The Controllable Elements of the Total Retail Experience: A Study of Clothing Shoppers

N S Terblanche
Department of Business Management, University of Stellenbosch

C Boshoff
Department of Business Management, University of Port Elizabeth

ABSTRACT

Retail clothing stores continually have to adapt to marketplace demands to remain competitive. Customer retention has become a major objective for many clothing retailers. This study combines the management of a number of the controllable personal and non-personal elements that a customer are exposed to and interacts within a retail store, as part of the shopping experience. The data analysis procedures closely followed the guidelines for scale development suggested by Churchill (1979). The empirical results suggest that there are five dimensions considered important by consumers when assessing their satisfaction with a total retail experience in a clothing store. These are: merchandise value, internal store environment, personal interaction with staff, merchandise variety and complaint handling.

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1   INTRODUCTION

More sophisticated and demanding customers, domestic and foreign competition and the expanding range of choices available to customers make it increasingly difficult to retain customers over the long term. Loyal customers are increasingly regarded as the backbone of any businesses and authors such as Singh and Sirdeshmukh (2000: 150) describe loyal customers as "the emerging market-place currency for the twenty-first century".

Two of the more popular alternatives that retailers utilise to differentiate themselves from competitors are customer loyalty schemes and the delivering of exceptional service quality as part of their retailing strategy (Egan, 1999: 11; Berry, 1986; Hummel & Savitt, 1988; Reichheld & Sasser, 1990). Egan (1999: 11) has, however, cited the mixed success of loyalty schemes in retail sectors such as the fast moving consumer goods (FMCG) sector. He suggests that low acquisition and switching costs in the FMCG sector impact negatively on the

success and viability of loyalty schemes. In other words, because competitors could easily copy them, loyalty schemes have yielded only limited success as a sustainable differential advantage.

Service quality and especially SERVQUAL, the instrument developed to measure service quality, received a considerable amount of attention in the marketing literature published the past decade. The majority of the studies using or assessing the SERVQUAL instrument were executed in fairly "pure" services settings such as banking, airline reservations and credit card services. The typical retail store experience includes activities such as browsing, price comparisons, looking for merchandise, evaluating product variety and quality and interaction with store personnel – dimensions not captured by the SERVQUAL instrument. In other words, SERVQUAL in its original form has proved unsuitable to capture the unique blend of merchandise and service that typically make up a retailing experience.

If loyalty schemes and/or other individual approaches such as the management of service quality are unsatisfactory to retain customers, it might be worthwhile to consider an approach that combines the management of a number of the personal and non-personal elements that a customer are exposed to and interact with in a retail store. This so-called shopping experience is defined by Kerin, Jain & Howard (1992) as the outcome of a customer's interaction with a store's physical surroundings, personal interaction with employees and customer-related policies and practices. In other words, managing the retail experience optimally presents a further alternative to retailers as a differentiating variable.

2   THE TOTAL RETAIL EXPERIENCE

Total retail experience (TRE) has been defined as all the elements that encourage or inhibit consumers during their contact with a retailer (Berman & Evans, 2001: 18). TRE is influenced by two groups of components, namely non-controllable and controllable components. The non-controllable components consists of aspects such as the adequacy of street parking and the timing of deliveries from suppliers and taxes, all of which are either uncontrollable or a retailer can exert only limited control. The controllable components, on the other hand, comprise of a variety of elements that the retailer can control to a varying degree, such as the number and quality of salespeople on the shopping floor, the variety of brands on offer and the volume of stock on hand. The controllable elements of the TRE form the focus of this study. The retail literature suggests that the dimensions of the controllable components may be described as (Hummel & Savitt, 1988; Mazursky & Jacoby; 1985; Kerin, Jain & Howard,

1992; Westbrook, 1981; Baker, Grewal & Parasuraman, 1994; Sirohi, Mclaughlin & Wittink, 1998):

- Service quality
- Merchandise quality
- Merchandise variety and assortment
- Internal store environment
- Product prices
- Store policies

The six dimensions mentioned above have been adequately described elsewhere (Terblanche & Boshoff, 2000(a): 99-117; Terblanche & Boshoff, 2000(b): 35-41) and are briefly attended to here. Service quality consists of the five dimensions of responsiveness, reliability, empathy, assurance and tangibles and is measured with the SERVQUAL instrument. Merchandise quality refers to customers' perception of the quality of the products on offer. Merchandise variety and assortment refer to the width and depth of the merchandise offered. Internal store environment includes all those elements that contribute towards a pleasant shopping atmosphere and include elements such as shop layout, aisles that make it easy to shop, store cleanliness, well-spaced product displays and attractive décor. Product prices as a dimension aims to establish customers' perception that product prices represent good value. Store policies are those elements that are influenced by a shop's responsiveness to the customer's needs and include elements such as the return or exchange of purchases, shopping hours, payment options available and a system or process to deal with customer enquiries and/or complaints.

Two dimensions that some want to include in TRE, namely store image and store location, are not extensively dealt with in this study. Retailing literature also suggests that a favourable store image leads to store loyalty (Hirschman, 1981). Store image, in turn, has been described as consisting of the following three general factors: merchandise-related aspects, service-related aspects and pleasantness of shopping at a store (Mazursky & Jacoby, 1985). All three of these factors are captured comprehensively in TRE (Figure 1) and that loyalty is an outcome of a positive total retail experience (TRE) rather than an underlying dimension.

Although store location is normally one of the important reasons for customers frequenting a particular shop, it is not addressed in this study because in many cases, a retailer does not have complete control over store location, irrespective of whether the retailer locates in a shopping centre or a separate shopping area. For instance, over time a favourable location may deteriorate in value due to changes in road patterns, traffic congestion, the opening of competitive shops and changing demands for parking.

The theoretical structure of the TRE is illustrated in Figure 1. The shaded dimensions in Figure 1 are the ones included in the first empirical survey. These are dealt with in paragraph 5.

Figure 1   Schematic presentation of the theoretical structure of the total retail experience[*]
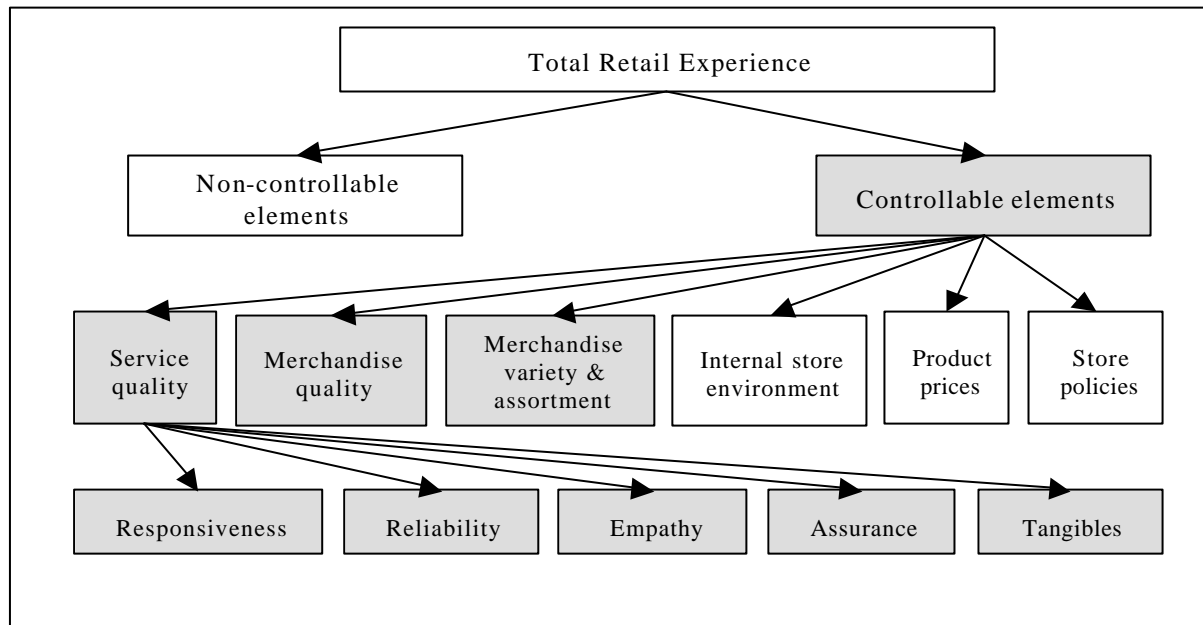
| * | Shaded areas indicate the controllable elements assessed in the first phase of the research |

3   SOME COMMENTS ON THE TYPICAL BEHAVIOUR AND EXPECTATIONS OF CLOTHING SHOPPERS

In a recent study on the importance of clothing store image attributes amongst black females, the dimensions of physical facilities, salespeople service, merchandise requests and store layout were considered as important by all the clusters of black female shoppers identified (Kleinhans, Visser, Van Aardt & Du Preez, 1998: 14-15). De Klerk, Velleman and Malherbe (1998: 15-24) also found that the appearance of and interaction with salespeople are important determinants of whether a female customer will take advice from and return for further purchases. A study amongst male consumers found the following five store attributes as most important (in order of most important to less important) to male shoppers when they shop for clothing (Torres, Summers & Belleau, 2001: 207).

- Price of merchandise
- Quality of merchandise

- Selection of merchandise
- Brand carried in the store
- Friendly personnel

In earlier studies the quality and knowledge of sales personnel were also found to be very important store attributes for clothing shoppers (Mahoney & Sternquist, 1989: 101-11; Thorpe & Avery, 1983: 35-41). In a study of speciality store customers, Thorpe and Avery (1983) found that customers were willing to travel longer distances and pay higher prices in order to be served by knowledgeable sales personnel. Westbrook (1981: 68-85) found that the most influential components of retail satisfaction were satisfaction with stores' sales personnel, special store sales, products/services purchased at the store, store environment and value-priced relationship offered by the store. The above-mentioned findings offer some explanation as to why middle and higher price clothing shops, in their attempts to entice shoppers to browse and spend time in the shop, use a free-flowing or boutique layout pattern because it creates a friendly atmosphere in which unplanned or impulse purchases are enhanced (Berman & Evans, 2001: 613). All of the above-mentioned attributes of clothing shops that have been found to be important to consumers, are included in or covered by the dimensions of TRE.

4   THE OBJECTIVES OF THIS STUDY

The main objective of this study is to develop a multi-item instrument to measure customer satisfaction with the controllable components of the total retail experience. This article reports on the first two phases of a long-term study attending to the controllable elements of the total retail experience for shoppers and deals specifically with the findings of the second phase in respect of clothing shoppers. Based on the disconfirmation paradigm (Oliver, 1980), the first two phases of this three-phase process is to identify the dimensions of importance to consumers when assessing their satisfaction with a total retail experience. Only once these dimensions have been identified and empirically confirmed, can there be proceeded to the development of a valid and reliable instrument to measure customer satisfaction with the total retail experience at retailer or shop level.

5   METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLE OF THE FIRST PHASE

The first phase of the empirical research was undertaken to assess which dimensions are of importance to retail shoppers when assessing their customer satisfaction at shop level. Based on the theory, the three dimensions of TRE

shaded in Figure 1 (service quality, merchandise quality and merchandise variety and assortment) were investigated during this first phase of the study. Because of the size of the complete TRE model and the large number of items measuring the three dimensions, as well as the distinct possibility of respondent fatigue, it was decided to include only three of the dimensions in the first empirical phase of the project. All 22 items of SERVQUAL were used to measure service quality. The merchandise quality dimension was measured with three merchandise quality items suggested by Finn & Kayandé (1997) as well as two self-generated items. Merchandise variety and assortment was measured with a self-generated five-item instrument. All items were linked to a 7-point Likert-type scale.

The sampling procedure used in the first phase was a combination of judgement, convenience and random sampling. Four retail industries, namely fast food, clothing, supermarkets, and hardware stores were selected for the sample. These industries were studied because they offer a combination of both service and physical products and their market offer cannot be described as a "pure" service or independent of any service component. Two organisations in each industry were then selected on a convenience basis and requested to participate in the study. Individual respondents (customers) to be interviewed were selected on a random basis. Personal interviews, using a structured questionnaire, were conducted with customers of firms in these four industries on the retailer's premises following a shopping visit. Every fourth customer leaving a shop was approached to take part in the survey. A total of 2 063 questionnaires were completed. In the scale purification process that followed, a Maximum Likelihood Exploratory Factor Analysis was conducted specifying a Direct Quartimin Oblique Rotation (Jennrich & Sampson, 1966) of the original factor matrix using the computer programme BMDP (Jennrich & Sampson, 1966). This was followed by an assessment of the internal consistency of each dimension as suggested by Churchill (1979).

6   RESULTS OF THE FIRST EMPIRICAL SURVEY

Several different factor solutions were considered during the scale purification process. The most interpretable factor structure (factor loading exceeding 0.4 and no cross-loadings) to emerge, was a 3-factor solution. All the factors in the 3-factor solution had Eigen values above 1.00 and a sufficient number of items loading on them to a significant (0.40) extent (Hair, Anderson, Tatham & Black, 1998). The three factors that emerged were named personal interaction (measured by 3 assurance, 4 empathy, 2 reliability and 3 responsiveness items of SERVQUAL), physical cues (measured by 1 reliability and 2 tangibles items of SERVQUAL and 4 merchandise quality items) and variety (represented by 5

variety items). The items that did load to a significant extent or did not demonstrate sufficient discriminant validity were deleted. The remaining 24 items were then subjected to a reliability analysis to assess the internal consistency of the instrument. All three factors, as well as the overall instrument returned Cronbach alpha coefficients above the 0.7 level suggested by Peterson (1994). The three remaining empirical factors and their associated items are listed in Table 1.

The outcome of the first survey was that Figure 1 had to be re-configured slightly as shown in Figure 2 to reflect the results of the scale purification process (Table 1).

Table 1   Empirical factor structure: Survey 1

Empirical dimension	**Items measuring the TRE dimensions**
Personal interaction (α = 0.937)	Employees of XYZ should always be willing to help me
	XYZ employees should give me personal attention
	Employees of XYZ should provide me with prompt service
	Employees of XYZ should be consistently courteous
	XYZ should give me individual attention
	Employees of XYZ should never be too busy to respond to my requests
	When I have a problem, XYZ should shows sincere interest in solving it
	I should have confidence in XYZs employees
	Employees of XYZ should understand my specific needs
	Employees of XYZ should have the knowledge to answer my questions
	XYZ should have my best interests at heart
	XYZ should provide its services at the time it promises to do so
Physical cues (α = 0.863)	The products available at XYZ should be of good quality
	XYZs should offer products of good quality
	XYZ should be known for good quality products
	Materials associated with XYZs service (such as shopping bags, till slips or catalogues) should look good

Table 1 continued

| Empirical dimension	Items measuring the TRE dimensions
	XYZs products should not have defects
	XYZs physical facilities should look good
	XYZ should provide error-free sales transaction records (till slips, credit card slips, accounts)
Merchandise variety and assortment ($\alpha = 0.857$)	XYZ should offer me a satisfactory choice of products
	XYZ should have all the products that I want to buy
	XYZ should offer a wide variety of products
	The products of XYZ should cater for a wide range of preferences
	XYZ should make products available in a variety of sizes

7   THE SECOND SURVEY

A second empirical survey was then conducted as suggested by Churchill (1979). The six items with the highest factor loadings that measured personal interaction were retained for the second empirical survey. Three of the items used to measure physical cues measured product quality and it was decided to retain only one of these three items as one item was enough to measure product quality. The following item was added to measure physical cues: "Products that function the way they are supposed to". Two new items, apart from the five that were used to measure merchandise variety and assortment in the first survey, were added for the second empirical survey. These two items were: "A choice of different brand names" and "A good selection of well-known brands". A total of sixteen items remaining from the scale purification process of phase 1 as well the three new items (in total nineteen items measuring personal interaction, physical cues and merchandise variety and assortment) were combined with items to measure the three remaining (then untested) dimensions of TRE, namely internal store environment (9 items), product prices (5 items) and store policies (7 items).

Figure 2 is a schematic presentation of the dimensions of TRE that were subjected to empirical assessment during the second survey.

Figure 2   Schematic presentation of the dimensions of the TRE tested in the second phase of the study
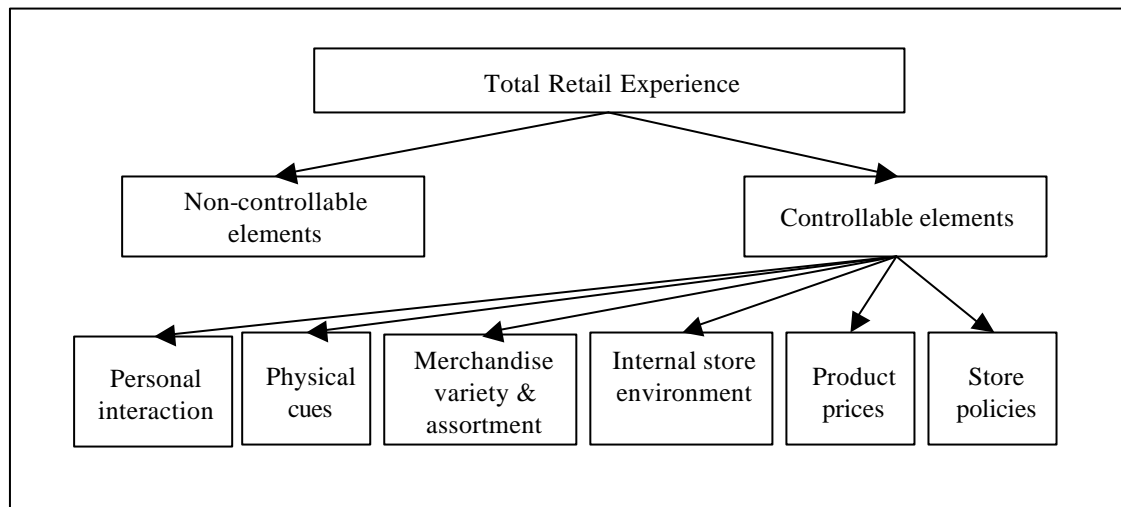
8   SAMPLE AND DATA COLLECTION: SECOND SURVEY

The sampling procedure used in the second survey was a combination of convenience and random sampling. Respondents were visitors to two regional shopping centres. Individual respondents (visitors) to be interviewed were selected on a simple random basis. Personal interviews, using a structured questionnaire, were conducted with visitors to the shopping centre after they had finished their shopping. The interviews were conducted over a period of two days to include all the different types of visitors that usually frequent these shopping centres. Respondents were asked to rate the importance of the various components of TRE on a 7-point scale where a 7 meant that the aspect under consideration is "extremely important" and a 1 meant that it is "not important". A total of 1307 questionnaires were completed.

9   EMPIRICAL RESULTS: SECOND SURVEY

The second survey data analysis procedures again closely followed the guidelines for scale development suggested by Churchill (1979). To assess the discriminant validity of the instrument a Maximum Likelihood Exploratory Factor Analysis was again conducted specifying a Direct Quartimin Oblique Rotation (Jennrich & Sampson, 1966) of the original factor matrix.

Although it was expected that a six-factor solution would emerge (in line with Figure 2) several different factor solutions were considered. The most interpretable factor structure (factor loading exceeding 0.4 and no cross-loadings) to emerge, was a 5-factor solution (Table 2). Four of the five factors in

Table 2 had Eigen values above 1,00 and a sufficient number of items loading on them to a significant (0.40) extent (Hair, Anderson, Tatham & Black, 1998). Two of the three factors retained from the first survey (personal interaction and product variety and assortment) remained stable during the second survey. Of the "new" dimensions added for the second survey internal store environment and store policies emerged as separate factors as expected. Some of the items expected to measure physical and product prices, however, loaded on a common factor that was labeled merchandise value (Table 2) whilst the internal store environment items that remained, all measured complaint handling and the dimension was subsequently called complaint handling.

Table 2   Rotated factor loadings

Items	Factor 1 Merchandise variety	Factor 2 Merchandise value	Factor 3 Personal interaction	Factor 4 Complaint handling	Factor 5 Internal store environment
VAR7	**0.742**	0.036	0.019	-0.040	0.012
VAR3	**0.701**	-0.063	0.057	-0.102	-0.005
VAR6	**0.682**	0.109	-0.043	0.094	-0.040
VAR4	**0.595**	0.133	0.007	0.045	-0.045
VAR5	**0.564**	0.054	0.026	0.133	0.026
ENV8	**0.523**	-0.121	0.026	0.073	0.202
PHYS1	-0.079	**0.631**	0.026	0.021	0.010
PRICE1	0.013	**0.585**	0.074	-0.018	0.056
PHYS2	0.038	**0.546**	0.042	0.080	0.086
PRICE2	0.139	**0.532**	0.039	0.175	-0.035
VAR1	0.149	**0.484**	-0.006	-0.124	0.172
PHYS3	0.025	**0.470**	-0.014	0.182	-0.019
PRICE3	0.172	**0.463**	0.173	0.181	-0.118
PERS3	0.100	-0.173	**0.663**	-0.002	0.027
PERS2	-0.105	0.201	**0.636**	-0.014	0.015
PERS4	0.089	0.004	**0.583**	0.139	0.023
PERS6	0.140	-0.021	**0.523**	0.272	-0.011
PERS1	0.006	0.156	**0.440**	-0.070	0.037
PERS5	-0.031	0.018	**0.423**	0.288	0.119
POL6	0.033	0.021	0.040	**0.731**	0.097
POL7	0.064	0.070	0.087	**0.660**	0.053
POL5	0.036	0.129	0.044	**0.620**	-0.006
ENV1	-0.032	0.099	0.042	0.037	**0.773**
ENV7	0.250	0.012	0.091	0.224	**0.400**
Eigenvalues	8.18	2.03	1.60	1.21	0.96
Cronbach Alpha	0.83	0.81	0.81	0.82	0.65

9.1 Reliability assessment

The assessment of the proposed instrument's discriminant validity by means of an exploratory factor analysis was followed by an assessment of the internal consistency of each dimension as suggested by Churchill (1979). As indicated at the bottom of Table 2, four of the five factors/dimensions returned Cronbach Alpha values above the customary cut-off of 0.7 (Peterson, 1994). The Cronbach Alpha value for the whole instrument was 0.914

9.2 Convergent validity

Any measuring instrument should be both reliable and valid (Churchill, 1979). A variety of different types of validity should be considered before any claims of validity can be made (Tull & Hawkins, 1993). To test the convergent validity of the TRE instrument the total TRE score (mean 151.45, SD18.43) was correlated with scores that was expected to measure perceptions of adequacy of parking facilities (PARK), satisfaction with the special in-store promotions (SPEC) and the image of the company (IMAGE). It was expected that consumer perceptions of these three retail issues would be positively associated with satisfaction with the total retail experience (TRE).

The empirical results reported in Table 3 confirm this contention. The Pearson correlation coefficients shown in Table 3 reveal a consistent pattern of significant positive correlations with the total TRE scores, namely perceptions of adequacy of parking facilities (PARK, mean 6.24, SD 1.23), satisfaction with special in-store promotions (SPEC, mean 5.33, SD 1.52) and the image of the company (IMAGE, mean 5.72, SD 1.40), confirming the convergent validity of the TRE instrument.

Table 3 Correlation matrix

	TRE	PARK	SPEC	IMAGE
TRE	1.00000 0.0			
PARK	0.43859 0.0001	1.0000 0.0		
SPEC	0.50349 0.0001	0.26448 0.0001	1.00000 0.0	
IMAGE	0.46983 0.0001	0.3506 0.0001	0.49265 0.0001	1.0000.0

9.3   Construct validity

To assess the construct validity of the instrument a confirmatory factor analysis was conducted using LISREL 8.30 (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 2000). The results summarised in Table 4 and Figure 3 suggest a close fit of the model to the data (χ^2 = 1113.9; df = 242; RMSEA = 0.057; GFI = 0.925; AGFI = 0.907; and ECVI = 1.07). The close fit of the model to the data provides additional evidence of the construct validity of the proposed instrument for clothing shoppers.

Figure 3   Empirical results of Survey 2: Clothing
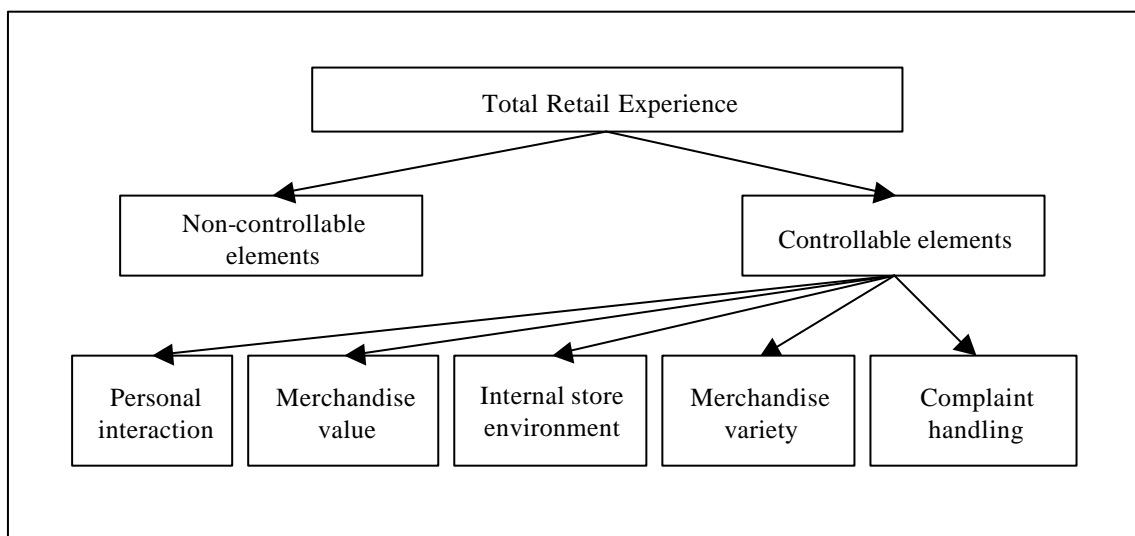
Table 4   Model fit indices

Chi-square	1113.9
Df	242
RMSEA	0.057
ECVI	1.07
Normed fit index (NFI)	0.901
Comparative fit index (CFI)	0.92
Standardised RMR	0.047
GFI	0.925
AGFI	0.907
PGFI	0.746

10   FINDINGS

This study attempted to develop a generic instrument that could be used to measure customer satisfaction with the controllable elements of the in-store shopping experience of clothing shoppers. The final questionnaire consists of 23 items measuring 5 dimensions of the in-store shopping experience that adequately tap the in-store retail experience of clothing shoppers, compared to customer expectations.

These five dimensions are merchandise value, internal store environment, personal interaction with staff, merchandise variety and complaint handling. Clothing retailers who whish to enhance the customer satisfaction of their shoppers will have to perform at exceptional levels on these dimensions to improve their customer satisfaction ratings and to differentiate themselves from competing clothing retailers.

11   CONCLUSION

This study reports on two phases of a long-term study on the controllable elements of the total retail experience. The eventual outcome of this stream of research is to develop a reliable and valid instrument to measure customer satisfaction with the controllable components of the total retail experience at store level. Closely following the guidelines for multi-item scale development suggested by Churchill (1979) and based on the result of two empirical surveys we conclude that there are five dimensions of importance to clothing shoppers when assessing their satisfaction with a total retail experience. These dimensions are merchandise value, internal store environment, personal interaction with staff, merchandise variety and complaint handling. These five dimensions and thus the total retail experience, are measured by means of 23 items (see Appendix A). The proposed instrument in its current form demonstrates high levels of reliability, discriminant validity, convergent validity and construct validity. Consistent with the guidelines suggested by Churchill (1979) the instrument in its current form needs to be subjected to a third empirical assessment to provide conclusive evidence of the its psychometric properties and construct validity in particular.

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APPENDIX A

Items to measure the total retail experience of customers

Merchandise variety	
VAROS1	A good selection of well-known brands
VAROS2	A choice of different brand names
VAROS3	A wide variety of products
VAROS4	A variety of brand names that are available in many different sizes
VAROS5	Products that cater for a wide range of preferences
Merchandise value	
MEVAL1	Products that function the way they are supposed to
MEVAL2	Reasonable prices
MEVAL3	Products of good quality
MEVAL4	Prices that offer value for money
MEVAL5	A satisfactory choice of products
MEVAL6	Products that are free from defects and flaws
MEVAL7	Products at prices that represent good value
Personal interaction	
PERSIN1	Staff that give me personal attention
PERSIN2	Staff are always willing to help me
PERSIN3	Staff that provide me with prompt service
PERSIN4	Staff that are never too busy to assist me
PERSIN5	Staff that understand my specific needs
PERSIN6	Staff that are courteous
Complaint handling	
COHAN1	An effective means of dealing with customer enquiries
COHAN2	Staff that efficiently deal with customer complaints
COHAN3	A fair system for the handling of complaints
Internal store environment	
STENV1	A pleasant shopping atmosphere
STENV2	A convenient shopping environment