



## **SERVICE QUALITY IN MULTICHANNEL FASHION RETAILING: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY**

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# SERVICE QUALITY IN MULTICHANNEL FASHION RETAILING: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

## Abstract

### Purpose

Consumer purchasing behaviour has changed substantially in the light of recent developments in E-commerce. So-called ‘multichannel customers’ tend to switch retail channels during the purchasing process. In order to address changing consumer behaviour, multichannel fashion retailing companies must continue to learn how to provide excellent service to such customers. The overall aim of this paper, therefore, is to contribute to the interpretation of multichannel service quality by explaining it from the perspective of the so-called ‘multichannel customers’.

### Design/Methodology/Approach

Drawing on social influence theory, this paper aims to investigate these issues from the perspective of multichannel customers. In contrast with dualist and objectivist studies this paper uses a constructivist epistemology and ethnographic methodology. Such an approach is associated with an interpretivist ontological worldview, which postulates the existence of ‘multiple realities’. The sample size for this research consisted of 34 in-depth interviews and two focus groups comprising ten focus group participants.

### Findings

The data analysis fundamentally found that multichannel customers tended to continually adjust choices regarding retailer and retail channel when making purchases. The perspective of this paper is different from mainstream positivist service quality research which sees service quality as static, objectively measurable and dualistic. As an alternative, this paper acknowledges service quality as a dynamic, subjective and pluralistic phenomenon.

### Originality/Value

This paper contributes to the interpretation of multichannel service quality with a new concept that explains the phenomenon from the perspective of customers and thus considers it necessary for multichannel retailers to adopt strategies relating to customers’ changing behaviour.

**Keywords:** customer typology, fashion industry, multichannel retailing, social influence theory, service quality, social constructivism, thematic analysis

**Paper type:** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

The evaluation and understanding of customer service quality perceptions has been a topic of major interest for academics and practitioners since the 1980s (Grönroos, 1984; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988; Shostack, 1982). Despite such intense research focus, a gap in the literature remains when it comes to understanding service quality in multichannel settings (Huan, Lobschat, & Verhoef, 2019; Verhoef, Kannan, & Inman, 2015). This is surprising, since multichannel service systems have become increasingly important with the rise of E-commerce. Based on what is mentioned above, there remain critical questions in understanding how multichannel fashion retail settings influence service quality. This research fulfils these needs by examining the following research questions:

- 1) How do customers perceive service provision in a multichannel fashion-retailing context?
- 2) What determines perceptions of service quality amongst multichannel fashion retail customers in Germany?
- 3) How can service quality be conceptualised in a multichannel fashion-retailing context?

Answers to these questions should provide more insight and understanding of multichannel fashion retailing and service quality. We discuss several theoretical and managerial implications of the findings. The overall objective of the research was to explore the association between multichannel fashion retailing and service quality, recognising the important role consumers' quality perceptions play in the decision-making process.

This study aims to contribute to the interpretation of multichannel service quality by explaining it from the perspective of so-called 'multichannel customers' (Avery, Steenburgh, Deighton, & Caravella, 2012; Heitz-Spahn, 2013; Kumar, 2010; Neslin & Shankar, 2009; Zhang et al., 2010). Its practical importance is to contribute to the understanding of the interactions when purchasing fashion products from a multichannel retailer with the aim of conceptualising service quality in a multichannel fashion retail context. Therefore, the paper considers extant service quality research with a focus on traditional, electronic, and multichannel settings. The perspective of this paper is different from mainstream positivist service quality research which sees service quality as static,

objectively measurable and dualistic. As an alternative, this paper acknowledges service quality as a dynamic, subjective and pluralistic phenomenon. Following this line of argument, the paper argues for the existence of multiple realities as consistent with social constructivism. Therefore, the paper investigates the service quality perceptions of experienced multichannel customers. Such perceptions are considered to be the meaning that these customers give to their service experiences (Barlow, 1990; Helmholtz, 1925; Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987; Zeithaml, 1988). Drawing on the work of Sousa and Voss (2006), it is indicated that customer perceptions of service quality in multichannel settings are fundamentally unique. We propose a holistic framework for conceptualising multichannel customer service quality perceptions by considering (1) the heterogeneity of multichannel customers, and (2) all moments of contact between customer and retailer. Our framework contributes to research into service quality by offering a theoretical interpretation of the phenomenon.

As a 'bounded system' within a unique border and research context, Germany was selected as a fitting case for this research (Stake, 1978, p. 7). Such a restriction was chosen to position the paper within a well-defined setting, and to provide a clear research focus (Stake, 2000). Germany was chosen for three reasons: (1) Germany is ranked as the fourth largest economy in the world (www.statista.com, 2016); (2) German online retailing accounts for the second largest such sector in Europe, experiencing the second highest growth rate in 2015 (Retailresearch.org, 2016); and (3) this work yields experiential knowledge about the German retailing market. Experiential knowledge enhances access to the researched subject (Maxwell, 2013) and shared cultural values facilitate a holistic understanding of a social phenomenon (Azemi, 2016). While multichannel fashion retailing presents various business opportunities, managing service quality across channels has been specifically regarded as one of the main challenges for multichannel fashion retailers (Lee et al 2019; Beck & Rygl, 2015; Ozuem et al., 2017). Most extant studies on multichannel retailing are at the organisational level and quantitative-oriented and there is a lack of empirical studies examining the relationship between consumers' perception of service quality and the multichannel retailing context. This is the first paper to provide empirical knowledge about multichannel service quality in the fashion industry within the particular localised context of Germany. The above theoretical framing motivates us to structure this paper as follows. The paper begins by presenting an overview of the German fashion retail industry, followed by a review of conceptual orientations on multichannel retailing. Next, the authors

synthesised the key findings of the review and empirical data into an integrated catalyst model of multichannel service quality. This model reveals the frequently neglected channel integration quality and service quality. Drawing on constructivist epistemological orientation, the paper discusses the methodology employed. The paper ends with four main categories of validated customer typology which serve as an appropriate framework for future researchers.

## 2. Theoretical Background

### 2.1 Multichannel Retailing

Engagement with a combination of different retail channels during the purchasing process has become the predominant purchasing pattern for customers (Pantano & Constantinou-Vasilios, 2016; Reinartz, Wiegand, & Imschloss, 2019; Rezaei & Valaei, 2017). For retailers, coordinating and integrating the different distribution channels provide synergies that increase the effectiveness of each channel and contribute to improving the overall performance of the retailer (Frasquet & Miquel, 2017; Huan et al., 2019; Rezaei & Valaei, 2017). Emrich et al. (2015) investigated the impact of multichannel assortment integration on underlying assortment relations. They classified three different assortment relations. 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 no integration of assortment is detrimental in any of the three assortment structures. For customers, multichannel integration is therefore beneficial, as they tend to switch channels during their purchasing process (Heinemann, 2019). As the literature suggests, customers ‘mix and match’ the different channels for their different phases in the purchasing process (Berman & Thelen, 2018; Frasquet, Ieva, & Ziliani, 2019; Swaid & Wigand, 2012). For fashion products, some customers might search for products online and then go to the stores to actually touch and try the product on. Later, they might purchase the product online, since they prefer a home delivery service.

Furthermore, customers use different devices when using the online channel, such as computers, tablets, or mobile devices (Huang, Lu, & Ba, 2016). As the literature suggests, customers either search for a product in an online environment, and later purchase it in an offline environment, or they search for a product in an offline environment and later purchase it in an online environment (Verhoef et al., 2015; Yang, Lu, Zhao, & Gupta, 2011). However, with very few exceptions (Patten & Ozuem, 2017; Saghiri, Wilding, Mena, & Bourlakis, 2017; Wolk & Ebling, 2010), researchers have failed to conceptualise the complex and discrete purchasing patterns of so-called multichannel customers when they switch channels and devices several times during a single purchasing process. These customers have been hitherto conceptualised as a homogeneous group exhibiting a generally linear purchasing behaviour (Agatz, Fleischmann, & Van Nunen, 2008; Akter et al., 2018; Xing, Grant, McKinnon, & Fernie, 2010). In this context, the terms ‘cross-channel’ and ‘omni-channel’ have augmented the terminology of ‘multichannel’ retailing. There is controversy in the extant literature about how to conceptualise each term. Beck and Rygl (2015) have conducted some initial research and have categorised these three different terms according to the level 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 level 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. Ailawadi and Farris (2017) argued that while the term ‘multichannel retailing’ focuses on managing and optimising the performance of each channel, ‘omnichannel retailing’ focuses on integrating activities within and across channels. However, these concepts are still used indistinctly in the context of retailers who sell products through their own offline and online channels (Ailawadi & Farris, 2017; Beck & Rygl, 2015; Liu, Lobschat, & Verhoef, 2018). Drawing on Lobschat and Verhoef (2018), this paper 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.

As Lobschat and Verhoef (2018) suggest, there is a continued need to conduct research into multichannel settings with respect to customer behaviour across channels, and behaviourally orientated research that concerns retail-mix issues across channels is of particular value. Furthermore, the scope of research in this area has not yet been applied to the fashion-retailing segment. Related literature suggests that industry segments should be

considered separately (J. Kim & Hahn, 2015; Kushwaha & Shankar, 2013; Piotrowicz & Cuthbertson, 2014). 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 (Blázquez, 2014; S. Kim & Stoel, 2004, p. 110). In the context of multichannel retailing, evaluating and understanding service quality has become increasingly popular and valued by both academics and practitioners (Akter et al., 2018; Blázquez, 2014; Hult, Tomas, & Zhang, 2019; Pantano & Viassone, 2015). Five common features of services among different industries have been identified as processes in relevant literature. 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) endorsed by the customer's involvement and experience (Grönroos, 1995).

The majority of service quality research can be considered customer-centred (Akter et al., 2018; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Malhorta, 2005; Van Birgelen, De Jong, & Ruyter, 2006). These studies mainly focus on investigating the perceived quality of various services amongst customers. According to Zeithaml (1988), 'Perceived quality is different from objective or actual quality, a higher level abstraction rather than a specific attribute of a product, a global assessment that in some cases resembles attitude, and a judgment usually made within a consumer's evoked set' (Zeithaml, 1988, pp. 3-4).

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 (Akter et al., 2018; Carr, 2007; Dabholkar, Thorpe, & Rentz, 1996). Others apply a performance-only approach (Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Martinez & Martinez, 2010).

## 2.2 Integrated Service Quality

The SERVQUAL model can be considered the most important gap-based service quality concept in relevant literature (Banerjee, 2014; Rafiq, Lu, & Fulford, 2012). 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 possessed certain attributes and to again rank their attitude based on their prior experiences on a seven-point Likert scale (perceptions). Hence, the actual perceived service quality resulted from the gap between service perception and expectation. Gap-based service quality concepts draw extensively on the work of Oliver (1990), who identifies himself within the tradition of Sherif and Hovland's 'assimilation theory' (Sherif & Hovland, 1961) and Festinger's 'dissonance theory' (Festinger, 1957). These theories see 'customers posited to perceptually distort expectation-discrepant performance so as to coincide with their prior expectation level' and, as a condition of the theories, '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).

Cronin and Taylor (1992) were the first researchers to conceptualise service quality based purely 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). To evaluate 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 services but were also conceptualised based on the general 'desires' of customers regarding specific service attributes (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1994, p. 112).

The current paper suggests that gap-analysis 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 et al., 1994). In terms of service settings, it has been argued that the concept of service quality in the context of online environments can be studied in isolation from traditional service quality (Parasuraman et al., 2005). Kallinikos (2005) noted that 'a different technological landscape with a different kind of problem has gradually been formed by the very connectivity or interoperability contemporary technologies of information and communication are currently able of constructing' (Kallinikos, 2005, p. 195). 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 suggesting that multichannel service quality concerns all moments of contact between a service deliverer and its customers.

### 2.3 Multichannel service quality

Multichannel service quality therefore refers to the different physical and electronic components that are delivered through two or more channels (Akter et al., 2018; Sousa & Amorim, 2018). 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 to be a function of integration quality, which they defined as providing a 'seamless service experience across channels' (Sousa & Voss, 2006, p. 359). They surmised that in a multichannel service system, even when the service quality of each channel is very high, the overall perception of service could be very low when integration quality is perceived as low. Sousa and Amorim (2018) call for a separate examination of physical, virtual, and integration quality. First, they emphasise the contrasting nature of each of the three quality components. Secondly, they forecast a rapid technological development for the virtual component, and they see advantages to examining it separately from the other two more constant components of physical and integration quality. The researchers have developed a sound foundation of research about multichannel service quality, but their work is based on secondary sources and therefore lacks empirical integrity (Sousa & Amorim, 2018).

Drawing on extant literature about multichannel retailing and perceived service quality, the following conceptualisation of an integrated service quality system is offered as a synthesis of existing theory:

*Insert Figure 1: Integrated service quality system*

As Figure 1 illustrates, multichannel service quality consists of several distinctive elements. Multichannel customers have several expectations of multichannel retailers in terms of the quality of service delivery. These expectations are distinguished by the three elements of

multichannel service quality: physical, electronic, and integration quality. In an integrated multichannel service system, the service supplier adopts integration mechanisms in order to provide a seamless interaction with customers.

The customer, however, is the recipient of the multichannel retailer's service quality. The customer thus experiences service quality as part of a 'journey'. This experience comprises the various retail-mix elements including assortment, price and promotions, fulfilment, and web and store design. The customer's shopping experience is formed across all moments of contact with the retailer. In some cases, the customer uses only one channel. Under such circumstances the customer will exclusively perceive the service quality they receive from a particular channel. However, the customer tends to switch channels during his purchase if the expected benefits are higher than the expected costs (Gensler, Neslin, & Verhoef, 2017). In this case, the customer considers service quality across all of the different channels he has experienced during the purchase process. Moreover, multichannel customers experience the integration of all channels utilised as part of their perception of service. This means that a poorly integrated service quality system can lead to negative overall service perceptions, even when the service quality of each individual channel has been considered positive. Thus, this paper approaches multichannel service quality as an interplay between a customer's interaction with the retailer and the multichannel retailer's integration of the different channels, to incorporate the different elements of the retail mix. Past studies on service quality have been mainly investigated taking a single-channel perspective. Traditional service quality models have been developed either in non-electronic settings (Radomir, Plaias, & Nistor, 2012; Seth, Deshmukh, & Vrat, 2005) or in electronic settings (Parasuraman et al., 2005; Rafiq et al., 2012). Within the literature, an individual's service quality perceptions are fragmented, based on cultural norms and values (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010; Banerjee, 2014a; Swaid & Wigand, 2012). A parallel stream of research similarly suggests that service quality perceptions differ among countries (Guesalaga & Pitta, 2014) and cultural influences play significant roles in customers' expectations and perceptions (Carrillat, Jaramillo, & Mulki, 2009).

## 2.4 Social influence theory

The current study maintained that the higher order implications of multichannel fashion retailing can be most clearly appreciated from the perspective of social influence theory.

The social influence theory (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955; Kaplan & Miller, 1987; Kelman, 1958) conceptualises the social behaviour of individuals. It states that the social influence of other members of a community affects an individual's decision (Wang, Yu, & Wei, 2012). Burnkraut and Cousineau (1975) distinguish two types of social influence, informational and normative. Informational social influence can be considered to persuade individuals to believe information obtained from others is true even when one's private information suggests otherwise (Kaplan & Miller, 1987; Kuan, Zhong, & Chau, 2014; Li, 2013). Informational social influence has been researched in the context of social phenomena such as the bandwagon effect, herd behaviour and social proof (Kuan et al., 2014). Normative social influence is based on the desire of individuals to conform with the expectations of others (Kaplan & Miller, 1987). Li (2013 p.265) advocates that when individuals are under normative influence, they perceive higher levels of social pressure to perform or not to perform in a particular way, regardless of their beliefs and attitudes towards such behaviour. Li noted that informational influence causes group members to re-evaluate their positions, when facts, evidence, or other forms of information pertinent to the decision are discussed by group members based on a desire to make valuable decisions or a higher order decision. Kuan et al (2014) argued that individuals strive for identification with reference groups and the social rewards gained when liked and accepted by them emphasising that both forms of social influence lead to conformity, which involves a change in attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours due to the real or imagined influence of others. Together, two sets of studies (Hoffman & Broekhuizen, 2009; Meyer and Anderson, 2000) endorse the viability of social influence theory as a worthy construct in higher order decision-making. In the current paper, we build on, and extend, extant studies by examining closely how the relative importance of the two streams of social influence (information and normative) can impact on consumers' perceptions of service quality in multichannel fashion retailing. **Building on the principle of service quality perceptions, social influence theory suggests how the diverse commitment mechanisms change the attitude towards target behaviour (Hwang, 2016). Consumers' behavioural intentions, including service perceptions and active participations in the multichannel settings translate into consumer behaviours and, subsequently, influence brand relationships (Jin & Phua, 2014; Dholakia et al 2004). For instance, an understanding of multichannel retail settings is essential to understanding the level of service quality and may be used to understand different groups of customers in the fashion industry.**

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Paradigm of inquiry

In contrast with the dominant dualistic and objectivistic approach, this paper uses a constructivist ethnographic methodological approach, which assesses the service quality phenomenon from a threefold perspective: (1) a pluralistic ideology, which permits diverse customer service quality perceptions; (2) the dynamic nature of service experiences and thus the inclusion of different perceptions; and (3) intangibility, heterogeneity and inseparability as important characteristics of services. Such perspectives are associated with a constructivist ontological worldview which postulates the existence of ‘multiple realities’ (Golafshani, 2003).

Constructivism 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 paper emphasises that potential meaning can exist, but that actual meaning emerges only when it engages with consciousness (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

Constructivist epistemology guides this paper towards an ethnographic and qualitative research approach (Holstein & Gubrium, 2007). Constructivist ethnography is considered a valuable methodological approach to adopt for the current paper because 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. This research interrogates the viewpoints of German multichannel customers. A customer perspective will help to explain the phenomenon and reveal the meanings that a customer gives to it. Constructivist ethnographic studies incorporate the synthesis of the theoretical and the empirical (practice/experience). The ‘final interpretive theory is multi-voiced and dialogical. It builds on native interpretations and ... articulates what is implicit in those

interpretations' (Denzin, 1989, p. 120). 'Constructivist ethnography ... involves interaction between the individual and what is sought in relation to values embedded in the research environment as well as other individuals involved in the investigation' (Howell, 2013, p. 128). This study (and research in general) has meaning in relation to 'existing and historical theoretical frameworks' as well as ongoing projects undertaken by other temporally placed individual researchers (ibid.). 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).

Constructivist ethnography wishes to understand what is taking place in specific contexts and emphasises experiential validity and, through thick interpretation, determines clear indications of how people react to phenomenon through emphasising 'the rich, real-world context in which the phenomenon occurs' (Eisenhardt, 2007, p. 25). Indeed, data collection is based on the requirements of experiential rather than measurable validity which requires in-depth observation (through interviews and focus groups) of multichannel customers in an attempt to construct or develop theory, using a single case study strategy (Reychav, Inbar, Simon, McHaney, & Zhu, 2019). **Surveys normally provide quantitative data and enable measurement validity or reliability and non-disputed generalisation or external reality. However, the thick description, interpretation, and richness as well as 'context of the research can be lost when using surveys; one is left with narrow explanation rather than in-depth understanding' (Howell, 2013, p. 194). Consequently, this study used semi-structured interviews and focus groups; 'interviews enable description, interrogation, evaluation and consideration of personal accounts (biographical and historical data) as well as provide opportunities for storytelling' (ibid: p. 198). In addition, the focus groups further explore and analyse data gathered through the interviews and facilitate opportunities for both participatory and non-participatory observations. 'Focus groups can deal with the dominant position of the interviewer and provide a mechanism for dealing with interviewer bias in terms of values and beliefs driving the interview' (ibid: pp. 200-201).**

### 3.2 Methods and data gathering

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. For this paper, 'combination, or mixed purposeful sampling' was applied, as participants were selected on the basis of their experience of

purchasing fashion products by accessing the various channels of one retailer ('homogeneous sampling'). Furthermore, a sample of sales people and managers of different fashion department stores in three major German cities (Stuttgart, Essen and Düsseldorf) was asked to suggest customers who might agree to participate in this research ('snowball sampling'), and people were chosen based on predetermined criteria ('criterion sampling'). First, only people older than 18 years, who had obtained full capacity to make contracts, were included in this research. Secondly, the customers who were included were specifically those who were experienced in searching for and purchasing clothing through different channels during a single purchase. This is in keeping with Verhoef's (2007) definition of multichannel customers as those who use different channels for searching and purchasing. The inclusion of 'experienced' multichannel customers who had made at least three purchases in the last 12 months enhances the information-richness of the sample of customers. Thirdly, it was crucial for the outcome of this research that the participating customers had had multichannel experiences with at least two multichannel retailers. This was seen as important because the concept of service quality is widely based on expectations that are, to some extent, founded on previous experiences (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985). Fourthly, only customers who described themselves as 'fashion enthusiasts' were considered qualified to take part in the research. These criteria were defined to ensure that the selected participants could provide 'information-richness' (Patton, 1990). In general, the study uses theoretical sampling, which considers that researchers should keep the purpose of the research as central and not adhere to set structures of data collection or, as Glaser and Strauss (1967) term, 'rules of evidence' that hinder 'discovery of theory' (p. 51). 'Typically a sociologist starts by applying these rules for selecting a purified set of groups to achieve accurate evidence' (ibid). However, eventually theoretical development will be limited due to a lack of diverse theoretical relevant data because preconceived groupings were utilised to accumulate data (ibid). Theoretical sampling allows freedom in the collection of data that is theoretically relevant but, at the same time, the theory generation through comparison controls the data collection process but does not hinder it. Through this process the theoretical dimensions and typologies are developed as the data collection and analysis progress.

Based on the sampling strategies, this research consisted of 34 in-depth interviews and two focus groups comprising ten focus group participants.

The following multichannel customers participated in the interview:

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
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



No.	Age	Gender	Income level	Occupation
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
34	25-30	M	Low	Sales assistant
35	25-30	M	Medium/high	Web designer
36	41-46	F	High	Marketing director
37	31-35	F	Medium/high	Teacher
38	18-24	F	Low	Student
39	25-30	M	Medium	Assistant to board member
40	36-40	M	High	Partner (Consultancy)
41	18-24	F	Low	Student
42	18-24	F	Low	Student
43	25-30	F	Medium/high	Sales Manager
44	25-30	M	Medium	Social Media Manager

Table 1: Interview participants

Through theoretical sampling the interviews led to an indication of who should be included in the focus groups. Since the study intends to offer valuable insights elicited from

information-rich multichannel customers, field research was conducted in two stages: first, in-depth interviews were conducted to gain an in-depth understanding about the phenomenon of multichannel service quality. Then, focus group participants discussed these findings to provide an even more holistic picture of the phenomenon. Methodological triangulation as a research technique was therefore applied to enrich the variety and volume of data. When undertaking the constructivist ethnographic approach and using interviews and focus groups it was evident that data collection and analysis involved ambiguity and subjectivity. However, unless we ask questions as to whether this involves questioning ourselves when observing or reflecting others, when interviewing, or being involved with focus-group interpretations and understandings, this is difficult to assess (Howell, 2013). The interviews enabled ‘description, interrogation, evaluation, consideration, personal accounts or biographical and historical data; they can be confrontational and allow an environment for storytelling’ (Howell, 2013, p. 198). The focus groups enabled an environment that provided the opportunity for plurality of ideas. Indeed, the focus groups built understanding through the language and frameworks of those involved. Participants entered conversations and group interactions that created empathy and commonality regarding individual experiences, which fostered ‘self-disclosure, self-understanding and self-validation’ (ibid p. 202). Interview excerpts were presented to the participants as proofs of evidence of phenomena observed. As Aricat (2015) articulates, this practice brings to ‘the fore the tensions between interrelated discourses, juxtaposed for the purpose of negating the idealized oppositions and to highlight how the singularity of voices’ and experiential accounts are contextualised (Aricat, 2015, p. 811).

The phenomena of multichannel service quality in general, and the German fashion retailing setting in particular, have not yet been fully conceptualised (Verhoef et al., 2015). This limited understanding of multichannel service quality justifies the selection of a relatively small sample and accounts for 44 participants in total. As 4 additional interviews were conducted in 2019, empirical data generation lasted for about 18 months. The objective of this study with a constructivist ethnographic approach through interviews and focus groups was to understand the researched phenomenon in some depth.

The interviews and focus groups were semi-structured in nature, comprising a number of predetermined questions (Robson, 2007). The interview questions were designed for an analytic use with the aim of answering the research questions (Robson, 2007). The average duration of the interviews 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 levels (Robson, 2007). At the beginning of the interviews, a short questionnaire to collect demographic data was completed by respondents. The interviews were recorded with the permission of participants. Furthermore, notes were taken to summarise key statements. The body language of participants was also observed during the conduct of interviews. The direct involvement of the researchers in this process enhanced experiential knowledge about the topic under investigation. Moreover, due to the semi-structured nature of the interviews, questions could be adjusted, and new questions could be added in the course of the interviews where such an intervention was felt beneficial in order to enhance the quality of discussions. Our interpretation phases are much more purposeful and involve the ‘mobilization of concepts to give sense to the descriptions’ (Pozzebon, Douglas, & Ames, 2016, p. 18).

3.3 Analysis and Results

Based on the constructivist epistemology, theory building was followed by an abductive approach so as to allow vacillation between extant theoretical concepts and literature, empirical data and the analytical framework in order to understand the phenomenon of multichannel service quality ‘using the participants’ own words within context’ (Ozuem, Thomas, & Lancaster, 2016, p. 6). Field research was conducted exclusively for the purpose of this study (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Following Colaizzi’s (1978) seven-stage process of thematic analytical approach, certain themes and questions were developed prior to the interviews.

1. Read all of the subjects’ descriptions in order to acquire a feeling for them.
2. Extract noteworthy statements from each transcript that relate to the research at hand.
3. Perform the process of explication – making sense of the statements – on each statement.
4. Formulate the resultant meanings, from the statements, into themes.
5. Parallel constituent themes with original participant transcripts to verify consistency.
6. Formulate a comprehensive definition that offers a description of the fundamentals of the phenomenon.
7. Re-visit participants to validate findings with participant experiences.

Table 2: Seven-stage process by (Colaizzi, 1978)

The resultant codes were developed into pertinent themes. The themes identified bear little relationship to the questions that were asked during the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006). However, the themes were inextricably connected to the data themselves (Patton, 1990). Thus, the applied thematic approach for this paper is data-driven (Boyatzis, 1998).

Ultimately, interpretations of respondents' perceptions of multichannel service quality generated six major themes as follows: (1) affiliation; (2) physical stimulation; (3) value for physical service quality; (4) electronic stimulation; (5) utility for electronic service quality; and (6) choice optimisation for the integration service quality. The explanatory frameworks of the sample used were modelled on the number of appropriate responses obtained, rather than the cumulative figures of those contacted. Some responses were discounted as inclusions of these opinions would have little or no valuable impact on the explanatory framework (Ozuem, Howell, & Lancaster, 2008). These themes represent the vivid perceptions of the empirical reality of German multichannel fashion customers.

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Lighting</li><li>• Colours</li><li>• Smell</li><li>• Music</li></ul>
		(2) Visual merchandising	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Arrangement of items</li><li>• Clarity of collections</li><li>• Inspiration</li><li>• Buy more than I wanted</li></ul>
		(3) Haptics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Try clothes on</li><li>• Proof of quality</li><li>• Does it look like the pictures?</li></ul>
Affiliation	The motivation to affiliate with other individuals involved in marketplace institutions, principally other shoppers or retail merchants.	(1) Human relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Common experience</li><li>• Meet friends and family</li><li>• Meet new people</li><li>• Have great shopping experience</li></ul>
		(2) Status	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Exclusive shopping environment</li><li>• Show off with shopping bag</li><li>• Everyone can see bags</li></ul>
		(3) Advice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Negative experience</li><li>• Significant quality differences</li><li>• No personal advice anymore</li><li>• I like an easy-going consultation</li><li>• Sales-people have a similar style</li></ul>
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Good feeling</li><li>• Feeling of being welcomed</li><li>• Stuck-up sales-people</li><li>• Being ignored</li><li>• Disregarded</li></ul>
		(2) Honesty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Con me to buy an item</li><li>• Did not want to show me alternatives</li><li>• Sales-people wanted a quick sale</li></ul>
		(3) Trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Real people</li><li>• Double check</li><li>• I'm sure she will take care of it</li></ul>
		(4) Friendliness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Greeting</li><li>• Peremptory tone</li><li>• No goodbye</li></ul>
		(5) Empathy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sensitivity</li><li>• Notice when I want to browse through the items alone</li><li>• To be there when I need her</li></ul>

Table 3: Themes representing physical service quality findings

Themes	Definitions	Codes	Key words
<b>Electronic stimulation</b>	The motivation to seek novel and interesting stimuli from the online-mediated retail environment encountered during shopping activities.	(1) Web design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear layout</li> <li>• Plentiful pictures</li> <li>• Video clips</li> <li>• Not too many banners</li> <li>• Aesthetic colours</li> <li>• Filter options</li> </ul>
		(2) Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not just products</li> <li>• Editorials</li> <li>• Individual</li> <li>• Not hundreds of look-alike products</li> <li>• Like a small boutique</li> <li>• Blogger</li> </ul>
		(3) Haptics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parcel</li> <li>• Packaging</li> <li>• Original package</li> </ul>
<b>Utility</b>	Utility means the outcome resulting from some type of conscious pursuit of an intended consequence.	(1) Convenience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uncomplicated</li> <li>• Practical</li> <li>• Comfortable</li> </ul>
		(2) Efficiency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fast system</li> <li>• Huge saving of time</li> <li>• In-store much more time-consuming</li> <li>• No time to go to the city</li> </ul>
		(3) Savings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compare prices</li> <li>• Check promotions</li> <li>• Free shipping</li> <li>• Free returns</li> </ul>
		(4) Goodwill	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Long returns</li> <li>• Lowest price offer</li> <li>• Fair</li> </ul>

Table 4: Themes representing electronic service quality findings

Themes	Definitions	Codes	Key words
<b>Choice optimisation</b>	The motivation to search for the right purchase channel that fits multichannel customers' demands in the best possible manner.	(1) Effort	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To save time</li> <li>• Fast</li> <li>• Convenient</li> <li>• Returns</li> </ul>
		(2) Availability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Check in-store</li> <li>• Check online</li> <li>• Across channels</li> <li>• Same article number</li> <li>• Up-to-date</li> </ul>
		(3) Price	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Price comparison</li> <li>• Check promotions</li> <li>• Discounts</li> <li>• Single-channel</li> </ul>
		(4) Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Help</li> <li>• Personal contact</li> <li>• Complaint</li> </ul>

Table 5: Theme representing integration quality findings

#### 4. Findings and Discussions

The major themes that relate to the physical channel imply some physical stimulation from offline-mediated environments and, in particular, from store design, visual merchandising and haptics. A 29-year-old senior project manager of a marketing department stated:

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

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

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

*Sometimes I want to go shopping and meet friends and my family. I think 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 she goes shopping. She shops to cultivate social contacts with her friends and her family. For her, it is important that her companions enjoy a pleasant purchase experience. Therefore, this respondent seeks hedonic value from her shopping experiences. Since her family members had different interests, a pleasant shopping experience meant, for her, that the store was able to provide several different service offerings. For this respondent, shopping is an important leisure activity.



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

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

*When I think of in-store service, I think of ... I want the sales-person to be attentive ... to greet me, to ask me if I need help. 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 can 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.*

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

The major themes that relate to the electronic channel context imply a mix of informational and normative influence on the part of multichannel customers. Electronic stimulation refers to web design, content, and haptics. In terms of web design, multichannel customers seek practicability, a clear structure and filter options. These findings resonate with the 'ease of use' service quality dimension that represents 'the degree to which the functionality of the user interface facilitates the customer's retrieval of the electronic service' (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Malhotra, 2002, p. 363). However, the findings of this paper go beyond this definition. Multichannel customers also value the emotional aspects of web design. Accordingly, they cite attractive web design and video footage as strong service features.

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3 A 23-year-old fashion management student from Düsseldorf reflected on his perception of  
4 web design as follows:

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6  
7 *And, of course, that it's well-structured and that you find the shopping basket immediately.*  
8 *That I understand how I can click on things. What I also find important is, for instance,*  
9 *that there are many pictures of the item and, just like at X, you have video sequences. Like*  
10 *that, you can see better what the item looks like when you move. And also, you can see*  
11 *better how the colour really looks.*

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

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

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

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

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47  
48 The concept of integration is the main difference between a single-channel and a  
49 multichannel service quality system. According to the literature, all physical and electronic  
50 elements enriched with integration mechanisms lead to overall perceptions of multichannel  
51 service quality (Sousa & Voss, 2006). 'Connection' and 'linkage' are the terms that explain  
52 how the interview respondents express what is known in the literature as 'integration  
53 quality'. The emergent theme for integration quality can be considered to be 'choice  
54 optimisation'. A 30-year-old sales director from Düsseldorf reflected as follows:

*I prefer retailers who operate an online shop and bricks-and-mortar stores because I want to exploit all the advantages this kind of retailer can provide me with. I can make a pre-choice online, note the article number, try it on in-store, buy it there and then, and have it delivered to my home address; or I can order online and ask for personal advice in-store when it's needed. I'm more flexible! If I need an item fast, I buy where it's faster; when I need advice, I purchase in-store; when stores are closed, I can browse and shop online. At some retailers, I own a loyalty card, which I can use online and offline. And then it is even easier to shop there.*

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

Before the invention of E-commerce and multichannel retailing, Westbrook and Black (1985) defined choice optimisation as the 'motivation to search for and secure precisely the right product to fit one's demands' (Westbrook & Black, 1985, p. 87). In the context of service quality in multichannel retailing, customers search for the 'right' type of service and select the most suitable channel. Multichannel customers tend to optimise their choices during the purchasing process (Zhang et al., 2010). Integration quality is the essence of competitive advantage for multichannel retailers compared with 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.

## **5. Key Findings**

### **5.1 The catalyst model of multichannel service quality**

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

The empirical findings of this study add value to extant studies, which state that customers perceive multichannel service quality by considering physical, electronic, and integration quality (Sousa & Voss, 2006). However, the current paper identifies six major themes that

describe multichannel customer service quality perceptions in a German fashion-retailing context, as the following figure illustrates:

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

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

## 5.2 Multichannel customer typology

The interview findings further suggest that four different types of German multichannel fashion customers exist within the homogeneous sample. Based on these findings, the current paper was able to develop a customer typology for the German market (Reynolds & Beatty, 1999). 'Each type of customer is distinguished by a specific pattern of social characteristics reflecting his position in the social structure' (Stone, 1954, p. 36). Drawing on social influence theory (Kelman, 1958; Li, 2013), the first generator of heterogeneity amongst German multichannel fashion customers can be considered to be 'informative versus normative social influence' (Hsieh & Tseng, 2018; Kaplan & Miller, 1987). As the analysis developed, it triggered some interlocking streams which compounded the categorisation of multichannel fashion customers into 'informative versus normative influences' but these were too complex and differentiated to be considered under the two main constructs. Although, they could broadly be placed in the two main constructs, they are mutually exclusive and could be further categorised into high (informational influence) and low (normative influence) such as high-low, high-low and low-high, low-high.

The second generator of heterogeneity among German multichannel fashion customers can be considered to be 'available income level'. The different income levels were built and the income classification was conducted based on the following criteria: 1) Low  $\leq$  30,000 GBP; 2) Low/medium  $>$  30,000 GBP  $\leq$  60,000 GBP; 3) Medium/high  $>$  60,000 GBP  $\leq$  90,000 GBP; 4) High  $>$  90,000 GBP

Figure 3: Customer typology matrix

Hedonists were the largest customer segment (representing 38 per cent of the sample). They had low or low/medium disposable incomes and they showed high normative social influence. Their principal drivers were shopping experiences and amusement. Furthermore, they were highly influenced by the behaviour, beliefs and attitudes of bloggers and other opinion leaders belonging to their reference group. The following statement from a 19-year-old apprentice in fashion retail illustrates the typical purchasing pattern of a hedonist:

*I'm permanently checking the fashion bloggers on Instagram. I like to be up-to-date with what's new. You can choose the 'like to know' option and then be immediately informed as to which brand an item they are wearing 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 illustrates, hedonist customers seek inspiration from Instagram and fashion blogs. For these customers, it is important to remain up-to-date about the latest fashion trends. They are price-sensitive due to their low disposable income. That is why they prefer to purchase from fast fashion discounters. A strong reference to affiliation and emotive stimulation are both indicators of normative social influence amongst this customer segment. Hedonists value multichannel retailing for reasons of efficiency. 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 normative social influence in fashion purchases but has a medium-high or high income. This segment accounts for 16 per cent of respondents. The connoisseur looks for indulgence when purchasing a fashion product, 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.*

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. Connoisseurs strive for the identification with lifestyle bloggers who belong to their reference group and share a similar attitude and lifestyle. Furthermore, 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 of reserving items online and trying them on in-store.

In contrast, smart shoppers (representing 23 per cent of the sample) have a low or low/medium disposable income and demonstrate informational social influence. They particularly look for price and product information and generally believe information obtained from others. Therefore, smart shoppers tend to use online rating portals, which provide information about shopping experiences from other customers with given products or services. Furthermore, smart shoppers are driven by savings. Thus, they 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 promote 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 make a purchase somewhere and have the option to pay later, I'll always buy the item 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 comparisons are easier to make 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 informational influenced multichannel customers (representing 23 per cent of the sample). These shoppers have a medium/high to high income level and are mainly driven by convenience. They can be considered loyal customers, except when they experience service failure at a retailer. Once they migrate, recovery is challenging for the retailer. 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 also find 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 drive me nuts! Their newsletter is customised and considers which brands or products I have bought recently. Sometimes I buy new items 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 dissuade 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.



Intriguingly, the emerged data shows that different customer types demonstrated a different level of susceptibility to either informational or normative influences. Hedonist shoppers showed a higher susceptibility to normative influence, as a 19-year-old apprentice in fashion retail stated:

*Often, when I wear a new outfit, I get compliments from others for my good taste. This gives me a good feeling – and somehow self-affirmation.*

A 22-year-old marketing student stated:

*Since I've been starting to be interested in fashion as a teenager, I have always received very positive feedbacks for my outfits from my friends, classmates or even from people I don't know. That's why I have started to post my daily outfits on Instagram – and the feedback is amazing. It makes me so happy to share my passion with others and even get so many absolutely positive reactions.*

As these comments illustrate, hedonist shoppers show a high level of desire to get positive reactions and acceptance from others. The above respondent indicated that sharing and receiving feedback from others makes her so happy and elevates her to positive moods.

Smart shoppers show a lower susceptibility to normative influence, but a high susceptibility to informational influence. A 19-year-old student stated:

*I spent most of the time of my fashion purchases online to check prices on price comparison pages. Here, it is easy for me to compare prices for certain items based on other consumers' reviews.*

Interestingly, the above respondent uses multichannel marketplace to compare prices based on other consumers' reviews. For her, the availability of online marketplace provides a platform to review and compare prices. Similarly, a deputy department manager stated:

*With my friends, we often talk about our latest shopping experiences and some of them always know about the latest 'special deals'.*

As the two statements illustrate, smart shoppers use the information of other shoppers to get fashion items for a lower price.

Connoisseur shoppers, however, showed a higher susceptibility to normative influence and a lower susceptibility to informational influence.

A 34-year-old senior purchaser from Düsseldorf stated:

*When I have enough time, I love to go shopping with my girl friends. We always go to our favourite department store – the sales assistants already know us. We get a glass of champagne to get into the right mood, we try on everything that we like and then we encourage each other with how great the items look on each of us.*

For connoisseur shoppers especially, the opinion of their peer group members is very important. Fashion is a way to receive positive feedback and self-affirmation, to show their status and the belongingness to a certain group of like-minded people.

Phlegmatic shoppers showed a lower susceptibility to normative influence, but a high susceptibility to informational influence.

A 43-year-old store manager stated:

*Before I purchase fashion items, I try to get information about the product and the brand - mostly online. I find it very helpful to read reviews from other customers, since I trust unpaid customers' opinions more than advertising.*

Another participant, a twenty-eight-year-old senior project manager averred:

*I'm a conservative customer: I always buy certain brands I have known for years. I have had good experiences with these brands and I know much about these brands: where they produce their items; under which circumstances; how they consider sustainability; how they treat their employees – so I will first check these brands when I'm looking for a new product. Only if I don't find the item there, am I open to buy from another brand. But – this means more effort for me and takes more time, that's why I try to avoid it.*

Phlegmatic shoppers showed a higher level of rationality than emotionality. Therefore, they are mostly influenced by facts. They prefer sources with independent information to paid advertising. Through an emphasis on external and experiential validity the following figure 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. Indeed, the customer typology emerged through the interviews and focus group dynamics and analysis to provide an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question. It would be difficult to develop such an in-depth comprehension from a positivist context and the use of surveys in the pursuit of replication or measurement validity.

	Smart shopper	Phlegmatic shopper	Hedonist	Connoisseur
<b>Generator:</b> Disposable income level	Low and medium	Medium-high and high	Low and medium	Medium-high and high
<b>Generator:</b> Social influence	High level of informational influence	High level of informational influence	High level of normative influence	High level of normative influence
<b>Principal driver</b>	Savings	Convenience	Experience, amusement	Indulgence
<b>Informational influence</b>	High	High	Low	Low
<b>Normative influence</b>	Low	Low	High	High
<b>Special behavioural characteristics</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Least loyal customer segment</li><li>• Most opportunistic customer segment</li><li>• Little importance of price consistency among channels when personally gaining an advantage</li><li>• Frequent channel and retailer switching during purchase</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Loyal customer segment: ‘Creatures of habit’</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Social media affinity</li><li>• See fashion blogs as an important source of inspiration</li><li>• Continually in search of upcoming brands and new retail formats</li><li>• Well-informed about fashion trends before purchasing</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Read editorials as a source of inspiration</li><li>• Follow like-minded lifestyle bloggers</li><li>• Well-informed about fashion trends and brands before purchasing</li><li>• Expect a high level of goodwill policy</li><li>• Generally loyal customer segment, but if they experience bad service, these customers are likely to migrate to other</li></ul>

	Smart shopper	Phlegmatic shopper	Hedonist	Connoisseur
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Well-informed about prices before purchasing</li> <li>Look for a retailer with a high level of goodwill policy</li> </ul>			retailers with a better perceived service
<b>Perception of physical service quality</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Personal advice is not a decisive factor</li> <li>Keen on discount clearing points</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Value efficiency of in-store purchases (i.e. no long queues, low availability of sales-people, long waiting time)</li> <li>Value clarity of store design and visual merchandising in order to find items quickly</li> <li>Value tidiness of items</li> <li>Attach importance to competent personal advice in-store</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strong reference to affiliation (look for like-minded people in-store, spend leisure time with friends and family)</li> <li>Customer segment with the most negative perception of sales-people (competence, friendliness and honesty)</li> <li>Tend to accept poor personal advice when purchasing a product that has high desirability and limited accessibility</li> <li>Seek physical stimulation through visual merchandising ('new looks', outfit combinations)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Seek affiliation with other people, who have the same high status</li> <li>Value an exclusive retail environment</li> <li>Tendency to prefer in-store shopping, due to better perceived shopping experience</li> <li>High degree of value-orientation in relation to brand/retailer image and personal interaction</li> <li>Competent and appreciative personal advice when needed</li> <li>Look for sensuality as well as for aesthetic store design and visual merchandising</li> <li>Haptics plays a predominant role in</li> </ul>

	Smart shopper	Phlegmatic shopper	Hedonist	Connoisseur
				choosing physical channels
Perception of electronic service quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Tendency to prefer online shopping because of easier price comparison and perceived lower price</li><li>• Prefer instalment payments</li><li>• Pay attention to free shipping and free returns online</li><li>• Favour a wide range of products</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Value practical aspects of web design when purchasing online (e.g. clear layout, filter options)</li><li>• Value efficiency and convenience</li><li>• Delivery and return options need to be convenient; if too complicated these customers tend to reject purchase</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Tendency to switch online shop after a short time when they do not find what they are looking for</li><li>• Importance of practicability, clear structure and filter options</li><li>• Pay attention to packaging of online purchases</li><li>• Attractiveness of web design</li><li>• Favour large assortments</li><li>• Value free shipping and free returns</li><li>• Tendency to order many items and have high return rates</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Seek electronic stimulation</li><li>• Attractiveness of web design</li><li>• Value visual stories and editorials</li><li>• Value sophisticated packaging</li><li>• Favour a smaller and customer-individual assortment</li><li>• Look for personal contact when having a query</li></ul>
Perception of integration quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Positive impact of channel integration by means of price comparison option between channels</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Switching barriers can help to avoid cross-channel free-riding for this customer segment</li><li>• Customer segment with the strongest</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Value effort optimisation since they intend to make as little effort as possible with non-emotional purchasing process elements (transaction, pick-up, return)</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Limited available time, seek the channel that can be accessed with the least effort, and value the ability to check availability across channels</li><li>• Use the Internet as the research channel,</li></ul>

	Smart shopper	Phlegmatic shopper	Hedonist	Connoisseur
		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	• 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	but prefer to shop in-store (preference for click-and-reserve)  • When purchasing online, still request personal contact in-store, if needed

Table 6: Customer typology

## 6. Theoretical implications

Extant studies about service quality mainly adopt a positivist epistemological paradigm (Martinez & Martinez, 2010; Patten, 2017; Radomir et al., 2012). Therefore, a focus has been put 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 a customer's service quality perception (Grönroos, 1984; Loiacono, Watson, & Goodhue, 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, Neslin, & Vroomen, 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. This study further investigated that the four customer types show a different level of susceptibility to informational vs normative social influences. Whereas hedonist and connoisseur shoppers show a higher susceptibility to normative influence, smart and phlegmatic shoppers show a higher susceptibility to informational influence. These customer types and their distinctive attitudes, perceptions and behaviours 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.

Moreover, the current study 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. The four different customer types, specifically 'smart shopper', 'phlegmatic shopper', 'hedonist shopper' and 'connoisseur' indicate different drivers of heterogeneity, distinctive principal drivers, special behavioural

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characteristics, and also different perceptions of the three different multichannel service quality dimensions.

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

**7. Managerial implications**

It is deemed necessary for multichannel retailers to adapt their strategy to the changing behaviour of their customers. Multichannel customers tend to constantly adjust their choices regarding retailer and retail channel during purchase. Therefore, 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. Different departments need to work in a cross-disciplinary manner, since multichannel customers expect a seamless shopping experience. 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 present a seamless 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 tedious when they need to provide their information again or laborious when they have to repeat their concerns when they switch between retailers.

In addition, multichannel fashion retailers should analyse their customer base by means of the four multichannel customer types proposed by this paper, namely (1) smart, (2) phlegmatic, (3) hedonist, and (4) connoisseur shoppers. Based on the target customers, retailers should mainly leverage on discount prices to attract smart shoppers. Retailers who aim to attract the group of phlegmatic shoppers should offer a superior sales advice and convenience with clearly-arranged stores and an easy to navigate online shop. Multichannel retailers, who target the group of connoisseur shoppers, however, should focus on an exclusive shopping experience online and offline, and retailers who want to attract hedonist

shoppers should leverage on high fashion products with a good price and an experience-orientated, hedonic store atmosphere. Furthermore, multichannel retailers need to adjust their strategy based on the susceptibility of multichannel customers to normative or informational social influence.

Hence, 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.

## 8. Limitations and Future research

Our findings should be considered in terms of the research design adopted, which also underlines several research opportunities for interpretations. The current work adopted a qualitative research paradigm utilising an abductive approach and an embedded case study research strategy. The social constructivist stance justified the researcher's case study approach (Annansingh & Howell, 2016). Our empirical study depends on the careful selection of information-rich interview participants and the application of triangulation ensure to rigour. Therefore, the paper can theoretically generalise multichannel service quality in fashion retailing. The qualitative research approach of this paper was helpful to conceptualise multichannel service quality and to develop a coherent model. Our study has some limitations. It has a single-country focus. Although, we have theoretically discussed the mechanism of service quality and multichannel fashion retailing from different perspectives, we do not empirically compare two or more countries to understand the dynamics of customer perceptions in the multichannel settings. Even though the literature suggests that customer perceptions are the predominant viewpoints for service quality, longitudinal ethnographic studies could offer further opportunities to provide rich descriptions of the four customer types. Another limitation is that we do not empirically examine how different genders perceive service quality and multichannel fashion retailing. It would be interesting to quantitatively study how genders perceive service quality and multichannel fashion retailing. Altogether, we believe that our study of the relationship between service quality perceptions and multichannel fashion retailing through social influence lens is a fruitful way to understand the complex engagement of interests in the

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emerging computer-mediated marketing environments, although future research could continue to examine how the four customer types apply to different countries.

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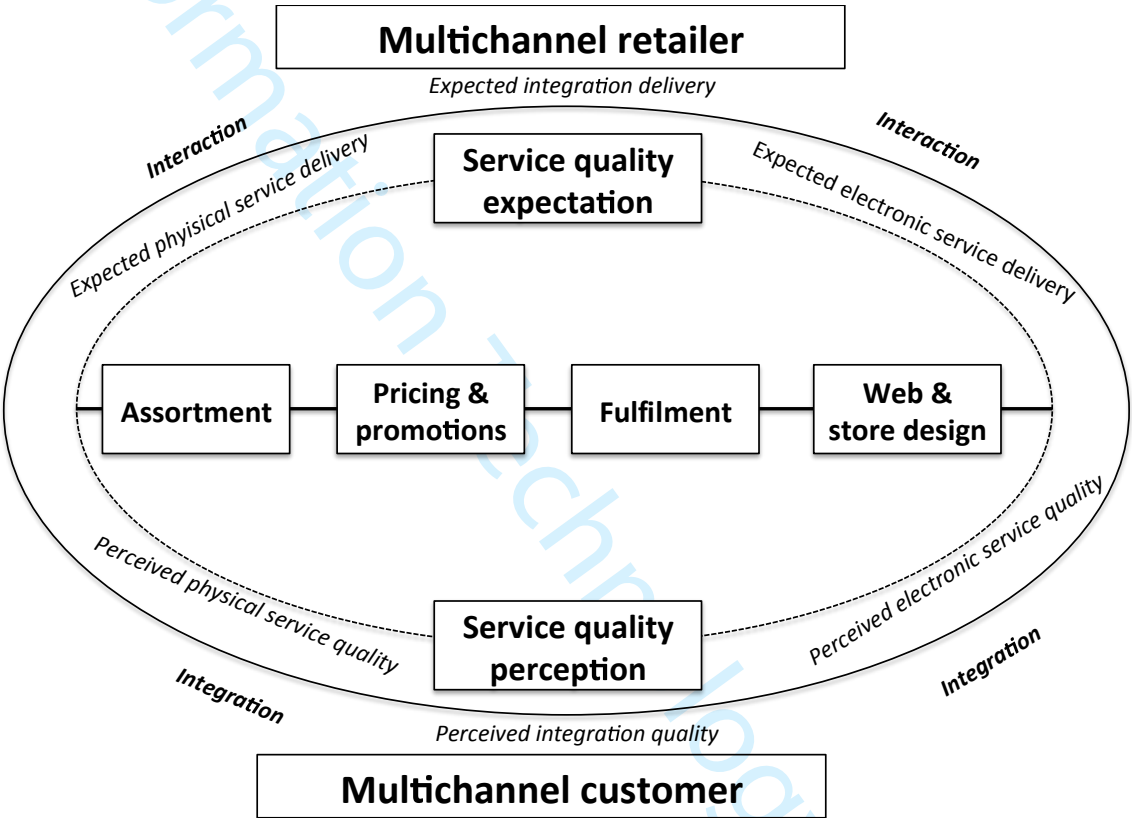


Figure 1: Integrated service quality system

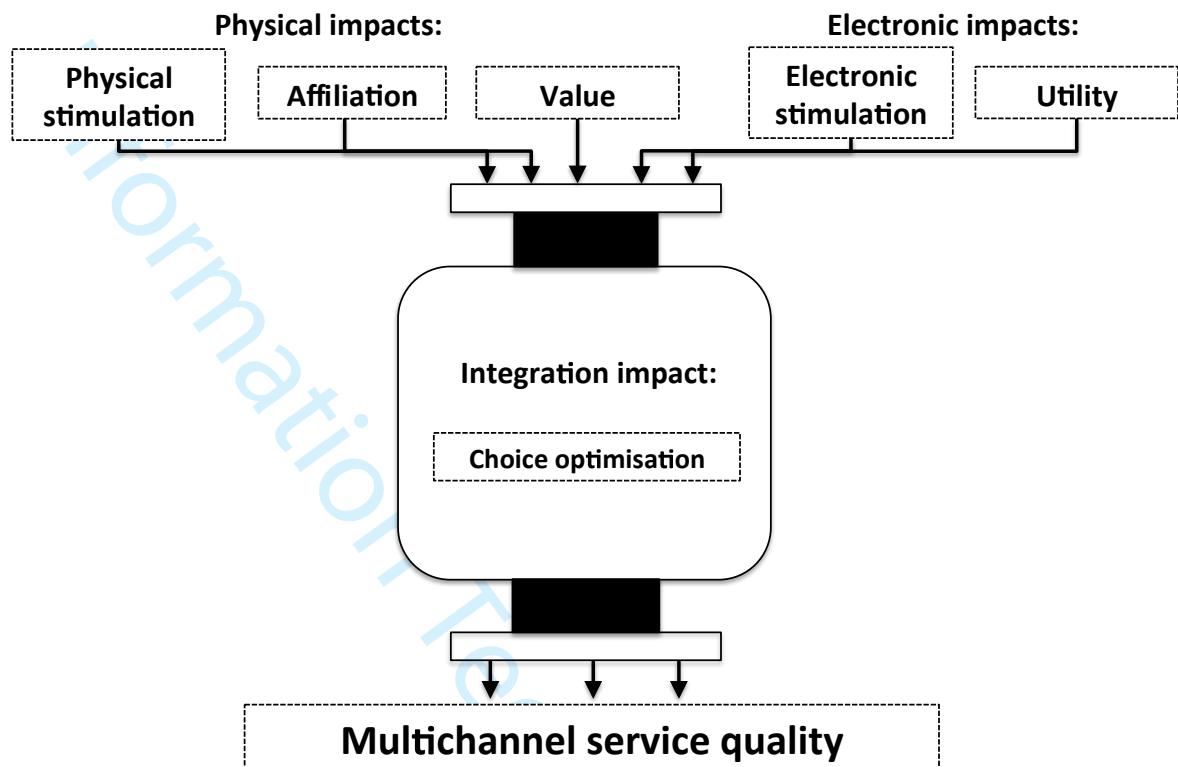


Figure 2: Integration quality as catalyst of multichannel service quality

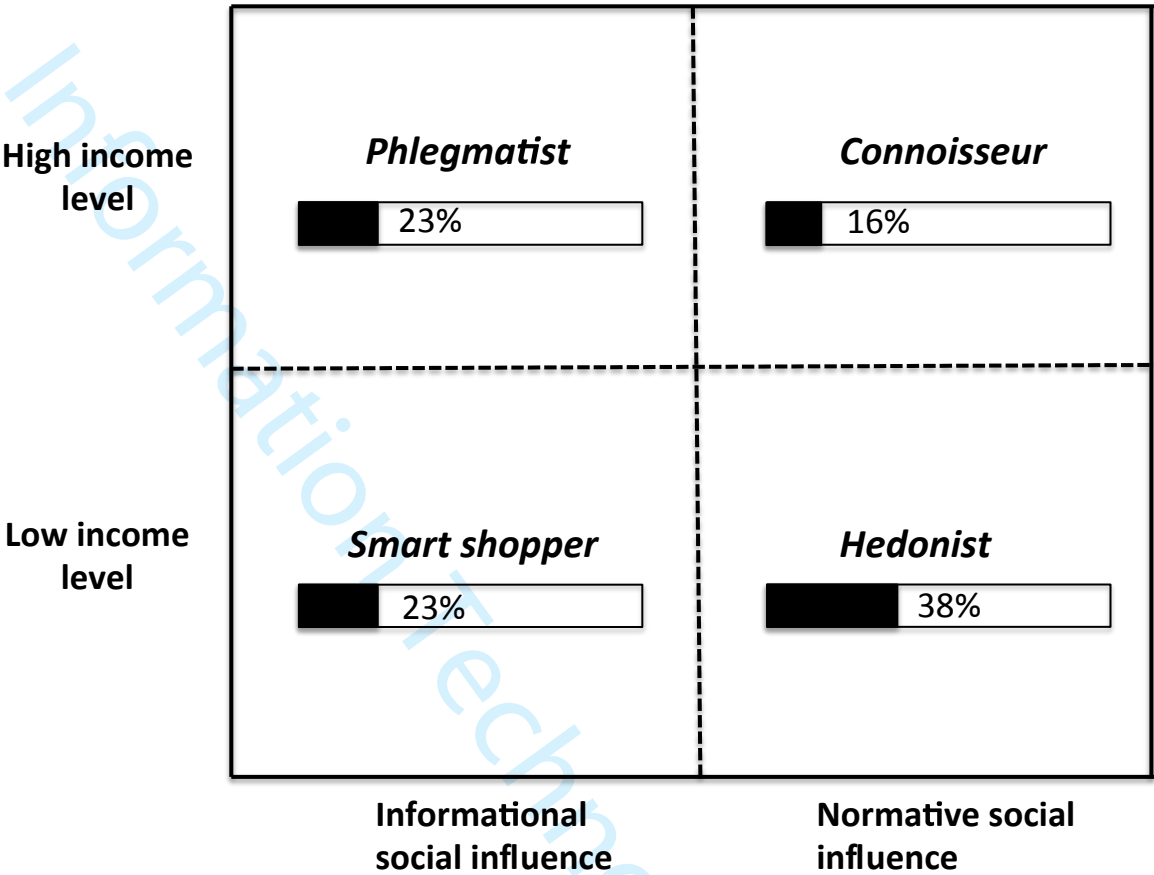


Figure 3: Customer typology matrix

Dear Reviewers,

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to you for reviewing our manuscript entitled '*Service quality in multichannel fashion retailing: an exploratory study*'. We greatly appreciate your valuable recommendations. The attached appendix includes an explanation of the responses we have provided.

We hope that our manuscript now meets the quality required for publication.

Sincerely,

Authors of the paper '*Service quality in multichannel fashion retailing: an exploratory study*'

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***NOTE: The appendix does not include the authors’ full response provided in the manuscript. Instead, it gives a brief explanation of our response and the location of the full response in the manuscript.***

**REVIEWER 1:**

**Reviewer’s comment: 1)** Although authors classified the multi-channel customers into four types according to the income level and social influence level, but I am wondering why these two levels can be regarded as the classification standard.

**Authors’ response:** We appreciate the insightful and valuable comments of the reviewer. We have added a section where we further explained how we developed the four customer types.

**Location of the response:** page 25

**Reviewer’s comment: 2)** Moreover, I am still confused that will it be possible for some customers simultaneously have informational influence and normative influence? Are such two types of influence exclusive? Or can the classification be changed to four types, such as high (informational influence) -low (normative influence), high-high, low-high, low-low?

**Authors’ response:** We have further found evidence based on the interviews we conducted, that hedonist and connoisseur shoppers show a higher susceptibility to normative social influence and smart and phlegmatic shoppers show a higher susceptibility to informational social influence. We have added a section in the paper which discusses these issues.

**Location of the response:** pages 25, 29-31, 36 -38



**Reviewer's comment: 3)** Authors emphasized that the contribution of this paper is the classification of multi-channel customers, which can help managers to develop strategies to target them. But in the practical implication, authors just mentioned that there is not "one-size-fit-all" solution. It might be better for authors to add more practical suggestions for managers about how to develop strategies for each type of customers.

**Authors' response:** We have added a section in the managerial implications chapter, where we have given recommendations for each of the four customer types.

**Location of the response:** pages 37 -38

**Reviewer's comment: 4)** Where is the figure of the whole manuscript? Authors should add it in the content or the appendix.

**Authors' response:** The figures and tables have been added to the manuscript

**Location of the response:** Tables (pages 14, 15, 17, 19, 20, 31 -34); Figures 1 -3 are located in the appendice

## **REVIEWER 2:**

**Reviewer's comment: 1)** The paper studies the problem about multichannel service quality by explaining it from the perspective of the so-called 'multichannel customers', and this can complement the current research about service quality. However, the paper doesn't show clearly research background. Why does this paper study these three questions? It would be better to add some specific explanations. in additional, why are all three research questions relative with Germany?

**Authors' response:** We appreciate the valuable comments of the reviewer. We've added a section in the introductory chapter and further explained why we have studied the given three research questions. We have provided further contextual

discussions on why Germany was chosen for the study (see pages 2 -3). We have also acknowledged the limitations of a single country focus and pointed to some future research directions.

**Location of the response:** pages 2 -3 and 36-38

**Reviewer’s comment: 2)** **Authors use the social influence theory as the theoretical support for this study. It might be better for authors to give more explanation about how the social impact theory combines with the service quality research in this paper. In addition, we suggest to increase the number of people, age, gender and other key basic information in the interview.**

**Authors’ response:** In order to address the reviewer’s valuable comments we have further elaborated the link between the service quality research of our study and social influence theory (see page 10). In addition, we have conducted additional interviews and added a table, where further information about interview and focus group participants is provided. Through theoretical sampling we incorporated the theory into the data collection process and analysis as well as research methods (interviews and focus groups), which provide analysis through non-participatory and participatory observations. Interviews allow the interrogation of personal accounts (biographical and historical data) and opportunities for individual narratives. Focus groups further explore and analyse data gathered through the interviews and facilitate opportunities for both participatory and non-participatory observations. A constructivist approach as such provides thick data and in-depth comprehension of the phenomenon under analysis.

**Location of the response:** pages 10, 12, 13, 25, 36 -38

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5 **Reviewer's comment: 3)**    **The topic of this paper focuses the fashion retail management, so it might be better for authors to focus on**  
6 **fashion retail industry in the conclusion.**  
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10 **Authors' response:**    We have added a section in the managerial implications chapter, where we have given recommendations for each  
11 of the four multichannel fashion customer types.  
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15 **Location of the response:** pages 36 -38  
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