

Effects of store attributes on retail patronage behaviors: Evidence from activewear specialty stores

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Chang, Hyo Jung, Cho, Hyeon Jeong, Turner, Thomas, Gupta, Megha, & Watchravesringkan, Kittichai (2015), "An examination of store attributes on retail patronage behaviors: Evidence from activewear specialty stores," *Journal of Fashion Marketing & Management*, 19(2), 136-153.

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Abstract:

Purpose The purpose of this paper is to identify selected store attributes of activewear specialty retailers that impact consumers' satisfaction, which in turn influence word-of-mouth (WOM) and retail patronage behavior.

Design/methodology/approach Using an on-site store intercept, 150 responses were collected to answer hypothesized relationships. An exploratory factor analysis was first performed followed by a confirmatory factor analysis and a structural equation analysis.

Findings Results revealed that sales employees and store atmosphere attributes of activewear specialty stores had a positive influence on consumer satisfaction, which in turn had a direct impact on WOM and repatronage intentions for activewear specialty stores. Therefore, in order to satisfy consumers, activewear specialty retailers need to ensure that they provide an attractive and pleasant shopping atmosphere. Furthermore, satisfied consumers are likely to spread positive WOM about the retailer and display their intention to revisit the store in the future. The authors conclude by discussing the results and suggest implications and future research directions.

Originality/value The findings of this research shed light on the managerial implications for activewear specialty retailers with regards to marketing strategies and consumers' attitudes.

Keywords: satisfaction | consumers | store attributes | activewear | repatronage behavior | WOM

Article:

Introduction

The specialty retail segment, accounting for 35.1 percent of the overall US retail market, is a lucrative sector (MarketLine, 2011). Many of today's specialty retailers have become successful

by personalizing service and selecting merchandise targeted toward a particular market segment (Gagliano and Hathcote, 1994). Among the various product types offered by specialty retailers, apparel (e.g. clothes, footwear, and accessories) is the second leading specialty retailing category (Euromonitor International, 2014; NPD Group, 2007) and the competition among these retailers continues to grow. Considering the profitability generated by the specialty apparel retail market, an understanding of factors that influence consumer retail patronage behaviors in specialty apparel retail stores is important because such information can be employed to develop effective retail strategies.

Existing evidence from previous studies showed the importance of consumers' evaluation of store attributes on consumer retail patronage behaviors (Baker et al., 2002; Pan and Zinkhan, 2006; Zentes et al., 2008). For example, researchers have reported that store attributes related to service quality (e.g. friendliness and knowledge of employees) and products (e.g. price and quality) are significant determinants for consumer satisfaction (Sivadas and Baker-Prewitt, 2000; Theodoridis and Chatzipanagiotou, 2009). Furthermore, the relationship between consumer satisfaction and repatronage behaviors has been investigated extensively in many retail studies (Carpenter, 2008) because of its potential to determine a firm's financial success. Although many researchers have addressed the relationships between store attributes and consumer satisfaction in different retail contexts (Sivadas and Baker-Prewitt, 2000; Theodoridis and Chatzipanagiotou, 2009), relatively few have investigated the relationships among store attributes, consumer satisfaction, and consumer repatronage behaviors simultaneously in the context of an activewear specialty retailer.

Activewear can be defined as apparel made for sports and recreation involvement and it now includes casual clothes worn by anyone for daily activities (Ko et al., 2012). Also, any clothing product purchased with the intent for the use in active sports is called activewear (Newbery, 2009). Thus, apparel stores focus on carrying activewear (i.e. apparel designed for sports, exercise, and outdoor activities) are defined as activewear specialty stores (Tong and Su, 2014). The retailing in the activewear specialty market is considered as an important business segment because they often include apparel purchases for everyday use as well as active sports or physical participation (Wray and Hodges, 2008). As various sports activities (e.g. outdoor sports or road running races for special causes) have seen substantial growth, consumer participation in these activities has grown as well (Gao, 2012). With this importance of the activewear industry, researchers need to explore the significant factors influencing activewear apparel shoppers' buying intentions and actual buying behaviors.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to identify selected store attributes of activewear specialty retailers that impact consumers' retail patronage behaviors. To achieve the research purpose, the study seeks to first, investigate the relationships between selected store attributes and consumer satisfaction; and second, examine the relationships between consumer satisfaction and consumer retail patronage intentions as measured by word-of-mouth (WOM) and repatronage intentions. An activewear specialty store was chosen because it represents the fastest-growing segment of the specialty apparel store market based on the trend of combining fashionable attributes and as practical purpose (NPD Group, 2007).

Literature review and development of hypotheses

Activewear market

The activewear retail segment is different from other non-fashion/apparel segments because of the importance of both practical and fashion needs of the products (Chi and Kilduff, 2011). As one of the dynamic apparel categories, overall the sportswear market experienced growth of 4 percent or higher in every year from 2000 to 2013 in the US (Euromonitor International, 2014). According to Euromonitor International (2014), the global sportswear market grew by more than 7.5 percent in 2012 and is expected to experience incremental sales of \$55 billion during 2013-2017 time frame. Therefore, the global sportswear market growth has motivated a number of retailers to enter the category at the casual end (Euromonitor International, 2014).

The high demand for activewear is influenced by lifestyle and disposable income (Wray and Hodges, 2008). The trend of consumer' health-conscious lifestyle has led that more people participate in sports and outdoor activities to promote healthy lifestyles and alleviate health risks such as obesity (Stamatakis and Chaudhury, 2008). According to 2014 Outdoor Recreation Participation Topline Report by the Outdoor Foundation, Americans participated in at least one outdoor activity and about 50 percent of all Americans aged six and older enjoyed the outdoors in 2013 (Outdoor Foundation, 2014). Given the continued health and wellness trends in the US market, the activewear goods have significantly gained popularity, which is different from other non-fashion/apparel segments. The steady rise in disposable income levels has also increased the quality, quantity, and frequency of sporting-goods purchases (Wray and Hodges, 2008). The US Bureau of Economic Analysis forecasts real disposable personal income increases of 2.2 percent in 2014 and 3.6 percent in 2015. As disposable income increases, consumers are more willing to invest in or upgrade the outdoor activity equipment with apparel (Michman and Mazze, 2006).

Adding to the increase in healthier lifestyles and disposable income levels is the increase in efforts of the innovation of products and the industries' collaborations in order to sustain or grow their margins (Chi and Kilduff, 2011). The textile industry continues to develop innovative specialized garments, such as wet suits for swimming, diving, or surfing and apparel for skiing (Euromonitor International, 2014). Furthermore, the growing popularity of running activity has led firms to develop barefoot-like running shoes, such as Nike's Free and Vibram's FiveFingers designs, which have prompted strong sales. The collaboration between Nike and Apple contributes to innovation footwear which measures and records the distance and pace of a walk or run (i.e. Nike+iPod Sports Kit) (Shoul and Kerris, 2006). This effort to innovate these products has led the activewear market to a higher constant value growth while the average unit prices of typical apparel goods have stayed flat or declined sharply (Euromonitor International, 2014).

Lastly, the increase in sports participation by females has enhanced the growth for the apparel sector in the activewear market (Wray and Hodges, 2008). Activewear includes sweatshirts, pants, shorts, and t-shirts for various sports, such as yoga, tennis, basketball, jogging and golf (Newbery, 2009). This apparel may be worn as a casual fashion outfit beyond participation in sports or physical activity. In addition, the increase of the baby boomer population concerned with a health-conscious lifestyle has led to more popularity of outdoor activities (Wray and Hodges, 2008).

The stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) model

The original S-O-R model was developed in 1974 by Mehrabian and Russell to describe store attributes that influence the consumer behavior and was revised by Belk (1975) to apply the model to the apparel retail environment and consumers' behavioral responses. Later, the S-O-R model was modified to include variables that influence consumer's decision to purchase products in retail stores (Sherman et al., 1997).

In the classic S-O-R model (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974), the stimulus is that which affects the internal state of an individual. The conceptualization of stimulus as that, which arouses, stimulates to action, or increases action has been accepted in literature (e.g. Bagozzi, 1980; Belk, 1975). When referring to a consumer decision-making process, the stimulus can be similarly conceptualized as those external factors associated with the store environments. Within the modified S-O-R framework, stimulus refers to the influence that stimulates the individual and is the factor that affects internal and organism states (Eroglu et al., 1999). In this study, store attributes are used as stimuli since these affect individuals' satisfaction.

In the original S-O-R model of consumer behavior (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974), organism can be defined as internal processes and structures intervening between external stimuli to the person and the final responses emitted. Consistent with this definition, consumer satisfaction is conceptualized as the organism component in the current study. According to the S-O-R paradigm, an organism can be represented by affective or cognitive states and processes, which mediate the relationship between the stimulus and the individuals' behavioral responses. Therefore, this study investigates the consumer satisfaction, an organism, as an antecedent of the actual behavior of consumers.

Bagozzi (1986) defined responses as the outcome or final action toward the organism, such as emotional reactions from consumers. This includes psychological reactions and/or behavioral reactions, such as actual buying behavior. The response in the S-O-R paradigm represents the final decisions of consumers, which can be either approach or avoidance behaviors (Donovan and Rossiter, 1982; Sherman et al., 1997). This study examines consumers' patronage behaviors, such as WOM and store repatronage intentions, as a response.

General store attributes

Store attributes can be defined as retail environments which stimulate a consumer's desire to purchase, and these include product, service, and store qualities (Kotler, 1973-1974). The retail store attributes have been found to be one of significant inputs into the consumer's perceptions of global store image and overall attitudes toward a store (Darden et al., 1983). Also, store attributes can be considered as the conscious design of a shopping environment to produce specific emotional effects of consumers that enhance their purchase probability (Zhou and Wong, 2003). Tai and Fung (1997) found that store attributes are positively related to the level of pleasure that consumers experience in the store. Store attributes can be described as ambient (i.e. non-visual conditions such as store atmosphere and convenience), design (i.e. visual characteristics such as product quality), and social factors (e.g. human variables such as attitudes of retail employees) (Turley and Milliman, 2000).

Three major store attributes and consumer satisfaction

Three major categories of store attributes have been found to influence consumer retail patronage behaviors: product-related, service quality-related, and store-related attributes (Zeithaml, 1988). Product-related factors pertain to product features and attributes, such as price, product quality, and assortment of choices. Several studies have suggested consumer patronage behaviors are driven by the price and quality of merchandise as well as the assortment of merchandise (Dhar et al., 2001; Dodds et al., 1991; Grewal et al., 1998). For example, Grewal et al. (1998) mentioned that a retailer's standing in the market and a consumer's selection within a store are determined by the quality of the merchandise offered by the retailer. Furthermore, other researchers (Darley and Lim, 1993; Dhar et al., 2001) stated that consumers rely on the price and quality of merchandise when making a purchase. In addition, it is reported that a variety of merchandise helps retailers attract more consumers to visit the store and induce them to make purchases when in the store (Dhar et al., 2001; Rolls et al., 1981). Some researchers have found that the quality of merchandise sold was considered a major determinant of consumer satisfaction (Selnes, 1993). This study focuses on price, product quality, and product assortment as product-related attributes because activewear needs to have reasonable price, good quality, and broad assortment component to make consumers be satisfied when they are involved in actual sports participation. Compared to fashion apparel, activewear apparel requires more price, quality, and assortment components to meet the needs of consumers (Rahulan et al., 2013).

Service quality-related factors deal specifically with store employees. Huang (2009) defines service quality as the total characteristics of service that satisfies one's needs. Retail service quality turns out to be an effective measure to differentiate one retailer from another (Reichheld and Sasser, 1990). Schiffman and Kanuk (2000) stated that it is important for retailers to know how consumers interact with employees in the shopping environment because oftentimes consumers are more likely to depend on salespeople's expertise when they compare alternatives and make decisions about specialty goods (Pan and Zinkhan, 2006). Thus, quality store service emphasized service delivery with positive responsiveness, accessibility, and courtesy by salespeople (Schneider, 1990). The positive feelings that consumers experience when interacting with friendly employees will result in positive consumer satisfaction. Also, employees' expertise influences consumers' trust and may influence consumers' overall satisfaction (Smith and Barclay, 1997). Therefore, this study focuses on personal interaction with salespeople as a service quality-related attribute. Activewear apparel consumers need salespeople's expertise and knowledge to explain the product attributes, so that they can choose the right product depending on their sports involvement (Rahulan et al., 2013). Moreover, consumers who shop in activewear stores will be more likely to be satisfied when expert salespeople can explain sports' products attributes and usage. Thus, this study focuses on employee's behaviors and expertise as service quality-related attributes as employees' positive attitudes and expertise about sporting products are positively related to consumers' satisfaction (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2000).

Store-related factors involve activities and environment related to a retail store, such as the stores' atmosphere, image, and convenience. A consumer's impression of a store is greatly influenced by the store environment. The store's image consists of the overall consumer perception of the store related to a number of factors that are linked to the store's personality or a feeling associated with a particular store (Porter and Claycomb, 1997).

Store atmosphere strictly deals with the physical attributes of the store. Kotler (1973-1974) suggested the term *atmospherics* to represent intended management and constructing of

environmental cues. The store environment represents the most imperative channel through which retailers can communicate with consumers (Seock and Bailey, 2009).

In terms of store convenience, Pan and Zinkhan (2006) describe it as “a key benefit that shoppers seek in the modern environment” (p. 231). Eastlick and Feinberg (1999) indicated that convenience plays an important role for customers in choosing a store. It is important for retailers to choose store locations and operating hours that are convenient for their target market. Wirtz et al. (2005) reported that a pleasant retail environment had a positive effect on consumer satisfaction. Therefore, this study focuses on store image, store atmosphere, store convenience as store-related attributes. Whether stores have pleasant environment or not, will influence consumers’ satisfaction of the store. Also, convenience of the stores location will be another important factor for consumers to decide their store choices.

Consumer satisfaction is defined as “a psychological process of evaluating outcomes based on predetermined expectations” (Hutcheson and Moutinho, 1998, p. 706) and further suggests that a large gap between a consumer’s expectation level and fulfillment of those expectations will result in a greater level of dissatisfaction. Thus, the cognitive reaction toward retail environments (i.e. store attributes) can be explained by consumers’ satisfaction/dissatisfaction levels (Sivadas and Baker-Prewitt, 2000). Therefore, this study hypothesized that store attributes (i.e. product-related, service quality-related, and store-related attributes) are significantly related to consumer satisfaction. Based on the above information, we proposed that:

- H1a.* Consumer satisfaction will be positively influenced by product-related attributes of an activewear store.
- H1b.* Consumer satisfaction will be positively influenced by service quality-related attributes of an activewear store.
- H1c.* Consumer satisfaction will be positively influenced by store-related attributes of an activewear store.

Consumer satisfaction and consumer patronage behaviors

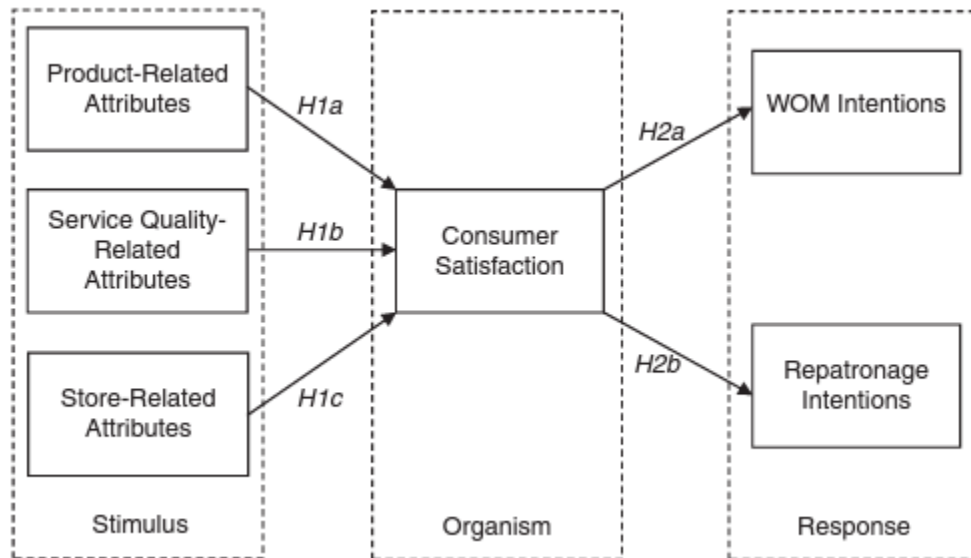
Previous studies generally measured consumers’ patronage behaviors in terms of WOM and store repatronage intentions (Carpenter, 2008; Reichheld and Teal, 1996). WOM is defined as person-to-person communication between a perceived communicator and a receiver regarding a brand, a product, or a service (Harrison-Walker, 2001). WOM is widely known as a significant factor which influences consumer decision-making; it can be either positive or negative (Keller and Fay, 2009). This powerful informal communication tool can persuade consumers to make purchasing decisions by offering others’ experiences and recommendations related to a store or a product (Okazaki, 2008). WOM is more influential for people who have high, perceived risks and less information about their choice of a store or a product. Thus, WOM is viewed as an essential component in determining consumers’ purchase decisions.

Furthermore, store repatronage behavior refers to the likelihood that the consumer will revisit the store in the future (Tsai, 2001). Several studies have reported a positive relationship between consumer satisfaction and consumer repatronage behavior in retail contexts (Carpenter, 2008; Grace and O’Cass, 2005). Thus, it is important to understand consumers’ intentions to return to the stores they visited. Hence, we expected that:

- H2a.* Consumer patronage behaviors related to WOM will be positively influenced by consumer satisfaction.
- H2b.* Consumer patronage behaviors related to store repatronage intentions will be positively influenced by consumer satisfaction.

The conceptual framework

Based on the S-O-R model and literature review, Figure 1 presents a schematic depiction of the conceptual model for this study. This model is built on the principles of store attributes related to products, stores, and services; consumer satisfaction; and consumer repatronage behavioral intentions. The underlying assumption is that selected store attributes affect consumers’ satisfaction, which subsequently influences their intentions to communicate positive WOM and re-patronize the store.



Method

Participants and data collection

The store-intercept survey was used for this study. A sample was gathered from consumers patronizing a selected activewear specialty store over a three-week period in a mid-sized city located in the Southeastern region of the United States. Prior to data collection, researchers requested permission from the store manager to collect data. Using an on-site store intercept survey procedure, field researchers approached shoppers who were walking in and out of the store and asked for their participation in the study. Field researchers explained the purpose of the survey and handed out the survey for them to complete when the consumers agreed to participate.

Instrument development

An initial pool of measurement items was drawn from previous research literature to properly reflect the context of the current study. The selected scales' Cronbach α values ranged from 0.70 to 0.96. Product-related attributes were measured using 12 items (three items assessing price, six items capturing merchandise quality, and three items measuring merchandise assortment) adapted from Yoo et al.'s (2000) and Kahn and Wansink's (2004) studies. Service-quality-related attributes were measured based on six items (three items assessing employee's behavior and three items capturing employee's expertise) and were adapted from Brady and Joseph (2001). For store-related attributes, 13 items were employed for measurement (seven items assessing store image, three items capturing store atmosphere, and three items reflecting store convenience) and were adapted from Grewal et al.'s (1998), Brady and Joseph's (2001), and Kim and Kang's (2001) studies. Six items measuring consumer satisfaction were adapted from Eroglu and Machleit (1990). Consumer patronage behavior was assessed using five items (one item capturing WOM intention and four items measuring repatronage intention) adapted from Porter and Claycomb (1997). All items were rated on a seven-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 7 ("strongly agree"), except consumer satisfaction, which was measured using a seven-point semantic differential scale. Demographic information was assessed including gender, ethnicity, age, income, and shopping frequency.

Results

Sample characteristics

The respondents for this study were 195 adult consumers of an activewear store. Of the total, 45 responses were incomplete, resulting in 150 usable responses and yielding a response rate of 76.9 percent. Approximately 60 percent were females and 40 percent were males. The majority of participants were Caucasian (91 percent), followed by African-American (4.1 percent). Ages ranged from 18 to 68 years with an average age of 38 years old. Nearly half of the participants held a college or university degree (45.3 percent). The highest income levels reported were between \$50,000 and \$74,999 (22 percent), followed by those with incomes between \$35,000 and \$49,999 (16 percent). The majority of participants (almost 90 percent) reported that they had visited this store one or two times during a one-month period. On average, over half of participants reported that their spending for activewear products was less than \$50 per month (55 percent). About 70 percent had purchased clothes and 85 percent had purchased apparel from an activewear specialty store previously.

Preliminary data analyses

To identify the dimensions of consumers' perceived store attributes of activewear specialty stores; an exploratory factor analysis was conducted on 31 items of store attributes using principal component analysis with Varimax rotation. A minimum eigenvalue of 1.00 was used as the criterion to extract the number of factors. Items loading greater than 0.5 on a factor were retained. In addition, any items that loaded on more than one factor with a loading value equal to or greater than 0.40 on each factor were removed from the analysis. As a result, 25 items were retained and 76.12 percent of the total variance was explained by four factors of store attributes. Factor 1,

Table I. Measurement model results

Construct/indicators	Standardized factor loading	SE	t-value	CR	AVE (%)
ζ_1 (<i>product quality</i>)				0.96	81.20
X ₁ (products are of high quality)	0.89 ^a		-		
X ₂ (quality of products is extremely high)	0.91	0.060	17.21***		
X ₃ (products would be functional)	0.95	0.056	19.09***		
X ₄ (products are reliable)	0.95	0.056	19.18***		
X ₅ (products must be of very good quality)	0.80	0.069	13.03***		
ζ_2 (<i>personal interaction</i>)				0.97	78.13
X ₆ (salespeople are friendly)	0.95 ^a	-	-		
X ₇ (salespeople are willing to help)	0.95	0.038	25.92***		
X ₈ (salespeople show me that they understand my needs)	0.93	0.040	24.49***		
X ₉ (salespeople respond quickly to my needs)	0.96	0.036	28.31***		
X ₁₀ (salespeople understand my needs)	0.96	0.035	28.51***		
X ₁₁ (salespeople are knowledgeable)	0.92	0.042	23.28***		
X ₁₂ (salespeople are able to answer questions quickly)	0.66	0.068	10.20***		
X ₁₃ (salespeople understand that I rely on their knowledge to meet my needs)	0.70	0.065	11.31***		
ζ_3 (<i>store atmosphere</i>)				0.94	74.0
X ₁₄ (store has good atmosphere)	0.85 ^a	-	-		
X ₁₅ (store's ambience is what I am looking for)	0.86	0.075	13.46***		
X ₁₆ (store understands that store atmosphere is important)	0.85	0.075	13.38***		
X ₁₇ (store is a pleasant place to shop)	0.85	0.075	13.32***		
X ₁₈ (store offers an attractive shopping experience)	0.88	0.074	14.08***		
X ₁₉ (store has good image)	0.88	0.074	14.13***		
ζ_4 (<i>store convenience</i>)				0.81	68.02
X ₂₀ (easy parking)	0.63 ^a		-		
X ₂₁ (convenient location)	0.98	0.410	3.85***		
η_1 (<i>consumer satisfaction</i>)				0.87	68.25
γ_1 (dissatisfied/satisfied)	0.80 ^a		-		
γ_2 (displeased/pleased)	0.91	0.10	11.39***		
γ_3 (unfavorable/favorable)	0.76	0.096	9.90***		
η_2 (<i>word-of-mouth intention</i>)				-	-
γ_4 (I would tell my friends about this store)	0.95 ^a	-	-		
η_3 (<i>repatronage intention</i>)				0.81	67.95
γ_4 (this is the kind of store I shop for activewear)	0.82 ^a	-	-		
γ_5 (I would purchase activewear products from this specialty store in the future)	0.83	0.23	4.37***		

Notes: CR, composite reliability; AVE, average variance extracted. a First λ path was set to 1, therefore, no SE's or t-values are given. *p \leq 0.05; **p \leq 0.01; ***p \leq 0.001

reflecting product-related attributes, consisted of five items and was labeled product quality ($\alpha=0.96$). Factor 2, reflecting service-quality-related attributes, consisted of eleven items and was labeled personal interaction ($\alpha=0.94$). Factors 3 and 4, reflecting store-related attributes and consisting of six items and three items, respectively, were labeled store atmosphere ($\alpha=0.90$) and store convenience ($\alpha=0.70$), respectively. All dimensions of store attributes revealed acceptable reliability. Additionally, the reliabilities of satisfaction and repatronage intention were deemed satisfactory as well with α values of 0.93 and 0.85, respectively. However, the reliability of WOM measurement was not reported because the measure consisted of only one item.

Measurement model. We followed preliminary analysis with the two-step procedure recommended by Anderson and Gerbing (1988) to establish measurement and structural model. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed via LISREL 8.72 on six 29-item constructs using maximum likelihood estimation in the analysis and the sample covariance matrix as input prior to incorporating the structural restrictions (Joreskog and Sorbom, 1993). According to the recommendations suggested by Joreskog and Sorbom (1993), a conservative error variance was established for the WOM intention, a single-item scale (see Table I).

Regarding psychometric properties, the composite reliability (CR) for each construct exceeded the acceptable level of 0.70 (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994) and the average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct accounted for more than 0.50 of the total variance (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Altogether, it is suggested that convergent validity is established for all constructs (Bagozzi et al., 1991). We also assessed discriminant validity among the constructs by examining whether the square correlation between two constructs was lower than the AVE for each construct (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Results revealed that these conditions were met, and therefore the constructs investigated in the study were distinct from each other, confirming discriminant validity (see Table I).

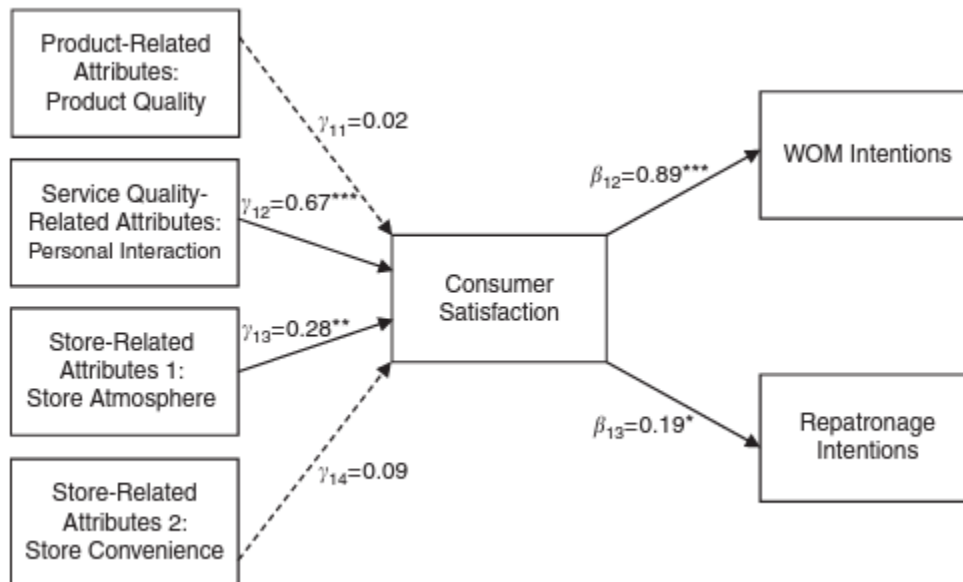
Structural model and hypotheses testing

After the measurement model was confirmed, structural equation modeling was then performed to test the hypothesized relationships. The model fit statistics revealed a $\chi^2(302)=536.55$, $p<0.001$; $\chi^2/df=1.78$; CFI=0.98; TLI=0.97; RMSEA=0.072, suggesting that the hypothesized structural relationships fit the data well. Each hypothesized relationship was examined based on path significance. H1 proposed that consumer satisfaction would be positively influenced by (a) product-related, (b) service quality-related, and (c) store-related attributes of the store. Results revealed that consumer satisfaction was not significantly influenced by product quality (product-related attributes), $\gamma_{11}=0.02$, $p>0.05$, thus, H1a was not supported. However, results further revealed that consumer satisfaction was significantly influenced by personal interaction (service quality-related attributes), $\gamma_{12}=0.67$, $p<0.001$, supporting H1b. In addition, results showed that while consumer satisfaction was influenced by store atmosphere (store-related attributes), $\gamma_{13}=0.28$, $p<0.01$; the relationship between consumer satisfaction and store convenience (store-related attributes) was not significant, $\gamma_{14}=0.09$, $p>0.05$. Hence, H1c was partially supported. That is, consumers were likely to be satisfied with their shopping experiences when the activewear specialty retailer provided a nice, pleasant shopping atmosphere and knowledgeable, courteous employees. Interestingly, product quality was not an antecedent of consumer satisfaction at the activewear specialty store. This demonstrates that product quality seems to be the minimum requirement for activewear specialty stores and consumers seek other factors (e.g. knowledge of salespeople) to make them to be satisfied. These consumers may expect relatively higher product

quality when shopping for apparel products at specialty retailers, thus explaining the significant relationship between product quality and consumer satisfaction. Likewise, the insignificant relationship between store convenience and consumer satisfaction may be a result of consumers' familiarity with the store. For example, these consumers may know what to expect in terms of store operating hours and availability of parking spaces. Therefore, when they shop for apparel products, they did not take such factors into consideration when thinking of their total shopping experience.

This study found that personal interaction is the most influential antecedent of consumer satisfaction. This means that consumers in activewear specialty store seek service as a significant factor to make people visit the store. Different from other retail stores, consumers in activewear stores do not mind more interaction with salespeople in the store. In other fashion retail environment, consumers do not want to be bothered by salespeople (Musgrove, 2011). Thus, salespeople in activewear stores need to address the needs of consumers and answer their questions more than other apparel specialty retail stores as the product is more specialized.

H2 proposed that consumer patronage behaviors related to (a) WOM and (b) store repatronage intentions would be positively influenced by consumer satisfaction. Results revealed that WOM intention was significantly influenced by consumer satisfaction, $\beta_{12}=0.89$, $p<0.001$. Thus, H2a was supported. Likewise, we also found store repatronage intention was significantly influenced by consumer satisfaction, $\beta_{13}=0.19$, $p<0.05$, supporting H2b. These findings suggest that consumers satisfied with their shopping experience in an activewear specialty store are more likely to recommend the store to others and to repatronize the store in the near future (see Figure 2). Consumers in activewear stores also look for the fun and exciting environment. Compared to the fashion retail stores, consumers in activewear stores look for more involvement, thus activewear retailers need to provide better shopping environment with fun and exciting events for consumers.



Notes: Model fit statistics: $\chi^2(302) = 536.55$, $p < 0.001$; $\chi^2/df = 1.78$; CFI = 0.98; TLI = 0.97; RMSEA = 0.072. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Discussion and conclusions

The current study was among the first to examine the relationships between store attributes, consumer satisfaction, and consumer patronage behaviors simultaneously in the context of an activewear specialty store. This study successfully applied the S-O-R model to understand the relationships among store attributes, consumer satisfaction, and consumer patronage behavior in the activewear specialty store. Utilizing data from actual consumers who patronized an activewear specialty store, the current study found that store personnel interaction and store atmosphere were the greatest determinants of consumer satisfaction. Our results confirm the studies conducted by Schneider (1990) and Schiffman and Kanuk (2000) who reported a significant connection between personnel interaction and consumer satisfaction. This suggests that activewear specialty stores need to provide quality service to their customers to help influence satisfaction. Compared to other regular fashion apparel retailers, consumers in activewear specialty stores may require more attention and help from salespeople (Musgrove, 2011). Consumers in fashion retail stores often feel uncomfortable when salespeople approach to them with excessive friendliness. However, consumers in activewear stores may need more help and information to select the right activewear products for both functional and fashion needs. Thus, consumers who shop in the activewear specialty stores will likely be more with their store visits when they meet salespeople who interact with them more closely.

In addition, our results also echo Wirtz et al.'s (2005) study, which found that store atmosphere is a determinant of consumer satisfaction. This means that the owners of an activewear specialty stores should focus on developing the store atmosphere matched to their store concept. For example, activewear stores may want to provide treadmills to test the right products for consumers. This may appeal to consumers who want to test the products as well as create consumer excitement while in the store. Also, sponsoring and involving local community sports events may attract more consumers for activewear specialty stores (Ko et al., 2012). This store atmosphere includes good image of the store as well as pleasant and attractive shopping environment as well as layout and displays to increase consumer satisfaction.

Our results further indicate that consumer satisfaction in turn predicts WOM and repatronage intentions. Such results are in line with previous studies conducted by Carpenter (2008), Grace and O'Cass (2005), and Tsai (2001). This suggests consumers that are satisfied with the store are more likely to spread positive WOM and to re-visit to the store. This finding also shows the importance of achieving consumer satisfaction, so that this will in turn influence positive actual patronage behaviors of consumers. However, product quality and store convenience did not significantly influence consumer satisfaction in the current study. This result can explain how expectations of consumers can be different in activewear stores compared to other types of apparel retailers. As activewear consumers' satisfaction was not related to store convenience, these consumers may be willing to travel to the further distance to get better service and experts' opinions. Furthermore, researchers and marketers need to understand the differences in consumers' satisfaction in terms of the types of store environment and product categories offered.

Implications

Our results provide several managerial implications. First, in order to satisfy consumers, activewear specialty retailers need to ensure that they provide an attractive and pleasant shopping atmosphere. This is critical to the company's financial success because these satisfied consumers

are likely to spread positive WOM about the retailer and display their intention to revisit the store in the future. Future management focus on store layout, shopping flow, store atmospherics, and image can improve the shopping experience. Prior research conducted on store-level data has shown the importance of both the physical and social features of a retail environment (Babin and Darden, 1996). Donovan et al. (1994) demonstrated that pleasure induced by store surroundings can lead consumers to stay longer and spend more on products than originally intended.

Baker et al. (1994) found that store ambience and social factors such as classical music, soft lighting, and well-dressed, friendly salespeople all positively impact customers' inferences of higher service and merchandise quality. Based on the previous research, and the current study findings, further in-store research related to store atmospherics at specific activewear specialty stores should be completed to understand consumers' patronage behaviors of these stores. In addition, given the significant relationship between personnel interaction and consumer satisfaction, we suggest that store ownership should include employee expertise factors into their hiring practices. The study results suggest that further training for employees on prompt customer service practices will increase consumer satisfaction, which consequently will positively affect WOM and patronage intentions.

Activewear retailers need to provide more fun and exciting environment because consumers in activewear stores look for fun and involvement. Thus, stores can provide some trial activities, such as trying new sports accessories and equipment, for consumers, so that they can actually feel excitement about the products as well as feeling involved more in the store environment. Also, equipping sports machines to test the products and sponsoring local sports events may attract more consumers who want to test the products and seek excitement in the store (Ko et al., 2012).

We did not find a significant relationship among consumer satisfaction and product quality and store convenience, but consumer satisfaction is significantly related to service of the store. This finding is different from the previous study which found that product quality is related to consumer emotions and satisfaction (Oliver, 1992). This may be because most of activewear retailers provide similar products, but their services are different as they are specialized on specific product offerings. Once these new consumers visit the store, the retailers may convert these consumers to regular, loyal customers by providing knowledgeable, friendly sales associates and a fun shopping environment. This research gives activewear retailers insights to provide quality employee training to provide more satisfactory customer service. In addition, providing convenience and good quality merchandise may be directly related to actual consumer purchase and positive WOM (Turley and Milliman, 2000). As found in this study, activewear specialty retailers need to have educated salespeople to assist consumers if they have questions or product advice, especially related to the types of products their target consumers may seek. Also, based on the findings from this study, consumer store loyalty in the activewear retail segment may be studied further.

Limitations and future research directions

There were limitations of this study. First, because the data was only collected in one local activewear specialty store, future studies may include more stores from various areas, such as local fitness centers or running/road race events. Second, this study surveyed participants who shopped in the activewear specialty store in general. Thus, further study of consumer behavior is needed in terms of exercise participation levels. Third, the sample size is one of limitations and a future study

with larger sample size may provide more rigorous results. Also, the expertise of the employees can help differentiate the store from its competition. Further research can be done to review service expectations and to develop methods to ensure that store personnel are meeting consumer expectations. Lastly, we suggest that further research should examine the relationships between other retail attributes (e.g. location, music, employee dress) on satisfaction and subsequent WOM, patronage behaviors, and customer loyalty.

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