Diagnostic cues used by female consumers to evaluate work wear assortments of major South African department stores

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the relative importance of diagnostic cues used by female consumers in an emerging market to evaluate work wear assortments in major South African department stores. The cue diagnostic framework was used as a theoretical perspective for the study together with conjoint analysis to provide insights into the relative importance of diagnostic cues in terms of specified attribute levels as well as attribute ranking of importance. A survey research design was employed for the study. Data were collected through a self-administered questionnaire and completed by 121 (N=121) female consumers residing in Gauteng. A non-probability sampling technique was used to recruit these working women who were between the ages of 20 and 60 years with some form of higher education or training. The results indicate that these female consumers have set preferences when purchasing work wear from department stores in South Africa. Certain product cues/attributes were found to be more prominent than others while some were used in conjunction with other attributes to collectively strengthen the importance of these attributes in the decision making process. The findings of this study contribute to existing literature on consumer preferences in emerging markets and the apparel attributes that inform these preference structures. This research will be useful for researchers as well as marketers who are interested in marketing campaigns, product assortment planning and retail settings.

Keywords: department stores; apparel; product assortment; diagnostic cues; emerging market; conjoint analysis

Female consumers' decision making and spending is not only important for the South African retail industry in general (Hirsch, 2012; Pricewaterhouse Coopers (PWC) & Economist Intelligence Unit, 2012), but also more specifically for the local apparel retail sector (Marketline, 2015; PWC & Economist Intelligence Unit, 2012). In 2014, the women's wear category was the most profitable segment in the South African apparel retail sector with total revenues of R41.4 billion ($3.8 billion), comprising 51.4% of the industry's overall value (Marketline, 2015). Females who belong to the "highly aspirational" emerging middle class segment and who possess the disposable income to spend on fashion labels and luxury goods, have significantly contributed to the growth in this retail sector (PWC & Economist Intelligence Unit, 2012). Their buying behaviour has sparked considerable interest among various role players in the organised retail sector of the South African apparel retail market (Marketline,

2015; PWC & Economist Intelligence Unit, 2012), including department stores that offer extensive product assortments and services to a consumer population with diverse needs and wants (The Coca-Cola Retailing Research Council, 2010).

Currently, the South African retail environment is dominated by a select few retail chains (PWC & Economist Intelligence Unit, 2012), from which only a few divide their stores into several departments falling under the realm of department stores. Department stores offer a wide assortment of merchandise, from hard goods to soft goods, displaying products in a structured and categorized manner (e.g. men's and women's wear, accessories, shoes, and home ware) (Diamond & Litt, 2009) to provide consumers with the convenience of a large range of products and services under one roof (Dransfield & Needham, 2005). This range of activities often makes a department store the anchor store within a community (Thang & Tan, 2003). Though department stores provide a variety of assortment to diverse market segments these stores are challenged by the socio-economic environment in an emerging market such as South Africa (The Coca-Cola Retailing Research Council, 2010). The complex consumption patterns that reflect the cultural diversity of South African consumers (Bruyn & Freathy, 2011), force many department stores to continuously update their product offerings to cater for specific preferences. As consumers grow accustomed to a wider variety and availability of products, patronage becomes increasingly important for the continued growth and success of these department stores (The Coca-Cola Retailing Research Council, 2010; PWC & Economist Intelligence Unit, 2012). A retailer's product assortment is said to have an enormous impact on sales (Kok, Fisher & Vaidyanathan, 2009) as well as customer patronage and brand loyalty (Amine & Cadenat, 2003).

A product assortment can be defined as the specific type or collection of products that are available to consumers within a retail store (Clodfelter, 2015). Assortment planning is a critical issue for retail managers and constitutes the process whereby they establish the quantity, variety and kind of products to include in their ranges (Rajaram, 2001) in relation to specific aspects such as brands, colours, sizes and fabrics (Clodfelter, 2015). Consumers generally prefer larger assortments because it offers them the benefit of more choice and variety when making decisions to acquire products (Boyd & Bahn, 2009). Introducing a larger product assortment is however costly, which compel retailers to carefully assess their customers' individual needs rather than attempting to cater for the mass market (Lloyd, 2004). In South Africa, the newfound spending power and unique product needs of emerging middle class female consumers (Olivier, 2007), underscores the importance of meticulous product assortment selection that will draw these consumers into a store and increase the likelihood of them purchasing products from the store (Pan & Zinkham, 2006). A desirable product assortment not only influence shoppers' decision to purchase but is the key reason why a store will be patronised by consumers (Paulins & Geistelfeld, 2003).

A number of studies have focused on product assortments in more developed countries. These studies have explored inventory depth and breadth of basic and fashion product collections (Rajaram, 2001), consumers' demand for variety (Stablein, Holweg & Miemczyk, 2011), the ideal size of product assortments (Boyd & Bahn, 2009) and the role of product assortments in developing customer patronage (Amine & Cadenat, 2003). To date, comparatively few studies have explored consumers' evaluation of product assortments in emerging markets such as South Africa. Diagnostic cues play a vital role in the assessment of products and can reduce the decision-making costs incurred by the consumer. By identifying the cues that are important to the target market and focusing on these cues, the retailer can simplify the decision-making process for the consumer (Herpen & Pieters, 2007). Under this assumption an opportunity exist to initiate research and gain a better understanding of the cues used by consumers in an emerging market to evaluate apparel product assortments; these cues in turn influence their perceptions of

the retailer and their patronage behaviour. This study therefore investigates the diagnostic cues used by female consumers to evaluate work wear product assortment in major South African department stores. Specific study objectives were to investigate the relative importance of a) intrinsic cues (i.e. style, colour, size and quality) and b) extrinsic cues (i.e. price, brand, store image, store name) and c) to determine the priority ranking (the most important diagnostic cues) intrinsic and extrinsic cues used by female consumers when evaluating work wear product assortment in prominent South African department stores. For the purpose of this study, work wear was selected as the specific product category to be explored. Women's extensive influence in the work and market place in recent years (Silverstein & Sayre, 2009) conceivably resulted in the significant and profitable contribution of women's wear to the apparel industry (Marketline, 2015). For women to function in various employment positions and working environments requires suitable work wear, since many companies have set dress codes (Smith, De Klerk & Fletcher, 2011). Work wear is also chosen based on its appropriateness for a particular social role, and the female consumer will often use this type of clothing to submerge the aspects of herself that are not pertinent to the office/work environment (Woodward, 2007). In summary, the decision-making process for selecting and evaluating work wear is very complex (Smith et al., 2011), and limited research has been conducted on this topic which provides further impetus for the study.

This study contributes to better insight regarding the diagnostic cues used by females in an emerging market to evaluate apparel product assortment. By focusing on the correct cues, apparel retailers can reduce the risk of carrying incorrect fashion lines/ranges and of over-stocking, both of which mean they have to sell products at a margin lower than they wished. Additionally, it can provide retailers with insight how to plan and build their apparel assortments to attract an evolving consumer base while simultaneously maintaining their existing customers. First, this paper presents the theoretical background, the Cue Diagnostic Framework, followed by an explication of apparel attributes consisting of intrinsic and extrinsic cues. Second, the methodology employed for this study is discussed and justified. Third, the results of the study are presented. This paper concludes with final conclusions and recommendations for retailers and brands considering apparel assortments for an emerging market followed by the limitations of the study.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Consumers' evaluation of product assortments

Literature suggests that consumers follow a hierarchical process, whereby they first evaluate an assortment and then assess individual products within that assortment (Cherney, 2003). During their assessment of individual products various attributes or cues may be used as evaluative criteria (Jin, Park & Ryu, 2010). Evidence further suggests that those attributes most prominent in consumers' evaluation would be in line with their needs and support their underlying personal values (Wickliffe & Pysarchik, 2001) as well as their goals or preferences, which is why these attributes are viewed as important marketing variables to influence consumers' purchasing decisions (Forsythe, Kim & Pethee, 1999). The argument brought forward is that consumers will evaluate apparel product assortments on the basis of certain diagnostic attributes, which is patterned after their assessment of individual products.

The aforementioned arguments closely relate to the underlying assumptions of Slovic and Lichtenstein's (1971) Cue Diagnostic Framework (CDF), which served as a suitable theoretical perspective for this study. CDF builds on cue usage suggesting that consumers' judgements and choices are based on the use of multiple cues. CDF further postulates that the degree to which a specific cue is used by a consumer depends on its predictive or diagnostic value (Slovic & Lichtenstein, 1971).

Consumers will usually choose and rank one cue from a well-defined list of cues as the most significant (Bradlow & Rao, 2000), which will further impact on the manner in which they use this cue/ attribute and incorporate or combine it in their final evaluation (Purohit & Srivastava, 2001). It is thus argued that consumers will evaluate an apparel assortment by ranking the diagnostic (predictive) value of product cues (i.e. attributes) in terms of their importance, but also by considering how certain cues are used together to make a final decision (Connolly & Srivastava, 1995). For the purposes of this study, two attribute categories are of particular interest namely intrinsic and extrinsic cues (Veale & Quester, 2009).

Product attributes: Intrinsic and extrinsic cues

Due to the many options available in department stores the evaluation of a product assortment can be overwhelming, yet the general notion is that consumers will base their purchasing behaviour on the intrinsic and extrinsic attributes that are presented to them (Meixner & Knoll, 2012). Cues (often used interchangeable with "attributes") refer to the product characteristics that are used as a baseline for evaluation; cues therefore have diagnostic abilities and convey information about the valued characteristic of an apparel product (Connolly & Srivastava, 1995). Intrinsic cues refer to product attributes that are intrinsic to the actual product (e.g. style, colour and size). This implies that when altering intrinsic cues/ attributes, the look and feel of the product itself will be changed (Veale & Quester, 2009). Extrinsic cues, on the other hand, are aspects that are related to the product but do not represent basic physical components of the product. An extrinsic cue (e.g. brand and price) can therefore be classified as any product characteristic that can be changed without changing the basic use or core ingredients of the product (Veale & Quester, 2009). Extrinsic attributes often serve as cues for product performance and thus substantiate specific preferences (Kauppinen-Raisanen & Luomala 2010). By adding and

combining the preferred intrinsic/ extrinsic cues in a product assortment, the consumer's overall anticipated identification cost (i.e. the cost of establishing the character of each alternative in the assortment) is lowered (Herpen & Pieters, 2007). These cues therefore serve as crucial indicators for consumers to assess whether an assortment will satisfy their specific needs (Herpen & Pieters, 2007; Purohit & Srivastava, 2001).

Intrinsic cues

Style is based on the structural design of an apparel product that is accomplished through the initial construction and assembly of the garment (Marshall, Jackson, Stanley, Kefgen & Touchie-Specht, 2004). Stone (2008) further explains that the style of an apparel product may refer to the distinctive appearance of a garment or the combination of certain features that makes it unique. Style includes dimensions such as silhouette as well as design elements and principles and can be categorized into classical styles - a trend that persists for a long duration of time; fashion styles - the accepted style of the moment (Brannon, 2010); casual styles - emphasis on practicality and comfort (North, De Vos & Kotze, 2003); and tailored styles - clothing that is moulded to create a desired shape on a body (Jones, 2005). Work attire is often tailored to provide a confident and professional appearance (Howlett, Pine, Orakcioglu & Fletcher, 2013). A combination of all the above-mentioned styles will result in a variety of styles. Style levels/ descriptors that were of particular interest for this study were classic styles, high fashion styles, tailored styles, casual styles and a variety of styles.

Size relates to the target market's preferred fit of a garment (Brown & Rice, 2014). Although each person's definition of a good fit may be subjective, consumers tend to use size labels as informational cues to assess the suitability and fit of an item in relation to their specific body type. They are also said to be more satisfied with fit if their body shape was taken into consideration and catered for in a product assortment (Lee, Istook, Nam & Park, 2007). A persistent

problem with size charts is that body shapes continuously change due to diet and physical exercise, which makes it very difficult to have one universal size for all population groups and cultures (Tamburrino, 1992). Retailers tend to base their size curves on past records and historic data to develop an appropriate product assortment for their target market (Clodfelter, 2015) and few cater for atypical groups such as petite or plus sized women (Yoo, Khan & Rutherford-Black, 1999). In terms of assessing an apparel product assortment, it would thus be important to understand consumers' preferences in terms of specific size categories such as petite sizes, plus sizes and standard sizes, and whether this will influence their evaluation of a store's product assortment.

Colour is a significant visual cue in consumers' assessment of apparel products and may involve a multi-dimensional, intricate experience (Funk & Ndubisi, 2006). Colour is seldom analysed as a single attribute, but rather in conjunction with other qualities such as fashionability, store image and style (Crozier, 1999). Colour preferences have been linked to specific product categories (e.g. work wear, shoes) (Grossman & Wisenblit, 1999) and consumers also seem to prefer brighter hues (Crozier, 1999). In addition, specific colours may form part of a current fashion trend and will determine whether an apparel product is considered fashionable or whether it is perceived as a basic item that is timeless and less bound by seasonal changes e.g. garment in a neutral colour (Clodfelter, 2015). Apparel retailers' understanding of a target market's colour preferences and the meanings associated with specific colours is therefore imperative (Funk & Ndubisi, 2006). The challenge facing apparel retailers is to establish whether their customers have universal colour preferences and how they use colours to coordinate items (Clodfelter, 2015). Levels that were included in this study to describe colour were neutral colours, bright colours, seasonal colours, muted pastel colours and earth tones.

Quality is seen as the degree to which a product or a retailer's entire product assortment meets the requirements or expectations of a consumer (Brown & Rice, 2014). It is important to note that the functional performance of an apparel product includes aspects such as construction, serviceability and overall finishing (Brown & Rice, 2014). Consumers are often unable to make an objective assessment of the functional quality of products before making a final product decision (Purohit & Srivastava, 2001), and in these instances they rely on alternative product cues (i.e. price, store image and brand) to determine the quality of the product, which in turn relates to perceived quality (Estelami, 2008). The price-quality relationship is of specific interest since the price-quality cue utilization theory postulates that consumers perceive higher-priced goods as higher-quality products, and therefore tolerate higher prices as an indicator of good quality (Estelami, 2008). For the purposes of this study, levels were included to describe quality as easy care, well made and durable.

Extrinsic cues

Price is classified as an extrinsic cue, since it is a non-physical product characteristic that does not form part of the actual product but nonetheless feature prominently in consumers' evaluation of apparel (Eckman, Damhorst & Kadolph, 1990). Amnine and Cadenat (2003) found price to be one of the main cues that affect consumers' evaluation of a product assortment. The pervasive influence of price is due in part to the fact that the price cue is present in all purchase situations and, at a minimum, represents to all consumers the amount of economic outlay that must be sacrificed in order to engage in a given purchase transaction (Slovic & Lichtenstein, 1971). Consumers perceive price both positively and negatively, and these perceptions will ultimately influence their purchasing behaviour (Moore & Carpenter, 2006). Concepts that represent price in its negative role include: price consciousness, sale proneness, and value consciousness (Amine & Cadenat, 2003). In order to attract a specific market segment to their stores, retailers often promote a price point policy that will appeal to a specific consumer

group (Su, 2007). The levels included in this study for price as a diagnostic cue was low to moderate prices, moderate to high prices and expensive to very expensive prices.

Brands may form the basis of an emotional and psychological connection with consumers and can therefore produce significant financial gain for brand owners (Okonkwo, 2007). Brand name products also create a certain image for a store, and retailers use this image to convey a message to consumers in their pre-purchase decision-making stage (North et al., 2003). In general, retailers define two types of brand to distinguish products, namely national- and private brands: National brands (also known as designer brands) are well-known brands which are sold through a wide variety of outlets, e.g. Levis. Private brands (also referred to as store or in-store brands) are exclusive to a particular retailer (Clodfelter, 2015) e.g. Kelso brand, which is unique to Edgars' stores. In a more developed context, Goldsmith, Flynn, Goldsmith and Stacey (2010) found that private brand buyers had more faith in the overall performance of a private label product and felt that it was more appropriate and suited to their lifestyles. Emerging market consumers on the other hand were reluctant to adopt store brands because they believed these brands lacked quality, freshness, performance, durability and aesthetic appeal (Herstein & Jaffe, 2007). It would therefore seem that emerging market consumers are more discerning and demand the best quality brands. For the purposes of this study, levels included in the description of brands were designer brands (national brands), in-store brands (private brands) and a variety of brands, which relate to a combination of designer and in-store brands.

Store image can be defined as the consumer's perception of a store that is based on a combination of different attributes (Chang & Lang, 2010). Yan, Yurchisin and Watchravesringkan (2010) suggest that location, convenience, price, promotion, store layout, quality and sales staff are aspects that contribute to the consumer's overall perception of store image. Furthermore, it is acknowledged that store atmospherics such as lighting, colour,

and music also affect consumers' perceptions of the store image (Ghosh, Tripathi & Kumar, 2010). Visser, Du Preez and Noordwyk (2006) found that product assortment and personnel significantly contributed to the perceived image of a store. It is thus argued that product assortment is closely linked to a store's image. Retailers invest considerable effort and financial means into creating a store image that will attract consumers' attention and differentiate the store from its competitors (Theodoridis & Chatzipanagiotou, 2009). Based on the aforementioned, store image can be seen as an important extrinsic cue, with descriptors/ levels that may include a discount image, fashionable image, convenience image, exclusive image, quality image and a value oriented image.

Store name is often the first point of reference between a consumer and retailer and therefore represents a key element in consumers' recollection of the characteristics that they associate with a specific product assortment or retailer (Hillenbrand, Alcauter, Cervantes & Barrios, 2013). Store name was divided into levels representative of the major stores currently operating in the South African apparel retail sector including Woolworths, Edgars, Truworths, Stuttafords, Ackermans and PEP. Although Truworths outlets might not conform to the classical definition of department stores, their product assortment include numerous product lines such as ladies wear, men's wear, children's clothing, cosmetics, shoes, accessories and home ware (Truworths website, n.d.). Similarly, Ackermans and PEP that are known for discount prices, can be compared to other South African department stores since their assortment include ladies' wear, men's wear, children's clothing, home ware, cosmetics and certain food items.

Having reviewed all the attributes that may describe a retailer's product assortment, conjoint analysis came to light as an appropriate technique to investigate the relative importance of these diagnostic (extrinsic and intrinsic) cues in a female consumer's evaluation of a work wear product assortment. Conjoint analysis aligns well with the underlying assumptions

of the Cue Diagnostic Framework as it permits the estimation of the relative importance (diagnostic value) of each attribute as well as the relative importance of each attribute level (Jin et al., 2010) thus providing insight into the consumer's preference structure across multi-attribute alternatives (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson & Tatham, 2006). These aspects are further clarified in the following research methodology section.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To gain insight into the relative importance of diagnostic cues used by female consumers when evaluating work wear product assortments in department stores a survey research design that included a conjoint analysis technique was employed. A survey research approach was followed to address the formulated research objectives about the importance of intrinsic and extrinsic cues used in work wear assortment evaluation. Conjoint analysis techniques have been extensively applied in the marketing field to identify product offerings with the ideal combination of attributes for specific consumer segments (Green, Krieger & Wind, 2001; Hair et al., 2006; Mazzocchi, 2008). These techniques are based on the simple premise that in a realistic decision framework, consumers will jointly compare a bundle of attributes (e.g. style, colour, price, brand etc.) and then exercise certain "trade-offs" to identify the best possible option (Green et al., 2001; Hair et al., 2006).

Instrument development

A conjoint analysis study involves the formulation of hypothetical alternatives, which for the purposes of this study was specified in terms of particular product assortment attributes (e.g. style, colour and price) and levels for each attribute (e.g. classic styles, neutral colours and low to moderate prices). The respondents' eventual rating of these hypothetical alternatives, would then provide an indication of their overall preference structures and the values (i.e. utilities and part-worths) that they assign to specific attribute levels (Hair et al., 2006). Since the results of a conjoint study

TABLE 1:
MATRIX WITH ASSORTMENT ATTRIBUTES AND LEVELS

Attribute Level	Attribute 1 Style	Attribute 2 Colour	Attribute 3 Size	Attribute 4 Price	Attribute 5 Brand	Attribute 6 Perceived quality	Attribute 7 Store image	Attribute 8 Store name
Level 1	Classic styles	Neutral colours	Standard & petite sizes	Low to moderate prices	In-store & de-signer brands	Easy Care	Discount	Edgars
Level 2	Trendy styles	Bright colours	Standard & plus sizes	Moderate to high prices	Designer Brands	Well made	Convenience	Woolworths
Level 3	Tailored styles	Seasonal colours	Standard sizes	Expensive to very expensive prices	In-store brands	Durable	Exclusive	Truworths
Level 4	Variety of styles	Muted pastels	Standard, plus & petite sizes				Quality	Ackermans
Level 5	Casual styles	Earth Tones					Value oriented	Pep
Level 6							Fashionable	Stuttafords

is based on hypothetical alternatives, a thorough approach is needed to ensure that the attributes and levels included in the conjoint task provides an unbiased approximation of respondents' true preferences. Previous studies (Fiore & Damhorst, 1992; Herpen & Pieters, 2007; Smith et al., 2011; Veale & Quester, 2009) highlighted the intrinsic and extrinsic product attributes that consumers use when evaluating apparel assortments. To confirm and isolate these intrinsic and extrinsic cues and their respective levels a focus group was conducted involving female consumers. The product assortment attributes were narrowed down to key intrinsic (i.e. style, size, colour and quality) and extrinsic (i.e. price; brand; store image and store name) factors. Stores included in the questionnaire had to comply with the definition of department stores and had to be South African based. Three to six attribute levels were specified for each of the identified product assortment attributes as illustrated in the choice set matrix (Table 1).

Conjoint tasks can be difficult and time consuming to complete which may result in respondent fatigue and information overload (Sawtooth Software© Inc., 1997-2002). For these reasons, relevant images were developed in conjunction with a graphic designer to communicate each attribute level in an easy to understand, practical manner that would facilitate quick comprehension and completion of the questionnaire. Once the attributes were identified and the levels were specified with appropriate images, the Conjoint Value Analyses (CVA) Sawtooth software© package was used to create 34 paired-profile conjoint tasks that employ an additive model of consumer preference (Hair et al, 2006). The computer generated conjoint tasks/ profiles were then transferred to an online survey questionnaire, using Survey Monkey. As illustrated in Figure 1, the conjoint tasks involved a comparison between two sets of profiles (including levels for each attribute) in addition to a nine point rating scale on which respondents could then indicate their preference for one of the hypothetical scenarios (Hair et al., 2006).

FIGURE 1:
PAIR-WISE PROFILES

Sampling and data collection

A non-probability, purposive sampling technique was used for this study. In adopting a purposive sampling approach, female respondents from the emerging middle class consumer segment were recruited for the purposes of the study. The emerging middle class market has occupational status and specific life-style characteristics that differentiate them from other markets (Seekings, 2008; Seekings & Nattrass, 2002). They typically have some type of tertiary qualification and earn a salary by working full- or part-time (Seekings 2008). Moreover, emerging markets are in transition and subjected to political, economic and social changes (The Coca-Cola Retailing Research Council, 2010). The target population for this study consisted of female consumers between the ages of 20 and 60, working full- or part-time, residing in Gauteng. The Coca Cola retailing council (2010) found that the emerging market consumer is sophisticated about internet access and the use of mobile phones. Acquaintances that adhere to the emerging female consumer criteria were asked, via emailing them the link, to complete the on-line questionnaire. A snowball sampling technique was employed to further extend the sample by asking the initial participants to forward the online questionnaire

to female friends and family residing in Gauteng. By using this referral method it was possible to include an adequate sample for the study. A total of 121 usable questionnaires were collected. Hair et al. (2006) suggests that the sample size should preferably be 100 respondents or more. Due to the nature of the study (conjoint analysis) a sample of 121 was deemed to give a reliable and accurate data analysis.

RESULTS

Sample characteristics

Female participants ranged in age from 20 to 62 years (M_{age} = 32) and resided in Gauteng. The majority of participants were Black (46.2%) followed by Whites (36.2%) and other population groups (17.3%). Most participants (47%) indicated that they had a tertiary degree, some even had a post-graduate degree (11%), whereas others (21%) indicated that they had some type of diploma or training, and the rest (19%) had a Grade 12 qualification. A third of the participants (33%) indicated that they had a household income of > R25 000 per month, while 21% earned > R15 000 to ≤ R25 000 per month, 31% earned > R5000 to ≤ R15 000 per month and 14% earned ≤ R5000 per month.

Relative importance of identified diagnostic cues

For the purposes of this study, the average importance of attributes and utility values for specific levels were analysed on an aggregate level by means of the ordinary lease squared (OLS) method. One of the benefits of conjoint analysis is that it has fewer statistical assumptions associated with model fit estimation (Hair et al., 2006). The average R-squared is the most common measure for conjoint analysis models and values above 0.80 can be described as a good model fit. Within this study, estimations were based on the responses of 121 individuals, each performing 34 choice tasks. The average R-squared goodness of fit measure for this study was 0.963 which indicated a very good fit. The results showed that the cues (attributes) rated the most important were store name (26.6%)

followed by store image (14.9%), colour (14.9%), style (12.2%) and size (10.1%). The least prominent cues in respondents' preference structures were price (9.7%), quality (5.6%) and brand (5.6%). Table 2 summarises the relative importance of each attribute in descending order.

Priority ranking and utility values of attribute levels

When consumers evaluate product attributes, they are likely to make trade-offs, for example when a consumer prefers a particular style of a product but perceives the price as high, quality might be introduced into the decision-making process to establish whether the garment is worth the price. This relates to the relative "worth" or utility value of an attribute (Hair et al., 2006). The higher the utility value of a particular attribute, the more preferred it is and the more likely a consumer would be willing to invest in it. Table 2 shows the highest ranking cue/ attribute levels with the corresponding utility values for each level. It is important to note that an arbitrary additive constant was used to determine the impact of each attribute level on consumer preferences, which means that the utility level values for one attribute cannot be measured/ compared to those of another attribute. Figures 2 to 9 depict the utility level values for each cue (attribute) in descending order.

Store name, which had the highest relative importance ranking (26.6%), was divided into levels representative of prominent South African apparel retail outlets including Woolworths, Edgars, Truworths, Stuttafords, Ackermans and PEP. Woolworths had the highest utility value of 17.3, followed by Edgars (12.0) and then Truworths (8.9), whereas negative utility values were linked to Stuttafords (-2.5), Ackermans (-8.8) and PEP (-26.9). These results indicate that respondents most preferred work wear assortments associated with the Woolworths, Edgars and Truworths store names. Dodds (1991) found that a store name had a direct influence on consumers' perceptions of products/ product ranges in terms of value and price, which may ultimately influence their overall assessment of

TABLE 2:
RELATIVE IMPORTANCE OF ASSORTMENT CUES AND
**HIGHEST RANKING LEVEL OF EACH ASSORTMENT CUE**

Assortment cue (attribute)	Relative importance (%)	Average	Number of levels	Attribute levels	Utility value for attribute level	Std dev.
Store name	26.6%	26.6	6	Woolworths	17.3	29.1
				Edgars	12.0	28.0
				Truworths	8.9	25.8
				Stuttafords	-2.5	31.7
				Ackermans	-8.8	26.9
				Pep	-26.9	32.5
Store image	14.9%	14.9	6	Quality	3.6	14.2
				Exclusive	2.0	18.9
				Convenience	1.5	17.5
				Value	-1.3	16.0
				Fashion	-2.0	15.9
				Discount	-3.6	18.4
Colour	14.9%	14.9	5	Neutral	6.5	18.2
				Bright	2.2	18.3
				Earth	-1.0	19.6
				Season	-1.9	15.8
				Pastel	-5.7	18.0
Style	12.2%	12.2	5	Varied	2.5	14.9
				Classic	2.0	14.6
				Trendy	-0.8	14.4
				Casual	-1.1	16.9
				Tailor	-2.5	13.8
Size	10.1%	10.1	4	Standard, petite & plus	3.5	15.8
				Standard & plus	2.6	15.0
				Standard	-2.3	14.4
				Standard & petite	-3.8	16.2
Price	9.7%	9.7	3	Low to Medium	6.1	15.9
				Moderate to High	2.1	9.5
				Expensive to Very expensive	-8.2	15.5
Quality	5.6%	5.6	3	Durable	0.9	8.8
				Well Made	0.5	7.7
				Easy Care	-1.4	8.2
Brand	5.6%	5.6	3	Store & Designer	1.9	8.0
				Designer	-0.8	9.3
				Store	-1.1	10.2

a retailer's product assortment. Another aspect that should be brought into consideration is that Woolworths, Edgars and Truworths offer credit facilities to their customers and based on these added benefits, the option to purchase wo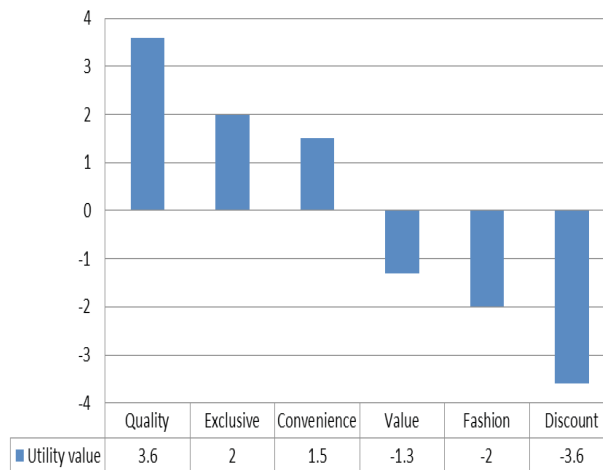rk wear from these stores may be more appealing than the other stores used in this study. In addition, prior experience and existing store patronage may contribute to pre-meditated store preference in participants' rating of the hypothetical alternatives.

Store image had the second highest relative importance ranking (14.9%), which underscores

FIGURE 2:
STORE NAME UTILITY VALUES

	Woolworths	Edgars	Truworths	Stuttafords	Ackermans	Pep
■ Utility value	17.3	12	8.9	-2.5	-8.8	-26.9
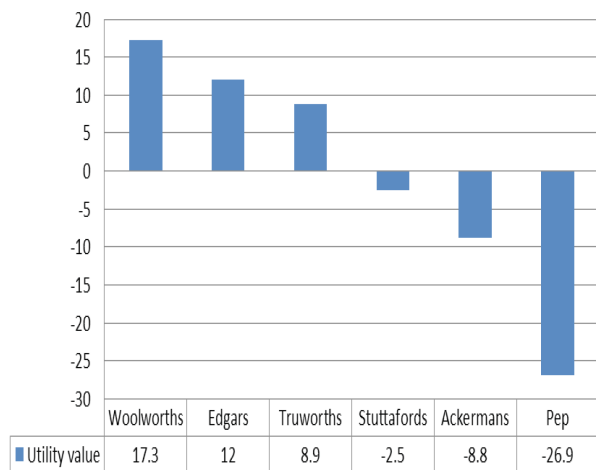
FIGURE 3:
STORE IMAGE UTILITY VALUES

	Quality	Exclusive	Convenience	Value	Fashion	Discount
■ Utility value	3.6	2	1.5	-1.3	-2	-3.6

the conclusion of Visser et al. (2006) that a unique store image is an important means for store differentiation. In terms of the relevance of store image in assessing work wear assortments, quality had the highest utility value (3.6), followed by exclusivity (2.0) and convenience (1.5). Value (-1.3), fashion (-2.0) and discount (-3.6) store images obtained negative utility values. These results link to the top three ranking stores i.e. Woolworths, Truworths and Edgars that are associated with quality, exclusivity and convenience, whereas the lowest ranking stores such as Ackermans and PEP are more associated with discount pricing structures and value-for-money and possibly not perceived as stores offering variety of work wear options. McGoldrick (2002) identified several attributes that contribute to the holistic store image of a department store. Store name, price, brands and styles may have all been linked to the store image, as the various stores included in the conjoint tasks are all well-known within South African apparel retail sector. Participants could therefore have been influenced by their own pre-conceived notions and ideas about the stores' images.

Colour was joint second in the ranking of diagnostic cues that are prevalent in the evaluation of work wear product assortments. Colour is recognized as one of the most significant visual attributes in various age groups' choice of product, regardless of their gender and other demographic variables (Ackay, Sable & Dalgin, 2012). Previous research by Crozier (1999) suggests that when

colour is analysed it is often paired with other intrinsic (e.g. style) or extrinsic (e.g. store image) attributes in the evaluation of a product/ product assortment. In this study, neutral colours were ranked the most preferred (6.5), followed by bright colours (2.2), whereas earth tones (-1.0), seasonal (-1.9) and pastel (-5.7) colours were ranked negatively by participants. Neutral colours are often associated with typical corporate wear and may thus account for these preferences. The results nevertheless substantiate those of Visser et al. (2006) who found that South African females preferred neutral and soft colours. These findings may offer significant insight for retailers to ensure that they have the correct colour mix in their work wear product assortments.

FIGURE 4:
COLOUR UTILITY VALUES

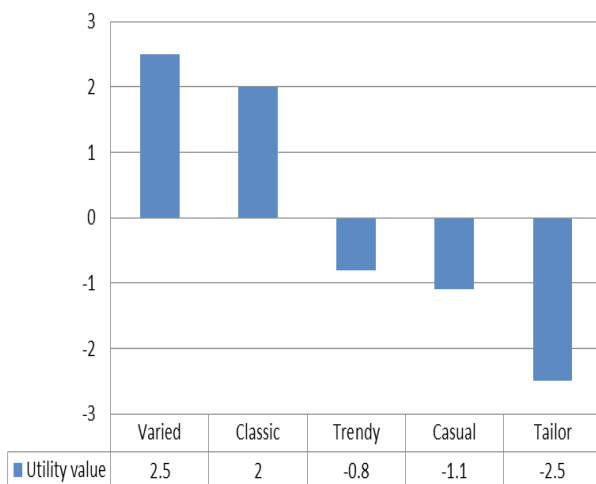|	Neutral	Bright	Earth	Season	Pastel
■ Utility value	6.5	2.2	-1	-1.9	-5.7
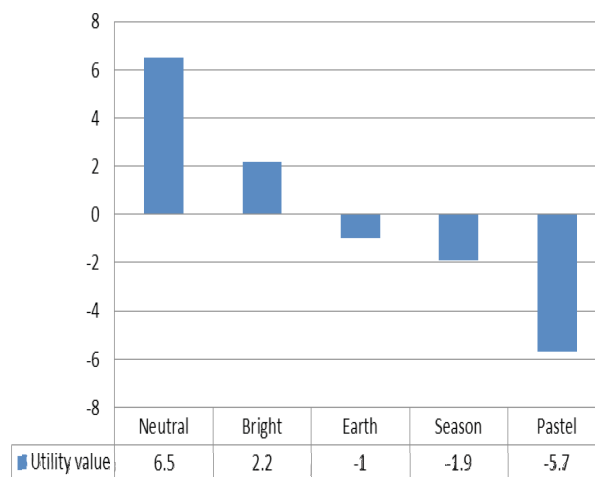
varied, classic, trendy, casual and tailored work Style was divided into five levels namely varied, classic, trendy, casual and tailored work wear styling. The varied category achieved the highest ranking (2.5) and were thus most preferred, followed by a preference for classic styles (2.0). Da Silva and Alwi (2008) found that consumers generally preferred stores with a large variety as opposed to stores that only specialize in one type of product. A variety of styles may offer female consumers the option of combining and matching different styles to create unique appearances in their work environment. In addition, classical styles may be considered a cost saving approach to acquiring work clothes, since these styles remain relevant for extended time periods and thus eliminate the need for constant updating of a wardrobe. Classical styles can also be combined with casual clothing to reduce the number of clothing options one has to purchase. Trendy (-0.8), casual (-1.1) and tailored (-2.5) styles achieved the lowest rankings. It is rather surprising that tailored styles were ranked last since tailored suits are generally perceived as appropriate work attire in a corporate environment. This could be an indication that women in the local context have a less formal approach to work wear.
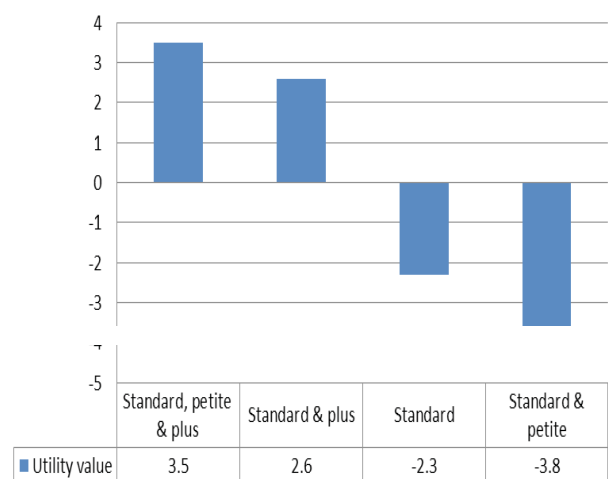
Size of garments within the work wear product assortment had a ranking of 5 out of 8 at 10.1%.

The fact that size ranked at such a low rating of importance could indicate that the female consumers are satisfied with the variety of sizes available to them in the South African retail market. Conversely, this may indicate they do not have sufficient understanding and background knowledge to correctly assess the sizing and fit of clothing items. The highest ranking level was a combination of standard, petite and plus sizes (3.5), while the combination of standard and plus sizes (2.6) was second. The size ratios that scored negative rankings were standard (-2.3) and the combination of standard and petite sizes (-3.8). Participants thus preferred to have the option of multiple sizes in a work wear assortment. Apparel retailers should thus cater for various body types and sizes, especially when there are different cultural groups and races prevalent in the consumer population (Lee et al., 2007) such as in the case of the South African emerging market context. Yoo et al. (1999) found that there are limited retailers who cater for additional consumer groups such as petite, tall or plus size women, which creates opportunity for further growth in the apparel retail sector. If retailers could firstly find a way to standardize sizing across department stores and secondly offer a variety of fits for different body shapes, they could achieve a competitive advantage over other retailers.
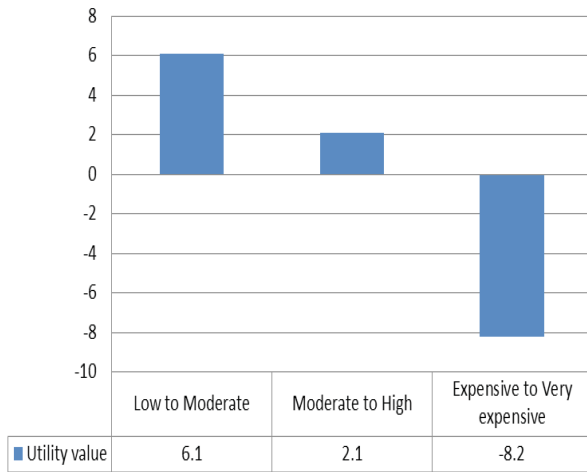
FIGURE 5:
STYLE UTILITY VALUES

	Varied	Classic	Trendy	Casual	Tailor
Utility value	2.5	2	-0.8	-1.1	-2.5

FIGURE 6:
SIZE UTILITY VALUES

	Standard, petite & plus	Standard & plus	Standard	Standard & petite
Utility value	3.5	2.6	-2.3	-3.8

FIGURE 7:
PRICE UTILITY VALUES

	Low to Moderate	Moderate to High	Expensive to Very expensive
■ Utility value	6.1	2.1	-8.2

FIGURE 8:
LEVELS OF QUALITY UTILITY VALUES

	Durable	Well Made	Easy Care
■ Utility value	0.9	0.5	-1.4

Price achieved the third lowest relative importance ranking (9.7%). Price can become less important when set against other attributes such as the fit of the product and colour (Holmlund, Hagman & Polsa, 2011) as reflected in the results of this study. The need for and importance of the product category (i.e. work wear) might also play a role in the lower ranking importance of price. Consumers are found to be more willing to pay for corporate office clothing than for casual day wear (Holmlund et al., 2011). However, a certain amount of price sensitivity still seems to prevail as the "low to moderate" pricing level received the highest utility value (6.1). The "moderate to high" price level (2.1) was ranked second, indicative of an emerging market consumer for whom a medium to high ratio would still be acceptable.

Quality was ranked second last (in conjunction with brand) and only obtained a 5.6% relative importance rating from participants in this study. When functional quality is not visible or the consumer cannot effectively assess or base a decision on the quality dimension they will make use of other attributes such as store name, price, brand or country of origin as an indication of the "perceived quality" (Brown & Rice, 2014). Participants may therefore have used the store name and image, e.g. Woolworths, as an indicator of perceived quality of the work wear assortment rather than the actual levels specified

for quality in the conjoint task. This reiterates the strong presence of store name and image in consumers' evaluation of work wear product assortments. Nevertheless, the highest ranked attribute level for quality was "durable work wear" (0.9), second was "well-made work wear" (0.5) and finally "easy care" (-1.4). Retailers can thus emphasize the durability of the work wear in their product assortments by adding product guarantees to their garments. They may also want to consider introducing performance features to work wear clothing such as non-iron, breathable, crease resistant and stain resistant finishes, which will extent the durability of the products.

Brand was, together with perceived quality, the lowest ranking diagnostic cue with a meagre 5.6% relative importance rating in the evaluation of work wear product assortments. The highest ranking level was a combination of store and designer brands (1.9). When presented individually as the only options available in an assortment, designer brands (-0.8) and store brands (-1.1) obtained negative rankings. These results again suggest that participants preferred an assortment with more alternatives and in this instance, a variety of brands. As mentioned by Okonkwo (2007), consumers can form an emotional and a psychological attachment to a store through the use of branding. By incorporating both store and designer brands, retailers can increase the variety of products

they offer, which may in turn contribute to increased sales.

Store brands have a certain advantage over manufacturer brands in the sense that they are multi-faceted (Ailawadi & Keller, 2004), and often rely on other attributes such as store atmospherics, price, quality and product assortments to create a stronger brand image. In this study, the store name seems to fulfil a prominent role in participants' evaluation of an assortment, more so than particular manufacturer brands. It may even be argued, that in this case the store name came to fore in the role of the more prominent "brand". Based on the findings of Goldsmith et al. (2010), the inclusion of store brands into a product assortment can greatly enhance the efficiency of the consumer decision-making process, since consumers may link the product attributes to the qualities of the store and then perceive the offering as a good quality product at a lower price than designer brands (Goldsmith et al., 2010).

FIGURE 9:
LEVELS OF BRAND'S UTILITY VALUES

	Store & Designer	Designer	Store
▪ Utility value	1.9	-0.8	-1.1
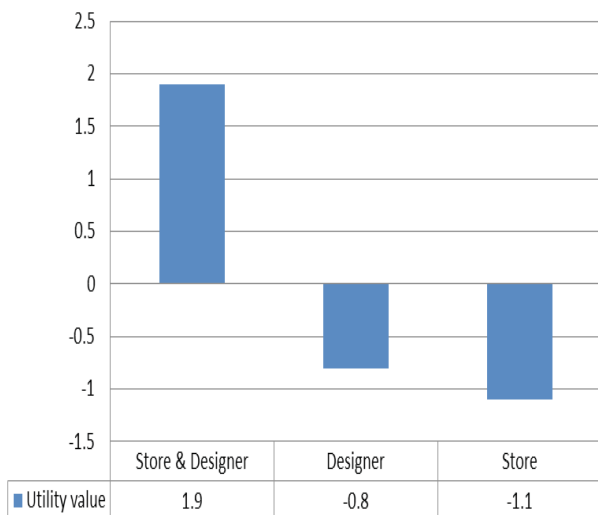
CONCLUSION

A total of eight cues were included in the hypothetical pair-wise conjoint tasks. The findings indicated that female consumers who participated in this study ranked diagnostic cues in a specific order when evaluating work wear assortments of department stores. The findings reflect those of Bradlow and Rao (2000) that consumers will usually choose and rank one cue from a well-defined list of cues as the most significant. Participants' preference structures included both intrinsic and extrinsic diagnostic cues. Store name and store image, both extrinsic cues, were rated the two most relative important diagnostic cues used by female consumers to evaluate work wear assortments. This underscores research by Erdem, Oumlil and Tuncalp (1999) who found that store image or store name were the most important determinants in consumers' choice of stores to acquire specific products.

Woolworths was ranked as the most preferred store. Its brand image is to provide quality products at affordable prices. At a customer level the name of a store can influence a customer's attitude towards the company and the image of the brand, encourage brand loyalty and help create a clear and differentiated image of the store which cannot be explained purely by its attributes (Alserhan & Alserhan, 2012). Thus, it seems that female consumers in an emerging market prefer to shop at a store with an image of quality, value and convenience when purchasing work wear. It is acknowledged that participants may have been influenced by predefined notions about each of the stores used in this study as the stores are well known in the South African retail market. Baker, Grewall and Parasuraman (1994) explain that when consumers do not have predefined notions about the service quality in a store they may base their judgements on other attributes.

Colour was ranked the most important intrinsic cue in female consumers' evaluation of work wear product assortments of department stores. Funk and Ndubisi (2006) also identified colour as a key determinant in product choices. Previous research suggests that colour has the power to create a strong brand image, influence a consumer's decision making process and even change a shopper's mood (Ackay et al., 2012). Style was ranked above other commonly preferred attributes such as price and brand when evaluating work wear assortments. These

findings were consistent with a study conducted by Herbst and Burger (2002), who found that style constituted 31.5% of attribute importance when young consumers evaluated fashion products. Size achieved a lower ranking in participants' preference structures. In contrast, Brown and Rice (2014) found sizing to be a significant criterion in consumers' evaluation of apparel assortments. With the lower preference of size one may deduce that when evaluating work wear assortments female consumers initially do not focus on size and fit and that they are satisfied with the size ranges available to them in South African department stores. However, fit associated with comfort and indirectly size was found to be an important product feature for professional women during the purchasing and in-use stages of career wear (Smith et al., 2011). Once female consumers try-on and wear clothing the fit and comfort of garments may become more important. The fact remains that if the correct size is not available to the consumer a purchase will not be made (Clodfelter, 2015).

Contrary to expectations, price did not emerge as a prominent factor in female participants' evaluation of work wear apparel assortments, as was the case in previous studies (e.g. Smith et al., 2011; Wickliffe & Pysarchik, 2001). It was further established that female consumers may use other attributes such as store name and image to draw conclusions about the quality of the product assortments. A number of extrinsic cues are known to influence the consumer's perception of product quality; these may include price, brand, retail outlet and country of origin (Veale & Quester, 2009). The findings suggest that brand and quality are not important cues when evaluating work wear assortments. This contradicts other empirical evidence (e.g. Herbst & Burger, 2002) where brand was ranked top of the list with a 32.2% importance rating. The difference could be attributed to the product category in question since brand may be more relevant when evaluating fashion clothing than in the case of work wear. This correlates with Smith et al. (2011) who found that professional women were not willing to splurge on career wear.

These findings may benefit various role players in the South African apparel retail sector. The results can be used to plan and develop appropriate product assortments that are based on customer preference. A store's product assortment will influence shoppers and is considered a key reason why shoppers will patronise a particular store (Paulins & Geistelfdon, 2003). Female consumers seem to prefer product assortments with increased variety. This is consistent with prior empirical evidence that consumers prefer department stores that offer a variety of styles, sizes, colours and brands under one roof. Store patronage is likely to increase once the variety of a product assortment is adequately enlarged (Amine & Cadenat, 2003).

Limitations and future recommendations

The most prominent limitation of this study was the restricted sample that only included participants living in the Gauteng area. This sample could therefore not provide a fair representation of all female consumers living in South Africa. Further research is required that broadens the scope of investigation to other geographical locations in South Africa to determine whether South African females in general assess work wear product assortments in a similar manner. Secondly, this research was exclusively focused on female consumers. Including the perspectives of male consumers would give researchers a more comprehensive understanding of the manner in which various emerging market segments evaluate product assortments. One of the issues that emerged from the findings is that past experiences relating to a particular store may play a significant role in consumers' subsequent evaluation of product assortments. Further research is needed in this regard and the influence of reference groups may also be considered for further investigation. In terms of methodology and the conjoint analysis design, it became apparent that questionnaires that include conjoint tasks can be very complex and time-consuming. Due to the many pair-wised profiles of the questionnaire participants

experienced respondent's fatigue and resorted to simplification strategies which can influence the validity of the data. To avoid this, caution should be taken to include a limited amount of attributes and levels and that the questionnaire is tested to ensure that it is user friendly and also takes less time to complete. In future studies on apparel assortment evaluation only the highest ranking cues could be included. Another recommendation would be to conduct a study that is solely qualitative and that could offer more in-depth insight into how consumers evaluate work wear product assortments. Such a study may contribute more in depth insight of how respondents differentiate between intrinsic and extrinsic cues and how these cues contribute to their preference structures.

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