CONCEPTUALIZING SERVICE QUALITY IN MULTICHANNEL FASHION RETAILING

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DECLARATION:

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of the University of Gloucestershire and is original except where indicated by specific reference in the text. No part of the thesis has been submitted as part of any other academic award. The thesis has not been presented to any other education institution in the United Kingdom or overseas.

Any views expressed in the thesis are those of the author and in no way represent those of the university.

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ABSTRACT

The evaluation and understanding of customers' service quality perception has been a topic of major interest for academics and practitioners since the 1980s. Despite this intense research focus, there is a gap in understanding service quality in multichannel settings. This is surprising, since multichannel service systems have become increasingly important with the rise of E-commerce.

The overall aim of this study, therefore, is to contribute to the interpretation of multichannel service quality by explaining it from the perspective of so-called 'multichannel customers'. The study looks at interactions when purchasing a fashion product at a multichannel retailer with the aim of conceptualising service quality in a multichannel fashion retail context. Therefore, the study considers extant service quality research from traditional, electronic, and multichannel settings. The perspective of the current study is different from mainstream positivist service quality research, which sees service quality as static, objectively measurable and dualistic. This study, however, acknowledges service quality as a dynamic, subjective and pluralistic phenomenon. Following this line of argument, the study postulates the existence of multiple realities as consistent with social constructivism. Therefore, the current study investigates the service quality perceptions of experienced multichannel customers. Perceptions are considered to be the meaning that these customers give to their service experiences.

The current study indicates that the customers' perceptions of service quality in multichannel settings imply some fundamental uniqueness. This study proposes a holistic conceptualisation of multichannel customers' service quality perception by considering (1) the heterogeneity of multichannel customers and (2) all moments

of contact between customer and retailer. The proposed framework contributes to

research about service quality with a theoretical interpretation of the phenomenon.

1   INTRODUCTION

E-Commerce has dramatically changed customer purchasing behaviour (Mahrdt, Lessing, Wagner, & Geissler, 2013; Neslin et al., 2006; Verhoef, Kannan, & Inman, 2015). The combination of different retail channels has influenced the predominant purchasing pattern of customers. The so-called 'research-shopper' phenomenon is described as a common 'tendency among customers to use one channel to search, and another to purchase' (Verhoef, Neslin, & Vroomen, 2007, p. 129). Customers nowadays use stores as 'showrooms' where they can physically interact with products, whereas they use the Internet for purchasing (Verhoef et al., 2015). Customers also conduct 'web-rooming', which describes the process of relocating the 'point of decision' to the Internet, while their point of sales still takes place in bricks & mortar stores (Heinemann, 2013).

In order to address changing consumer behaviours, multichannel retailing companies that distribute their products over multiple channels such as stores and the Internet need to set a coherent retail strategy 'to uphold the same high standards across channels' (Payne & Frow, 2005, p. 172).

In this context, the evaluation and understanding of service quality in multichannel retailing companies has developed and has become a topic of major interest for both academics and practitioners (Badrinarayanan, Becerra, & Madhavaram, 2014; Banerjee, 2014; Seck & Philippe, 2013; Swaid & Wigand, 2012; Van Birgelen, De Jong, & Ruyter, 2006). Service quality can be defined as 'the consumer´s judgment about a product´s overall excellence or superiority' (Zeithaml, 1988, p.3). Academic debate about how to evaluate service quality has developed extensively since the 1980s. In essence, the literature can be divided into two streams: some researchers use a performance-only approach to evaluate

service quality (Boulding, Kalra, Staelin, & Zeithaml, 1993; Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Teas, 1993), whilst the majority evaluate service quality based on the disconfirmation paradigm as a gap between expected service and perceived service (Carr, 2007; Dabholkar, Thorpe, & Rentz, 1996; Grönroos, 1984; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988). Several different service quality gap models, such as 'The Service Quality Model' (Grönroos, 1984), 'SERVQUAL' (Parasuraman et al., 1988), 'E-SQUAL' (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Malhorta, 2005) and 'WEBQUAL' (Loiacono, Watson, & Goodhue, 2002) have been developed to conceptualise service quality and consumer perceptions of it. However, most of these approaches tend to take a single-channel perspective at the expense of considering multichannel settings (Seck & Philippe, 2013; Sousa & Voss, 2012). Sousa and Voss (2006) provide a conceptual framework ('Service Delivery System'), which frames physical, virtual and integration qualities. Their research has taken the area of service quality research forward because they are the first researchers to provide a conceptual framework for service quality that considers multiple channels.

Despite this progress, research into multichannel service quality is far from being comprehensive (Verhoef et al., 2015). Several research topics have not yet been addressed. This study builds on existing service quality frameworks with the aim of conceptualising multichannel service quality in a German multichannel fashion-retailing context.

This study approaches the topic of multichannel service quality by adopting a qualitative research paradigm, utilising an abductive approach and an embedded case study research strategy (Yin, 2004). Ozuem, Howell and Lancaster (2008, p.1097) assert that contextualised case studies provide an explicit understanding

of 'the voice of experience'. This study aims to explore the lived experiences and perspectives of individuals in the context of an evolving complex and multidimensional phenomenon. The study seeks information-rich cases (Patton, 1990) 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.

1.1   INQUIRY OVERVIEW

Chapter One introduces the background of this study. Furthermore it sets out the basis for the research by describing the academic gap and research problem. The research objectives and corresponding research questions are developed on the basis of the limitations of extant conceptual theories in the field of multichannel service quality. The rationale for the study is to contribute to the extension of current knowledge in the researched area.

The second chapter studies extant literature about multichannel retailing and service quality. First, the study examines the application of multichannel retailing related terminologies in theory and practice by profiling the concepts of 'multichannel', 'cross-channel' and 'omni-channel' retailing (Beck & Rygl, 2015). Next, the study examines the concept of integration and its implications for the different retail-mix elements. It then provides insights into multichannel customer purchasing behaviour. The second part of the critical literature review considers a wealth of research about service quality. This study particularly considers rigorous and relevant (Tranfield, 2003) service quality concepts for further investigation. Thus, five forces can be identified as particular elements related to these conceptualisations, specifically the conceptual framework, method, dimension,

industry, and setting. As the literature suggests, the study further examines traditional, online and multichannel service quality settings as separate units (Sousa & Voss, 2006). Chapter Two culminates in a discussion of some literary conclusions.

Chapter Three sets out the research design for this study. First, the chapter defends the selected paradigmatic perspective for the study. It opposes different paradigms and discusses the implications of each choice. The chapter opposes quantitative and qualitative research methodologies in the context of the researched field and argues that a qualitative approach can be considered a valuable methodology to move the multichannel service quality research forward. In this context, the research of Schembri and Sandberg (2003) is introduced as a point of departure for the current study. Schembri and Sandberg (2003) were the first researchers to acknowledge service quality as a pluralistic and dynamic phenomenon. Their contributions to the field of service quality research are discussed and the limitations of their work are considered. A case study approach is then introduced as a suitable research strategy and the chapter briefly introduces details of a pilot study that was conducted before data collection took place. Furthermore, the chapter justifies the sample selection, sample size and data collection method deployed. Next, the axiological stance for this study is presented. In the following section, the research quality of the study is discussed. Finally, some ethical considerations relating to the study are revealed.

Chapter Four discusses the rationale for selecting thematic analysis as a data analytical method. Thematic analysis is then identified as a suitable approach for this study and the concept is explained more in detail (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The chapter presents an analysis of interviewee responses based on interviews with

German multichannel fashion customers. In particular, the chapter provides answers to research questions 1 and 2 ('How do customers perceive service provision in a multichannel fashion retailing context in Germany?' And 'What determines perceptions of service quality amongst multichannel fashion retail customers in Germany?'). The interview findings support six major themes, which describe participants' perceptions of service quality, including affiliation, physical stimulation, value, electronic stimulation, utility and choice optimisation. Then, the implications of the interview findings are discussed. Furthermore, the chapter suggests a multichannel customer typology.

Chapter Five presents the conceptual framework that is the product of this study. This is referred to as the 'catalyst model of multichannel service quality'. This model addresses the third research question ('How can service quality be conceptualised in a multichannel fashion retailing context?'). The chapter contains a synthesis of key findings from the literature review about multichannel retailing and service quality and factual findings from field research. Moreover, the chapter discusses the reasoning behind the naming of the model.

Chapter Six presents a brief conclusion to the study. Finally, the contribution of this research to theory and to practice is presented. The chapter also considers some of the salient managerial implications. It addresses the limitations of the study and suggests how researchers can expand upon the scope of multichannel service quality concepts in future research projects.

1.2 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Retailing has changed fundamentally during the last decade (Neslin et al., 2006; Zhang et al., 2010). This development has mainly been driven by technological and societal factors (Emrich, 2011). In this context, E-commerce has probably

been the most important technological invention (Patten & Rashid, 2015). Currently, 80.7 per cent of European households have Internet access (Statista.com, 2016a).

Several different kinds of leisure activities take place in the online environment (Stockinger & Ozuem, 2015). Furthermore, 65 per cent of European Internet users shopped online in 2015 (Reinecke, 2016). The borders between different online activities are blurred, and retailers use the online environment as an important instrument of communication and distribution (Stockinger & Ozuem, 2015). Thus, the online environment provides excellent opportunities for retailers to develop distinctive strategies (Porter, 2001).

In the case of the German retail market, the online marketplace can be considered the fuel for growth. Whereas stationary sales have been decreasing steadily over recent years, the German online fashion retail market grew by 15 per cent between 2014 and 2015, measured by a turnover of some 13.29 billion Euros. Currently, the online marketplace accounts for a market share of some 17.3 per cent (handelsdaten.de, 2016; statista.com, 2016b).

The result is that retailers are continuing to develop their online shops. Over the past 15 years, several online retailing business models have been developed in the marketplace. During the initial phases, pure online players such as Amazon and eBay launched online shops. The consequent phase saw the appearance of shopping comparison websites enter the marketplace. These players allowed customers to compare products or services on a single page and to read recommendations and critiques written by previous users. The optimisation and scale-up phase, which began in 2005, offered new system solutions and service providers. Since 2008, many bricks-and-mortar retailers have been launching

online shops as an addition to their offline channels and have subsequently become multichannel retailers (Heinemann, 2013). In recent years, corporate multichannel retailing strategies have developed further (Beck & Rygl, 2015; Verhoef et al., 2015). Multichannel retailers continue to seek opportunities to attain competitive advantage by leveraging retail channels to increase market share. However, these multichannel retailers still need to learn about the changing needs of their customers to develop a coherent strategy in order to improve the superiority of their services.

1.3   RESEARCH PROBLEM

The underlying aim of this current study is to contribute to the interpretation of multichannel service quality with a new concept that explains the phenomenon from the perspective of customers. The study looks at retailer/customer interactions when purchasing a fashion product at one retailer using different retail channels. The research therefore investigates so-called 'multichannel customers' (Verhoef et al., 2007).

Previously, service quality conceptualisations were able to interpret service quality based on a single-channel perspective (Sousa & Voss, 2006). Only a limited number of studies attend to integration quality as a driver of service quality in multichannel service settings (Seck, 2013; Sousa & Voss, 2012). As the literature suggests, multichannel settings account for a set of complexities that call for a broader conceptualisation of service quality (Sousa & Voss, 2006). Thus, a separate examination of physical, electronic and integration quality is deemed necessary, since all three dimensions have a distinctive nature.

Existing multichannel service quality conceptualisations have not yet fully grasped the role of customer perceptions. Research into service quality dimensions can be considered fragmented. Some researchers take dimensions from previous studies (Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Teas, 1993). Others take dimensions from previous studies and add their own dimensions (Banerjee, 2014; Swaid & Wigand, 2012). Some suggest entirely new dimensions in their studies (Gummerus, Liljander, Pura, & Van Riel, 2004).

Furthermore, the scope of research in this area has not yet been applied in the fashion-retailing segment. The literature suggests that industry segments should be considered separately (Kushwaha & Shankar, 2013). Fashion retailing is defined by several unique aspects, such as 'the hedonic orientation of customers, transaction processes, store image, relative advantage to other retail formats, and task accomplishment' (Kim & Stoel, 2004, p. 110).

There is also evidence that culture influences human behaviour (Hofstede, 1993). Thus, service quality perceptions differ among countries (Guesalaga & Pitta, 2014). Cultural influences have an impact on customer expectations and perceptions, which in turn determines service quality perceptions (Carrillat, Jaramillo, & Mulki, 2009). The 'Hofstede Centre' compares cultural differences between several countries based on Gert Hofstede´s 'cultural dimensions theory' (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). According to that survey, German culture is considered individualistic with a strong belief in self-actualisation. Performance and task orientation are highly valued. Germans tend to avoid uncertainty on the one hand but they are easily able to adapt traditions to changed conditions on the other. Germans have a tendency towards pessimism, which implies that self-indulgence is considered somewhat 'wrong' (www.geert-hofstede.com, 2016).

Thus, this study investigates distinctive German multichannel fashion customer perceptions of service quality.

	RESEARCH PROBLEM	EVIDENCE FOR RESEARCH PROBLEM	CURRENT STUDY INVESTIGATES
1	Service quality has been mainly investigated taking a single-channel perspective	Traditional service quality models in non-electronic settings (Grönroos, 1984; Parasuraman et al., 1988); electronic service quality models (Loiacono, 2002; Parasuraman et al., 2005)	Multichannel service quality considering physical, electronic, and integration quality
2	Fragmented research about customers' service quality perception	Researchers have taken service quality dimensions from previous studies (Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Teas, 1993); other researchers have taken service quality dimensions from previous studies and have added their own ones (Banerjee, 2014; Swaid and Wigand, 2012); researchers have suggested entirely new dimensions (Gummerus et al., 2004)	The service quality perceptions of information-rich multichannel customers applying triangulation technique
3	Multichannel service quality has not been investigated in the fashion retailing segment yet	Fashion retailing accounts for several unique aspects: the hedonic and experiential orientation of customers (Kim and Stoel, 2004; Ha and Stoel, 2012); the mixed offer of products and services (Dabholkar et al., 1996); the influencing factor of store image (Bishop and Hathcote, 1994)	Multichannel service quality in a fashion retailing environment
4	Limited knowledge about customers' service quality perception in Germany	Service quality perceptions differ among countries (Guesalaga and Pitta, 2014); cultural influences have an impact on customers' expectations and perceptions (Carrillat et al., 2009); Germans possess several distinctive cultural characteristics (www.geert-hofstede.com, 2016)	Multichannel service quality through the eyes of German customers

Image 1.1: Patten (2017) Research problem

1.4 RESEARCH AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The underlying aim of the current study is to contribute to interpretations of multichannel service quality based on a new conceptual model that explains the phenomenon from the perspective of customers. The study looks at interactions when purchasing a fashion product from one retailer which distributes items via online and offline channels.

Thus, the research aims of the current study are suggested as follows:

1. To critically review extant literature about multichannel retailing and service quality concepts related to physical, electronic, and multichannel service quality.

The study takes as its starting point an exploration of multichannel retailing and service quality with an exploratory review of extant multichannel retailing literature. This review includes a classification of the terms 'multichannel', 'cross-channel' and 'omni-channel' retailing. Furthermore, the review critically examines the literature about channel integration in multichannel retailing. The study then investigates extant research into customer behaviour and offers insights into the multichannel customer's purchasing journey.

The second part of the review investigates extant service quality concepts. It argues that multichannel service quality consists of five forces: specifically, the conceptual framework, method, dimension, perspective and industry. These forces are studied in-depth and consideration is given to the different types of physical, electronic and integration quality. Next, the limitations are explored and areas for further research in existing literature are developed.

2. To investigate customer perceptions of service quality combining different retail channels when purchasing a fashion product.

The nature of multichannel service quality as an evolving complex and multidimensional phenomenon directs this study towards social constructivism.

3. To contribute to the conceptualisation of service quality for German multichannel fashion retailing.

Based on the literature review and interview findings, the study aims to conceptualise multichannel service quality in the context of German fashion retailing.

1.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The service quality perception of German multichannel fashion customers is empirically researched addressing the following three research questions:

1. How do customers perceive service provision in a multichannel fashion-retailing context in Germany?

2. What determines perceptions of service quality amongst multichannel fashion retail customers in Germany?

These two questions seek answers about how German multichannel customers look at interactions when purchasing fashion products from one retailer using different retail channels. The study intends to offer valuable insights elicited from information-rich multichannel customers in two stages: first, in-depth interviews are conducted in three large German cities. Then, focus group participants discuss these findings to provide an even more holistic picture of the phenomenon. Triangulation as a research technique is therefore applied to enrich the variety and volume of data.

3. *How can service quality be conceptualised in a multichannel fashion-retailing context in Germany?*

The current study is the first to theoretically conceptualise multichannel service quality based on a social constructivist approach within the discrete context of German fashion retailing. It can help companies operating with different retail channels to understand the needs of their customers and to develop a coherent strategy that aims to improve the superiority of the organisation and its services.

1.6   RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

There is widespread agreement in academic literature that multichannel retailing encompasses the concept of integrating the different channels operating within one organisation (Neslin et al., 2006; Verhoef et al., 2015). However, the complexity of the multichannel retailing strategies that have evolved has led to a degree of confusion with regard to a coherent terminology. Researchers and practitioners have primarily used the terms 'multichannel', 'cross-channel', and 'omni-channel' retailing to conceptualise the process of retailing that operates across more than one retail channel (Brynjolfsson, Hu, & Rahman, 2013; Emrich, 2011; Lewin, 2015). Beck and Rygl (2015) have conducted some initial research and have categorised these three different terms according to the degree of customer interaction options and the degree of company integration they facilitate. Thus, cross-channel retailing can be considered an advanced stage of multichannel retailing with a higher degree of customer interaction and/or company integration. Omni-channel retailing can be considered the ultimate stage of multichannel retailing, achieving full customer interaction and/or full company integration. However, these terminologies continue to be deployed indistinctly in literature and practice (Beck & Rygl, 2015).

Related literature has explored channel integration in the context of the different elements of the retail mix (Verhoef et al., 2015).

Emrich et al. (2015) investigated the implications of assortment integration of multichannel retailers. The researchers investigated three different assortment structures: substitutive, complementary, and independent assortments. Emrich et al. (2015) found that customer perceptions of the degree of assortment integration differ across various assortment structures. Moreover, they argued that the relationship between multichannel assortment integration and patronage intentions depends on certain perceived shopping benefits, which include assortment variety, convenience and reduced risk.

Wolk and Ebling (2010) developed a conceptual framework based on the integration of pricing and promotions in multichannel retailing settings. The researchers specifically investigated competition, offline and online reach, the number of distribution channels, organisational size, the product type, and brand power as the factors that might influence pricing strategies across channels.

Other researchers investigated multichannel fulfilment (Agatz, Fleischmann, & Van Nunen, 2008; Lang & Bressolles, 2013; Xing, Grant, McKinnon, & Fernie, 2010). Extant literature suggests that multichannel fulfilment can be considered to fulfil online or in-store orders, including warehousing, picking and order preparation, distribution, purchasing, delivery, and returns (Agatz et al., 2008; Lang & Bressolles, 2013). In two related studies, Xing and Grant (2006), and Xing et al. (2010), examined four fulfilment dimensions that they saw as predominantly important for multichannel customers. These are: timeliness, availability, condition, and return.

Emrich and Verhoef (2015) examined multichannel customer behaviours with regard to web and store design. Their investigation revealed that the design of

websites and stores has a very important impact on retail patronage (Emrich & Verhoef, 2015). Multichannel retailers need to decide whether or not to adopt a prototypical approach (with channel-specific attributes) or a homogeneous web and store design approach. The researchers recommend adopting a homogeneous web and store design in order to increase retail patronage.

Customer behaviour in multichannel settings as understood in the literature has led the current study towards an investigation of the multichannel customer's journey. In multichannel retailing literature, it has been widely agreed upon that the combination of different retail channels during one purchase has become the predominant purchasing pattern for customers (Mahrdt et al., 2013; Neslin et al., 2006). Heinemann (2013) introduced the term 'ropo', which basically has the following two meanings: (1) customers conduct 'webrooming', when they search for a product in an online environment and later purchase it in an offline environment; (2) conversely, customers conduct 'showrooming' and so they search for a product in an offline environment and later purchase it in an online environment (Verhoef et al., 2015). Some research has been conducted to explore the motivations of multichannel customers who exhibit 'ropo' behaviour. Verhoef et al. (2007) have investigated the motives behind why customers conduct webrooming. They found that there are three reasons for customers to perform online research first before buying a product in-store. These are as follows: (1) customers prefer the channel that offers them the most advantages in each part of the purchase process, and they switch amongst channels during the purchase process if another channel offers more advantages; (2) the behaviour of customers to generally purchase via the channel with the most research advantages is considered unlikely; and (3) customers carry out shopping research when a channel switch increases their overall shopping experience.

Steinmann (2011) has examined multichannel customer behaviour during the overall service process by considering the different 'touchpoints' (service encounters) between the customer and the service provider. Steinmann (2011) illustrated how the multichannel customer purchasing process could be analysed by means of customer touchpoints. Unlike other studies about customer behaviour in multichannel service settings, Steinmann (2011) revealed that the multichannel purchasing process holds a high level of complexity, since customers tend to switch channels several times during a single purchasing process.

Heitz–Spahn (2013) has conducted research into the motives of customers to switch channels during a single purchase. She defined 'free-riding behaviour' as when customers search for a product through the channel of one retailer, before later purchasing the product through a different channel and from another retailer. Heitz–Spahn (2013) explored shopping convenience, flexibility, and price comparisons as the three major cross-channel free-riding motives. She argued that utilitarian-motivated customers tend more towards cross-channel free-riding than hedonic-motivated customers.

However, with very few exceptions (Steinmann, 2011; Wolk & Ebling, 2010), researchers have failed to conceptualise the complex and discrete purchasing patterns of multichannel customers. These customers have been hitherto conceptualised as a homogeneous group exhibiting a generally linear purchasing behaviour (Agatz et al., 2008; Xing et al., 2010). Furthermore, various researchers have examined several different services and products within a single study (Heitz-Spahn, 2013; Steinmann, 2011). Even though some researchers have selected apparel as one of the product categories to study (Emrich & Verhoef, 2015; Wolk & Ebling, 2010), they have failed thus far to present an analysis of the

findings organised into individual product categories. Thus there is a lack of understanding about channel integration for fashion products. As Verhoef et al. (2015) suggest, there is a continued need to conduct research into multichannel settings with respect to customer behaviour across channels, and behaviourally oriented research that concerns retail-mix issues across channels. Drawing on Verhoef et al.'s (2015) suggestions, the current study addresses some of the limitations of extant studies by examining the service encounters of experienced multichannel fashion customers and by considering the different elements of the retail mix.

In the context of multichannel retailing, the evaluation and understanding of service quality has become a topic of major interest for both academics and practitioners (Badrinarayanan et al., 2014; Banerjee, 2014; Seck & Philippe, 2013; Swaid & Wigand, 2012; Van Birgelen et al., 2006). 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).

The majority of service quality research can be considered customer-centred (Grönroos, 1984; Parasuraman et al., 2005; Van Birgelen et al., 2006). These studies mainly focus on investigating the perceived quality of various services amongst customers. According to Zeithaml, '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). This study acknowledges the concept of perceived service quality as 'a global judgement, or attitude, relating to the superiority of the service' (Zeithaml, 1988, p. 16).

However, the academic debate around how to conceptualise service quality has not yet been fully resolved. Some researchers evaluate service quality based on the disconfirmation paradigm, that is, as a gap between the expected (desired) service and perceived service (Carr, 2007; Dabholkar et al., 1996; Grönroos, 1984; Parasuraman et al., 1988). Parasuraman et al. (1985) 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 et al., 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. Gap-analysis however provides a more pragmatic and operational approach, since the customers' service perceptions can be considered to be negative as soon as their expectations are assumed to be higher than their perceptions (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1994). Therefore, this study adopts a gap-analysis approach due to its diagnostic and managerial benefits.

In terms of service settings, it has been argued that conceptualisations of service quality in an online environment 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 suggest that multichannel service quality concerns all moments of contact between a service deliverer and its customers (Sousa & Voss, 2006). Multichannel service quality, therefore, refers to the different physical and electronic components that are delivered through two or more channels (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). According to Sousa and Voss (2006), the distinctive component of multichannel service quality can be considered integration quality. Sousa and Voss (2006) argue for a separate examination of physical, virtual, and integration quality to take into account their different natures. They developed a sound foundation of research about multichannel service quality, but their work is based on a literature review and they therefore do not apply their thinking empirically. Since then, other researchers have developed upon Sousa and Voss' (2006) findings and have empirically tested new sub-dimensions of the integration quality dimension (Banerjee, 2014; Swaid & Wigand, 2012). However, extant research about multichannel service quality is still in its infancy. It can be considered inchoate, as current studies are only able to provide an incomplete conceptualisation of multichannel service quality (Verhoef et al., 2015).

A comprehensive overview of service quality literature reveals that empirical research in this area has been widely developed based on a positivist ontological paradigm. Extant literature has generally focused on an objective measurement of service quality dimensions. The outcome was static service quality models, which were generalised to several service settings (Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Parasuraman et al., 1988; Wolfinbarger & Gilly, 2003). However, important service quality researchers have acknowledged the need for conceptual ideas about service quality that embrace subjective first-person customer perspectives (Grönroos, 1984). Gummesson (2001) suggested a shift to scientific pluralism as the existing methodologies were not able to solve the exigent research problems in the field. Schembri and Sandberg (2003) have set the foundations for a new understanding of customer service experiences. They recommended a re-evaluation of traditional research methods for service quality concepts. Schembri and Sandberg (2003) provided a conceptual framework that acknowledges the pluralistic and dynamic nature of service quality. They claimed that 'different people in different contexts may hold different meanings for similar service experiences' (Schembri & Sandberg, 2003, p. 5). Overcoming the dominance of positivism in service quality research, Schembri and Sandberg (2003) followed an interpretivist philosophical stance to acknowledge the world as a socially constructed entity. Their phenomenological investigation of Australian general practice patients provided insights into the heterogeneous customer's service quality perception of medical services. Based on their findings, they generated three qualitatively different patient types: namely, passive, monitoring, and partnering patients. However, Schembri and Sandberg's (2003) study has limited local and industrial scope. Empirical research was conducted specifically within the Australian health system.

In their conceptual framework the researchers omitted to explain the implications of these limitations.

The current study adopts the work of Schembri and Sandberg (2003) to improve the understanding of service quality as a dynamic and pluralistic phenomenon. An investigation of the extent to which their framework is applicable in other industries, settings, and venues is therefore merited.

Consequently, the current study suggests that the shortcomings of extant research in the fields of multichannel retailing and service quality can be best addressed by applying an interpretivist ontological worldview. Such a view postulates the existence of 'multiple realities' (Golafshani, 2003). This way of seeing the world resonates with social constructivism (Holstein & Gubrium, 2007; Howell, 2013), which was selected as the salient epistemological stance for this research. The study focuses on an in-depth understanding of information-rich cases (Patton, 1990) and their perceptions of multichannel service quality. As social constructivism permits the involvement of experiential research (Maxwell, 2013), this study was situated in the German fashion industry.

As the aforementioned rationale shows, a conceptualisation of multichannel service quality in German multichannel fashion retailing addresses some of the limitations of the existing research.

1.7 SUMMARY

The following figure illuminates the progression of this PhD thesis after the introductory chapter:

INTRODUCTION	**Background of the study:**

Background of the study:
- Online retailing as fuel for growth in the German fashion retail market
- Since 2008, many stationary retailing companies in Germany have been launching online shops as additional retail channels

Academic gap and research problem:
- Integration quality as a driver of service quality in multichannel service settings
- Existing multichannel service quality conceptualisations have not yet fully grasped the customer´s perception
- Expansion of conceptualisation towards the fashion segment and towards the German market

Research questions:
1. How do German multichannel customers perceive service provision in fashion retailing?
2. What determines the perception of service quality for the studied multichannel fashion retailing customers?
3. How can service quality be conceptualised in a multichannel fashion retailing context?

Rationale for the study:
- The continued need to examine customer behaviour across channels
- The lack of existence of a multichannel service quality conceptualisation in a German fashion retailing context
- The in-depth understanding of service quality as a dynamic and pluralistic phenomenon

Left sidebar items:
- INTRODUCTION
- CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE
- RESEARCH DESIGN
- ANALYSIS OF FACTUAL EVIDENCE
- CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK
- CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Image 1.2: Patten (2017) Dissertation progression

This chapter provides an overview of the research. It presents the background of the study as one that is situated in the German retailing industry. Next, the chapter identifies a research gap and research problem, before setting out the research objective and corresponding research questions.

2   CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

2.1   INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter discussed the foundational basis of the study. It examined the aims and objectives and the corresponding research questions. It also set out how this research makes a contribution to extant knowledge in the field of multichannel service quality.

This chapter consists of a critical literature review that builds a baseline of knowledge about multichannel retailing. The concept of service quality is therefore introduced, before a synthesis of extant service quality concepts is developed. As the review reveals, concepts of service quality consist of five main elements. These elements will be presented and critiqued. The last section of the chapter contains some literary conclusions.

2.2   CONCEPTUALISATION OF MULTICHANNEL RETAILING

2.2.1   TERMINOLOGY: MULTI-, CROSS-, AND OMNI-CHANNEL RETAILING

In recent years, multichannel retailing strategies have developed at some pace (Beck & Rygl, 2015; Verhoef et al., 2015). Retailers aim to offer their customers a seamless shopping experience by integrating their different retail channels. As a consequence, switching between channels during the process of performing a purchase has become easier for customers (Mahrdt et al., 2013).

Customers interface with different formats and media, such as stores, computers, mobile devices, tablets and social media during the purchasing process and they use these media as sources of inspiration and communication (Verhoef et al.,

2015). The borders between the different channels have consequently become blurred (Brynjolfsson et al., 2013).

The complexity of retail channel strategies has led to confusion regarding a coherent terminology for both professional classes and practitioners. There are different terminologies that refer to the processes of retailing that operate across more than one retail channel. These have been variously called 'multichannel', 'cross-channel' and 'omni-channel' retailing. To date, these terminologies are used indistinctly (Beck & Rygl, 2015).

The initial perception of multichannel retailing was of a system that administered two or more parallel channels (Berman, 1996; Pelton, Strutton, & Lumpkin, 2002). During the next phase, the concept of integration became a topic of major interest for both practitioners and academia (Neslin et al., 2006). In this context, the terms 'cross-channel' and 'omni-channel' augmented the terminology of 'multichannel' retailing. Yet there has been no obvious attempt to conceptualise these new terms (Verhoef et al., 2015), although Beck and Rygl (2015) published some initial research on the topic. The following image illustrates their arguments succinctly:

	Multichannel	**Cross-Channel**			**Omni-Channel**		
		I	II Hybrid	III Hybrid	I	II Hybrid	III Hybrid
Customer Interaction	◯	◒	◯	◒	●	●	◒
Company Integration	◯	◒	◒	◯	●	◒	●

◯ = no   ◒ = partial   ● = full
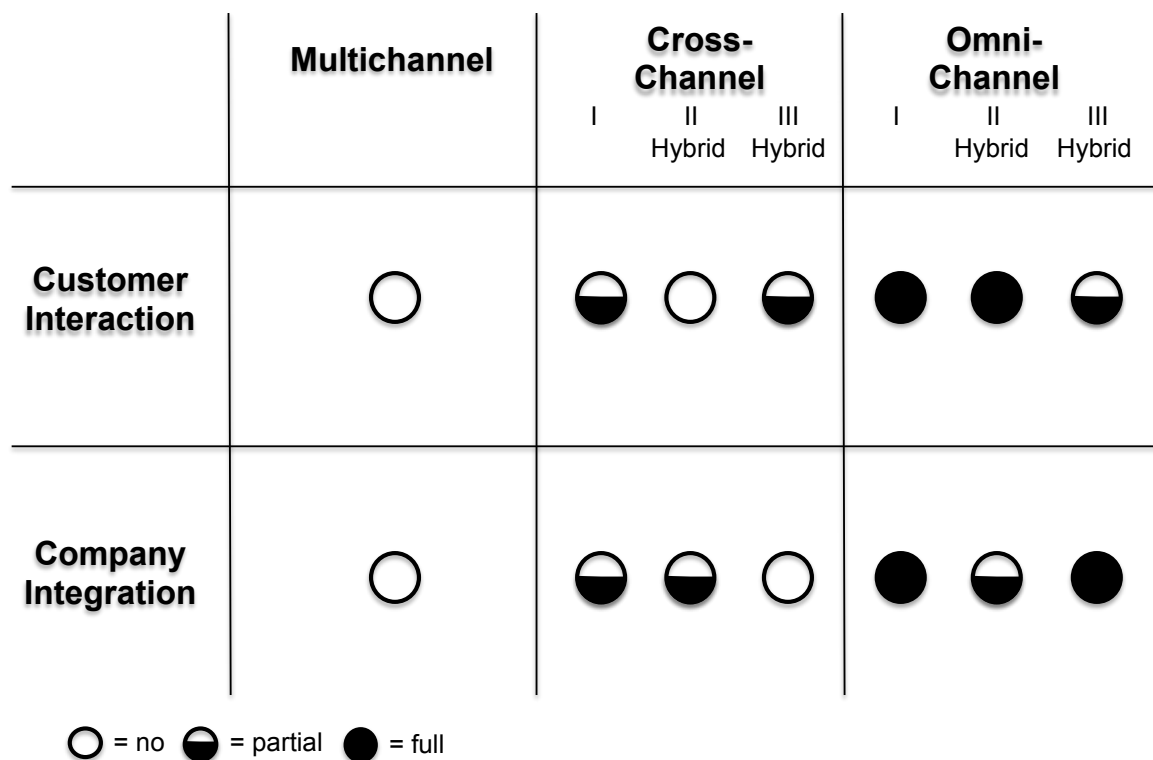
Image 2.1: Patten (2017) Terminology of multi-, cross-, and omni-channel retailing

As the image illustrates, Beck and Rygl (2015) categorised multichannel, cross-channel and omni-channel retailing according to the degree to which they enable customer interactions and the degree to which they facilitate company integration. They defined multichannel retailing as 'the set of activities involved in selling merchandise or services through more than one channel, or all widespread channels, whereby the customer cannot trigger channel interaction and the retailer does not control channel interaction' (Beck & Rygl, 2015, p. 175). The term 'cross-channel retailing' developed from multichannel retailing. In this context, the multiple channels of a retailer are integrated to a higher degree. Thus, such a concept can be considered to represent an evolution in retail. Cross-channel retailing means 'the customer can trigger partial channel interaction and/or the retailer controls partial channel integration' (Beck & Rygl, 2015, p. 176). The term 'omni-channel' ultimately refers to the most advanced stage of a multichannel retailing system. Hence, omni-channel retailing means full customer

interaction and/or retailer integration (Beck & Rygl, 2015). Furthermore, Beck and Rygl (2015) suggested a third form: If just one party – customer or retailer – fulfils the criterion of interaction/integration this is known as the 'hybrid form' (Beck & Rygl, 2015, p. 174). For several reasons, this framework is a valuable contribution to retailing research in this context, particularly in instances when retailers operate more than one channel. It helps to set clear boundaries for the classification of each of the three connected, albeit different concepts. This conceptualisation considers both perspectives: the customer's interaction with different channels and the retailer's level of integration. Moreover, it provides guidelines for both researchers and practitioners to use when approaching the different terms more distinctively. This chapter uses the term 'multichannel retailing' as an umbrella term to embrace all the different forms of multiple channel systems that can be found in retailing.

2.2.2   THE CONCEPT OF INTEGRATION

Research into multichannel retailing embraces the concept of integration of the different channels operating within an organisation (Neslin et al., 2006). It implies that customers should be able to switch channels easily during their interaction with the retailer (Goersch, 2002; Seck, 2013). Thus, channel integration means that a retailer should provide a seamless customer experience between stores and online shops. However, important questions remain unanswered. Researchers and practitioners alike remain keenly interested in the extent to which a seamless customer experience automatically means full channel integration, or if it simply means that the more integrated the retail system, the better the customer experience. For retailers, the level of integration is a difficult managerial decision. They face various challenges since channels might vary

according to their purpose, features, cost structure and competitors (Berry et al., 2010). Studies have investigated the optimal level of integration in certain areas. Related literature has explored several aspects of the retail mix. In particular, a special focus has been reserved for the integration of assortment (Emrich, Paul, & Rudolph, 2015; Mantrala et al., 2009), pricing and promotions (Vogel & Paul, 2015; Wolk & Ebling, 2010), fulfilment (Agatz et al., 2008; Lang & Bressolles, 2013; Wolk & Ebling, 2010; Xing et al., 2010), and web and store design integration (Emrich & Verhoef, 2015). However, none of the aforementioned areas has been completely resolved yet. On the contrary, there are still several areas that merit further investigation (Verhoef et al., 2015).

As regards retailer assortment strategies, it is deemed necessary to overcome the complex requirement to offer an attractive and large assortment on the one hand, but to avoid choice-difficulty on the other hand (Mantrala et al., 2009). There is controversy in the literature surrounding the degree of assortment integration in multichannel retailing (Patten, 2017). Some researchers argue that assortment does not necessarily have to be integrated when the target customer of the two channels is different (Berry et al., 2010; Neslin & Shankar, 2009). This is not the case for multichannel customers, who switch retail channels during the purchasing process. However, other researchers have argued that product consistency is crucial to provide a seamless shopping experience for the customer (Berman & Thelen, 2004). In practice, most of the multichannel retailers nowadays apply an asymmetrical assortment strategy, which means that they offer a larger assortment online than offline (Emrich et al., 2015). Emrich et al. (2015) investigated the impact of multichannel assortment integration on underlying assortment relations. They classified three different assortment relations. Either

assortments are substitutive (for instance, when a retailer sells two different kinds of similar shoes), or complementary (as is the case with shoes and shoe crème), or independent (for example, shoes and sun lotion). The researchers found that in any of the three assortment structures no integration of assortment is detrimental. However, they argued that for a multichannel retailer with a substitutive assortment, perceived variety is lower when the assortment strategy is asymmetrical because customers tend to disfavour decreased channel choice.

Regarding pricing and promotions, multichannel retailers often need to reach a compromise and negotiate the dilemma that customers generally expect products online to be equally or even less expensive than their in-store equivalents (Zhang et al., 2010). However, at the same time, customers expect integrated channels with a consistent pricing strategy among channels (Seck, 2013). In this context, the underlying question is how multichannel retailers are able to overcome this dilemma without losing market share and unsatisfied customers. In practice, retailers mostly tend towards a partial integration of their pricing (Wolk & Ebling, 2010). They charge the same posted prices across different channels, because they fear that different prices might lead to customer confusion and resentment. Yet at the same time, many retailers apply channel-specific price promotions or charge handling and shipping costs (Neslin et al., 2006).

Wolk and Ebling (2010) developed a conceptual framework to describe the factors which might influence a pricing strategy across channels: specifically, competition, offline reach and online reach, the number of distribution channels, the size of the organisation, the product type, and the power of the brand. They argued that the lower the level of competition in one segment, the higher the extent of price differentiation that occurs. Thus, market power has an impact on price

differentiation. For Wolk and Ebling (2010), physical distance is a criterion that determines whether customers have easy access to a product or if they need to spend more to gain access. For multichannel retailers this means that if the retailer operates just a few stores and also sells products online, the retailer is able to operate both channels exclusively. As a consequence, this retailer is in a better position in that he can apply price differentiation on- and offline. The increasing numbers of customers who buy online and furthermore use different channels to do so means customers have easy access to a retailer's overall offer. This means that multichannel retailers should offer the same prices across their various retail channels. Regarding the number of distribution channels, the two researchers argued that the customised operation of each channel means an increase in transaction costs and this results in a requirement for more effort to be put into creating sales on the part of the retailer. Consequently, the more channels a retailer operates, the less channel-based price differentiation they will apply. The size of the company is therefore pivotal. Retailers who face lower costs when engaging in price differentiation will apply price differentiation more often. Normally, big companies can leverage strategic advantages such as the efficiency of the organisation, cheaper prices or superior technologies. Thus, larger retailing companies will be more likely to apply channel-based price differentiation. For certain product types, customers prefer one channel over another. For instance, customers prefer to buy clothing in-store, since they want to try clothes on and physically see and touch the items. So if one channel is superior to the other, it is more likely that customers will accept channel-based price differentiation and pay a higher price for a preferred channel. Generally, branding decreases the customer's price sensitivity. But channel-based price differentiation might also lead to confusion, and this might in turn compromise the power of the brand (Wolk

& Ebling, 2010). Wolk and Ebling`s (2010) conceptual framework is a valuable contribution to the debate on channel-based price differentiation. It is the first framework to conceptualise the factors that chiefly influence customer (market), retailer and product characteristics. However, channel-based price differentiation has certain positive and negative impacts on customer satisfaction. 'It positively affects their perceptions of value and it increases relationship quality. Furthermore, it enhances repurchase intentions, but it also leads to perceptions of price unfairness and limits customer self-determination. This can negatively affect retention outcomes' (Vogel & Paul, 2015, p. 134). The extent to which the aforementioned factors affect the final choice of shopping location remains questionable, as does the sustainability of the long-term relationship that is established with the retailer.

One possible pricing strategy for multichannel retailers, which embraces both a high perception of value and price fairness, is 'self-matching pricing' (Kireyev, Kumar, & Ofek, 2015). Based on this concept, the multichannel retailer can set different prices across channels, but offers the lowest price to customers when they can supply evidence. Thus, 'self-matching policies by design offers retailers the flexibility of setting different prices across channels, while affording consumers the possibility of a consistent experience, presumably in line with the omni-channel philosophy' (Kireyev et al., 2015, p. 29).

Price promotions at multichannel retailers have several within- and across-channel implications. Offline price promotions can reduce category sales online during the promotion period. Furthermore, online promotions can reduce category sales offline during the promotion period. Negative cross-channel impacts are stronger for loyal customers than for opportunists; and the impact of online

promotions on offline sales within a promoted category is higher than it would be if these variables were reversed (Breugelmans & Campo, 2016).

One can conclude that the successful management of pricing and promotions is a complex field in multichannel retailing. It is therefore useful to consider the impacts within and across channels.

In terms of fulfilment, a coherent multichannel strategy should concern both the marketing mix and operations management (Agatz et al., 2008). In this respect fulfilment is an important component of a multichannel retailer's operations strategy. According to the literature, multichannel e-fulfilment can be considered to fulfil online or in-store orders, including warehousing, picking and order preparation, distribution, purchasing, delivery and returns (Agatz et al., 2008; Lang & Bressolles, 2013). For multichannel customers, four dimensions of fulfilment can be considered predominantly important: timeliness, availability, condition and return (Xing & Grant, 2006; Xing et al., 2010). Timeliness refers to several aspects, such as the speed of delivery, choice of delivery date, or delivery within a certain time slot. Availability refers to the confirmation of availability, order tracking, or waiting time. Condition refers to order accuracy, order completeness, or order damage. Return refers to return policies, such as ease of return and return channel options, the promptness of collection and of replacement (Lang & Bressolles, 2013). For multichannel retailers this means that their supply chain management needs to be adapted to these specific customer needs. This has several implications: (1) an online channel provides not only a physical product, but also several related services, most notably delivery. The delivery service may range from making the product available for pick-up to offering a time-specific home delivery slot. The management of this service component of e-fulfilment

gives rise to novel planning issues. (2) The flexibility of a multichannel retailer with respect to order promising and pricing makes it necessary to imply an appropriate strategy. (3) The integration of different channels raises issues for inventory deployment, since different channels may require varied service levels (Agatz et al., 2008). (4) E-fulfilment requirements vary across various product categories (Hu, Kumar, & Sumit, 2014).

In addition, web and store design integration has an important impact for multichannel retailers. Web and store design can be considered counterparts that fulfil a similar ultimate function. Web design refers 'to the richness of the representation of the website's environment, linked to its formal characteristics such as graphics, colours, images and animations, amongst others. These elements 'contribute to the look, feel, and atmosphere of the website' (Bressolles, Durrieu, & Senecal, 2014, p. 890). Thus, web design is the visual appearance and audible application of the site. Store design refers to aspects such as modern-looking in-store equipment and fixtures. Furthermore, it implies that physical facilities are visually appealing (Dabholkar et al., 1996).

Multichannel retailers need to decide whether or not to adopt a prototypical approach (with channel-specific attributes) or a homogeneous design approach of web and store design (Emrich & Verhoef, 2015). Emrich and Verhoef (2015) suggest that a homogenous design creates positive effects for patronage intentions and behaviour when a customer generally shows a high store-orientation. If a customer exhibits a high web-orientation, these effects are not evident (Emrich & Verhoef, 2015). Thus, multichannel retailers can use a homogeneous design to increase their appeal to store-oriented customers in both on- and offline environments.

2.2.3 THE MULTICHANNEL CUSTOMER JOURNEY

In multichannel retailing, the combination of different retail channels along the various customer touchpoints has become the predominant purchasing pattern for customers (Mahrdt et al., 2013; Neslin et al., 2006).

The so-called 'research shopper phenomenon' describes a common tendency amongst customers to use one channel to search and another to purchase (Verhoef et al., 2007). Shankar (2011) and Heinemann (2013) call the switch between different channels 'ropo', which stands for 'Research online and purchase offline'. This term has two meanings. Firstly, under this scenario, users of the online environment carry out research online before making a purchase decision. They compare prices online, obtain information from the retailer's webpage or read comments posted by consumers of the product in which they are interested. This trend is called 'web-rooming', a wordplay on 'showrooming'. It describes a specific behaviour, which is that customers shop online but visit the store in order to physically interact with the product (Verhoef et al., 2015). This purchase pattern has an important impact on the overall purchase process. In the past, customers would first decide upon a particular retailer and then enquire with this retailer about a particular product. Then, the customer would visit the store to obtain information about different products offered by this retailer. Most probably, they would also consult other retailers in order to compare the offer. Afterwards they would make a purchase decision.

Nowadays, the customer primarily knows what product they want before choosing a retailer. Thus, when customers – after the initial phase of research – frequent a retail store, they have already contemplated a great deal of information, such as product features, prices, online availability and opinions from other users (Verhoef

et al., 2007). The 'point of decision' is, nowadays, often relocated to the online environment, while the store is only perceived as the 'point of sale' (Heinemann, 2013; Shankar, 2011). Customers increasingly trust the opinions of other product users more than the recommendations of in-store sales people or advertisements. When customers enter a retail store, they already possess detailed knowledge about products and features. Hence, customers have high expectations regarding product availability, immediate accessibility to information and service delivery.

Secondly, customers can also 'research offline and purchase online', reversing the terms of 'ropo'. In this context, the store can be seen as a 'showroom', where customers can physically touch products, interact with sales people, gather information and enjoy the shopping experience (Verhoef et al., 2015). A survey revealed that over 50 per cent of non-food online customers use stores as pre-purchase channels. Customers try products in-store, especially when high 'mis-purchase risks' are associated with buying the product (Heinemann, 2013).

Verhoef et al. (2007) explained that there are three reasons for this phenomenon. First, customers prefer the channel that offers them the most advantages in each part of the purchase process, and they switch among channels during the purchase process if another channel offers more advantages. This phenomenon is called 'attribute-based decision-making'. Second, it is seen as unlikely that customers generally purchase via the channel with the most research advantages and this is referred to as 'lack of channel lock-in'. Third, customers carry out research shopping when a channel switch increases their overall shopping experience. This is referred to as 'cross-channel synergy'.

Another study focused on retention and free-riding behaviour. Customers search for a product at one channel from a certain retailer, and then buy from a different

channel, but through the same retailer. This is called 'cross-channel retention'. Alternatively, customers might search for a product through one retailer channel, but then switch channels and retailers when purchasing. This is referred to as 'cross-channel free-riding' (Heitz-Spahn, 2013). Chiu et al. (2011) identified two major reasons for cross-channel free-riding. First, customers who have a high level of self-efficacy tend to switch channels and retailers during the purchasing process. Second, customers buy from the retailer who offers the best perceived quality with the least risk. Furthermore they suggested that within-firm lock-in decreases cross-channel free-riding. This means that retailers can install switching barriers, which reduce customer intentions to switch channels. Heitz-Spahn (2013) explored shopping convenience, flexibility and price comparisons as the three major cross-channel free-riding motives. The extent to which these motives transcend industry contexts has been debated. Heitz-Spahn (2013) argued that for products that customers buy infrequently but which have a high financial value, cross-channel free-riding behaviour is more likely than for other product categories. Kushwaha and Shankar (2013) also found that customer behaviour varies across different product categories. They clustered these different product categories into hedonic and utilitarian ones.

The concept of 'hedonic consumption' was introduced by Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) 'as those facets of consumer behaviour that relate to the multisensory, fantasy and emotive aspects of product usage experience' (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982, p. 92). Hedonic value is linked to playfulness and fun and thus can be considered as a highly subjective and personal experience (Babin, Darden, & Griffin, 1994).

In their study, Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) opposed 'hedonic consumption' to the traditional economic perspective in which products are seen as 'objects for which the consumer desires to maximise utility, where utility typically is measured as some function of the product's tangible attributes' (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982, p. 94). Further, utilitarian shopping behaviour has been defined as 'ergic, task related, and rational (Babin et al., 1994, p. 646). In the utilitarian view, consumers are concerned with purchasing products in an efficient and timely manner to satisfy their individual needs with a minimum of effort.

Thus, utilitarian motivated consumers primarily conduct a purchase 'to get something', whereas hedonic motivated consumers do it because 'they love it' (Triandis, 1977, as cited in(Babin et al., 1994, p. 645).

The distinction of products and consumer behaviour based on hedonism and utility is widely agreed upon in the retail literature (Childers, Carr, Peck, & Carson, 2001; Ha & Stoel, 2012; Westbrook & Black, 1985).

Kushwaha and Shankar suggested that consumers of hedonic products, such as apparel, tend more towards impulse purchase and variety-seeking behaviour and switch channels more often than consumers of utilitarian products (Kushwaha & Shankar, 2013). In addition to varied purchasing behaviour across product categories, the degree of maturity plays an important role in multichannel purchasing behaviour. Melis et al. (2015) conducted research in the UK grocery multichannel market. They found that customers tend to choose the retailer they prefer when purchasing offline for their first online purchase. When they become more used to purchasing online, they start switching retailers (Melis, 2015).

2.3   CONCEPTUALISATION OF SERVICE QUALITY

Service marketing evolved from 'a goods-centred, manufacturing-based model' during the Industrial Revolution (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, p. 324). Since then, research has focused on identifying a distinction between products and services. Marshall McLuhan (1964), a pioneer of service quality research, discussed some of the key logics of products and services. He suggested that in the context of services, the process is the product. As processes, the literature identifies the following common features of services among different industries. Services are (1) intangible (Shostack, 1977), (2) perishable (Zeithaml et al., 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). Thus, the key distinctions of services and products can be considered as follows:

	Products	Services
Nature	Tangible	Intangible
Durability	Dependent on the product (convenience goods versus consumer durable goods)	Short-lived/perishable
Timeline	Separate (consumption after the production)	Simultaneous (consumption during the production)
Variety	Higher degree of homogeneity among the same product and its production process	Higher degree of heterogeneity among the same service and its delivery process
Role of customer	Passive: No involvement of the customer in the production process (focus on product utility)	Active: Strong involvement of the customer in the creation process (focus on customer experience)

Image 2.2: Patten (2017) Differences between products and services

Services are clearly distinguishable from products based on 'durability', 'timeline', 'variety' and 'role of customers' criteria. Thus, researchers have argued for a dissociation of service logic from products (Lusch & Vargo, 2004). In her widely

acknowledged pamphlet, G. Shostack (1977) advocates for separating service marketing from product marketing, because she doubts that 'product marketing can be overlaid on service businesses' (Shostack, 1977, p. 73).

However, the evolving debate has neglected to present a consistent definition of services. Indeed, services are mostly conceptualised in relation to tangible goods (Lusch & Vargo, 2004). Thus, the following considerations are relevant to this literature review:

- What is service quality?

- How can service quality be conceptualised?

The first question seeks a definition of the term 'service quality'. Researchers have struggled to reach consensus around a definition for service and service quality. The following statement supports this thesis: 'Service quality means different things to different people but this article uses the user-based definition discussed by Garvin (3): services that meet customer preferences and expectations are considered to be of high quality. Maister (4) felt that customers judge quality by comparing their perceptions of what they receive to their expectations of what they should receive' (Haywood-Farmer, 1988, p. 19). The first part of this statement does not provide a definition of service quality, but offers instead a loose definition of 'high quality', since it describes its nature. The second part of the statement is an explanation of customer behaviour concerning service quality, although this is again not a definition. Thus, several service quality definitions were excluded from this review.

Finally, seventy-nine relevant research articles about 'traditional service quality', which refer to settings without online and multichannel references, were further

reviewed. Some of the articles reviewed had adopted definitions from other researchers, or had in some cases failed to provide a definition of service quality. The following table summarises the findings:

Source	Year	Service quality definition
(Crosby, 1979)	1979	Conformance to requirements
(Grönroos, 1984)	1984	A function of a range of resources and activities
(Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985)	1985	With reference to Japanese philosophy: Zero defects; doing it right the first time
(Parasuraman et al., 1985)	1985	An illusive and indistinct construct
(Parasuraman et al., 1985)	1985	A function of the magnitude and direction of the gap between expected service and perceived service
Eiglier & Langeard (1987) as (Jain & Gupta, 2004)	1987	Service quality is one that satisfies the customer
(Parasuraman et al., 1988)	1988	A comparison between expectation and performance
(Parasuraman et al., 1988)	1988	The customer`s assessment of the overall excellence or superiority of the service
Garvin (1988) as cited in (Holbrook, 1994)	1988	An unusually slippery concept, easy to visualise yet exasperatingly difficult to define
(Grasing & Hessick, 1988)	1988	The degree of excellence of its kind
(Bolton & Drew, 1991)	1991	An attitude
(Boulding et al., 1993)	1993	A blend of (1) customers' prior expectations of what will and what should transpire during the contact and (2) the actual delivered service during the service encounter
(Steenkamp & Hoffmann, 1994)	1994	An overall uni-dimensional construct concerning the fitness for consumption of the service
(Chandon, Pierre-Yves, & Philippe, 1997)	1997	A global attribute of the firm
Oliver (1997) as cited in (Schneider & White, 2004)	1997	A consumer-generated comparative judgement, since individuals have no implicit sense of quality unless a standard of comparison is provided
(Grönroos, 2001)	2001	It results from the combination between (1) the quality of the consumption process itself, (2) the quality of outcomes of the process, and (3) image of the provider of the service
(Brysland & Curry, 2001)	2001	Providing something intangible in a way that pleases the consumer and that preferably gives some value to that consumer

Source	Year	Service quality definition
(Schembri & Sandberg, 2002)	2002	A multidimensional attitude held by consumers, with each dimension comprising a number of attributes or service aspects
(Santos, 2003)	2003	The overall evaluation of service performance
(Vargo & Lusch, 2004)	2004	Application of specialised competences (knowledge and skills) through deeds, processes and performances, for the benefit of another entity or the entity itself
(Radomir, Plaias, & Nistor, 2012)	2012	Subjective construct that can only be determined by the user

Table 2.1: Patten (2017) Definitions of service quality in traditional settings

As the findings suggest, service quality is defined according to the following taxonomy: (1) Service quality definitions are subject to a perspective; they are either customer or organisation oriented. The majority of definitions capture the customer`s perspective, whilst others look at the firm as a service provider. (2) Service quality definitions are subject to an assessment. This assessment can be either objective or subjective. Service quality definitions that argue for an objective assessment of service quality are mostly organisation-oriented. This implies that researchers expect firms to be able to objectively measure service quality. In contrast, service quality definitions, which contain subjective assessments, are customer-oriented. Customer-oriented definitions are very common in the literature. Of all the customer-oriented service quality definitions, the concept of 'perceived' service quality has evolved as: '(1) different from objective or actual quality, (2) a higher level abstraction rather than a specific attribute of a product, (3) a global assessment that in some cases resembles attitude, and (4) a judgment usually made within a consumer´s evoked set' (Zeithaml, 1988, pp. 3-4).

Originally, the concept of perception has its roots in the area of physiology. 'Percepts represent unconscious inferences' (Helmholtz, 1925, as cited in Barlow, 1990, p. 1561). These individual perceptions are highly dependent on what one

has experienced (Barlow, 1990). Thus, the essence of perception is to declare that perception is not presumed true, but defined as access to truth (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. xviii).

As Zeithaml (1988) argues, customer perception is inevitably associated with the concept of consumer value. Sanchez-Fernandez and Iniesta-Bonillo (2006) identify six characterising attributes of consumer value. (1) As the most universally accepted feature, consumer value holds perceptual nature in any stage of the purchase process; (2) consumer value implies an interaction between a subject (customer) and an object (good, service, or idea). This interaction might also be relationship-related, associated with the relationship between the supplier and the customer; (3) consumer value is relative by virtue of its comparative, personal and situational nature; (4) it embodies a preferential evaluative judgment; (5) consumer value obtains a higher-level abstraction. It has its origin in means-end theory, which distinguishes between the simple attributes of the product and the consequences and ends wanted by the consumer. Following this theory, value would be placed at the top of this consumer's hierarchical structure. (6) For consumer value, the presence of both cognitive and affective systems needs to be considered.

However, the authors reason that there are several different definitions and uses of the term consumer value in the literature. Therefore, this study follows Schwartz & Bilsky's (1987) notion in which values are construed as 'concepts or beliefs about desirable end states or behaviours that transcend specific situations, guide selection or evaluation of behaviour and events, and are ordered by relative importance' (Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987, p. 551). Their approach is considered particularly valuable for this study, since it holds that values are formed through

motivational and social processes and their dynamic nature. With their study, Schwartz & Bilsky (1987) made an important contribution to how the perception of value relates to culture. They compared the value perceptions of Israelis and Germans, and based on their findings they suggest that value perceptions are distinct across the two countries. There is wide agreement in the literature that culture influences human behaviour (Hofstede, 1993; Schein, 1996; Trice & Beyer, 1984). Allport emphasises that within any particular culture there are common traits or dispositions, which are a part of that culture and that everyone in that culture recognises and names (Boeree, 2006).

The 'Hofstede Centre' compares cultural differences between several countries based on Gert Hofstede´s 'cultural dimensions theory'. This theory conceptualises the impact of a society's culture on the values of its members, and how these values relate to behaviour (Hofstede et al., 2010). According to that survey, German culture is considered individualistic with a strong belief in self-actualisation. Performance and task orientation are highly valued. Germans tend to avoid uncertainty on the one hand but they are easily able to adapt traditions to changed conditions on the other. Germans have a tendency towards pessimism, which implies that self-indulgence is considered somewhat 'wrong' (www.geert-hofstede.com, 2016). Thus, service quality perceptions differ among countries (Guesalaga & Pitta, 2014) and should be examined separately.

In conclusion, Zeithaml (1988) has made an important contribution to the research area of service marketing, when connecting the concepts of 'perception' and 'service quality'. Therefore, this study adopts her definition of perceived service quality as 'a global judgement, or attitude, relating to the superiority of the service' (Zeithaml, 1988, p. 16).

The previous discussion sheds light on the debates about how to define service quality in traditional settings. The outcome is also a valuable contribution to service quality provided in a virtual-mediated environment as this review of forty-seven research articles about electronic service quality revealed. The following table provides an overview of different electronic service quality definitions:

Source	Year	Service quality definition
(Grönroos, Heinonen, Isoniemi, & Lindholm, 2000)	2000	A multi-dimensional construct that can be divided into a functional dimension (what is delivered in terms of service outcome) and a technical dimension (how it is delivered in terms of service process)
(Rust & Lemon, 2001)	2001	Providing a superior experience to consumers with respect to the interactive flow of information
(Rust, 2001)	2001	The provision of service over electronic networks
(Santos, 2003)	2003	The overall customer evaluations and judgments regarding the excellence and quality of e-service delivery in the virtual marketplace
(Gummerus et al., 2004)	2004	The consumer´s evaluation of process and outcome quality of the interaction with a service provider´s electronic channels
(Parasuraman et al., 2005)	2005	The extent to which a website facilitates efficient and effective shopping, purchasing and delivery
(Bauer, Falk, & Hammerschmidt, 2006)	2006	Coverage of all cues and encounters that occur before, during and after the electronic service delivery
(Fassnacht & Köse, 2007)	2007	Service delivery via information technology where customers solely interact with a user interface on the worldwide web in order to retrieve desired benefits
(Ha & Stoel, 2009)	2009	The overall consumer´s perceptions of the excellence and effectiveness of an e-tailer`s product and/or service offering through its virtual store

Table 2.2: Patten (2017) Definitions of service quality in electronic settings

The literature findings suggest that electronic service quality can be considered an extension of traditional service quality. Mainly, this extension contains aspects of (1) the Internet as the location for service provision, and (2) Information technology (IT) as the service provider. This has a significant impact on the customer/firm relationship, because 'there is almost no face-to-face interaction between the customer and service provider, and it is an interaction between the customer and the website' (Tshin et al., 2014, p. 7).

There is no consensus around definitions of multichannel service quality. The few studies that exist suggest that it concerns all moments of contact between a service deliverer and its customers (Sousa & Voss, 2006). There is some evidence that multichannel service quality further contains the different physical and electronic components that are delivered through two or more channels (Santos, 2003). Customers using electronic and physical channels might evaluate their service quality perceptions based on all channels that they have encountered during the process of making a purchase (Seck & Philippe, 2013). Thus, there is agreement in the revised literature that multichannel service quality should be defined as 'the quality of the overall service experience by a customer, encompassing all the existing physical and virtual components' (Sousa & Voss, 2006, p. 358). Furthermore, the third component of multichannel service quality can be considered a form of integration quality. This is defined as 'the ability to provide customers with a seamless service experience across multiple channels' (Sousa & Voss, 2006, p. 365). Sousa and Voss (2006) call for a separate examination of physical, virtual and integration quality. First of all they emphasise the different nature of each of the three quality components. Second, they forecast a rapid technological development for the virtual component and they see advantages in examining it separately from the other two more constant components of physical and integration quality. In keeping with this notion, the three concepts of traditional, electronic and multichannel service quality are examined separately in the course of this study.

In keeping with the thoughts of Tranfield et al. (2003) who are concerned with the 'relevance' and 'rigour' of research literature, the findings from this literature review suggest that service quality conceptualisations consist of five main

elements, which are conceptual framework, method, dimension, perspective and industry. Therefore, articles about service quality which do not contain at least four of these five elements were excluded from any further review. Thus, 69 'key articles' were subject to a critical review. Findings are presented in the following sections.

Author (Year)	Dimensions	Industry	Perspective	Method and Sample	Conceptual framework
Grönroos (1984)	Technical quality, functional quality, image	Pure service	Customers	Quantitative: 219 surveys	Disconfirmation paradigm
Parasura-man et al. (1985)	Access, communication, competence, courtesy, credibility, reliability, responsiveness, security, tangibles, understanding the customer	Pure service	Customers and executives	Qualitative: 12 focus groups with customers; in-depth interviews with executives	Disconfirmation paradigm
Parasura-man et al. (1988)	Tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy	Pure service	Customers	Quantitative: 200 structured interviews	Disconfirmation paradigm
Cronin and Taylor (1992)	Tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy	Pure service	Customers	Quantitative: 660 personal, standardised interviews	Adequacy-importance model
Boulding et al. (1993)	Reliability, assurance, responsiveness, empathy, tangibles	Pure service	Experts/ Customers	Experiment: 96 usable results; quantitative: 177 surveys	Disconfirmation paradigm
Teas (1993)	Tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy	Retail	Customers	Quantitative: 120 personal interviews	Comparison of disconfirmation paradigm, evaluated performance and normed quality
Dabholkar et al. (1996)	Physical aspects, reliability, personal interaction, problem solving, policy	Retail	Customers	Qualitative: 3 phenomeno-logical interviews; 6 in-depth interviews; 3 customer-tracking while

Author (Year)	Dimensions	Industry	Perspective	Method and Sample	Conceptual framework
				purchasing	
Cronin et al. (2000)	Reliability, timeliness, competence, ease of contact, courtesy, understandable language, trustworthiness, security, understanding of needs, physical facilities	Mixed (Pure service and retail)	Customers	Quantitative: 1944 surveys	Convergent and divergent theory
Dabholkar et al. (2000)	Reliability, personal attention, comfort, features	Retail	Customers	Qualitative: 10 focus groups; quantitative: 397 telephone interviews	Comparison of disconfirmation paradigm and perceived service
Brady and Cronin (2001)	Interaction quality, physical environment quality, outcome quality	Pure service	Customers	Qualitative: open-ended surveys from 391 participants	Disconfirmation paradigm
Siu (2001)	Personal interaction, policy, physical appearance, promises, problem solving, convenience	Retail	Customers	Quantitative: 200 surveys	Adequacy-importance model
Thang and Tan (2003)	Merchandising, store atmosphere, in-store service, accessibility, reputation, promotion, facilities, post-transaction service	Retail	Customers	Quantitative: 278 surveys	Stimulus-organism-response framework
Wong and Sohal (2003)	Check-out service, lay-by service, exchange service, attitude of staff, price, operation hours, store security, product variety	Retail	Customers	Qualitative: 3 focus groups with 18 participants	Critical incident technique
Katerattana-kul and Siau (2003)	Physical facilities, merchandise, promotion, service, post-transaction satisfaction,	Retail	Customers	Quantitative: 427 surveys	

Author (Year)	Dimensions	Industry	Perspective	Method and Sample	Conceptual framework
	convenience, clientele, store atmosphere, institutional factors				
Patricio et al. (2003)	Mutual knowledge, individualised attention, professional knowledge, empathy and courtesy, ability to solve, clarify and decide, completeness of functionalities	Pure service	Customers and bank employees	Qualitative: in-depth interviews and focus groups with 36 customers and 13 bank employees	Consumer decision behaviour
Carr (2007)	Tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, system service fairness	Pure service	Users of IS services	Quantitative: 879 surveys	Equity theory; disconfirmation paradigm
Jinfeng and Zhilong (2009)	Convenience, institutional factors, physical facilities, perceived price, employee service	Retail	Customers	Quantitative: 530 surveys	Retailer equity

Table 2.3: Patten (2017) Five forces of traditional service quality conceptualisations

Author (Year)	Dimensions	Industry	Perspective	Method and Sample	Conceptual framework
Grönroos et al. (2000)	Service concept, participation, communication	Pure service	Customers	Case study	Augmented service offering model
Kaynama and Black (2000)	Content, access, navigation, design, response, background, personalisation	Pure service	Organisation	Qualitative: interviews	GAP model
Liu and Arnett (2000)	System design quality, information quality, playfulness, system use	Mixed (Pure service and retail)	Organisation	Quantitative: 119 webmasters of Fortune 1000 companies	IS
Alpar (1999)	Ease of use, information content, entertainment, interactivity	Mixed (Pure service and retail)	Customers	Quantitative: Over 1000 users	-
Childers et al. (2001)	Hedonic motivation, utilitarian motivation	Retail	Customers	Quantitative: Hedonic motivation: 274 surveys with students; Utilitarian motivation: survey with 266 customers	Technology acceptance model (TAM)
Cox and Dale (2001)	Accessibility, communication, credibility, appearance	Pure service	-	Literature review	GAP model
Yoo and Donthu (2001)	Ease of use, aesthetic design, processing speed, security	Retail	Customers	Qualitative: 57 focus groups with students; Quantitative: 94 surveys with students	-
Aladwani and Palvia (2002)	Specific content, content quality, appearance, technical adequacy	Pure service	Customers	Quantitative: 101 surveys with students	-
Barnes and Vidgen (2002)	Website usability, information, service interaction	Retail	Customers	Quantitative: 376 online surveys with students	-

Author (Year)	Dimensions	Industry	Perspective	Method and Sample	Conceptual framework
Francis and White (2002)	Web store functionality, product attribute, description, delivered products, customer products, customer service, security	Retail	Customers	Qualitative: Explanatory interviews	-
Li, Tan and Xie (2002)	Assurance, reliability, quality of information, responsiveness, empathy, integration of communication	Pure service	Customers	Quantitative: 202 users of internet news	SERVQUAL
Madu and Madu (2002)	Performance, features, structure, aesthetics, reliability, storage capacity, service availability, security and system integrity, trust, responsiveness, differentiation, web store policies	-	-	Literature review	GAP model
Swinder (2002)	Termed performance, access, security, sensation, information	Retail	Customers	Qualitative: 58 in-depth interviews; quantitative: 446 surveys	-
Cai,(2003)	Website design and content, trustworthiness, prompt and reliable service, communication	Retail	Customers	Quantitative: 171 surveys	-
Collier and Bienstock (2003)	Privacy, design, information accuracy, ease of use, functionality, order timeliness, order accuracy, order condition, interactive fairness, procedural fairness, outcome fairness	Retail	Customers	Quantitative: 266 surveys	E-service quality
Katerattana ku and Siau (2003)	Site and System facilities, product and promotion information, transaction service and satisfaction, convenience, appearance and	Retail	Customers	Quantitative: 427 surveys	Virtual store image

Author (Year)	Dimensions	Industry	Perspective	Method and Sample	Conceptual framework
	congeniality, institutional factors				
Santos (2003)	Ease of use, appearance, linkage, structure and layout, content, efficiency, reliability, communication, security, incentive, customer support	Retail	Customers	Qualitative: 30 focus groups with students	-
Van Riel (2003)	User interface, reliability, responsiveness, customisation, security	Pure service	Customers	Quantitative: 159 students	SERVQUAL
Wolfinbarger and Gilly (2003)	Website design, fulfilment and reliability, customer service	Retail	Customers	Qualitative: 9 focus groups with total 64 participants; quantitative: 1013 surveys	Structured conceptualis-ation
Patricio et al. (2003)	Access, ease of navigation, efficiency, flexibility, reliability, personalisation, security/privacy, responsiveness, assurance, trust, site aesthetics, price knowledge	Pure Service	Customers and Bank staff	Qualitative: in-depth interviews and focus groups with 36 customers and 13 bank staff	Consumer decision behaviour
Gummerus (2004)	User interface, responsiveness, need fulfilment, security	Pure service	User	Quantitative: 421 surveys	-
Jun et al. (2004)	Reliable and prompt response, access, ease of use, attentiveness, security, credibility	Retail	Customers	Quantitative: 260 surveys with students and academic staff	-
Kim and Stoel (2004)	Web appearance, entertainment, information fit-to-task, transaction capability, response time, trust	Retail	Customers	Quantitative: 273 surveys	-
Long and McMellon (2004)	Tangibility, assurance, reliability, responsiveness, purchase process		Customers	Quantitative: 477 online customers	GAP model

Author (Year)	Dimensions	Industry	Perspective	Method and Sample	Conceptual framework
Ribbink et al. (2004)	Customisation, assurance, ease of use, site design, responsiveness	Retail	Customers	Quantitative: 350 online surveys from students and academics	Conceptual E-quality model
Yang and Fang (2004)	Responsiveness, service reliability, ease of use, competence, access, system reliability, timeliness, security, responsiveness, web design	Pure service	Customers	Qualitative: 740 online consumer anecdotes were analysed	Services Marketing and information systems management
Yang et al. (2004)	Reliability, responsiveness, competence, ease of use, security, product portfolio	Pure service	Customers	Qualitative: an ethnographic content analysis of 848 customer reviews	IS
Lee and Lin (2005)	Website design, reliability, responsiveness, trust	Retail	Customers	Quantitative: 297 surveys	SERVQUAL
Parasura-man et al. (2005)	Efficiency, fulfilment, system availability, privacy	Mixed (Pure service and retail)	Customers	Quantitative: 549 surveys	Means-end framework
Bauer et al. (2005)	Functionality and design, enjoyment, process, reliability, responsiveness	-	Customers	Qualitative: 30 semi-structured interviews; quantitative: 384 surveys	Transaction process model
Boshoff (2006)	Efficiency, web site speed, delivery, reliability, system availability, privacy	Retail	Customers	Quantitative: 1409 surveys	E-S-Qual

Author (Year)	Dimensions	Industry	Perspective	Method and Sample	Conceptual framework
Fassnacht and Köse (2006)	Environment quality, delivery quality, outcome quality, ease of use, quality of appearance and layout, information quality, privacy and security, reliability, speed and responsiveness, content	Pure service	Customers	Qualitative: 24 in-depth interviews	Service quality framework from Rust and Oliver (1994)
Kim et al. (2006)	Efficiency, fulfilment, system availability, privacy, responsiveness, contact, information, personalisation, graphic style	Retail	-	Content analysis of 111 apparel websites	E-S-QUAL
Tih and Ennis (2006)	Core service, website, service assessment, purchase process, responsiveness	Mixed (Pure service and retail)	Customers	Quantitative: 136 surveys	-
Cristobal et al. (2007)	Web design, customer service, assurance, order management	Mixed (Pure service and retail)	Customers	Quantitative: 461 surveys	Structural model
Loiacoano et al. (2007)	Usefulness, ease of use, entertainment, complimentary relationship	Mixed (Pure service and retail)	Customers	Quantitative: 307 surveys	Theory of reasoned action (TRA); technology acceptance model (TAM)
Sohn and Tadisina (2008)	Trust, customised communications, ease of use, website content and functionality, reliability, speed of delivery	Pure service	Customers	Quantitative: 2004 surveys	-
Barrutia (2009)	Availability of content and information, ease of use, sensations, compliance and reliability	Pure service	Organisation	Quantitative: 301 surveys	Triangle model; service pyramid model from Parasuraman (1996)

Author (Year)	Dimensions	Industry	Perspective	Method and Sample	Conceptual framework
Francis (2009)	Website, transaction, delivery, customer service, security	Retail	Customers	Qualitative: 40 Interviews; Quantitative: 1262 surveys	RECIPE
Ha and Stoel (2009)	Website design, customer service, privacy and security, atmospheric and experiential	Retail	Customers	Quantitative: 298 surveys	Technology acceptance model (TAM); theory of reason action (TRA); theory of planned behaviour
Heinonen and Strandvik (2009)	Temporal value, spatial value, functional value, technical value	Pure service	Customers	Quantitative: 3328 surveys	Heinonen´s value model
Mahani (2011)	Ease of use, website responsiveness, order return, fulfilment, privacy, security, improvement, information	Retail	Organisation and customers	Quantitative: 225 surveys	Contingency theory
Ha and Stoel (2012)	Privacy and security, website content and functionality, customer service, experiential and atmospheric	Retail	Customers	Quantitative: 298 surveys	Quality-satisfaction-behavioural intention link model
Rafiq et al. (2012)	Efficiency, system availability, fulfilment, privacy	Retail	Customers	Quantitative: 491 surveys	E-S-QUAL
Sousa and Voss (2012)	Information availability and content, ease of use, privacy and security, graphic style, fulfilment	Pure service	Customers	Quantitative: 5942 surveys	-
Bressolles et al. (2014)	Quality and quantity of information, ease of use, aesthetics, security and privacy	Retail and service	Customers	Quantitative: 1144 surveys	NetQual

Table 2.4: Patten (2017) Five forces of electronic service quality conceptualisations

Author (Year)	Dimensions	Industry	Perspective	Method and Sample	Conceptual framework
Sousa and Voss (2006)	Physical quality, virtual quality, integration quality	-	Customer	Literature review	Service delivery system (SDS)
Swaid (2012)	Website efficiency, website reliability, information quality, assurance, responsiveness, personalisation, integrated pick-up	-	Customer	Qualitative: 3 focus groups with 18 college students; Quantitative: 402 online surveys with students	SERVQUAL and TRA
Seck et al. (2013)	Physical service quality, virtual service quality, integration quality	Pure service	Customer	Qualitative: In-depth interviews. Quantitative: 445 surveys	SDS
Badrinaray-anan et al. (2014)	Congruity (online and offline) aesthetic appeal, congruity navigation convenience, congruity transaction convenience, congruity atmosphere, congruity of service, congruity of price orientation, congruity of security	Retail	Customer	Quantitative: 316 students of a US university	Theory of reasoned action (TRA)
Banerjee (2014)	Physical quality, virtual quality, integration quality	Pure service	Customer and organisation	Qualitative: multi-method case study; 31 in-depth interviews with bank customers; 4 in-depth interviews with senior managers of the bank	SERVQUAL and E-S-QUAL; SDS

Table 2.5: Patten (2017) Five forces of multichannel service quality conceptualisations

2.3.1 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

Academic debate about how to conceptualise service quality has developed extensively since the 1980s. In essence, the service quality literature can be divided into two streams. The majority of researchers evaluate service quality based on the disconfirmation paradigm as a gap between expected service and perceived service (Carr, 2007; Dabholkar et al., 1996; Grönroos, 1984; Parasuraman et al., 1988). The SERVQUAL model can be considered the most important gap-based service quality conceptualisation (Parasuraman et al., 1988). For their measurement of perceived service quality, Parasuraman et al. (1988) used a seven-point Likert scale (from 1=low and 7=high) and asked participants whether or not a service company should have certain attributes (expectations). They then asked participants if the company actually possesses certain attributes and to again rank their attitude based on their prior experiences on a seven-point Likert scale (perceptions). Later, Parasuraman et al. (1990) modified the measures of the survey towards normative expectations, because they faced major operational problems with participants who expressed unrealistically high expectations about a specific feature of service (as cited in Teas, 1993). Gap-based service quality concepts draw extensively on the work of Oliver (1990), who identifies himself within the tradition of Sherif's and Hovland´s 'assimilation theory' (Sherif & Hovland, 1961) and Festinger´s 'dissonance theory' (Festinger, 1957), whereby '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).

Other researchers use a performance-only approach to evaluate service quality (Boulding et al., 1993; Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Teas, 1993). Cronin and Taylor (1992) were the first researchers who conceptualised service quality based only on measurements of performance (SERVPERF). They used a seven-point Likert scale for their evaluation and asked participants to rank service companies based on their service performance between 1 (low performance) and 7 (high performance).

For an evaluation of both approaches it is important to highlight, that, in the case of the gap model, expectations were not just conceptualised based on previous experiences with a service, but also as the general 'desires' of customers regarding specific service attributes (Parasuraman et al., 1994, p. 112).

Several different service quality gap models, such as 'The Service Quality Model' (Grönroos, 1984), 'SERVQUAL' (Parasuraman et al., 1988), 'E-SQUAL' (Parasuraman et al., 2005) and 'WEBQUAL' (Loiacono et al., 2002) have been developed to conceptualise service quality and consumer perceptions. However, most of these approaches tend to take orientation from a single-channel perspective, and do not consider multichannel settings (Seck & Philippe, 2013; Sousa & Voss, 2012). It is therefore necessary to view multichannel service quality from a different perspective to traditional (for instance, retail stores) and electronic (for instance, the online environment) service settings, since perceived service quality results from all moments of contact between a retailer and its customers across all channels (Sousa & Voss, 2006).

Sousa and Voss (2006) were the first researchers to develop a framework that detracted from the single-channel approach. Their 'Service Delivery System' (SDS) considers all moments of contact between the firm and its customers. Sousa and Voss (2006) distinguished between a physical and a virtual component of service delivery. In terms of the physical component, non-automated operations take place and humans are directly involved. In the context of virtual components, operations are automated and humans do not play an active role. Sousa and Voss (2006) also distinguish between back office and front office operations. Back office operations are not directly visible to the customer, whilst front office operations are. The researchers argue that existing service quality research focuses on front office processes. Based on their framework, the physical and virtual service components (front office and back office) are linked with each other via integration mechanisms. These mechanisms function to integrate 'the several service components and associated parts of the SDS' (Sousa & Voss, 2006, p. 359). According to Sousa and Voss (2006), all front and back office physical and virtual operations enriched with integration mechanisms determine the overall perceived multichannel service quality. They argued for a separate examination of physical, virtual and integration quality. First of all, they emphasise the different nature of the three quality dimensions. Second, they forecast a rapid technological development for the virtual dimension, and they see advantages in examining this separately from the other two more constant dimensions of physical and integration quality.

2.3.2 METHODS

The study methods applied in the 69 reviewed service quality conceptualisations were based variously on quantitative approaches, mixed methods, literature reviews, content analyses and purely qualitative studies.

Of the eighteen traditional service quality conceptualisations reviewed, quantitative methods tended to dominate. The researchers used this method consistently, but do not explain why.

In any case, the preference for quantitative methods reflects the dominance of positivistic researchers who seek to objectively measure customer perceptions of service quality (Schembri & Sandberg, 2003). These researchers aim to generate 'generic dimensions, applicable across service contexts' (Schembri & Sandberg, 2003, p. 3). The underlying assumption of these researchers is their ability to display a 'tangible reality' of the service quality phenomenon (Brymann & Bell, 2007, p. 64). This is in fact a contradiction in terms, since service quality is defined as intangible. It is thus questionable whether an intangible phenomenon can be situated within an objective and tangible reality in the first place.

The first researchers to apply a qualitative method in services research were Parasuraman et al. (1985). They decided to apply a qualitative method due to a lack of richness in the related literature in order to provide 'a sound conceptual foundation for investigating service quality' (Parasuraman et al., 1985, p. 43). The researchers carried out twelve focus group interviews with customers and a series of in-depth interviews with executives 'to develop a conceptual model of service quality' (Parasuraman et al., 1985, p. 43). Hence, Parasuraman et al. (1985) used qualitative methods in the early stages of their service quality research. They carried out inductive research in order to develop their theory.

Dabholkar et al. (1996) were the first researchers to develop a service quality model for retailers, the retail service quality scale (RSQS). They applied qualitative methods 'to conduct further research to gain an understanding of the dimensions of retail service quality' (Dabholkar et al., 1996, p. 4). For their inductive study Dabholkar et al. (1996) used three different qualitative methods comprising three phenomenological interviews, six exploratory in-depth interviews and three customer observation exercises during three shopping experiences. Dabholkar et al. (1996) used this kind of triangulation technique for their research in order to enrich their data and improve the overall validity of their study.

Brady and Cronin (2001) used 'qualitative research to identify the sub-dimensions customers consider when evaluating … a service experience' (Brady & Cronin, 2001, p. 36). The research suggested that 'the service quality construct conforms to the structure of a third-order factor model' consisting of dimensions, sub-dimensions and items under these sub-dimensions (Brady & Cronin, 2001, p. 34).

In the early stages of research about electronic service quality two studies were published, which applied a qualitative approach: Kaynama et al. (2000) used 'a qualitative exploratory research design, because the literature on the travel agencies´ internal organisational factors that contribute to service quality is not rich enough to suggest formal relationships among variables' (Kaynama, Black, & Keesling, 2000, p. 138). In the same year, Grönroos et al. (2000) published a qualitative case study 'to develop an understanding of the nature (of Internet) offerings' (Grönroos et al., 2000, p. 243).

Few studies at the time of writing have sought to examine service quality in a multichannel context (Banerjee, 2014; Seck & Philippe, 2013; Sousa & Voss, 2006). However, the five multichannel service quality studies that were reviewed

applied qualitative methods, mixed methods and a literature review approach to knowledge creation. Sousa and Voss (2006) focused on conducting a literature review in their research into multichannel service quality since they aimed to achieve exploratory research findings. Other researchers were motivated towards a qualitative approach with the aim of developing 'an in-depth and holistic understanding of multiple aspects of (the) phenomenon' (Banerjee, 2014, p. 463) and the development of theory (Seck & Philippe, 2013; Swaid & Wigand, 2012).

As the reviewed literature suggests, the reasoning for selecting qualitative research over quantitative approaches include variously:

• The absence of a sound conceptual foundation for the research topic

• The exploratory nature of the study

• The development of a service quality conceptual model

• The development of theory

• The desire to understand a phenomenon.

2.3.3 DIMENSIONS

Service quality attributes, the so-called 'dimensions' play a predominant role in service quality research, as perceived service quality is a function of different dimensions (Parasuraman et al., 1985). The literature review reveals that these dimensions vary across traditional, electronic and multichannel concepts. In terms of the 18 traditional service quality studies that were reviewed, some 66 dimensions were found to exist. In terms of the 46 electronic service quality models reviewed, some 142 dimensions exist, and in terms of the five multichannel service quality models reviewed, some 20 dimensions exist. As a

result of the great variation between the service quality dimensions it is not practical to analyse each of them qualitatively. Therefore, the following chart sums up the most frequently mentioned dimensions grouped by traditional, electronic and multichannel dimensions:

	Dimension I	Dimension II	Dimension III	Dimension IV	Dimension V
Traditional	Reliability	Tangibles	Assurance	Empathy	Respon-siveness
Electronic	Privacy	Respon-siveness	Ease of use	Reliability	
Multi-channel	Integration quality	Physical quality	Virtual quality		

Table 2.6: Patten (2017) Service quality dimensions divided by the setting

The majority of researchers whose work was reviewed incorporate service quality dimensions from previous research. They often fail to explain why they have selected particular dimensions. As such, the following qualitative analysis of service quality dimensions is limited to those researchers that provided a rationale for their selection of particular dimensions.

The dimensions that are predominantly used in the reviewed literature for traditional service quality resonate with the SERVQUAL dimensions (Parasuraman et al., 1988) of reliability (cited eight times by researchers), tangibles (cited six times), assurance (cited five times), empathy (cited five times) and responsiveness (cited six times):

Reliability:

According to Parasuraman et al. (1985), 'reliability involves consistency of performance and dependability. It means that the firm performs the service right the first time. It also means that the firm honours its promises. Specifically, it involves accuracy in billing, keeping records correctly and performing the service at the designated time' (Parasuraman et al., 1985). For Dabholkar et al., reliability

means the combination of 'keeping promises' and 'doing it right' (Dabholkar et al., 1996, p. 7).

Tangibles:

Tangibles 'include the physical evidence of the service: physical facilities, appearance of personnel, tools or equipment used to provide the service, physical representations of the service, such as a plastic credit card or a bank statement, other customers in the service facility' (Parasuraman et al., 1985, p. 47).

Assurance:

Assurance refers to the 'knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence' (Parasuraman et al., 1988, p. 23).

Empathy:

Empathy means 'caring, individualised attention the firm provides its customers' (Parasuraman et al., 1988, p. 23).

Responsiveness:

'Responsiveness concerns the willingness or readiness of employees to provide service. It concerns the timeliness of service and examples include mailing a transaction slip promptly, calling a customer back quickly, or providing prompt service (for example making appointments quickly)' (Parasuraman et al., 1985, p. 47).

The dimensions that are primarily referred to in the reviewed literature on e-service quality are privacy/security (referred to 27 times by researchers), responsiveness (referenced 17 times), ease of use (referenced 16 times) and reliability (referenced 15 times):

Privacy/security:

There is consensus in the reviewed literature that privacy/security means the 'degree to which the customer believes the site is safe from intrusion and personal information is protected' (Parasuraman et al., 2005, p. 219).

Responsiveness:

Responsiveness is a service quality dimension, which has already played a role in the traditional service quality field. However, in terms of electronic service quality, it is supposed to play a more important role, since it is the second most frequently mentioned service quality dimension in the reviewed electronic service quality literature (and the fifth most frequently used in literature in traditional service quality). Responsiveness refers to the company´s ability to answer quickly and correctly, and to provide helpful solutions where customers have a problem with the service or the product, and where there are mechanisms for handling returns (Gummerus et al., 2004; Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Malhorta, 2000).

Ease of use:

Ease of use is defined in the literature as 'the degree to which the prospective user expects the target system to be free of effort' (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Malhotra, 2002, p. 363) and 'the degree to which the functionality of the user interface facilitates the customer´s retrieval of the electronic service' (Fassnacht & Köse, 2006, p. 26). '(…) It has been characterised as the customer´s ability to use as few 'clicks' as possible' (Collier & Bienstock, 2006, p. 264). Ease of use generally refers to two concepts: 'ease of operation (intuitive operations) and navigation (ease of understanding) for a Web site' (Loiacono, Watson, & Goodhue, 2007, p. 58), Even where it was considered an important dimension in the literature, it has been argued that ease of use is important as long as the

Internet counts as a 'new technology' and customers are not so familiar with it (Zeithaml et al., 2002, p. 364).

Reliability:

Reliability is seen by different researchers as the most important electronic service quality dimension (Bauer et al., 2006; Van Riel, Semeijn, & Janssen, 2003; Wolfinbarger & Gilly, 2003; Zeithaml et al., 2002) and it is defined in the literature as 'on-time and accurate delivery, accurate product representation and other fulfilment issues, (moreover) technical reliability, such as the proper functioning of the site' (Zeithaml et al., 2002, p. 364). Another aspect of reliability is that information provided on websites is reliable, which means that it is accurate and up-to-date (Madu & Madu, 2002; Santos, 2003).

In the reviewed literature there is agreement that the key distinction between multichannel and single channel service quality concepts is the integration quality dimension. The contribution of the reviewed studies to the concept of integration quality is illustrated in the following image:
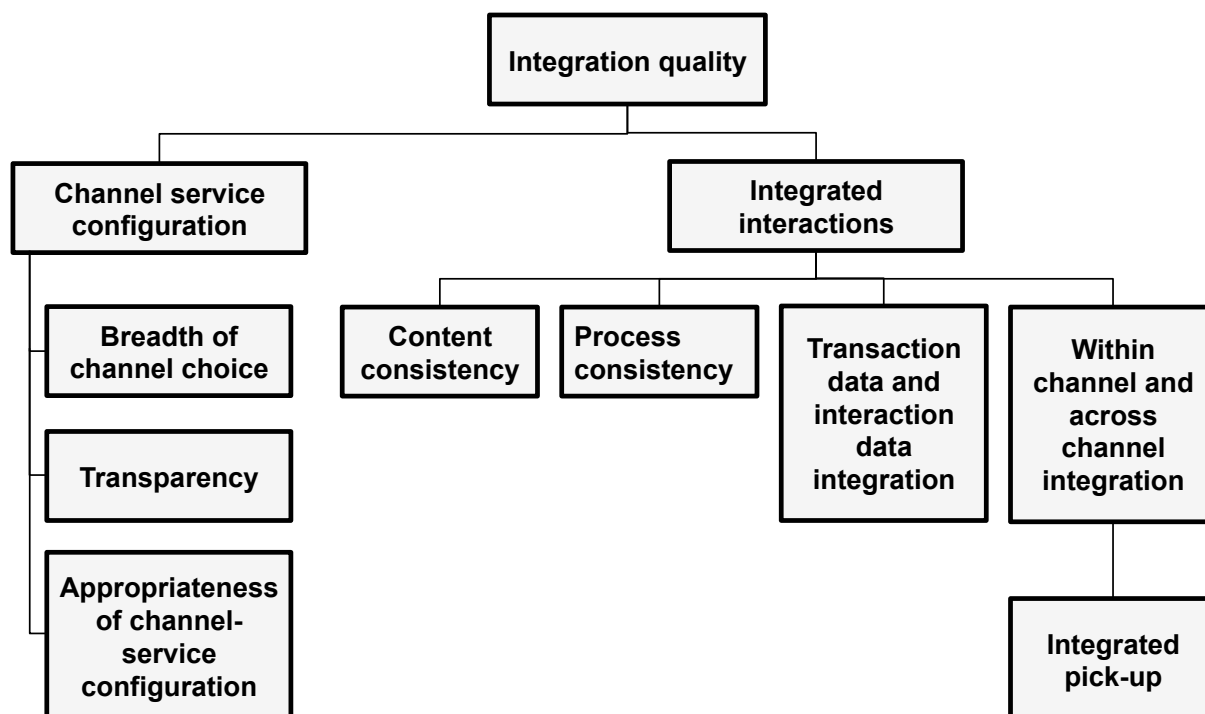
Image 2.3: Patten (2017) The concept of integration quality

Sousa and Voss (2006) were the first researchers to suggest dimensions for multichannel service quality systems that did not take a single-channel approach. Their study forms the basis for the following literature synthesis.

Integration:

In their multichannel 'service delivery system' framework Sousa and Voss established the integration quality dimension. They defined integration quality as providing a 'seamless service experience across channels' (Sousa & Voss, 2006, p. 359). Sousa and Voss 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 Voss presented two sub-dimensions for integration quality: 'channel-service configuration' and 'integrated interactions':

Channel-service configuration:

Channel-service configuration is the degree of choice a customer has regarding a service offer in each of the channels ('service breadth').

Integrated interactions:

When introducing integrated interactions, Sousa and Voss refer to 'the consistency of interactions across channels' (Sousa & Voss, 2006, p. 366). The researchers emphasise two aspects of integrated interactions: content and process consistency. Content consistency means that customers receive the same information from the company when communicating through different channels. Process consistency means that customers expect the same handling of comparable processes.

Appropriateness of channel service configuration:

The appropriateness of channel service configuration refers to the degree to which a channel is suitable for different functions as a sub-dimension of channel-service configuration (Banerjee, 2014).

Transaction data and interaction data integration:

This refers to the degree to which customer transaction information and inbound and outbound interaction information are synthesised within and across channels (Banerjee, 2014).

Within channel and across channel integration:

This refers to the degree to which content and process information is integrated within parts of a channel and across channels (Banerjee, 2014).

Integrated pickup:

This refers to the extent to which a smooth and easy pickup of products purchased online using a physical outlet/touchpoint can be confirmed (Swaid & Wigand, 2012). Swaid and Wigand (2012) examined customer perceptions of service quality in the context of buying online and picking-up purchases in-store. With respect to their service quality dimensions, Swaid and Wigand did not distinguish between the different channels. For their conceptual framework, the researchers chose specific online service quality dimensions, which they published in an earlier study (Swaid & Wigand, 2009).

Besides integration quality, Sousa and Voss (2006) investigated virtual and physical quality as two other primary dimensions of multichannel service quality.

Virtual quality:

The researchers define virtual quality as 'the pure information component of a customer´s service experience provided in an automated fashion (without human intervention) through a given virtual channel (…)' (Sousa & Voss, 2006, p. 357). Thus, this definition of virtual quality cannot be considered the equivalent of electronic service quality based on single-channel conceptualisations.

Physical quality:

Sousa and Voss define physical quality 'as the portion of a customer´s service experience provided in a non-automated fashion, requiring some degree of human intervention, either through a virtual or physical channel' (Sousa & Voss, 2006, p. 358). Again, this conceptualisation is different from the definition in traditional service quality literature, which does not specify that humans need to be directly involved in the service provision, and which considers all services provided in a physical marketplace.

There is disagreement as to which concept is more appropriate to conceptualise the physical and virtual service quality dimensions in a multichannel setting. Sousa and Voss have not yet tested their multichannel service quality dimensions empirically. In their 2006 study, they conducted a literature review and recognised that 'the measurements of some instruments fall into more than one category, and some of the individual dimensions are themselves a mix of virtual and physical aspects' (Sousa & Voss, 2006, p. 361).

Due to these conceptual inaccuracies, this study embraces the idea of physical service quality as defined in traditional settings (Parasuraman et al., 1988) and applies the term electronic service quality to mean general perceived service in the virtual marketplace, either with or without human intervention (Parasuraman et al., 2005; Santos, 2003).

Based on the reviewed literature, extant knowledge about service quality dimensions can be synthesised as follows:

• Multichannel service quality is a multidimensional construct which consists of primary dimensions and corresponding sub-dimensions.

• There is evidence in the reviewed literature that the existing dimensions have not yet fully grasped the customer´s perception of service quality since studies consistently investigate new service quality dimensions. Thus, research about service quality dimensions can be considered to be fragmented. There is therefore no central theme that is recognisable. Some researchers take dimensions from previous studies. Others take dimensions from previous studies and add their own dimensions. Some suggest entirely new dimensions in their studies.

- Multichannel service quality consists of the quality that each channel can provide for the customer. However, multichannel service quality is not a simple summation between service quality perceptions in each channel. The service quality dimensions that are experienced in any channel during the purchase process should be congruent online and offline and should provide a seamless shopping experience for the customer.

2.3.4 PERSPECTIVES

The dominant perspective in the reviewed service quality literature is the customer´s perspective. Of the 69-service quality models reviewed, some 62 models focused on the consumer´s point of view. Grönroos argued that it is particularly important to understand how the customer evaluates service, because 'if we know this and the components of service quality, we will be able to develop service-oriented concepts and models more successfully' (Grönroos, 1984, p. 36). The customer perspective is therefore useful, as the literature reveals the following impacts related to high service quality:

1. Customer satisfaction (Badrinarayanan et al., 2014)

2. Customer loyalty (Grönroos, 1984, p. 37)

3. Purchase intention (Bolton & Drew, 1991; Bressolles et al., 2014; Cronin, Brady, & Hult, 2000; Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Spreng & Mackoy, 1996)

4. Profitability (Collier & Bienstock, 2006; Cox & Dale, 2001; Cristobal, Flavian, & Guinaliu, 2007; Gummerus et al., 2004)

5. Purchase retention (Cai & Jun, 2003; Parasuraman et al., 1988; Zeithaml, 2000).

Nonetheless, this issue is approached as something quite controversial and much of the service quality research claims to represent a first-person customer perspective. Schembri and Sandberg (2002), however, argue that the objective measurement of service quality dimensions based on the disconfirmation paradigm merely remains a static third-person perspective of customer service quality perceptions. Following this line of argument, the researchers conceptualised a dynamic and interpretative framework for first-person service quality experiences. Thus they were able to provide evidence, that 'different people in different contexts may hold different meanings for similar service quality experiences' (Schembri & Sandberg, 2003, p. 5).

In conclusion, studies focusing on first-person perspectives can help companies improve their service strategies, and the performance of their service offer (Cristobal et al., 2007; Fassnacht & Köse, 2007; Zeithaml, 2000).

Less research has been conducted to investigate the organisational perspective of service quality. Such research has been undertaken mainly to evaluate management perceptions of customer expectations (Collier & Bienstock, 2006; Wolfinbarger & Gilly, 2003), the organisation´s ability to establish service standards arising from customer expectations (Dabholkar et al., 1996; Fassnacht & Köse, 2006; Parasuraman et al., 1988), and employee training in respect of service issues (Kaynama et al., 2000).

2.3.5 INDUSTRIES

In the literature that was reviewed, three different industry contexts of service quality were identified, and these are the pure service industry, such as banking and pest control; the retail industry, such as supermarkets; and a mix of pure service and retail industries.

The distinction between pure service and retail industries is that the pure service industry is an industry, whereas service is the actual 'product', and the retail industry is an industry in which stores 'offer a mix of merchandise and service' (Dabholkar et al., 1996, p. 3).

The early service quality models were researched in the pure service industry (Bolton & Drew, 1991; Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Grönroos, 1984; Parasuraman et al., 1988). Later, researchers argued for a distinction to be made between different industries (Dabholkar et al., 1996). In the retail industry, the literature suggests that the arrangement of merchandise, physical facilities, interaction with sales personnel, transaction process and returning merchandise directly influence the customer's service experience (Cronin et al., 2000; Dabholkar et al., 1996; Vanheems, 2013).

The arrangement of merchandise can be considered crucial for the customer's in-store shopping experience (Thang & Tan, 2003). As for fashion items, the hedonic orientation of customers (Kim & Stoel, 2004) can even reinforce the impact of merchandise-related issues. The arrangement of merchandise is one criterion that determines the customers' attitude towards the store – the so-called 'store image' (Baker, Grewal, & Parasuraman, 1994). In the reviewed literature, the arrangement of merchandise is also referred to as 'visual merchandising', 'store environment' or 'store atmosphere' (Baker et al., 1994; Thang & Tan, 2003). However, there is some controversy surrounding the extent to which these terms are actually part of service quality. Some researchers argue that the concepts of merchandise, service quality, store environment and store image are closely linked with each other. More precisely, the former are the antecedents of store image (Baker et al., 1994). Others conceptualise the store environment as being

one dimension of the higher-order construct of service quality (Brady & Cronin, 2001; Dabholkar et al., 1996).

A similar debate arose around the topic of 'store design'. The reviewed literature presents different definitions and terms to conceptualise store design (Brady & Cronin, 2001; Dabholkar et al., 1996; Katerattanakul & Siau, 2003; Siu & Cheung, 2001). However, there is some consensus that store design refers to aspects concerning navigation through the store, furniture, cleanliness, lighting, smell, and music. Thus, store design has the function of supporting a store's ease of navigation, aesthetics and sensuality.

As the literature suggests, sales people have a tremendous impact on the in-store service experience (Shepherd, 1999; Vanheems, 2013). It is therefore surprising that there is an apparent lack of research about the role of sales people in customer relationship management (O'Reilly & Paper, 2012). As the existing literature suggests, the role of sales people depends to a great extent on 'the degree of knowledge needed' and 'the routine or non-routine nature of interactions' (O'Reilly & Paper, 2012, p. 877). This has several implications for multichannel settings. Here, customers might have already visited the retailer's webpage before entering the store. This has an impact on the company-customer relationship. Sales people are no longer the 'sole keeper of knowledge' (Vanheems, 2013, p. 93). They are suddenly confronted with 'an enlightened customer' who already possesses knowledge about products and services (Vanheems, 2013, p. 93). The literature suggests that managers of multichannel retailing companies should already consider changing job specifications when recruiting new sales people. These sales people should have abilities and qualities that are suitable for dealing with multichannel customers. Furthermore,

sales people should be constantly trained in how to address multichannel customer needs (Vanheems, 2013).

Issues related to the transaction process play a predominant role in both online and offline retail channels. In the context of online channels, customers are particularly concerned about security aspects (Aladwani & Palvia, 2002) and transaction convenience (Badrinarayanan et al., 2014). In both retail channels, customers value a high level of transaction service, which means that they are able to communicate easily with the company in case of any queries, and that they receive help if needed (Badrinarayanan et al., 2014; Katerattanakul & Siau, 2003). Moreover, the literature suggests that multichannel retailers should strive for the integration of transaction processes across channels (Zhang et al., 2010).

As the literature suggests, the handling of returns of items is another important aspect of the customer service experience in a retailing setting. In an offline environment, customers value stores that 'willingly handle returns and exchanges' (Dabholkar et al., 1996, p. 15). In a broader sense, the return of items can be contextualised in a company's overall service recovery strategy, since, in most cases, customers return items when they are not satisfied with their purchase.

In the case of online environments, Parasuraman et al. (2005) developed the E-RecS-QUAL framework in order to capture customer perceptions of service recovery. The researchers investigated three dimensions which determine customer perceptions of service recovery. These were responsiveness, compensation and contact. Ozuem et al. (2016) examined four major themes of successful online service recoveries. The researchers suggested the following themes should be considered: (1) communication, (2) expected time of delivery, (3) fairness and understanding, and (4) customer satisfaction. The researchers

argue for the implementation of contextual recovery strategies with respect to the varying social and economic conditions of the retailer and his customers (Ozuem, Patel, Howell, & Lancaster, 2016). In the context of multichannel retailing, it is deemed necessary to integrate the return of items across channels and furthermore to implement a coherent multichannel service recovery strategy (Badrinarayanan et al., 2014).

2.4 LITERARY CONCLUSIONS

The underlying aim of this literature review was to answer the following review questions:

- What is service quality?

- How can service quality be conceptualised?

The initial search that was undertaken to answer these review questions resulted in some 85.000 findings. It was not manageable to report and disseminate the findings from so many studies. It was therefore necessary to concentrate on key articles with high rigour and with clear relevance to this study (Tranfield, 2003). The critical review of key articles suggests that service quality conceptualisations consist of five elements, which are the conceptual framework, the method, the dimension, the perspective, and the industry context. These elements can be approached as five forces of service quality, as the following image illustrates:
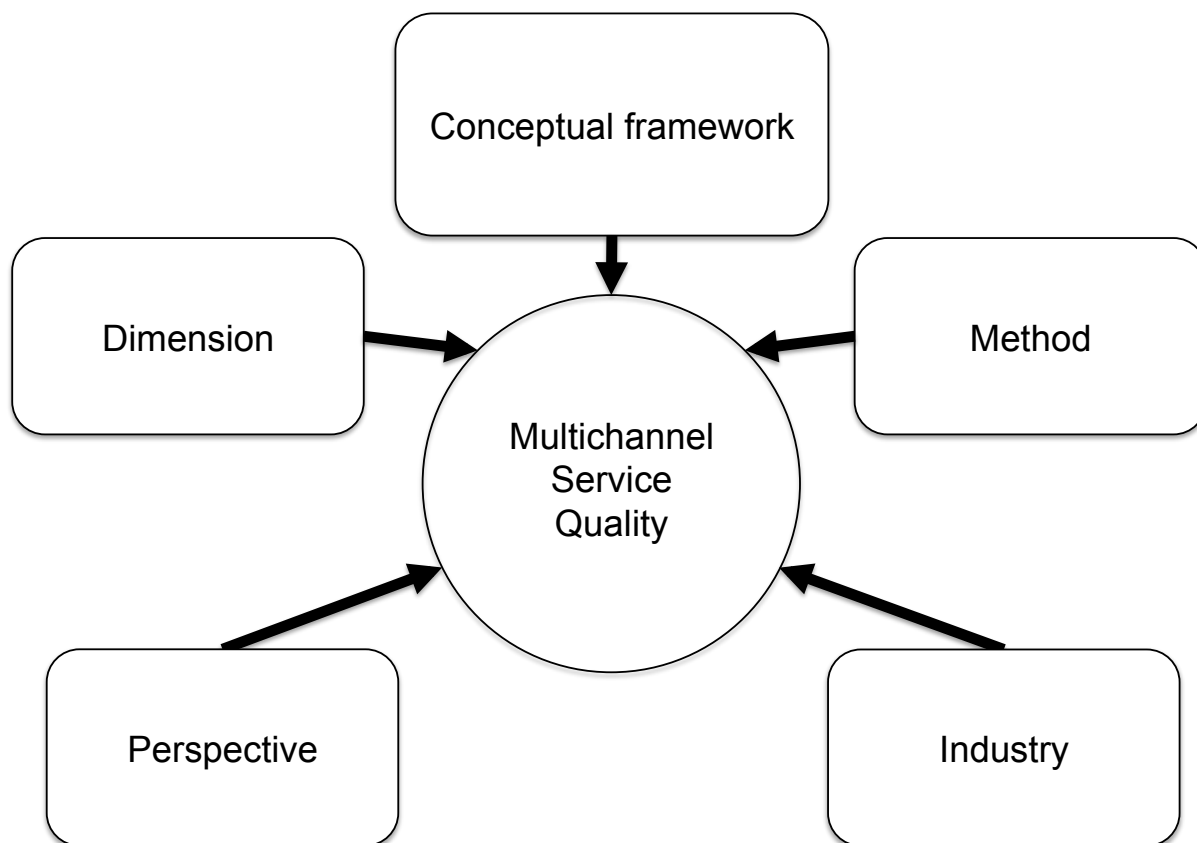
Image 2.4: Patten (2017) Five forces of service quality

Some 69 articles, which contained at least four of the five forces, were subject to further analysis. It emerged that the definition of the term 'service quality' varies between traditional, electronic and multichannel service quality contexts. Thus, these three concepts were studied separately. In terms of a definition for service quality in traditional settings this study followed Parasuraman et al.'s (1988) definition that 'perceived service quality is a global judgement, or attitude, relating to the superiority of the service' (Parasuraman et al., 1988, p. 16). The definition of electronic service quality can be considered an extension of the traditional service quality definition. Therefore electronic service quality is 'the consumers´ overall evaluation and judgement of the excellence and quality of e-service offerings in the virtual marketplace' (Santos, 2003, p. 235).

In line with this, multichannel service quality can be defined as the overall perception of service quality, encompassing a service experience in the terms of all existing physical and electronic channels, and the integration of all channels. Further, an equation for multichannel service quality can be considered as:

Multichannel service quality = Physical quality (physical channel quality +/- integration quality) + electronic quality (electronic channel quality +/- integration quality).

2.5 SUMMARY

The following image illustrates the progress of this dissertation consequent to the above systematic literature review:

INTRODUCTION

CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

RESEARCH DESIGN

ANALYSIS OF FACTUAL EVIDENCE

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Review approach:
- What are the underlying conceptualisations of existing service quality models?
- Critical literature review of 69 service quality studies

Outcomes:
- Service quality conceptualisations consist of five forces, namely conceptual framework, method, dimension, industry, and perspective
- Multichannel service quality is a multidimensional and dynamic construct
- Service quality has an intangible, inseparable, heterogeneous, simultaneous, and perishable nature
- It requires an active involvement of the customer in the creation and consumption process
- The key distinction between multichannel and single-channel service quality conceptualisations is the integration quality dimension
- Multichannel service quality = Physical quality (physical channel quality +/- integration quality) + electronic quality (electronic channel quality +/- integration quality)
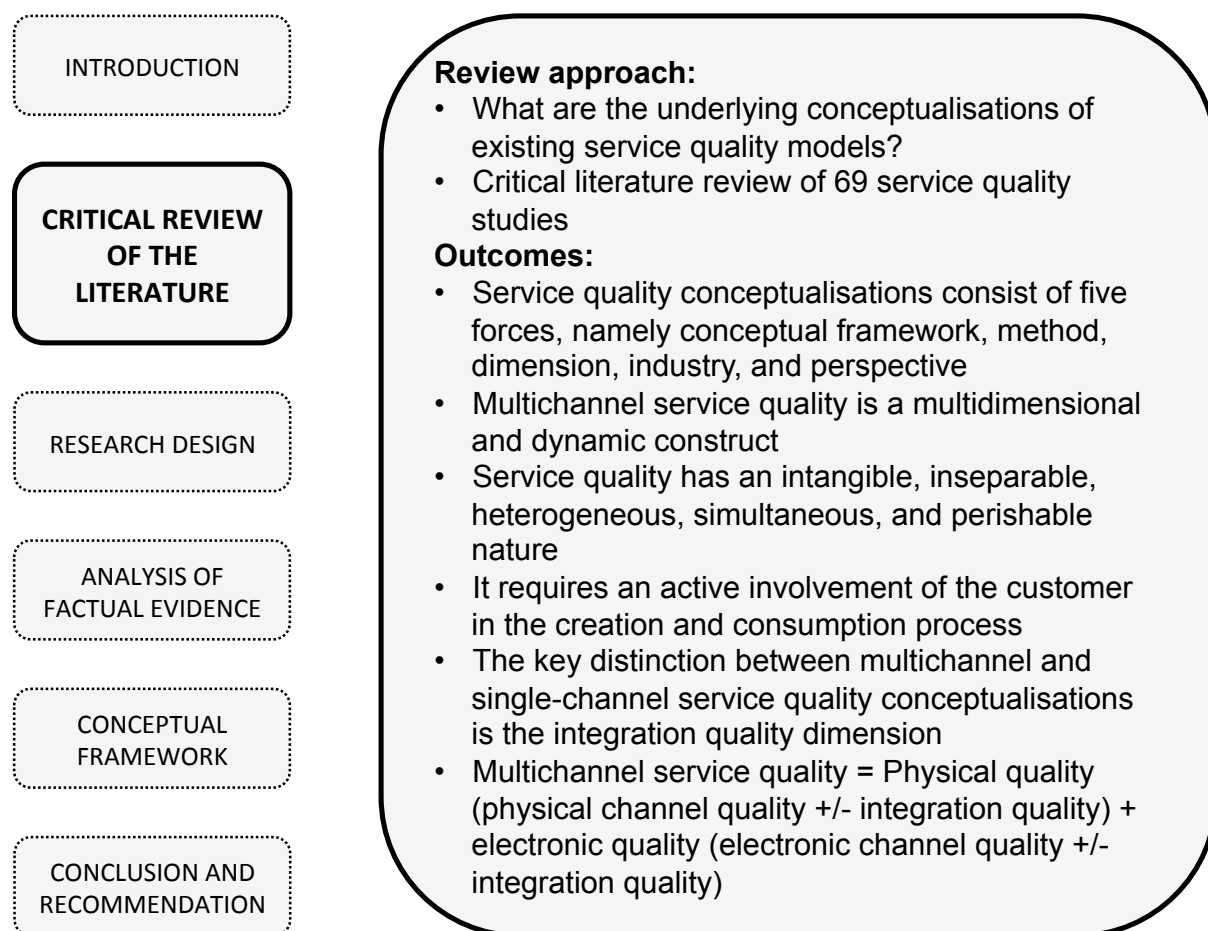
Image 2.5: Patten (2017) Dissertation progression

This chapter presents a critical review of service quality literature. It focuses on a broad review of service quality conceptualisations. The review elaborates upon different concepts of service quality considering conceptual frameworks, methodological approaches, dimensions, perspectives and industries. It also outlines traditional, electronic and multichannel service settings. The literature review reveals a number of topics that merit further investigation.

In the next chapter the research design for this study is developed.

3   RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1   INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter reviewed extant conceptual theory. It examined the different elements of service quality concepts and their impacts on an interpretation of the phenomenon. Furthermore, it examined the distinctive natures of single-channel and multichannel service quality conceptualisations.

The underlying aim of the current chapter is to present the methodological composition of the study. First, it examines the different paradigmatic assumptions underpinning multichannel service quality. The chapter continues by exploring and defending qualitative research as a suitable methodological approach. Case study design is introduced as the chosen research strategy for this study and the chapter then briefly introduces details of a pilot study that was conducted before data collection took place 'in the field'. Then, the chapter offers some justification for sample selection, sample size and data collection methods. Next, the axiological stance of the current study is presented and the quality of the research undertaken for this study is then analysed. The chapter explains how the research approach challenges the dominance of positivism in order to contribute new knowledge to the field of research into multichannel service quality. Finally, some ethical considerations are revealed.

3.2   RESEARCH PARADIGM

The adoption of a research paradigm is a key concern in evaluating service quality. Extant literature has widely focused on an objective measurement of different service quality dimensions. The outcomes were generic service quality models which were generalisable to several service settings (Cronin & Taylor,

1992; Parasuraman et al., 1988; Wolfinbarger & Gilly, 2003). In this context, two streams of service quality researchers can be identified. The first use a performance-only approach to evaluate service quality (Boulding et al., 1993; Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Teas, 1993). Others evaluate service quality based on the disconfirmation paradigm as a gap between expected and perceived service (Carr, 2007; Dabholkar et al., 1996; Grönroos, 1984; Parasuraman et al., 1988). Nevertheless, both streams view service quality as static and based on a generic and simplified picture (Schembri & Sandberg, 2003). Reality is seen as independent of human experience (Schembri & Sandberg, 2002). These researchers mainly follow a positivistic paradigm and thus believe in the existence of an objective and measurable truth (Brymann & Bell, 2007). They consider service quality to be a research object that exists separately from the customer. Existing service quality models tend to adopt a third-person perspective with regard to the customer's service encounter. The 'ontological duality [of existing service quality conceptualisations] is a reflection of the objective goal of contemporary service quality research. While the end result may indeed be an objective measurement of service quality, it is not a genuine reflection of the consumer's view' (Schembri & Sandberg, 2003, p. 4). This is underpinned by the fact that researchers constantly investigate new service quality dimensions. Thus, the existing dimensions have not fully captured the complexity of customer perceptions of service.

Moreover, researchers have considered service quality perceptions as widely homogenous and have subsequently developed tools such as the 'service blueprint' to enable retailers to implement standardised solutions for improving their customer service (Kumar, Strandlund, & Thomas, 2008). These approaches

acknowledge the existence of a tenuous 'tangible reality' (Brymann & Bell, 2011, p. 21).

However, important service quality researchers have acknowledged the need for service quality conceptualisations that embrace the customer's first-person perspective: 'What we need is a model of service quality, a model which describes how the quality of services is perceived and evaluated by consumers' (Grönroos, 1984, p. 36). Circular arguments about service quality perceptions are common within the literature and so 'traditional methods and their underlying assumptions may need to be re-evaluated' (Schembri & Sandberg, 2003, p. 4).

Gummesson (2001) suggests a shift to scientific pluralism, since the existing methodologies are not able to solve the exigent research problems in this field. Schembri and Sandberg (2003) provided a conceptual framework of service quality that shifted from a dualistic ontology and objectivistic epistemology towards a dynamic understanding of customer service quality experiences. Their phenomenological investigation generated three qualitatively different customer understandings of service quality. Interestingly, the researchers were able to provide evidence that that 'different people in different contexts may hold different meanings for similar service quality experiences' (Schembri & Sandberg, 2003, p. 5).

In contrast with the dominant existence of dualistic and objectivistic studies, this study acknowledges the apparent characteristics of the service quality phenomenon from a threefold perspective: (1) It represents a pluralistic ideology, which permits diverse customer service quality perceptions, (2) it considers the dynamic nature of service experiences and thus perceptions, and (3) it considers

intangibility, heterogeneity and inseparability as important characteristics of services.

Such arguments are associated with an interpretivist ontological worldview, as they postulate the existence of 'multiple realities' (Golafshani, 2003). Interpretivism places emphasis on *Verstehen* – understanding something in its context (Tucker, 1965). The researcher's way of understanding and explaining knowledge is central to research (Crotty, 1998), thus the epistemological choice for this study emphasises that potential meaning can exist, but that actual meaning emerges only when it engages with consciousness (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). This way of seeing the world is in line with social constructivism, which was selected as the basic paradigmatic choice for this study.

In order to critique the value of social constructivism for this study, the following table contains a comparison of the three basic epistemological choices of objectivism, subjectivism, and constructivism. Furthermore, it exposes the impacts of paradigmatic choice on the five forces of service quality conceptualisations:

Five forces	Objectivism	Subjectivism	Social constructivism
1) Conceptual framework	Service quality can be objectively observed and measured	The customers impose the meaning of service quality	Understanding expectations and perceptions of customers
2) Method	Observation and quantitative measurement of service quality	Meaning of service quality is already there; it needs to be discovered qualitatively	Interpretive, in-depth, holistic understanding of the service quality phenomenon by means of qualitative or mixed method
3) Dimension	Same, universal dimensions	Several dimensions	Several, evolving dimensions

Five forces	Objectivism	Subjectivism	Social constructivism
4) Industry	Possibility to observe different industries	Possibility to interact with different industries	Possibility to investigate different industries
5) Perspective	Examines service quality from outside	Interacts with participants to understand their perceptions	Investigates participants' perceptions to gain understanding about the phenomenon

Table 3.1: Patten (2017) Epistemological choice and the five service quality forces

Objectivism states that reality exists independently of the human mind (Crotty, 1998). Thus, objectivism enables researchers to investigate something that already exists. If researchers observe phenomena in the right way they will explore objective 'truth'. For several reasons, objectivism is not an appropriate basic epistemological approach that would be suitable for investigating the phenomenon of service quality. This position becomes clearer when looking more closely at the conceptual frameworks, methods and dimensions of the existing conceptualisations of service quality. There are generally two different conceptual frameworks applied to service quality situations: the disconfirmation paradigm (gap model) and the perception-only approach. The disconfirmation paradigm views service quality as the gap between expectation and perception. Both variables can be considered highly subjective. Parasuraman et al. (1988) argue that expectations are influenced by word-of-mouth, personal needs and past experiences. Perceptions are the meaning that customers give to service experiences. The performance-only supporters, however, compare customer perception of service quality with a norm or an ideal standard, which also differs

between different customers. The subjective nature of service quality excludes objectivism as an appropriate epistemological approach.

The methods applied for existing service quality concepts vary between purely quantitative, purely qualitative and mixed methods. One aspect they have in common however is that they mostly seek to understand customer perceptions of service quality. The existing service quality concepts, which were developed in multichannel retail settings, mainly embrace qualitative methods. They commonly look for a holistic understanding of the phenomenon. Multichannel service quality researchers agree that there are 'multiple aspects to the phenomenon' (Banerjee, 2014, p. 463). If objectivism were an appropriate basic belief for the phenomenon of service quality, this would mean that different researchers could discover the same dimensions to conceptualise service quality. However, the opposite is more often than not true. Some 66 dimensions were found in the 18 traditional service quality studies that were reviewed. As for the 46 electronic service quality models reviewed, some 142 dimensions were identified, and some 20 dimensions existed in the five multichannel service quality models reviewed. Hence, objectivism is not an appropriate approach to conceptualise multichannel service quality.

Subjectivism can be considered the opposite to objectivism. It is different from constructivism as well because subjectivists intend to create meaning. Constructivists instead construct meaning. 'In subjectivism, meaning does not come out of an interplay between subject and object but is imposed on the object by the subject' (Crotty, 1998, p. 9). The differences between the three concepts become obvious by looking at the relationship between subjects and objects. The objectivist believes that the existence and nature of objects are independent of subjects; whereas the subjectivist believes that subjects exist independent of

objects. Constructivists believe that subjects and objects intentionally belong together. Therefore, from a subjectivist's perspective, the perception of service quality can exist even without the customer experiencing it. This does not fit in with the widely accepted nature of service quality. As Grönroos (1984) argued, services can be characterised as spaces where production and consumption mostly take place simultaneously. In other words, services only come into existence during interactions with consumers. Some may argue that services exist before and independently of their consumption. However, it can be argued that the meaning of service does not exist until it is actually consumed through a direct or indirect interaction with a customer.

In contrast, constructivism is the belief that meaning is only constructed with social engagement. 'In this understanding of knowledge, it is clear that different people may construct meaning in different ways, even in relation to the same phenomenon' (Crotty, 1998, p. 9). Thus, for a constructivist, knowledge is socially constructed. Even though a service can exist without a service supplier and a service receiver, the meaning of service is only given to the existing service in the course of interaction between the service supplier and the service receiver. A constructivist aims to understand the world in which he lives. 'He develops subjective meanings of his experiences for certain objectives or things. These meanings are varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrow the meanings into a few categories or ideas' (Creswell, 2007, p. 36). Social constructivists do not postulate objectivity at all in their worldview (Howell, 2013). Thus, the constructivist's research goal mainly relies on subjective participant views. This basic epistemological belief corresponds to the phenomenon of service quality. As presented in the systematic

literature review, the widely accepted definition of service quality as a 'judgement', 'attitude' or 'belief' embraces social constructivism as an appropriate epistemology. Service quality is a subjective customer perception, and customers assign a meaning to it when they interact with the service; in other words, when customers consume the service. Their interpretation of service quality – their so-called 'service perception' – principally gives service quality a shape. Brentano (1995) calls this 'intentionality'. 'In fact, it seems much more natural to define the act according to the object, and therefore to state that inner perception, in contrast to every other kind, is the perception of mental phenomena … of all the types of knowledge of the objects of experience, inner perception alone possesses [self-evidence]. Consequently, when we say that mental phenomena are those which are apprehended by means of inner perception, we say that their perception is immediately evident' (Brentano, 1995, p. 91). Service quality is what Brentano would call a 'mental phenomenon'. This becomes clear when 'physical phenomenon' is constructed as the opposite of 'mental phenomenon'. Service quality possesses an intangible nature as its fundamental characteristic (Parasuraman et al., 1985). Therefore, it cannot be physical and intangible at the same time. As a mental phenomenon, service quality seeks the perception of human beings, who give a meaning to it. This perception is evident. This is also true when different perceptions are given to one service. This explains why service quality dimensions and conceptualisations are varied, and some are not truer than others.

Thus, the epistemology of constructivism is a reasonable approach to adopt in a study of service quality. Based on this, the next section introduces the research approach for this study.

3.3 METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The constructivist epistemology fundamentally guides the current study towards critical ethnography (Madison, 2005). Critical ethnography studies humans in their context. It examines a culture-sharing group of people with the aim of understanding participants' shared patterns of perceptions and behaviours (Burns, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) . Following this path, the current study examines experienced German multichannel customers in depth to understand their purchasing behaviour and their perception of service quality. This approach embraces 'value laden orientation, empowering people by giving them more authority (and) challenging the status quo' (Creswell, 2007, p. 70). As is suggested in the literature about ethnographic studies (Flick, 2007), the current study applies methodological triangulation by conducting in-depth interviews and focus groups. These different data collection methods are conducted iteratively so as to countervail various possible threats to the validity of the analysis. 'The final product is a holistic cultural portrait of the group that incorporates the views of the participants as well as the views of the researcher' (Creswell, 2007, p. 72).

Critical ethnography embraces a qualitative research design. The current study identifies the following reasoning for applying a qualitative research approach to achieve a coherent analysis of multichannel service quality in a fashion retailing setting. Qualitative methods have an observational nature and a focus on spoken words, as compared to numbers, which are tied to a quantitative approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). In this study, respondents' words are used to investigate attitudes, beliefs and opinions about multichannel service quality. Moreover, the study aims to explore the lived experiences and perspectives of individuals in the context of service quality in a German multichannel fashion retail environment.

In quantitative research, the researcher guides the investigation. In contrast, in qualitative research the ways in which participants see the world are the source of interpretation (Brymann & Bell, 2007). The viewpoint for this research study is through the eyes of German multichannel customers enthusiastic about fashion. A customer perspective helps to explain the phenomenon of multichannel service quality and disclose the meaning that these customers give to it.

In quantitative research, researchers aim to objectively investigate an object. Therefore they tend to be uninvolved and distanced from participants. In contrast, a 'qualitative researcher seeks close involvement with the people investigated, so that he or she can genuinely understand the world through their eyes' (Brymann & Bell, 2007, p. 112). The current study does not claim to be value-free. It certainly contains a great amount of axiological impact. A shared German culture with interview participants and working experience in the field of investigation are purposefully used to understand the multichannel service quality perceptions of participants when purchasing a fashion product.

Usually in quantitative research, deductive reasoning is applied, whereby existing theories precede the collection of data. In contrast, in the case of qualitative research, more often than not theoretical conceptualisations emerge inductively out of data collection (Brymann & Bell, 2007). The data analysis of this study can be considered as abductive as it followed a logic of going back and forth between extant theoretical concepts and literature, empirical data and analytical framework. Dubois and Gadde (2002) argued why abductive reasoning is a valuable approach in case study research. (1) Case studies need to rely on analytical inference instead of statistical inference. Thus, the sampling procedure plays a predominant role in these studies. It aims to arrive at an appropriate

matching between empiric and extant theoretical constructs. (2) In case studies, the outcome should be characterised by logical coherence. This logical coherence originates from both the adequacy of the research process and the empirical grounding of theory. (3) In case studies, learning is the essence of all research. Basically, this learning should be articulated in the theoretical framework, which should be combined with the matching case. Thus, learning takes place in the interplay between extant theory and discovery of the new. Discoveries, which cannot be planned in advance, force the researcher to reconsider the prevailing framework (Dubois & Gadde, 2002).

Data have been collected from experienced multichannel customers who were interviewed to investigate how customers assign meaning to the phenomenon of multichannel service quality. These customer perceptions are then used in order to develop a conceptual framework to interpret multichannel service quality in the German fashion retailing segment. Moreover, the current study challenges existing service quality research, which has been based on deductive reasoning. In this way, the study discloses that existing (deductive) studies have not fully captured complex service quality phenomena. They have instead constantly tested new service quality dimensions. Moreover, existing service quality models have been limited to third-party perspectives in terms of customer service encounters. The focus of these studies was to offer an objective measurement of service quality, and such an approach arguably does not accurately reflect the customer's perspective.

'Quantitative research is mainly depicted as showing a static image of social reality with its emphasis on relationships between variables. Change and connections between events over time tend not to surface' (Brymann & Bell, 2007,

p. 113). Following this line of thought, existing service quality models seem to be generic, and provide a rather simplified picture about customer service quality perception (Grönroos, 1993; Schembri & Sandberg, 2002). Schembri and Sandberg (2002) suggest switching the research focus away from simply testing existing and new service quality dimensions towards investigating customer service experiences. The social constructivist epistemology enables the current study to exploit the vivid and dynamic service quality perceptions of experienced multichannel customers. Moreover, it takes into account the heterogeneous nature of multichannel customers by establishing a customer typology. This typology considers the fact that human beings are dynamic creatures and develop over time.

In quantitative research, the main focus is on the generalisability of findings to other populations or samples. In addition, in qualitative research, generalisability is a criterion for research quality (Patton, 2002). In this context, generalisability refers to theoretical generalisation rather than to statistical generalisation. Moreover, qualitative studies seek a contextual understanding of attitudes, beliefs and perceptions of multiple realities. In this context, the focus is firmly on credibility and the trustworthiness of findings. The current study is based on methodological triangulation in order to consider multiple-perspective interpretations (Patton, 2002). Therefore, in-depth interviews and focus groups are conducted in order to examine the consistency or variety of findings generated by these differing data collection methods.

Quantitative data are often considered 'hard' and 'reliable', whereas some positivist researchers consider qualitative data to be 'soft' (Kuhn, 1970). Patton (1999) instead argues that qualitative data are not softer than quantitative data; they are just 'different'. Other qualitative researchers claim that their intense

engagement in the field generates 'richer' and 'deeper' data than quantitative studies can achieve (Brymann & Bell, 2007). In the current study, the researcher is intensively involved with each step of the research. She possesses professional experience in the researched field and can draw from this experience during the undertaking of the study. Furthermore, the researcher commands a personal understanding of the cultural characteristics of German customers, since she shares the same cultural background with the interview participants. Additionally, the researcher personally conducted the interviews, and personally carried out the ensuing data analysis. The data material originated from in-depth interviews and focus groups and can therefore be considered rich. Interview participants were selected based on purposeful sampling and therefore revealed rich information about the perceptions of German multichannel fashion service quality perceptions. The interview material contained digital audio of approximately 30 hours in length.

In quantitative research, emphasis is placed on large-scale data material, whereas in qualitative research, studies are concerned with small-scale data (Brymann & Bell, 2007). The current study certainly contains threats relating to data scale: one could argue that 33 customer perceptions are insufficient to depict the multiple realities of millions of German multichannel fashion retailing customers. However, as Robson (2011) claims, if a researcher identifies possible threats, he is able to overcome them. In the case of this study, it was deemed necessary to exclusively select information-rich cases. Therefore a list of inclusion and exclusion criteria was developed. These criteria guaranteed valid findings for a coherent analysis of multichannel service quality. In-depth interviews were conducted to acquire profound insights into the topic under research. Furthermore, the current study considers a research paper that investigated an

average number of 32 interview participants in qualitative research. (Saunders & Townsed, 2016).

Quantitative research tends to take place in artificial settings, such as laboratories. In contrast, qualitative research investigates participants in their natural environment. This study has been based on interviews carried out mainly at or near the participants' workplaces, with which they were familiar and in which they felt at ease. Most of the in-depth interviews took place in coffee shops around the workplace, where participants regularly spent their breaks. Some of the managers preferred to meet in their offices. The focus group interviews were conducted in meeting rooms close to participants' offices. These meeting rooms were familiar to the participants. All participants were arranged in a circle in order to allow eye contact. They were able to communicate actively with each other during the interviews.

As presented in the previous section, critical ethnography is a valuable methodological approach to adopt for the current study, 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.

The next section defends the use of a case study as a research strategy for this study.

3.4   MULTICHANNEL SERVICE QUALITY WITHIN A CASE

This study adopts a case study research strategy approach. Yin (Yin, 2009, p. 18) defines a case study as 'an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in-depth and within its real-life context, especially when the

boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident'. The phenomenon of service quality in the context of German multichannel fashion retailing has not been extensively researched so far. There have to date been no published studies about similar cases which could have helped to explain this phenomenon. Therefore, it is important for this study to offer an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon and its context, as well as the interaction between the phenomenon and multichannel customers. A case study strategy helps to answer the question of *how* multichannel customers perceive service quality in the context of multichannel fashion retailing (Yin, 2009). In line with the social constructivist paradigm, the case study research strategy is useful for investigating the meaning that the subject of multichannel customers gives to the object of service quality during intentional interactions.

As Cook and Campbell (1979) argue, a 'case study is not a flawed experimental design; it is a fundamentally different research strategy with its own designs' (Cook & Campbell, 1979, p. 21). In keeping with this notion, Ozuem, Howell and Lancaster (2008) assert that the contextualised action of a case study provides an explicit understanding of 'the voice of experience' (Ozuem, Howell, & Lancaster, 2008, p. 1097). The research interrogates the viewpoints of German multichannel customers. A customer perspective will help to explain the phenomenon and reveal the meanings that customers give to it.

The initial step in a case study is to offer a detailed description of the case (Ozuem et al., 2008). In order to define the case in this study, it is useful to consider Yin's (2009) advice, to explain the questions that the case study aims to answer. The first research question was 'How do customers perceive service provision in a multichannel fashion-retailing context in Germany?' This research

question refers to the investigation of 'physical quality', 'electronic quality' and 'integration quality'. The case aims to provide insights into customer perceptions of each of these three dimensions. The second research question was: 'What determines the perception of service quality for the studied multichannel fashion retailing customers?' This question aims to gain a deep understanding of multichannel customer attitudes, beliefs and perceptions regarding service quality in a German multichannel fashion-retailing environment. The third research question was: 'How can service quality be conceptualised in a multichannel fashion-retailing context in Germany?' This question aims to build a new theory in the field of multichannel service quality. It seeks to contribute a coherent understanding of multichannel service quality for the German multichannel fashion retailing segment.

Thus, this study aims to investigate the cause-effect relationship between a German fashion multichannel retailer as the service provider, and its customers as the service recipients. 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 a phenomenon isolated from its context. 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.

As a 'bounded system' within a unique border and research context, Germany was selected as a fitting case for this study (Stake, 1978, p. 7). Such a restriction

was chosen to situate the study within a setting, and to set a clear focus (Stake, 2000). Germany was chosen for three reasons. (1) Germany is ranked as the fourth largest economy in the world (www.statista.com, 2016), (2) German online retailing accounts for the second largest such sector in Europe, with the second highest growth rate in 2015 (Retailresearch.org, 2016), and (3) the current study 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 (Azemi, 2016).

The next section provides the rationale for conducting a pilot study before the data collection phase.

3.5   PILOT STUDY

Some major questions emerged out of reflecting on the research strategy for this study such as: What if the interview questions were unclear to the participants? What if the interview questions led them in another direction? What if the questions were ill-suited to the research goal? Consequently, it was considered necessary to conduct a pilot study in order to address these topics (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009). Participants for the pilot study were selected based on three previously defined inclusion/exclusion criteria: specifically, 'full capacity to contract', 'highly experienced with multichannel purchasing', and 'experiences with purchases at different multichannel retailers'. These criteria were considered for the pilot study in order to guarantee that participants met the same criteria as the participants taking part in the main study. The pilot study took place in March

2016. Participants had to run through the same process as it was planned for the participants in the main study.

During the interviews, two of three participants made regular mention of multichannel purchases regarding buying articles other than fashion-related items. Finally it transpired that these participants did not consider themselves particularly interested in fashion; in fact, they conducted multichannel purchases mostly for non-fashion products, such as appliances, CDs and books. The purpose of the study was to focus on 'information-rich cases' about fashion multichannel purchases. As an outcome of the pilot study, a fourth inclusion criterion was set up for the study as 'high fashion enthusiasm'.

Further justification of the selected data sample is argued for in the next section.

3.6 SAMPLE SELECTION

As in any research study, the coherent selection of cases is essential for the outcome of this study about multichannel service quality in fashion retailing. The technique applied to the sample selection was *purposeful sampling* (Patton, 1990). Patton (1990) emphasises that the value of a sample in a qualitative study lies in the richness of information about the selected sample. He lists several different strategies for purposefully selecting information-rich cases. Patton recommends choosing a strategy that is most valuable for the desired outcome. The different strategies are summarised in the following table:

	Sampling strategy	Description
1	Extreme or deviant sampling	Examples with unusual conditions or extreme outcomes are selected.
2	Intensity sampling	Excellent (but not extreme) examples of the phenomenon are selected.
3	Maximum variation sampling	A number of heterogeneous samples are selected in order to find central themes.

	Sampling strategy	Description
4	Homogeneous sampling	Similar examples are selected in order to gain an in-depth understanding of a certain sub-group.
5	Typical case sampling	Typical examples for the case are selected; mainly with the help of experts or data from previous surveys.
6	Stratified purposeful sampling	Selection of above-average, average and below-average examples.
7	Critical case sampling	Examples are chosen that are particularly important in the scheme of things.
8	Snowball or chain sampling	Asking a number of people about whom else to talk with about the case; looking for names that are repeatedly mentioned and choosing them as a sample.
9	Criterion sampling	Choosing the sample that meets some predetermined criterion of importance.
10	Theory-based or operational construct sampling	People are chosen based on their potential representation of important theoretical constructs.
11	Confirming and disconfirming cases	The evaluator explores emerging patterns and then looks for other examples which fit the already emerging patterns.
12	Opportunistic sampling	Further samples are chosen during the actual data generation process.
13	Purposeful random sampling	The sample is chosen randomly.
14	Sampling politically important cases	A variation of the critical case sampling strategy involves selecting a politically sensitive site or unit of analysis.
15	Convenience sampling	Sample selection based on the fastest and most convenient choice.
16	Combination or mixed purposeful sampling	A combination of different sampling strategies.

Table 3.2: Purposeful sampling strategies as per Patton (1990)

For this study, 'combination, or mixed purposeful sampling' was applied, as participants were selected (1) on the basis of their experience of purchasing fashion products by using different channels of one retailer ('homogeneous sampling'). (2) Furthermore, sales people and managers of a German fashion department store chain in three different cities were asked to suggest customers who might participate in the study ('snowball sampling'), and (3) people were chosen based on predetermined criteria ('criterion sampling').

These criteria were defined to ensure that the selected participants could provide 'information-richness' (Patton, 1990).

Hence, four inclusion and exclusion criteria were set, as illustrated in the following table:

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Full capacity to contract	18 years and above	People below 18 years old
Experienced multichannel customers	At least 3 multichannel purchases within the last 12 months	Fewer than 3 multichannel purchases within the last 12 months
Experiences with different multichannel retailers	Purchases from at least 2 different multichannel retailers	Purchases at fewer than 2 different multichannel retailers
Fashion enthusiasm	High fashion enthusiasm	Low fashion enthusiasm

Table 3.3: Patten (2017) Inclusion and exclusion criteria for purposeful sampling

First, only the people who had obtained full capacity to contract were included in this study. In Germany, people receive full capacity to contract at the age of 18. Therefore, people younger than 18 were excluded from the study.

Second, customers were included who were experienced in searching for and purchasing clothing through different channels during one purchase. This is in keeping with Verhoef's (2007) definition of multichannel customers, as those that use different channels for searching and for 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 selected customers. Less experienced multichannel customers who had made fewer than three multichannel purchases in the last 12 months were excluded from this study.

Third, it was crucial for the outcome of this study that the participating customers had had multichannel experiences with at least two multichannel retailers. This is

important because the concept of service quality is widely based on expectations, which are to some extent based on previous experiences (Parasuraman et al., 1985). Simply by including the customers who had experiences of more than two multichannel retailers enhances the significance of the data.

Fourth, as it turned out during the pilot study, interview participants with little enthusiasm regarding fashion were also excluded from the study. Two out of three pilot participants considered themselves to be 'fashion grouches', although they met the other inclusion criteria. These pilot participants could be considered less valuable for the purposes of further analysis, since they tended to digress from the topic of multichannel fashion purchases to discuss multichannel purchases of other items, such as house appliances, CDs or books. Moreover, these participants did not provide valuable insights into the fashion industry and could not be considered to enhance the current study.

The rationale for the sample size is offered below along with some discussion of the data collection and analytical methods deployed.

3.7   SAMPLE SIZE AND DATA COLLECTION METHOD

In any research, the number of participants is one criterion that determines the extent to which a study is valuable enough to generate theory. In quantitative terminology, interview participants are referred to as sample size. Various published resources provide standard statistical methods to guide sample size selection in order to represent a population (Bartlett & Kotrlik, 2001). In qualitative research, the case is different and more complex. Patton argues that, in qualitative enquiry, 'there are purposeful strategies instead of methodological rules' (Patton, 1990, p. 183). Literature on research methods that speaks to interview selection in qualitative studies suggests that sample selection will

depend on the nature of each enquiry. 'There are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry. Sample size depends on what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what's at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with available time and resources' (Patton, 1990, p. 184). Others claim that the deeper and broader the unit of analysis is, the smaller the sample size can be to generate a new theory (Leavy, 2014). Charmaz (2011) points out that numerous researchers have legitimised studies with small data. She argues that a researcher can finish off by obtaining data when the different categories become 'saturated'. 'Categories are saturated when gathering fresh data no longer illuminates new theoretical insights or new properties to the core theoretical categories' (Charmaz, 2011, p. 113). Thus, it is not possible to determine the final number of interviews beforehand. The interviews need to proceed until saturation is reached. Saunders et al. (2016) analysed a number of participants in several qualitative research enquiries and concluded that, on average, 32 participants were interrogated. They concluded that this number of participants could be considered sufficient (Saunders & Townsed, 2016). Creswell (1998) recommends conducting at least 10 in-depth interviews for a phenomenological study. He claims that he has observed a large range of sample sizes in different research projects. For this study, it is therefore worth analysing the sample sizes in analogous studies. Previous qualitative research studies focusing on service quality were based on between 15 and 58 in-depth interviews.

Accordingly, the sample size for this study consists of 24 in-depth interviews and two focus groups including nine focus group participants. This accounts for 33 participants in total. Multichannel service quality in general, and in a German fashion retailing setting in particular, has not yet been fully conceptualised

(Verhoef et al., 2015). This limited understanding of multichannel service quality justifies the selection of a relatively small sample. The focus of the current study was to understand the researched phenomenon in some depth.

In-depth interviews and focus groups were executed iteratively. First, the 24 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 nine 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, a lively debate 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., 2007). This built the foundation for the multichannel customer typology.

The following multichannel customers participated in the survey:

No.	Age	Gender	Income level	Occupation
1	18-24	F	Low	Marketing student
2	25-30	F	Medium/high	Department manager in fashion retail
3	18-24	F	Low	Apprentice in fashion retail
4	25-30	F	Medium/high	Department manager in fashion retail

No.	Age	Gender	Income level	Occupation
5	18-24	M	Low	Student
6	25-30	F	High	Mother
7	25-30	F	Low	Fashion management student
8	25-30	F	Medium	Fashion management trainee
9	18-24	M	Low	Apprentice in fashion retail
10	31-35	M	Medium/high	Department manager in fashion retail
11	18-24	F	Low	Apprentice in fashion retail
12	18-24	F	Low	Apprentice in fashion retail
13	25-30	M	Medium/ high	Project manager
14	41-46	M	High	Store manager
15	18-24	F	Low	Fashion management student
16	36-40	F	High	Brand director
17	25-30	F	Low	Fashion student
18	31-35	F	High	Senior project manager
19	25-30	F	High	Sales manager
20	25-30	M	High	Senior project manager
21	25-30	F	Low/medium	Deputy department manager in fashion retail
22	31-35	M	High	Store manager
23	25-30	M	High	Senior project manager
24	31-35	F	High	Senior purchaser
25	41-46	F	High	Purchasing director
26	25-30	F	High	Sales director
27	18-24	F	Low	Design student
28	31-35	M	Low	Sales assistant
29	41-46	F	High	Brand director
30	31-35	F	High	Senior project manager
31	31-35	M	High	Logistics manager
32	31-35	F	Medium/high	Project manager
33	36-40	F	High	Mother

Table 3.4: Patten (2017) Interview participants

The income classification was conducted according to the following criteria:

	Available gross income p.a. in EUR
Low	<= 30,000
Low/medium	> 30,000 <= 50,000
Medium	> 50,000 <= 70,000
Medium/high	> 70,000 <= 90,000
High	> 90,000

Table 3.5: Patten (2017) Income clusters

The in-depth and focus group interviews were conducted in three major German cities between May and August 2016.

3.7.1   SEMI-STRUCTURED IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

The interviews were semi-structured in nature comprising some predetermined questions (Robson, 2007). The predetermined in-depth interview and focus group questions are attached as appendices (Appendices 3 and 4). Semi-structured interviews are suggested to trigger more talk from participants than structured and unstructured interviews (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2012). This justifies why this approach to interviews was selected in preference to the latter two.

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).

Possible interviewees who met the predefined criteria and who agreed to participate in the study were invited personally. These participants received two documents electronically: an invitation letter (Appendix 1) and a participant's informed consent form (Appendix 2), as attached in the appendices.

As participants consented to take part, they were asked about a preferred location where the interview should take place. The choice of interview location is an important decision since it has a certain impact on the interview outcomes. The literature suggests that it is important to choose a location where the participant feels comfortable (Saunders et al., 2009). Participants mostly selected their favourite canteens and time-out areas or their offices as interview locations.

The interviews were recorded. Furthermore, notes were taken to summarise key statements. The body language of participants was also observed during the undertaking of interviews. Verbal and non-verbal communications can be considered valuable in order to understand the perceptions of participants and the meaning they give to the investigated phenomenon (Robson, 2007).

The interview questions were designed for 'an analytic use' with the aim of answering the research questions of the study (Robson, 2007, p. 242). A direct involvement in this process enhanced the experiential knowledge about the topic under investigation. Moreover, due to the semi-structured nature of interviews, questions could be adjusted and new questions could be added in the course of the interviews, where it was felt beneficial in order to enhance the quality of discussion.

3.7.2 FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS

In the broadest sense, focus group interviews are interviews which are conducted with multiple participants at the same time (Robson, 2007; Saunders et al., 2009). Moreover, as Howell (2013) observes, focus groups are a form of observation without restricting the researcher's understanding of verbal and non-verbal expressions amongst participants.

As service quality perceptions of customers are highly influenced by word-of-mouth and past experiences, focus groups can be considered a valuable tool for this kind of study. They give the researcher the opportunity to place people in real-life situations where they are influenced by the comments of others and are invited to interact with other focus group participants. 'One-to-one interviews are not suitable for capturing the dynamic nature of this group interaction' (Krueger, 1994, p. 34). Moreover, Wilkinson (1998) suggests that there are five unique contributions that focus groups bring to research: (1) they enhance disclosure, (2) they provide access to the participant's own language and concepts, (3) they let participants follow their own agenda, (4) they encourage the production of elaborated accounts, and (5) they provide an opportunity to observe the co-construction of meaning in action (Wilkinson, 1998 as cited in Morgan (2012), p.164).

Therefore, focus group interviews were carried out in the workspaces of participants. As they worked for one company, both focus group interviews took place in two different conference rooms within the company's offices. The participants felt at ease using these locations, since they had used these rooms for several meetings before.

The interviews took around 50 minutes each, which Robson (2011) considers an appropriate length of time in which to receive sufficient information.

As Patton (1990) suggests, the participants for each focus group can be considered homogeneous, since they had in common a similar educational level and income level, and furthermore they worked for the same department within the same company. But interestingly, their perceptions towards service quality in a multichannel setting were significantly different within and across groups. A lively debate among participants around some controversial topics could be observed during the interviews.

A social constructivist researcher locates himself between 'an adjunct respondent' and an explorative researcher when it comes to focus group interviews (Ozuem, 2004, p. 97). However, it is necessary to avoid influencing the opinions of participants and to therefore mitigate the possibility of manipulating the findings. The researcher's role within the study is discussed in detail in the next section.

3.8   RESEARCHER´S REFLEXIBILITY

At the beginning of the research journey, some of my colleagues and friends had challenged the premise of my research project. To a lesser extent, they challenged the overall topic. All of them were curious about gaining insights into the service quality perceptions of customers in a multichannel fashion context. What they challenged was my approach to gathering insight into the topic. They challenged the fact that I had chosen a qualitative approach for the study. Essentially, they doubted that an analysis of the insights of a handful of German multichannel fashion customers could offer anything of value. Furthermore, they doubted whether this study could contribute to developing a theory. Initially, I too

had reservations about this approach. Even though I believed in getting interesting insights into the topic by choosing in-depth interviews and focus groups, I suddenly thought of embellishing my results with some quantitative data. But then I read further into the different epistemological positions available, and realised that my colleagues and friends who had challenged my research approach were simply coming from a different school of thought. They tended to have a positivist worldview, and believed in numeric results more than spoken words. Furthermore, they expected answers to different kinds of questions from those that I had set out to answer with this study. They were interested in the 'what' and 'ifs', whereas my aim was to understand the 'hows' and 'whys'. Thus, my research approach does not intend to compete with positivist research approaches since both worldviews can enrich research into multichannel service quality customer perceptions. However, I became confident that my research approach could culminate in a valuable contribution.

The choice for a constructivist perspective emerged both from my professional experiences as a Store Director in a German fashion department store, as well as from my personal worldview of focusing on social interactions to understand the reasons for human behaviour.

Professionally, I developed a particular insight into the topic of multichannel service quality when the company in which I was employed as a store director launched an online store as an adjunct to its bricks-and-mortar business in 2013. During this project in which I participated, I experienced a lack of understanding about how customers perceived service quality in a multichannel context. At this point, I personally became curious about the extant knowledge of multichannel service quality in research, and started to read journal articles on the topic. After

reading Sousa and Voss' (2006) fundamental journal article 'Service quality in multichannel services employing virtual channels' in 2015, I took part in an email conversation with Professor Rui Soucasaux Sousa, who had co-authored the article. Prof Sousa confirmed that research into multichannel service quality was still in its early stages. Sousa and Voss (2006) were the first to introduce 'integration quality' as a link between 'virtual' and 'physical quality'. This concept particularly seized my attention because their approach also helped me to understand what was missing in practice, and what I could experience in multichannel retailing companies. At the time when I began my study, German multichannel retailing companies tended to operate their channels independently, without paying much intention to integrating them. Moreover, different managers were responsible for online and offline channels. Potentially, these managers were working to different guidelines and targets. This meant that the channels were not fully integrated. In some cases, the prices, layouts or sales campaigns of each channel were different. Furthermore, the general knowledge of in-store sales people about the online channel could be considered insufficient and not customer-facing. Thus, the overall customer experience with retailing companies was not coherent amongst the channels.

However, this study does not consider the problem from an organisational perspective. With the same notion of Christian Grönroos' (1984) early research about service quality, this study aims to understand how customers evaluate service in a multichannel setting in order to contribute to research on service quality, and to enable retail companies to develop service-oriented concepts more successfully.

Bearing this in mind, I started reflecting on the quality criteria of my research. In other words, I asked myself how I could demonstrate validity, rigour and trustworthiness in my study. I came to the conclusion that I could leverage validity, rigour and trustworthiness as a researcher by transparently revealing my personal and professional background, my connection with the topic, the research process undertaken, and the bias and limitations of my research. By doing so, my audience – the readers of this study – could judge for themselves the level of my trustworthiness.

The continuum of reliability, validity and generalisability is further discussed in the next section, which speaks to research quality.

3.9   RESEARCH QUALITY

The issue of acceptance of the research quality of qualitative studies has been debated for decades (Shenton, 2004). Applying positivist terminologies like 'reliability', 'validity' and 'generalisability' can harm the quality of qualitative studies. Qualitative studies have their own research quality. However, the preference for quantitative methods in the area of service quality research reflects the dominance of positivistic epistemology, which seeks to measure customer perceptions of service quality objectively. It is therefore necessary to translate positivist concepts into the terminologies of qualitative research to show the peculiar properties of qualitative research (Golafshani, 2003). The following table provides an overview of established quantitative terms and their translation into a qualitative mind-set:

Terminology in quantitative research	Meaning	Terminology in qualitative research	Meaning
Reliability	Repeatability; consistence over time (Kirk and Miller (1986) as cited in (Golafshani, 2003)	Trustworthiness (Seale, 1999) (Denzi n & Lincoln, 2011)	Credibility, dependability, confirmability, transferability (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011)
Validity	Truthfulness of research results; construct validity testable (Cronbach, 1988)	Rigour (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011); credibility (Altheide & Johnson, 2011)	Sound application of methods (Lincoln et al., 2011)
Generalisability	Degree to which research findings are applicable to other populations or samples (Falk & Guenther, 2013)	Transferability; naturalistic and theoretical generalisability (Stake, 1978)	Knowing the particular and generalising it in another context (Stake, 1978)

Table 3.6: Patten (2017) Terminology of quantitative versus qualitative research

Reliability is a concept that is widely used by positivists. In a quantitative context, it means that a study can be repeated, and it leads to the same results when the same methodology is applied (Golafshani, 2003). Reliable results must be consistent over time. However, in qualitative research, the concept is deemed irrelevant because the purpose of qualitative research is to 'generate understanding' rather than to measure and generate explanation as in quantitative research (Stenbacka, 2001, p. 551). Instead of reliability, it is the concept of 'trustworthiness' that is relevant for qualitative research. 'Trustworthiness' consists of four variables: 'credibility', 'dependability', 'confirmability' and 'transferability' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Nevertheless, 'trustworthiness is always negotiable and open-ended, and not a matter of final proof, whereby readers are compelled to accept an account' (Seale, 1999, p. 468). This study addresses the issue of

trustworthiness as follows. The research was conducted according to the guidelines of the University of Gloucestershire's *Handbook of Research Ethics* (Gloucestershire, 2008) and it addresses some additional topics in order to avoid conflicts of interest, and to meet the ethical standards of research studies (Saunders et al., 2009).

Triangulation was used as 'an essential tactic to interrogate multiple sources of evidence' (Yin, 2009, p. 2). Triangulation makes case study research 'hard', although it has been classically considered a 'soft' form of research (Yin, 2009). Therefore, the study generated empirical materials using two techniques: in-depth interviews and focus groups. Both techniques helped 'to describe what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon' (Creswell, 2007, p. 58) and were combined to provide 'a more holistic view of the setting' (Morse, 1994, p. 224).

This chapter has offered some reflexive discussion, whereby the researcher's personal and professional background was revealed alongside details of the research process, and the potential for bias. The limitations of the research were also disclosed (Outhwaite & Turner, 2007).

Validity in quantitative research means 'the extent to which a concept is accurately measured' (Heale & Twycross, 2015, p. 66). This positivistic meaning of validity does not work in a social world, 'where there are … multiple perspectives, … different methods and materials with which to work, and myriad uses and audiences' (Altheide & Johnson, 2011, p. 593). Altheide and Johnson (2011) propose a set of criteria for assessing 'credibility', such as 'considering the place of evidence in an interactive process between the researcher, the subject matter (the phenomenon to be investigated), the intended effort or utility, and the

audience for which the project will be evaluated and assessed' (Altheide & Johnson, 2011, p. 593). Lincoln et al. (2011) refer to rigour when defining validity in qualitative research. They argue for rigour in the application of methods and 'for both a community consent and a form of rigour-defensible reasoning, plausible alongside some other reality that is known to the author and the reader in ascribing salience to one interpretation over another and in framing and bounding the interpretive study itself' (Lincoln et al., 2011, p. 120). Patton (1999) also views rigour as an alternative concept of validity in qualitative research. He introduced the concept of technical rigour as 'searching for rival explanations, explaining negative cases, triangulation, and keeping data in context' (Patton, 1999, p. 1198). Patton (1999) views technical rigour as being fundamental to the researcher's credibility. This study addresses credibility by means of a detailed description of the research process and coherent conclusions.

In quantitative studies, researchers stake claims to the generalisability of their findings. In positivist terminology, the term generalisability means 'the degree to which the research findings are applicable to other populations or samples' (Falk & Guenther, 2013, p. 89). Three different positions of qualitative researchers on the issue of generalisability can be synthesised: (1) Generalisability is not the purpose of qualitative research. In fact, research is seen as a contribution to research, or as an interpretation of a phenomenon. Readers should 'weigh our interpretation, judge whether it has been soundly arrived at and is plausible … , and decide whether it has application to their interests and concerns' (Crotty, 1998, p. 41), (2) Qualitative research is generalisable, but one needs to be aware of the limitations due to the limited units of analysis used in comparison to quantitative studies (Eisenhardt, 2007) and (3) Qualitative research is as

generalisable as quantitative research: 'What becomes useful in understanding this is a full and thorough knowledge of particular findings, recognising them in new and foreign contexts. It is also important to acknowledge that knowledge is a form of generalisation too, not a scientific induction, but a naturalistic generalisation' (Stake, 1978, p. 6). This study follows the notion of Yin (2009), who suggests that case studies are generalisable to theoretical propositions and not to populations. In this sense, the case study does not represent a sample, and in carrying out a case study, the research goal is to generalise theories, not to enumerate statistical frequencies. In the current study, participants expressed their personal perceptions of multichannel service quality in fashion settings. This means that the findings are analytically generalisable to the phenomenon within the setting that the research was carried out (Azemi, 2016; Maxwell, 2013; Robson, 2007).

In the context of research quality, the current study certainly follows some ethical considerations, which are discussed in the next section.

3.10 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The adherence to research ethics in qualitative research implies two levels: (1) the consideration and application of the University's research ethics, and (2) the consideration of the values by which the study uses and creates knowledge (Angrosino, 2011).

Regarding the former, the current study was conducted according to the guidelines of the University of Gloucestershire´s *Handbook of Research Ethics* (Gloucestershire, 2008). The research in this study focuses on the service quality perceptions of multichannel customers. The information obtained during in-depth

interviews and focus groups were used to understand the experiences, attitudes and opinions of customers with regard to multichannel service quality. German multichannel customers were asked to participate in this study. These customers needed to have experience of multichannel purchasing according to pre-defined criteria. If they agreed, and met the criteria, they were informed about the nature, purpose and data employment of the interview through a 'participant's informed consent form', which they needed to sign before the interview.

Regarding the latter issue, the participants in this study were selected from the researcher´s workplace and private environment. Therefore, certain additional topics needed to be addressed in order to avoid conflicts of interest, and to meet the ethical standards of research studies more generally. In this regard, the current study addresses the following issues: (1) participation was entirely voluntary and the participants could withdraw at any time without any consequences. In cases of withdrawal, all information pertaining to the participant was destroyed. (2) The identities of participants have remained confidential. Members of the retailer's management did not have any access to the interview material. Furthermore, the organisation did not come to know who participated in the research. (3) The participants were provided with information about where the interviews were to be published. (4) Participants were informed about the researcher's dual role as a researcher and interviewer. (5) The company was asked for approval to comply with these ethical standards before conducting the interviews.

3.11   SUMMARY

The following image shows the progression of this dissertation following the research design chapter.
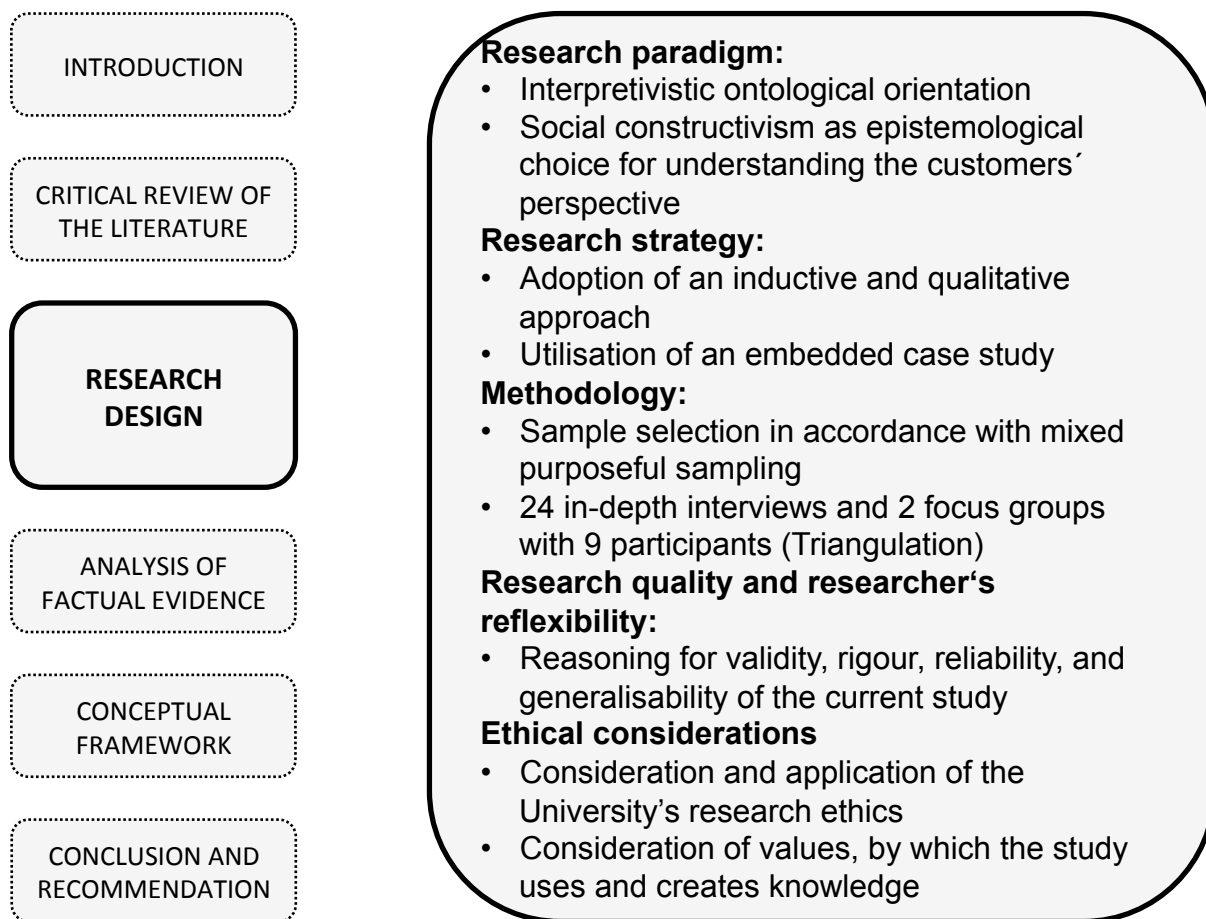
Research paradigm:
- Interpretivistic ontological orientation
- Social constructivism as epistemological choice for understanding the customers´ perspective

Research strategy:
- Adoption of an inductive and qualitative approach
- Utilisation of an embedded case study

Methodology:
- Sample selection in accordance with mixed purposeful sampling
- 24 in-depth interviews and 2 focus groups with 9 participants (Triangulation)

Research quality and researcher's reflexibility:
- Reasoning for validity, rigour, reliability, and generalisability of the current study

Ethical considerations
- Consideration and application of the University's research ethics
- Consideration of values, by which the study uses and creates knowledge

Image 3.1: Patten (2017) Dissertation progression

This chapter presents the research design for this study. First, the selected paradigmatic perspective was presented. The chapter continued by defending qualitative research as a suitable methodological approach. It then discussed the case study as a suitable research strategy and briefly introduced details of a pilot study that was conducted before data collection took place. The chapter then offered some justification for the sample selection, sample size and data collection methods used. After that, the axiological stance of this study was presented. The next section explored the quality of the research and clarified how the approach overcomes the positivist argument in order to contribute a theoretical generalisation to the research field of multichannel service quality. Finally, some ethical considerations were discussed.

4   ANALYSIS OF FACTUAL EVIDENCE

4.1   INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter discussed the research design that governs the direction of the study. It justified why an interpretative ontology and social constructivist epistemology can provide a holistic understanding of multichannel service quality. Furthermore, it reasoned around the choice of a qualitative research paradigm and an embedded case study research strategy to explore the lived experiences and perspectives of experienced multichannel customers.

This chapter presents an analysis of responses from interviews with German multichannel fashion customers. In particular, the chapter provides an answer to research questions one and two: 'How do customers perceive service provision in a multichannel fashion-retailing context in Germany?' and 'What determines the perception of service quality for the studied multichannel fashion retailing customers?'

The current study elaborates upon six coherent themes that describe perceptions amongst interview respondents of service quality. The interpretation of interview findings takes orientation from the philosophical approach of social constructivism. The implications of the interview findings are discussed and the chapter presents a customer typology based on available income level and involvement as drivers for customer heterogeneity.

4.2   RATIONALE FOR A THEMATIC ANALYTICAL APPROACH

This study analyses data using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The existing literature offers a variety of different thematic analytical approaches (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Fereday, 2006).

Based on a constructivist epistemology, an inductive thematic analytical approach is adopted in this section to interpret the data (Boyatzis, 1998) in order to better understand the phenomenon of multichannel service quality 'using the participants' own words within context' (Ozuem, Thomas, & Lancaster, 2015, p. 6). Service quality can be considered a mental phenomenon, and it is therefore appropriate to analyse human perceptions that give meaning to their social environment. In this context, the researcher advances a pluralistic role in this study since: (1) direct involvement entitles participants to share their voices of experience and to participate in the study, and (2) interview participants are accompanied and guided through the interviews by means of direct involvement. Interview questions were devised based on both theoretical and experiential knowledge. Semi-structured interviews were adopted in order to fully exploit the recounted vivid experiences and obtain the richest data. (3) Data analysis was conducted inductively. An inductive approach to data analysis means that such data are not aligned to existing conceptual frameworks. Moreover, field research has been conducted exclusively for the purpose of this study (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 study is data-driven (Boyatzis, 1998).

The data analytical process followed the guidelines established by Braun and Clarke (2006). The aim was to become familiar with the data during the undertaking of interviews. Valuable insights were retrieved iteratively in order to inform successive interviews. Therefore, the interview transcripts were examined closely and initial analysis was undertaken as soon as interviews were carried out.

After the ninth interview, the some initial codes were generated. NVIVO software was used to filter words that were repeatedly used by participants. These words were grouped into thematic codes. After all the 33 interviews and the focus groups had been conducted, it was necessary to read through the interview transcripts again to better understand the contexts in which participants had used certain words. Preliminary codes were then revised and grouped with the help of a thematic map. Thus, 83 terms could be identified based on respondents' comments that seemed relevant to the study. In the next phase, themes were developed and then checked for internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity (Patton, 1990). During this process, it became obvious that participants used different terms related to service provision in-store ('physical service quality') and online ('electronic service quality'). Furthermore, participants tended to use the German term *Verknüpfung* (connection) when talking about the third element of multichannel service quality, which was defined by Sousa and Voss (2006) as 'integration quality'. Hence, themes were generated for each of the three elements in relation to multichannel services, which are physical, electronic and integration elements. Ultimately, interpretations of respondent perceptions of multichannel service quality generated six major themes as follows: (1) affiliation, (2) physical stimulation, and (3) value for physical service quality; (4) electronic stimulation and (5) utility for electronic service quality, and (6) choice optimisation for the integration service quality. These themes represent the vivid perceptions of the empirical reality of German multichannel fashion customers. Hence, the presence of themes permits the generation of a testable, relevant and valid theory (Eisenhardt, 1989). All related literature was reviewed in order to investigate whether definitions and concepts exist which could help to describe each theme in detail and in the context of multichannel service quality. This could strengthen the

research quality of the empirical findings. In the last phase, the findings were reiterated. They are set out in detail first in the following sections.

Themes	Definitions	Codes	Key words
Physical stimulation	The motivation to seek novel and interesting stimuli from the offline-mediated retail environment encountered during shopping activities.	(1) Store design	• Lighting • Colours • Smell • Music
		(2) Visual merchandising	• Arrangement of items • Clarity of collections • Inspiration • Buy more than I wanted
		(3) Haptics	• Trying clothes on • Proof quality • Does it look the same as in the pictures?
Affiliation	The motivation to affiliate with other individuals involved in marketplace institutions, principally other shoppers or retail merchants.	(1) Human relations	• Common experience • Meet friends and family • Meet new people • Have great shopping experience
		(2) Status	• Exclusive shopping environment • Show off with shopping bag • Everyone can see bags • Stroll through Königsallee (Düsseldorf)
		(3) Advice	• Negative experience • Significant quality differences • No personal advice anymore • I like an easy-going consultation • Sales people have a similar style
Value	Concepts or beliefs about desirable end states or behaviours that transcend specific situations, guide selection or evaluation of behaviour and events, and are ordered by relative importance.	(1) Appreciation	• Good feeling • Feeling of being welcomed • Stuck-up sales people • Being ignored • Disregard
		(2) Honesty	• Con me to buy an item • Did not want to show me alternatives • They just go after their provision
		(3) Trust	• Real people • Double check • I'm sure she will look after it
		(4) Friendliness	• Greeting • Peremptory tone • No goodbye
		(5) Empathy	• Sensitivity • Notice when I want to browse through the items alone • To be there when I need her

Table 4.1: Patten (2017) Themes representing physical service quality findings

Themes	Definitions	Codes	Key words
Electronic stimulation	The motivation to seek novel and interesting stimuli from the online-mediated retail environment encountered during shopping activities.	(1) Web design	• Clear layout • Many pictures • Video clips • Not too many banners • Aesthetic colours • Filter options
		(2) Content	• Not just products • Editorials • Individual • Not hundreds of look-alike products • Like a small boutique • Blogger
		(3) Haptics	• Parcel • Packaging • Original packaged
Utility	Utility means the outcome resulting from some type of conscious pursuit of an intended consequence.	(1) Convenience	• Uncomplicated • Practical • Comfortable
		(2) Efficiency	• Fast system • Huge saving of time • In-store much more time-consuming • No time to go to city
		(3) Savings	• Compare prices • Check promotions • Free shipping • Free returns
		(4) Goodwill	• Long returns • Cheapest price offer • Fair

Table 4.2: Patten (2017) Themes representing electronic service quality findings

Themes	Definitions	Codes	Key words
Choice optimisation	The motivation to search for the right purchase channel that fits multichannel customers' demands in the best possible manner.	(1) Effort	• To save time • Fast • Convenient • Returns
		(2) Availability	• Check in-store • Check online • Across channels • Same article number • Up-to-date
		(3) Price	• Price comparison • Check promotions • Discounts • Single-channel
		(4) Support	• Help • Personal contact • Complaint

Table 4.3: Patten (2017) Theme representing integration quality findings

4.3   MAJOR THEMES REFLECTING PHYSICAL SERVICE QUALITY

4.3.1   AFFILIATION

The term 'affiliation' has been described as 'the motivation of multichannel customers to affiliate directly or indirectly with other individuals involved in marketplace institutions. This refers mainly to other shoppers and retail merchants. Direct affiliation involves social interaction and communication, while indirect affiliation describes the process in which shoppers identify with particular reference groups through their patronage, dress, or mannerisms in retail settings' (Westbrook & Black, 1985, p. 87).

The findings suggest that multichannel customers visit stores because they value human interactions. 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. You know, we can spend a whole day in the city. My family and I especially like Store X in Düsseldorf. When we go there, my mum and I look for the new collections – sometimes that can take hours – and my father can sit on a sofa, drink a coffee, and read a newspaper. So, I mean, every one of us gets his money's worth.

Interestingly, this respondent identifies a social dimension as one of the main reasons why she goes shopping. She shops to cultivate social contacts with her friends and her family. For her, it is important that every one of her companions enjoys a pleasant purchase experience. Therefore, this respondent was seeking hedonic value from 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.

A 19-year-old apprentice in a fashion-clothing store in Stuttgart noted another key issue emerging from affiliation:

When I go shopping, I like those stores where I meet people with the same style as me. Somehow, this gets me into the right mood. I see them and I think, wow, cool! I see that we've the same passion for fashion. Once, I even met someone in-store, who worked there as a sales person at that time, who has since become a good friend of mine.

This respondent refers to the interpersonal dimension of in-store shopping. She felt affiliated when she met like-minded people. The respondent mentioned three different aspects. First, this reinforced positive emotions within her and put her in a positive mind-set. Second, it was important to her that stores gave her the feeling that it sold the fashion that matched her taste. Third, she was open-minded about meeting new people with whom she could strike up a friendship.

The desire of multichannel customers to gain affiliation is also status-driven. One respondent who was a purchase director in the fashion industry stated:

I simply know that when I go to Store X, I'll have an exclusive shopping experience. I work so hard that when I have free time and try to go to the city, I don't want to explain myself too much… what I wish, what I like… When the store matches me, I've never had any bad experience with waiting time or sales people… I get my glass of sparkling wine – of course, I get a little bit spoiled – but isn't this what we need after a busy week?

This respondent formed service perceptions on the basis of store exclusivity. She had a high level of disposable income but little time for leisure activities. She therefore had a wide choice of stores to choose from. In a suitable shopping environment she perceived that her requirements were addressed in an efficient and exclusive manner. She expected the store's staff to treat her according to her status. Thus, she preferred shopping locations that guaranteed her a special high-class service.

Another respondent, a mother and former event manager, stated:

I'm sure that there is a trend of self-exposing. Well, I mean, when you shop online, you can't flaunt your shopping bag.

Following the same logic, a project manager from Düsseldorf noted:

I think that many customers nowadays prefer to buy in-store because of the shopping bag, especially in the luxury segment. I mean, they want everyone to see their X shopping bags.

Both respondents referred to self-portrayal. One reason for customers to select a certain retailer/brand is its level of status. Before wearing the clothes of this retailer, customers are already able to display their newly gained status symbolically and immediately after the purchase by being seen to carry a branded retailer shopping bag. Both respondents affirm that one of reasons for shopping in-stores is to use shopping bags and show others their affiliation to certain groups of buyers. As the second respondent argued, customers even choose retail channels depending on the level of self-portrayal opportunities. Nevertheless, in online-mediated environments, there are also ways to achieve self-portrayal of a status. For example, customers use social media to self-expose

virtually by sharing product pictures and 'selfies' or posting narratives about their latest purchases. Friends and followers can post comments and offer feedback. Additionally it appears that customers still purchase offline to perceive the highest level of self-portrayal.

In the same vein, a 21-year-old apprentice in luxury fashion retail, stated:

When I go home from work, I sometimes stroll through Königsallee. It's so fancy to see all these rich people! I need to dress-up every day for my job, I find that I simply look like other people there! Maybe they think that I'm rich, too (laughs).

This respondent sought affiliation to upper-class society when she strolled through the most exclusive shopping boulevard of her hometown. As her look was similar to that of higher status customers (she worked in a luxury fashion store as a sales consultant) she liked to feel that she 'belonged' to this customer segment.

Advice is another code for multichannel customers to feel affiliated with a retailer and is a service element that is exclusively provided in-store. A 35-year-old senior purchaser in the fast fashion segment noted of advice:

When I recently bought my wedding dress, I took advice. That was really important for me – I mean, it's the first time I purchased a wedding dress. I've come to realise that tremendous differences exist from one store to another in terms of personal advice.

This respondent saw advice as a considerable benefit when purchasing her wedding dress in an offline-mediated environment. During the interviews, it turned out that multichannel customers do not generally look for advice. In particular, when they look for a product they are not familiar with they ask for help. Even

though these customers often purchase without any personal advice, they pay much attention to competence and friendliness in case they need advice.

A 27-year-old fashion management trainee in a luxury boutique stated:

When I'm not really looking for something in-store, I don't want any help. But when I don't find a product or I'm unsecure about finding any, I ask for help. I've had some bad experience with that: I was at Store X and had two coats. I couldn't decide which one I should prefer. So I asked a sales person which of the two coats she liked more. Just imagine, she said 'No idea' and left me! I didn´t buy any coat there because of such behaviour.

As noted by this respondent, negative service experiences regarding advice could lead to customer migration in regard to channel, retailer, or channel and retailer. This respondent described an experience when she needed help with a purchase decision but the sales consultant was not service-oriented. During the interviews, many multichannel customers referred to negative experiences related to advice. Such experiences led to a feeling of non-affiliation.

Regarding advice, a 19-year-old apprentice from Düsseldorf stated:

Yeah, for me, I like a cool and easy-going consultation. I don't want to be treated like a pupil. If someone acts educational, I retreat and would rather try to find my own stuff. If someone is like me, says 'du' rather than 'Sie' (German for informal and formal salutation), I can somehow identify with that person or… mmm… even like that person. I will always feel more comfortable in that store.

According to this respondent, personal advice took place at eye height. She did not wish to become educated or treated in a patronising way. Furthermore, she

wanted to be addressed in an age-appropriate, informal manner. These aspects were mentioned several times during interviews. Multichannel customers tended to have a stronger affiliation with stores in which sales people were like-minded, and their advice was personalised and individual.

Another respondent, a 32-year-old department manager in the accessories section, reflected on the outer appearance of sales people:

When I buy in-store, the sales person needs to have a similar style to me. She mustn't look dowdy or prissy. When a sales person who looks like that approaches, I say 'No, thank you' and don't want her help. I somehow think that she won't be able to give me a good consultation. I think she would dress me in her style – imagine me looking dowdy and prissy! haha! NO!

This respondent defines affiliation on the basis of the sales person's sense of style. She was afraid that a badly dressed sales person would not be able to sell effectively. That is why she admitted to rejecting personal advice, even when needed, for being consulted by a sales person with – in her eyes – bad taste. It is therefore important that managers of fashion retailers hire sales staff fitting the style of clothes they offer and matching the customer types they serve.

4.3.2 PHYSICAL STIMULATION

The term physical stimulation has been described as 'the motivation to seek novel and interesting stimuli from the [offline-mediated] retail environment encountered during shopping activity' (Westbrook & Black, 1985, p. 87).

A key issue to emerge from physical stimulation was store design, as noted by a 40-year-old brand director for a private label from Düsseldorf:

The service should make the shopping experience as pleasant as possible. I find it great when there is a comfortable indoor climate. I like it when the atmosphere appeals to all my senses. The music shouldn't be too loud and the temperature should be pleasant. It should also smell nice.

Similarly, 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.

Both respondents referred to the experiential features of store design. They 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. However, as the next statement illustrates, individual perceptions of aesthetics were very different.

A 22-year-old male student from Stuttgart stated:

A DJ plays music in my favourite store every second Saturday. My friends and I wait for that day. We go there, check the latest collection, listen to the music, and sometimes dance a little bit. The music is really loud, it`s somehow like in a club.

This respondent referred to music as a tool for physical stimulation while shopping. He saw the DJ's set as an event, and visited the store not just to purchase something but also to enjoy a stimulating overall shopping experience. The perception of store atmosphere could be considered highly subjective. Some customers love loud music while others will not even enter a store that is playing

loud music. The same can be said of lighting. Some respondents preferred more unnatural lighting – either very light or very dark – while others tended to like natural light and colours.

A 19-year-old apprentice at a fast fashion retail chain remarked on another aspect of store design:

For me, it's important that I find everything immediately. If the store is contorted or they use too many or too high furnishings, that would be a reason for me to leave the store and go to another one.

This respondent argued for straight and clear store design in harmony with the saying 'form follows function'. Many respondents preferred functional furnishings that did not reduce overall visibility. Multichannel customers wished to easily browse through the store without barriers. Store design still has a supportive function and is not there for its own sake. As the interviews suggest, fashion retailers should emphasise the appeal of their products, and not of their furnishings.

Another emerging theme noted by several respondents was the arrangement of fashion items: so-called 'visual merchandising'. Such a strategy is a sales tool that plays an important role in shaping perceptions of in-store services. As noted by a 25-year-old deputy department manager:

A well-arranged store inspires me. You can see different themes, which are arranged together.

This respondent stated that appealing visual merchandising inspired him. Thus, she was able to identify themes within a collection. By means of visual

merchandising, fashion trends can be presented in a clear and visually appealing way. Sales merchandising can be an effective tool to tell the story behind the brand or collection. Like a thread, visual merchandising can be helpful for fashion retailers to guide their customers through stores.

In terms of the related concepts of guidance and inspiration, a 23-year-old marketing student from Stuttgart stated:

When I stood in line for the checkout, I suddenly saw items to wear at a festival arranged very nicely next to me. Even when queuing, I tried on a hat, a vest, and sandals, and finally bought the sandals. This was all because of the nice arrangement of items. If they hadn't done it so nicely, I would've just given back my online shop item. So I bought more than I wanted. And X could gain some extra turnover.

Interestingly, multichannel customers were open to additional fashion purchases while waiting at the cash desk. This was the case even though they were not able to use a fitting room to try items on. This particular respondent visited the store in order to return online purchases. Many respondents valued this service offer since they were presented with a choice to select the channel for return that corresponded best to their needs. Furthermore, it was an opportunity for the retailer to realise cross-channel sales if they were able to stimulate their customers to conduct additional purchases.

Another key issue to emerge from the type of physical stimulation customers could experience in-store was the haptics of items. A 46-year-old purchase director from Düsseldorf noted:

For me, fashion is all about the product, and not just the look, and also the quality and how an item feels on my skin. That's why I accept the effort and go in-store.

This respondent was driven by product and quality. For her, the outer appearance of a fashion product was not primarily what mattered. She needed to try on clothes in-store before purchasing to ensure that the quality met her high standards. For this respondent haptics was the pivotal motivation to purchase in-store. Corresponding to the demand for high quality expressed by several respondents, a 35-year-old store manager asserted with regard to online shops:

I've bought several times from X online. But the quality was just so poor! I was literally shocked when I opened the packaging. Yet I've sent everything back. I know it's cheap, but it looks better in pictures.

In the same vein, a 21-year-old apprentice from Stuttgart stated:

I became smarter with my experiences. I just buy from certain online stores. From others where I had very bad experience with quality and other things, I don`t order anymore. But I prefer retailers that have an online store as well as other stores because I can check in-store whether it resembles the picture on the Internet or if it looks cheaper.

Both respondents experienced items that were well photographed online and looked expensive in the pictures, but the physical product quality was often poor. Providers of professionally operated online shops have learned how to stage items. For a customer, it is often hard to recognise quality differences on the basis of product pictures. This is a double-edged sword, since customers who have higher expectations regarding product quality are likely to return items and then migrate to other retailers. Customer preferences to try fashion items on before

purchasing is dependent on the product category, as a 39-year-old fashion blogger noted:

Online buying is just fine, but I'm still a fan of purchasing in-store because the shopping experience is better. It's that I can try the shoes on in the store. It's not easy without knowing the size, the fit and the look. It's completely different when I do some clicks online, and the items will be delivered to home.

This respondent preferred buying in-store because she wanted to try the product on before purchasing, even though she admitted that online shopping was more convenient. A great number of respondents who referred to haptics distinguished between different product categories. These included mainly shoes and dresses, which were considered critical, and the respondents preferred buying these from a store where they could try them on.

4.3.3 VALUE

In this study, value is viewed from an ethical and altruistic perspective. It has been described as a 'concept or belief about desirable end states or behaviours that transcend specific situations, guide selection or evaluation of behaviour and events, and are ordered by relative importance' (Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987, p. 551).

The interview findings suggest that sales people very strongly influence multichannel customer perceptions of value regarding in-store purchases. They are critical to the quality of the customer/retailer relationship. In this regard, multichannel customers attach importance to appreciation when assessing in-store service quality. 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. As I said before, I'm not a person who needs personal advice. I wouldn't say, 'Hello, I need a blouse! Please help me to find a nice one!' But what I want is that I could approach the sales person and she must be helpful. I want to feel welcomed. I don't want to get the feeling that I'm disturbing the sales person by making her do something else.

This respondent described how in-store sales people should treat her. For her, introductions from sales people are crucial. She wished to be given attention quite conspicuously when entering a store, and sought a friendly greeting and the opportunity to ask for help when needed. Like many other multichannel customers, this respondent did not wish to receive personal advice. She preferred to look around on her own. Generally, multichannel customer expectations regarding sales people could be described as ambivalent. On one hand, they wanted sales people to attend closely to them, but on the other hand they did not want to receive advice. Thus, multichannel customers felt appreciated when sales people behaved flexibly and empathetically.

One respondent, a 30-year-old sales manager from Düsseldorf, stated:

I don't like to buy from a store where no one cares about me and where I need to run after the sales people. It should be natural that the customer comes first and that a sales person must try to do everything possible to satisfy me.

This respondent selected his shopping location based on the level of appreciation he received from sales people. He had high expectations regarding service orientation, in accord with the guiding principle 'the customer is king'. This respondent saw service delivery as a way for the store to show appreciation for its

customers. As he indicated, he had been through some bad experiences in the past regarding the behaviour of sales people. Similarly, a senior project manager of a multinational company in the consumer goods industry stated:

I know many stores where they look at you and think 'He can't afford to purchase here anyway!' Then you have an uncomfortable feeling right from the beginning, even if you have the money and can afford to buy from there.

This respondent shared some details of negative experiences of in-store visits when he felt patronised by sales personnel. Many respondents mentioned similar experiences. It seems to be a problem in stationary retail, where some sales people assume that they can estimate the purchasing power of customers by judging from their clothes. A 46-year-old managing director described how she wanted to be treated in a sales environment as follows:

I like X Store. They know me; they greet me by name; they know what I want. When I buy many items, they even help me to carry my purchases to my car.

This respondent described a positive service experience. He was a regular customer in a luxury department store. He valued the personal and friendly treatment he received there.

Another emerging theme from respondents was the honesty of sales people. As noted by a 19-year-old apprentice in fast fashion retail:

I have noticed that the sales assistant wanted to con me into buying this dress. She didn't show me any alternatives. I could see that she wanted to sell me this dress because she was simply too lazy to show me something else. And she just

wanted to sell anything without any effort. She kept saying that the dress looked good on me and didn't even care about my doubts!

In a similar vein, a 28-year-old sales manager stated:

So I went to the store to ask the sales person if he had the shoes from the online shop available in my size. He checked it and said: 'No!' He immediately showed me some other shoes. They really had no similarity to the shoes I actually wanted. But he kept saying that those shoes are similar and very fashionable and a good choice for me. And when I finally said that I didn't want those shoes, he simply disappeared.

These two statements represent two instances of negative experiences with sales people regarding honesty. In the first statement, the respondent would have liked to have been offered an alternative dress to have more choice and for the purpose of making a comparison. The sales person did not show her any further options and finally the respondent decided not to make a purchase. The second statement described a multichannel purchase. The respondent had already browsed for shoes online, but he preferred to buy them in-store. He could not check in-store stock availability and also found that the shoes were not available in his size. However, he was already determined to obtain a specific style and was upset that the sales person did not show him similar alternatives. Since the sales person pretended to show him similar styles, the respondent considered him dishonest. The trust of some of the interview respondents has obviously been affected by such incidents. Thus, many of them assumed the sales people to be dishonest. A 35-year-old logistics manager from Stuttgart gave another example of poor advice:

I've had very bad experience! They were showing me outfits that were supposed to look good on me. I took them because I trusted them. But you know what? When I came home and presented them to my family, they were laughing at me.

This respondent described a situation in which he trusted the opinion of a sales person regarding an outfit, but was ultimately disappointed. The respondent felt affected because his family laughed at his new outfit. Customers might expect sales people to show them tasteful outfits that would impress their social environment. If this is not the case, customers could question either the abilities or the honesty of the sales person. The following statement reveals one of the reasons behind this assessment. A senior purchaser from Düsseldorf stated:

When I have been visiting stores, it happened more than once that sales people tended to be very careless regarding their customers. But then, when the customers left the changing room on the way to the cash desk carrying some items, they would run after them. And we all know they are just keen on their incentives.

What this respondent is arguing is that sales people often get certain sales targets from their management. These targets are related to their performance and even their pay depends on these sales targets. As a consequence, some sales people are not primarily interested in providing good personal advice and would rather meet their incentive targets. This might lead to poor advice and result in poor sales staff reputations in general.

As the interview findings suggest, multichannel customers emphasise trust-related value-orientation when purchasing in-store. A 32-year-old project manager in the advertising industry stated:

If I buy from a store, I'm still dealing with real people. I know them and they wouldn't suddenly disappear and take my money. In an online store, how can I be sure about that? That's why I prefer to buy from online stores that also operate physical stores. I know that when I have a problem with an online order, I can visit their store and talk with them in-person.

The respondent preferred a personal interaction and hence tended to buy in-store. She argued that she found it more trustworthy than buying from a fully-fledged online store. Since this is a line of argument adopted by many customers, a seal of approval called 'Trusted e-shops' has been introduced. The seal guarantees buyer protection. Nevertheless, this respondent preferred to purchase from multichannel retailers. She argued that, in the event of a query, there would be someone whom she could contact in person.

Corresponding to the idea of trust-related value-orientation, a 39-year-old mother stated:

At Store X, the sales people write down my name and telephone number when they need to order an item for me, for instance when my size is sold out. And you know what, I've never been disappointed with that. After a couple of days they would call me, either to tell me that I can come to pick up the item or to tell me that they cannot reorder the item. I can really rely on that.

In this example, the respondent referred to a store where she has had several good experiences. As a consequence of these experiences she had built trust with retailer and stated that she relied on store staff for support. As several interviews show, multichannel customers appreciate it when sales people order items

individually for them. It was also important for them that they received personal information when an item could not be reordered.

Another key issue emerging around the idea of value was the competence of sales people regarding products, services and procedures. A 27-year-old apprentice from a luxury boutique in Essen noted:

And then, I asked her if this jacket was available in their online shop. She said: 'Yes, well, I believe yes,' without even checking it in their computer system. But I – still in the store – took out my Smartphone and double-checked it. And guess what! My size was sold out.

This respondent was frustrated about her in-store experience because she received poor information from a sales person. In this example, the customer was more competent than the sales person – a situation about which several respondents complained during the interviews. Customers who have already browsed online before coming to the store are knowledgeable about products and competing offers. Thus, the sales people are no longer the sole bearers of knowledge. They need to be trained constantly in order not to lose credibility in the eyes of the multichannel customer.

Another key issue to emerge from value was the friendliness of sales people. A 27-year-old fashion management trainee noted:

When I shop in-store, it's important that the sales people welcome me and that they recognise me without being intrusive. Best practice: at Store X, when you go there and look for an item, this older generation of sales people stands behind the cash desk without moving a centimetre. They babble about their lunch, and when they cash up, they do not even look into your eyes. They keep on babbling. When

you say 'bye' before you go, sometimes they would respond, but most of the time they would not even do that. They shouldn't be surprised when they lose their job. There is no reason to buy in that store – you can find everything online. And online, you at least get a message that says 'Thank you for your purchase'.

The respondent referred to a store where employees were not customer-oriented, but rather self-absorbed. They spent their time talking about private topics and ignored their customers. The respondent did not show any understanding of this behaviour and suspected they might soon become unemployed due to poor customer retention. Thus, this respondent expected to be welcomed and recognised. Many respondents considered friendliness to be the basis of the sales person/customer relationship.

Another key issue to emerge from value was sales peoples' empathy, as noted by a 30-year-old event manager:

A certain degree of empathy. They must consider whether the customer wants help or not. And if the customer indicates that he doesn't need help, then they indicate, 'I am here when you need me!' But leave him alone! Every customer needs to decide that for himself. Service is often misinterpreted as: You have to ask him if he needs help within one minute, you have to be with him the whole time he is in the store, and you have to follow him through the store and open the door when he leaves. I say, 'No, this is not service for me, this is just too much!'

This respondent demonstrated a keen awareness of what she expected from sales people and she set clear boundaries between what she saw as too little and too much care. She sought a certain degree of support, but also a certain degree of freedom. The respondent also argued that the right level of personal advice

was individualistic and thus perceived differently amongst multichannel customers. If a sales person is empathetic they can serve an individualistic customer in the right way. A 29-year-old senior project manager from Düsseldorf stated in the same vein:

Sometimes I want to rummage alone, but sometimes I need help when I am looking for something special.

The interviews suggest that multichannel customers appreciate sales people who are able to address their current needs in the best possible manner. This is something that is customer- and situation-dependent. How to serve a customer in the best possible manner is not based on the positioning and image of the store anymore, but rather on the customer and his individual needs.

4.4   MAJOR THEMES REFLECTING ELECTRONIC SERVICE QUALITY

4.4.1   ELECTRONIC STIMULATION

The term electronic stimulation refers to 'the motivation to seek novel and interesting stimuli from the [online-mediated] retail environment encountered during shopping activity' (Westbrook & Black, 1985, p. 87).

The findings suggest that multichannel customers attach importance to web-design when purchasing online. A 29-year-old project manager from a business development department stated:

I want a clear layout. If I cannot find my product category after 30 seconds, I leave the page. It's sometimes annoying.

This respondent referred to the practicality of web design. He wanted to find items quickly online and if unable to do so, he switched to a different channel. Even

though the requirements concerning web design varied among different respondents, it was evident that the average 'stay' in online shops was shorter than the average stay in physical stores. Respondents tended to switch to other online shops if they did not find what they were looking for.

X is my favourite online shop. The look is very simple. Not too many colours, just black and white. It's very minimalistic and thus matches brand`s style.

This respondent valued the aesthetics of websites. She had simple tastes and thus she preferred online shops which have a clean look. As several respondents reinforced, the layout of web content is appreciated in much the same way as a physical store design, including visual merchandising. Each online shop provides a unique navigational experience that the customer does not know a priori. Many respondents argued for a design that was appealing and reflected the image and style of the brand. A 23-year-old fashion management student from Düsseldorf reflected on his perception of web design as follows:

And, of course, that it's well-structured and that you find the shopping basket immediately. That I understand, how I can click on things. 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. Like that, you can see better how the item looks when you move. And also, you can see better how the colour really looks.

This respondent valued clarity and the visuals of web design. He preferred the application of visual tools such as product pictures and video sequences. She argued that it was easier for her to imagine the 'real' look of an item when presented with effective graphics. Another respondent stated that she returned fewer items when the online shop offered video sequences. Multichannel

customers sought a realistic impression of items when shopping online. As several participants argued, they tended to migrate to other retailers when the perceived product quality of online items varied from the physical product. A 21-year-old apprentice from Stuttgart stated:

I can tell you about several experiences when the clothes looked so much nicer in the photos than they were when they arrived. This is so disappointing! Of course I could have known it, because the price was so cheap, but I didn`t think it would be such a big difference!

This respondent regularly purchased in the lower price segment. The presentation of low price fashion online seldom differs from luxury fashion. For customers, this is both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, they feel stimulated by nicely presented items and, furthermore, they perceive a high hedonic shopping experience. On the other hand, the reality of the physical product they receive is often at variance with how it is presented online. Several returned these items, and some of them permanently migrated from the retailer.

Another key issue to emerge from web design was content, as noted by a department manager in fashion retail:

I just want to see the product categories I am actually interested in. It means that I wish to see which t-shirts, bags, or dresses are in stock and that I can sort everything by colour. Then I have many filter options.

This respondent referred to the arrangement of the online shop's content and its filter options. She argued for a clear arrangement of assortment that would be easier to understand. Several online shops follow a different strategy and display items that are already sold out. Some offer to send a notification to the customer

via email when items have been returned to stock. Others simply display items that are no longer available. Several respondents complained about this policy. Another respondent, a 22-year-old student from Stuttgart, reflected on the use of advertising banners:

Too many banners drive me crazy. Sometimes I don't go to online shops that use too many banners. I find it very confusing.

Online retailers use banners for advertising or to inform customers about new topics and product lines. However, some respondents were critical of banners and saw these as unnecessary.

A 25-year-old deputy department manager from Essen remarked about online content as follows:

I'm quite bored by online shops that just present hundreds of lookalike products. This is true if I want to buy, let's say, a white t-shirt. If the online shop shows me 200 matches for my search and I would need to browse through 15 pages, I get very annoyed and switch the online shop. Mass instead of class isn't for me!

This respondent saw online content as a strategic tool for retailers to practise range design. She argued for a smaller assortment to simplify choice. In stationary retailing, sales people learn to show customers three different options for one product in which they are interested. In such circumstances customers have a choice, but they are not overburdened with information. In a similar vein, a 35-year-old project manager of an electronic supplier noted:

You know, I hate department stores – they are too big. They just offer you so much that you get lost. Online is the same: some shops have just everything.

Take, for instance, Online Shop X. It is as if they offer everything in any product category that is available on the market. For me, an online shop must be like a small boutique. I just want to see products that I like. The assortment should be kind of tailored for me. I don't want to see all the trousers that exist, but only those I would like to see.

This respondent commented on the retailer's assortment strategy. For him, online and stationary retailers alike should offer a made-to-measure assortment. He had a negative perception of retailers that offered large assortments without makers' labels. If a retailer offered a large assortment, this respondent lost the overview and migrated. But generally, perceptions of assortment policies varied amongst respondents. One respondent, a 28-year-old sales manager from Düsseldorf, emphasised the benefits of large assortments:

I prefer to buy online. If I wanted to have the same selection in-store as in some of the bigger online stores, I would have needed to go to at least 10 stores.

As noted by this respondent, multichannel customers compare assortment strategies of different channels. This participant argued in favour of online shops, since she perceived that they offer more choice.

Moreover, many respondents referred to fashion bloggers as a source of electronic stimulation. A 35-year-old sales assistant for a young fashion firm from Stuttgart noted:

I`m on Instagram almost always. From the morning, when I go to work on the metro, till the evening on the couch, I am always checking what's going on there. I follow Blogger X from Vienna, Blogger Y from the Netherlands, Blogger Z from Munich – I even know her in person. If they post an item that I like, I check

immediately if it's available in the online shop. Mostly, the items are linked, and when you click on the link you are forwarded directly to the online shop. I also use 'like to know' at Instagram. If you subscribe, you get an email telling you where you can buy the bloggers' items.

As this respondent noted, social networks are part of her everyday life. She used Instagram on several occasions during the day to keep updated about the latest fashion trends. Moreover, fashion items were linked with online shops and this participant liked being able to easily check product availability online. Many respondents were users of Instagram and followed different bloggers. Blogs started to be developed around the Millennium as the role of digital technologies grew. A blog is a website which often contains informal diary-like posts from people who want to share content with others. It started as a non-profit-oriented activity, but nowadays companies sponsor or collaborate with bloggers. Fashion bloggers are people who have certain credibility when it comes to fashion topics and they were considered highly influential amongst the respondents to this research. This was evident from several statements.

Other respondents wished to be guided through the online assortment. For example, a 46-year-old purchasing director stated:

Visual stories are important. Somehow, I find it easier to find what I'm looking for. I love editorials. A dull 'what´s new in this week' without any orchestration doesn't appeal to me. I have to find an editorial that inspires me and I appreciate that very much.

The respondent argued that online content should offer much more than a representation of products. She preferred online shops that use fashion editorials

in order to stimulate their customers. Fashion editorials tell a story about certain topics and attract customers in more subtle ways than straightforward advertisements. Such methods convey a mood or an occasion when the displayed fashion items can be worn.

The data suggests that haptics also play a role in the online-mediated environment. A 23-year-old marketing student stated:

When the postman delivers the parcel, I'm quite happy that I'm finally able to hold my purchase in my hand.

In the same vein, a 39-year-old mother and fashion blogger noted:

I feel like a child on Christmas Eve when I unpack the parcel. Why shouldn't I be happy when I receive a parcel with nice things in it?

Both statements referred to the delivery of items purchased online. For these respondents, the order delivery triggered positive emotional feelings. In line with this, many respondents attached importance to packaging. As a 32-year-old department manager from Stuttgart stated:

The items were beautifully packaged. They even added a personal greeting card saying 'Thank you Mrs. X for your purchase'.

Similarly, a 22-year-old design student from Essen argued:

Clearly, the more expensive the product, the nicer the packaging. I've recently purchased online from X. The packaging was so nice that I didn't want to throw it away. If it were so nice to order there, I would do it again and again.

Both statements refer to the aesthetic aspects of packaging. Respondents enthusiastic about fashion tended to purchase new fashion items more for hedonistic reasons than for utilitarian ones. Hence, they perceived appealing packaging as a form of added value. For some respondents, packaging increased repurchase rates.

Furthermore, some respondents preferred online purchases because they wanted to receive new and originally packaged items. A 34-year-old project manager in advertising noted:

Because I think that other in-store customers have already tried my item and it's not 'new' anymore. When I buy online, the items are originally packaged.

This respondent believed that items from online stores were brand new and never tried on before – unlike in-store purchased items, which had usually been tried on by several customers. In fact, items from online stores could have also been tried on before and later returned before being purchased again. In the case of multichannel retailers, items that were offered online could also have been taken from in-store stock.

4.4.2 UTILITY

Utility has been described as the 'outcome resulting from some type of conscious pursuit of an intended consequence' (Babin et al., p. 645).

A key issue to emerge from utility was convenience, as noted by a 29-year-old senior project manager of a marketing department:

Principally because of convenience. Because it is possible nowadays and it's more uncomplicated. It is more convenient to get home delivery.

This respondent found it more convenient when his purchases were sent to his home and this saved him a trip to the city to purchase in-store. Several respondents compared online and stationary shopping, as illustrated by the following example of a 44-year-old store manager from Essen:

You know, online shopping is more comfortable!

In the same vein, another respondent stated:

It's practical! Simply because I don't want to carry the bags home.

This respondent found it cumbersome to carry her shopping bags and therefore preferred to order online. A 35-year-old logistics manager stated:

Instead of rushing to the city after work and visiting eight stores to find what I need and its size and colour, I can quickly go online and check the availability. I can collect all the things together and that really saves time!

This respondent compared a stationary purchase process with an online one and claimed that purchasing online was more time-efficient for him. In the same vein, a senior purchaser described her online shopping experience as follows:

I knew what I wanted to have: a lace dress that shouldn't be too expensive. And I made a find quite quickly online. I could directly select different sizes because I needed it for different age groups. And I also found matching accessories – the typical additional sales you actually didn`t want to do. And finally, I bought a clutch and a cardigan for each maid of honour. If I ran to the city for all of these, I am sure it would have been much more time-consuming. That`s why I find online shopping much better than in-store shopping.

This respondent described the purchase of bride-of-honour dresses for her wedding. Even though she stated at another point during the interview that she bought her own wedding dress in-store because she needed some personal advice, she was looking for an efficient solution regarding which dresses to choose for her maids of honour. This was why she chose an electronic channel.

Another emerging theme from one respondent was the efficiency of the online-mediated environment. As noted by a 27-year-old fashion management trainee from Essen:

Mmm… that the system works fast. I find it extremely frustrating when you want to pay for something that you've put in the shopping basket and discover it's not available anymore. Fast translation of availability and non-availability is really important for me.

This respondent asked for efficient data processing. She recalled previous poor experiences with slow data processing online and this made her frustrated. This respondent in particular valued fast data transactions in order to attain up-to-date data on the availability of items.

Moreover, several interview respondents sought to make savings when purchasing online, as this 19-year-old apprentice in fashion retail noted:

Free shipping and free return, preferably over a long period of time!

For several interview respondents, free shipping and free return options were the main criteria for selecting particular online retailers. A brand director of a German multi-brand fashion multichannel retailer explained why her company offered free shipping and returns as follows:

As long as Online Store X offers it, we have to offer it to remain relevant to the customers.

This respondent demonstrated a keen awareness of the importance of free shipping. In Germany, the most important online shops in terms of market share offer free shipping. This respondent referred to the example of the most important player in the fashion segment. The respondent's company was afraid to lose market share if it demanded shipping costs. Another respondent, a 24-year-old regular customer of different online shops, noted:

Free shipping and return – the way in which X offers it – makes it interesting for me. Otherwise, I would have bought things in-store! Shipping costs are a deterrent for me. I wouldn't buy a t-shirt for EUR 14.90 and pay an extra EUR 4.90 for shipping. I'd rather register at a new online shop from where I hadn't purchased previously to save shipping costs.

The respondents even accepted other disadvantages such as longer shipping times or more complicated data inputting when trying to receive free shipping and returns. Respondents who shopped at the lower end of the market criticised the fairness of product and shipping costs. The case was, however, different when the retailer offered fashion items exclusively purchased from online stock. If this shop charged shipping costs and even extra return costs, respondents tended to accept it, since they were motivated more by products than by price. Furthermore, respondents often checked for promotions when purchasing online. A 28-year-old sales manager noted:

Actually, I buy online most of the time because there are always coupons and special offers, especially for shoes.

Several respondents including this one expected to find cheaper prices online than in-store. Some respondents were opportunistic in terms of their online shopping behaviour and, for example, purchased from the online store that offered the lowest price. The following statement from a 23-year-old student from Düsseldorf supports this observation:

When I buy items that you can find in different online shops, I spend a lot of time comparing prices. I search until I am confident that I have found the cheapest available online price.

Another key issue to emerge from utility was goodwill, as noted by a 25-year-old deputy department manager:

They were really nice: my mum got married last year again and for that occasion I had ordered a beautiful dress from X. It was sequined and I wanted to have it shortened. But the tailor told me that it was really extensive work. It would have cost EUR 400, more than the dress had actually cost. And so I called X through its hotline. I explained my situation to them and asked if I could return the dress, even though I had purchased it some months before. They were really kind and understanding. They said, 'Of course you can still return it!'

This respondent described a situation in which she intended to return a dress, even though she had purchased it a long time before. She appreciated the fair returns policy of the online retailer. Several respondents mentioned 'long return period' as an important criterion for goodwill and they linked this with a high level of service quality.

4.5   MAJOR THEME REFLECTING INTEGRATION QUALITY

4.5.1   CHOICE OPTIMISATION

The term choice optimisation has been described as the multichannel customer's motivation to search for the purchase channel 'that best fits their demands. The gratification experienced when this motivation is fulfilled is reflected in a sense of achievement and mastery of the choice environment' (Westbrook & Black, 1985, p. 87).

'Connection' and 'linkage' are the terms that explain how interview respondents expressed what is known in the literature as 'integration quality'.

One of the intriguing issues that emerged with regard to channel optimisation was indicated by a 30-year-old sales director from Düsseldorf:

To save time! To get the item as fast as possible. I guess there are actually customers who don't need personal contact with sales people. They don't need the in-store shopping experience. They say: 'I want everything as fast as I can get it' and it doesn't matter which way.

This respondent reasoned that multichannel customers took advantage of the channel from which they could get the item fastest. She perceived stores as locations where customers could get in touch with sales people and have a certain hedonic shopping experience. This respondent argued that a group of multichannel customers did not value these properties of offline-mediated environments, and moreover, they preferred to purchase from the fastest channel. Thus, some multichannel customers selected purchase channels based on the availability of items that they were seen to offer.

Another key issue to emerge from channel optimisation was availability-checking across channels, as noted by a 35-year-old senior purchaser in fast fashion:

The sales person should be able to tell me if an item that I have seen online is available in-store. If not, she must check online whether a similar item is available.

According to this respondent, store staff employed by multichannel retailers should be able to provide information if an online item is available in-store. Furthermore, a sales person should be knowledgeable about the retailer's online and offline assortment and should be able to offer similar styles.

Other respondents used IT to conduct in-store stock availability searches independently. A 27-year-old management trainee from Essen stated:

Often, for example, at X, I can use the App to check whether the dress is available in-store. Before that, I wouldn't even go to the store. If I know that it's available, I would ask a sales person for help in case I can't find it.

This respondent could be considered a research shopper. She used the online-mediated environment to search for items, and visited stores to make purchases. This respondent considered the information she obtained online as 'correct'. Thus, when she visited the store, she was already prepared and had acquired knowledge about products. She saw sales people as guides that could be instructive in helping her to complete a purchase.

Similarly, a 23-year-old marketing student from Stuttgart noted:

Both systems must be linked. As I said before, it is a must so that I can take the article number from the store and check online if the item is available. I don't want to spend a lifetime in browsing through all the products to find something!

This respondent asked for a channel-comprehensive availability check. This demand requires some technical conditions: merchandise management systems of online and offline channels have to be linked and must use the same article numbers. This, however, is not always the case. Moreover, information about availability needed to be up-to-date, which was supported by the following statement:

Also, that the online information I get whether an item is available in-store is right! There is nothing more annoying than if I see something online and then go to the store only to find that it's not there! I become so upset if something like that happens.

This respondent described encountering problems accessing legitimate information concerning the availability of items. The up-to-date nature of availability is a delicate topic in retailing. Customers want to experience accurate availability notifications, but retailers face several challenges and these include: (1) overnight data processing, (2) incorrect booking, (3) shoplifting of items, and (4) disorder of items. Retailers try to resolve these problems with the installation of faster systems, permanent inventories, and availability displays that are triggered when more than one item is available. Some communicate stock availability via their website. These actions can be helpful to prevent customer dissatisfaction.

With regard to the availability of items across channels (also considered assortment integration) the interviews revealed different standpoints. A 40-year-old brand director from Düsseldorf noted:

The collections do not inevitably need to be the same online and in-store. But it's important as a customer to understand the logic of differences between an online shop and physical stores. In particular, when an item is not available in-store that needs to be indicated online.

This respondent sought assortment transparency. She argued that multichannel retailers should adopt an explicit communication strategy regarding product availability. She felt dissatisfied if items were available online but not in-store when she made the effort to visit.

Other respondents generally valued a larger online assortment, since they saw the online shop as an extended storage room of the store. This was noted by a 29-year-old senior project manager:

Why not have more choices online than in-store? In stores, retailers have limited space and so they have to decide which items they are going to sell. But there are no such limits online. So why not take advantage of that?

This respondent viewed multichannel assortment strategies from a practical and business-oriented standpoint. He saw it as a win-win situation for retailer and customers if retailers offered large assortments of products. He argued that retailers had limited space in their stores, but unlimited space in their online stockrooms. This statement again supports the idea that respondents used multichannel integration to achieve availability optimisation.

Furthermore, the interviews revealed that multichannel customers used integration to purchase items at the best available price, as 35-year-old sales assistant from Stuttgart noted:

I always recheck prices online and in-store when I want to buy from such a retailer. I've had enough experience that prices are different or that there was a promotion just offered online or in-store.

Several of the respondents shared similar experiences in relation to encountering different pricing levels across channels. There was a perception of price inconsistency amongst respondents. The interviews suggest that multichannel customers mostly accepted price inconsistencies as a matter of course, and simply tried to get the best price. However, some respondents expressed a lack of understanding about this strategy. For instance, a 34-year-old project manager from Düsseldorf argued:

My expectation of purchasing from one retailer is that there will be no differences online and in-store. I can't understand it when prices are different. Items are sometimes discounted online, but not in-store. Or even regular prices are different. For me, it is still one retailer and I feel cheated if it wants to charge a higher price in-store than online.

This respondent argued in favour of price consistency across channels. He felt deceived in the case of price inconsistency since he did not understand the reasons why a multichannel retailer should apply a different pricing strategy across channels. This participant illustrated two common scenarios for price inconsistency among channels: (1) items can be seasonally discounted in one channel, but not in the other; (2) regular prices can be different across channels. A third scenario for price inconsistency was noted by a 25-year-old fashion management student from Düsseldorf:

Once I went to the X webpage and was looking for a t-shirt. And they showed different prices for different sizes of the same t-shirt. At first, I thought it was a mistake. So I sent them a message and told them about it. But they answered that some of the t-shirts are not part of their stock but from a different retailer that charges a different price. They just collaborate with this retailer and cannot force it to change its retail price. I didn't buy this item. I felt so fooled! They should either offer the cheapest price for all the sizes or at least an average price.

As indicated by this respondent, online prices sometimes varied among different sizes of one article. This scenario can be considered the most extreme form of price inconsistency and may be notable amongst retailers that operate a 'platform strategy'. Such suppliers collaborate with retailers and offer their online shops as platforms. Thus, the online shop operator does not obtain merchandise sovereignty and cannot influence pricing. However, for this respondent the platform strategy is not transparent and comprehensive and in this case it led to mistrust and purchase refusal.

Generally, respondents expressed ambivalent feelings regarding inconsistent pricing amongst multichannel retailers. A 19-year-old fashion retail apprentice noted:

(Respondent): For me, it's comprehensible that retailers sometimes give you discounts online. For example, they want to push sales in their online shops and claim 'When you buy online during the next weeks, you'll get 10% off'. Sometimes, I even buy online instead of in-store when I come to know about a sales promotion like that. At H&M, for example, you always pay EUR 5 as the delivery cost. And when they offer a discount online, I order there and take the discount to compensate for the delivery costs.

(Interviewer): Imagine you've just heard of a sales promotion at H&M and want to buy an item online to benefit from this sales promotion. But, unfortunately, your size is sold out online. So you have to buy this item in-store where you don't get any discount. What would you think about that?

(Respondent): I'd ask in-store if I'd get the same discount as offered online.

(Interviewer): And if they refuse?

(Respondent): I'd become very angry and think that unless I need this item very much, which is unlikely, I wouldn't buy it. And I would have a very bad impression of this retailer.

This situation illustrated a very common experience amongst multichannel customers: the more they switched channels, the more they knew about the different sales promotions of a retailer across channels. Currently, it is often observed that retailers apply different strategies both online and offline, and accordingly sales promotions are not integrated. As demonstrated in this case, customers usually appreciate sales promotions as long as they can benefit from them. Some of them perceive of many benefits from a sales promotion because they feel they have selected the 'right' channel. However, if they are discriminated against as customers of other channels then this might negatively influence their perceptions of the retailer. Similarly, a 23-year-old marketing student from Stuttgart noted:

Of course I'm happy when I find out that a product is cheaper in one channel of a retailer and I can buy it from there. But it always leaves a bitter taste because I cannot fully rely on this retailer, since I know that I always need to check all its retail channels for the cheapest price before I purchase the product.

This respondent was ambivalent about the benefits of discounts, particularly those that differed across channels, even though she managed to save money. Her perception of the reliability of the retailer was compromised. If perceptions about the reliability of a multichannel retailer are compromised due to price inconsistency, customers use choice optimisation to add value. In that case, multichannel service quality decreases despite the possibility of conducting choice optimisation.

Another key issue emerging from choice optimisation was the support multichannel customers can optionally receive when encountering both channels, as noted by a 30-year-old mother from Düsseldorf:

Sometimes I need help when I buy an item, and I find it better when I can choose to call the hotline of an online store or go directly to a store.

As noted by this respondent, multi-optionality was important for him when he had a query. Other respondents generally preferred personal contact in case they needed support. A 29-year-old senior project manager in a business development department noted:

I'd rather talk to a real sales person when I have a complaint. I cannot often properly express what I mean when I send a mail to the online sales personnel. It takes longer than going in-store and talking to someone. Oh yes, it's the same with hotlines as you have to wait so long until you can get someone on the phone.

This respondent preferred to solve his queries in-store. He preferred personal contact with sales staff to online interactions. This respondent perceived online contact tools negatively as he found emailing cumbersome and using telephone hotlines rather time-consuming.

4.6   DISCUSSION OF FACTUAL FINDINGS

This section provides a detailed explanation of the major themes that emerged out of the research. It discussed the perceptions of multichannel customers in relation to three elements of multichannel service quality – physical, electronic, and integration quality – in the context of German fashion retailing. As the interviews indicate, purchase behaviour amongst German multichannel customers involves a high degree of complexity, since their purchasing involves making decisions about (1) the choice of vendor, (2) the choice of retail channel, and (3) a persistent justification of (1) and (2) during the purchase process. This outcome is supported by the literature on multichannel customers (Verhoef et al., 2007).

The literature provides general conceptualisations of service quality. The current study considers those statements that were consistent with the generally accepted understanding of service quality in the literature. However, it is worth emphasising that respondents were willing to tolerate lower service quality when the following two criteria were fulfilled: (1) the product obtains high desirability, and (2) the accessibility of the product is limited. A 27-year-old fashion management trainee illustrates this in the following comment:

Well, I often buy from retailers where they don't offer personal advice – for example, from retailer X. I don't find personal advice in such places and so I have become kind of used to looking after my needs.

This respondent mentioned that she generally paid attention to personal advice. However, since she preferred a particular brand, which was the only one available in both bricks-and-mortar boutiques and online shops, she was forced to accept poor levels of personal advice from that retailer, and sometimes no personal advice at all. Other respondents cited negative store atmospheres as a key

reason for shopping online, as noted by a 23-year-old marketing student from Stuttgart:

I don't fancy going to X. The stores look very messy and I don't find what I'm looking for. That's why I normally tend to buy from their online shop.

This respondent referred to the same multichannel retailer as the previous respondent. She argued that she purchased to buy online from this retailer in order to avoid being confronted with the disorder of items in its retail stores. The interviews suggest that there are a few retailers whose fashion items are so desirable that they are able to offer poor service quality without losing customers. Their regular customers have accepted the need to adapt to these retailers and their service levels. The retailers themselves need to consider a revised service strategy to address customer needs in the best possible way (Grönroos, 1984). However, since end-product properties are not part of the generally accepted understanding of service quality, product-related statements are excluded from this discussion.

The interview findings indicate that perceptions of service quality amongst German multichannel fashion customers vary from the kind of wider consumer profile of this segment that is evident in the literature. Multichannel customers tend to compare different retail channels and thus their service quality perceptions have developed into a complex construct. Expectations about service quality, which were originally formed based on past experiences at a retailer (Parasuraman et al., 1988), are now also based upon past experiences at retail channels. Hence, perceptions of the quality of one channel are influenced by experiences at another. It is still possible and even useful for the analysis and discussion of findings to categorise the interview findings into distinct retail

channels. Hence, the first section contains a discussion of the findings about the physical channel, whilst the second part discusses the findings that relate to electronic channels. The section that discusses integration quality discusses findings relevant to how multichannel customers perceive the impacts of channel integration. Finally, this section concludes with a conceptualisation of multichannel service quality in the context of the German fashion retail segment. Hence, the next section captures responses to the following research questions: 'How do customers perceive service provision in a multichannel fashion retailing context in Germany?' and 'What determines the perception of service quality for the studied German multichannel fashion retailing customers?'

4.6.1   IMPLICATIONS OF PHYSICAL SERVICE QUALITY

There are certain impacts for multichannel customers when they select a physical channel. Thus, the emergent themes and sub-themes regarding physical service quality for these customers can be considered to be 'physical stimulation', 'affiliation', and 'value', as illustrated below.
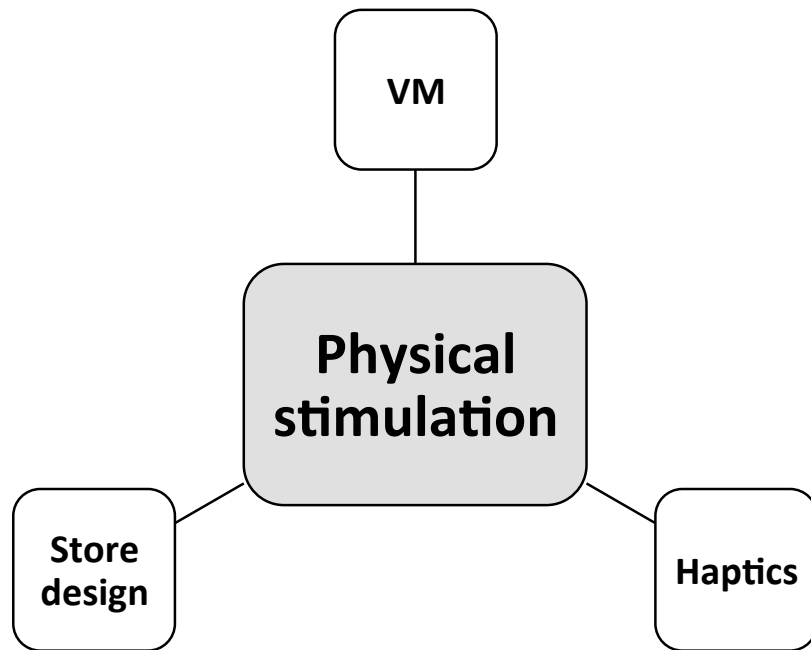
Image 4.1: Patten (2017) PHYSICAL STIMULATION – Thematic network diagram
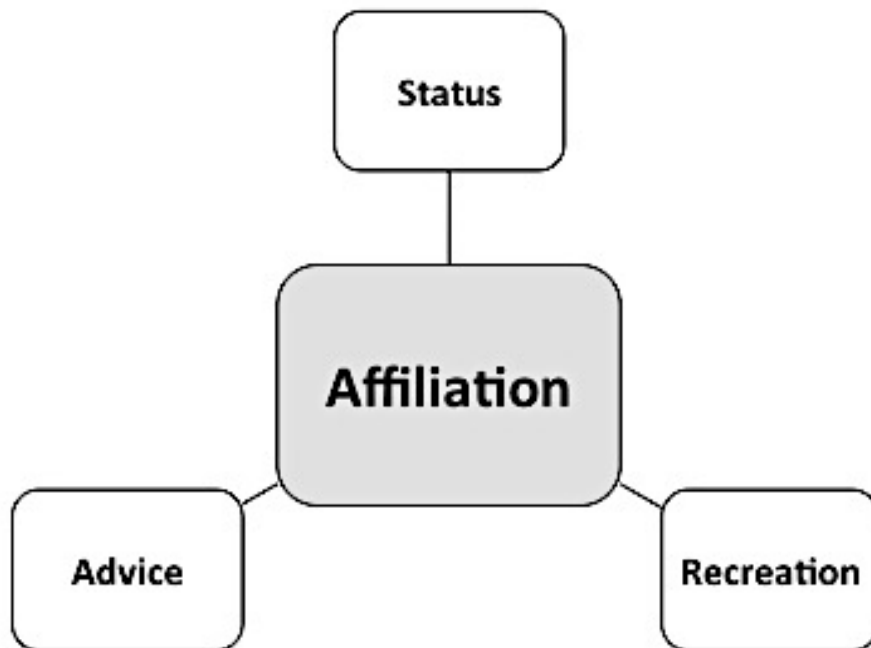
Image 4.2: Patten (2017) AFFILIATION – Thematic network diagram
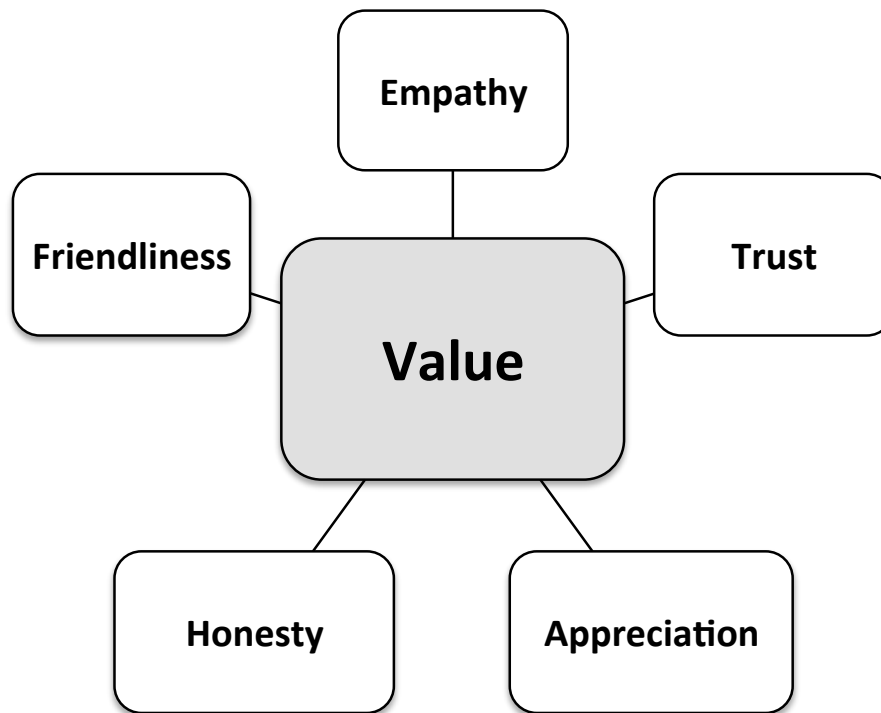
Image 4.3: Patten (2017) VALUE – Thematic network diagram

These 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 emotional involvement service perceptions of physical channels. A 45-year-old brand director for consumer goods noted:

A kind welcoming is important for me. I like it, you know, simply a nice smile will do. I'd much prefer buying from there.

In the same vein, a 35-year-old senior purchaser from Düsseldorf noted:

If I remember now, I was at X yesterday. I have been aged by 20 years... It was a terrible experience. Just awful!

As these statements illustrate, multichannel customers are emotionally involved in purchasing fashion items. They experience positive emotions when the shopping experience is pleasant and negative emotions when it is unpleasant. The importance of emotions in the fashion segment is also supported by the literature (Ha & Stoel, 2012), since fashion products can be considered 'hedonic products' from which customers seek fun and amusement as their major values (Babin et al., 1994). However, in the literature, traditional service quality concepts speak to a mix of emotional and rational dimensions. Existing multichannel service quality concepts have thus far failed to investigate the ingredients of the physical dimension. They mainly argue that their physical service quality dimensions are based on single-channel studies (Banerjee, 2014; Sousa & Voss, 2006).

The interview findings in this study reveal quite the opposite: multichannel customers constantly compare service offers in both channels before, during and after making purchases, and this does not depend on which channel they ultimately select.

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 a pleasant shopping environment. These people can be familiar (for example, friends, family or regular sales people) or unknown (other customers or unknown sales people). Status is related to exclusivity and self-exposing. In terms of advice, multichannel customers seek a quality consultation, individuality, and a sense of style. The findings about affiliation are supported by the literature that speaks to customer typologies in traditional retail settings. 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).

Furthermore, multichannel customers seek physical stimulation from offline-mediated environments and in particular from store design, visual merchandising and haptics. The success of store design depends on the aesthetics and sensuality of a store. Multichannel customers perceive visual merchandising as a tool to support the sensuality of a collection and to tell the collection's story in an effective and stimulating manner. Haptics refers to physically checking of product quality.

The concept of physical stimulation is also supported by Westbrook and Black's (1985) shopper typology, whereby the researchers referred to (1) seeing mall exhibits while shopping and (2) just looking around at interesting store displays (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 an offline-mediated environment. Their 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) request for an individualistic and situation-related approach, (2) enlightenment of customers by already possessing knowledge about a product before entering the retail store, and (3) scepticism regarding advice provided by sales people.

4.6.2 IMPLICATIONS OF ELECTRONIC SERVICE QUALITY

There are certain impacts for multichannel customers when they interact with electronic channels. Thus, the emergent themes regarding electronic service quality for multichannel customers can be considered to be 'electronic stimulation' and 'utility'. These themes and their corresponding sub-themes are presented below.
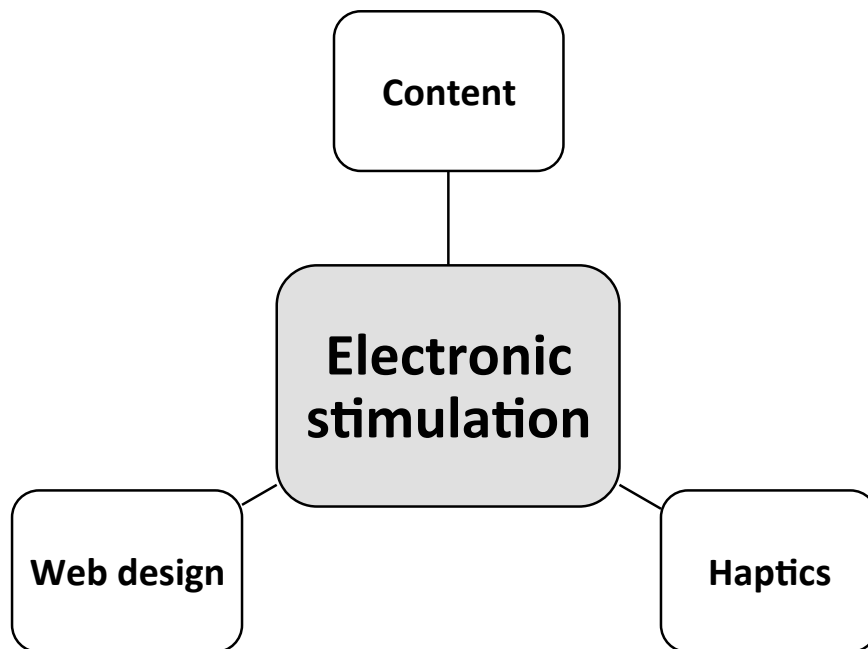

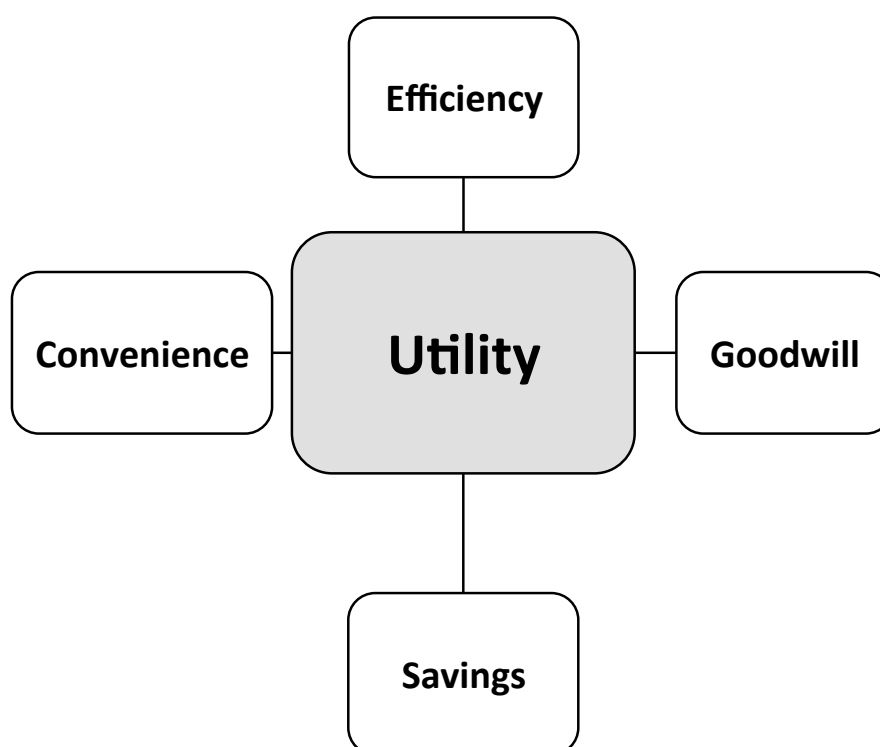*Image 4.4: Patten (2017) ELECTRONIC STIMULATION – Thematic network diagram*

Image 4.5: Patten (2017) UTILITY – Thematic network diagram

Electronic stimulation refers to web design, content, and haptics. In terms of web design, multichannel customers argue for practicability, clear structure, and filter options. These findings resonate with the 'utilitarian value' of shopping (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982), where consumers are primarily concerned with purchasing products in an efficient and timely manner to satisfy their individual needs with a minimum of effort. In the service quality literature, utility is represented by the 'ease of use' dimension that is defined as 'the degree to which the functionality of the user interface facilitates the customer's retrieval of the electronic service' (Zeithaml et al., 2002, p. 363). However, this study goes beyond the literature findings. Multichannel customers also value the emotional aspects of web design. Accordingly, they cite attractive web design and video footage as strong product features. 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 study (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 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.

As the interview findings suggest, multichannel customers show a higher rational involvement in online environments. This is also supported in the literature. The most popular electronic service quality mode, namely 'E-S-Qual', consists of the following four rationality-driven dimensions: (1) efficiency, (2) fulfilment, (3) system availability, and (4) privacy (Parasuraman et al., 2005). In this study, the utility-orientation of multichannel customers becomes apparent with respect to savings, convenience, goodwill, and efficiency. It is worth mentioning that the more the assortment is similar to other online shops (this is particularly true for multi-brand online stores), the more multichannel customers show opportunistic

purchase behaviour. Customers favour online shops that offer them the most benefits. Retailers are aware of this purchasing behaviour, which is apparent from the statement of a 40-year-old brand director of a German multichannel fashion retailer:

As long as Online Store X offers it, we've to offer it to remain relevant to customers.

This respondent referred to free shipping and free return, which could be considered a competitive advantage amongst retailers. One group of customers were even prepared to tolerate other disadvantages when they were able to gain these savings.

4.6.3   IMPLICATIONS OF INTEGRATION QUALITY

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'. As the interviews suggest, multichannel customers exploit integration mechanisms to optimise the search for the right purchase channel that fits their demands in the best manner. Therefore, the emergent theme for integration quality can be considered to be 'choice optimisation' and its corresponding sub-themes, as illustrated below.
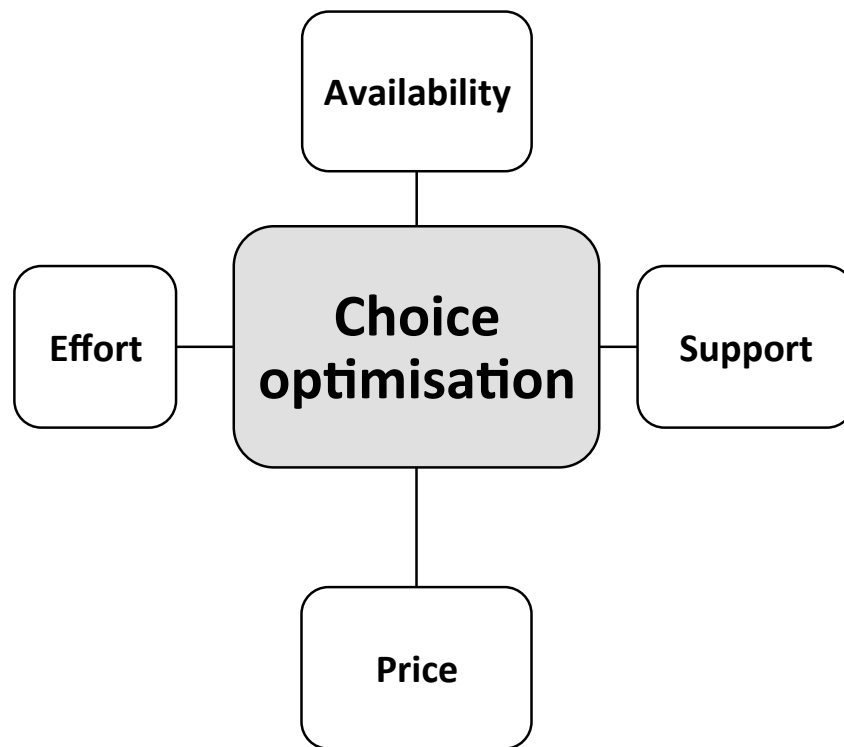
Image 4.6: Patten (2017) CHOICE OPTIMISATION – Thematic network diagram

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 service and select the most suitable channel. Multichannel customers constantly 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.

4.7   MULTICHANNEL CUSTOMER TYPOLOGY

Interview participants were chosen in accordance with the purposive sampling technique (Patton, 1990). Information-rich cases were selected in order to investigate in detail the phenomenon of multichannel fashion retailing in Germany. In line with homogeneous sampling, the current study selected multichannel customers on the basis of four criteria: (1) high involvement in fashion products; (2) full capacity to contract; (3) at least three multichannel purchases (including switching channel at one retailer during one purchase) within the last 12 months; and (4) multichannel purchases from at least two different retailers within the last 12 months.

The interview findings suggest that four different types of German multichannel fashion customers exist within the homogeneous sample. Based on these findings, the current study was able to develop a customer typology. 'The appeal of such typologies is their potential to improve retail strategy decision-making by enabling retailers to differentiate and target their offerings, locations, and promotional efforts according to the varying patronage responses of the basic shopper types. In addition, shopper typologies are of interest for the insights they lend into the determinants of consumer shopping behaviour and the development of theories thereof' (Westbrook & Black, 1985, p. 78).

'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'.

Multichannel customers with a lower available income level pay close attention to savings and costs. Among the respondents, apprentices, students, young professionals and non-academics represent this group. For students and young

professionals, in particular, the income level is likely to increase in future, as a 22-year-old student from Stuttgart noted:

I'm convinced that when I have more money to spend in future, I'll pay attention to other things. For example, I'll pay less attention to the method of payment.

This statement suggests that the customer typology is a dynamic construct. Purchase behaviour changes over time, when certain living conditions such as income levels change.

Other respondents with higher available income are generally not as price-conscious as those with a lower available income. A 40-year-old brand director from Düsseldorf stated:

My awareness of price/performance has been changing during the last few years. I don't care about the price when I like an item. I'd buy it anyway.

This respondent demonstrated a keen awareness of her altering tastes with regard to price/performance ratio. She admitted that she now paid more attention to the hedonic value of an item.

Generally, interview participants were selected based on their high level of involvement in fashion products. Yet, as the interviews suggest, some respondents showed a higher emotional involvement, while others evinced a higher rational involvement. Emotionally concerned customers are highly involved in sensory, emotive, and/or hedonic stimuli. Rationally involved customers, on the contrary, are highly involved in cognitive and/or utilitarian stimuli.
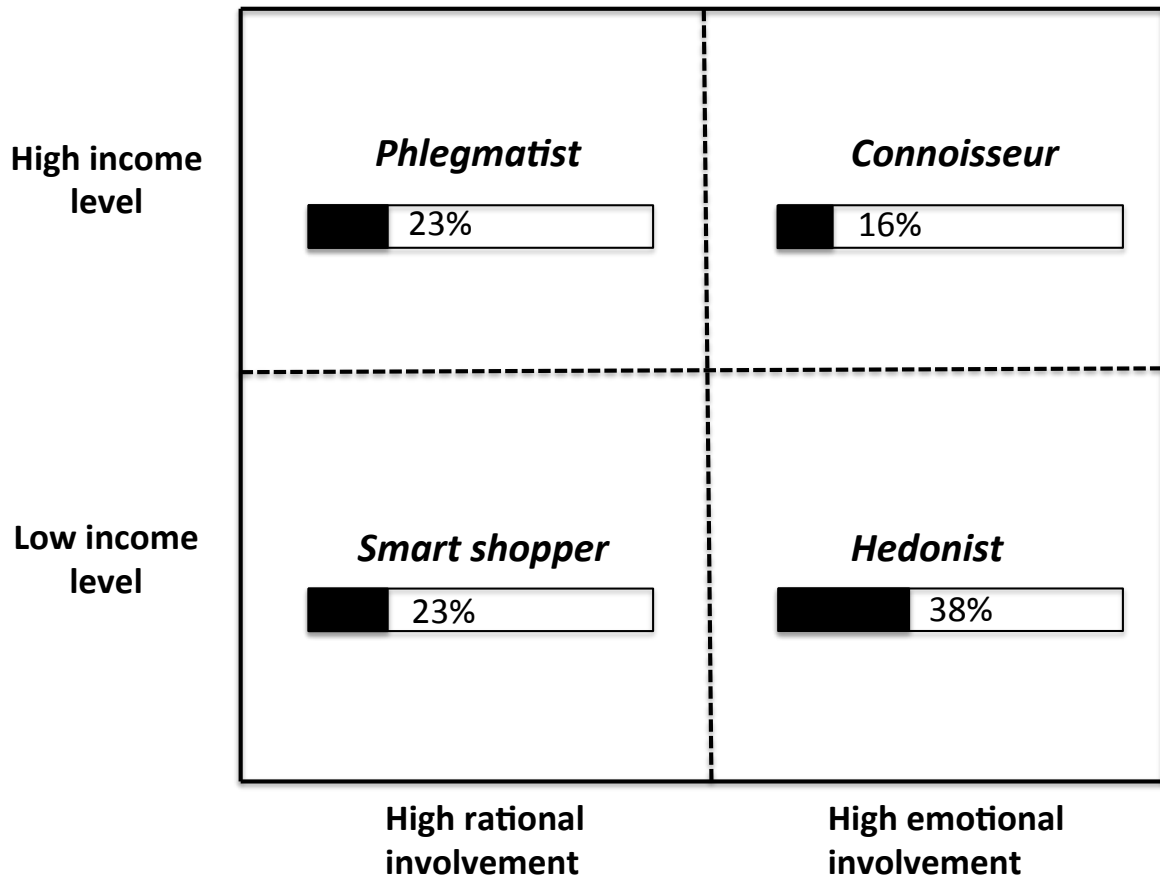
Image 4.7: Patten (2017) Customer typology matrix

Hedonists were the largest customer segment (38 per cent of the respondents). They have a low or medium available income and they show high emotional involvement. Their principal drivers are shopping experience and amusement. The following statement from a 19-year-old apprentice in fashion retail illustrates the typical purchasing pattern of a hedonist:

I'm permanently checking Instagram to be up-to-date with what's new. You can choose the 'like to know' option and then get immediately informed to which brand the item belongs. It's too expensive most of the time. That's why I go to Store X and check if they have something similar. But most of the time, these are just inspirations and I end up buying something else.

As this statement supports, hedonist customers seek inspiration from Instagram and fashion blogs. 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. Strong reference to affiliation and emotive stimulation are 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 the respondents. The connoisseur looks for indulgence when purchasing a fashion product, as the following statement from a 46-year-old purchasing director in fashion illustrates:

I go shopping when I want to reward myself. I always know where to shop. There are certain brands and shops I prefer. It can be online or in-store – always after my fancy. I need an appealing atmosphere. It's the whole sideshow: the colours and the lighting. That's what really matters.

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 (23 per cent of the respondents) have a low or medium available income and show a 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. A 22-year-old student from Stuttgart argued:

I can understand that retailers with online shops and stores sometimes offer a cheaper price online. Normally, the online shops have opened more recently, and they want to push them. For me, it's not a problem, since I always compare prices before buying.

A 23-year-old marketing student stated, with reference to payment:

When I can purchase somewhere and have the option to pay later, I'll always buy from there. I even buy more items by thinking that I might like them!

These two statements illustrate the price-orientation of smart shoppers. In the first statement, the respondent claimed that he did not necessarily need price-consistency among channels, since he compared different channels before purchasing. The second statement referred to the payment-after-receiving option.

Smart shoppers show a preference towards online shopping, since price comparison is easier 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 (23 per cent of the respondents). These shoppers are mainly driven by convenience. They can be considered loyal customers, except when they experience failure of service at a retailer. Once they migrate, recovery is challenging for the retailer. The behavioural characteristics of the phlegmatic customer segment are illustrated in the following statement from a 29-year-old senior project manager of a business development department:

Well… in my case, it depends very much on what I need. For example, if I buy office clothes, I tend to buy online from X. I don't like to drive to the city especially for that purpose, and, you know, I know the sizes I need for shirts and suits. This is what I basically need. Anyway, I find that X has a very large assortment. But nevertheless, the layout of their site is very clear. And what I find also good is that they inform you with a newsletter about novelties and other interesting topics. Recently, they wrote about smart grids. But thankfully they do not send me a standardised newsletter. That would have made me nuts! Their newsletter is customised and considers which brands or products I have bought recently. Sometimes I buy new items from there which I didn't want to buy, just because of their newsletter.

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 hinder phlegmatic shoppers from cross-channel free-riding. This segment has 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	• 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	• Loyal customer segment: 'Creatures of habit'	• 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	• 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

	Smart shopper	**Phlegmatic shopper**	**Hedonist**	**Connoisseur**
	retailer with a high level of goodwill policy			
Perception of physical service quality	• Personal advice is not a decisive factor • Keen on discount clearing points	• 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 in order to find items quickly • Value tidiness of items • Attach importance to competent personal advice in-store	• 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) • 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)	• 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 • 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 for choosing physical channels
Perception of electronic service quality	• 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	• 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	• 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 • Attractiveness of web design • Favour large	• 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
	products	tend to reject purchase	assortments • Value free shipping and free returns • Tendency to order many items and have high return rates	
Perception of integration quality	• Positive impact of channel integration by means of price comparison option between channels	• 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	• 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	• Limited available time, seek the channel with least effort and the ability to check availability across channels • Use the Internet as the research channel, but prefer to shop in-store (preference to click-and-reserve) • When purchasing online, still request personal contact in-store, if needed

Table 4.4: Patten (2017) Customer typology

4.8   SUMMARY

The following image shows the progression of this dissertation after the data analysis:
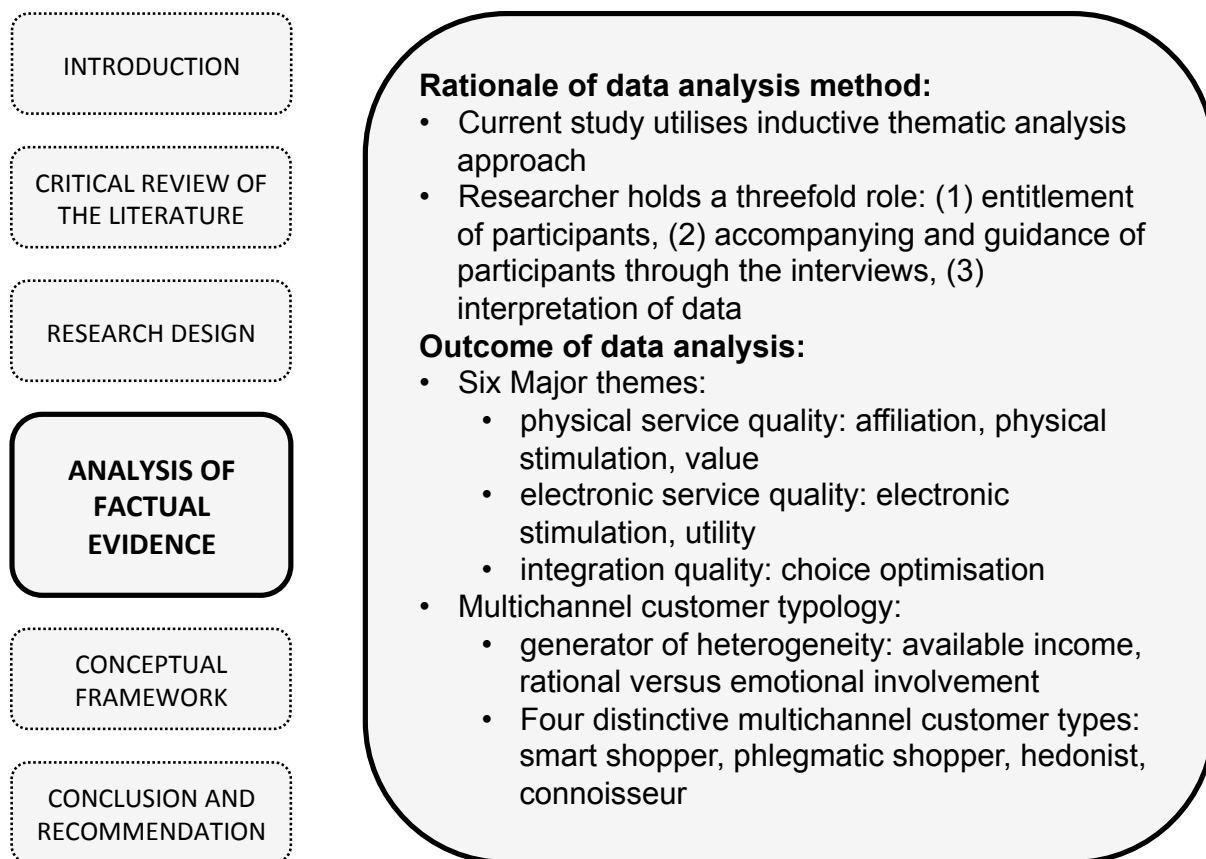
Image 4.8: Patten (2017) Dissertation progression

This chapter has presented an analysis and discussion of research findings. First, it introduced inductive thematic analysis as a suitable data analytical approach. Then, it identified six major themes representing the perception of German multichannel fashion customers. Furthermore, it contained a customer typology considering the two generators of heterogeneity concerning German multichannel fashion customers.

In the next chapter the theoretical concept that has emerged out for this study will be developed.

5 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The critical literature review in Chapter Two set the foundation for this study about German multichannel customer service quality perceptions in fashion retailing. Chapter Three reasoned around how the social constructivist paradigm can provide a holistic understanding of multichannel service quality. The emergent themes presented in Chapter Four explored and defended the epistemic choices for a new conceptualisation of multichannel service quality.

This chapter focuses on answering the third research question, 'How can service quality be conceptualised in a multichannel fashion-retailing context?' It develops a conceptual framework, which is the 'catalyst model of multichannel service quality'. First, the chapter contains a presentation of key findings from the literature about multichannel retailing and service quality. Second, the factual findings from field research are summarised. After that, the conceptual framework is presented.

5.2 EXISTING THEORY AND RESEARCH

As illustrated in the rationale for the study (see Chapter 1.5), multichannel service quality has been widely investigated from a single-channel perspective. However, these conceptualisations do not take account of changing customer behaviours. Multichannel customers use different options such as stores, computers, mobile devices, tablets and social media during their purchase process for their transactions, and furthermore as a source of inspiration and communication (Verhoef et al., 2015).

Often, multichannel customers carry out research online before making purchase decisions. This is defined as 'web-rooming' and occurs when customers compare prices online, obtain information from the producer's webpage or read comments from other users in relation to the same product (Verhoef et al., 2015). Thus, when the customer frequents a retail store, he has already encountered a great deal of information online (Verhoef et al., 2007). Others use retail stores as 'show-rooms', where they can physically touch products, interact with sales people, gather information and enjoy a pleasant shopping experience (Verhoef et al., 2015). Verhoef et al. (2007) explain that there are three reasons for this phenomenon: (1) Multichannel customers prefer the channel that offers them the most advantages in each part of the purchase process, and they switch among channels during the purchase process if another channel offers more advantages. (2) Multichannel customers do not generally purchase via the channel with the most research advantages. (3) Multichannel customers switch channels when it increases their overall shopping experience.

Multichannel customers of hedonic products, such as apparel, tend towards variety-seeking behaviour and switch channels often during the purchase process (Kushwaha & Shankar, 2013).

For this reason, retailers seek to integrate different retail channels. Channel integration means that a retailer should provide a 'seamless' customer experience between stores and online shops and customers should be able to easily switch channels during their interaction with the retailer (Goersch, 2002; Seck, 2013).

The increasing complexity of retail channel systems has led to calls for a coherent conceptualisation of different multichannel strategies. One approach considers the

degree of customer interaction options on the one hand and company integration degree on the other hand (Beck & Rygl, 2015).

For retailers, the level of integration is a difficult managerial decision. Studies have investigated the optimal level of integration in certain areas. Related literature has been devoted to several aspects of the retail mix. In particular, special attention has been given to the integration of assortment, pricing and promotions, fulfilment and web and store design (Agatz et al., 2008; Emrich et al., 2015; Lang & Bressolles, 2013; Mantrala et al., 2009; Vogel & Paul, 2015; Wolk & Ebling, 2010; Xing et al., 2010).

In the context of multichannel retailing, the customer´s perception of service quality has an important impact on the success of retailers. As the literature suggests, the distinctiveness of services is their intangible, heterogeneous and inseparable nature (Martinez & Martinez, 2010). Service quality implies a customer focus, since it determines the inferiority or superiority of the company´s service (Bitner & Hubbert, 1994). The majority of researchers evaluate service quality based on the disconfirmation paradigm as a gap between expected service and perceived service (Carr, 2007; Dabholkar et al., 1996; Grönroos, 1984; Parasuraman et al., 1988). The key benefit of gap analytical approaches are their more pragmatic and operational approach, since customer service perceptions can be considered negative as soon as their expectations are assumed to be higher than their perceptions (Parasuraman et al., 1994).

Multichannel service quality is a multidimensional construct, which consists of primary dimensions (physical, electronic and integration quality) and corresponding sub-dimensions (Sousa & Voss, 2006). The key distinction between multichannel and single-channel service systems is the integration

quality dimension. Integration quality has the purpose of providing a seamless service experience across channels (Sousa & Voss, 2006). There is evidence in the reviewed literature that the existing dimensions have not yet fully grasped the customer´s perception of multichannel service quality, since these studies consistently investigate new dimensions. However, in generic terms, multichannel service quality consists of the level of quality that each channel can provide for the customer. However, it is not a summation between service quality perceptions in each channel. Researchers argue that even when physical and electronic qualities are very high, the overall service quality perception from the customer can be very low when the integration of each service channel is missing (Sousa & Voss, 2006). Thus, the service quality dimensions that are experienced in any channel during the purchase process should be congruent online and offline, and should provide a seamless shopping experience for the customer.

As the literature suggests, most of the existing service quality models have adopted a positivist epistemology, conceptualising service quality as objectively measurable and generalisable across service settings, and a universal phenomenon. Schembri and Sandberg (2003), however, have set the foundations for a new understanding of customer service experiences. They provided a conceptual framework that acknowledges the pluralistic nature of service quality. They claimed that 'different people in different contexts may hold different meanings for similar service experiences' (Schembri & Sandberg, 2003, p. 5). Overcoming the dominance of positivism in service quality research, Schembri and Sandberg (2003) selected interpretivism as a pertinent philosophical stance to acknowledge the world as a socially constructed entity. Their investigation of Australian general practice patients provided insights into the heterogeneous

customer's service quality perception of medical services. Based on their findings, Schembri and Sandberg (2003) generated a patient typology, conceptualising service quality as a dynamic phenomenon.

Based 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:
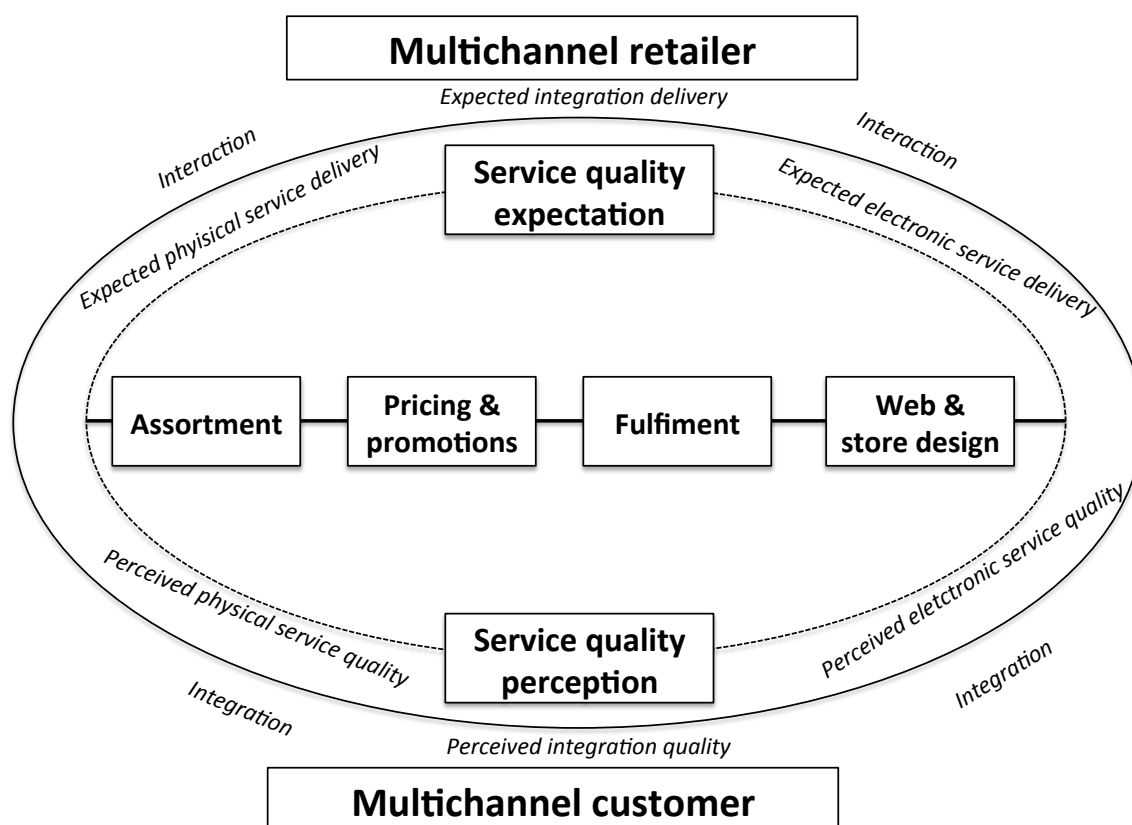

Image 5.1: Patten (2017) Integrated service quality system

As the image illustrates, multichannel service quality consists of several distinctive elements. Multichannel customers have several expectations of multichannel retailers regarding 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 experiences service quality as part of his customer journey. This experience concerns 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 service quality from that particular channel. However, customers often switch channels during the purchase process and consider service quality across all of the different channels they have experienced during the purchase process. Moreover, multichannel customers experience the integration of all utilised channels as part of their perception of service. This means that a lack of integration of the service quality system can lead to a negative overall service perception, even when the service quality of each individual channel has been considered positive.

Thus, multichannel service quality can be considered as the interplay between the customer´s interaction with the retailer and the multichannel retailer`s integration of the different channels regarding the different elements of the retail mix.

5.3 EXPERIENTIAL KNOWLEDGE AND EXPLORATORY RESEARCH

As the empirical findings indicate, the purchase behaviour of German multichannel customers involves a high degree of complexity as their purchasing pattern involves decisions about retailer, retail channel, and a constant justification of the former two during the purchase process.

The current study acknowledges Schembri and Sandberg's (2003) framework, wherein customer behaviour is highly dynamic and differs from purchase to purchase. For some purchases, multichannel customers do not change retail channel or retailer during the purchase process. For other purchases, they change channel and/or retailer either once or several times.

In any case, service quality perceptions of one channel are influenced by experiences of another. The empirical findings support the findings from the literature, which state that customers perceive multichannel service quality by considering physical, electronic, and integration quality.

However, the findings of this study also add to this knowledge. The current study identifies six major themes that describe multichannel customer service quality perceptions in a German fashion-retailing context as the following image illustrates:
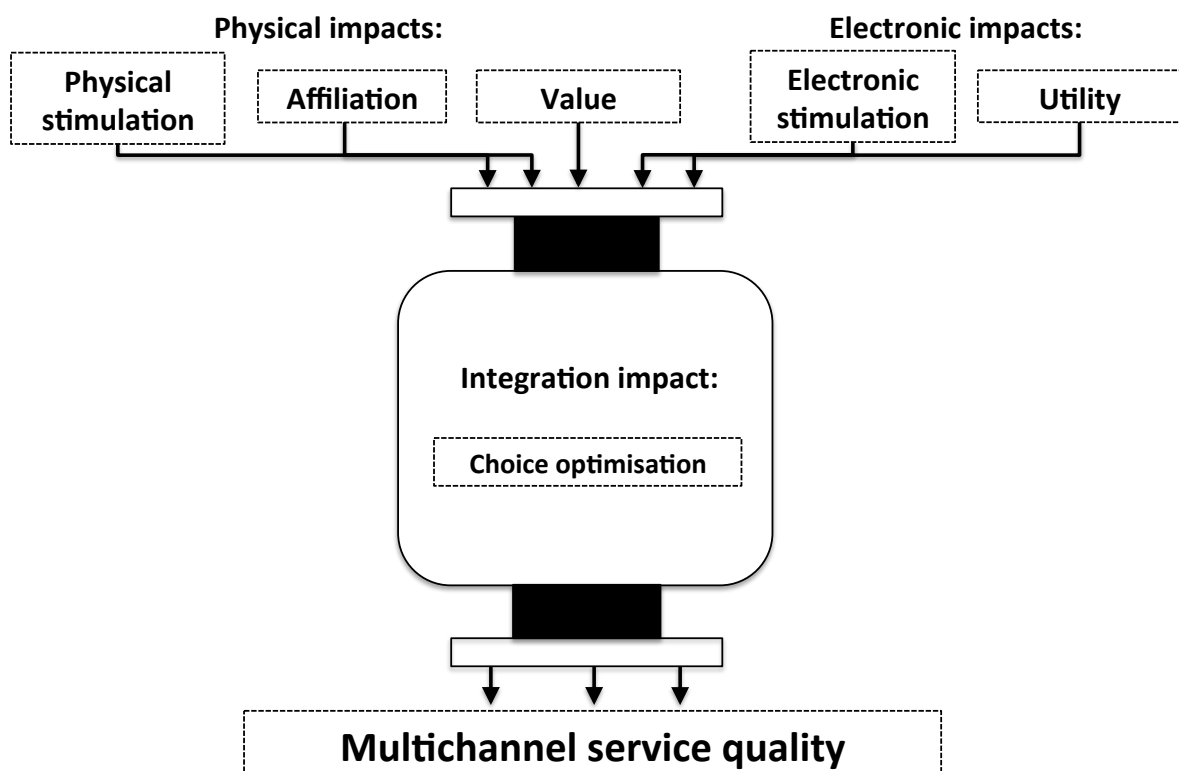

Image 5.2: Patten (2017) Integration quality as catalyst of multichannel service quality

Regarding physical service quality, multichannel customers look for affiliation with other individuals; principally other shoppers and sales people. Furthermore, they wish to receive novel and interesting stimuli from the offline environment encountered during shopping. This is particularly true of store design, visual merchandising and haptics which are all important means of physical stimulation. When purchasing offline, multichannel customers tend to be value-oriented. They search for appreciation, friendliness, honesty, trust, and empathy.

For electronic service quality, multichannel customers also value stimulation. In an online environment, multichannel customers consider web design, webpage content and the haptics of items as a means of stimulation. In online environments, multichannel customers tend to be more utility-oriented than when purchasing in offline environments, which means that they seek out savings, an efficient and convenient purchase process, and a high level of goodwill.

The terms through which the interview respondents expressed 'integration quality' were 'connection' and 'linkage'. As the interviews suggest, integration quality is the key driver of multichannel service quality. For multichannel customers, integration quality refers to channel mix optimisation. Integration quality is the essence of multichannel retailers' competitive advantage over single-channel retailers. At multichannel retailers, customers are able to switch channels without switching retailer. As the interviews suggest, they exploit this opportunity when aiming to optimise effort, availability of items, prices, and support.

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.

As the image below further illustrates, each channel provides different ingredients. In a well-integrated multichannel system, a customer is able to optimise his choice options. Thus, he is able to exploit the full advantages of each channel, which has a positive impact on his overall service quality perception.

5.4   CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: THE CATALYST MODEL

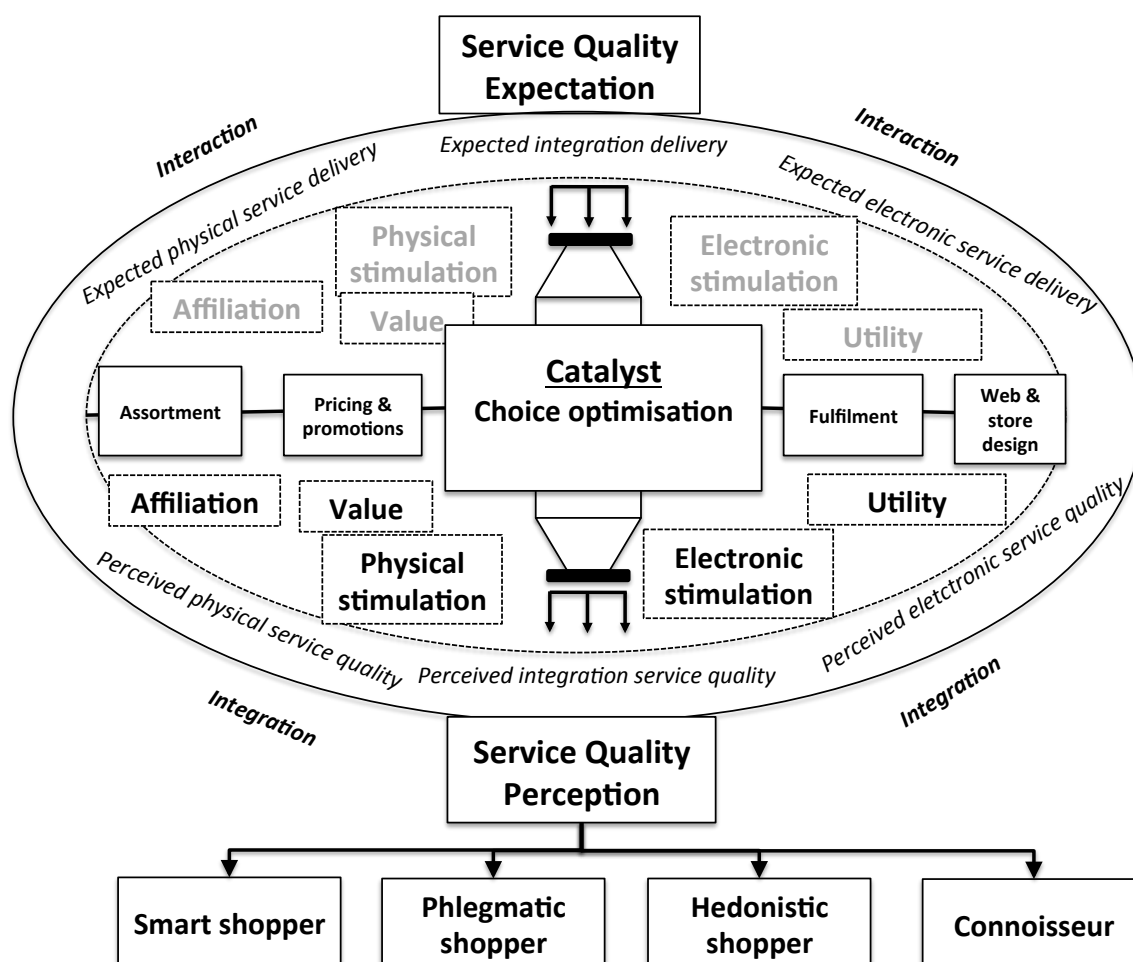This study conceptualises multichannel service quality as follows:

Image 5.3: Patten (2017) Catalyst model of multichannel service quality

The catalyst model of multichannel service quality provides an answer to the third research question: 'How can service quality be conceptualised in a German

multichannel fashion-retailing context?' It considers the literature findings as well as the outcomes of the empirical research.

As the illustration indicates, 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; and 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. They perceive physical stimulation, affiliation and value for the physical channel and electronic stimulation and utility for the electronic channel. These perceptions can be directly experienced with each of the different elements of the retail mix. For instance, customers can be highly stimulated by the assortment in-store. They can also gain

benefits from online promotions. However, customers can also perceive value in-store negatively, for example due to poor personal advice.

In comparison, customers perceive choice optimisation more unconsciously. It is in the nature of a catalyst that it provides a supportive function which has the task of enhancing the performance of the main functions. Therefore, 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 the catalyst during every purchase, as they do not always switch channels. Thus, the two channels function without the catalyst as single channels, where customer service quality perception uniquely and exclusively consists of the service quality provided through the channel they select. However, the catalyst can be considered the essence of competitive advantage for multichannel retailers.

The framework presented in the current study suggests a high degree of heterogeneity amongst German multichannel fashion customers. Consequently, four types of multichannel customers exist: (1) Smart shoppers – customers with a lower income and a more rational involvement – seek for savings. They tend to purchase online because of perceived lower prices. (2) Phlegmatic shoppers – customers with a higher income and a more rational involvement who value convenience – value the idea of buying from multichannel retailers because they aim to optimise effort. (3) Hedonistic shoppers – customers with lower incomes and a high emotional involvement – seek experiences and amusement. They value stimulation and affiliation with like-minded people. Hedonistic shoppers have a tendency to switch channels because they spend much time shopping and

want to be well informed about new trends. Hedonistic shoppers value multichannel shopping because they seek to optimise effort and wish to receive fashion items as fast as possible. (4) Connoisseur shoppers – customers with a high income and high emotional involvement – seek indulgence, stimulation, affiliation and value.

The 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 four 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 the catalyst function of integration quality. Across the different customer types and purchase situations, multichannel customers seek choice optimisation when performing multichannel purchases.

5.5 SUMMARY

The following image shows the progression of this dissertation up to this point and following the development of the above conceptual framework:
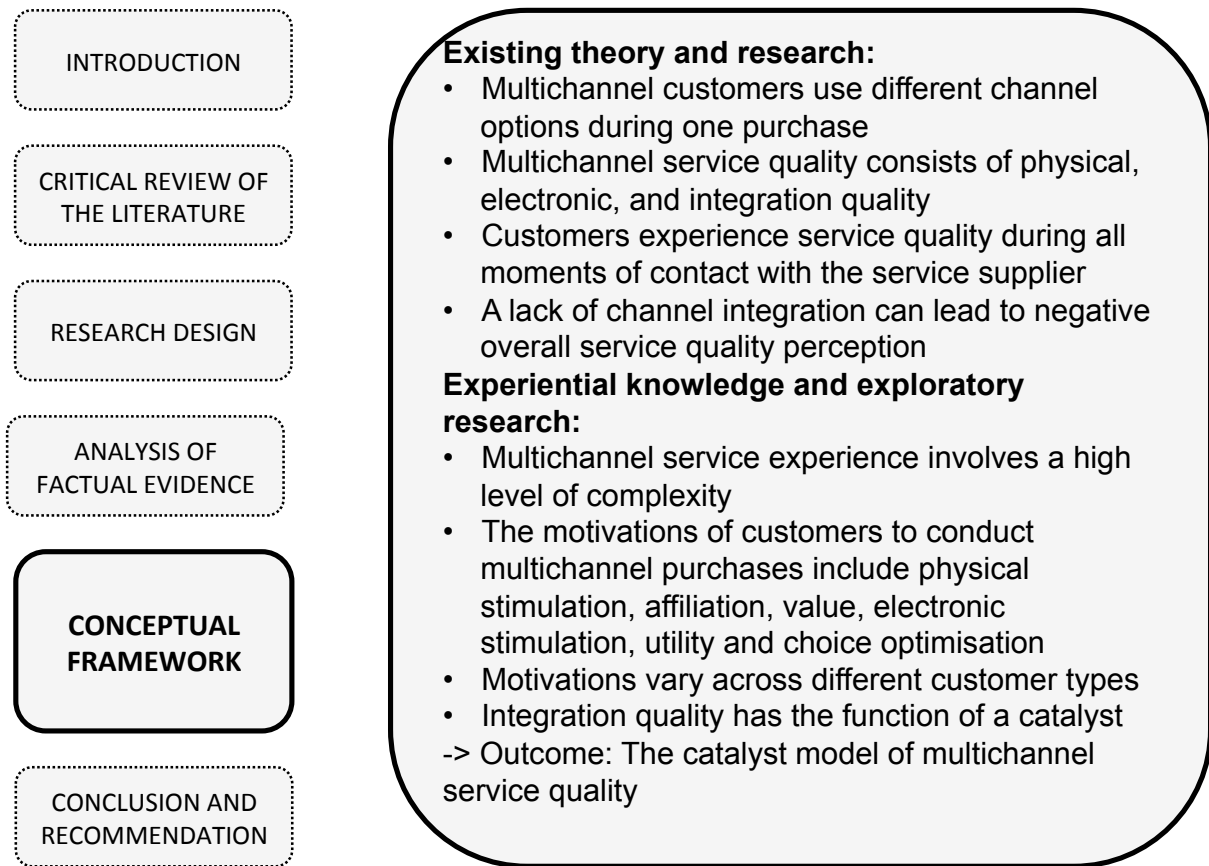
Image 5.4: Patten (2017) Dissertation progression

The chapter has presented a conceptual framework and an insight into existing theory about multichannel service quality. It has synthesised the findings and has produced an original conceptual framework. Furthermore, it presents the exploratory research outcomes from empirical research.

Finally, it presents the conceptual framework of the current study: the catalyst model of multichannel service quality.

6   CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

6.1   INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter presented the contribution of this study to extant knowledge about multichannel service quality. This contribution was based on existing conceptual theories and new empirical findings. Thus, this study conceptualised multichannel service quality as a catalyst model (Image 5.3).

This chapter presents the conclusion to the current study. It discusses the contribution of this work to theory and to practice and it contains some managerial implications. This chapter addresses the limitations of the study and how researchers can expand the scope of multichannel service quality concepts in future research projects.

6.2   CONCLUSION

The 'catalyst model' contributes to the research area of service quality with a theoretical generalisation in the field of German multichannel fashion retailing.

In the context of multichannel retailing, customer behaviour has developed into a complex construct. Customers constantly adjust their decisions about vendor and retail channels during the purchase process. As this study suggests, expectations about service quality, which originally contained the past experiences of retailers (Parasuraman et al., 1988), nowadays also contain past experiences of retail channels.

Furthermore, extant literature has conceptualised multichannel service quality as consisting of physical and electronic quality and integration quality (Sousa & Voss, 2006). The findings of this study present evidence to support this approach. This study further suggests that multichannel customers constantly compare service

delivery among different channels and the perception of service through each channel has an impact on the perception of the others.

Moreover, each channel has distinctive attributes. In terms of the physical channel, customers seek emotional connections, whilst in terms of electronic channels customers tend to be more rationally involved.

The findings of this study coincide with extant literature and view integration quality as the essence of competitive advantage for multichannel retailers to a greater degree than for single-channel retailers. Sousa and Voss (2006) argue that all physical and electronic elements enriched with integration mechanisms influence perceptions of multichannel service quality. Sousa and Voss defined integration quality as 'the ability to provide customers with a seamless service experience across multiple channels' (Sousa & Voss, 2006, p. 365). This study goes beyond Sousa and Voss' definition and conceptualises integration quality as a catalyst. The catalyst has the supportive function of reinforcing the reactions of the two ingredients, physical and electronic service quality, in order to provide an optimised service quality perception. This study conceptualises multichannel service quality as a twofold concept. It consists of (1) the ingredients that the multichannel retailer delivers to its customers and (2) the outcome the customer perceives as the level of service quality.

As a final, yet important, outcome of this study, extant research about multichannel retailing and service quality considers the customer as a homogeneous 'multichannel customer'. The interview findings of this study, however, reveal that multichannel customers are heterogeneous to a certain extent. This study henceforth identifies four different customer types, based on two generators of heterogeneity: 'available income level' and 'involvement'. Each

customer type has a different principal driver and distinctive behavioural characteristics. Furthermore, each customer type has a different perception of the three service quality elements, specifically physical, electronic and integration quality.

6.3   CONTRIBUTION TO THEORY

Service quality in traditional service settings (for instance banks and bricks-and-mortar retail) has been extensively researched since the 1980s (Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Grönroos, 1984; Parasuraman et al., 1988).

The main focus of these studies is customer-centred and concerned with investigating the perceived quality of various services amongst customers. The extant literature widely defines the concept of perceived service quality as 'a global judgement, or attitude, relating to the superiority of the service' (Zeithaml, 1988, p. 16). To date, there are two predominant approaches towards a service quality framework. Some researchers evaluate service quality based on the disconfirmation paradigm, that is, as a gap between the expected (desired) service and perceived service (Carr, 2007; Dabholkar et al., 1996; Grönroos, 1984; Parasuraman et al., 1988). Other researchers use a performance-only approach to evaluate service quality based on an ideal standard (Boulding et al., 1993; Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Teas, 1993). The current study argues about the clarity of the latter framework, since the point from which the customers' service quality perception is negative is not defined. Gap-analysis however provides a more pragmatic and operational approach, since the customers' service perceptions can be considered to be negative as soon as their expectations are assumed to be higher than their perceptions.

In terms of service settings, the literature agrees that service quality perceptions, which take place in different service settings, need be considered separately. This means that conceptualisations of service quality in an online environment need to be studied in isolation from traditional service quality (Parasuraman et al., 2005). Therefore, 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 et al., 2014).

However, service quality research that overcomes single-channel approaches and considers companies that operate multiple channels is relatively new (Seck, 2013; Sousa & Voss, 2006; Verhoef et al., 2015).

Sousa and Voss (2006) were the first researchers to conceptualise multichannel service quality by means of its three distinctive elements: physical, virtual and integration quality. However, their study was methodologically limited. Sousa and Voss (2006) conducted a literature review and did not empirically test their framework.

Swaid and Wigand (2012) and Banerjee (2014) have empirically tested Sousa and Voss' (2006) findings and have developed new sub-dimensions of integration quality. However, both studies failed to conceptualise the complex behaviour of multichannel customers, whereby multichannel customers often switch channels several times during one service encounter. Swaid and Wigand (2012) merely investigated the uni-dimensional case when customers research in an online environment and later purchase offline. Moreover, their study lacked methodological rigour (Eisenhardt, 1991; Tranfield, 2003), since the researchers failed to situate the study in a bounded setting of an industrial context. They

generically surveyed online-focused students with general experiences of 'site-to-store' purchases.

Banerjee (2014) investigated cases in which customers used both channels during one service encounter, since her study aimed to understand the integration quality dimension of multichannel service settings. Thus, Banerjee (2014) failed to conceptualise service encounters where customers just utilise one service channel. Moreover, Banerjee's (2014) study was situated in the banking sector and did not consider other industries. Thus, the current study contributes to multichannel service quality research by acknowledging the complex purchasing pattern of multichannel customers and by investigating the phenomenon in a fashion retail environment.

Another major shortcoming of the majority of extant studies about service quality is their adoption of a positivist epistemological paradigm. Therefore, extant literature has focused on measuring service quality dimensions in an objective manner. The outcomes were a number of generic service quality models that are generalisable to several service settings (Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Parasuraman et al., 1988; Wolfinbarger & Gilly, 2003). In particular, research conducted in traditional service quality settings has been based mainly on quantitative methods. Such limited paradigmatic variety initially directed the current study in similar surroundings. However, Schembri and Sandberg (2003) have questioned this limitation. They claimed to re-evaluate traditional research methods for service quality concepts. The current study considers Schembri and Sandberg's (2003) study as a point of departure to overcome the prevailing positivistic epistemology. For this study, Schembri and Sandberg's (2003) paradigmatic stance provides a more comprehensive approach to conceptualising multichannel

service quality as a dynamic and interpretative phenomenon. Schembri and Sandberg (2003) contemplated social actors' heterogeneity (passive, monitoring, and partnering types) and their different behavioural characteristics and service perceptions.

The acknowledgment of Schembri and Sandberg's (2003) approach directed the current study towards an interpretivist ontological worldview, as it postulates the existence of multiple realities (Golafshani, 2003). The current study investigates the lived experiences and perspectives of individuals in the context of evolving complex and multidimensional phenomena. Therefore it applies social constructivism as epistemology (Holstein & Gubrium, 2007). As social constructivism encourages researchers to involve their experiential knowledge (Maxwell, 2013), the present study was situated in Germany. This is the first study to provide empirical knowledge about multichannel service quality from a social constructivist stance considering the local context of Germany.

While the focus of extant studies mostly lies in investigating service quality dimensions as antecedents of customer's service quality perception (Grönroos, 1984; Loiacono et al., 2002; Parasuraman et al., 1985), the current study has generated a more dynamic multichannel service quality conceptualisation. The outcome of this study, 'the catalyst model of multichannel service quality', can be considered a holistic conceptualisation, since it examines the overall multichannel customer journey. It comprises the different elements of the retail mix, namely assortment, pricing and promotions, fulfilment, and web and store design. Besides that, the adoption of the gap approach (Parasuraman et al., 1988) for the current study acknowledges consideration of both the customer's expectation regarding the retailer's service delivery and the customer's service perception.

With the sole exception of one study (Schembri & Sandberg, 2003), which was situated in the health sector, previous literature has studied multichannel customers as a relatively homogeneous group (Verhoef et al., 2007). The proposed model considers multichannel customers as a heterogeneous group of customers, consisting of four distinctive customer types. The drivers of heterogeneity can be considered to be rational/emotional involvement and income level. The investigated customer groups of the current study are (1) hedonistic shoppers and (2) connoisseurs for emotionally involved customers and (3) smart shoppers and (4) phlegmatic shoppers for rationally involved customers. These customer types have not been discovered in previous studies.

The proposed conceptualisation further expands extant multichannel service quality dimensions and contributes six dimensions, which represent the mind-set of multichannel customers. As the literature suggests (Sousa & Voss, 2006), these six dimensions are divided into physical, electronic, and integration quality. Yet, other than in existing multichannel studies, which tend to separate multichannel purchases from others (Banerjee, 2014; Sousa & Voss, 2006; Swaid & Wigand, 2012), the investigated dimensions of the current study are not limited to multichannel purchases; the conceptualisation contributed by the current study considers any service experience of customers who show a general tendency towards multichannel purchasing behaviour. Thus, the conceptualisation of the current study concerns single-channel purchases of the increasingly important multichannel customer group as well as multichannel purchases. For purchases where the multichannel customer uses different channels of one retailer, the current study has identified 'integration quality' as the 'catalyst function' of the

retailer's service quality system. This catalyst has the task of optimising the customer's overall multichannel service experience with the retailer.

Consequently, the current study offers an additional explanation of multichannel service quality as a contribution to the extant literature in this field.

6.4   MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

This study 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.

Second, 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. Regarding assortment, the product range structure relation affects the impact of assortment integration (Emrich & Verhoef, 2015). For substitutive assortments – applicable to most fashion retailers – the current paper suggests that managers should set up a symmetrical assortment strategy, since the variety perception is higher when assortments are symmetrical.

In terms of prices and promotions, customers expect online products to be equally or even less expensive than their in-store equivalents (Zhang et al., 2010), but at the same time, customers expect integrated channels to have a consistent pricing strategy among channels (Seck, 2013). Therefore, this study suggests three different pricing strategies: (1) retailers can charge the same posted prices online and offline, but additionally charge handling and shipping costs; (2) retailers can apply 'self-matching pricing', which offers retailers the flexibility of setting different prices across channels, while affording customers the possibility of a consistent experience; (3) retailers can perform single-channel promotions to temporarily support one channel. This leads to a short-term increase of sales in the channel that is promoted, but does not carry any negative long-term effects. However, managers of multichannel retailers need to consider effects within and across channels when devising a promotion strategy (Patten & Ozuem, 2017).

Furthermore, multichannel retailers need to adapt their supply chain management processes to the specific needs of multichannel customers (Agatz et al., 2008). In this context, the current study suggests four dimensions of fulfilment as predominantly important: timeliness, availability, condition and return of items.

Regarding web and store design, retail managers who aim to increase their channel synergies should adopt a homogeneous design in order to specifically leverage the store-oriented customer segment (Emrich & Verhoef, 2015).

Third, as this study suggests, sales people still play a predominant role in the offline channel as source of affiliation and furthermore to provide value. In this context (1) competence, (2) friendliness, (3) appreciation, (4) honesty, (5) trust, and (6) empathy are important attributes for multichannel customer service quality perceptions. 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, multichannel retailers need to train their sales team to have empathy. It is crucial that sales people have a feeling for what each individual customer actually expects, since their expectations are manifold. Does this customer need help? Does this customer already have some knowledge about the product he requires? How can the sales person support customer loyalty for this client? Sales staff are supposed to address the various requests of individualistic buying habits.

Fourth, 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. Here, it is important to bear in mind that even when the service quality of each channel is strong, the overall perception of service could be very poor when integration quality is perceived as low. 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. Then, multichannel customers can take advantage of

both online and offline channels and experience a congruent shopping experience across channels.

Whichever journey customers choose, managers of multichannel retailers should find ways to avoid 'cross-channel free-riding' behaviour, which means that customers do not just switch channel, but also retailer. It might be necessary to install switching barriers. For instance, customers might find it costly when they need to provide their information again or when it is laborious to express their concerns every time they switch between retailers.

Fifth, this study suggests that multichannel fashion retailers should analyse their customer base by means of the four multichannel customer types proposed by this study, 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.

6.5   LIMITATIONS AND AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The study 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. Further, the careful selection of information-rich interview participants and the application of triangulation ensured the rigour of this study. Therefore, the study is able to theoretically generalise multichannel service quality in fashion retailing.

However, for future research it could be of value to study this topic over a longer period of time based on an ethnographic study. Further, the research scope was isolated to an investigation of German customers. It would be interesting to investigate multichannel service quality across cultures. In addition, research could be extended towards other industry settings, such as pure service settings or retailers that offer other products away from fashion.

This study has contributed to research about multichannel service quality with the 'catalyst model of multichannel service quality'. The model provides six major themes representing multichannel service quality. Furthermore, it considers multichannel customers as heterogeneous, but consisting of four types. Future studies might identify other determinants important to customer perceptions to enrich the proposed model.

The qualitative research approach of this study 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 study's findings on a larger scale.

Moreover, the study 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 study multichannel service quality based on organisational viewpoints.

6.6 SUMMARY

The following image shows the final progression of this PhD thesis following the development of the conclusion and recommendation chapter:
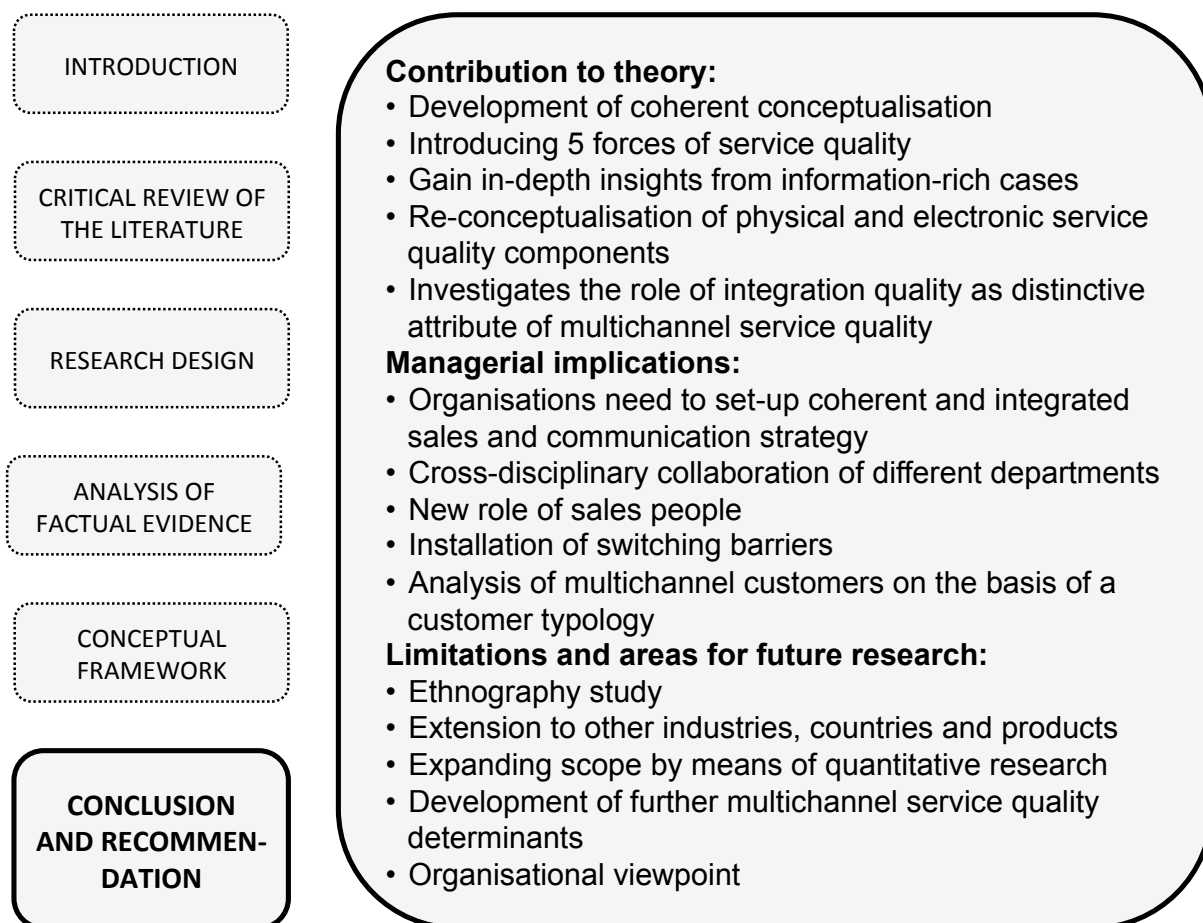
Image 6.1: Patten (2017) Dissertation progression

This chapter presents the conclusion and recommendations for this study. It identifies the theoretical contribution to the research area of multichannel service quality. It also contains managerial implications and illustrates the limitations of the study whilst recommending areas for future research.

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APPENDICES
Appendix 1:
Invitation letter (English translation)

Elena Patten   Location, **\<date\>**

Dear X,

I am pleased that you are willing to participate in my doctoral thesis as an interviewee. The aim of my thesis is to investigate the concept of customers' service quality perception in the so-called ‚multichannel retailing'.

Your opinion is very valuable for my study because you have already gained experience in purchasing at a retailer that operates an online shop and stores. Furthermore you often switch across online shop and store during one purchase. You can share your experience and this is what my thesis is about.

It is important for me to stress, that your participation is voluntary. The information you share are entirely confidential and anonymous. With your permission I will use them for my study. I will record the interview on a voice recording. Afterwards, I will transcribe the interview and then delete the voice recording.
I would like to provide you with a copy of my doctoral thesis, if you wish.

I would like to ask you to come to \<location\> \<date\>. I will wait for you there.
Please allow the interview to take 45 minutes.

I look forward to meeting you at our interview and I already want to thank you for your participation. I really appreciate that a lot!

Kind regards
Elena Patten

Appendix 2: Participants' informed consent form (English translation)

	Yes	No
I understand that Elena Patten asked me to participate in her study		
I have received and read the attached invitation letter		
I understand that my data will be kept confidential and who will have access		
I understand that my participation is voluntary; I am free to withdraw at any time		
I agree to take part in the study		
I give permission to be voice recorded during the interview		

Date/ Name of participant: Signature:

Appendix 3:
Predetermined in-depth interview questions

Pre-phase: Background/ demography

Questions:

1) I would like to understand more about you as a customer. If I followed you through a typical shopping process of a fashion product, what would I see you doing? Let´s start from the very beginning: When does it normally come to your mind to buy a new fashion product? What are you doing then…..? And then? (Tell me an example…)

2) Tell me about an experience you had with a purchase, when you used different channels of one retailer (Explain, that this is called multichannel shopping in the following)! How was it? How were your feelings?

3) Do you remember an extremely nice experience when you did multichannel shopping? Why was it so nice? What happened? What were your thoughts/ feelings?

4) Do you remember an extremely bad experience when you did multichannel shopping? Why was it so bad? What happened? What were your thoughts/ feelings?

5) What is your general understanding of service provision?

   1a) What is your understanding of service provision in a retail store?

   1b) What is your understanding of service provision in an online shop?

   1c) What is your understanding of service provision in a multichannel retailing context?

   1d) What do you understand from multichannel customers? Why actually do customers do multichannel shopping? Why do YOU do multichannel shopping?

6) Which multichannel retail company (internationally) can be seen as benchmark for you in terms of level of service provision? Why?

7) You have mentioned different attributes considering service quality in the course of our conversation, namely (…). Do you find each of these attributes equally important? And why? Is it differing? Whereof is it dependent?

8) How important is it for you that you experience the same level of service, the same assortment, and the same prices online and in-store at one retailer? Have you got an experience with that you want to share? What were your feelings?

Appendix 4:
Predetermined focus group questions

Introduction (Welcoming the participants; brief introduction to my dissertation topic and why I have invited these participants)

Questions:

1) First of all, I want you to take some pieces of paper and write down what you consider to be the important ingredients of a service when purchasing a fashion product.

2) Assuming that you buy a fashion product online, which are the factors that are important for your personal service experience?

3) If you buy a fashion product using the retailer`s online shop and store during the different phases of your purchase process, which are the factors that are important for you in terms of service experience?

4) Generally, which are the criteria that determine if you search online or in the store for a fashion product? And then, which are the criteria that determine where you buy this product later? And if you return it, how do you select if you return it online or in store?

5) Please tell me now about a personal experience that occurred when you purchased a fashion product using the online shop and the store of one retailer (why have you chosen them for this purchase?).

6) Which is your favourite fashion retailer that operates an online shop and stores? Why?

7) According to you, which is the worst retailer that operates an online shop and stores? Why?

8) It is common for fashion retailers to operate an online shop and stores to offer a different assortment online and another one in-store. What is your opinion about that?

9) Furthermore, it so happens that fashion retailers, which operate an online shop and stores, have different prices online and in-store. How do you behave when you discover that your selected item is cheaper f.e. online, but you intended to make your purchase in-store? How does this impact your shopping experience?

10) Sometimes, promotions are held just online or in-store. For example, you get an offer from a retailer that you'll get 10% off when you purchase online within the next two weeks- but if you buy in-store you'll get nothing. What is your opinion about such

promotions? Would it affect your shopping experience? Or your opinion about the retailer in any way? Would it have any impact on future purchases at this retailer?

11) We have now talked quite a bit about shopping fashion products at retailers that operate an online shop and stores. Generally, what is your opinion to buy at these retailers?' Do you think this entails any advantages or disadvantages for the customer?

12) What do you personally think: What kind of customers would benefit most from this opportunity?