minded people in pleasant shopping environments. Such people can be familiar (for example, friends, family or regular sales people) or unfamiliar (other customers or unknown sales people). A 23-year-old marketing student from Stuttgart reflected on her shopping habits as follows:

Sometimes I want to go shopping and meet friends and my family. Mmmh ... I think that it's much more about the great shopping experience you enjoy with your friends and family.

Interestingly, this respondent identifies a social dimension as one of the main reasons she goes shopping. She shops to cultivate social contacts with her friends and her family. For her, it is important that her companions enjoy a pleasant purchase experience. Therefore, this respondent seeks hedonic value from her shopping experiences. Since her family members had different interests, a pleasant shopping experience meant, for her, that the store was able to provide several different service offers. For this respondent, shopping is an important leisure activity.

Westbrook et al. (1985) define affiliation as a dimension of shopping motivation that contains (1) shopping alongside other customers who have similar tastes, (2) talking with sales people and other shoppers who share interests, and (3) shopping with friends as a social occasion (Westbrook & Black, 1985, p. 90).

The third sub-dimension of physical service quality in a multichannel retailing context is value. Multichannel customers tend to be value-oriented when purchasing in offline-mediated environments. A 23-year-old fashion management student from Düsseldorf stated:

When I think of in-store service, I think of ... I want the sales person to be attentive ... to greet me, to ask me if I need help. I don't want to get the feeling that I'm disturbing the sales person by making her do something else.

Value orientation includes appreciation, honesty, trust, friendliness, and empathy. As the interviews suggest, sales people have the most significant impact on these customers' value perceptions. In this context, three characteristics of multichannel customers can be synthesised from the interviews: (1) those who seek an individualistic and situation-related approach, (2) those who are enlightened by prior knowledge about a product before entering the retail store, and (3) those who retain a level of scepticism regarding advice received from sales employees.

The major themes that relate to the electronic channel context imply a mix of rational and emotional involvement on the part of multichannel customers. Electronic stimulation refers to web design, content, and haptics. In terms of web design, multichannel customers seek practicability, a clear structure and filter options. These findings resonate with the 'ease of use' service quality dimension that represents 'the degree to which the functionality of the user interface facilitates the customer's retrieval of the electronic service' (Zeithaml,

Parasuraman, & Malhotra, 2002, p. 363). However, the findings of this paper go beyond this definition. Multichannel customers also value the emotional aspects of web design. Accordingly, they cite attractive web design and video footage as strong product features. A 23-year-old fashion management student from Düsseldorf reflected on his perception of web design as follows:

What I also find important is, for instance, that there are many pictures of the item and, just like at X, you have video sequences.

Some respondents preferred visual stories and editorials and wanted to be told a story in a subtle manner, instead of simply being given the facts. In this context, the phenomenon of ‘blogging’ plays a predominant role in influencing the decisions of several multichannel fashion customers.

In the context of online content, the retailer’s assortment strategy can be seen as a controversial issue, both in the literature and in this paper (Mantrala et al., 2009). It is a strategic, managerial decision to overcome the complex duty of offering an attractive assortment as well as avoiding choice difficulty. Several interview respondents complained about oversupply in some online shops. One respondent who was a deputy department manager in fast fashion retail stated:

The assortment should be kind of tailored for me. I don’t want to see all the dresses but only those that I like.

This respondent expected the online shop to offer a more customer-individual assortment at the expense of choice. For several respondents, no added value was perceived if a retailer displayed items that were not appealing to them. They only wanted to see items that they were interested in.

The concept of integration is the main difference between a single-channel and a multichannel service quality system. According to the literature, all physical and electronic elements enriched with integration mechanisms lead to overall perceptions of multichannel service quality (Sousa & Voss, 2006). ‘Connection’ and ‘linkage’ are the terms that explain how the interview respondents express what is known in the literature as ‘integration quality’. The emergent theme for integration quality can be considered to be ‘choice optimisation’. A 30-year-old sales director from Düsseldorf reflected as follows:

I prefer retailers which operate an online shop AND bricks-and-mortar stores because I want to exploit all the advantages this kind of retailer can provide me with.

As this statement suggests, multichannel customers exploit integration mechanisms to optimise the search for the right purchase channel that fits their demands in the best manner.

Before the invention of E-commerce and multichannel retailing, Westbrook and Black (1985) defined choice optimisation as the ‘motivation to search for and secure precisely the right product to fit one’s demands’ (Westbrook & Black, 1985, p. 87). In the context of service quality in multichannel retailing, customers search for the ‘right’ type of service and select the most suitable channel. Multichannel customers tend to optimise their choices during the purchasing process. Integration quality is the essence of competitive advantage for multichannel retailers compared to single-channel retailers. At multichannel retailers, customers are able to switch channels without switching retailer. As the interviews suggest, they exploit this opportunity when the multichannel retailer ensures optimised efforts, availability of items, price, and support.

The catalyst model of multichannel service quality

As the empirical findings indicate, the purchase behaviour of German multichannel customers involves a high degree of complexity as their purchasing pattern includes decisions about the retailer and the retail channel (Patten, 2017). A constant justification of these takes place during the purchase process.

The empirical findings support the findings from the literature, which state that customers perceive multichannel service quality by considering physical, electronic, and integration quality (Sousa & Voss, 2006). However, the findings presented in this paper also add to this knowledge. The current paper identifies six major themes that describe multichannel customer service quality perceptions in a German fashion-retailing context.

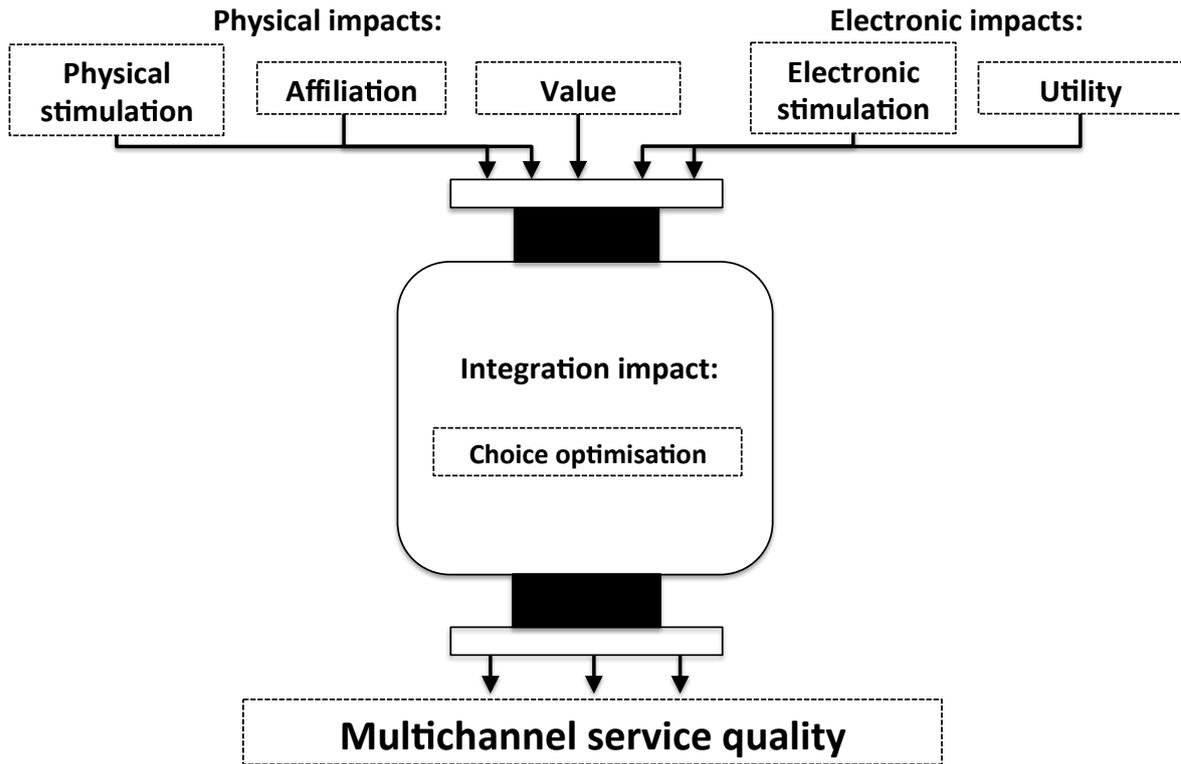


Figure 2: Integration quality as a catalyst of multichannel service quality

As Figure 2 illustrates, each retail channel provides different ingredients. In a well-integrated multichannel system, a customer is able to optimise his choice options. Hence, integration quality has the function of a catalyst. It reinforces the reactions of the two ingredients of physical and electronic service quality in order to provide an optimised service quality experience. Therefore, the catalyst function can be considered to be the competitive advantage enjoyed by a multichannel retailer. The customer can exploit the full advantages of each channel, which has a positive impact on his overall service quality perception.

Multichannel customer typology

The interview findings further suggest that four different types of German multichannel fashion customers exist within the homogeneous sample. Based on these findings, the current paper was able to develop a customer typology. ‘Each type of customer is distinguished by a specific pattern of social characteristics reflecting his position in the social structure’ (Stone, 1954, p. 36). The generators of heterogeneity amongst German multichannel fashion customers can be considered to be ‘available income level’ and ‘involvement with fashion products’ (Patten, 2017).

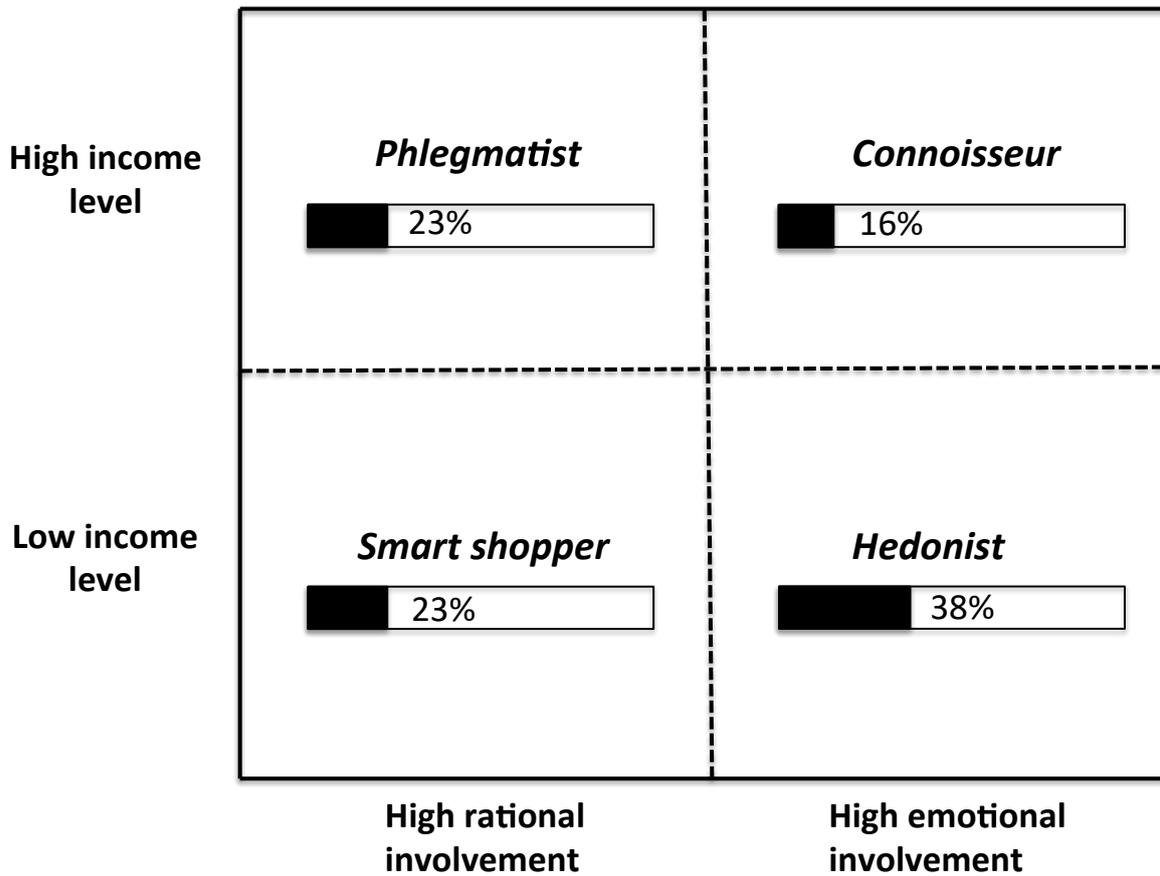


Figure 3: Customer typology matrix

Hedonists were the largest customer segment (representing 38 per cent of the sample). They had low or medium available incomes and they showed high emotional involvement. Their principal drivers were shopping experiences and amusement. For these customers, it is important to remain well-informed about the latest fashion trends. They are price-sensitive due to their low available income. That is why they prefer to purchase from fast fashion discounters. A strong reference to affiliation and emotive stimulation are both indicators of high emotional involvement amongst this customer segment. Hedonists value multichannel retailing for efficiency reasons. Since fashion trends are very short-lived nowadays, they mainly use channel integration for availability checks across channels and they value fast delivery and an effortless purchasing process.

The connoisseur customer segment also demonstrates high emotional involvement in fashion purchases, but has a medium-high or high income. This segment accounts for 16 per cent of respondents. The connoisseur looks for indulgence when purchasing a fashion product. Connoisseurs can be considered the most demanding customer segment. They tend to have a clear idea of what they want. They are not dependent on the lower-priced retailing

segment and they have high expectations concerning service quality. Generally, connoisseurs can be considered loyal customers, but if they migrate due to unsatisfying experiences it is hard for retailers to win them back. This customer segment seeks inspiration online and offline. They are receptive to aesthetic store design and visual merchandising. Furthermore, they follow lifestyle bloggers. However, in contrast to hedonists, who are influenced by bloggers and their fashion styles, connoisseurs look for bloggers who share a similar attitude and lifestyle. This segment seeks to appreciate competent personal advice and they avoid visiting stores with poor personal advice. When purchasing online, they value visual stories and editorials as well as aesthetic web design and sophisticated packaging. Connoisseurs have limited time and so they carry out multichannel shopping to be efficient. They seek availability checks across channels and prefer the option to reserve items online and try them on in-store.

In contrast, smart shoppers (representing 23 per cent of the sample) have a low or medium available income and demonstrate higher rational involvement. They are principally driven by savings. Smart shoppers can be considered the least loyal segment because they show opportunistic buying behaviour at the retailer that offers them the cheapest price. Smart shoppers show a preference towards online shopping, since price comparisons are easier to complete online than offline. Furthermore, smart shoppers generally perceive prices to be lower online. They value integration quality for a more efficient comparison of prices across channels.

Phlegmatic shoppers are the second segment of higher rationally involved multichannel customers (representing 23 per cent of the sample). These shoppers have a medium to high income level. They are mainly driven by convenience. They can be considered loyal customers, except when they experience service failure at a retailer. Once they migrate, recovery is challenging for the retailer. Phlegmatic shoppers tend to have high expectations regarding the services they are offered. They value efficiency, convenience, practicability, and competence above all. These shoppers have a clear channel preference when it comes to purchasing fashion products. Switching barriers can be a helpful tool for multichannel retailers to dissuade phlegmatic shoppers from cross-channel free-riding. Phlegmatic shoppers have a positive perception of channel integration because they value choice optimisation for effort, availability, price and support.

The following table presents a summary of the four different customer types, as discussed in the previous section; specifically, their drivers of heterogeneity, their principal drivers, their special behavioural characteristics, and their perceptions of the three different multichannel service quality dimensions.

| | Smart shopper | Phlegmatic shopper | Hedonist | Connoisseur |
|---|--|---|---|--|
| Generator: Available income level | Low and medium | Medium-high and high | Low and medium | Medium-high and high |
| Generator: Involvement | High degree of rational involvement | High degree of rational involvement | Higher degree of emotional involvement | Higher degree of emotional involvement |
| Principal driver | Savings | Convenience | Experience, amusement | Indulgence |
| Special behavioural characteristics | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Least loyal customer segment • Most opportunistic customer segment • Little importance of price consistency among channels when personally gaining an advantage • Frequent channel and retailer switching during purchase • Well-informed about prices before purchasing • Look for a retailer with a high level of goodwill policy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loyal customer segment: ‘Creatures of habit’ | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social media affinity • See fashion blogs as an important source of inspiration • Continually in search of upcoming brands and new retail formats • Well-informed about fashion trends before purchasing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read editorials as a source of inspiration • Follow like-minded lifestyle bloggers • Well-informed about fashion trends and brands before purchasing • Expect a high level of goodwill policy • Generally loyal customer segment, but if they experience bad service, these customers are likely to migrate to other retailers with a better perceived service |
| Perception of physical service quality | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal advice is not a decisive factor • Keen on discount clearing points | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Value efficiency of in-store purchases (i.e. no long queues, low availability of sales people, long waiting time) • Value clarity of store design and visual merchandising | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong reference to affiliation (look for like-minded people in-store, spend leisure time with friends and family) • Customer segment with the most negative perception of sales people (competence, friendliness and honesty) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek affiliation with other people, who have the same high status • Value an exclusive retail environment • Tendency to prefer in-store shopping, due to better perceived shopping experience |

| | Smart shopper | Phlegmatic shopper | Hedonist | Connoisseur |
|---|--|---|--|---|
| | | <p>in order to find items quickly</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Value tidiness of items • Attach importance to competent personal advice in-store | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tend to accept poor personal advice when purchasing a product that has high desirability and limited accessibility • Seek physical stimulation through visual merchandising ('new looks', outfit combinations) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High degree of value-orientation in relation to brand/retailer image and personal interaction • Competent and appreciative personal advice when needed • Look for sensuality as well as for aesthetic store design and visual merchandising • Haptics plays a predominant role in choosing physical channels |
| Perception of electronic service quality | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tendency to prefer online shopping because of easier price comparison and perceived lower price • Prefer instalment payments • Pay attention to free shipping and free returns online • Favour a wide range of products | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Value practical aspects of web design when purchasing online (e.g. clear layout, filter options) • Value efficiency and convenience • Delivery and return options need to be convenient; if too complicated these customers tend to reject purchase | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tendency to switch online shop after a short time when they do not find what they are looking for • Importance of practicability, clear structure and filter options • Pay attention to packaging of online purchases • Favour large assortments • Value free shipping and free returns • Tendency to order many items and have high return rates | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek electronic stimulation • Attractiveness of web design • Value visual stories and editorials • Value sophisticated packaging • Favour a smaller and customer-individual assortment • Look for personal contact when having a query |

| | Smart shopper | Phlegmatic shopper | Hedonist | Connoisseur |
|--|---|---|---|--|
| Perception of integration quality | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive impact of channel integration by means of price comparison option between channels | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Switching barriers can help to avoid cross-channel free-riding for this customer segment • Customer segment with the strongest positive impact of channel integration by means of effort, availability, price and support optimisation • Value availability check for both channels and also across channels • Value options of receiving and returning items in both channels | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Value effort optimisation since they intend to make as little effort as possible with non-emotional purchasing process elements (transaction, pick-up, return) • Demand for receiving the item as fast as possible; value different delivery options (same day, delivery in-store or at home) • Pay attention to availability check across channels | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited available time, seek the channel that can be accessed with the least effort, and value the ability to check availability across channels • Use the Internet as the research channel, but prefer to shop in-store (preference for click-and-reserve) • When purchasing online, still request personal contact in-store, if needed |

Table 1: Customer typology

Conclusion

This study suggests, that multichannel service quality is a twofold concept. It contains all of the ingredients that multichannel retailers deliver to their customers, and the outcome is that the customer perceives a high level of service quality. As the empirical findings suggest, the ingredients that the multichannel customer expects the retailer to deliver are physical stimulation, affiliation and value for the physical channel. These ingredients also include electronic stimulation and utility for the electronic channel as well as choice optimisation for integrating both channels. Thereby, the multichannel customers' service

delivery expectations contain all of the different elements of the retail mix, which are assortment, pricing and promotions, fulfilment and web and store design. As the recipients of the retailers' service delivery, customers consciously perceive the service ingredients of the physical and the electronic channels when interacting directly or indirectly with a retailer. Direct interaction involves social interaction and communication with a retailer through physical or electronic channels during the purchasing process. Indirect interaction involves social interaction and communication with a retailer through physical or electronic channels before and after the purchasing process.

In comparison, customers perceive choice optimisation more unconsciously. Multichannel customers notice a high level of connection or linkage with regard to channel integration and link it to a positive service quality perception. However, they are not able to directly associate it with certain attributes. As the conceptualisation clarifies, multichannel customers do not use all the different channels during every purchase, as they do not always switch channels. Thus, the two channels function without their integration as single channels, where customer service quality perception uniquely and exclusively consists of the service quality provided through the channel they select. However, channel integration can be considered the essence of competitive advantage for multichannel retailers.

The presented catalyst model of multichannel service quality is a dynamic concept. It gives meaning to the contextual customer's service experience. Therefore, it considers the three main elements of multichannel service quality separately. These are physical, electronic and integration qualities. Furthermore, it considers the different elements of the retail mix separately. This is deemed necessary since multichannel customers have different needs that are even subject to change in different purchase situations. Therefore, the presented catalyst model of multichannel service quality acknowledges the dynamic nature of the multichannel service quality phenomenon, as it is able to conceptualise different customer types and purchase situations. The constant of this model, however, is integration quality. Across the different customer types and purchase situations, multichannel customers seek choice optimisation when performing multichannel purchases.

Managerial implications

This paper sets out a number of managerial implications. First, since multichannel customers tend to constantly adjust their choices regarding retailer and retail channel during purchase, it is important for multichannel retailers to set up coherent and integrated sales and communication strategies across channels. Retailers should cease working in silo organisations where one stream is in charge of online activities and another is in charge of offline activities. The different departments need to work in a cross-disciplinary manner, since multichannel customers expect a seamless shopping experience.

Secondly, multichannel retailers should implement managers who are in charge of the 'integration' of the different channels, since it is a strategic managerial decision for multichannel retailers to find the 'right' level of integration, especially regarding assortment, pricing and promotions, fulfilment, and web and store design. In so doing, they are able to fully leverage the competitive advantage of both channels.

Thirdly, as this paper suggests, sales people still play a predominant role in the offline channel as a source of affiliation and furthermore to provide value. However, several respondents expressed dissatisfaction with regard to the sales team. The more accessible a fashion product is online and in-store, the more likely customers are to migrate to other retailers and/or retail channels when dissatisfied with the sales experience. Retailers need to train their sales teams to address the aforementioned attributes. Sales people need to be better adjusted to the needs of 'enlightened' multichannel customers who already possess knowledge when entering a store. Furthermore, sales people are supposed to address the various requests of the individualistic buying habits of multichannel customers.

Fourthly, the changed behaviour of multichannel customers makes it necessary to identify a new approach towards service quality. At present, multichannel retailers still tend to take a single-channel approach, and do not consider the distinctive requirements of multiple-channel systems. So managers of multichannel retailers should not only place emphasis on enhancing and improving physical and/or electronic service quality, but also shift towards the integration of the service offers of both channels. The overall purchasing experience needs to be consistent for the customer at all moments of contact between the retailer and the customer in order to receive a seamlessly perceived service quality.

Fifthly, this paper suggests that multichannel fashion retailers should analyse their customer base by means of the four multichannel customer types proposed by this paper, namely (1) phlegmatic, (2) smart, (3) hedonist, and (4) connoisseur shoppers. There is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ solution, since each customer group has distinctive drivers, behavioural characteristics and perceptions regarding physical, electronic and integration quality. Thus, the fundamental question multichannel retailers should be able to answer is: ‘Which specific customer type do we want to target?’ in order to be able to set up an effective and successful strategy.

Limitations and future research directions

The current paper adopted a qualitative research paradigm utilising an abductive approach and an embedded case study research strategy. The social constructivist stance justified the researcher’s case study approach (Annansingh & Howell, 2016). Further, the careful selection of information-rich interview participants and the application of triangulation ensured the rigour of this paper. Therefore, the paper is able to theoretically generalise multichannel service quality in fashion retailing.

The qualitative research approach of this paper was helpful to conceptualise multichannel service quality and to develop a coherent model. However, future researchers could build on these findings and conduct quantitative research to test the paper’s findings on a larger scale. Moreover, this paper investigated multichannel service quality based on multichannel customer perceptions. Even though the literature suggests that customer perceptions are the predominant viewpoints for service quality, future research could focus on multichannel service quality based on organisational viewpoints. There are shortcomings resulting from the nature of the sample size utilised in the study that limit our generalisation of the current work. Our sample size is country-focused and driven by qualitatively theoretical approach. We believe that a further comparative study, for example, between Germany and USA, using a quantitative approach may provide more insights on the level of multichannel service quality in the fashion retail industry.

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