



“Tackling the ‘death’ of brick-and-mortar clothing retailers through store atmospherics and customer experience”

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TACKLING THE 'DEATH' OF BRICK-AND-MORTAR CLOTHING RETAILERS THROUGH STORE ATMOSPHERICS AND CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

Abstract

The threat of online shopping propels brick-and-mortar retailers to innovate and design their retail atmosphere to create unforgettable shopping experiences to compete effectively and retain customers. The study firstly identifies store atmospherics factors that enhance the shopping experience and secondly explores the hypothesized relationships between store atmospherics dimensions (lighting, music, layout, and employee interaction) and customer experience. Furthermore, the effect of customer experience and repurchase intention is also explored. A self-administered survey was used, and data were collected from 390 respondents who visit physical clothing stores regularly in the City of Johannesburg in South Africa. The survey results were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) for descriptive statistics. Covariance-Based Structural Equation Modelling (CB-SEM) was utilized for the path analysis. The findings reveal that only store layout, lighting, and employee interaction are essential elements in creating pleasurable customer in-store experiences ($\beta = 0.163, p = 0.05$; $\beta = 0.207, p = 0.01$; $\beta = 0.293, p = 0.001$). It is also evident that consumers perceive music to be less effective in enhancing their shopping experiences ($\beta = 0.048, p = ns$). Moreover, the results show that enriching customer experiences stimulate repeat purchases ($\beta = 0.745, p = 0.001$). The findings demonstrate that innovating the store environment should be based on shop layout, illumination, and employee contact to create appealing experiences. This study contributes to consumer and retailing services literature.

Keywords

design, ambient, social, in-store experience, shopping behavior, South Africa

JEL Classification

M30, M31, M37

INTRODUCTION

In a world where shopping online has been triggered, is there a future for physical retailers? The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) stated that Covid-19 has activated changes in online buying patterns and highlighted that the most significant shift to online shopping was from consumers in emerging economies. However, as an emerging economy, South African consumers still depend on in-store (physical) shopping, particularly for clothing (Ungerer, 2019), making the store atmosphere crucial than ever. Store atmosphere comprises all the sensory effects such as physical features and design in the customer journey touchpoint that contribute to the consumer experience (Gültekin & Saraç, 2021). As such, store owners are altering their environment to have exciting experiences (Munaro et al., 2019).

Even with the closure of many physical retailers, some online stores are doing the opposite, opening up physical stores to supplement the online environment (Egan-Wyer et al., 2021), indicating that the phys-



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ical retail format is not dead (Maguire, 2020). Since in-store shopping has resumed worldwide for retailers, the online sales for textiles and clothing saw a decline, and on the other hand, consumers started visiting the brick-and-mortar shops (Spinoso, 2021). In South Africa, the sales of apparel, textiles, and footwear bounced back by 12.3% after experiencing a decline in 2020 and the beginning of 2021 (Stoddard, 2021). In recent times, consumers find anything they are looking for online, and it is important to investigate why would the same consumers visit a brick-and-mortar shop (Smit, 2021). The effect of store atmosphere on consumer behavior has recently received much attention (Barros et al., 2019; Berčík et al., 2016; Bonfanti & Yfantidou, 2021; Helmfalk & Hultén, 2017).

Berčík (2016) argued that consumers are first attracted to certain features within the store environment during the product selection stage, including lighting, music, scent, and color. Furthermore, Helmfalk and Hultén (2017) posit that retail atmospherics strongly impact consumer cognitions and emotions during the purchase decision process. Berman (2019) argues that in pursuit of combatting the death of store-based retailers, retailers should ensure that stores design their environment for entertaining and competing with pleasurable leisure activities such as visiting a cinema. Similarly, Kim et al. (2021) showed that physical retailers will not evaporate; however, retailers should improve their store environment to keep up with customers' shopping habits. Kim et al. (2021) further stated that high-experience products such as clothing require to be seen and touched before a customer can make a purchasing decision. There is a lot of attention focusing on the increase of online shopping and shopper experience strategies. To compete successfully, understanding how best to provide customer experience to stimulate repurchase behavior within the physical store environment has become necessary.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Bonfanti and Yfantidou (2021) and Roggeveen et al. (2020) have used the DAST (design-ambient-social-trialability) framework in the retailing context to explore customer decision making, which justifies adapting it for this study. Additionally, Wang et al. (2021) have shown interest in the framework from the restaurant context. According to Bonfanti and Yfantidou (2021), as part of creating memorable shopping experiences, retailers have leveraged the DAST framework introduced by Roggeveen et al. (2020) to stimulate sales. As a result, the study draws on the framework and its influence on customer shopping behavior. The design aspect refers to the store's visual components, such as the layout and style of the store or website (Wang et al., 2021). The ambient factors include the lighting, brightness, and music, also referred to as a visual stimulus (Helmfalk & Hultén, 2017). The social aspect involves people; this could be store personnel or other customers in-store (Poncin & Mimoun, 2014; Roggeveen et al., 2020). For this study, the latter description is adopted. Lastly, trialability refers to how easy it

is for customers to try new products and services (Roggeveen et al., 2020). Trialability will not be included because this paper explicitly focuses on clothing stores, where sampling is not always necessary. Consumers visit a physical retail store because they will get to touch (try) the clothes they buy by design unless they already know what to purchase. More so, there seems to be some overlap between the design and trialability factor as both include visual and touch elements, which the current study measures under design. As a result, trialability will not apply.

To assist retailers in creating meaningful experiences, the study seeks to unearth insights on atmospherics classification, including design (layout), ambient (music and lighting), and social factors (employee interaction) and their effect on customer experience and repurchase intention. Studies have shown that the brick-and-mortar store environment is one of the most critical features in customer purchasing decisions (Wang et al., 2021). The store layout emphasizes how products are grouped and how the shelf and floor space is divided (Hussain & Ali, 2015). A central function of the store's layout is to display products and services to customers to assist in contemplation and eventually purchase. A flourishing store lay-

out design can help persuade customers to move around the store and relate to the merchandise, ultimately affecting their shopping experience and purchase (Mowrey et al., 2018).

Similarly, a successfully designed store layout has been positively linked with the time spent in-store and approach or avoidance behavior (Mowrey et al., 2019). The retailer would want at all costs to evade avoidance. Therefore encouraging customers to pursue a decision, music can be used as a stimulator. Music has been found to influence experience, meaning that enjoyable music enhances pleasurable feelings for customers (Triantafyllidou et al., 2017). The use of music is effective in retailing and advertising (Raja et al., 2019). Playing the right music can assist retail stores in developing a good and acceptable atmosphere, which contributes to the store's image and the type of consumers that visit it (de Farias et al., 2014). According to Raja et al. (2019), consumers are likely to experience three emotional states in a retail environment, pleasure (satisfaction), arousal (stimulation), and dominance (feeling in charge), which may or not determine the time spent in-store and purchasing decisions. Another critical element in the physical store environment is lighting. Lighting is a feature in a store that stimulates the visual appearance of the products. The key reason for utilizing lighting within stores is to attract the customer's interest to influence their purchasing decision (Hussain & Ali, 2015).

There is a strong relationship between music and lighting on customer experience, influencing a customer's purchase intention (Sharma & Agarwal, 2017). However, purchase intention can also be stimulated by social factors, for example, the presence of an employee in-store, which has been linked positively with pleasurable in-store experiences (Triantafyllidou et al., 2017). During these interactions, the service person must be of great assistance in terms of products and services required by customers. It includes service personnel's appearance and helpfulness; as such, a positive experience with an employee enhances how customers perceive the store's service quality (Roggeveen et al., 2020) and customer experience (Gokcen & Anderson, 2018). One of the critical outcomes of a positive employee interacting with a customer is satisfaction and loyalty (Roozen & Katidis, 2019).

Based on the literature review, it is evident that the store environment acts as a stimulator to propel consumers to stay longer (Munaro et al., 2019), which addresses the importance of the shopping experience. Therefore, store atmospherics are considered the first step in contributing to customer experience (de Farias et al., 2014). For retailers to stay competitive and relevant, it is vital to focus on enhancing the consumer experience (Grewal et al., 2021). Customer experience involves customers' physical, emotional, and social reactions to interactions with an organization, focusing on customer journey touchpoints (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2015). Touchpoints, especially those controlled by the organization, include but are not limited to the store environment and service personnel (employees) (De Keyser et al., 2020). These touchpoints are essential as they help create memorable customer experiences that become a competitive advantage and form of differentiation (Rather, 2020) in response to the threat of e-commerce (Bonfanti & Yfantidou, 2021).

Numerous marketing literature has explored customer experience in the retail environment, starting with Holbrook and Hirschman (1982), who introduced experiential consumption elements, which involved considering the customer feelings, fantasies, and pleasure in the store environment (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). Since then, customer experience has become a foundation of marketing (Bustamante & Rubio, 2017). More studies have followed suit in investigating incorporating customer experience in shopping journeys of physical stores (Bagdare & Jain, 2013; Bustamante & Rubio, 2017; Sachdeva & Goel, 2015), multichannel (Blázquez, 2014; Quach et al., 2020; Shi et al., 2020) and online (Bhattacharya et al., 2019; Kumar & Anjaly, 2017). All these studies emphasize the positive outcome of incorporating customer experience in shopping journeys, such as purchase intention (Shi et al., 2020); satisfaction and loyalty (Pandey & Chawla, 2018; Roozen & Katidis, 2019); word of mouth (Siqueira et al., 2019); and repurchase intention (Kavitha & Haritha, 2018). Although there are positive outcomes derived from customer experience, it can also be fatal for brands, especially when the occasion is unpleasant, increasing negative feedback (Kim et al., 2019), which will not result in the repurchase.

Javed and Wu (2020), Kazancoglu and Demir (2021), and Liu et al. (2016) have identified the linkage between customer experience and repurchase intention; however, from an e-commerce perspective and not so much in the physical clothing stores. Other studies from the physical environment perspective seem to focus mainly on actual purchase (Dabrynin & Zhang, 2019; Hamouda, 2021; Helmfalk & Hultén, 2017) and not so much on repurchase. Repurchase intention refers to the customer's ability to return to the store and purchase products in the future (Liu et al., 2016; Meyer et al., 2017; Simanjuntak et al., 2020). Therefore, firms must formulate strategies that encourage customers to engage in repurchase behavior (Wilson et al., 2019), making customer experience important than ever. Because of the competitive nature of the retail industry, repurchase intention becomes crucial as it signifies repeat purchase (Antwi, 2021), which to be comparable to loyalty (Zhu et al., 2020). When customers demonstrate satisfaction customarily attributed to experience, they tend to exhibit repurchase behaviors (Kazancoglu & Demir, 2021). As justified by Zhu et al. (2020), repeat purchase is based on the consumer's level of satisfaction with prior experiences. Customers who have a positive experience in the store are more likely to return. Store experience has been found to positively impact repurchase intention (Kavitha & Haritha, 2018).

There has been considerable interest in studies relating to store atmospherics in emerging economies, including retail atmospherics on store patronage in supermarkets (Dokcen et al., 2021) and store environment impulse buying (Hashmi et al., 2020). However, there have been limited studies in the South African context on physical store atmospherics' impact on customer experience and repurchase intention within the clothing industry. Furthermore, the preceding literature shows that customer experience has primarily been explored as the predecessor of repeat purchase. Since the study focuses on current customers who already know the physical clothing store environment, the biggest challenge for these retailers is to identify strategies that will enhance customer experience and repurchase intention. With the role of store atmosphere, customer experience, and repurchase intention emphasized, the purpose of the study is to investigate the effect of store atmospherics on customer experience and ultimately repurchase intention. Therefore, the study attempts to answer the following questions: 1) what store atmosphere factors stimulate customer experience in physical clothing stores? 2) does customer experience encourage repurchase intention behavior in physical clothing stores? To address the research questions, the proposed hypotheses are formulated:

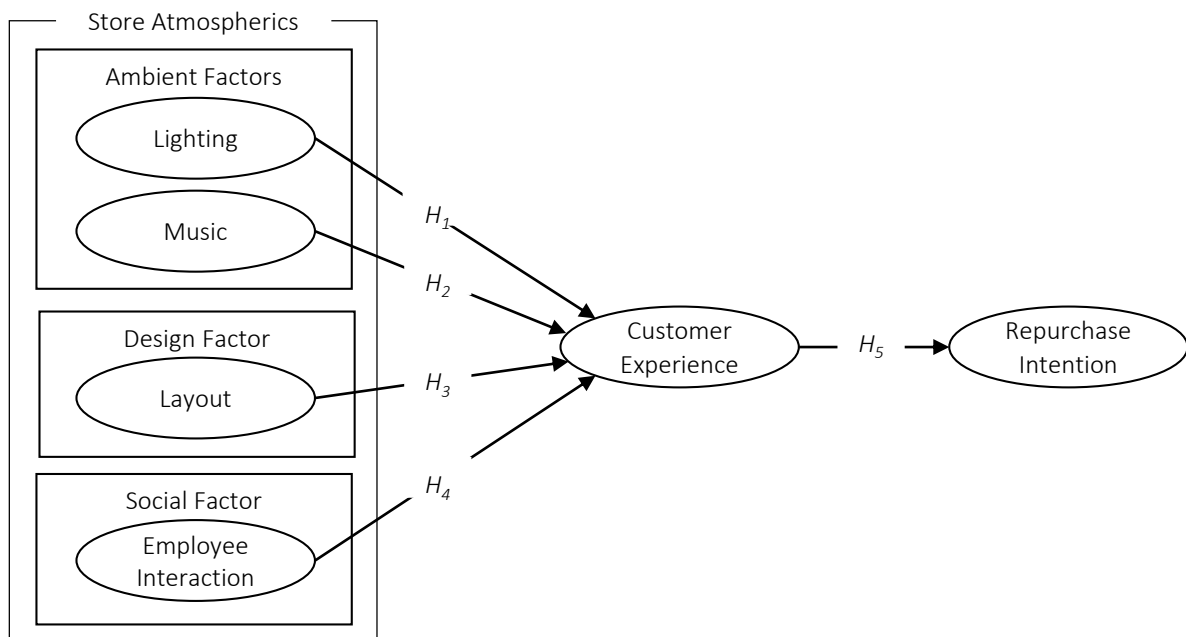


Figure 1. Conceptual framework

- H_1 : Store layout enhances customer experience.
- H_2 : Store music enhances customer experience.
- H_3 : Store lighting enhances the customer experience.
- H_4 : Employee interaction enhances customer experience.
- H_5 : Customer experience positively influences repurchase intention.

2. METHODS

This study used a quantitative approach and a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of sections, namely, sections A and B. Section A collected information about respondents' demographic profile and characteristics, including gender, age, marital status, level of qualification, occupation, and monthly income. Section B included the study's constructs (store layout, lighting, music, employee interaction, customer experience, and repurchase intention) as proposed in the conceptual model and their respective measurement items. It is crucial to highlight that the survey consisted of a screening question to ensure that the correct people participated in the study. The reason for having a screening question was that it was essential to determine that the participants were regular consumers of physical clothing retail stores. Customers who are well-informed and experienced on the subject matter will provide meaningful feedback to enable the research to respond to the research questions (Tucker et al., 2015).

The measurement items were developed using a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. The measurement items were adapted from previous studies (Hussain & Ali, 2015; Shahzadi et al., 2018). A non-probability convenience sampling technique was used to obtain data from regulars of brick-and-mortar clothing stores. The data was collected from 390 participants in Johannesburg in South Africa who voluntarily consented to participate in the study. The study adopted Covariance-Based Structural Equation Modelling (CB-SEM) because it aims

to confirm the hypothesized relationships (Hair Jr et al., 2014). Confirmatory Factor Analysis was conducted to assess the model fit, and the path analysis was used to evaluate the hypothesized relationships. Cronbach's alpha, item-total correlation, and composite were used (Jacobs et al., 2017; Vaske et al., 2017). The construct correlation matrix, average variance extracted, and factor loadings were assessed to measure validity (Singh et al., 2021).

3. RESULTS

The data analysis was performed on SPSS 25 to obtain descriptive statistics and AMOS 25 to run the CB-SEM, including Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) and structural model assessment. Table 1 represents the demographic profile of the respondents. According to the demographic profile, most of the respondents were female (56.92%), followed by males consisting of 36.92%, and a tiny percentage (1.03%) preferred not to say. A vast majority (80.51%) of respondents were between 18 to 25 years. 14.36% of the respondents were between the ages of 26 to 35 years. 2.82% of the respondents were between the ages of 36 to 45 years, while a tiny minority (2.31%) is above 46. The majority of the respondents are single (92.31%), while a small number (7.69%) are married. Just under half (47.44%) of the sample's level of qualification is a university bachelor's degree, 31.79% of the respondents have a high school qualification, while 9.49% of the participants have a college diploma.

The smallest group of the sample stated "other" as their level of qualification, while 9.49% of the participants have a post-graduate degree. A large majority of the respondents are students (76.92%), which makes sense considering the study was conducted in a city that houses higher education institutions; 7.44% of the respondents stated that they are employed, and 4.62% said that they are self-employed. In comparison, 3.33% of the sample is unemployed. Only 1.03% of the respondents stated their occupation as "other", while 6.67% are temporary/part-time students. Regarding monthly income, most of the participants (67.69%) indicated their income to be less than \$350, while 21.54% of the participants' income ranged from \$350-\$700. Additionally, 6.92% of the participants

Table 1. Demographic profile of respondents

Profile	Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage %
Gender	Female	222	56.92
	Male	144	36.92
Age	Prefer not to say	24	6.15
	18-25 years	314	80.51
	26-35 years	56	14.36
	36-45 years	11	2.82
	Above 45 years	9	2.31
Marital status	Married	30	7.69
	Single	360	92.31
Level of qualification	High School Diploma	124	31.79
	College Diploma	37	9.49
	University Bachelor's Degree	185	47.44
	Postgraduate Degree	33	8.46
	Other	11	2.82
Occupation	Student	300	76.92
	Employed	29	7.44
	Self-employed	18	4.62
	Unemployed	13	3.33
	Temporary/Part-time	26	6.67
	Other	4	1.03
Monthly income	Less than \$350	264	67.69
	\$350-\$700	84	21.54
	\$1,051-\$1,400	27	6.92
	Above \$1,400	15	3.85

indicated an income of \$1,051-\$1,400, with 3.85% of the respondents' income being above \$1,400.

0.503 because all factor loadings loading low had already been deleted.

The Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted to ascertain the model fit. For the model fit assessment, the most frequently used indices were assessed. These include CMIN/DF (χ^2/df) < 3, CFI > 0.9, IFI > 0.9, TLI > 0.9, GFI > 0.9, and RMSEA < 0.080 (Ho et al., 2019). The measurement model demonstrated acceptable results, CMIN/DF χ^2/df (1.1790), CFI (0.953), IFI (0.954), TLI (0.934), GFI (0.932), and RMSEA (0.045), which were all satisfactory (Dwivedi, 2015; Pappas et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2016). The second test included the reliability and validity assessment (Table 2). To test reliability, Cronbach's alpha, item-total correlation, and composite reliability were assessed. The first reliability test was conducted using Cronbach's alpha test to check the internal consistency of the measurement. The values ranged between 0.605 to 0.805. The item-total correlation values were above 0.30, indicating internal consistency (Jacobs et al., 2017; Vaske et al., 2017). Lastly, the composite reliability values were between 0.503 to 0.833. Although the suggested cut-off point is above 0.60 (Hair et al., 2011; Hair et al., 2019), the study kept

The paper assessed the factor loadings and average variance extracted (AVE) to measure convergent validity. Not all of the average variance extracted values met the proposed threshold of 0.50. However, the values were very close, except 1, which was below 0.40. Factor loadings that loaded low were removed. As suggested by Fornell and Larcker (1981, cited in Singh et al., 2021), only values above 0.500 were considered. Other scholars believe above 0.40 is also acceptable (Ahmad & Khan, 2017). The factor loadings ranged from 0.544 to 0.864, showing that convergent validity is evident. The construct correlation matrix, as outlined in Table 3, shows evidence of discriminant validity. These results indicate no multicollinearity among variables, as the paired constructs were less than 0.80 (Hanaysha, 2018).

The structural model was assessed to check the significance of the hypotheses, as demonstrated in Table 4. Four of the five hypotheses were supported. The findings reveal that the strongest relationship is between customer experience and repur-

Table 2. Reliability and validity assessment

Research constructs		M	SD	Item-total correlation	Cronbach's test	CR	AVE	Factor loadings
Store layout	SL1	5.07	1.622	0.409	0.696	0.765	0.450	0.615
	SL3	5.28	1.426	0.490				0.695
	SL4	5.59	1.520	0.480				0.637
Store music	SM1	5.32	1.511	0.446	0.680	0.748	0.503	0.729
	SM2	4.43	1.630	0.489				0.567
	SM4	4.97	1.650	0.595				0.810
Store lighting	SL1	5.59	1.414	0.614	0.805	0.833	0.562	0.744
	SL2	4.23	1.547	0.436				0.544
	SL3	5.38	1.495	0.726				0.813
	SL4	5.58	1.426	0.732				0.858
Employee interaction	EI1	5.78	1.465	0.528	0.733	0.712	0.457	0.806
	EI3	5.36	1.633	0.531				0.621
	EI4	5.35	1.612	0.529				0.579
Customer experience	CE1	4.80	1.444	0.310	0.605	0.503	0.336	0.578
	CE4	4.64	1.452	0.337				0.582
Repurchase intention	RI1	4.80	1.444	0.660	0.701	0.817	0.601	0.864
	RI2	5.85	1.479	0.569				0.761
	RI3	5.65	1.505	0.483				0.690

Note: M means value; SD means standard deviation; CR means composite reliability; AVE means average variance extracted.

Table 3. Construct correlation matrix

Constructs	SL	SM	SL	EI	CE	RI
SL	1	–	–	–	–	–
SM	.296**	1	–	–	–	–
SL	.405**	.475**	1	–	–	–
EI	.448**	.328**	.485**	1	–	–
CE	.343**	.311**	.429**	.404**	1	–
RI	.502**	.344**	.547**	.578**	.498**	1

Note: Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); SL means Store Layout; SM means Store Music; SL means Store Lighting; EI means Employee Interaction; CE means Customer Experience; RI means Repurchase Intention.

chase intention ($\beta = 0.745, p = 0.001$), followed by employee interaction and customer experience ($\beta = 0.293, p = 0.001$), and store layout and customer experience ($\beta = 0.207, p = 0.01$). Therefore, *H5, H4,* and *H3* are supported. The results also show that store layout enhances customer experience ($\beta = 0.163, p = 0.05$). However, the results demonstrated that store music does not enhance customer experience ($\beta = 0.048, p = ns$). Therefore, *H2* is not supported.

4. DISCUSSION

The retail environment is highly competitive, mainly because of the rise of online shopping, leaving physical retailers with challenges of increasing in-store traffic. In a physical store environment, certain elements play a crucial role in keeping customers in-store longer and, more importantly, keeping them coming back. This study investigated store environment factors that can

Table 4. Hypothesis test results

Hypothesis	Relationship	Estimate	Outcome
<i>H1</i>	Store layout → Customer experience	0.163*	Supported
<i>H2</i>	Store music → Customer experience	0.048 ^{ns}	Not supported
<i>H3</i>	Store lighting → Customer experience	0.207**	Supported
<i>H4</i>	Employee interaction → Customer experience	0.293***	Supported
<i>H5</i>	Customer experience → Repurchase intention	0.745***	Supported

Notes: *** means $p < 0.000$; ** means $p < 0.01$; * means $p < 0.05$, ns means not significant.

enhance customer experience and, in turn, repurchase intention. Barros et al. (2019) argued that the store atmosphere is a noteworthy feature in determining consumer satisfaction, affecting consumers' feelings regarding their shopping experiences. Prior studies have used the DAST (design-ambient-social-trialability) framework to investigate consumer decision-making in the retailing environment; however, limited studies have adapted the framework (excluding trialability) to a physical retail clothing store environment in South Africa.

Furthermore, prior studies have also focused on shopping behaviors such as purchase intention and not so much on repurchase. Therefore, this study attempts to close this gap. The findings reveal that the design factor (layout of the store), ambient factor (lighting), and social factor (employee interaction) have a positive impact on customer experience. The results are consistent with Gokcen and Anderson (2018), Mowrey et al. (2018), and Sharma and Agarwal (2017), who found these

elements necessary in the retail environment. Interestingly, one of the ambient factors, music, does not impact customer experience, which contradicts findings from prior research (Sharma & Agarwal, 2017).

Similarly, music has also been found to stimulate consumer spending (Roggeveen et al., 2020). However, this might also indicate that music is not an essential factor that keeps consumers in-store when shopping for clothes. Furthermore, the most vital relationship was customer experience and repurchase intention in physical clothing stores, as confirmed by Kavitha and Haritha (2018). Even with the increase in online shopping, consumers still want the opportunity to touch and inspect the clothes with the benefits of fulfilling their needs or wants for instant ownership (Mowrey et al., 2018). Moreover, it is imperative to note that a positive consumer experience is one of the antecedents of store attachment (Egan-Wyer et al., 2021). Store attachment is necessary because it means that consumers will repurchase.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of the study was to investigate the effect of store atmospherics on customer experience and ultimately repurchase intention. The results show that only store layout, lighting, and employee interaction affect customer experience positively. Moreover, customer experience significantly impacts repurchase intention. The first contribution is that the DAST framework is adapted to the physical clothing store environment. This study did not test trialability and only applied DAS (design-ambient-social) as important factors to consider when designing memorable in-store shopping experiences. Secondly, only one ambient aspect, lighting, is an enhancer of customer experience and not music. Thirdly, the study confirmed the most vital relationship to be between customer experience and repurchase intention within the physical retail clothing store environment. Therefore, marketers must consider these factors during mapping out the customer journey for brick-and-mortar stores. Future studies can replicate the proposed model within rural areas and other emerging economies. Additionally, the study used a convenient sampling technique, which limits generalisability, and that out of the 390 respondents, 314 were between the ages of 18-25. Future studies could also ensure that the distribution in terms of age is representative as per the store customer database (presenting generalisability opportunity), which can also be achieved through a quota sampling technique.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization: Etuhole Angula, Valencia Melissa Zulu.

Formal analysis: Etuhole Angula.

Methodology: Etuhole Angula, Valencia Melissa Zulu.

Supervision: Valencia Melissa Zulu.

Writing – original draft: Etuhole Angula.

Writing – review & editing: Valencia Melissa Zulu.

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