Skills and knowledge required for merchandising professionals in the South African apparel retail industry

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Skills and knowledge required for merchandising professionals in the South African apparel retail industry

by

Bertha M. Jacobs

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Major: Apparel, Merchandising, and Design

Program of Study Committee:
Elena E. Karpova, Major Professor
Fatma Baytar
Amy Froelich
Sara B. Marcketti
Susan W. Arendt

The student author, whose presentation of the scholarship herein was approved by the program of study committee, is solely responsible for the content of this dissertation. The Graduate College will ensure this thesis is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2018

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DEDICATION

Completing my doctoral studies seemed like an impossible dream. All glory to God, for making the impossible possible.

This dissertation is dedicated to Almero, Christie, and Almi, who believe with me that anything is possible.
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<td>Apparel merchandising competency</td>
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<td>Average utility value</td>
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate skills and knowledge for merchandising professionals in the South African apparel retail industry. An exploratory, sequential mixed method research design was implemented in two phases. Phase I followed a phenomenological approach focused on: (a) examining merchandising positions and responsibilities and (b) identifying skills and knowledge required for apparel merchandising professionals to fulfill their positions and perform their responsibilities. Data were collected through semi-structured individual in-depth interviews from a purposive sample of 16 merchandising professionals employed within the South African retail industry. The successive Phase II employed an adaptive conjoint analysis survey to prioritize the skills and knowledge identified in Phase I. A total of 172 merchandising professionals completed the electronic, self-administered survey generated through Sawtooth Software Inc.

The results of the individual interviews revealed that four distinct positions in the South African retail industry correspond with merchandising positions suggested in international literature. In most retailers, merchandising departments consisted of discrete positions such as buyers, planners, product developers, and sourcing coordinators that perform a range of complex responsibilities to execute the product and profit strategy of retailers. Analysis of interviews identified 29 skills and knowledge types and 116 individual skills and knowledge dimensions describing the types, that merchandising professionals need to do their jobs.

The 29 skills and knowledge types were prioritized based on their relative importance score (RIS) ranging from 4.55 - 1.57. With communication receiving the highest RIS (4.55) and sustainability the lowest RIS (1.57). The average utility value of individual dimensions determined the most important ones to have within each skills and knowledge type. Fifty-
eight individual skills and knowledge dimensions with positive average utility values were retained, that were deemed important for merchandising professionals in the South African retail industry. Based on the prioritized merchandising skills and knowledge in Phase II, an apparel merchandising competency framework, developed from on extensive analyses of extant studies, was adapted specifically for the South African retail industry. The apparel merchandising competency framework provided a typology for organizing the prioritized merchandising skills and knowledge required for merchandising professionals in the South African apparel retail industry.

This study contributes to the literature in terms of skills and knowledge required for apparel merchandising professionals in the 21st century and the importance of competent professionals in a consumer-led and profit driven industry such as apparel retail. The apparel merchandising competency framework, that to date was not available in theory, is a valuable tool for educators, industry, and government. The framework (a) is apparel merchandising specific; (b) indicates the priority of skills and knowledge that should be stressed in curricula and professional development and where to allocate resources; and (c) can be adapted to the ever-changing needs and requirements of the apparel industry.
CHAPTER 1. BACKGROUND

Introduction

The biggest challenge experienced by South African retailers, after increased operational costs, is employee skills shortage (Gauteng Treasury, 2013). In 2013, a Wholesale and Retail Sector Education and Training Authority (W&R Seta) report identified critical skills and knowledge gaps in the South African retail sector that had to be addressed to withstand the on-going skills shortage (W&R Seta, 2013). Skills shortage refers to deficiencies in the labor market pool caused by: (a) the absence of individuals with specific required sets of skills to fill available positions; (b) the lack of required skills by current workforce to perform tasks; and/or (c) the need for anticipated skills not being met as the company expands and develops (Hart, Stachow, Farell & Reed, 2007). This study investigates skills and knowledge required for apparel merchandising professionals in the South African retail industry.

Skill Sets for Apparel Retail and Merchandising

Apparel retailing comprises business activities that are specific and unique to offering finished apparel products and related services to the end consumer with an overall aim of making a profit for the company (Diamond, Diamond & Litt, 2015; Kunz, 2010). Merchandising, a key retail function, is directly responsible for the apparel products and/or services offered within a retailer (Choi & Gaskill, 2000). Because apparel merchandising professionals perform strategic and operational responsibilities and might be involved in activities across the entire supply chain, the required skills, knowledge, and competencies vastly vary depending on the position and organizational structure (Howse, Hines & Swinker, 2000). Further, the nature of the apparel industry and product lifecycle place additional demands on merchandising professionals, as discussed below.
Because it is a style dependent industry, apparel products’ lifecycle is short and context specific (Christopher, Lowson & Peck, 2004; Da Silva, Davies & Naudé, 2002). Merchandising professionals need to react fast to new developments and trends and must be aware of the time and place their products will work the best (context). Further, buying apparel products require complex decision-making to forecast unstable consumer demand, while buying staple or food products hinges more on repeat orders as consumer demand is more stable (Da Silva et al., 2002). Each season merchandisers are involved in risky and new activities regarding the development of new products, sourcing them from new suppliers (Christopher et al., 2004). Third, apparel is a technical product, which starts as a conceptual idea formulated into 2D patterns and are then constructed to fit 3D bodies (Da Silva et al., 2002). This necessitates specific skill and knowledge sets to combine technical aspects of apparel with technological advances in the apparel industry (Kim & Johnson, 2009a; Kim & Johnson, 2009b). Lastly, the apparel industry is the most globalized industry, consisting of various networks (e.g. raw materials, production, distribution, and marketing) (Gereffi & Memedovic, 2003), which requires highly skilled personnel to synchronize the activities within and across companies and countries (Christopher et al., 2004).

**South African Apparel Retail Industry**

South Africa is the largest and most “sophisticated” economy in Africa (Pricewaterhouse and Coopers [PwC], 2012, p. 2). The country has an established formal retail sector, dating back to over 150 years, with a mix of global and independent domestic companies (PwC, 2012). Nevertheless, South Africa is an emerging economy with a fragmented retail landscape. There is division between the formal and organized retail sector located in urban areas with more assortment availability and fixed prices versus the various informal segments located in rural areas with limited variety but with more unique products (The Coca-Cola Retailing Research Council, 2010).
In South Africa, the wholesale and retail (W&R) sector is the sixth most important sector in terms of economic growth and employment. Furthermore, it has been an important economic growth driver since the early 1990s (Media Club South Africa, 2013). The W&R sector is the fourth largest contributor (15%) to the Gross Domestic Product in the country and employs about 22% (1,950,000 people) of the total active workforce of the country (W&R Seta, 2016).

Between 2012 and 2016, the South African apparel retail landscape was subject to major changes (PwC, 2012). The three most notable developments were: (a) the expanding Black consumer market; (b) the entry of international retailers; and (c) South African apparel retailers’ expansion into international markets (Hugo et al., 2016). The emerging Black consumer market’s fast-growing spending power translated into demand for unique and luxury apparel products (PwC, 2012). Because of market saturation in developed economies and the opportunity to target new upcoming consumer markets, developing countries like South Africa became a viable retail market for international brands like Zara, H&M, TopShop, and Cotton On (Hugo et al., 2016). Likewise, participating in global retailing became a feasible option for many South African apparel retailers to increase their earnings through foreign revenue (W&R Seta, 2013). Several leading South African apparel retailers (e.g., Pepkor, Woolworths, Mr Price, Truworths, and Pick’n Pay) have successfully extended their operations into foreign markets of Sub-Saharan Africa, Middle East, South America, and Australia (PwC, 2012). South African retailers’ expansion into global markets has contributed to a greater demand for skilled retail professionals who can adapt and function in competitive environments (Ndweni, 2015; PwC, 2012).

The South African Retail Industry’s Workforce

Historically, employment entry into the South African retail industry did not require a high level of education and the level of education of workers in the retail industry is relatively
low compared to other developing countries (W&R Seta, 2013). Similarly, the skills challenge in the retail sector relative to the other major industries in South Africa is problematic, especially in middle management positions (PwC, 2012). The skills gap is a widely recognized national priority and the W&R Seta (2013) report outlined the skill sets that urgently need support by higher education institutions. Merchandising professions in retail (i.e., retail buyers and planners, brand managers, and supply chain and distribution managers) were highlighted as scarce expertise and an immediate priority (W&R Seta, 2013).

In addition to the skills shortage in the retail industry, the effectiveness of the higher education institutions preparing professionals for the industry has been problematic. Currently, the effectiveness and quality of South Africa’s higher education institutions scored 77th out of 138 countries world-wide (World Economic Forum, The Global Competitiveness Index, 2016). For South African apparel retailers to stay competitive, it is vital to have access to merchandising professionals who: (a) are equipped with relevant skills, knowledge, and competencies; (b) can function successfully in the local and global apparel retail industries; and (c) can enhance retailer performance and create a competitive advantage.

**Problem Statement**

A plethora of studies exists that focus on important skills, knowledge, and competencies that university graduates should possess to be employable and successful when entering the workforce (e.g., Andrews & Higson, 2008; Collet, Hine & du Plessis, 2015; Green, Hammer & Star, 2009; Jackson, 2013; Rosenberg, Heimler & Morote, 2012). However, most of these studies focused on preparing graduates for managerial positions in general business environments and do not consider the complexities and specificities of the global apparel retail industry. Moreover, many of these studies do not reflect the requirements to operate in the demanding apparel merchandising function with various positions and responsibilities.
Studies that did investigate skills and knowledge for the apparel industry focused on specific areas such as global apparel entrepreneurship (Hodges et al., 2011; Watchravesringkan et al., 2013), product development (Power, 2012a; Power, 2012b), retail buying (Goworek, 2014), and apparel sourcing (Muhammad & Ha-Brookshire, 2011). Also, many of the studies investigating skills, knowledge, or competencies required for apparel merchandising were completed in the 1980s and 1990s, and became outdated in the 21st century (e.g., Arnold & Forney, 1998, Garner & Buckley, 1988; Heitmeyer, Grise & Force, 1992; Hines & Swinker, 1998; Kotsiopulos, Oliver, Shim, 1993; Woodard & Geissler, 1999). More recent studies focusing on skills, knowledge, or competencies needed for apparel merchandising professionals were completed in the context of developed economies, like the US (Chida & Brown, 2011; Frazier & Cheek, 2016; Muhammad & Ha-Brookshire, 2011), UK (Goworek, 2010; Goworek, 2014; Nobbs, O’Sullivan & Middleton, 2014) or New Zealand (Clokie & Fourie, 2016). One known study was conducted in a developing country, Alzahrani and Kozar (2017) investigated the skills and knowledge needed for female graduates to succeed in the Saudi Arabian apparel retail industry.

To summarize, very few studies have examined skills and knowledge specific to apparel merchandising professionals in developing economies, and no known study has specifically focused on South Africa. In addition, existing studies did not use a theoretical foundation to analyze and classify various skills and knowledge into a framework specific to apparel merchandising. Overall, preparation of graduates for the apparel merchandising function in the global retail industry has received limited attention. As the workforce challenges in the South African retail industry intensify, the lack of empirical data in terms of skills and knowledge required for apparel merchandising professionals warrants research in this area.
Purpose of the Study and Research Objectives

The purpose of this research was to investigate skills and knowledge required for merchandising professionals in the South African apparel retail industry. The aim was to gain a better understanding of the skills and knowledge required to fulfill merchandising positions and perform associated responsibilities. Specifically, in this study, skills and knowledge required for apparel merchandising professionals were identified and prioritized. Based on the prioritized merchandising skills and knowledge, a merchandising competency framework was developed to aid apparel programs in developing curriculum in order to increase graduates’ employability within the South African retail industry. To address the purpose of this study, the research objectives included:

- To analyze existing literature on skills, knowledge, and competencies required for college graduates in business and apparel retail environments with the goal of developing a general apparel merchandising framework.
- To investigate apparel merchandising professionals’ positions and responsibilities in the South African retail industry.
- To identify a comprehensive list of merchandising skills and knowledge required in the South African retail industry.
- To prioritize skills and knowledge required by apparel merchandising professionals in the South African retail industry.
- To adapt the general apparel merchandising competency framework to the South African retail industry.

Significance of the Study

Extant research has identified various skills and knowledge that graduates should possess to function in general business environment as well as specifically in the apparel industry. However, these skills and knowledge have not been prioritized in terms of
importance (e.g., the ones that are absolutely critical/’must-have’ versus ‘nice-to-have’), nor were they classified and presented as a framework to facilitate application in higher education institutions. In this study, a prioritized list of skills and knowledge required for apparel merchandising professionals in the context of the South African retail industry was developed. Based on the prioritized skills and knowledge, merchandising competency framework was proposed. This framework focused on preparing future industry professionals and can be used to guide apparel curriculum development in higher education institutions. The research findings are useful for apparel, retail, and fashion related programs in higher education institutions, which can more effectively address the existing workforce gaps in the South African apparel retail industry. This contribute to a concerted effort of the government, retailers, and higher education institutions to increase the competitiveness of the domestic apparel and retail industries. Investing in well-trained merchandising professionals could steer South African retailers into future success.

From a theoretical perspective, this study adds to the literature in terms of skills and knowledge required for the apparel merchandising professionals in the 21st century. It attempted to classify skills and knowledge and develop a competency framework for apparel merchandising. From a method perspective, another contribution of this research is the use of a mixed method research design, which helps not to only better understand skills and knowledge required to fulfill merchandising positions and responsibilities but also prioritize skills and knowledge required. The adaptive conjoint analysis used to prioritize identified skills and knowledge, is typically employed in consumer choice modelling and to date has not been used in any studies investigating skills and knowledge.

**Definitions of Terms**

*Apparel merchandising* is defined as a key retail function that manages and/or coordinates development, buying, planning, sourcing and distribution of apparel products in
the supply chain to offer the right merchandise assortment(s) that will satisfy a specific target market’s needs and wants and optimize the profitability of the company (Glock & Kunz, 2005; Varley, 2014).

**Apparel merchandising professional** are appointed in an apparel merchandising position, hold a relevant tertiary qualification, and have responsibilities and activities that involve strategic and operational decision-making pertaining to an apparel retailer’s product lines (Bruce & Daly, 2006; Glock & Kunz, 2005).

**Apparel retail** comprises the business activities involved in offering apparel products and/or related services (e.g., alterations) to the end consumer with an overall aim of making a profit for the company (Diamond et al., 2015; Kunz 2010).

**Competency** is the ability to apply or use skills and knowledge to perform tasks effectively and efficiently in the workplace (Jackson, 2010; Pellegrino & Hilton, 2012).

**Explicit knowledge** is formally written and communicated through scientific work and findings and is easy to share and teach (Danskin et al., 2005; Nonaka, Toyama & Kanno, 2000).

**Hard skills** are linked to a person’s technical and thinking abilities (Robles, 2012).

**Knowledge** pertains to a person’s “awareness and understanding gained through experience and study” (Johansson, Larsson & Wingård, n. d., p. 7).

**Retailing** refers to all the “business activities that adds value to products and services sold to consumers for their personal or family use” (Levy & Weitz, 2001, p. 8).

**Skills** are the ability, aptitude, or capability to do a specific task well and are “acquired or developed through training or experience” (Johansson et al., n. d., p. 7).

**Soft skills** are character qualities or traits that can be transferred from one work context to another such as communication, flexibility, interpersonal skills, and teamwork.
(Yorke & Knight, 2003). Soft skills relate more to “who we are than what we know” (Robles, 2012, p. 75).

Tacit knowledge is gained through our personal experiences and involvement in a specific context; “subjective insights, intuitions and hunches” and is not easily shared or taught (Nonaka et al., 2000, p. 7).
CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This chapter defines the merchandising function in the apparel retail industry and examines the existing literature about skills, knowledge, and competencies needed by merchandising professionals to be successful in their careers. The first section defines the scope of the merchandising function, with the focus on merchandising positions and responsibilities. The second section critically examines existing research on skills and knowledge that merchandising professionals need to succeed in the retail industry. The skills and knowledge were classified according to Pellegrino and Hilton’s (2012) competency domain framework to develop an apparel merchandising competency framework. The last section presents concluding remarks about the importance of equipping future merchandising professionals with necessary skills, knowledge, and competencies.

Merchandising Function in the Apparel Retail Industry

Merchandising Defined

Merchandising and retailing terms are often used interchangeably as both entail product and service offering with the purpose of making a profit (Choi & Gaskill, 2000; Rabolt & Miler, 1997). To clarify the main differences between retailing and merchandising these terms are explained according to their function within the apparel supply chain. Retail is an industry sector consisting of various firms, called retailers, with different types of stores (e.g., department, discount stores) specializing in different product and/or service offerings to end consumers through various channels (e.g., brick-and-mortar or online stores) (Diamond et al., 2015). In the supply chain, retailing involves all the business activities of the retailer aligned towards the procurement of products and/or services for re-selling to the target consumer (Kunz, 2010; Levy & Weitz, 2001). In this study, apparel retail refers to the business activities involved in offering apparel products and/or related services (e.g.,
alterations) to satisfy the wants and needs of a specified target market, with an overall aim of making a profit for the company. The retailer’s traditional and major function within the supply chain has been breaking bulk by offering the right product assortment and variety to the target market (Varley, 2014). The apparel retailer comprises of various business functions such as finance, HR, marketing, merchandising, logistics, and operations (Glock & Kunz, 2005). So, merchandising is one of the retail functions.

Merchandising, as a key retail function, is directly responsible for the products and/or services offered (Choi & Gaskill, 2000). It is a process that involves the entire supply chain (Swindley, 1992). This agrees with Fiorito and Fairhurst (1993) who underscored merchandising as the process of planning, analyzing, purchasing, and controlling of merchandise investments in an apparel retail company. Merchandisers are actively involved in the planning and development of product lines as well as the management of apparel products throughout the supply chain that will satisfy the requirements of the target consumer and optimize the profitability of the company (Glock & Kunz, 2005; Varley, 2014).

In many apparel retail companies, merchandising is a specialized function and separated into several diverse managerial roles to synchronize the various processes throughout the apparel supply chain. These functions often include product development, assortment management, buying and planning, sourcing, and distribution (Glock & Kunz, 2005; Muhammad & Ha-Brookshire, 2011; Varley, 2014). The scope of these functions can vary, depending on the size of the retailer (multi-national versus small business), type of retailer (specialty versus department versus discount), format of the retailer (corporation versus privately owned) (Kunz, 2010).

Definition of merchandising varies depending on the context. First, merchandising is a key retail function and forms an important link between producers, other business functions and departments, and end consumers in apparel retail. Second, the merchandising function is
directly involved in setting the direction product lines will take by interpreting consumer demand and relating it to product decisions that will satisfy the demand whilst obtain maximum profits for the retailer. Third, it is an operational function that synchronizes numerous activities in the apparel supply chain to develop and deliver the right assortment and variety at the right price in a convenient place while optimizing retailer performance.

For the purpose of this study, apparel merchandising is defined as a key retail function that manages and/or coordinates the development, buying, planning, sourcing, and distribution of apparel products in the supply chain to offer the right merchandise assortment(s) to satisfy a specific target market’s needs and wants, as well as generate profit for the company. Therefore, the range of positions that apparel merchandising professionals fulfill include: product development, assortment management, sourcing and distribution. Responsibilities associated with these roles are coordinated and managed by separate multi-functional teams (Bruce & Daly, 2006; Muhammad & Ha-Brookshire, 2011) that are structured based on the size, type, and format of a retailer as well as their level of involvement with certain activities (Goworek, 2014; Varley, 2014).

**Merchandisers’ Positions and Responsibilities**

Even though all retailers employ merchandising professionals, the job titles and responsibilities vary greatly from one company to another. In some companies, merchandisers have more traditional roles associated with buyers’ responsibilities and oversee the product but are not involved in product development. In other companies, such as private label retailers, merchandisers might perform product development and sourcing activities, coordinate sample and fabric approval, and work with factories to ensure product quality and timely delivery (Goworek, 2010). In a small company, a merchandiser can be responsible for all above-mentioned tasks.
Product Development

The main objective of product developers is to “meet and interpret” changing consumer demands (Keiser & Garner, 2010, p. 18). Product development is essential for offering unique products and more variety to consumers (Varely, 2014). Merchandisers responsible for product development work closely with other departments (i.e., design, buying, and sourcing) to develop new products (Goworek, 2010).

Product development departments are typical for private brands retailers, where the private labels are corporately managed and controlled (Varely, 2014). Product development entails responsibilities such as market research, line planning and line development (Keiser & Garner, 2010). With many associated activities such as trend analysis, product concept development, line planning and review, costing, approval of samples and specification development (Keiser & Garner, 2010; Rosenau & Wilson, 2007).

Assortment Management

In large companies, buying or merchandising departments are often formed at the corporate office. To make informed buying decisions, merchandisers continuously negotiate, collaborate, and communicate with all the apparel value chain members (i.e. designers and product developers, fabric suppliers, apparel manufacturers, logistic personnel, marketers, sales and store personnel) (Bahng & Kincade, 2014; Goworek, 2014). Assortment managers’ responsibilities include but are not limited to: analysis of past sales and promotions to assess profitability (e.g., analysis of store performance and stock levels); consumer research; trends forecasting, planning and allocating financial budgets (e.g., develop sales and purchase plans, markdowns); planning and selection of merchandise (e.g., developing merchandise and assortment plans, deliveries and stock allocations, and controlling inventory) (Fiorito, Gable & Conseur, 2010; Goworek, 2014; Varley, 2014).
Sourcing and Distribution

Sourcing is the strategic decision process of determining how and where finished apparel products or components will be produced or procured for timely delivery (Dickerson, 2003; Kunz, 2005). Sourcing is an essential factor for success in apparel retail (Gereffi & Memedovic, 2003). Sourcing-related responsibilities are performed by merchandisers in some companies and might include: vendor selection and management (e.g., working with vendors to obtain raw materials or parts of products), coordinating apparel manufacturing, and warehousing and distribution of finished goods (e.g., logistic and transportation) (Muhammad & Ha-Brookshire, 2011).

Vendor management entails locating suitable suppliers and assessing their capabilities and capacity (Gereffi & Memedovic, 2003), and negotiating with vendors and building strong relationships (Clodfelter, 2018). Coordinating production entails timely delivery of products that comply with specifications and quality standards (Keiser & Garner, 2010). Distribution responsibilities include coordination of receiving, sorting, allocating, and shipping of apparel products (Kunz, 2010). To ensure on-time delivery, merchandisers might work with different departments like logistics, importing, and legal.

Summary of Merchandising Positions and Responsibilities

The purpose of this section was to clarify apparel merchandising positions and responsibilities (Table 2.1). It is obvious that apparel merchandisers might fulfill diverse roles, which have become “more fluid” and “integrated” (Goworek, 2010, p. 659). Hart et al. (2007) emphasize the importance of clarifying relevant skills required for specific positions as a basis for development and recruitment. Clearly defining typical merchandising positions and responsibilities is the first step to understanding what skills, knowledge, and competencies are required for these professionals to have when entering the global apparel retail industry.
Table 2.1. Typical apparel merchandising positions and responsibilities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Department/Position</th>
<th>Responsibilities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Product development</strong></td>
<td><strong>Market research:</strong>&lt;br&gt;Target market research&lt;br&gt;Forecast demand and fashion trends&lt;br&gt;Analyze competition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Line planning:</strong>&lt;br&gt;Evaluate past and current merchandise offerings&lt;br&gt;Forecast merchandise offerings&lt;br&gt;Concept boards&lt;br&gt;Communication with other teams (e.g., design and sourcing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Line development:</strong>&lt;br&gt;Translate line concept into products&lt;br&gt;Color and fabrication selection&lt;br&gt;Costing&lt;br&gt;Approve prototypes and samples&lt;br&gt;Develop specifications&lt;br&gt;Color matching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assortment management</strong></td>
<td><strong>Analysis of past sales and promotions:</strong>&lt;br&gt;Analyze sales reports&lt;br&gt;Identify best-sellers and slow sellers&lt;br&gt;Analyze customer buying patterns&lt;br&gt;Forecast future trends&lt;br&gt;Review inventory records&lt;br&gt;Analyze store performance and stock levels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Planning financial budgets:</strong>&lt;br&gt;Develop sales and purchase plans&lt;br&gt;Analyze and plan gross margin&lt;br&gt;Balance stock unit ratios&lt;br&gt;Develop sales goals, stock levels, and markups&lt;br&gt;Analyze markdown records&lt;br&gt;React to sales figures via repeat orders and markdowns&lt;br&gt;Create strategic financial/budget plans&lt;br&gt;Meet financial targets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Planning and selection of merchandise:</strong>&lt;br&gt;Range planning (assortment and lead times)&lt;br&gt;Visit markets and trade fairs&lt;br&gt;Plan and select merchandise assortments&lt;br&gt;Control planned purchases and stock levels&lt;br&gt;Supervise price marking&lt;br&gt;Write orders and follow-up on orders&lt;br&gt;Replenish basic stock&lt;br&gt;Supervise returns to vendors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sourcing and distribution</strong></td>
<td><strong>Production and sourcing:</strong>&lt;br&gt;Establish sourcing strategy&lt;br&gt;Select and evaluate locations for production&lt;br&gt;Plan and authorize production&lt;br&gt;Contract and secure materials&lt;br&gt;Textile and garment testing&lt;br&gt;Fulfill and track orders&lt;br&gt;Ensure manufacturing compliance&lt;br&gt;Quality assurance and labeling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Vendor management:</strong>&lt;br&gt;Liaison with suppliers&lt;br&gt;Product pricing and negotiation&lt;br&gt;Develop and expand vendor/manufacturing bases&lt;br&gt;Respond to market changes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Distribution management:</strong>&lt;br&gt;Determine stock allocation&lt;br&gt;Manage on-time delivery&lt;br&gt;Packaging compliance&lt;br&gt;Liaison with logistics, legal, and importing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on: Fiorito et al. (2010); Goworek (2014); Keiser and Garner (2010); Muhammad and Ha-Brookshire (2011)
Skills, Knowledge, and Competencies for Apparel Merchandising Professionals

To succeed in the global retail industry, apparel merchandising professionals need specific competencies that comprise of relevant knowledge and skills (Arnold & Forney, 1998). There is a lack of shared meaning and conceptual clarity on how to define skills, knowledge, and competencies. Scholars often use these terms interchangeably, adding to blurring conceptual understanding of these concepts (Bridgstock, 2009; Green et al., 2009; Tymon, 2013). Existing literature was analyzed to define the concepts of skills, knowledge, and competencies.

Skills

Definition of skills.

Skills are the ability, aptitude, or capability to do a specific task well and are “acquired or developed through training or experience” (Johansson et al., n. d., p. 7). Adjectives describing skills such as ‘generic’, ‘core’ and ‘transferable’ are often used interchangeably in the skills literature (e.g., Green et al., 2009). Core skills refer to discipline specific skills, whereas generic or transferable skills describe skills that can be transferred from one working situation to another such as communication skills (Yorke & Knight, 2003). Many scholars differentiate between soft and hard skills (e.g., Andrews & Higson, 2008; Robles, 2012; Yorke & Knight, 2003).

Soft skills.

Soft skills are character traits or desirable qualities that are transferable from one work or industry context to another. Soft skills are generic skills; they relate more to “who we are than what we know” (Robles, 2012, p. 75). Soft skills form the basis of people-related skills (interpersonal) and personal attributes (intrapersonal) (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Yorke & Knight, 2003). Scholars proposed various types of soft skills as essential for professional success. For example, Robles (2012) identified ten types of soft skills consisting of various
dimensions, important for business executives in the 21st century: communication, courtesy, flexibility, integrity, interpersonal skills, positive attitude, professionalism, responsibility, teamwork, and work ethic. According to Javidan, Teagarden and Bowen (2010), people working in global industries should also have intercultural awareness and diplomacy. Jackson (2013) confirmed the soft skills proposed by Robles (2012) and Javidan et al. (2010) but also added leadership, organizational skills, and self-management and self-evaluation.

For the purpose of the study, all soft skills were classified using a three-step process. First, soft skills are defined as having desirable people-related skills (interpersonal) and individual’s personal attributes or qualities (intrapersonal) (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Yorke & Knight, 2003). Based on this definition, two categories for soft skills were identified namely, interpersonal and intrapersonal. Various soft skills were then classified into the interpersonal or intrapersonal category of skills (Table 2.2).

Table 2.2. Soft skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of soft skills</th>
<th>Dimensions of soft skills</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interpersonal category</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>verbal, written, presentation, listening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courtesy</td>
<td>polite, respectful, considerate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diplomacy</td>
<td>negotiation, discretion, resolve conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>motivates others, coaches/mentors, monitors performance, functions in diverse settings, goal-setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professionalism</td>
<td>businesslike, well-dressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>pleasant, friendly, sense of humor, intercultural awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork</td>
<td>cooperative, collaborative, supportive, helpful, trust others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intrapersonal category</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility</td>
<td>adaptability, willingness to change, acceptance of new things</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrity</td>
<td>honesty, ethical, high morals, does the right thing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational</td>
<td>project management, time management, multi-tasking, prioritizing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive attitude</td>
<td>optimistic, enthusiastic, encouraging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>accountable, reliable, gets the job done</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-management</td>
<td>disciplined, stress tolerance, work-life balance, independent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-evaluation</td>
<td>self-efficacy, realistic judgement of abilities, values, and beliefs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work ethic</td>
<td>hard working, loyal, self-motivated, punctuality, good attendance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Next, within the two intrapersonal and interpersonal categories, soft skills were further classified using the types of skills suggested by Robles’ (2012), Javidan et al. (2010),
and Jackson (2013). Based on this classification, fifteen distinct types of soft skills were proposed: seven in the interpersonal category and eight in the intrapersonal category. Finally, every soft skill identified through the analysis of extant research was categorized as a dimension of one of the fifteen types of soft skill. For example, presentation skill was classified as a dimension of the communication type skills within the interpersonal category (Table 2.2).

**Soft skills in the business context.**

Similar soft skills to those identified by Robles (2012) and Jackson (2013) have been reported in several studies to be important for business professionals (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Baharun, Suleiman & Awang, 2012; Prajogo & Sohal, 2013; Rosenberg et al., 2012). For example, communication and teamwork were common soft skills in all studies as well as leadership, maintaining high ethical standards, and organizational or management skills (setting goals, project and time management). Yorke and Knight (2003) suggested that stress tolerance was a desired competency in a business environment, but no study was found that investigated this specifically for apparel merchandising. It can be concluded that there is a consistency in the literature on soft skills that are important in business environments. Even though the soft skills identified in extant research were not exactly the same, there is consensus that the soft skills important in business environments are about effectively and efficiently working and communicating in project teams and keeping up ethical and organizational standards in managing people and projects.

**Soft skills in the apparel merchandising context.**

Similar to the general business studies, communication and teamwork were identified as the most important skills across all retail functions (Clokie & Fourie, 2016). Muhammad and Ha-Brookshire (2011) also found communication and teamwork to be important skills when they analyzed job responsibilities of apparel sourcing personnel (Table 2.2).
Communication is important for merchandising professionals because of reliance on cross-functional and even virtual teamwork (Clokie & Fourie, 2016; Karpova, Jacobs, Lee & Andrew, 2011b). Likewise, writing reports, descriptive specifications, business letters and emails as well as conducting meetings and oral presentations were essential skills (Clokie & Fourie, 2016; Goworek, 2010). In the global apparel industry, communication and teamwork are critical for establishing partnerships across organizational and cultural boundaries and different time-zones (Karpova et al., 2011b). In addition, Frazier and Cheek (2016) identified professional behavior and applying ethics and leadership as important soft skills for merchandising positions. Analysis of extant research indicates that soft skills required for merchandising professionals are similar to those needed in the general business environment. These required soft skills align with the soft skills identified in a report for the South African retail sector, namely, conflict resolution, negotiation, communication (listening, report writing), ethical/moral skills, time and project management (W&R Seta, 2013).

**Hard skills.**

Hard skills are linked to a person’s technical and thinking abilities (Robles, 2012). Hard skills can be classified into two categories: technical skills (e.g., numeracy or use of technology) and thinking or conceptual skills (Jackson, 2013; Robles, 2012). Thinking or conceptual capabilities relate to higher order thinking skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and organizing information for decision-making (Danskin et al., 2005; Green et al., 2009). As such, thinking or conceptual skills are transferable and not discipline specific. Some technical skills are also transferable, such as numeracy or use of general software (e.g., Microsoft Office), whereas other technical skills are discipline specific. For example, use of specialized software for patternmaking and grading, or virtual retailing.

For the purpose of this study, hard skills from extant research were classified using a three-step process (Table 2.3). First, based on Jackson (2013) and Robles’ (2012), hard skills
were classified into two categories: technical and thinking/conceptual skills. Next, within each category, hard skills were classified as by certain types of skills, following Jackson (2013), Danskin et al. (2005), and Power (2010a). Numeracy and technology types were classified under the technical category. Critical thinking, problem-solving, strategic thinking, decision-making, meta-cognition, and innovation types were classified under the thinking/conceptual skills category. Individual hard skills represented dimensions of specific hard skill types. For example, reflection on experiences was classified as the metacognition type, within the thinking/conceptual category (Table 2.3).

Table 2.3. Hard skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of hard skills</th>
<th>Dimensions of hard skills</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Technical category</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Numeracy</td>
<td>mathematical, budgeting, costing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>use of information and communication technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Thinking/conceptual category</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical thinking</td>
<td>pattern recognition, conceptualization, evaluation, interpretation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision-making</td>
<td>lateral thinking, information management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innovation</td>
<td>creativity, original ideas, resourcefulness, implementation of ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metacognition</td>
<td>self-awareness, lifelong learning, reflecting on experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem solving</td>
<td>analytical reasoning, diagnosing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic thinking</td>
<td>planning, visioning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Hard skills in the business context.**

Jackson (2013) identified the following hard skills as important for business executives: numeracy, critical thinking, problem solving, decision-making, and self-awareness (Table 2.3). Numeracy relates to the accurate use of numbers and data (Jackson, 2014). Technological aptitude, using industry specific types of databases and software programs to do analysis as well as management of information systems have become essential to perform daily tasks in the business environment (Schlee & Harich, 2010). Conceptual or thinking skills are highly valued in the business industry (Jackson & Chapman, 2012). Especially, critical thinking and problem solving are desirable hard skills in any business context (Bridgstock, 2009; Yorke & Knight, 2003).
**Hard skills in the apparel merchandising context.**

In the apparel context, Howse et al. (2000) surveyed retail buyers and identified mathematical skills, finding information to solve problems, and critically interpreting information as important skills (Table 2.3). This agrees with Chida and Brown (2011) who underscored the importance of critical thinking and innovation for merchandising positions. In studies by Power (2010a, 2010b, 2012a), self-awareness, referred to as metacognition, was identified as an important skill in the product development and merchandising field.

Technical skills pertaining to technology were reported to be very important for merchandisers (Fiorito et al., 2010). Especially being proficient in technologies that support merchandisers to perform their responsibilities (e.g., point-of-sale, inventory management systems and customer relationship management software) as well as those that allow them to instantly react to changes in their supply chain (Fiorito, et al., 2010). The competitive nature of apparel retail necessitates using information technology to coordinate and control supply chains (Muhammad & Ha-Brookshire, 2011). Merchandisers are relying more on technology (e.g., online sources to do comparison shopping, trend analysis, and searching for new suppliers) to perform their responsibilities (Nobbs et al., 2014). Similar skills were identified as lacking in the South African retail industry: numeracy, computer and technology, problem solving and decision-making, and analytical skills (W&R Seta, 2013).

Analysis of literature showed that similar hard skills are noted for business and apparel merchandising. Both technical and thinking/conceptual skills are important for both areas. Even though technical hard skills might be industry specific, it is possible to transfer the mastery of information and communication technologies between different contexts. Numeracy, critical thinking, problem solving, metacognition, and innovation can be applied in different industries once the skills have been mastered.
Knowledge

Knowledge refers to the cognizance, “awareness, or understanding gained through experience or study” (Johansson et al., n.d., p. 7). Knowledge is divided into explicit and tacit categories (Nonaka et al., 2000). Explicit knowledge is formally structured through scientific work and findings, whereas tacit knowledge is gained informally from personal experiences through observations and practice (Nonaka et al., 2000). Garud and Nyyar (1994) further explain that knowledge can be understood as: (a) how easy or difficult it is to codify (how easily it can be communicated, shared or learned), (b) degree of simplicity or complexity (amount of information needed to communicate knowledge), and (c) level of dependency (dependent/systemic knowledge hinged on how fixed it is in the organization/context and independent knowledge can be explained on its own).

Explicit knowledge.

Explicit knowledge is easy to share and teach (Danskin et al., 2005). It is what graduates have formally learned in a discipline field: the structure or organization of the discipline, the truth criteria of the discipline, and the methods and application used in the discipline (Donald, 1986). Literature stresses the importance of discipline-specific knowledge in the apparel industry (Chida & Brown, 2011; Frazier & Cheek, 2016; Muhammad & Ha-Brookshire, 2011).

To explicate the types of explicit knowledge needed for merchandising professionals, the merchandising definition is employed. Apparel merchandising is a key retail function that manages and/or coordinates the development, buying, planning, sourcing and distribution of apparel products to offer the right merchandise assortment(s) that will satisfy a specific target market’s needs and wants as well as generate profit for the company. Apparel merchandisers therefore, need to have knowledge about apparel products, the processes involved in manufacturing and distributing products, consumer behavior, as well as the external
environmental factors influencing products, processes, and consumers. In addition, merchandising is a retail function that interlinks with other business functions, therefore knowledge pertaining to retailing, marketing, finance, logistics, and trade is needed. To clarify the types of explicit knowledge needed for merchandising professionals, a differentiation between general apparel subject matter and merchandising subject matter was made on the premises of the merchandising definition.

**Explicit general apparel knowledge.**

Fundamental or fact-based knowledge about textiles and apparel subject matter is primary to merchandising curricula (Fiore & Ogle, 2000). In addition, Howse et al., (2000) stressed that knowledge about apparel products such as textile science, quality assurance, and apparel construction form the foundation knowledge and should be included in all apparel programs. To clarify what general apparel knowledge is needed by merchandising professionals, literature pertaining to the development of apparel subject matter was analyzed. In the 1990s, Kaiser and Damhorst (1991a; 1991b) clarified the content and subject matter of textiles and apparel by distinguishing between three main areas: (a) textile product evaluation (the relationship between the physical properties of the product and consumers’ responses to those properties); (b) appearance and social realities (how meaning is created through consumers’ interaction with other consumers and products); and (c) textile and apparel distribution systems (processes and systems involved in manufacturing, merchandising and distribution of products within a global economy).

A decade later, Fiore and Ogle (2000, p. 32) proposed a model that follows an integrated approach to textiles and apparel subject matter. Their model included: (a) merchandising decision-making (i.e., development, gate-keeping, and promotion) within companies; (b) the product or environment (i.e., formal-, expressive-, and symbolic qualities); (c) aspects of the consumer (socio-cultural and individual differences) that influences the
perceived value; (d) the value derived (i.e., aesthetics and instrumental benefits) by consumers; and (e) the global context which are the external influencing factors (i.e., aesthetic, economic, legal, political, religious, social and technological) (Fiore & Ogle, 2000).

In 2012, Ha-Brookshire and Hawley (2012) proposed that the domain of clothing and textiles include (a) humans’ needs and wants (influenced by external factors such as natural, social, political, economic, technological, cultural, and psychological environments); (b) apparel supply chain (consisting of processes such as history/forecasting, consumer research, design, product development, merchandising, sourcing/production and retailing); and (c) humans’ satisfaction as an outcome (taking into account environmental responsibility and social responsibility within the global supply chain).

An analysis of the three frameworks indicated that over time scholars have proposed similar apparel subject matter areas. All three frameworks have the following topics in common: consumer, apparel product, distribution processes/supply chain, and external environmental influences/context. These topics were used as the basis to form types of general apparel knowledge (Table 2.4). The types of general apparel knowledge identified based on the three frameworks were: apparel product, aesthetics, consumer behavior, fashion, manufacturing, social-cultural aspects, sustainability and social responsibility, and textiles.

To further clarify each type, different areas of knowledge were identified through an extensive analysis of extant research. These areas formed dimensions of explicit knowledge pertinent to general apparel subject matter (Table 2.4). For example, product performance, product quality, and product safety were classified as dimensions of the apparel product type of knowledge. Other areas of knowledge identified in the three frameworks were classified under the merchandising knowledge category namely, distribution systems and supply chain (Ha-Brookshire & Hawley, 2012; Kaiser & Damhorst, 1991a; Kaiser & Damhorst, 1991b), which consist of processes such as product development, assortment management, and
sourcing; and the global context with external influencing factors (Fiore & Ogle, 2000), as explained below.

Table 2.4. Explicit and tacit knowledge

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of knowledge</th>
<th>Dimensions of knowledge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Explicit knowledge</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>General apparel knowledge category</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apparel product</td>
<td>product performance (mechanical, physical, chemical, biological and social dimensions), product quality, product safety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aesthetics</td>
<td>aesthetic principles, design elements and principles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumer behavior</td>
<td>consumption behavior, target market analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fashion</td>
<td>history, fashion cycles, fashion theories, forecasting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>production systems, productivity, quality assurance, construction techniques</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social-cultural aspect</td>
<td>appearance management, symbolic consumption, nonverbal appearance communication, identity creation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustainability</td>
<td>socially, economically, and environmentally responsible practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textiles</td>
<td>fibers, yarns, fabrics (properties, structure, performance), care/maintenance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Merchandising knowledge category</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td>finance, HR, accounting, sales, entrepreneurship, business theories, competition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment awareness</td>
<td>internal: organizational and commercial, external: ecological, global, political, economic and social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>product positioning, branding, market segmentation, pricing, promotions, customer service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assortment management</td>
<td>assortment planning, product management, buying and planning processes, stock replenishment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product development</td>
<td>line planning and line development, sizing and fit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail operations</td>
<td>technology systems, global retail operations, logistics, distribution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sourcing</td>
<td>supply chain management, trade policies, industry regulations, international trade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tacit knowledge</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Experience category</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional experience</td>
<td>Knowledge obtained through practice and observation during internships, retail work, and on the job training</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Explicit merchandising knowledge.**

Merchandising is a key retail function that manages and/or coordinates the development, buying, planning, sourcing and distribution of apparel products in the supply chain to offer the right merchandise assortment(s) to satisfy a specific target market’s needs and wants, as well as generate profit for the company. Given the overlap of business and merchandising functions, Muhammad and Ha-Brookshire (2011) argue that business knowledge is increasingly more important for merchandising professionals. This includes...
knowledge of finance, accounting, sales, and entrepreneurship (Alzahrani & Kozar, 2017; Watchravesringkan, et al., 2013). Radipere and Scheers (2005) found that major contributing factors to the failure of micro, small, and medium enterprises in South Africa were lack of knowledge in business management (organizing physical and financial resources), finance, and marketing. To differentiate from competition, apparel companies rely on knowledge about product positioning, branding, and marketing (Danskin et al., 2005). The findings from these studies corroborate the knowledge gaps identified in the South African retail sector such as selling, customer service, and financial knowledge (W&R Seta, 2013).

Given the global nature of the textile and apparel industry, knowledge about supply chain management, global apparel retail operations, globalization trends, and legal and political environments is critical (Alzahrani & Kozar, 2017; Karpova, Marcketti & Barker, 2011a; Yu & Jin, 2005). To understand global manufacturing and distribution, professionals in the apparel industry need comprehensive knowledge about international trade and regulations (Hodges et al., 2011). This is in agreement with Frazier and Cheek (2016) who found process knowledge, global awareness, and human factors to be the most important areas of knowledge for entry-level merchandising positions, especially the consciousness of economic and political issues and impact, social/cultural change, and environmental sustainability. In conclusion, the types of explicit knowledge derived for merchandising are: business, environmental awareness, marketing, assortment management, product development, retail operations, and sourcing (Table 2.4).

**Tacit knowledge.**

Tacit knowledge refers to what we know from our experiences and can be defined as “subjective insights, intuitions and hunches” (p. 7); it is not easily formalized, shared or communicated (Nonaka et al., 2000). The degree of tacit knowledge complexity varies and, in turn, determines how difficult it is to share and teach (Garud & Nyyar, 1994). For example,
merchandising professional’s experience (e.g., making buying decisions and selecting styles that will sell at full price) will become tacit knowledge, which might be not easy to explain to others (Eraut, 1994). Tacit knowledge is engrained in specific actions, procedures, routines in a specific context (Nonaka et al., 2000) and involves “people and situations we encountered, communication received, and events and activities experienced through observation or participation” (Eraut, 1994, p. 104). Tacit knowledge can be informally obtained and learned through experience and practice such as an apprenticeship (learning a craft form an expert), internships, or on the job training (hands-on learning by doing it yourself or observing) rather than through textbooks or manuals (Nonaka et al., 2000). This knowledge is more difficult to describe, define, and classify, as it entails personal experience gained from working in the industry.

**Experience.**

Prior experience in the industry has been found to be important to function in sourcing positions (Muhammad & Ha-Brookshire, 2011), for entry-level merchandising positions (Frazier & Cheek, 2016), and apparel retail (Alzahrani & Kozar, 2017). For tacit knowledge, one category pertaining to professional experiences was created with related dimensions: internship, retail work, and on the job training (Table 2.4).

In conclusion, merchandising professionals must possess both explicit and tacit knowledge. Gereffi (1999) argues that sourcing, for instance, requires both explicit and tacit knowledge regarding how and where to acquire or produce the right products to maximize profits. The research stream on general apparel and merchandising knowledge is more developed than research on tacit knowledge needed by merchandising professionals. Even though explicit apparel and merchandising knowledge provide a sound theoretical foundation, tacit knowledge might also be important as it provides professionals with almost instinctive and automatic way of functioning in a company (Alavi & Leidner, 2001).
**Competencies**

In literature, different concepts, such as skills, knowledge, traits, personal qualities, abilities, capabilities, and aptitudes are used as indicators of competence. However, more often competencies are viewed as the culmination of relevant skills and knowledge obtained through training, education, and experiences (Jackson, 2010; Pellegrino & Hilton, 2012). Being competent means not only having the right knowledge and skills but also being able to apply them (Gurteen, 1998). Eraut (1994) explains that competence can be described in terms of scope and quality. What a person is competent in (e.g., specific position, task, software, etc.) relates to the scope, and quality relays to where that work falls on a continuum from novice to expert. Graduates with strong disciplinary knowledge and adequate soft and hard skills might still not be competent if they are not able to apply them in the correct way. How well they can apply their skills and knowledge will reflect their level of competency (quality). In this study, competencies will refer to the ability to apply relevant skills and knowledge needed for performing responsibilities in apparel merchandising positions.

**Competency frameworks.**

Competencies needed to perform specific tasks are linked to the person’s position or job description (Jackson, 2010). In other words, job description (compiled from the position and responsibilities) will ultimately dictate the important skills and knowledge needed to perform the job (Johansson et al., n. d). Scholars have proposed various competency frameworks (Collet et al., 2015). Four frameworks are analyzed below and summarized in Table 2.5 to establish a suitable framework for this study.
Table 2.5. Four competency frameworks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Framework/Author</th>
<th>Skills</th>
<th>Knowledge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>USEM framework (Yorke &amp; Knight, 2003)</td>
<td>Skillful practices Efficacy beliefs Metacognition</td>
<td>Understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employability framework (Power, 2010b)</td>
<td>Interpersonal and intrapersonal skills Metacognitive strategies Higher order cognitive skills</td>
<td>Technical competencies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ITAA Meta-Goals (Frazier &amp; Cheek, 2016)</td>
<td>Professional skills: - Ethics - Critical and creative thinking - Professional development (i.e., communication, teamwork, intercultural awareness, leadership, apply career planning concepts)</td>
<td>Understanding and knowledge about: - Social responsibility and sustainability - Industry processes (i.e., product development, production, sourcing, merchandising, marketing) - Appearance and human behavior (i.e., theories, concepts, regarding appearance and human behavior, historic, sociocultural, and psychological factors of dress) - Aesthetics and the design process (i.e., creation of products that meet marketplace needs; how aesthetics and the design process can support quality of life; elements and principles of design) - Global interdependence (i.e., political, cultural, and economic systems’ impact, theoretical perspectives on markets, trade, and economic development applied on production, consumption, and disposal of products)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Power (2010b) identified four key areas of competencies to make apparel graduates more employable: (a) technical competencies (knowledge, understanding and abilities); (b) life skills for a globalized knowledge economy (key and occupational skills which comprise of interpersonal and intrapersonal skills); (c) higher order cognitive skills (analysis, synthesis
and evaluation); and (d) metacognitive strategies (learning how to learn and appreciating skill development). This framework augments Yorke and Knight’s (2003) more general understanding, skillful practices, efficacy beliefs, and metacognition (USEM) framework that outlines four competency areas: (a) understanding (knowledge); (b) skillful practices (deployment of skills); (c) efficacy beliefs (how effective students view themselves); and (d) metacognition (self-awareness and capacity to reflect on learning). Both frameworks emphasized metacognition. Graduates’ approach, orientation, and reflection on learning is very important in terms of their continuous learning and development apart from formal training (Yorke & Knight, 2003).

Frazier and Cheek (2016) surveyed mid-level retail managers to explore important competencies for entry-level merchandising positions using the International Textiles and Apparel Associations (ITAA) baccalaureate meta-goals as a framework. These ITAA meta-goals were re-worked into competency items and included in the survey. The ITAA meta-goals include proposed content for curricula related to professional skills and knowledge deemed important for functioning effectively in the textile and apparel industry. Professional skills included: (a) ethics; (b) critical and creative thinking; and (c) professional development (communication, teamwork, intercultural awareness, leadership; and applying career planning concepts). Understanding and knowledge covered (a) social responsibility and sustainability; (b) industry processes; (c) appearance and human behavior; (d) aesthetics and the design process; and (e) global interdependence.

Pellegrino and Hilton’s (2012) competency domain framework distinguishes between three areas, or domains of competencies: (a) interpersonal – expressing ideas and responding to others’ messages; (b) intrapersonal – self-management; and (c) cognitive – reasoning and memory. The competency domain framework describes how different skills and knowledge from each domain relate to each other and “support, enhance or impinge upon skills in the
other domains” (Collet et al., 2015, p. 538). In other words, the skills and knowledge in the different competency domains augment each other to improve the overall level of a person’s competence. For example, to develop leadership competency a person needs to improve his/her interpersonal and intrapersonal competencies. Pellegrino and Hilton’s (2012) competency domain framework distinguishes between inter- and intrapersonal skills as well as cognitive processes, innovation and creativity, and knowledge.

The ITAA meta-goals, the USEM, and Power’s key areas of competencies did not provide a solid framework to systematically classify identified merchandising S&K from the literature review. Pellegrino and Hilton’s (2012) framework was employed in this study as it clearly distinguishes between different types of skills and knowledge as well as include domains of competency. Pellegrino and Hilton’s (2012) framework can be modified to be apparel merchandising specific and can be used to classify skills and knowledge.

Table 2.5 provides a summary of the four analyzed competency frameworks. Competencies related to personal attributes or people-related qualities were classified as skills. Competencies related to understanding obtained through experience or formal study were classified as knowledge.

**Pellegrino and Hilton’s Competency Framework**

Pellegrino and Hilton’s (2012) competency domain framework was used to organize the skills and knowledge required for merchandising positions. The framework differentiates between three domains: interpersonal; intrapersonal, and cognitive. Together, interpersonal (people-related) and intrapersonal (personal attributes) domains cover various soft skills summarized in Table 2.2. Hard skills (Table 2.3) and knowledge (Table 2.4) were classified into competencies related to the cognitive domain. All skills and knowledge, which were identified as important for apparel professionals in the literature, were analyzed and classified into one of the three domains and respective clusters, as follows:
First, all categories of merchandising skills and knowledge were classified into one of the three domains (interpersonal, intrapersonal, and cognitive).

Next, within each of the three domains, all categories and types of skills and knowledge were classified into an appropriate cluster identified by Pellegrino and Hilton’s framework:

- Interpersonal domain: (a) collaboration and (b) leadership.
- Intrapersonal domain: (a) intellectual openness, (b) work ethic and conscientiousness, and (c) positive core self-evaluation;
- Cognitive domain: (a) cognitive processes and strategies, (b) innovation and creativity; and (c) knowledge.

The goal of classifying merchandising skills and knowledge using Pellegrino and Hilton’s framework was to establish a competency framework specific to apparel merchandising. Such a framework will help to clarify and organize all merchandising related skills and knowledge based on a theoretical framework. In addition, the classification scheme can guide analyses of skills and knowledge identified as important in the South African apparel retail context. Lastly, the identified domains and clusters might be useful to focus curricula development and learning outcomes to prepare graduates for the apparel retail industry. As Pellegrino and Hilton (2012) pointed out, “our taxonomy offers a useful starting point, but further research is needed to more carefully organize, align, and define” the proposed domains and clusters of the framework (p. 12). The competency domain framework is, therefore, fluid and can be tailored to a specific discipline.

**Interpersonal competencies.**

The interpersonal domain refers to the expression of ideas and interpretation and response to messages from others (Pellegrino & Hilton, 2012). Two competency clusters are included in this domain: (a) collaboration, and (b) leadership. From Table 2.2, interpersonal
skills (i.e., communication, courtesy, diplomacy, leadership, professionalism, social, and teamwork) that form the basis of people-related skills were classified under the two interpersonal competency clusters. If interpersonal skills are well-developed it will become interpersonal competencies that determine how well a person work with others as well as guiding and developing others.

**Collaboration.**

This cluster represents interpersonal soft skills related to interaction with others. Interpersonal skills (Table 2.2) classified under this cluster are (a) communication (i.e., verbal, written, presentation, listening); (b) courtesy (i.e., polite, respectful, considerate); (c) professionalism (i.e., business like, well-dressed); (d) social (i.e., pleasant, friendly, sense of humor, intercultural awareness); and (e) teamwork (i.e., cooperative, collaborative, supportive, helpful, trust others). Tymon (2013) established that communication and teamwork were the common competencies cited by many studies as desirable in terms of employability. The critical importance of communication and teamwork skills is also evident in the context of the apparel industry (Alzahrani & Kozar, 2017; Frazier & Cheek, 2016; Muhammad & Ha-Brookshire, 2011).

**Leadership.**

Interpersonal skills (Table 2.2) classified under this cluster include (a) diplomacy (i.e., negotiation, discretion, resolve conflict); and (b) leadership (i.e., motivates others, coaches/mentors, monitors performance, functions in diverse settings, and goal-setting). Leadership was found to be one of the most important competencies for entry-level apparel merchandising jobs (Frazier & Cheek, 2016). This is consistent with Rosenberg et al. (2012) who found leadership to be the only critical skill that all three groups (faculty, retail professionals, and recent graduates) agreed on as being important in business environments. Well-developed leadership skills will grow in desired competencies such as motivating,
supporting, and developing others, and own professional development (Jackson & Chapman, 2012). This involves setting realistic professional goals, identifying learning opportunities, creating professional networks and making strategic work-related decision to progress in one’s career (Bridgstock, 2009).

**Intrapersonal competencies.**

The intrapersonal domain denotes self-management in terms of behavior and emotions and consists of three competency clusters: (a) intellectual openness; (b) work ethic and conscientiousness; and (c) positive core self-evaluation. Based on the analysis in the soft skills section, intrapersonal skills are desirable and transferable soft skills that represents personal attributes/trait possessed by an individual. If intrapersonal skills are well developed it will become intrapersonal competencies. Intrapersonal skills from Table 2.2 (i.e., flexibility, integrity, organizational, positive attitude, responsibility, self-management, self-evaluation, and work ethic) were classified in one of the three intrapersonal competency clusters, as follows.

**Intellectual openness.**

Intellectual openness denotes a person’s capability to adapt to change, new ideas, and environments and include a person’s ability to be flexible and appreciate diversity (Pellegrino & Hilton, 2012). Intrapersonal skills classified under intellectual openness include flexibility (e.g., adaptability, willingness to change, and acceptance of new things) and having a positive attitude (i.e., optimistic, enthusiastic, encouraging). Both flexibility and positive attitude define a person’s ability to deal with change, which is intrinsic to the fast-paced apparel retail industry. Merchandising professionals have to be able to adapt to a constantly evolving globalized economy (Power, 2010b).
**Work ethics and conscientiousness.**

This cluster represents the tendency to be responsible, hardworking, and organized. This cluster also denotes intrapersonal skills related to work ethics such as being loyal, self-motivated, and on time (Pellegrino & Hilton, 2012). Intrapersonal skills classified under this cluster, which signify the ability apply work ethics and conscientiousness are: (a) responsibility (i.e., accountable, reliable, and gets the job done); (b) self-management (i.e., disciplined, stress tolerance, work-life balance, and independent); (c) integrity (i.e., honesty, ethical, high morals, and does the right thing); (d) organizational skills (i.e., project management, time management, multi-tasking, and prioritizing); and (e) work ethic (i.e., hard-working, loyal, self-motivated, punctuality, and good attendance). Applying ethics in work related decision-making are highly valued in the apparel industry (Frazier & Cheek, 2016; Hodges et al., 2015; Muhammad & Ha-Brookshire, 2011). Ethical behavior also translates to environmental awareness and social responsibility (Frazier & Cheek, 2016). Professionals working in the various supply chain stages need to be aware of the impact their decisions have on the environment, people, and communities (Baytar & Ashdown, 2014).

**Positive core self-evaluation.**

Positive self-evaluation pertains to individuals’ self-knowledge and self-efficacy (Pellegrino & Hilton, 2012). Intrapersonal skills classified under this cluster denote positive core self-evaluation skills such as self-efficacy and realistic judgement of abilities, values, and beliefs. Watchravesringkan, et al. (2013) found personal values related to self-accomplishment and self-respect important for successful apparel entrepreneurial careers. A person’s ability to realistically judge his/her goals, values, and interest in terms of career were also noted in previous studies (Bridgstock, 2009; Yorke & Knight, 2003). If merchandisers can identify and evaluate their personal strengths and limitations, they will be able to apply
themselves more effectively and improve on weaknesses, which inevitably leads to self-confidence (Alzaharani & Kozar, 2016).

Cognitive competencies.

The cognitive domain refers to the reasoning and memory ability of a person and includes three competency clusters: (a) cognitive processes and strategies; (b) creativity and innovation; and (c) knowledge (Pellegrino & Hilton, 2012). Based on Tables 2.3 and 2.4, hard skills (technical and thinking/conceptual) and knowledge (explicit and tacit) were classified in one of the three cognitive domain competency clusters.

Cognitive processes and strategies.

Cognitive processes and strategies relate to a person’s ability to use thinking/conceptual skills (i.e., critical thinking, decision-making, metacognition, problem-solving, strategic thinking) and technical skills (i.e., numeracy, technology) in the workplace (Table 2.3). “Cognition is the ability to learn and solve a problem” (Power, 2010b). Critical thinking is a cognitive competency valued by apparel retail companies as it reflects a person’s ability to combine logical reasoning and creativity to resolve a problem and is considered the way forward in addressing global economic challenges (Chida & Brown, 2011). Frazier and Cheek (2016) found critical thinking, problem solving, and decision-making to be important abilities to have by merchandising professionals. Cognitive processes also relate to metacognition and how a person puts into practice what has been learned and being aware what thinking processes are involved (Power, 2010b).

Innovation and creativity.

Innovation is a part of a person’s cognitive abilities and relates to creativity, original ideas, resourcefulness, and implementation of ideas. Creativity is about using mental processes and knowledge to generate new original ideas, whereas innovation is about the implementation of new ideas (Gurteen, 1998). Creativity is a highly valued skill by all
apparel professionals (Karpova, Marcketti, & Kamm, 2013). It was found to help apparel professionals be more efficient and effective in performing their daily tasks and responsibilities (Karpova et al., 2011a). Intrinsic to being innovative is the ability to think critically, know how to use data sparsely and effectively, reach a profitable outcome, and reduce risk - precisely what apparel companies are looking for (Chida & Brown, 2011).

**Knowledge.**

Discipline-specific knowledge is very important for performing tasks in merchandising positions (Muhammad & Ha-Brookshire, 2011). Merchandising professionals need to have the right explicit knowledge, but should know how to use it to create a competitive advantage for their company related to tacit knowledge (previous professional experiences) (Chida & Brown, 2011; Danskin et al., 2005). This agrees with Jackson (2010), who reiterates that knowledgeable graduates add value, feed innovation and enables global competitiveness of companies. Explicit knowledge includes general apparel knowledge and knowledge specific to merchandising (Table 2.4). For merchandising professionals to function successfully, they must be competent in applying both explicit and tacit knowledge about products and processes.

**Proposed Apparel Merchandising Competency Framework.**

In this study, competencies entail skills and knowledge and refer to how well a person can apply relevant skills and knowledge needed for performing critical responsibilities in apparel merchandising positions. Based on Pellegrino and Hilton’s (2012) competency domain framework and the analysis of skills and knowledge required for merchandising professionals, the merchandising competency framework was developed. After all the categories of apparel skills and knowledge were classified into one of the three appropriate domains (cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal) and respective clusters it was tabulated. The skills and knowledge are presented in no prioritized order here. Table 2.6 presents a
proposed apparel merchandising competency framework and how skills and knowledge relate
to the respective competency domains and clusters.

Table 2.6. Apparel merchandising competency framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competency domain</th>
<th>Cluster</th>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Types</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interpersonal competency</strong></td>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>Soft skills</td>
<td>Interpersonal</td>
<td>Communication</td>
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<td>Courtesy</td>
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<td>Teamwork</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Soft skills</td>
<td>Interpersonal</td>
<td>Diplomacy</td>
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<td>Leadership</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Intrapersonal competency</strong></td>
<td>Intellectual openness</td>
<td>Soft skills</td>
<td>Intrapersonal</td>
<td>Flexibility</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Work ethic and conscientiousness</td>
<td>Soft skills</td>
<td>Intrapersonal</td>
<td>Integrity</td>
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<td>Organizational skills</td>
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<td>Positive core self-evaluation</td>
<td>Soft skills</td>
<td>Intrapersonal</td>
<td>Self-evaluation</td>
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<td>Positive attitude</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Cognitive competency</strong></td>
<td>Cognitive processes and strategies</td>
<td>Hard skills</td>
<td>Technical skills</td>
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<td>Technology</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Innovation and creativity</td>
<td>Hard skills</td>
<td>Thinking/ conceptual skills</td>
<td>Critical thinking</td>
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<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>Explicit knowledge</td>
<td>General apparel knowledge</td>
<td>Decision-making</td>
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<td>Metacognition</td>
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<td>Strategic thinking</td>
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<td>Explicit knowledge</td>
<td>Merchandising knowledge</td>
<td>Apparel product</td>
<td>Innovation</td>
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<td>Aesthetics</td>
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<td>Social-cultural aspect</td>
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<td>Sustainability</td>
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<td>Textiles</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tacit knowledge</td>
<td>Experience</td>
<td>Professional experience</td>
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</table>
Conclusions

To summarize, merchandising graduates need specific skills, knowledge, and competencies to be employable and build a successful career in the apparel industry. Research underscores that competent merchandisers contribute to the overall performance and success of a retail firm (Howse et al., 2000). Competence of merchandising professionals affects the strategical, operational, and store-level performance of an apparel retail company.

The merchandising competency framework was developed using Pellegrino and Hilton’s (2012) competency domain framework. Merchandising skills and knowledge identified through the analysis of existing literature were classified into the three domains of competencies (cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal) and their respective clusters. Each cluster represents skills or knowledge required by merchandising professionals to be competent in the respective domain. Pellegrino and Hilton (2012) believe that competencies from all three domains can be taught and obtained by students during their college studies.

In the literature, there is agreement on the types of skills and knowledge, but not on their importance or priority for merchandising professionals in the context of the South African retail industry. From a theoretical perspective, this study will develop a competency framework specifically tailored for merchandising professionals in South Africa. This framework will be useful for identifying learning outcomes and developing curricula for apparel retail and merchandising programs. The merchandising competency framework will include different levels/tiers of important skills and knowledge for employability in the industry. The goal is to distinguish between (a) absolutely essential or ‘must have’ skills and knowledge; (b) important skills and knowledge; and (c) ‘nice to have’ skills and knowledge. As many higher education institutions experience constraints in term of resources (time, financial, and human resources), it is important to effectively and efficiently use these precious resources for strategic planning and development of apparel programs. Educators
might find useful the different levels of importance for skills and knowledge as focus in their program and curriculum development. In essence, higher education needs to foster graduates who are not only able to obtain and function in a job with their competencies but also have the ability to stay current and be employable throughout their life (Yorke & Knight, 2003).
CHAPTER 3. METHOD

This chapter presents the research method of the study. The purpose of this study was to investigate skills and knowledge required for apparel merchandising professionals in the South African retail industry. To investigate merchandising skills and knowledge, an exploratory sequential mixed method research design was employed. This research design is best suited when a relatively understudied and/or complex topic is investigated (Creswell, 2014). This research design suited the study, as there is a lack of up-to-date research about the merchandising function in the ever-evolving retail industry. Moreover, very few empirical studies investigated skills and knowledge required for apparel merchandising professionals, especially, in the context of a developing country like South Africa.

In the first qualitative exploratory phase (Phase I), the merchandising function and skills and knowledge were explored through individual interviews. Specifically, skills and knowledge required to fulfill merchandising positions and perform associated responsibilities were identified. The successive quantitative phase (Phase II) employed an adaptive conjoint analysis survey to prioritize the skills and knowledge identified in Phase I. Based on the prioritized merchandising skills and knowledge, a merchandising competency framework was developed to aid apparel programs in developing curriculum to increase graduates’ employability within the South African retail industry.

Phase I: Qualitative Research

The qualitative phase: (1) investigated apparel merchandising professionals’ positions and responsibilities, and (2) identified a comprehensive list of merchandising skills and knowledge required in the South African retail industry for these positions. A qualitative research study is appropriate when a better understanding of individual’s experiences and perspectives is needed (Creswell, 2013). A major advantage of qualitative research is the
opportunity to explore complex topics that had limited investigation within a specific context or population (Arendt et al., 2012). Apparel merchandising is a complex process with variation in the scope of the function depending on the retailer type and size. To fully grasp the complexities and demands of apparel merchandising professionals in different positions necessitates a comprehensive understanding, and in-depth exploration of the skills and knowledge required to fulfil these positions and perform associated responsibilities.

Through individual interviews, merchandising professionals was able to share their unique professional experiences and perspectives on what skills and knowledge they need to fulfill their positions and to perform their responsibilities. The researcher was permitted an in-depth insider perspective of the participant’s own accounts of the situation (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). Several studies have successfully used a qualitative research approach to explore apparel professionals’ views and experiences of various topics such as creativity (Karpova et al., 2011a), the roles and responsibilities of buyers (Goworek, 2014), and entrepreneurship (Hodges et al., 2011). Finally, qualitative research not only provides the way in which a context or a specific population can be investigated, it also helps to develop “sound quantitative measurement instruments” (Achterberg & Arendt, 2008 in Arendt et al., 2012, p. 821). Using a qualitative approach provided a realistic (i.e., perspectives of industry professionals) and contextualized (South African retail industry) account of the skills and knowledge required for different merchandising positions as well as helped to identify the skills and knowledge to be prioritized in the quantitative phase.

Social Constructivism Perspective

Social constructivism is the underlying philosophy used in Phase I of this study. Social constructivism is a perspective used to understand the world individuals “live and work” in (Creswell, 2013, p. 24). This philosophy acknowledges that multiple realities exist and that individuals construct them through their social interactions (Greeff, 2011).
Merchandising professionals’ daily experiences in the apparel retail industry will shape their reality about their positions, responsibilities, and how these are accomplished, which will define what skills and knowledge they use in the process. It is important to acknowledge individual experiences of these professionals and their constructed perspectives on how they get their jobs done.

**Phenomenological Approach**

Phase I, followed a phenomenological approach. This approach is especially suitable to explore research questions that aim to understand and describe the what, why, and how of experiences from multiple perspectives (Creswell, 2013). Specifically, this approach helped to understand and describe what it takes to be a competent merchandising professional in the South African retail industry. Phenomenological approach has provided a flexible platform for researchers who explored industry professionals’ perspectives on specified aspects (Arendt et al., 2012; Karpova et al., 2011a). In-depth descriptions were obtained from merchandising professionals about what, how, and why they use specific skills and knowledge to perform their responsibilities.

**Participants and Purposive Sampling**

For phenomenological studies, a small purposive sample of participants with experience of the situation is recommended (Creswell, 2013). This entails the use of pre-specified criteria that the participants must meet to be included in the study (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). The participants had to comply with the following criteria: (1) be appointed in an apparel merchandising position with a minimum of two years of experience, and (2) have an apparel-related bachelor’s degree. In choosing participants who had at least two years of experience, the objective was to gain insight from merchandisers who already had experience with the demands and requirements of a merchandising position. Merchandising
professionals in different stages of their careers will also have different conceptions of skills and knowledge needed.

Two conditions directed the purposive sampling: sufficiency and data saturation. Sufficiency is ensuring that an adequate number of apparel merchandising professionals are included in the study to “reflect the range of participants and sites that make up the population so that those outside the sample might have a chance to connect to the experience of those in it” (Greeff, 2011, p. 350). As outlined in Chapter 2, the apparel merchandising function is separated into different roles or industry positions: (a) product developer, (b) assortment management (buyers ad planners), and (c) sourcing and distribution managers. Merchandising professionals from all these roles were included to ensure that a sufficient range of different merchandising positions was included.

In South Africa, apparel retail companies are located in three regions (provinces): Western-Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, and Gauteng (W&R Seta, 2013). It is important to include merchandising professionals from different locations to reflect a realistic view of the target population (Greeff, 2011). To ensure the geographic sufficiency of participants, merchandising professionals from the three regions (Western-Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, and Gauteng) where apparel retailers are mainly located in South Africa were included.

The second condition that directed the purposive sampling is data saturation. Data saturation occurs when information becomes redundant and no new information emerges (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). When data saturation occurs, the data collection process can stop, but until that point the researcher keeps on recruiting new participants (Greeff, 2011). Data collection was completed once data saturation occurred and no new information emerged.

A list of alumni from the Clothing Retail Management program at the University of Pretoria was used to gain access to potential participants. Graduates from the University of Pretoria were contacted through email to participate in the study and asked to also refer
potential participants who fitted the purposive sampling criteria but did not graduate from the University of Pretoria. Snowball sampling or referral technique ensured that graduates from different apparel, fashion, and/or merchandising academic programs were recruited.

**Data Collection**

Data collection started after human subject research approval was obtained from the Iowa State University’s Institutional Review Board (Appendix A). Data were collected through semi-structured, face-to-face, individual interviews with merchandising professionals working in the South African apparel retail industry. Individual interviews allow for a ‘thick’ description of everyday experiences from participants who are considered the experts on the topic (Greeff, 2011). Individual interviews are useful to get an insider perspective that is true and relevant to the particular participant’s experience and situation (Creswell, 2013). The semi-structured interview strategy focused on giving the participant time and opportunity to reflect on his/her experiences but also subtly steer the interview (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). Individual interviews are compatible with a phenomenological approach and allowed for comparing the perspectives and experiences of professionals in various merchandising positions, giving broader insights into what, why, and how skills and knowledge are used by participants. Further, it generated rich data to identify merchandising skills and knowledge for developing the survey instrument.

To pre-test the interview protocol, a graduate of the Clothing Retail Management program at the University of Pretoria was approached. The interview protocol was condensed, and problematic questions were revised to be understandable. Potential participants, identified by graduates from the Clothing Retail Management program, were then approached by email (Appendix B). The email explained who referred them, the purpose of the study, that no personal or company details will be asked, and invited them to participate in the study. Once professionals agreed to participate, a suitable date and time for the individual
interview were scheduled. The researcher traveled to the different provinces and cities to meet the participants at a convenient place and time to conduct the interview. Five interviews were conducted in Gauteng, seven in the Western-Cape, and four in Kwazulu-Natal. Prior to the interviews, all participants were asked to complete: (a) a consent form (Appendix C), and (b) a short demographic questionnaire (Appendix D). The demographic questionnaire covered general information about the participants’ age, gender, education, current position, and professional experience. Participants were also ensured that participation is voluntarily, and that their identity and company’s names will not be disclosed.

The pre-tested interview protocol (Appendix E), consisting of open-ended questions, ensured a systematic collection of data. Participants were asked about their previous and current merchandising position(s), daily responsibilities, what skills and knowledge they use to complete them, and what they think it takes to succeed and be effective and efficient in the industry. Participants received a 200 rand (equivalent of 15 USD) gift card, as token of appreciation for their time. Interviews lasted between 30 to 70 minutes and were digitally audio recorded with the permission of the participants. Data were collected between mid-November 2017 and January 2018. One interview had to be rescheduled for March 2018 because of clashes with the participant’s work schedule. A description of participants’ demographic and professional characteristics for Phase I is presented in Chapter 4 and 5.

**Data Analysis of Interviews**

The underlying philosophy of Phase I was social constructivism that aims to understand the world individuals “live and work” in (Creswell, 2013, p. 24) and acknowledges that multiple realities exist (Greeff, 2011). It was important to acknowledge individual experiences and their constructed perspectives on how they get their jobs done.

The data analysis process followed the five steps outlined in Creswell (2014). During Step 1, the data was organized and prepared for analysis. All interviews were transcribed
verbatim and organized into separate files by the researcher. Each file was labelled by the participant’s job description, type of retail store and the date of the interview, e.g., Product developer _department store_21 Nov. To protect participants’ identity their names and company names were not used. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym.

In Step 2, the researcher carefully read through the transcripts. The objective was to get a general idea of what participants said as well as form an overall impression of the data. During Step 3, Atlas.ti, a qualitative analysis software program, was used to organize and analyze the interviews in a systematic way. The transcribed interviews were imported into Atlast.ti for analysis specifically developed for qualitative data analysis. The transcripts were then open-coded with the goal to develop categories, which were then clustered into themes (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). The coding process entailed organizing the data by bracketing chunks of text, segments of sentences or paragraphs and allocating a code to the segments of the text. Codes with definitions were developed throughout this step. Segments with the same code were then sorted together into categories. Next, categories were merged into themes, labelled with a suited description (Creswell, 2013). A priori codes obtained from the literature review in Chapter 2. Atlas.ti has the capacity to locate all text associated with a specific code which gives the researcher easy access to all phrases or text relevant to that code.

During Step 4, descriptions of themes were generated to describe the research findings pertinent to merchandising positions, responsibilities, and skills and knowledge required to perform these responsibilities (Creswell, 2013). Categories were merged to form themes. During Step 5, findings were presented and discussed. The presentation of data is aimed at better understanding the different merchandising positions and responsibilities, what skills and knowledge are required and why certain skills and knowledge are important to perform merchandising responsibilities. The data analysis concluded with a generated list of
skills and knowledge 29 types and 116 dimensions describing the types for the development of the survey in Phase II.

Trustworthiness of the data during collection and analysis was ensured by implementing the following measures: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). Credibility was achieved to stop data collection when data saturation occurred. Transferability is if findings can be applied in another context by purposive sampling and providing a detailed description of the data. A detailed description of the sampling process and outline of techniques were included in the reporting of the findings. Dependability is if repeating the study in similar circumstances would yield similar findings. Through detailed reporting of this phase the study can be replicated. Confirmability is providing evidence that the findings present the outcome of the study and not the predispositions of the researcher (Babbie & Mouton, 2001, p. 278). An audit trail, that included reviewing raw data, field and observation notes, coders coding, and construction of categories and themes were kept.

**Phase II: Quantitative Research**

Conjoint analysis is based on the decomposition of multiple attributes to understand the judgement of and preference for products, services, ideas, and/or decisions (Agarwal, DeSarbo, Malhorta & Rai, 2014; Hair, Black, Babin & Anderson, 2010). This method was developed for choice modelling in marketing and consumer research (Agarwal et al., 2014). It is a useful tool when different alternatives exist, and a decision maker must choose the relative importance or preference of a single attribute or a combination of attributes (Lacobucci & Churchill, 2010; Mazzocchi, 2008). In this study, an adaptive conjoint analysis, a hybrid conjoint analysis method was used to prioritize merchandising skills and knowledge identified by participants during Phase I.
Adaptive conjoint analysis is based on the same principle as conjoint analysis: participants are presented with a combination of multivariate information, which is then used to establish preference for a specific attribute over another (Hair et al., 2010). Adaptive conjoint analysis forms part of discrete choice models where the dependent variable has binary, ordinal, or categorical measures (Mazzocchi, 2008). It allows the researcher to present the participant with multiple attributes to compare and select the most preferred or important attribute(s).

**Conjoint Analysis Terminology**

In adaptive conjoint analysis and conjoint analysis, factors or variables are called attributes. For example, the soft skills category included different skill types, or attributes, such as leadership, communication, and teamwork. Adaptive conjoint analysis can accommodate up to 30 attributes. The different dimensions of skills that describe or operationalize each attribute are called the attribute levels (Mazzocchi, 2008). Usually, five to six levels per attribute are included (Hair et al., 2010). For example, the different levels describing the communication attribute were verbal skills, writing skills, presentation skills, listening skills, keeping open-communication line, and informing or briefing. Although, up to ten levels per attribute can be included in adaptive conjoint analysis (Hair et al., 2010), for this study the maximum level was six and the minimum level two. Attributes with their levels are independent from each other, mutually exclusive, and specified on a verbal scale (Scholl, Mantley, Helm & Steiner, 2005). In other words, attributes and their levels should have no overlaps and described in words or phrases that are easy to understand by participants.

Profiles are created by combining one level from different attributes to develop a stimulus to be evaluated by participants (Hair et al., 2010). Profiles (stimuli) can have many attribute levels, a few or only two.
For this adaptive conjoint analysis study, *pair-wise comparison* as recommended by Hair et al. (2010) was adopted. Participants evaluate two profiles with five to six attribute levels each and select the most preferred profile, using a rating scale. Pair-wise profiles are used in adaptive conjoint analysis because the initial large number of attributes can be reduced to smaller sub-sets of profiles (Hair et al., 2010). Using smaller sub-sets is less taxing on participants (Huertas-Garcia, Gázquez-Abad & Forgas-Coll, 2016). The *conjoint task* is the procedure or activity given to the participant to evaluate or compare the attributes in different profiles to select the most preferred profile (Hair et al., 2010).

The modelling of preferences in conjoint analysis and adaptive conjoint analysis aims to determine the contribution a single attribute has in terms of consumers’ final choice of a product, service, or idea (Hair et al., 2010; Mazzocchi, 2008). This refers to the total *utility* of the product, which is based on the premise that the overall preference for a product is made up by combining all the utilities associated with each attribute (Hair et al., 2010). *Utilities* are “subjective judgement of preference” and are measurements that are formed by combining the *part-worth* estimates of a set of preferences (values given to each level) of an attribute (Hair et al., 2010, p. 277). A *utility value* (a numerical score) is assigned to each attribute level that rates it in terms of preference (Lacobucci & Churchill, 2010). The utility value also indicates the relative importance of the preference. In other words, it ranks the attribute levels from most important to least important and measures the predicted preference level of an attribute (Hair et al., 2010).

*Part-worth* is the overall preference, worth, or derived importance associated with each level of each attribute (partial value) (Hair et al., 2010). The part-worth model assumes that the decomposition of preferences will have partial contribution (part-worth) to the attribute (Green & Krieger, 1991) and that the “total utility of a choice is equal to the sum of utilities of the attributes of that specific choice” (Mazzocchi, 2008, p. 348). For example,
participants’ final preference of the skills and knowledge attributes most important for merchandising professionals was determined by combining all the utility values assigned to each attribute level of each attribute (Hair et al., 2010). Rating every attribute level of a specific attribute determined that attribute’s overall importance relative to all the other skills and knowledge attributes, giving it a priority.

**Rationale for Adaptive Conjoint Analysis**

In Phase II of the study, an adaptive conjoint analysis survey was used to prioritize merchandising skills and knowledge identified by participants during Phase I. Adaptive conjoint analysis has been used in various fields such as marketing, consumer behavior, and product development to determine consumers’ preferences for product attributes (Green & Krieger, 1991; Green, Krieger & Wind, 2001). It has also been used in the medical field to design customized medical treatment programs (Al-Omari, Sim, Croft & Frisher, 2017). Adaptive conjoint analysis is especially valuable for making a choice among multi-attribute alternatives, isolating those of primary importance (Lacobucci & Churchill, 2010). Adaptive conjoint analysis was appropriate for this study because it can accommodate more constructs (up to 30 attributes) than the traditional conjoint analysis, which can only accommodate six attributes (Hair et al., 2010).

Based on the literature review in Chapter 2, there was an extensive number of merchandising skills and knowledge (i.e., potential attributes) and no agreement on the priority of these merchandising skills and knowledge types. With the resource constraints in higher education institutions, knowing which skills and knowledge are more important for merchandising professionals will allow for developing more effective and efficient curriculum and programs. Using importance scales like in previous studies (e.g., Frazier & Cheek, 2016; Heitemeyer et al., 1992; Hines & Swinker, 1998; Howse et al., 2000;
Kotsiopulos et al., 1993; Woodard & Geissler, 1999) could result in participants rating all skills and knowledge as important.

**Survey Design for Adaptive Conjoint Analysis**

The overall purpose of the adaptive conjoint analysis questionnaire was to prioritize the predefined list of merchandising skills and knowledge. The adaptive conjoint analysis follows a sequential experimental design that consist of two steps. In the first step, each participant is presented with a list of attributes and their related attribute levels (related dimensions). They evaluate and rate the importance of each attribute level using a metric scale. In the second step, the highest rated attribute levels are combined into pair-wise profiles based on the preferred attributes levels identified in the first step. The pair-wise profiles are presented to the participant for rating to estimate the importance of each attribute level, which in the end are used to determine the overall importance of the attribute (Huertas-Garcia et al., 2016).

The two sequential steps are performed by using computer programs like Sawtooth Software Inc. To execute the survey, Sawtooth Software Inc. specially developed for conjoint analysis and adaptive conjoint analysis was used (Johnson & Orme, 2007). For this study, the researcher used a Pretoria based research company Consulta Research who owns a Sawtooth Software Inc. license. Consulta Research assisted with the development and administration of the electronic self-administered, adaptive conjoint analysis survey.

**Initial adaptive conjoint analysis design.**

A predefined list of skills and knowledge types (attributes) with related dimensions (attribute levels) was generated during Phase I. The attributes and their related attribute levels were compiled into a matrix using Sawtooth Software Inc. These attributes and attribute levels must be independent from each other and mutually exclusive (Orme, 2002). Careful consideration was taken to ensure that attributes and attribute levels complied to the
orthogonal design needed for adaptive conjoint analysis. Attributes and attribute levels were systematically checked for overlaps and compared to ensure it is independent from other attribute levels and that the wording will be easy to understand by participants. In addition, both attributes and attribute levels have to be concepts that could be put into practice, or implemented in a curriculum (Hair et al., 2010). For each attribute level a description can be created that explains it to participants as well. The attribute levels per attribute are then programmed into the Sawtooth Software Inc. to generate the adaptive conjoint analysis survey. Table 3.1 presents an example of a possible matrix for soft skills based on Table 2.2 in the literature review.

Table 3.1. Soft skills matrix with possible attributes and levels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute level</th>
<th>Attribute 1</th>
<th>Attribute 2</th>
<th>Attribute 3</th>
<th>Attribute 4</th>
<th>Attribute 5</th>
<th>Attribute 6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Verbal skills</td>
<td>Motivates others</td>
<td>Cooperative</td>
<td>Adaptable</td>
<td>Pleasant</td>
<td>Account-able</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Writing skills</td>
<td>Coaches/Mentors others</td>
<td>Collaborative</td>
<td>Willing to change</td>
<td>Friendly</td>
<td>Reliable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Listening skills</td>
<td>Monitors performance</td>
<td>Supportive</td>
<td>Accepts new things</td>
<td>Sense of humor</td>
<td>Gets the job done</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Presentation skills</td>
<td>Functions in diverse settings</td>
<td>Helpful</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Visual communication</td>
<td>Trusts others</td>
<td>Intercultural awareness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Adaptive conjoint analysis survey procedure.**

*Step 1: Rating of attributes and levels.* An interactive Build Your Own task was created using Sawtooth Software Inc. The Build Your Own task introduces the attributes and their related levels and gives participants the opportunity to indicate the preferred level for each attribute (Johnson & Orme, 2007). This task includes a list of attributes levels similar to the example matrix (Table 3.1). Participants have to rate each attribute level using a scale (Huertas-Garcia et al., 2016). The highest rated levels will be used in Step 2. The main
Objective of Step 1 is to determine the most important set of attributes and attribute levels. An illustration of potential Build Your Own task is presented in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2. An illustration of Build Your Own task in adaptive conjoint analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skills</th>
<th>Levels</th>
<th>Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Motivates others</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coaches/mentors others</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Monitors performance</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Functions in diverse settings</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Verbal communication</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Writing skills</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Listening skills</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Presentation skills</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Visual communication</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social skills</td>
<td>Pleasant</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Friendly</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sense of humor</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Considerate</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Intercultural awareness</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>Accountable</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reliable</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gets the job done</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Step 2: Presentation of the choice tasks. Based on individual participant’s highest rated levels from Step 1, SSI generate a pool of pairwise profiles (Al-Omari et al., 2017). In a single profile only one level of an attribute is included. Each profile consists of several levels from different attributes. Participants are then presented with two pair-wise profiles, randomly arranged by the Sawtooth Software Inc. (Table 3.3). For each pair-wise profile task, participants have to compare the two related levels of the same attribute in combination with other levels describing other attributes (Huertas-Garcia et al., 2016). Participants must choose between the two profiles giving a preference to one over the other (Scholl et al., 2005). The pair-wise conjoint task of randomly arranged profiles is repeated several times to include as many combinations as possible. Although the pair-wise comparison approach allows for all possible combinations to be included it can become time-consuming and taxing for participants to select between all possible combinations. Therefore, the composition rule...
which “determines the number of profiles (treatments) the participant must evaluate (Hair et al, 2010, p. 327) can be applied and guide the number of pair-wise combinations Sawtooth Software Inc. generate for inclusion in Step 2 of the adaptive conjoint analysis survey.

Table 3.3. An illustration of a pair-wise profile task in adaptive conjoint analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of skills</th>
<th>Set of skills 1</th>
<th>Set of skills 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Motivates others</td>
<td>Functions in diverse settings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Verbal communication</td>
<td>Listening skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social skills</td>
<td>Friendly</td>
<td>Intercultural awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>Accountable</td>
<td>Gets the job done</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Types of skills are greyed out, as they are not visible to participants at this step.

**Data Collection**

The questionnaire consisted of various sections. Appendix F included sections of the survey. Apart from the adaptive conjoint analysis elements, the survey started with screening questions to ensure only merchandising professionals working in the South African retail industry, for at least two years participated. In between the four adaptive conjoint analysis stages demographic questions (i.e., gender, age, level of education, academic qualification) and working experience (i.e., current position, year in current position, overall years of experience, type of retailer working for, and retailer size in terms of employee/stores/sales) were included. A website was specifically created to launch the adaptive conjoint analysis survey from. Sawtooth Software Inc. was downloaded onto the website to capture the responses of participants. An open-participation link of the adaptive conjoint analysis survey connected to the website was sent via an invitational email to potential participants.

**Participants and Sampling**

The target population for Phase II was a larger nationwide sample of apparel merchandising professionals employed in the South African retail industry for at least two
years. The researcher has access to an existing database of alumni (±300) who graduate in the Clothing Retail Management program at the Department of Consumer Science, University of Pretoria. The Clothing Retail Management program was implemented in 1995 and was developed from the Home Economic Clothing and Interior program. The University of Pretoria is based in large urban metropolitan and the Department of Consumer Science (originally called Department of Home Economics) are one of the oldest (90 years) departments at this university.

An email mailing list of alumni from a clothing retail management program and industry contacts was compiled. An invitation email was sent out to all the individuals on the email list (Appendix F). The email explained the purpose of the study and participants’ rights. It also contained the open-participation link to the survey. Non-probability sampling method, snowballing, were employed to reach a larger sample (Strydom, 2011). Participants were asked to refer colleagues or friends within and outside their companies at the end of the survey or forward the email to them. When data collection stagnated the open-participation link with a description of the study and the consent elements were shared on social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn) by the researcher, alumni, and industry contacts. Data were collected between May and July 2018.

A total of 172 merchandising professionals completed the online survey (Appendix G). In adaptive conjoint analysis, part-worth estimates depend on the number of conjoint choice tasks (i.e., the number of pair-wise profiles) and not the number of participants. The important sampling consideration for adaptive conjoint analysis is that participants are representative of the target population and presented with adequate choice tasks (Hair et al., 2010). A description of participants’ demographic and professional characteristics for Phase II is presented in Chapter 6.
Data Analysis for Adaptive Conjoint Analysis

Regression built in to Sawtooth Software Inc. was used for the analysis of the adaptive conjoint analysis responses. The predictive capacity of the adaptive conjoint analysis has been found to be the same as the traditional conjoint analysis, and is appropriate when including larger numbers of attributes (Huertas-Garcia et al., 2016). The Ordinary Least Squared method is used to calculate the utility values of the attributes. Adaptive conjoint analysis allows that the average importance of attributes and utility values for specific attribute levels can be analyzed on an individual or aggregate level (Hair et al., 2010). For this study the analysis was done on an aggregated level and averages are reported. The Sawtooth Software Inc. output analysis consists of the relative importance score for attributes and the average utility value for attribute levels. The average utility values show the desirability of attribute levels derived from participants’ preference rating. Part-worth utilities were reported for each attribute level. Phase II’s data analysis resulted in a prioritized list of merchandising skills and knowledge based on the combined utility values of each skills and knowledge attribute. Conjoint analysis has fewer statistical assumptions associated with the model estimation. The average R-squared is the most general goodness of fit measure for conjoint analysis and higher values (closer to 100%) indicate a better fit (Hair et al., 2010).

Results for Phase I and Phase II are presented in Chapters 4-6.
CHAPTER 4. APPAREL MERCHANDISING POSITIONS AND RESPONSIBILITIES IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN RETAIL INDUSTRY

Prepared for the *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management.*

**Introduction**

The South African apparel retail industry is a significant contributor to the country’s economy. In 2017, the apparel and footwear sector generated the second highest number of sales (18%) of the total South African retail industry (Statistics South Africa, 2017). The industry went through major changes between 2012 and 2016: (a) the fast-growing Black consumer market resulted in a demand for unique and luxury products (PwC, 2012); (b) the influx of new international retailers (e.g., Zara, H&M, TopShop and Cotton On); and (c) the expansion of South African retailers into foreign markets (Hugo et al., 2016). These factors added a lot of pressure for the South African companies to create and maintain a competitive advantage.

Merchandising is a strategic retail function that not only improves the competitiveness of retailers but also contributes to the success of an apparel product, consumer satisfaction, and overall retail profitability (Kunz, 2010; Varley, 2014). Merchandising professionals are, therefore, essential for the commercial success of retailers (Bahng & Kincade, 2014; Bruce & Daly, 2006). Although competent merchandising professionals, who can make important business decisions, are in high demand, limited research investigating the positions they fulfill, and the responsibilities they perform has been done. Previous studies that examined the positions and responsibilities of merchandising professionals were done in the United Kingdom (UK) or the United States (US) context (Goworek, 2010; Goworek, 2014; Nobbs, O’Sullivan & Middleton, 2014; Swindley, 1992). Moreover, they mainly focused on specific merchandising positions such as buyers (Fiorito, Gable & Conseur, 2010; Goworek, 2014,
Swindley, 1992), with the exception of studies exploring buyers and merchandisers (Nobbs, O’Sullivan & Middleton, 2014), buyers and product developers (Goworek, 2010), and sourcing personnel (Muhammad & Ha-Brookshire, 2011).

The purpose of this study was to investigate merchandising positions and responsibilities within the South African apparel retail industry. Understanding the demands of merchandising positions and responsibilities can assist retailers in organizing these roles in their merchandising departments for staff to be effective and efficient to increase the performance and profitability of the company. Retailers might also be more successful in recruiting suitable individuals for specific merchandising positions (Hart, Stachow, Farrell & Reed, 2007). Furthermore, a better understanding of the merchandising positions and responsibilities can help educators to prepare graduates and future employees for the competitive global industry.

**Literature Review**

**Merchandising Function**

Merchandising is a key retail function that manages development, buying, planning, sourcing, and distribution of apparel products to satisfy a specific target market’s needs and wants, as well as generate profit for the company (Glock & Kunz, 2005; Varley, 2014). Apparel merchandising focuses on products with short and context-specific lifecycles and requires merchandising professionals who can react very quickly to changing fashion trends and unstable consumer demand (Christopher, Lowson & Peck, 2004). Consequently, each season, merchandising professionals are involved in risky forecasting and complex analytical activities regarding the development, sourcing, and procurement of new products from suppliers around the globe.
Merchandising Positions and Responsibilities

Depending on the retailer’s size (e.g., multi-national versus small business), the type of retailer (e.g., specialty versus department store versus discount store), and format of the retailer (e.g., corporation versus privately owned), merchandising positions and responsibilities can vary greatly (Kunz, 2010). In some companies, merchandising professionals have more traditional roles associated with buyers’ responsibilities, and oversee specific activities related to the acquisition of products but are not involved in product development. In other companies, such as private label retailers, merchandising roles have become “more fluid” and “integrated” and often include responsibilities related to product development as well as sourcing (Goworek, 2010, p. 659). In a small company, a merchandising professional can cover a range of different responsibilities related to different roles. Still, in most apparel retail companies, merchandising is a specialized function with various positions organized within a merchandising department to synchronize various processes throughout the apparel supply chain (Bruce & Daly, 2006; Varley, 2014).

Literature outlines key merchandising positions such as buyers, planners, product developers, and sourcing personnel (Goworek, 2010; Nobbs, et al., 2014; Muhammad & Ha-Brookshire, 2011; Varley, 2014).

Buyers.

Buyers are vital for the commercial success of products (Bruce & Daly, 2006). The main objective of buyers is to procure and select product ranges for retailers’ target consumers (Grose, 2012). To make informed buying decisions, they continuously negotiate, collaborate, and communicate with other merchandising professionals, including planners, product developers, and sourcing personnel (Bahng & Kincade, 2014; Goworek, 2014). Buyers are typically responsible for trend analysis and forecasting, consumer research,
line/range building, and strategies for developing merchandising and assortment plans (Nobbs et al., 2014).

**Planners.**

Working with buyers are planners, also referred to as merchandisers in the UK, who are responsible for the financial aspects related to products (Nobbs et al., 2014; Varley, 2014). Their responsibilities include analysis of past sales and product performance, assessing product profitability for the analysis of store performance and stock levels; planning and allocating financial budgets to develop sales and purchase plans, markdowns, and controlling inventory, stock allocations, and deliveries (Nobbs et al., 2014).

**Product developers.**

The main objective of product developers is to “meet and interpret” changing consumer demands (Keiser & Garner, 2010, p. 18). Product development is essential for offering unique products and more variety to consumers (Varley, 2014). Merchandisers responsible for product development work closely with other departments within the company, like design, buying, and sourcing (Goworek, 2010). Product development typically entails the following responsibilities: market research, trend analysis and forecasting, product concept development, line planning and line development, costing, approval of samples, and specification development (Goworek, 2010).

**Sourcing coordinators.**

Sourcing is a strategic decision process to determine how and where apparel products or components will be produced or procured for timely delivery (Künz, 2010). Sourcing-related responsibilities include: vendor selection; assessing capacity and capabilities of suppliers; negotiating with vendors and building strong relationships; coordinating production, especially, timely delivery of products that comply with specifications and quality standards; and warehousing and distribution of finished goods that include logistics
and transportation, receiving and allocation (Keiser & Garner, 2010; Muhammad & Ha-Brookshire, 2011).

**South African Merchandising Context Gap**

Scholars suggest that merchandising positions are becoming more specialized and, at the same time, more integrated to enable better decision making to save costs and time for retailers (Bruce & Daly, 2006; Goworek, 2010). Although, these discrete positions are described in literatures as directly involved in delivering a product for sale in stores; satisfying target markets’ needs; and generating profit for the retail company (Varley, 2014), little is known what merchandising positions entail within the South African retail industry. In this particular context that faces many challenges, to date, a study examining various merchandising positions and related responsibilities could not be found. Hart et al. (2007) emphasize that clearly defining typical merchandising positions and responsibilities is the first step towards understanding what competencies are required for these professionals to have when entering the global apparel retail industry. Clarifying competencies for specific positions and responsibilities forms the basis of professional development and effective recruitment. Therefore, investigating the scope and organization of merchandising positions and responsibilities are important aspects to explore in the context of the South African retail industry.

**Method**

**Research Design and Data Collection**

To examine merchandising positions and responsibilities, a phenomenological approach was followed. This approach provides a flexible platform for studying industry practitioners’ perspectives and aims to understand the world individuals work and live in (Creswell, 2013). Individual in-depth interviews were used to collect data from a purposive sample of 16 industry professionals. Potential participants were recruited through referrals
from graduates from a clothing management program working in retail. Participants were approached with an invitation email. The email explained who referred them, the purpose of the study, and that no personal or company details will be asked. Participants had to comply with the following criteria set for the purposive sampling: (1) be appointed in an apparel merchandising position with a minimum of two years of experience, and (2) have an apparel-related bachelor’s degree. In choosing participants who had at least two years of experience, the objective was to gain insights from merchandisers who were already familiar with being in a merchandising position and could knowingly discuss what it entails. Once a professional had agreed to participate, a suitable date and time for the individual interview was scheduled. The researcher traveled to the different provinces to interview participants at a convenient place and time. All participants received a gift card (value $15 US), as a token of appreciation for their time. An interview protocol with questions and probes guided the interview process. For example, participants were asked about what their position entails, where it fits into their company, and their responsibilities. Interviews lasted between 40 and 70 minutes and were recorded with participant permission. The study was approved by the Human Subject Institutional Review Board.

**Description of Participants**

Table 4.1 presents the demographic and professional characteristics of the participants. The purposive sample comprised 16 female professionals aged between 27 and 45 years. Eleven of them had apparel-related bachelor’s degrees and four had Masters degrees. One participant did not have a formal education but was included based on her high-profile position and extensive experience in industry. Participants were employed at ten different companies: department stores, specialty retailers, discount retailers, a fast fashion retailer, and sourcing companies supplying to major retailers in South Africa. Participants were employed in the following merchandising positions: buyers (4); buying/merchandising
managers (4); planners (2); product developers/quality assurance (QA) (4); and sourcing coordinators (2). The professionals had between 2 and 20 years of work experience in apparel retail, with an average of 11.8 years. For confidentiality, pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the participants and the companies’ names were omitted from the interview quotes included in the paper.

Table 4.1. Characteristics of participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Degree and academic major</th>
<th>Type of retailer</th>
<th>Position or job title</th>
<th>Years in current position/total in retail</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>BS Clothing Management</td>
<td>Discount retailer</td>
<td>Buyer</td>
<td>2.5 / 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bea</td>
<td>BS Clothing retail management</td>
<td>Discount retailer</td>
<td>Senior buyer</td>
<td>1 / 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belle</td>
<td>BA Fashion Design</td>
<td>Specialty retailer</td>
<td>Product developer</td>
<td>7 / 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christine</td>
<td>BA Fashion Design</td>
<td>Specialty retailer</td>
<td>Product developer</td>
<td>1.5 / 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claire</td>
<td>BA Fashion and Textiles</td>
<td>Sourcing company</td>
<td>Sourcing coordinator</td>
<td>1 / 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danni</td>
<td>BA Fashion Design</td>
<td>Specialty retailer</td>
<td>Product developer/QA</td>
<td>5 / 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denise</td>
<td>MS Clothing Management</td>
<td>Specialty retailer</td>
<td>Planner</td>
<td>3.5 / 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isabelle</td>
<td>BA Clothing and Textiles</td>
<td>Specialty retailer</td>
<td>*Merchandising manager</td>
<td>6 / 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie</td>
<td>BA Fashion Design and Technology</td>
<td>Specialty retailer</td>
<td>Product developer/QA</td>
<td>5 months / 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leigh</td>
<td>MS Clothing management</td>
<td>Specialty retailer</td>
<td>*Buying manager</td>
<td>1.5 / 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lilly</td>
<td>MS Consumer Science</td>
<td>Department store</td>
<td>*Buying manager</td>
<td>7 / 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>No formal education</td>
<td>Specialty retailer</td>
<td>*Merchandising manager</td>
<td>3 months / 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Megan</td>
<td>BS Consumer Science</td>
<td>Specialty retailer</td>
<td>Buyer</td>
<td>1 / 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>BS Clothing retail management</td>
<td>Fast fashion retailer</td>
<td>Senior buyer</td>
<td>3 / 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yanna</td>
<td>BA Fashion</td>
<td>Specialty retailer</td>
<td>Planner</td>
<td>1 / 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zia</td>
<td>BA Commercial Fashion</td>
<td>Sourcing company</td>
<td>Sourcing coordinator</td>
<td>3.5 / 7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *Buying/merchandising managers were mainly involved in buying and planning responsibilities

Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed with Atlas.ti software. Using Atlas.ti software ensured a systematic data analysis. The transcripts were open-coded first with the goal to develop codes (Creswell, 2013). Segments of sentences or paragraphs were coded during this process. Segments with the same code were grouped into categories and
then clustered into themes (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). Based on the data analyses, two overarching topical areas emerged: (1) Merchandising Positions and (2) Merchandising Responsibilities. Each topical area consisted of four themes related to the positions and responsibilities of buyers, planners, product developers, and sourcing coordinators.

**Findings**

**Apparel Merchandising Positions**

The first topical area described participants’ current positions and their roles within the structure of the company. Most participants (14) were able to clearly describe their positions and what they entailed. Their responses included statements such as “I am a men’s outerwear buyer”, “I am a merchandiser for a supplier”, “I am a product developer within the men’s wear division”, and “I am a planner for ladies’ fitness.” Participants also discussed their roles within the merchandising department: “The layout of our floor is: the buyers, the planners, the quality assurance and sourcing coordinators are all mixed, and the product developer sits in the corner” (Christine, product developer). It was clear that there were different specialization roles within the merchandising function.

You have a lot of other players sitting on the same team. In a group you would have buying, planning, sourcing and so forth. The structures differ from business to business but the business that I am in is typically those are all the roles. (Lilly, buying manager)

When discussing their positions and in relation to the departmental organization, every participant described significant internal interactions with others involved in the merchandising side of retail in their company, such as marketing, QA, and stores. They stressed the intensity and importance of these interactions: “None of the other managers work with other departments in the way that I do” (Leigh, buying manager). The distinctive
positions within the merchandising function correspond with what is reported in the literature.

**Buyer position.**

Participants explained that buyers are “involved in every aspect of the product” (Lilly) and are the ones who “procure goods for a specific customer” (Sally). All the buyers agreed that their position is about managing all the different processes in the buying cycle to execute the product strategy. They constantly interacted with the many involved parties, “quite like a middleman” (Megan), to achieve this: “As a buyer you have a central role. You are the one who develops the range and manages the day-to-day workings of that range and all the people involved” (Lilly). From the interviews, it was evident that the buying position regarding the product strategy is well-defined.

Participants conceded that buying involves a range of strategic and operational decisions to produce the best product for consumers and to make sales. Megan, a buyer, explains her view of the buying position, “You pull all the different departments together to execute your strategy. Your main aim is to make as many sales as possible. It is to learn your customer quickly and service them as quickly as possible.”

About two thirds of the participants (11) pointed out that planners and buyers form small cohesive teams that work closely together: “Normally, in my team, me and the buyer we sit together” (Denise). Buyer-planner teams were the tendency across all the retail companies. In one retailer, though, buyers shared planners: “We would be working with a planner or we work across one or two planners” (Bea, a senior buyer).

**Planner position.**

Planners were involved with all the financial aspects. Half the participants (8) noted that planners are the “numbers people” (Megan), “they are all about the money” (Belle), “work with the financial aspects of it” (Denise), “planners usually chase the figures
According to participants, planners are critical in the analytical and financial processes to achieve sales targets and company profit objectives: “That’s where the planners are very involved because they know the money, and they know how many lines you need to get that money, or to make those sales or whatever” (Megan, a buyer).

Similar to buying, planning is also a strategic role, and the multiple analysis and planning in this role ensure budgets are met and the company makes a profit.

In the planning role, I have to do work on what strategic management has given to me. We need to set a budget for the year. Then we do product planning by month, by category. I also look at the analysis of the business regarding performance on a weekly basis, which also includes what is happening in my stores at a product level.

(Yanna)

**Product developer position.**

Product developers interpreted trends and styles to develop new product lines for retailers’ target markets. Participants mentioned product development “balance[s] newness of trend and new silhouettes with what we know works well” (Christine). Participants (6) explained that in their companies, product developers typically work with buyers to interpret trends, and from there, develop new product lines that are commercially successful for the retailer.

I consult multiple divisions and help them develop their product ranges on a seasonal basis. How I can service them to get the product to look like they have envisioned it and to make sure it comes out right and that we’ve backed it to the right units.

(Christine)

Product developers were also involved in fittings, checking measurements and specifications, and fabric testing. Belle explains how her role as product developer evolved more into quality
assurance: “I am ensuring that the fits are correct, and the correct trims are being used, and the measurements are correct.”

All the product developers conceded that, apart from their daily interactions with buyers, they also deal with the laboratory personnel for testing: “I work a lot with the buyers. The laboratory, we normally liaise with them when it comes to the fabrics” (Julie, product developer/QA). They also dealt with the QA department, as Danni, a product developer explains, “We do have a QA specialist who works with me because it’s very difficult to do all of that.” Product developer position was not present in all companies. At five retailers, buyers fulfilled product development tasks: “Product developers, we don’t necessarily have [them] in our department. In [Retailer] that is a role that we basically fulfil ourselves” (Sally, a senior buyer).

**Sourcing coordinator position.**

Sourcing coordinators explained they work between the buyers and suppliers and would sometimes find new products that they would propose to buyers to test for the season. Zia, a sourcing coordinator, described this, “We will travel to China, and we’ll source newness.” Only four of the companies in this study employed sourcing coordinators. Across South Africa, many buyers sourced products themselves, but sometimes would make use of sourcing coordinators specifically to source from overseas suppliers: “The sourcing department takes care of the direct import suppliers and they would liaise with them. We would say, ‘I want this T-shirt, in that color with that print’, and they would go chat to the suppliers” (Lilly, buying manager). Isabelle noted, “Sourcing is seeing a lot of suppliers and know where to get the raw materials for your product.”

**Merchandising Responsibilities**

The second topical area captured the range of activities and tasks merchandising professionals handled within the different positions. To address overlapping tasks and
activities within different positions, a matrix of merchandising responsibilities was developed for buyers, planners, product developers, and sourcing coordinators (Table 4.2). The left column presents the different responsibilities that emerged from the interviews. Shaded blocks indicate how these responsibilities relate to each position. To structure the discussion of the themes within the topical area, responsibilities follow the product lifecycle.

Merchandising professionals explained that these processes usually take place concurrently, as they work on different seasons at the same time.

It starts and ends with buying a range. At the same time, you’re focusing on your current trade which is not necessarily the season you’re building; and then, at the same time, we’ll be looking at the end of another season and analyzing that whole season. (Megan, a buyer)

Table 4.2. Merchandising positions and responsibilities in the South African retail industry

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Merchandising Responsibilities</th>
<th>Merchandising Positions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Buyer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researching the market</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forecasting trends</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Line planning and developing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range/assortment building</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selecting and managing suppliers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approving samples</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coordinating production</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing orders and deliveries</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring sales and product performance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analyzing sales reports and reacting to sales</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning financial targets and allocating budgets</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reviewing and controlling inventory</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing and promotions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Shaded cells indicate areas responsibilities related to specific position; * = indicates areas where the person in the position provides input. X = buyers had additional responsibilities because the companies did not have product developers or sourcing coordinators.
Responsibilities of buyers.

To execute a product strategy, buyers handled a wide range of activities that developed into seven themes, responsibility areas: researching the market, forecasting trends, range/assortment building, selecting, and managing suppliers, approving samples, monitoring sales and product performance, and marketing and promotions (Table 4.2).

**Researching the market** involved investigating consumer behavior; competition’s offerings; and the overall market domestic and international markets. Buying/merchandising managers, who were mostly involved in buying and planning activities, agreed that looking at the market share is a valuable way to find out where they stand in the retail market: “So, there’s the external piece which is market share information. It will help guide me in how we are doing against the competition” (Lisa, merchandising manager). Lilly, a buying manager, described how buyers would research their consumers and competitors.

> Store visits must be done regularly. At least once a week to look at competitors’ price points, to look at their ranges. You start with you own store to see what the range looks like that you bought and then you would walk through your competitors’ stores.

> Most importantly is to look at who the customers are.

Part of researching markets was also assessing if consumers have an ‘appetite’ for the product before putting larger orders in. Typically, this was done every season: “My team tested tights two years ago for the first time. It never worked. Now, it’s, like, our bestseller category. It took them [consumers] two years to catch on to it” (Megan).

**Forecasting trends** were the activities in which buyers, product developers engaged to direct the season namely, interpreting trends for target market(s), strategizing and forecasting the season, and going on trend/buying trips. Going on trend/buying trips was an activity that only buyers would do. These activities were extremely important at the onset of each season. Sally, a fast fashion buyer, emphasized that at the beginning of each season they
would drill down into the key trends, fabrics, colors, and silhouettes for the entire season and do high level planning and analysis: “We basically strategize the whole season upfront. We conceptualize the season in question. We work with a trend company from London.” In some companies, product developers were directly involved in strategizing and forecasting with the buyers. In these cases, buyers and product developers had joint decision-making responsibilities related to trends analysis (Table 4.2).

It starts with the beginning of the season, where we have done a lot of trend research as a development team and present this to the different departments as to how we think they [buyers] should interpret their new product ranges for the coming seasons. (Christine, a product developer)

After these in-depth strategizing sessions, buyers traveled overseas on trend trips to get ideas and buy samples. Trend and/or buying trips were common for buyers before starting with range/line building. Bea, a senior buyer, asserted, “You could be going overseas, on an exposure or trend trip. Look at the new season’s styles and trends and decide - what are we going to do? What are we going to buy?”

**Range/assortment building**, as a strategy involved creating a mix of products that will satisfy the target markets’ demand. Range building concerned responsibilities such as selecting products, presenting ranges to management, approval of ranges and assortment planning. According to all the buyers, range planning started with the “blueprint” they created from their planning sessions and samples from their trip: “Those ranges are then presented to management and, once that is approved, you start with the process” (Lilly).

Range building encompasses a detailed assortment plan for the entire season. This task entailed selecting products and including variety in terms of units, colors, and styles. Sally, a senior buyer, explains that this activity involves the planners’ input and is a joint decision-making responsibility: “We will then break it down and start the physical act of
range building. Range building means you sit with your planner who is your left-hand person, and she gives you the list of all the garments she wants you to buy.”

*Selecting and managing suppliers* described the responsibilities of establishing reliable suppliers, costing products, negotiating prices, fabrics, trims, delivery, and building relationships with suppliers. Managing suppliers was a main responsibility for buyers and buying/merchandising managers (8) as well as sourcing coordinators (2) (Table 4.2).

Suppliers are regarded as “strategic partners” and their performance is vital to ensure the success of a range. Participants explained they would brief all the product details to suppliers: “I would brief them this range. So, I would give them all the lab dips for the season, talk them through the fabrics we want to run, talk them through the silhouettes we want to run” (Sally).

Buyers and sourcing coordinators would cost their ranges with suppliers. Simultaneously, every aspect of the range - the costs of fabrics, trims, prints, shipping, and delivery dates - are negotiated: “You develop with your suppliers your costings. Then it’s all negotiating. So, that becomes part of your daily tasks” (Megan). Managing suppliers also entailed building relationships with them: “A big part of my job is going to suppliers and building suppliers’ relationships” (Isabelle). Lilly emphasized that cultivating relationships with suppliers is an important part of the strategy to achieve success, because it not only helps with negotiations but also gives buyers more latitude in the buying cycle: “I think your relationship with your supplier base is incredibly important. If they are a little bit late you can say, ‘Okay I grant you this extension. However, if we miss our sales targets I want a discount from you.’”

*Marketing and promotions* emerged from buyers and buying/merchandising managers’ (8) comments about their involvement with the marketing department regarding planning product packaging, promotions, visual displays of products, and advertising campaigns.
At [Retailer], you are also responsible for marketing and visual merchandising. Fifty percent of my time I would actually sit in marketing briefs and signing off ways to merchandise or briefing promotions that I wanted to run.” (Isabelle)

For most buyers (4), this was a weekly activity: “On a weekly basis, it is marketing. What is happening on the marketing calendar, what are you planning for marketing?” (Bea). As Lilly, a buying manager, underscored,

You would also be in contact with the marketing departments, because with them you develop all your packaging, and the buyer is the one who understands what the product is about; what it is intended for; what it is made of; and where it comes from.

**Responsibilities of planners.**

The responsibilities of planners developed as five major tasks: monitoring sales and product performance, analyzing sales reports and reacting to sales, planning financials and allocating budgets, reviewing and controlling inventory, and managing orders and delivery.

**Monitoring sales and product performance** were a joint responsibility area of buyers and planners (Table 4.2). Responsibilities included monitoring sales and evaluating reasons for best and worse sellers. Participants (9) pointed out that the performance of products currently in-store would be monitored weekly to determine the sales they are generating: “I’ll just be monitoring if it sells, yes or no? Monitoring what has worked in the week and what hasn’t worked” (Bea). Planners and buyers commented that much of their day revolves around “how are sales doing” (Denise), and “are we putting money in the till” (Sally). To be able to manage the risk of a product or capitalize on products, weekly meetings are held to discuss the sell-through (sales) of products as well as reasons for the best and worst sellers: “Weekly we look at our performance and we do that together with a planner. We go through our style cards to see what the sell-offs were performers and non-performers, look at history and the projections” (Amy, buyer).
Analyzing sales reports and reacting to sales developed from the responsibilities related to continually scrutinizing sales reports, the product itself, the stores, and formulating action plans to either increase performance or reduce risk. Responsibilities involved analysis of sales, re-styling, re-ordering, markdowns, canceling orders and reporting performances. Analyzing sales reports was a main responsibility for planners and very important when deciding on a course of action. Leigh highlighted the importance of these analysis procedures,

A big part of it is the analysis of the business: store level, category level, and product level. And that information helps us to create immediate plans of action but also guides us regarding future buys and how we strategize going forward.

Participants (10) explained that depending on the product’s performance the team must decide how to “react to trade”. This task involved a joint decision-making between buyers and planners, but from two different perspectives. Buyers looked into reimagining the product for future lines, or to discontinue the product.

If it is doing well, what am I doing to trade that style? Am I turning on more? Am I re-styling future styles into that style? If it is doing badly, what am I doing to get out of that style? (Sally, a senior buyer)

Planners typically reacted by sending more products to the store or consolidating the product in other stores, or marking the product down and canceling orders, “We see if it needs a markdown or consolidation to another store. What needs to happen? Do we need to get deliveries in, push, pull, cancel, or order more?” (Denise, a planner). Planners also report on various aspects in their portfolio against their set targets: “I do a bunch of reporting based on the previous month’s performance, which involves pulling data from the system and then pulling together information and tracking how far we are on our budgets and against last year” (Yanna).
Planning financial targets and allocating budgets materialized from participants’ responses about all the financial workings and calculations planners are responsible for to make profit. Responsibilities included interpreting information/reports for developing sales forecasts, targets, budgets; developing buying plans; calculating growth, gross margins, profits, and loss; and meeting financial targets. Planners had to interpret many reports as well to inform their financial planning, sales forecasts, re-forecasts, and budgets. Yanna, a planner, explains,

Initially in the year, we have an original budget that is set and submitted to the board and finance for approval. But, because so many things happen within the season, in the months, in the weeks, we always have to re-forecast.

To meet their budgets and projected sales, planners, together with their buyer, develop assortment plans. A comprehensive analysis of the past seasons are used as part of assortment planning. The assortment plan is then placed into a shopping or buying plan for each month during that specific season. Buying plans include units per style and color, and volume to achieve target sales numbers, with profit factored in.

I do my numbers and say how many units behind each item we are buying, and we forecast. Normally, it [the sales forecast] is a bit up to us. We say we want growth of whatever - we forecast it, and we present it. (Denise)

Apart from developing budgets and buying plans, planners do various calculations. Sally pointed out all the calculations her planner take responsibility for: “She looks at things like profit, GP (gross profit) margin, the growths, the clearances. She allocates the money and keeps control of the stock levels.”

Reviewing and controlling inventory included developing store grids and allocation strategies to distribute stock according to sales, controlling stock levels (covers), and consolidation and replenishment of stock. Participants (5) mentioned allocation planners
assist the planner in stock management and making sure the size curve, styles, brands, and colors meet consumer demands. Denise, a planner, explained that she formulates the allocation strategy based on analyses of store and product performance, and then the allocation planner will distribute products accordingly, “I will tell her, ‘This is the plan or strategy for it to go where.’ We have certain store profiles. You know you want to send to all-stores or the best-selling flagships. We just see where it trades.”

Controlling stock was a very important responsibility, as planners need to balance the stock ratios in stores to generate the sales they forecasted. To sustain sales, there should be enough products in stores: “Stock covers. How many weeks of stock will last me in my store” (Yanna). Yanna continued to emphasize the tactic behind this responsibility area,

I look at what strategies I can do to improve sales. If I see there is a lack of stock in a specific store, then I would have to see if there is stock available in the warehouse and push that out.

**Responsibilities of product developers.**

To develop and introduce new products into retailers’ ranges, product developers oversee three major responsibility areas: forecasting trends, line planning and developing, and approving samples. Some of these responsibilities overlapped with those of buyers and sourcing coordinators. In some companies, the product developer also liaised with suppliers on quality assurance of products (Table 4.2).

**Line planning and developing** is a strategy to generate value for retailers’ consumer markets each season. Activities included analyzing competitors’ samples, conceptualizing new products, selecting the designs, colors, fabrications, and developing specifications and tech packs. Product developers explained they would analyze samples from overseas that buyers bring back from their trend trips: “On their trending trip, they will identify the styles that they want. They will buy whatever they want and bring it to the office, and we will sit
down and analyze their garments and styles.” Next, product developers with the buyer would continue to conceptualize new and fresh products for the season, followed by in-depth planning of every style that needs to be developed: “We then workshop together as to how their season should unfold from what would the first month look like up through to the last month, and that would entail color, silhouette, and fabric choices” (Christine).

Some of the in-house sourcing coordinators had limited input in the line development activities and only got involved once the tech packs were ready for production: “The biggest thing for sourcing is that we get the tech packs in the right way that they would need it” (Christine, product developer). In contrast, sourcing coordinators at independent sourcing companies were much more involved in line development. Even though their position was sourcing coordinator, they were in charge of typical responsibilities that buyers and product developers would do together regarding line planning and development.

I would say my main responsibilities would probably be product development and costing. If we see a cool new watch, when we come back, we will do the costing with our supplier. We will put a very detailed brief together and we will brief it to the design team to do the artworks of each different style (Zia, a sourcing manager).

After line developing, product developers (4) were involved in creating sample specifications and compiling production tech packs (technical information sheets) for suppliers: “Once we made a decision on the styles, they can distribute the styles to the suppliers for tendering. I have to create a tech pack. The specifications for the particular garment” (Julie).

**Approving samples** was a task common for buyers, product developers, and sourcing coordinators depending on the retailers they were employed at. Typical responsibilities before approving bulk production would entail inspecting and approving pre-production and production samples (lap dips, trims, strike-offs), and quality assurance regarding compliance to specifications, fit, measurements, color, and fabrication. These responsibilities were
essential to ensure that the correct product was produced. Product developers (4), buyers (4) and a sourcing coordinator (1) were involved in checking lab dips to approve color of fabrics and trims: “We develop new styles and the supplier needs to submit lab dips and fabrics for testing” (Sally, a buyer). Claire, a sourcing coordinator, stressed it is vital to check aspects such as prints (strike-offs) and construction, because it is never right the first time: “You have to get a strike-off done over in China. They’ll do the actual print, send it over and it comes for approval. Things come out wrong all the time.”

Product developers (2) and some buyers (2) also check quality of products, the fit, and measurements. Belle, a product developer, discussed the duties involved in quality assurance checks,

We would measure samples and compare them to the measurements the suppliers had given us. We then compared those measurements to the spec we had produced on the QA side. If we don’t approve it, they have to re-submit it and have to do it fast because, otherwise, we would get a delay in the delivery. If we approve it, they can produce their PPS [pre-production sample]. If we approve the PPS they can go ahead and make bulk.

**Responsibilities of sourcing coordinators.**

Sourcing coordinators had four major responsibility areas focused on preparation for production and ensuring products are produced: selecting and managing suppliers, approving samples, coordinating production, and managing orders and delivery. Selecting and managing suppliers and approving samples were responsibilities that, depending on the retailer, were done by other positions such as buyers or product developers (Table 4.2).

**Coordinating production** focused on pre- and post-production processes to ensure products are produced at the desired quality level. Activities included sourcing products and materials, contracting and securing materials, compliance and authorizing production. Some
retail companies will make use of outside companies to find specific products or fabrics:
“What they do on the men’s side, they will go overseas and see a fabric and bring it back. And then we send it to our Chinese suppliers and they will actually source that fabric for you” (Megan). Claire, a sourcing coordinator, described the aspects she needs to align to ensure production starts on time,

I will place my order with my fabric supplier. After which, I must negotiate CMT prices with my factories. Try to get things placed in your factories. When things ship, you deal with things like the weather, port congestion because if your fabric doesn’t get there on time, you have a shorter lead-time. You have to negotiate again with your factories to get quicker responses on your production (Claire, sourcing coordinator).

The retailer Lily, a buying manager, works for, production is coordinated in-house and must comply with specific standards set by the retailer,

If you work for my retailer it would be quite strict in terms of the sourcing of the fabric; the compliance of the factories to make sure that it is accredited with the world-wide accreditation; to ensure they don’t have any child labor, and that the factories adhere to all the standards.

Managing orders and deliveries involved placing and tracking orders and managing on-time delivery of products. Sourcing coordinators (2) and planners (2) were tasked with aspects around orders and deliveries. Claire pointed out,

Once your fabric and your orders are complete, we still deal with the purchase orders, making sure they read correctly, the dates are fine, liaising with the planners to make sure that’s all good. And then pushing to see if your items can come in earlier.

After orders are placed, scheduling, and tracking deliveries are important activities for sourcing coordinators and planners. Participants (8) explained that managing orders and
delivery would be the planner’s responsibility: “Your planner is making sure your stock is arriving at the right time” (Isabelle, merchandising manager).

The planners (2) mentioned that the success of a season depended on tracking orders each day to meet delivery deadlines: “We always have to chase delivery dates because, obviously, that will influence our trade” (Yanna, a planner). Even Danni, a product developer, asserted, “There is a production meeting that happens on a weekly basis. Where products are track to every supplier to meet delivery dates. That’s a key thing, because product and delivery work hand in hand.”

Conclusions

Merchandising professionals in the South African retail industry are involved in many strategic and value-adding activities related to products with relative short lifecycles. The findings of this study provide a deeper understanding of the merchandising positions, the organization of these positions, and what responsibilities they entail. These results concur with work of several studies conducted in different countries such as UK and US (Goworek, 2010, Goworek, 2014; Muhammad & Ha-Brookshire, 2011; Nobbs et al., 2014).

Based on the research results, three major conclusions can be drawn regarding merchandising departments, positions, and responsibilities within the South African retail industry:

a) merchandising departments tend to employ professionals in four distinct positions of buyers, planners, product developers, and sourcing coordinators;

b) the four merchandising positions have somewhat distinct responsibilities that are organized according to the product lifecycle; and

c) professionals in the merchandising department rely on frequent daily interactions with each other through shared responsibilities for some of the stages of the product lifecycle.
Overall, the scope of the four identified merchandising positions in the South African retail is similar to merchandising positions in more developed markets (Goworek, 2010; Muhammad & Ha-Brookshire, 2011; Nobbs et al., 2014). A few previous studies investigated merchandising position and responsibilities, in relation to one other merchandising positions, such as buyers and product developers (Goworek, 2014) and buyers and planners (Nobbs et al., 2014), however these studies did not consider the extent of the interaction between more merchandising positions identified in this study. This research was the first to examine and describe the full range of merchandising positions and responsibilities and their intersections. The four merchandising positions complement each other and work hand in hand to execute the product and profit strategy of retailers. This is in agreement with other studies that found collaboration between buyers and product developers and buyers and planners contributes to better performance (Goworek, 2010; Goworek, 2014; Nobbs et al., 2014).

The findings have several implications for apparel educators and retailers. First, the results outline the scope of the four merchandising positions and their respective responsibilities (Table 4.2). For most participants, responsibilities were specific to their position. Where responsibilities areas intersected, the result was a joint decision-making process. Retailers should stress the importance of communication and teamwork skills to ensure successful collaboration between positions that will also contribute to effective and efficient decision making in departments. As the findings provide clear descriptions for each position and define joint areas, retail companies could utilize this information to create a clear structure of the merchandising department and facilitate hiring professionals with defined skill and knowledge sets for different positions.

Second, overlaps in responsibilities might lead to overload of key professionals, especially, buyers. The findings point to the need of investing in performance improvement initiatives, such as introducing effective organizational and support systems. Positions in
merchandising departments should be organized to advance speedy decision-making, streamline processes, reduce costs, and adapt quickly to changes in the consumer market. Added support in the form of advanced technology should enable merchandising professionals to manage the extensive range of responsibilities and activities. Finally, since merchandising function is changing with retail, in general, educators should be more responsive in aligning their education programs to industry’s needs and changing expectations of higher education graduates. The findings of this study can inform the curricula for preparing graduates with relevant skills and knowledge for the South African retail industry. The scope of what distinct merchandising positions entail gives a deeper understanding of what industry expects for specific positions such as buyers, or product developers. It could provide justification for educators to develop specialization within programs for graduates to specialize in specific areas, for example sourcing before entering the industry. Moreover, the range of identified responsibilities outlined in Table 4.2 could inform coursework objectives and content. For example, market research, trend forecasting, line development, costing, and negotiating should be incorporated into merchandising subjects to reflect the requirements of the retail industry and prepare graduates accordingly.

As the title implies, this study was completed in the context of South Africa, therefore, the results regarding apparel merchandising positions and responsibilities are applicable to this context and should be interpreted with caution if applied to other retail industries. While overall description of merchandising positions and respective responsibilities align well with previous research (Goworek, 2010, Goworek, 2014; Muhammad & Ha-Brookshire, 2011; Nobbs et al., 2014; Swindley, 1993), the processes and shared responsibilities might differ by company and country. For example, terminology and strategies used by merchandisers to develop, approve, produce, and deliver products might be context specific. In the future, comparing how merchandising positions contribute to
accomplishing retailers’ strategies between different types and size of companies would be valuable when differences and similarities between retailers are sought. This would help to form a more comprehensive understanding of merchandising positions and responsibilities in apparel retail. The extensive number of responsibilities merchandising professionals undertake point to a need for competent workers. As merchandising professionals are in high demand especially in decision-making situations, future studies could investigate the different sets of skills and knowledge needed to fulfill merchandising positions and perform different responsibilities.

References


CHAPTER 5. MERCHANDISING PROFESSIONALS’ PERSPECTIVES ON SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE NEEDED TO SUCCEED IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN RETAIL INDUSTRY

Prepared for the Clothing and Textiles Research Journal

Introduction

The South African apparel retail sector employs approximately 120,000 (57%) of the total 210,000 textile, apparel, and footwear industry workforce (Barnes, 2018) and 14.7% of the overall (812,100) retail industry workforce (W&R Seta, 2016). Despite the economic significance of the South African apparel retail industry, major gaps in the workers’ skills and knowledge (S&K) were identified by the Wholesale and Retail Sector Education and Training Authority (W&R Seta, 2013). Specifically, merchandising professionals (e.g., buyers, planners, distribution managers) were highlighted as lacking necessary S&K and identified as an immediate priority for higher education (W&R Seta, 2016).

The importance of competent merchandising professionals in apparel retail has been widely acknowledge (Frazier & Cheek, 2016; Muhammad & Ha-Brookshire, 2011). Consequently, extant research has investigated competencies needed for merchandising professionals. Yet, many of the studies investigating S&K required for merchandising positions were completed in the 1990s, (e.g., Arnold & Forney, 1998, Hines & Swinker, 1998; Kotsiopulos et al., 1993) and might not fully reflect the fast-changing retail environment of the 21st century. Recent studies focusing on competencies needed for merchandising professionals were completed in the context of developed economies, like the United States (Frazier & Cheek, 2016; Muhammad & Ha-Brookshire, 2011). To date, no known study has specifically investigated S&K for apparel merchandising professionals in an emerging economy, such as South Africa. To align education agenda with the industry
requirements for competent workers necessitates identifying essential S&K for merchandising professionals. This study aims to identify what S&K are required for merchandising professionals to fulfill their roles and perform their responsibilities in the South African apparel retail industry.

**Literature Review**

**Merchandising Professionals**

Apparel merchandising professionals are individuals with appropriate education and training who perform responsibilities directly related to the products of a retailer (Glock & Kunz, 2005). Merchandising, a key retail function, manages development, buying, planning, sourcing, and distribution of apparel products that will satisfy a specific target market’s needs and wants as well as generate profit for the company (Kunz, 2010). Therefore, merchandising professionals fulfill different roles (e.g., buyers, planners, product developers, and sourcing managers) which require a wide range of skills and knowledge to perform a variety of responsibilities in the apparel supply chain (Howse et al., 2000; Varley, 2014).

Scholars concur that competent professionals are needed for the ever-changing local and globalized apparel industries (Karpova et al., 2011a; Power, 2012). To be competent, merchandising professionals need relevant and industry required knowledge and skills (Arnold & Forney, 1998). Little is known which S&K are specifically needed for merchandising professionals in the South African retail industry.

**Skills for Merchandising Professionals**

To better understand industry requirements for college graduates, scholars distinguish between soft and hard skills (Yorke & Knight, 2003).

**Soft skills.** Soft skills consist of: (a) interpersonal (people-related) skills that reflect how well we interact with others; and (b) “intangible, nontechnical, personality-specific skills” that describe personal traits (Robles, 2012, p. 457; Yorke & Knight, 2003). Robles
(2012) surveyed business executives and found twelve distinct soft skills important for success in the workplace: communication, courtesy, flexibility, integrity, interpersonal skills, positive attitude, professionalism, responsibility, teamwork, and work ethic. In surveying retail managers, Frazier and Cheek (2016) reported six comparable soft skills to be essential for entry-level merchandising jobs: teamwork, professional behavior, communication (verbal and writing), leadership, self-management, and recognizing ethical issues. Javidan et al. (2013) concluded that in global business such as apparel retail, diplomacy was important to conduct business. Having good organizational skills such as multi-tasking, time management, and being organized was found to be needed by sourcing personnel (Muhammad & Ha-Brookshire, 2011).

**Hard skills.** Hard skills encompass technical skills (e.g., numeracy and use of technology) and thinking/conceptual skills (e.g., critical thinking) (Jackson, 2013; Robles, 2012). Technical skills identified to be important for merchandising professions were mathematical skills (Howse et al., 2000) and being proficient in technologies that support decision-making (e.g., product lifecycle management software) (Fiorito, et al., 2010). Thinking/conceptual capabilities found to be vital for apparel professionals included: problem-solving, decision-making, strategic thinking, critical thinking, and creativity (Chida & Brown, 2011; Danskin et al., 2005; Karpova et al., 2011b). Additionally, Power (2012) identified metacognition (life-long learning and self-awareness) as important for professionals in the apparel industry. Similar soft and hard skills were identified as lacking in the South African retail industry, namely: communication, conflict resolution, negotiation, ethical/moral, time management, numeracy, computer and technology, problem solving, decision-making, and analytical skills (W&R Seta, 2013).
Knowledge for Merchandising Professionals

Knowledge consists of two dimensions: explicit and tacit knowledge (Nonaka et al., 2000). Explicit knowledge refers to what we have learned through formal studies in a discipline (Nonaka et al., 2000). Tacit knowledge includes what we have gained and learned from our experiences either by observing or participating in an activity directly (Nonaka et al., 2000).

Explicit knowledge. Several scholars stress the importance of general apparel subject knowledge (e.g., textile science, product assembly/construction techniques, aesthetics, consumer behavior) for merchandising professionals (Frazier & Cheek, 2016; Howse et al., 2000; Muhammad & Ha-Brookshire, 2011). Likewise, the overlap of merchandising with other retail functions necessitates knowledge in business, marketing (Danskin et al., 2005), sourcing, and marketplace awareness (Muhammad & Ha-Brookshire, 2011).

Tacit knowledge. Tacit knowledge entails personal experiences gained from working in the industry, for example, internships and on-the-job training. Prior experience in the industry has been found to be important to be successful in merchandising positions (Muhammad & Ha-Brookshire, 2011). Even though explicit knowledge (learned in the classroom) provides a sound foundation for future professionals, tacit knowledge is critical as it allows almost instinctive and automatic way of functioning in the industry when making business-related decisions (Nonaka et al., 2000).

To identify S&K required for merchandising professionals to perform their responsibilities in the South African retail industry, Jacobs and Karpova’s (2018) apparel merchandising competency (AMC) framework, based on the analysis of literature, was used. The AMC framework classifies and organizes the wide range of merchandising S&K into: (a) four main constructs (i.e., soft skills, hard skills, explicit knowledge, and tacit knowledge); (b) seven categories (i.e., interpersonal and intrapersonal, technical and thinking/conceptual,
general apparel and merchandising knowledge, professional experience); (c) 23 skills and 16 knowledge types; and (d) 140 individual S&K dimensions. The framework provided deduced (a priori) codes for analyzing and classifying S&K that South African merchandising professionals identified as important in this study.

**Method**

**Research Design, Data Collection, and Description of Participants**

A phenomenological approach was employed to explore the S&K required for apparel merchandising professionals. This approach provided a realistic account of the world individuals “live and work” in (Creswell, 2013, p. 24). After Institutional Review Board approval, the data were collected through semi-structured, face-to-face, in-depth individual interviews. Participants were recruited through merchandising professionals working in the South African apparel retail industry. The individual interviews were used to get an insider perspective that was true and relevant to merchandising professionals’ unique experiences and perspectives on the S&K required to fulfill their roles and perform their responsibilities. The semi-structured interview strategy, together with an interview protocol, focused on giving participants time and opportunity to reflect on their experiences but also allowed for a systematic data collection (Babbie & Mouton, 2001).

For phenomenological studies, a small purposive sample of participants with experience of the situation is recommended (Creswell, 2013). Two conditions directed the purposive sampling: sufficiency and data saturation. Sufficiency is ensuring that an adequate number of apparel merchandising professionals are included in the study to “reflect the range of participants and sites that make up the target population so that those outside the sample might have a chance to connect to the experience of those in it” (Greeff, 2011, p. 350). Merchandising professionals from different roles and regions where apparel retailers are mainly located in South Africa (i.e., Western-Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, and Gauteng) were
included to ensure sufficiency. Data collection was completed once data saturation occurred and no new information emerged from interviews.

Participants were recruited with an invitation email, which explained the purpose of the study. Once the merchandising professionals agreed to participate, a suitable date and time for the individual interviews were scheduled. Interviews lasted between 40 to 70 minutes and were digitally audio recorded with the permission of the participants. Participants received a gift card to the value of $15 as a token of appreciation for their time.

The purposive sample consisted of 16 merchandising professionals currently employed within the South African apparel retail industry. For confidentiality, pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of the participants. In addition, the names of companies were omitted from the interview transcripts. Table 5.1 presents description of participants, who were women between 27 and 45 years old, with the average age of 34.3 years. Fifteen participants had bachelor’s degrees in specialization areas such as clothing management, fashion design, or textiles and technology. Four participants had a Masters degree. One participant did not have higher education, but was included based on the extensive industry experience. The companies that employed professionals included international and national retailers, department stores, specialty retailers, a fast fashion retailer, discount retailers, and sourcing companies supplying to major retailers in South Africa. Retail companies were dispersed throughout the three clothing regions in South Africa: Western Cape, Kwa-Zulu-Natal, and Gauteng. Participants were appointed in merchandising positions: buyers (4); buying/merchandising managers (4); planners (2); product developers/QA (4); and sourcing coordinators (2). Participants worked between 2 and 20 years in the apparel retail industry, with an average of 11.8 years.
Table 5.1. Description of participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Degree and academic major</th>
<th>Type of retailer</th>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Position or job title</th>
<th>Total years in retail</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>BS Clothing Management</td>
<td>Discount retailer</td>
<td>Western Cape</td>
<td>Buyer</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bea</td>
<td>BS Clothing retail</td>
<td>Discount retailer</td>
<td>Western Cape</td>
<td>Senior buyer</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belle</td>
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<td>Speciality retailer</td>
<td>Kwa-Zulu Natal</td>
<td>Product developer</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christine</td>
<td>BA Fashion Design</td>
<td>Speciality retailer</td>
<td>Western Cape</td>
<td>Product developer</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claire</td>
<td>BA Fashion and Textiles</td>
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<td>Kwa-Zulu Natal</td>
<td>Sourcing coordinator</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danni</td>
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<td>National brand</td>
<td>Gauteng</td>
<td>Product developer/QA</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denise</td>
<td>MS Clothing Management</td>
<td>Speciality retailer</td>
<td>Kwa-Zulu Natal</td>
<td>Planner</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isabelle</td>
<td>BA Clothing and Textiles</td>
<td>Speciality retailer</td>
<td>Western Cape</td>
<td>Merchandising manager</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie</td>
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<td>Product developer/QA</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Leigh</td>
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<td>Gauteng</td>
<td>Buying manager</td>
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<td>Lisa*</td>
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<td>Merchandising manager</td>
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<tr>
<td>Megan</td>
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<td>Sourcing coordinator</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *The S&K identified by this participant did not differ from other participants

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and organized by one of the authors. Atlas.ti software was used for the analyses. Initial open-coding directed the data analyses and entailed bracketing chunks of text, segments of sentences, or paragraphs and allocating a code (Creswell, 2013). A priori codes, based on Jacobs and Karpova’s (2018) merchandising competency framework were used to classify the initial codes into categories. Throughout this step, a priori codes and codes that emerged through the open-coding process were further defined to provide a uniform guide to clearly describe categories (e.g., communication or...
leadership). Next, the categories were clustered into “meaning units” (p. 193), or common themes that were labelled following the competency framework (e.g., interpersonal and intrapersonal skills). Finally, the themes were merged into four topical areas, according to the framework: soft skills, hard skills, explicit knowledge, and tacit knowledge. The first topical area, soft skills, consisted of two themes: *Interpersonal Skills* and *Intrapersonal Skills*. The second topical area explored participants’ references to hard skills and the two themes that emerged were: *Technical Skills* and *Thinking/Conceptual Skills*. Under the topical area, explicit knowledge two themes emerged: *General Apparel Knowledge* and *Merchandising Knowledge*. The last topical area, tacit knowledge, accounts for the significance of *Professional Experience* within the retail industry.

**Interpretation**

**Soft Skills**

*Interpersonal skills.*

Interpersonal skills consisted of four categories: communication, diplomacy, teamwork, and leadership. They encapsulate people-related skills essential for working in retail environments that rely on daily interaction with multiple people within and outside the company.

*Communication.* Without exception, all participants depended a great deal on daily communication with team members, management, other departments, and suppliers.

The wrong message can be sent through. Especially now, working with the rest of the world, the language barrier and things like that. It forms the basis of your everyday job, of what you do. If you don’t communicate, like I said, things get lost. (Amy)

Important aspects of communication included both written and verbal components: “write proper emails that are to the point” (Zia) and “verbally express yourself with confidence” (Megan). Presentations skills were also identified as essential to “sell” and “justify” ideas to
management: “As a buyer, you stand in front of an auditorium all the time and argue your case and present your range” (Isabelle). Listening skills were especially important for product developers; because they had to pay attention to and interpret buyers’ requests, “It is to really try and understand what the team needs from you and how you can really service them. Focus on what they need” (Christine).

The ability to relay information accurately when briefing/informing suppliers regarding products was vital for seasonal success. Participants asserted, “making sure that it comes through in the right way” (Christine) and “the extension of your brief and how particular you are” (Sally) assured that suppliers could deliver. Keeping an open-communication line also contributed to creating a good flow of interaction and trusting relationship between parties: “I keep an open line of communication with all the departments” (Megan).

**Diplomacy** described how participants managed relations with different parties. All professionals discussed the importance of negotiation, persuasion, relationship building, and being respectful. Most participants (14) conceded that negotiation skills were critical, as every aspect of the merchandising process had to be negotiated, including, timelines, delivery dates, prices of materials, production cost, etc. At the same time, they needed to “get buy in” or convince management about the feasibility of proposed plans. Negotiation and persuasion necessitated a mutual understanding between all parties. Sally, a senior buyer, explained,

Persuasion and negotiation and the art of seduction [laughs]. I have to charm a lot of people, as I said. And I don’t mean that in an unauthentic way but building rapport with people very quickly because you work with so many key players and you need something from each of them.

To form “strategic partnerships” in the supply chain, investment in relationship building and being respectful were acknowledged as valuable diplomatic skills. Professionals had to deal
with people from all “walks of life” and have to accommodate people from different cultures, demographic backgrounds, and different management levels of a company. Lisa stated, “The ability to embrace diverse cultures. South Africa, in particular, but also sitting across someone that’s from Chinese descent or come from a different background. You wouldn’t be able to partner if you can’t think how that person is.”

Teamwork was defined by participants as an encompassing skill related to collaboration, providing support, being helpful, and trusting teammates. There was agreement among all professionals that merchandising function relied heavily on a strong collaborative environment in order to execute company objectives.

You have to be a team player and it is difficult when you butt heads, or you have difficult people on your team. Your product is not the only product in the store. You kind of have to work with all the other buyers, be in line with the company trend and what they are doing. So, we all moving towards the same goal. (Isabelle)

Trusting your team to do what is expected was identified as a vital skill for merchandisers to achieve goals in a timely manner. As Zia pointed out,

Your team, the people that you work with, is very important. You have to trust them. It is such a fast-paced environment; you can’t ask people 50,000 times to do one thing. If you ask somebody, you must depend on them to do it. So, that makes a big difference if you work with a strong team and everybody pulls their weight.

Participants noted that “your team is your support network” (Christine) and being supportive and helpful team player relieved some stress and high demands of their jobs. Denise, a planner, asserted that her team helps her to stay positive in the extremely pressurized retail environment: “It’s actually the people you work with. Like, you support each other. Like, we have a WhatsApp group, my team. Sometimes it’s just about sharing silly jokes or like
gossiping about something. And we do social things as well every now and again to just to get out of the office.”

**Leadership** skill emerged from participants’ descriptions of abilities to motivate others, mentor, delegate responsibilities, identify others’ strengths and weaknesses, and give recognition for achievements. About two thirds of participants asserted that motivating others to do their best and mentoring them by sharing your knowledge and expertise were critical components of leadership and pivotal to the overall success of the business: “You can shine brighter when your staff are doing the right thing. And for them to do the right thing, you got to share yourself, help them, and push them forward” (Danni).

Just over a third of the participants explained that identifying others’ strengths and weaknesses and delegating responsibilities ensured that people’s talents were utilized and developed. They shared that leadership entailed understanding what each team member needs were, accommodating these needs whenever possible, and giving recognition for superior performance. Leigh’s quote summarized all the important aspects of leadership:

I want to give them [my team] lots of recognition and I want to spend lots of time training if I notice what they need. So, I would rather work in that way and it is all about coaching, knowing people’s strengths and weaknesses, when to push them, when to not push them, when to give them support, when to leave them to do their thing. And it is all leadership.

**Intrapersonal skills.**

The intrapersonal theme emerged from participants’ descriptions of the desirable personal qualities or character traits necessary to accomplish the multiple merchandising responsibilities. Six categories were developed based on the data analyses: flexibility, administrative/managerial, positive attitude, responsibility, and self-management.
Flexibility skills emerged from participant descriptions of open-minded, adaptable, and thick-skinned characteristics. Without exception, professionals asserted that in the retail industry “change is the only constant” (Lisa) or “change is the new normal” (Sally). To thrive, a merchandiser must be adaptable and open-minded. Several participants (9) noted that “there is more than one way of doing things” (Bea). Christine, a product developer, explained how embracing new ideas could contribute to a better result,

I think with the fast-moving industry like ours you can’t be stuck on one idea and that’s how it’s going to be and that’s going to stay like that through the whole product lifecycle. If you are going to do that, by the time your product comes out it might be stale, and the customer might have seen it. You know, you can flex a little bit this way and flex a little bit that way. And if changes come at you, try to embrace them and see how they can impact the product in a good way and even your team.

When asked what merchants need to succeed in the retail industry, an overwhelming number of participants (11) indicated that they must be thick-skinned. They explained that it was important to “take it [feedback] in a positive way and improve” (Julie) or “brush things off” (Megan). Bea explained, “A thick skin [laughs]. Don’t take things too personally. That I think is the most important thing: don’t take things too personally. I’ve seen a lot of people fail because they are taking things personally.”

Administrative/managerial skills were needed by participants to complete their responsibilities efficiently. All professionals relied on time management, multi-tasking, organized, prioritizing, and follow-up as essential to do their jobs. Participants noted “you must make the most of your time” (Bea), “be super organized” (Lilly), and “have some sort of systematic approach” (Amy). Time-management helped to systematically structure the various activities and tasks imperative to “pull all the pieces together” and meet deadlines. A number of participants (6) remarked that someone who is efficient and effective is,
“somebody who reaches their deadlines” (Leigh). Bea pointed out that retail is result driven and therefore you need to be excellent with time management, “The deadlines are very important. If you achieve the results, in all the companies, that is what it is about.” Participants further explained that because they handled so many tasks at once, and to “work in organized chaos” (Megan) it was important to be organized and multi-task.

Because every product has its own critical path. So, you’ve to be able to manage so many different things that is at so many stages of the same process. So, you really have to keep your head together and be organised and be able to multitask. (Lilly)

About half participants acknowledged that merchandising necessitated someone who was able to prioritize and follow-up on tasks because of the complexity of the process that transcends over different timelines and suppliers around the world. Claire remarked,

Because there are always a hundred things to do, and my list never gets shorter only longer. Understanding priorities is very important and to be able to set boundaries. I actually have to prioritize all the chaos that’s happening around me.

*Positive attitude* skill emerged from participant discussion about the significance of personal traits such as being optimistic, passionate, driven, and confident. All but one participant pointed out that working in the retail industry can be hard and being optimistic helped to cope with pressure, “You got to be positive. You have to have that energy about yourself” (Danni). More than half of participants (9) expressed that being passionate about what they kept them motivated to persist in a merchandising career.

You can’t do this job if you don’t like it. Then this job isn’t going to be worth it to you, because this job is very demanding, and if you don’t absolutely love what you do, then you are going to absolutely hate it. (Sally)
Roughly half of professionals (9) explained that apart from being passionate, one also had to be driven, which means having “direction and purpose” (Leigh). Being self-motivated and having the drive to succeed without pressure from others was an important personal trait. We are always set against budgets. We are always set against sales targets. We always want to grow, grow, grow the business. You have to be very determined, very driven. Have a passion for it. It can get really crazy and stressful, but just remember why you are doing it. (Yanna)

Half of the participants (8) highlighted confidence as an important intrapersonal skill. Their responses about confidence pointed to believing in yourself and making calls with conviction: “Just honestly believing you are right. Having confidence in what you are saying but then also having your facts together” (Megan).

Responsibility developed from participants’ descriptions about beings accountable. Just more than half of participants (9) referred to the importance of taking ownership for your work activities, portfolio, and constantly improving it: “That, I believe, allows you to be even more successful. You take the ownership, it’s yours and you almost want to make it better” (Megan). Due to the enormous number of tasks that are deadline driven being reliable and someone that is responsible is a vital quality. Belle explains this, “You’ve got to be dependable, because people are relying on you to do it. And if I am not dependable and get my stuff out quickly it messes it up for everyone else.”

Self-management evolved as participants articulated personal skills perceived as desirable to cope with the demands of their jobs: hard-working, work-life balance, stress tolerance, and perseverance. About three quarter of participants (11) explained that jobs in the retail industry demanded extra hours and effort: “Work hard and don’t give up” (Danni). That was why the ability to maintain a work-life balance to absorb all the pressure was essential as explained by Claire, “I am learning hard work with balance will make people rise
to the top, because it’s long-term as well. There are too many people burning out. I think to be able to put in the hours but think long-term.”

Half of the participants (8) asserted that to survive and succeed in this extremely pressurized environment, merchandisers must be able to tolerate stress and persevere. They referred to the ability to withstand “harsh conditions” (e.g., long working hours, sleep deprivation, international travels, and negativty) and having “true grit.” Lilly summarized the views of her colleagues: “You have to have the right sort of temperament to handle the stress. The retailer that I am with is one of the best, so only the really tough ones survive there.”

**Hard Skills**

**Technical skills.**

The first theme developed from participant references to being proficient in math and technology.

**Math-related skills** described proficiencies to calculate, estimate, and understand “business workings”: costing, pricing, and budgeting. All professionals agreed that math-related skills were absolutely essential. For budgeting, it was vital to be able to calculate margins, profits, mark-ups, and revenues for a given period: “You need to know how to calculate initial mark-up unit, how to calculate gross margin, how to calculate the differences, the impact on your business, and how to plot it” (Leigh). Merchandisers were responsible for accounting for volumes, shipping, tariffs, commissions (the middle man’s cut), and exchange rates on the final product price. Zia explained how costing and pricing affected profit margin,

You have to be good at numbers. Some people don’t realize that you need to know your margins, you need to know if this product is worth giving it a shot or not. Not only that, but you usually need about 60% mark-up above our cost, so you kind of work it out backwards, saying ‘Okay, I quoted 19.95 because you need to retail at 49 or 50, based on your margin’.
Technology proficiency emerged from participants’ heavy reliance on software and hardware to perform their daily tasks, “everything is computerized” and “you’ve got to be good with computers” (Belle). All professionals depended on information technology to collect data from various online databases to do trend, sale, or product analysis: “The internet is key. We get our ideas there” (Danni). Similarly, Amy pointed out, “We trade in more countries. We need to pull the information from these countries”. To make projections, inform decisions, and distribute information to all involved parties dispersed throughout the supply chain, proper information management skills are critical. Without exception, participants emphasized the importance of having intermediate software skills. They specifically referred to the use of Microsoft Office (e.g., Excel, PowerPoint, Word) to create and use spreadsheets, presentations, or compile agreements with suppliers.

Excel is important. Word and PowerPoint are very important. On [other] systems you will get on the job training. They are quite complicated but once you get to know them they are not that bad. You really do need good computer skills. It is very irritating to work with somebody if they don’t have good computer skills (Sally).

Product developers used Excel to do fit formulas, product specifications, and grading sizes.

With QA you use Microsoft Excel. If you are good with Excel, it’s good. On the specs, we work with formulas. If you have your grading on the system punched in, then when you get a new fit, you use the same grading. (Julie)

A third of participants stated (5) that the capability to use PLM software was critical for merchandising positions to track products: “You need to understand the systems the company offers, like, purchase order system, your online system where you brief suppliers, and log all your fittings and comments” (Lilly). Being skilled in CAD software (e.g., Adobe Illustrator, Photoshop, Corel Draw, etc.) was especially important for product developers to create and present product ideas.
If I didn’t learn CAD, I wouldn’t be able to do it [my job]. CAD is key. I take what I see and put it in CAD. It’s neat, it’s presentable, it’s in different colors. When my supplier sees it, they can read it. They can make the pattern according to what they see. (Danni)

Thinking/conceptual skills

The second theme emerged from references to higher order thinking needed to make complex business decisions. Five categories explored this theme: problem solving and decision-making, critical thinking, innovation, metacognition, and strategic thinking.

**Problem-solving and decision-making** skill described an ability to recognize problems, find multiple solutions, begin decisive, intuition to make decisions, and being reactive. Leigh asserted, “Problem-solving and decision-making skills, combined at the same time because I find in our business across all the different disciplines, we lack to make quick responsible decisions.” Half of the participant asserted that they were “professional problem solvers” (Zia), or “Every single day is a problem. I literally have about 99 problems every single day” (Sally). Participants were constantly in the mode of acknowledging problems and being realistic about their magnitudes: “Sometimes a problem isn’t as big as people make it out to be, ‘Okay we have a problem, let’s look at it. Okay it’s only 200K, it’s not 200 million rand.’ You quantify it” (Denise). Problem solving was acknowledged as a critical part of their daily tasks.

You actually problem-solve more than you do anything else. It’s natural that everyone is going to make errors. The skills required to deal with people and their errors and your own errors as well as to admit them and work through them. (Claire)

Claire further emphasized the importance to develop multiple solutions to every problem, “To be able to step back from a situation and to think of multiple options of resolutions. I can’t tell you how many times a day that’s all we do. Just trying to think of options.”
Part of problem solving was thus the ability to react to the problem and make a decision. A third of the participants (5) emphasized the importance of intuition in decision-making, referring to it as “natural gut instinct” or “gut feeling.” More than half of the participants (9) repeatedly referred to the ability to make timely decisions, without hesitation, “make decisions very quickly” (Isabelle). Professionals emphasized this ability “be on the ball and handle things quickly.” For them, being able to react to new dynamics in the global industry and economy ensured that the company could capitalize on opportunities. Sally remarked, “The pie in South Africa is only this big, and we are all fighting for our piece of the pie. For me, it is that reactivity [snapping her fingers] to the market is the biggest skill I’ve learned.”

**Critical thinking** described analytical skills, or the evaluation and interpretation of information. Half participants commented on “tapping into analytical thinking” (Lilly) to examine and scrutinize information. They pointed out that to make a logical decision, evaluation of information involved comparing products and/or sales and making a judgement in terms of performance, changes, or growth potential. Participants highlighted interpretation of information as the process of compiling and using facts to explain or report the current situation. Yanna explains,

> We look at weekly sales and compare the jumps between the week-to-week growths. I also have to do a bunch of reporting based on the previous months’ performance, which involves pulling data from the system and then pulling together information and tracking how far we are to our budgets.

**Innovation** developed from participants’ discussion about the importance of creative thinking and resourcefulness. Most participants (10) believed that thinking creatively was important for merchandising professionals: “Creativeness. You need a creative individual” (Lisa). Creativity was balancing the “change in products every season” (Christine) with what
will work commercially but still have “newness.” Zia shared a common perspective on creativity, “You have to be creative to be able to do product development. You have to be able to think outside the box.” Lily explained the importance of creativity for merchandisers, “Buyers have to have the insight into the creativity and to have an interest in colour and shape and drape and everything that goes with clothing, so that you can come up with great ideas.”

About half of participants (7) elaborated that part of creativity is being resourceful. Claire, a sourcing coordinator, explained that resourcefulness is about getting inventive or finding ways to fix something.

We have to look at our markers to see if it helps to take a back seam in, or a back seam out, make your bindings smaller. There is a hundred ways you re-work your garments to try and get you target [price] down.

**Metacognition** represented participant views of curiosity, lifelong learning, and self-awareness. Most participants (13) stated that to grow in the industry, professionals need “curious mindset” and “never stop learning.” Being inquisitive and engaged in lifelong self-learning were essential traits to keep up with the ever-changing industry, “You got to evolve. Whatever new is happening in the market, make yourself available to learn. It doesn’t matter where you are in your life. I thought ‘I am 43. Maybe I should chill.’ No, you shouldn’t” (Danni). The importance of self-awareness—having a clear perception of your thoughts and emotions allowed professionals to realize their strengths and weaknesses and grow further.

Self-awareness is a skill that not many people have. We don’t always want to learn how to be self-aware but, unfortunately, if you’re not, you don’t grow. You don’t grow if you don’t spend the time doing introspection, listen what other people have to say about you. (Sally)
Strategic thinking skill emerged from merchandising professionals’ views on future thinking, planning, and being proactive. Half of participants pointed out that to stay ahead of the retail industry, they had to constantly think of “what the next big thing will be” (Lilly). To achieve their objectives and ensure timely development and delivery of products and their commercial success, professionals had to plan well in advance: “We strategize the whole season upfront. So, it is very top-level strategic meetings that we have” (Sally). A third of the participants discussed the importance of being proactive. Based on their perspective, it was better to anticipate situations before they transpire.

We have to pre-empt because, generally, you will have seven drops of a style, different colors, different months. If I see that my drop in April is really not selling well. I’ve got to pre-empt the fact that they are probably not going to re-style my May and June. So, then I put a hold on my production. (Claire)

Explicit Knowledge

General apparel knowledge.

Three categories describe what general apparel-related knowledge was perceived as important to have for merchandising professionals: (a) textiles, (b) fashion and consumer markets, and (c) manufacturing.

Textiles. Most participants (12) had a strong argument about the importance of sound understanding of textiles, including: (a) types of fibers, yarns, and dyes; (b) textile testing; and (c) properties, structures, and performance of fabrics. In addition, suitability of different fabrics for certain print applications, finishes, and products was imperative, as merchandisers must understand product care and maintenance: “It’s not just a matter of textiles science, it is a matter of understanding the entire technology process. It’s standard in the industry to do light fastness, color fastness, griming, roping – all those tests” (Lilly).
Product developers, like Danni, emphasized understanding care and maintenance of fabrics and products made of these fabrics,

The acid wash or a normal basic single stone wash, or an enzyme wash – you have different reactions to that one denim fabric. It won’t last too long if you bleach wash something. Because you are destroying the fibers of the fabric.

**Fashion and consumer markets** knowledge emerged from professionals’ reference to forecasting of fashion trends and consumer demand. Merchandisers should be able to spot, analyze, and interpret a trend for a target market: “It is adapting the latest trends and the latest ideas for your market and for your actual customer” (Bea). In addition to forecasting, it was important to understand fashion cycles and trends in terms of profitability for your company. Sally remarked, “You need to be able to spot a trend quickly: not just in fashion but also in sales, in customer spending.” Most participants (11) conceded that to sell products merchandisers need to be knowledgeable about consumer taste and decision-making processes: “When you step into a company, you have to research the customer. Who is the customer? You look at the demographics. You always keep in mind what your customer would like” (Danni).

**Manufacturing** developed from participant responses about understanding production processes, construction techniques, patternmaking, and quality assurance. Almost all participants (14) stressed the importance of understanding the entire apparel manufacturing process: how factories function, machinery used, types of production lines and procedures, and how construction techniques can be adjusted to lower product cost. Claire, a sourcing coordinator, explained how sound manufacturing knowledge helped her to achieve the desired product cost,

I need to know that my volume, whether it is small or big, is going to impact negotiating a better price. I need to understand how every procedure costs 50c. So,
how can I eliminate procedures? My knowledge on construction on what is a slower process or what is a faster process – all these things are so vital.

Half of participants discussed basic patternmaking knowledge needed to assess garment fit and fix problems. For Bea, a buyer, understanding how 2D patterns translate into 3D garments was critical to perform her job, “You need to know what a 3D product is going to look like and how to go from 2D to 3D. Those were big lessons that you don’t realize at the time, but it is part of your knowledge.” Most product developers and buyers agreed that knowledge of “quality standards” was required to approve samples: “We compare measurements to the specs we produce on the quality assurance side. From there we would either approve it or not approve it” (Belle).

**Merchandising knowledge.**

Seven categories described what merchandising-specific knowledge was essential for professionals to have: sourcing, marketplace awareness, business, product development, retail operations, assortment management, and marketing.

**Sourcing** emerged form knowledge related to supply chain management, trade policies and regulations, logistics, and establishing suppliers. Most participants (12) conceded that the success of merchandising is how well you understand the process of supply chain management and how each stage contributes to the final product: “I know every single phase that a product goes through: from when it is still a plant growing, being cotton, to where it gets sold. So, to know every single step, and also how to execute it” (Leigh). Because most apparel in the South African market is imported, knowledge about trade policies (trade regulations, export and import taxes, tariffs, and quotas) and logistics (shipping time and cost, custom clearance, lead times of importing) was required: “The ideal way is to understand the whole chain. Typically, you also want to be in logistics. I did my internship at a distribution center. So, I understood the logistics quite well” (Lilly). Professionals agreed that a major
factor in the merchandising process was managing their supplier base. To establish reliable suppliers, or, as one participant noted, “strategic partners” required knowledge about factories’ manufacturing capacity, fair labor and wages practices, and ability to meet delivery dates, “Understanding the timeline and the costing and all of that is important. At the end of the day, all the different factors that are involved, like, the actual making of the product and getting the product from China to here, there are lots of different steps” (Zia).

**Marketplace awareness** emphasizes the importance of insights into external factors that influence merchandising processes. Majority of professionals (11) discussed the significance of having marketplace awareness. They highlighted the need to be on top of what your direct competition is doing and how to react to their offerings, “If you don’t know what’s going on with your competitors, you might as well be blind. Again, very arrogant to go through life when you don’t know what your competitors are doing” (Sally). Professionals agreed that fashion is not a “singular industry” but affected by many factors. Professionals highlighted the significance of being informed about political, economic, and social factors influencing business. Belle, a product developer, pointed out,

To know what is happening in the world and within the industry because we can’t think that fashion is just a thing on its own. We are impacted by what the government is doing, what people are earning, how the credit act will affect stores that are based on credit.

**Business** category summarizes discussion about knowledge of finance and accounting as well as commercial mindset. Half of participants (8) argued that basic financial and accounting knowledge was essential to report and make sense of sales, cash flow, profits, and losses: “If you come into the buying area, you need some sort of financial background, even if it is just your entry level of financial information” (Lilly). Professionals (9) also emphasized the importance of a commercial mindset. They asserted that they were “traders”
or “sellers” and highlighted the importance of “business acumen” and “know-how of doing business”, as they were there to make profit for their companies. Leigh explained, “Traders’ mentality. Commercial mindset. It is all about that.”

**Product development** category materialized from participant discussion of product attributes and aesthetics, sizing and fit, and commercial appeal. A third of participants (5) explained that being knowledgeable on “tangible product attributes” and aesthetics was critical, “Obviously, the aesthetics in terms of the design and the balance in the garment, those kinds of things” (Bea). Sizing and fit knowledge was also important, as Leigh noted:

Because it is all fair and well to see it on a hanger, but how does it translate onto a body? So, you need to understand what fits with what body types, what’s the general trend behind it and what’s the idea behind it—on all levels, it is so important.

Further, understanding the commercial appeal of garments was essential for satisfying consumer demand as well as offering a profitable product.

Would a customer buy it? And how many units would they buy? And what is the cost effectiveness of my design interpreted into buying? I think that is the one thing that I’ve learned very quickly. Because you can design the most beautiful dress and develop the most beautiful fabric in the most amazing colors and silhouette and you can sell it for 1,300 Rand [90 USD], but our customer actually wants a cotton dress in white for 300 Rand. And you’ve missed your gap. (Christine)

**Retail operations** category evolved from the discussion of knowledge regarding retail principles, distribution, and quick response. According to participants, retail begins at the store level and builds upwards: “It is to ensure that you have the right product, at the right price, at the right time—you know all those rights in the store” (Leigh). Professionals asserted the need to understand the inner working of retail: “You have to know the retail principles, because, unfortunately, you use it daily. They call it the rules of retail” (Megan).
Participants applied this principle to distribution as well: “We learned that to make sure that when you are consolidating product, that you consolidate in the right amount, to the right time, to the right place” (Christine). To respond quickly to changing consumer demands, allocating the right products to stores across different regions by size, brand, and style was discussed as a critical knowledge.

How do we get quick response into our business? It takes many, many years to get a quick response model up and running because it is incredibly expensive. A big growth point for me was to change that mindset and work in a very, very current time and current thinking. (Sally)

*Assortment management* category emerged from descriptions of range building, product lifecycle management, buying processes, and stock replenishment. In the interviews, half of the professionals (8) explained that range building was a complicated process, and understanding how various product variables (e.g., color, style, brand, and fabric) impact assortment was essential. It was critical to tap into “what worked and what didn’t work” (Amy) to create a balanced product range for a season. According to Megan, a buyer, “Range building is a skill, because it’s quite difficult. Even assorting a range. There are so many variables you have to look at. There’s a lot of balancing that comes into the assortment.”

Participants believed knowledge about the buying cycle and product lifecycle management was essential to achieve profitable ranges each season. This involved understanding different aspects of the buying cycle (lead-time, volume calculation, and delivery) and product lifecycle from concept to stores. Lilly, a buying manager, explained,

Every single product has its own critical path and [you need] to keep track of a 120 of those every season. It is all the critical points in the path that each item follows. You have to do all of those points to be able to deliver it into stores.
**Marketing** category includes knowledge about product positioning, customer service, branding, market segmentation, promotions, and visual merchandising. Half of participants made it clear that being knowledgeable about marketing was essential in executing product strategy. The emphasized serving customers and making sure they understand your products through strategic use of promotions and visual merchandising.

I need to ensure that product knowledge is instilled onto the people in stores. If you can’t be with your customer, put an outfit together that is for the customer in your store, if you can’t do that on store level, you sure as hell won’t be a buyer. (Leigh)

Participants explained how expertise in market segmentation contributed to shaping product strategies: “The merchandise team creates an assortment for each one of these boxes. And the reason why we do this is: because there’re different consumer profiles. We segment the marketplace to create differentiation between our markets” (Lisa).

**Tacit Knowledge**

**Professional experience.**

The theme emerged from participant discussion of work experience (e.g., on-the-job training, internships). Without exception, merchandising professionals valued their professional experiences, which contributed to their confidence and equipped them to succeed in the industry. Various experiences were discussed: exposure to the retail industry early on in their careers, such as in-store retail work, on-the-job-training, and internships. There was a consensus that learning by doing was essential because it was real life experience, and not just learning facts from a textbook. Yanna summarized this view:

Retail is such a dynamic industry. Sometimes what you learn in a textbook was written ten years ago and doesn’t apply to what’s happening in the industry now. For example, working in stores could give you an understanding of how systems take place from a store level and up-folds to head office level. There are so many things
you learn on the job. For instance, if a customer complains, how do you react? If your stock doesn’t arrive on time, how do you deal with the situation? Getting that experience is very important.

**Conclusions and Implications**

The results of this study revealed that a comprehensive range of (a) soft and hard skills and (b) explicit and tacit knowledge were required for apparel merchandising professionals to fulfill their roles and perform their responsibilities. Figure 5.1 presents the identified merchandising skills and knowledge in the context of the South African retail industry.  

![Figure 5.1. Skills and knowledge required for merchandising professionals in South Africa](image)

1 Note: Only four participants discussed integrity and sustainability, which were not included in the results, but were included in Chapter 6 for prioritizing.
The S&K were identified using the AMC framework (Jacobs & Karpova, 2018). The perspectives of merchandising professionals in the South African retail industry corroborated most S&K from this framework. Through the analysis of participant professional experiences, nine soft skills, and seven hard skills were identified as critical for performing merchandising-related responsibilities (Figure 5.1). In the AMC framework, interpersonal skills were established such as courtesy, professionalism, and social skills together with communication, diplomacy, teamwork, and leadership. In the context of the South African retail industry participants did not discuss professionalism and social skills. However, interpersonal soft skills (i.e., communication, diplomacy, teamwork, and leadership) were confirmed which describe people-related skills necessary to support interaction and relationships throughout the apparel supply chain. Courtesy were included under diplomacy which involved being respectful to people from different management levels and demographic backgrounds. Five intrapersonal soft skills (i.e., flexibility, administrative/managerial, positive attitude, responsibility, and self-management) were identified that relate to desirable personal qualities for merchandising professional. These soft skills were consistent with the AMC framework.

Hard skills denoted the technical and thinking/conceptual skills needed for merchandising professionals. Technical skills comprised of math-related and technology skills and were consistent with the framework. Five thinking/conceptual skills (i.e., problem solving and decision-making, critical thinking, innovation, metacognition, and strategic thinking) were identified explaining merchandising professionals’ ability to strategize, make decisions and solve problems. Further, ability to learn continuously and realistic evaluation of abilities (metacognition) were described as part of thinking/conceptual skills. These results corroborated with the framework.
Ten explicit knowledge types essential for merchandising professionals were identified (Figure 5.1), confirming the AMC framework. Three were classified as general apparel knowledge (i.e., textiles, fashion and consumer markets, and manufacturing) and seven merchandising knowledge types (i.e., sourcing, marketplace awareness, business, product development, retail operations, assortment management, and marketing). Apparel product and aesthetics from the framework were included under the product development category. In addition, socio-cultural aspects of apparel were not confirmed in this study to be important for South African merchandising professionals. Consistent with the AMC framework, tacit knowledge included the professional experience that merchandisers gained in the retail industry. The advantage of exposure to different aspects of the retail industry was perceived as critical as not everything was possible to learn from the books and in the classrooms. Work experience was found to be valued by retailers and played an influential role when appointing merchandisers (Muhammad & Ha-Brookshire, 2011).

The research findings highlight the perspectives of industry practitioners on what S&K are essential for merchandising professionals to perform their responsibilities and, ultimately, succeed in the South African retail industry. Insights into the comprehensive range of S&K required to perform merchandising tasks across the apparel supply chain provide a starting point for developing curricula and courses addressing S&K gaps in the South African retail industry. It is evident that to address the S&K gaps, educators need to incorporate soft and hard skills as well as explicit and tacit knowledge in curricula. First, apparel programs should not only focus on general apparel subject matter but also incorporate merchandising subject matter combined with the development of inter- and intrapersonal skills as well as technical and thinking/conceptual skills. Second, retailers should partner with educators in the development of training and internship programs to further hone tacit knowledge and foster competent merchandising professionals. Because so many S&K appear
to be important for merchandising professionals to master, it is important to prioritize the multitude of S&K so educators can focus resources on developing most critical ones. Further investigation is needed with a larger sample and a quantitative approach to prioritize the identified S&K.

References


CHAPTER 6. ‘MUST-HAVE’ SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE FOR MERCHANDISING PROFESSIONALS IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN RETAIL INDUSTRY


Introduction

Competent merchandising professionals, who have appropriate skills and knowledge, contribute to the overall performance and success of a retail company (Frazier & Cheek, 2016; Howse et al., 2000). However, a major challenge in the South African retail industry, after increased operational costs, is shortage of competent professionals (Gauteng Treasury, 2013). In 2013, critical skills and knowledge gaps for merchandising professions were reported by the Wholesale and Retail Sector Education and Training Authority (W&R Seta, 2013). Yet, in the consequent 2016 report, the merchandising skills and knowledge gaps persisted (W&R Seta, 2016). In addition, expansion of South African retailers into global markets has increased the demand for competent retail professionals who can adapt to and function in unpredictable environments (Ndweni, 2015). For South African apparel retailers to stay competitive, it is vital to have merchandising professionals equipped with essential skills and knowledge (S&K).

The problem with fostering a competent retail workforce of well-educated professionals is not unique to South Africa. Extant research confirms that this is a global challenge. A plethora of studies have investigated competencies required for graduates to be employable and successful in business (Collet et al., 2015; Jackson, 2013; Jackson & Chapman, 2012; Robles, 2012), marketing (Schlee & Harich, 2010), retail and tourism (Clokie & Fourie, 2016; Hart et al., 2007; Wesley et al., 2017), global entrepreneurship (Hodges et al., 2015), supply chain (Prajogo & Sohal, 2013), and merchandising (Alzahrani
& Kozar, 2017; Frazier & Cheek, 2016; Howse et al., 2000; Muhammad & Ha-Brookshire, 2011; Reeves-DeArmond et al., 2015; Power, 2012a). According to Jackson and Chapman (2012), most research focused on “devising ‘wish lists’ of competencies for graduates” (p. 542). Indeed, all the previous studies identified many different S&K as important for professionals’ success in a specific field. While many of the identified knowledge and, especially, skills overlap, it is not clear which of them are absolutely critical. No study has prioritized various S&K and, in particular, in relation to the merchandising profession.

As the skill shortage challenges in the South African retail industry intensify, the lack of empirical data in terms of S&K required for apparel merchandising professionals warranted research in this area. A preceding qualitative inquiry identified 29 S&K types through interviews with 16 merchandisers in the South African retail (Jacobs, 2018). However, the list of S&K types has no importance priority, i.e., it is not clear which S&K are absolutely essential or ‘must have’ for merchandisers versus ‘nice-to-have’. The purpose of this study was to prioritize the list of the identified S&K required for apparel merchandising professionals in South Africa.

The research was guided by apparel merchandising competency (AMC) framework (Jacobs & Karpova, 2018). The framework classified all merchandising-related S&K identified in extant research and provided a systematic typology for organizing various S&K. Based on the prioritized merchandising S&K, the AMC framework was adapted specific for the South African retail industry.

**Literature Review**

**Apparel Merchandising Competency Framework**

A competency framework serves as a descriptive tool that outlines and integrates S&K needed to effectively and efficiently perform in a position (Sanghi, 2016). Competency describes the application of relevant S&K obtained through education, training, and
experience to support successful job performance (Pellegrino & Hilton, 2012; Sanghi, 2016). Competencies included in a framework should also reflect the content of a specific discipline (Collet et al., 2015).

Jacobs and Karpova’s (2018) apparel merchandising competency (AMC) framework provided a systematic typology for organizing relevant S&K from extant literature (Figure 6.1). In the framework, 140 individual S&K were first classified into 39 S&K types, which formed seven distinct categories (i.e., interpersonal and intrapersonal, technical and thinking/conceptual, general apparel knowledge, merchandising specific knowledge, and professional experience). Next, the categories were organized into four main constructs (i.e., soft skills, hard skills, explicit knowledge, and tacit knowledge). Even though the AMC framework (Jacobs & Karpova, 2018) logically and systematically organized the 39 types and 140 individual merchandising S&K, the multitude of S&K had no priority and appeared to be equally important.

![Apparel merchandising competency framework]

**Figure 6.1. Apparel merchandising competency framework**

**Merchandising Skills and Knowledge**

To apply the AMC framework in the South African retail context, a qualitative study with 16 industry professionals was conducted (Jacobs, 2018). The study identified 29 S&K types and a total of 116 individual S&K required for merchandising professionals appointed in positions such as buyers, planners, product developers, and sourcing coordinators in the South African retail industry. Using the AMC framework, the total of 116 individual S&K
were classified into soft skills, hard skills, explicit knowledge, and tacit knowledge. The list of the 29 merchandising S&K types included:

- Ten soft skills: four interpersonal skills (communication, diplomacy, teamwork, leadership) that refer to their ability to handle relations and interactions between people; and six intrapersonal skills (flexibility; administrative/managerial; positive attitude; responsibility; self-management; integrity) that describe personal traits and professionals’ ability to manage themselves (Robles, 2012; Yorke & Knight, 2003).

- Seven hard skills: two technical skills (math-related and technology) denoting proficiency in numbers and use of technology; and five thinking/conceptual skills (problem solving and decision-making; critical thinking; innovation; metacognition; strategic thinking) which relate to higher order thinking capabilities (Jackson, 2013; Robles, 2012).

- Eleven explicit knowledge types that refer to what merchandising professionals have learned though formal studies in their subject matter. These included four general apparel knowledge (textiles; manufacturing; fashion and consumer markets; sustainability) and seven merchandising-specific knowledge (sourcing; marketplace awareness; business; product development; retail operations; assortment management; marketing).

- Tacit knowledge included one type, professional experience, entailing what professionals have gained and learned through direct experiences, either by observing or participating (Nonaka et al., 2000).

**Method**

**Adaptive Conjoint Analysis Research Design**

To prioritize merchandising S&K identified as relevant for the South African apparel retail industry, adaptive conjoint analysis (ACA) was employed. ACA is a multivariate
technique that presents participants with multiple attributes to assess the value of each attribute (Hair et al., 2010). Attributes are the factors or variables measured in ACA. Participants make trade-offs between attributes and indicate the relative importance of a specific attribute over another or a combination of attributes (Lacobucci & Churchill, 2010). The relative importance of, or preference for, an attribute is derived from the value placed on that attribute by participants (Mazzocchi, 2008). ACA was administered with Sawtooth Software Inc. that was specifically developed for conjoint analysis modeling.

Predefined attributes form the basis of ACA survey design. For example, different interpersonal S&K types (communication, diplomacy, leadership, and teamwork) were attributes in this study. Each attribute has a number of levels, or dimensions, that describe the attributes (Mazzocchi, 2008). For example, the six dimensions describing the communication attribute verbal skills, writing skills, presentation skills, listening skills, keeping open-communication line, and informing/briefing were the levels used in this study. ACA permits participants to compare and make trade-offs between up to 30 attributes with a maximum of ten levels per each attribute (Hair et al., 2010). In this study, the 29 S&K types represented the 29 attributes for the ACA survey and the 116 individual S&K dimensions represented the attribute levels. Each attribute had from two to six dimensions (individual skills and knowledge).

The 29 types with respective dimensions were programmed into the Sawtooth Software Inc. to create the ACA survey. Caution was taken to ensure that types (attributes) and dimensions (attribute levels) complied with the orthogonal design required in ACA (Johnson & Orme, 2007). Attributes with their attribute dimensions must be independent from each other and mutually exclusive (no overlaps). In addition, attribute dimensions should be specified in words/phrases that are easy to understand and realistic in terms of the situation (Hair et al., 2010). For each individual S&K, a description was provided. The
survey was pre-tested with three industry professionals to ensure the clarity of the survey items.

A research company, Consulta Research, that owns Sawtooth Software Inc. license assisted with the development and administration of the electronic self-administered ACA survey. A screening question preceded the survey to ensure that only merchandising professionals working in the South African retail industry for at least two years were participating in the study. The survey included background questions: age, gender, current industry position, years of industry experience, and qualifications.

**Adaptive Conjoint Analysis Survey Procedure**

The ACA survey followed four stages: build your own task, screening task, pair-wise profile task, and calibration task. During Stage 1, the Build Your Own Task introduces all the attribute dimensions for each attribute. It allows participants to see all the attribute dimensions before making trade-offs. Participants had to rate all attribute dimensions for each attribute, indicating how desirable each attribute dimension was for their position. The seven-point Likert-type scale ranged from “Not desirable” to “Extremely desirable”. The goal was to determine the importance of each attribute dimension within each respective attribute (Hair et al., 2010).

For Stage 2, Screening Task, the tasks were customized based on participant rating of attribute dimensions in Stage 1. Participants were presented with 29 screening tasks, one per attribute. In each screening task, two dimensions (the lowest and the highest rated in Stage 1) within the same attribute were presented. Participants had to rate how important one attribute dimension was over another, using a seven-point Likert-type scale ranging from “Not important” to “Extremely important”. The goal of Stage 2 was to determine the importance of the difference between the two attribute dimensions within an attribute (Hair et al., 2010). The S&K types (attributes) and individual dimensions (attribute levels) important/desirable to
participants are clearer at the end of this step and form the focus of the following stage. In the next stage, the combination of attribute dimensions/levels will be trade-off to establish the most important S&K types and dimensions (Sawtooth Software Inc., 2007).

In Stage 3, Pair-Wise Profile Tasks, customized profiles were created based on each participant’s preferred attribute dimensions from Stages 1 and 2 (Hair et al., 2010). In this study, 20 unique profiles consisting of five different S&K attribute dimensions, personalized for each participant, were created. The 20 customized profiles were randomly presented in pair-wise combinations to participants for rating. Participants completed ten choice tasks of comparing two or pairs of the 20 profiles created for them. Participants indicated their preference for the left or right profile on a nine-point scale, ranging from “Strongly prefer left profile” to “Strongly prefer right profile”. ACA uses pair-wise profiles because the large number of attributes and their dimensions make the survey lengthy. Stage 1 and 2 ensure that only attribute dimensions viewed as important are focused on to reduce the amount of work to be completed by participants (Huertas-Garcia et al., 2016). In Figure 6.2, for example, the two most preferred attribute dimensions from five attributes, personalized/customized for a participant, are presented in pair-wise profiles for the participant to compare: (a) technology (intermediate software skill versus information management); (b) sustainability (environmental versus social responsibility); (c) flexibility (patient versus thick-skinned); (d) diplomacy (conflict resolution versus relationship building); and (e) problem solving/decision-making (develop multiple solutions versus diagnosing problems).
Stage 4 introduced a calibration task. Based on participant responses in the Stage 3, five unique profiles were generated for each participant with five most desirable attribute dimensions. For each of these profiles, participants had to indicate how likely they would appoint someone with the set of the five skills and/or knowledge for their own position by giving a score between 0 (highly unlikely) and 100 (highly likely).

**Data Collection**

Data collection started after approval of the study by the Human Subject Review Board. To ensure greater participation and to reach professionals from different regions, various companies and types of positions so the sample represented the South African retail industry as much as possible, participants for the study were recruited using three different strategies.
First, professionals were invited to participate in the study via email. An email list of alumni from a clothing retail management program and industry contacts was used. Invitation email included the purpose of the study, consent form, and survey link. Next, snowballing strategy was employed (Strydom, 2011). At the end of the survey, participants were asked to refer merchandising professionals within and outside of their companies or forward the invitation email to them. Finally, the survey link with a description of the study and consent elements was shared on social media platforms (Facebook and LinkedIn). Out of 425 professionals who started the survey, only 172 completed. The completion rate was 48%. Baruch and Holtom (2008) found that individuals working in business environments are reluctant to respond to surveys because of time constraints.

Sample

The target population for this research was apparel merchandising professionals employed in the South African retail industry for at least two years. A total of 172 merchandising professionals completed the online survey (Table 6.1). The sample consisted of 87% female and 13% male participants. Participant age ranged from 22 to 61 years ($M = 35$). About 58.7% of the participants had a Baccalaureate degree as the highest level of education; 15% of professionals obtained a Masters degree, and 18.6% had Diplomas (a three-year associate degree), with the remainder completing Ph.D. (1.6%) or high school (6.4%). Participants graduated with ten different college majors, with the largest being clothing retail management (36%), business management (12.2%), fashion design (9.8%), financial management (7.5%), and retail management (7.5%).
Table 6.1. Sample description

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td><strong>Location in South Africa</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>86.62</td>
<td>Western Cape: Cape Town</td>
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<td>50.58</td>
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<td>Male</td>
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<td>13.37</td>
<td>Gauteng: Johannesburg and Pretoria</td>
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<td>37.79</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Age (Missing = 2)</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Kwa-Zulu Natal: Durban</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>10.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-30</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>36.62</td>
<td>Eastern Cape: Mthatha/ Free State: Bloemfontein</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.16</td>
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<td>31-40</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>39.53</td>
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<td>51-&gt;60</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7.55</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td><strong>Highest level of education</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Type of company</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>Baccalaureate degree</td>
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<td>58.72</td>
<td>Department stores</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>38.95</td>
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<tr>
<td>Diploma (3-year degree)</td>
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<td>18.60</td>
<td>Specialty retailer</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>29.07</td>
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<tr>
<td>Masters degree</td>
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<td>15.12</td>
<td>Discount/Off-price retailer</td>
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<td>High school</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6.39</td>
<td>Other: online, manufacturing, wholesale, sourcing</td>
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<td>7.55</td>
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<tr>
<td>PhD degree</td>
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<td>1.16</td>
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<td><strong>Job title</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Years in current position (Missing = 1)</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>Clothing retail management</td>
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<td>36.0</td>
<td>Buyer</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>32.56</td>
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<tr>
<td>Business management</td>
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<td>12.21</td>
<td>Planner</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>28.49</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fashion design</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>9.88</td>
<td>Merchandiser</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial management (general)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7.56</td>
<td>Product developer</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8.14</td>
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<tr>
<td>Retail management (general)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7.56</td>
<td>Quality assurance</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>3.49</td>
<td>Brand manager</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3.49</td>
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<td>Product development</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.91</td>
<td>Distribution/allocation planners</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3.49</td>
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<td>Merchandising management</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>Sourcing coordinator</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.33</td>
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<tr>
<td>Textile design</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>Other: training, marketing, operations</td>
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<td>8.72</td>
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<td>Logistic management</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.74</td>
<td>&lt; than a year</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8.72</td>
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<td>Other: marketing, consumer science, graphic design, IT</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>12.21</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Retail industry experience, years</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td>2-4 years</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>58.14</td>
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<tr>
<td>2-7</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>15.11</td>
<td>2-4 years</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>58.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8-10</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>15.11</td>
<td>5-7 years</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>15.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;10 years</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>69.76</td>
<td>8-10 years</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-0 years</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>&gt;10 years</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>10.47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The majority of participants (69.8%) had more than 10 years of experience in the retail industry, and the rest had between 2 to 10 years of experience. Half of the companies (50.5%) that participants were employed at were located in the Western Cape province (Cape Town); more than a third (37.7%) in Gauteng province (Johannesburg and Pretoria), and 10.5% in Kwazulu-Natal province (Durban). The type of companies varied from department stores (38.9%), specialty retailers (29%), discount retailers (19.7%), boutiques (4.6%), and the remainder (7.5%) comprising of sourcing, online, manufacturing, and wholesale companies. A third of the participants (32.5%) worked as buyers, 28.5% were planners, 8.1% were product developers, 8.7% merchandisers, 4.1% in quality assurance, and the remainder of participants (18%) appointed as brand managers, distribution/allocation planners, sourcing coordinators, and marketers. Length of employment in their current positions ranged from 3 months to 37 years.

Data Analysis

Sawtooth Software Inc. built-in regression analysis was used to analyze the ACA survey responses. Ordinary Least Squared method was employed to calculate the utility values for the attribute dimensions. Sawtooth Software Inc. output analysis consists of the relative importance score (RIS) for attributes (S&K types) and the average utility value (AUV) for attribute dimensions (individual S&K). The AUVs show the desirability of attribute dimensions. Part-worth utilities were reported for each attribute dimension. The part-worth model assumes that the preferences for attribute dimensions have partial contribution (part-worth) to the overall priority of an attribute (Hair et al., 2010). The “total utility of a choice is equal to the sum of utilities of the attributes of that specific choice” (Mazzocchi, 2008, p. 348). In this study, the priority of each S&K type (attribute) was determined by combining the AUVs of individual S&K (attribute dimensions) of the respective S&K type (attribute) (Hair et al., 2010).
Results

Prioritized Types of Skills and Knowledge

The goodness of fit measure, R-squared, was used to assess if the choice tasks captured the merchandising professionals’ preferences accurately: $R^2 = 60\%$ indicated a relatively good fit (Hair et al., 2010). Table 6.2 shows the overall priority order for the 29 S&K types measured in the ACA survey. Importance of each of the 29 S&K types for merchandising positions in the SA retail industry was assessed by the relative importance score (RIS). All the RISs add up to 100%. S&K types with the highest RIS scores have the highest priority in terms of perceived importance for SA merchandising professionals.

To establish statistically different groups within the 29 S&K types in terms of RIS means, a one-way ANOVA was performed. The analysis showed there were significant differences between the means of the 29 S&K types ($F(1, 28) = 43.5, p < .001$). To determine homogeneous sub-sets within the 29 S&K types based on the RIS means, Scheffe post hoc test was performed. As a result, three homogenous groups with RIS means that were not significantly different ($\alpha = 0.05$) were determined. All three groups $p$-values’ were not smaller than 0.05, demonstrating that the groups were homogenous and there was no significant difference between the RIS means within each of the three groups.

The first priority group, labeled as ‘must-have’, consisted of seven skill types (italicized in Table 6.2) and six knowledge types ($p = 0.055$). The second priority group, labeled as fairly-important, consisted of nine skill types (italicized in Table 6.2) and four knowledge types ($p = 0.050$). The last priority group, labeled as ‘nice-to-have’, included one skill type (italicized in Table 6.2) and two knowledge types ($p = 0.169$). As a result, three groups with different priorities or importance of respective S&K types required for merchandising professionals were established.
### Table 6.2. Priority order of merchandising skills and knowledge types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#1 Priority order: Must-have S&amp;K type</th>
<th>RIS (SD)</th>
<th>#2 Priority order: Fairly-important S&amp;K type</th>
<th>RIS (SD)</th>
<th>#3 Priority order: Nice-to-have S&amp;K type</th>
<th>RIS (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>4.55 (1.33)</td>
<td>Self-management</td>
<td>3.60 (1.45)</td>
<td>Textiles</td>
<td>2.42 (1.24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail operations</td>
<td>4.26 (1.26)</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>3.60 (1.30)</td>
<td>Innovation</td>
<td>2.27 (1.24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>4.17 (1.60)</td>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>3.59 (1.29)</td>
<td>Sustainability</td>
<td>1.57 (0.81)</td>
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<td>Professional experience</td>
<td>4.15 (1.25)</td>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>3.58 (1.19)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>4.04 (1.62)</td>
<td>Sourcing</td>
<td>3.54 (1.33)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diplomacy</td>
<td>4.03 (1.20)</td>
<td>Problem solving and decision-making</td>
<td>3.40 (1.26)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketplace awareness</td>
<td>3.88 (1.33)</td>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>3.27 (1.48)</td>
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<td>Assortment management</td>
<td>3.87 (1.63)</td>
<td>Math-related skills</td>
<td>3.22 (1.44)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Flexibility</td>
<td>3.87 (1.42)</td>
<td>Metacognition</td>
<td>3.07 (1.19)</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative/managerial</td>
<td>3.84 (1.30)</td>
<td>Fashion and consumer markets</td>
<td>2.91 (1.37)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive attitude</td>
<td>3.77 (1.24)</td>
<td>Integrity</td>
<td>2.83 (1.50)</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork</td>
<td>3.65 (1.36)</td>
<td>Critical thinking</td>
<td>2.76 (1.21)</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product development</td>
<td>3.64 (1.30)</td>
<td>Strategic thinking</td>
<td>2.68 (1.09)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: N = 172; RIS = relative importance score; SD = standard deviation. Initially, self-management did not group into ‘must-have’ or fairly-important sub-sets; however, because there was no significant difference in means between self-management and business, it was included into the fairly-important group.

### Important Soft Skills for Merchandising Professionals

While RISs indicate the relative importance or priority for types of S&K (attribute), they do not provide an indication of which individual skill or knowledge (attribute dimensions) are important (Al-Omari et al., 2017). The importance of one attribute dimension over another is indicated by the average utility value (AUV). The size (value) and direction (positive) of the utility values indicate the importance, or desirability, of the attribute dimension. More important attribute dimensions have higher positive AUV within that attribute, and less important attribute levels have lower or negative AUV (Hair et al., 2010). However, the AUV of attribute dimensions (individual S&K) can only be compared within the same attribute (the same S&K type); they cannot be compared with attribute dimensions of a different attribute (Al-Omari et al., 2017). For example, within the communication type,
the AUVs of written and verbal skills can be compared; but they cannot be compared with individual skills within the flexibility type, patience, and adaptability.

In order of priority, interpersonal soft skill types are presented in Table 6.3.

Communication received the highest priority (RIS = 4.55%) of all the 29 S&K types. Within the communication type, five individual skills were rated as important (positive AUV): briefing/informing (17.47), presentation (6.25), listening (4.29), keeping open-communication line (3.76), and verbal (0.67). Writing was not found to be an important communication skill (negative AUV = -32.44). For the diplomacy type (RIS = 4.03%), only two out of five skills were important: building relationships (29.46) and negotiation (17.33). Three other skills (respect, conflict resolution, and persuasiveness) had negative AUVs.

Regarding the teamwork type (RIS = 3.65%), three out of four skills were important: collaboration (20.31), helpfulness (5.57), and trust (3.27). For leadership (RIS = 3.58%), only two out of five skills had positive AUV: identifying others’ strengths and weaknesses (15.61) and motivating others (5.62).

Table 6.3. Importance of individual soft skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute / soft skill type</th>
<th>RIS (%)</th>
<th>Attribute dimension / individual skill</th>
<th>AUV</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Lower 95% CI</th>
<th>Upper 95% CI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication*</td>
<td>4.55</td>
<td>Briefing/informing**</td>
<td>17.47</td>
<td>35.05</td>
<td>12.23</td>
<td>22.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Presentation skills**</td>
<td>6.25</td>
<td>63.07</td>
<td>-3.17</td>
<td>15.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Listening skills**</td>
<td>4.29</td>
<td>41.03</td>
<td>-1.84</td>
<td>10.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Keeping open-communication line**</td>
<td>3.76</td>
<td>44.67</td>
<td>-2.92</td>
<td>10.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Verbal skills**</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>30.80</td>
<td>-3.93</td>
<td>5.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Writing skills</td>
<td>-32.44</td>
<td>42.46</td>
<td>-38.79</td>
<td>-26.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diplomacy*</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>Building relationships**</td>
<td>29.46</td>
<td>38.48</td>
<td>23.71</td>
<td>35.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Negotiation**</td>
<td>17.33</td>
<td>34.95</td>
<td>12.11</td>
<td>22.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Respectful</td>
<td>-6.96</td>
<td>47.45</td>
<td>-14.05</td>
<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Conflict resolution</td>
<td>-15.69</td>
<td>38.38</td>
<td>-21.42</td>
<td>-9.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Persuasive</td>
<td>-24.15</td>
<td>38.61</td>
<td>-29.92</td>
<td>-18.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork*</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>Collaborative**</td>
<td>20.31</td>
<td>42.47</td>
<td>13.96</td>
<td>26.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Helpful**</td>
<td>5.57</td>
<td>34.84</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>10.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Trusting others**</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>40.24</td>
<td>-2.74</td>
<td>9.28</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Supportive</td>
<td>-29.15</td>
<td>39.67</td>
<td>-35.08</td>
<td>-23.23</td>
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</table>
Table 6.3. (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership</th>
<th>3.58</th>
<th>Identify others’ strengths and weaknesses **</th>
<th>15.61</th>
<th>39.78</th>
<th>9.66</th>
<th>21.55</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Motivates others **</td>
<td>5.62</td>
<td>25.17</td>
<td>1.86</td>
<td>9.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Recognizes others' work</td>
<td>-0.15</td>
<td>40.75</td>
<td>-6.24</td>
<td>5.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Coaching/mentoring</td>
<td>-3.30</td>
<td>40.80</td>
<td>-9.40</td>
<td>2.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Delegates</td>
<td>-17.78</td>
<td>39.89</td>
<td>-23.74</td>
<td>-11.82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Intrapersonal characteristics are included in order of priority in Table 6.3. In terms of flexibility type (RIS = 3.87%), three out of four skills had positive AUV: adaptability (23.43), open-mindedness (11.03), and thick-skinned (2.24), but not patience (-36.69). For administrative/managerial type (RIS = 3.84%), only two out of six skills were identified as important: multi-tasking (9.64) and time management (5.03). For positive attitude type (RIS = 3.77%), three out of five skills were important: driven (32.28), passionate (21.66), and confident (18.93).
Self-management type (RIS = 3.60%) included two important skills: hard working (18.20) and stress tolerance (16.16), but not perseverance (-3.94) or work-life balance (-30.42). For responsibility (RIS = 3.27%), only one out of four skills had positive AUV: meeting deadlines (21.38); the rest were not perceived as important (accountable, reliable, and pedantic). For integrity (RIS = 2.83%), ethics (13.43) was the only essential skill, but not honesty (-3.72) or fairness (-9.71).

**Important Hard Skills for Merchandising Professionals**

In order of priority, hard skill types are presented in Table 6.4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute / hard skill type</th>
<th>RIS (%)</th>
<th>Attribute dimension / individual skill</th>
<th>AUV</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Lower 95% CI</th>
<th>Upper 95% CI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Technical skills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology*</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>Intermediate software skills**</td>
<td>26.81</td>
<td>38.61</td>
<td>21.04</td>
<td>32.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Information management skills**</td>
<td>15.17</td>
<td>28.87</td>
<td>10.86</td>
<td>19.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Product lifecycle management software skills**</td>
<td>7.28</td>
<td>40.18</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>13.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math-related skills</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>Computer-aided design software**</td>
<td>-49.26</td>
<td>47.30</td>
<td>-56.33</td>
<td>-42.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Pricing**</td>
<td>18.70</td>
<td>38.49</td>
<td>12.95</td>
<td>24.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Budgeting</td>
<td>-3.29</td>
<td>42.18</td>
<td>-9.60</td>
<td>3.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Costing</td>
<td>-15.40</td>
<td>42.75</td>
<td>-21.79</td>
<td>-9.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinking/conceptual skills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem solving/decision-making</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>Decisiveness**</td>
<td>5.50</td>
<td>36.86</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>11.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Reactive**</td>
<td>5.05</td>
<td>37.94</td>
<td>-0.61</td>
<td>10.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Developing multiple solutions**</td>
<td>-2.89</td>
<td>39.42</td>
<td>-8.78</td>
<td>3.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Diagnosing problems</td>
<td>-3.60</td>
<td>26.22</td>
<td>-7.51</td>
<td>0.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Intuition to make decision</td>
<td>-4.08</td>
<td>44.56</td>
<td>-10.74</td>
<td>2.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metacognition</td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td>Lifelong and self-learning**</td>
<td>16.26</td>
<td>36.27</td>
<td>10.84</td>
<td>21.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Self-awareness</td>
<td>-4.97</td>
<td>38.16</td>
<td>-10.67</td>
<td>0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Realistic judgement of abilities</td>
<td>-5.30</td>
<td>34.93</td>
<td>-10.52</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Inquisitive</td>
<td>-5.99</td>
<td>32.05</td>
<td>-10.78</td>
<td>-1.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical thinking</td>
<td>2.76</td>
<td>Evaluation**</td>
<td>16.30</td>
<td>37.69</td>
<td>10.66</td>
<td>21.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Interpretation of information</td>
<td>-0.31</td>
<td>33.52</td>
<td>-5.32</td>
<td>4.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Analytical</td>
<td>-15.98</td>
<td>32.86</td>
<td>-20.89</td>
<td>-11.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic thinking</td>
<td>2.68</td>
<td>Proactive**</td>
<td>12.48</td>
<td>34.90</td>
<td>7.27</td>
<td>17.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Planning</td>
<td>-9.01</td>
<td>31.24</td>
<td>-13.68</td>
<td>-4.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Future thinking</td>
<td>-3.47</td>
<td>37.12</td>
<td>-9.02</td>
<td>2.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innovation</td>
<td>2.27</td>
<td>Resourcefulness**</td>
<td>25.00</td>
<td>27.95</td>
<td>20.83</td>
<td>29.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Creativity</td>
<td>-25.00</td>
<td>27.95</td>
<td>-29.18</td>
<td>-20.83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: RIS = relative importance score; AUV = average utility value; SD = standard deviation; * - ‘must-have’ hard skill types; ** - important individual hard skills.
Technology was the third most important out of the 29 S&K types and the most important hard skill for merchandising professionals. For the technology type (RIS = 4.17%), three individual skills were important: intermediate software (26.81), information management (15.17), and product lifecycle management software (7.28). CAD software was not found to be an important skill (- 49.26). Within the math-related type (RIS = 3.22%), only pricing (18.70) had positive AUV, whereas budgeting (-3.29) and costing (-15.40) had negative AUVs.

Thinking/conceptual skill types are included in order of priority in Table 6.4. Within the problem solving/decision-making type (RIS = 3.40%), only two out of five skills were important: decisiveness (5.50) and reactiveness (5.05). For the metacognition type (RIS = 3.07%), only one out of four skills was important: lifelong and self-learning (16.26). Within the critical thinking type (RIS = 2.76%), evaluation (16.30) was the only essential skill. Regarding the strategic thinking type (RIS = 2.68%), only one out of three skills had a positive AUV: proactive (12.48). For the innovation type (RIS = 2.27%), resourcefulness (25.00) was the only important skill, but not creativity (-25.00).

Important Explicit and Tacit Knowledge for Merchandising Professionals

In order of priority, general apparel knowledge types are presented in Table 6.5. Manufacturing type (RIS = 4.04%) received the highest priority of all the general apparel knowledge types and the fifth highest out of the total 29 S&K types. Within the manufacturing type, two out of four knowledge dimensions were important: quality assurance (39.75) and production processes (21.80), but not construction techniques (- 12.43) and pattern making (- 49.12). For the fashion and consumer markets type (RIS = 2.91%), two important knowledge dimensions were identified: fashion forecasting (13.77) and consumer behavior (10.06), but not fashion cycles (- 23.83). In terms of textiles (RIS = 2.42%), two out of three dimensions had positive AUVs: fabrics (2.15) and textiles basics (1.11), but not
product care (-3.26). For the sustainability type (RIS = 1.57%), the lowest of the 29 S&K types, environmental responsibility (11.54) was important knowledge but not social responsibility (-11.54).

Table 6.5. Important explicit and tacit knowledge

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute / knowledge type</th>
<th>RIS (%)</th>
<th>Attribute dimension / knowledge dimension</th>
<th>AUV</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Lower 95% CI</th>
<th>Upper 95% CI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Explicit knowledge: General apparel</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing*</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>Quality assurance**</td>
<td>39.75</td>
<td>31.93</td>
<td>34.98</td>
<td>44.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Production processes**</td>
<td>21.80</td>
<td>36.89</td>
<td>16.29</td>
<td>27.31</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Construction techniques</td>
<td>-12.43</td>
<td>26.49</td>
<td>-16.39</td>
<td>-8.47</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Pattern making</td>
<td>-49.12</td>
<td>39.54</td>
<td>-55.03</td>
<td>-43.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fashion and consumer markets</td>
<td>2.91</td>
<td>Consumer behavior**</td>
<td>13.77</td>
<td>38.69</td>
<td>7.99</td>
<td>19.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Fashion cycles</td>
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<td>32.35</td>
<td>-28.67</td>
<td>-19.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textiles</td>
<td>2.42</td>
<td>Fabrics (properties, structure, performance)**</td>
<td>2.15</td>
<td>32.01</td>
<td>-2.64</td>
<td>6.93</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Textiles basics and terms**</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>27.32</td>
<td>-2.97</td>
<td>5.19</td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Product care/maintenance</td>
<td>-3.26</td>
<td>40.05</td>
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<td>Environmental responsibility**</td>
<td>11.54</td>
<td>22.92</td>
<td>8.12</td>
<td>14.97</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Social responsibility</td>
<td>-11.54</td>
<td>22.92</td>
<td>-14.97</td>
<td>-8.12</td>
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<td><strong>Explicit knowledge: Merchandising specific</strong></td>
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<td>Retail operations*</td>
<td>4.26</td>
<td>Retail principles**</td>
<td>45.49</td>
<td>29.75</td>
<td>41.04</td>
<td>49.94</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Quick response**</td>
<td>17.02</td>
<td>36.94</td>
<td>11.50</td>
<td>22.54</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Distribution</td>
<td>-16.53</td>
<td>43.24</td>
<td>-22.99</td>
<td>-10.07</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Global retail operations</td>
<td>-45.98</td>
<td>33.72</td>
<td>-51.02</td>
<td>-40.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketplace awareness*</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>Competition**</td>
<td>47.45</td>
<td>30.00</td>
<td>42.97</td>
<td>51.93</td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Social awareness**</td>
<td>6.54</td>
<td>35.06</td>
<td>1.30</td>
<td>11.77</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Economic awareness</td>
<td>-8.42</td>
<td>32.50</td>
<td>-13.28</td>
<td>-3.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Political awareness</td>
<td>-45.56</td>
<td>32.33</td>
<td>-50.40</td>
<td>-40.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assortment management*</td>
<td>3.87</td>
<td>Range building**</td>
<td>9.85</td>
<td>31.39</td>
<td>5.16</td>
<td>14.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Product lifecycle management**</td>
<td>1.95</td>
<td>32.50</td>
<td>-2.91</td>
<td>6.80</td>
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<td>Stock replenishment</td>
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<td>62.53</td>
<td>-10.09</td>
<td>8.60</td>
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<td>Buying processes</td>
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<td>50.23</td>
<td>-18.56</td>
<td>-3.55</td>
</tr>
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<td>3.64</td>
<td>Commercial appeal**</td>
<td>18.06</td>
<td>45.30</td>
<td>11.29</td>
<td>24.83</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Product aesthetics**</td>
<td>16.12</td>
<td>34.08</td>
<td>11.03</td>
<td>21.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Line (range) development</td>
<td>-13.92</td>
<td>34.87</td>
<td>-19.13</td>
<td>-8.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sizing and fit</td>
<td>-20.27</td>
<td>42.76</td>
<td>-26.66</td>
<td>-13.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>Commercial awareness**</td>
<td>49.00</td>
<td>30.59</td>
<td>44.43</td>
<td>53.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Accounting</td>
<td>-10.05</td>
<td>30.37</td>
<td>-14.59</td>
<td>-5.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Finance</td>
<td>-38.96</td>
<td>28.90</td>
<td>-43.28</td>
<td>-34.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>3.59</td>
<td>Product positioning**</td>
<td>15.81</td>
<td>23.95</td>
<td>12.23</td>
<td>19.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Customer service**</td>
<td>9.69</td>
<td>42.33</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>16.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Branding**</td>
<td>8.97</td>
<td>36.65</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>14.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Promotions and visual merchandising</td>
<td>-0.92</td>
<td>29.91</td>
<td>-5.39</td>
<td>3.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Market segmentation</td>
<td>-33.55</td>
<td>39.73</td>
<td>-39.48</td>
<td>-27.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sourcing</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>Establishing suppliers**</td>
<td>15.79</td>
<td>53.73</td>
<td>7.76</td>
<td>23.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Supply chain management**</td>
<td>6.56</td>
<td>29.03</td>
<td>2.22</td>
<td>10.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Logistics</td>
<td>-2.78</td>
<td>40.07</td>
<td>-8.77</td>
<td>3.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Trade policies and regulations</td>
<td>-19.58</td>
<td>29.03</td>
<td>2.22</td>
<td>10.90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6.5. (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tacit knowledge: Experience</th>
<th>4.15</th>
<th>Eye for fashion and product**</th>
<th>27.69</th>
<th>50.12</th>
<th>20.20</th>
<th>35.18</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professional experience*</td>
<td></td>
<td>On the job training**</td>
<td>19.84</td>
<td>35.72</td>
<td>14.50</td>
<td>25.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Corporate culture awareness</td>
<td>-0.13</td>
<td>31.80</td>
<td>-4.88</td>
<td>4.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Company structure awareness</td>
<td>-11.53</td>
<td>36.59</td>
<td>-17.00</td>
<td>-6.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Store experience</td>
<td>-12.59</td>
<td>34.90</td>
<td>-17.81</td>
<td>-7.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internship(s)</td>
<td>-23.28</td>
<td>37.16</td>
<td>-28.83</td>
<td>-17.72</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: RIS = relative importance score; AUV = average utility value; SD = standard deviation; * - ‘must-have’ knowledge type; ** important knowledge.

Merchandising knowledge types are included in order of priority in Table 6.5. Retail operations had the second highest priority ranking (RIS = 4.26%) of all 29 S&K types.

Regarding the retail operations type, two important knowledge dimensions were identified: retail principles (45.49) and quick response (17.02), but not distribution (-16.53) or global retail operations (-45.98). For the marketplace awareness type (RIS = 3.88%), only two out of four knowledge dimensions were essential: competition (47.45) and social awareness (6.54). Regarding the assortment management type (RIS = 3.87%), two out of four knowledge dimensions were important: range building (9.85) and product lifecycle management (1.95). The product development type (3.64%) included two important knowledge dimensions: commercial appeal (18.06) and product aesthetics (16.12), but not line (range) development (-13.92) or sizing and fit (-20.27). Within the business type (RIS = 3.60%), only one out of three knowledge dimensions had a positive AUV: commercial awareness (49.00). In the marketing type (RIS = 3.59%), three out of five knowledge dimensions had positive AUV: product positioning (15.81), customer service (9.69), and branding (8.97). The sourcing type (RIS = 3.54) included two important knowledge dimensions: establishing suppliers (15.79) and supply chain management (6.56), but not logistics (-2.78) or trade policies (-19.58).

Professional experience, or tacit knowledge, received the fourth highest priority rating (RIS = 4.15%) of all 29 S&K types. In the professional experience type, only two out six
knowledge dimensions were important: eye for fashion/product (27.69) and on the job training (19.84). Awareness of corporate culture (-0.13) and company structure (-11.53) as well as store experience (-12.59) and internship (-23.28) were not found to be important.

**Apparel Merchandising Competency Framework for the South African Retail Industry**

Based on the research results, Jacobs and Karpova’s AMC framework was adapted to the South African context. Table 6.6 presents the AMC framework with respect to S&K required for merchandising professionals in the South African apparel retail. The 29 S&K types are divided into three groups:

a) ‘Must-have’, or thirteen very important S&K types were highlighted in bold;

b) Thirteen fairly-important S&K types were shown in italics;

c) Three ‘nice-to-have’ S&K types were in black.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competency domain</th>
<th>Cluster</th>
<th>S&amp;K</th>
<th>S&amp;K types</th>
<th>Individual S&amp;K dimensions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal</td>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>Soft skills:</td>
<td><strong>Communication</strong></td>
<td>Briefing/informing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Interpersonal</td>
<td></td>
<td>Presentation skills</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Listening skills</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Keeping open-communication line</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Verbal skills</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Teamwork</strong></td>
<td>Collaborative</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Helpful</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Trusting others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Leadership</strong></td>
<td>Building relationships</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Negotiation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Identify others’ strengths and weaknesses</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Motivates others</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Trusting others</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6.6. (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intrapersonal competency</th>
<th>Intellectual openness</th>
<th>Soft skills: Intrapersonal</th>
<th>Flexibility</th>
<th>Adaptable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Open-minded</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Thick-skinned</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Driven</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Passionate</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Confident</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Work ethic and conscientiousness</td>
<td>Administrative/managerial</td>
<td>Multi-tasking</td>
<td>Time management</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Self-management</td>
<td>Hard working</td>
<td>Stress tolerance</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>Meets deadlines</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Integrity</td>
<td>Ethical</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive competency</td>
<td>Cognitive processes and strategies</td>
<td>Hard skills: Technical</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Intermediate software skills</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Information management</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Product lifecycle management software</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Pricing</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Math related</td>
<td>Decisiveness</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Problem solving</td>
<td>Reactive</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>and decision-making</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Metacognition</td>
<td>Lifelong and self-learning</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Critical thinking</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Strategic thinking</td>
<td>Proactive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Innovation</td>
<td>Resourcefulness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innovation and creativity Knowledge</td>
<td>Explicit knowledge: General apparel knowledge and Merchandising-specific knowledge</td>
<td>Hard skills: Thinking/conceptual</td>
<td>Retail operations</td>
<td>Retail principles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Quick response</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>Quality assurance</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Production processes</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Marketplace awareness</td>
<td>Competition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Social awareness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Assortment management</td>
<td>Range building</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Product lifecycle management</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Product development</td>
<td>Commercial appeal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>Product aesthetics</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Customer service</td>
<td>Commercial awareness</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Branding</td>
<td>Product positioning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sourcing</td>
<td>Customer service</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Establishing suppliers</td>
<td>Branding</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Supply chain management</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Fashion and consumer markets</td>
<td>Fashion forecasting</td>
<td>Consumer behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sustainability</td>
<td>Environmental responsibility</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Textiles</td>
<td>Fabrics (properties, structure, performance)</td>
<td>Textiles basics and terms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tacit knowledge</td>
<td>Professional experience</td>
<td></td>
<td>Expertise</td>
<td>Eye for fashion and product</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>On the job training</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Out of 116 individual S&K included in the study, 58 individual S&K dimensions with positive AUVs (presented in Tables 6.3-6.5) that were found to be important for merchandisers were included in the final framework. Because educators typically experience constraints in terms of time, financial, and human resources (Power, 2012a), having the AMC framework with prioritized S&K will help to emphasize critical S&K in curriculum to prepare competent graduates. The AMC framework can be adapted to changing industry needs; S&K can be deleted, added, or change priority.

It is important to note that ‘must-have’ S&K for merchandising professionals are often supported or enhanced by S&K from fairly-important or ‘nice-to-have’ categories (Colette et al., 2015). For example, the knowledge type textiles was not rated as ‘must-have’ for merchandising professionals. However, textiles form the basic building block of apparel and textile programs (Howse et al., 2000). Product development, manufacturing, assortment management, and sourcing depend on textiles knowledge (Ha-Brookshire & Hawley, 2012). Another reason could be that in the current South African retail industry soft skills and other knowledge types were deemed more important than some explicit knowledge type such as textiles and sustainability.

Conclusions and Implications

To foster competent merchandising professionals for the South African retail industry, it is important to know which S&K are in demand and should be developed. This study prioritized S&K identified as relevant for merchandising professionals in South Africa (Jacobs, 2018) by identifying three distinct groups: ‘must-have’, fairly important and ‘nice-to-have’ S&K. The thirteen ‘must-have’ S&K types included a mix between soft skills (communication, teamwork, diplomacy, flexibility, positive attitude, managerial), hard skills (technology), explicit knowledge (retail operations, manufacturing, marketplace awareness, assortment management, product development) and tacit knowledge (professional
experience). In contrast to previous studies (Frazier & Cheek, 2016; Reeves-DeArmond et al., 2015), soft skills were more important than knowledge types. The findings of this study indicate that a competent merchandising professional must have a well-balanced academic preparation, including: (a) soft skills, both inter- and intrapersonal; (b) technical hard skills; and (c) explicit and tacit knowledge. This underscores that a holistic educational approach should focus on soft and hard skills as well as explicit and tacit knowledge.

In this study, thinking/conceptual skills (problem-solving and decision-making, metacognition, critical thinking, strategic thinking, and innovation) were not prioritized as ‘must-have’ but, instead, were rated as fairly-important. The result contradicts previous research that identified thinking/conceptual skills as vital for apparel professionals (Chida & Brown, 2011; Danskin et al., 2005; Howse et al., 2000; Power, 2010). There could be two possible reasons for this. First, mentioned studies were conducted within in developed economies where higher order thinking skills development are emphasized already on undergraduate level (Chida & Brown, 2011; Power, 2010). Second, the effectiveness and quality of the higher education system in South Africa has been problematic, rated 77th out of 138 countries world-wide (World Economic Forum, The Global Competitiveness Index, 2016), the level of education of workers in the South African retail industry is relatively low to other developed and developing countries (W&R Seta, 2013).

Interpersonal skill types with the highest priority for merchandising professionals were: communication, diplomacy, and teamwork. Frazier and Cheek’s (2016) study reported the importance of communication and teamwork as interpersonal competencies for merchandising. Merchandisers constantly need to share technical knowledge about products with nontechnical people in their organization (e.g., managers, marketers) as well as with suppliers (Muhammad & Ha-Brookshire, 2011). In support, briefing/informing, presentation skills, listening skills, keeping open-communication line, and verbal skills were identified as
must-have skills in the current study. Likewise, teamwork is important as merchandising is a team-oriented process that interlinks with many supply chain members (Kunz, 2010; Varley, 2014). Because of the global nature of the apparel industry, establishing partnerships across organizational and cultural boundaries are essential (Karpova et al., 2011). In support, diplomacy (building relationships and negotiating) and teamwork (collaborative, helpful, and trusting others) were rated as ‘must-have’ skills in the current study. It is important to develop curriculum, courses, and assignments that provide opportunities to students to hone communication, teamwork, and diplomacy skills.

In the intrapersonal competency domain, flexibility, positive attitude, and managerial were the ‘must-have’ personal traits for merchandising professionals. These findings align with previous research (Alzahrani & Kozar, 2017; Reeves-DeArmond et al., 2015). Both flexibility and positive attitude define a person’s ability to deal with change, which is intrinsic to the fast-paced apparel industry. Merchandising professionals must be able to adapt to a constantly evolving globalized economy (Power, 2010). Administrative/managerial skills such as multi-tasking and time-management were reported as important for merchandising positions as the apparel supply chain stretches across countries, uses complex information, and involves a multitude of tasks (Muhammad & Ha-Brookshire, 2011).

Technology, a hard skill, was prioritized as one of the most important S&K types. Merchandising professionals’ dependence on technology to perform their responsibilities and to coordinate the supply chain not only necessitates proficiency in general Microsoft Office programs and information management, but also requires skills in more advance software such as product lifecycle management and quick response. The importance of these skills is corroborated by other research (Fiorito et al., 2010; Muhammad & Ha-Brookshire, 2011). The challenge for educators is to embed technology into every aspect of curricula. Active or
experiential learning strategies should be used to develop important soft and hard skills (Power, 2012b).

In the knowledge cluster, six explicit knowledge types and a tacit knowledge were identified as must-haves for merchandising professionals in South Africa. In order of priority, the six essential explicit knowledge types were: retail operations, manufacturing, marketplace awareness, assortment management, and product development. Specifically, commercial awareness referring a trader’s mentality and knowing how to make profit for a company is important (Jacobs, 2018). Merchandising professionals should have sound knowledge about which products will be profitable for the company and viable for their target consumers. Previous studies reported that sector-specific knowledge such as retail operations and marketplace awareness were extremely important for merchandising positions (Chida & Brown, 2011; Ha-Brookshire & Hawley, 2012). Similarly, product and process knowledge encapsulated by manufacturing, assortment management, and product development were found to be important for merchandisers (Frazier & Cheek, 2016). Ha-Brookshire and Hawley (2012) proposed that the domain of clothing and textiles included processes such as product development, sourcing, production, and retailing, which aligned well with the ‘must-have’ knowledge types identified in the current study. In terms of curricula development, it is critical for textile and apparel programs incorporate these knowledge competencies and keep them updated to reflect the changing landscape of the global retail industry.

Professional experience was found to be a critical tacit knowledge competency. Eye for fashion/product and on the job training were highlighted in this study and reported in a previous research (Muhammad & Ha-Brookshire, 2011). These results, again, point out to the importance of active learning and practical experience to prepare competent graduates for the retail industry.
From a theoretical perspective, this study adds to the literature in terms of S&K required for apparel merchandising professionals in the 21st century. While the S&K investigated are specific to the South African retail context, the alignment of this study results with the previous research findings indicates that many of these skills and knowledge are universal and applicable to merchandisers across the global industry. This research corroborated the applicability and relevance of the AMC framework for studying merchandising S&K from the industry perspective. In terms of methodological contribution, this research was the first to employ the ACA research design to prioritize S&K within and industry. Typically, this design is employed in consumer choice modelling and, to date, has not been used in any studies investigating S&K.

The findings from this study should be applied with caution to merchandising professionals in other countries. Perceived importance of S&K can be influenced by a range of factors such social, cultural, and learning environments as well as the industry context (Jackson, 2013). As the South African social, cultural, and economic environments are very diverse and less formalized than in developed countries, the emphasis on certain S&K might differ across countries and context. While many S&K identified as important in this study were corroborated by extant research, there were several exceptions. For example, thinking/conceptual skills were not rated as essential, which contradicts the results from previous studies.

A limitation of this study was a relatively high drop-out rate for completion of the online survey. One of the possible reasons – it was difficult for professionals to take about 45 minutes out of their busy days to complete the survey. It is recommended for future studies to decrease the number of S&K types and individual dimensions included to facilitate a higher survey completion rate. The S&K types important for specific positions were not examined in this study. Possibly merchandising professionals in different positions favor different
knowledge to be important for completing their responsibilities. For instance, textiles might be viewed as more important for product developers but not for planners. Future studies might distinguish between S&K for the distinct merchandising positions (e.g., buyers, planners, product developers, and sourcing coordinators), which might provide valuable comparisons regarding specific S&K for specialized merchandising positions.

References


CHAPTER 7. CONCLUSIONS

Merchandising professionals with relevant skills and knowledge (S&K) are not only competent and more likely to succeed in the workplace, but they are also instrumental in improving retailers’ performance and competitiveness. Since 2013, the identified skills and knowledge gap for merchandising professions in the South African retail industry has persisted (W&R Seta, 2016). To date, no known study has focused on exploring the skills and knowledge required to counter the existing gap in the South African retail industry. The escalating need for competent merchandising professionals that can meet the many challenges the retail industry has instigated this study. This research explored the skills and knowledge required for merchandising professionals in the South African apparel retail industry, addressing the following research objectives:

- To analyze existing literature on skills, knowledge, and competencies required for college graduates in business and apparel retail environments with the goal of developing a general apparel merchandising competency framework.
- To investigate apparel merchandising professionals’ positions and responsibilities.
- To identify a comprehensive list of merchandising skills and knowledge required for merchandising professionals.
- To prioritize skills and knowledge required by apparel merchandising professionals.
- To adapt the general apparel merchandising competency framework to the South African retail industry.
To address the first research objective, a general apparel merchandising competency framework was developed based on extensive analyses of extant studies. The framework utilized:

- four main constructs: soft skills, hard skills, explicit knowledge, and tacit knowledge;
- seven distinct categories (i.e., interpersonal and intrapersonal, technical and thinking/conceptual, general apparel knowledge, merchandising knowledge, and professional experience);
- 39 S&K types; and
- 140 individual dimensions.

The apparel merchandising competency framework provided a typology for organizing relevant merchandising S&K, but the multitude of associated skills and knowledge had no priority or application to the South African retail industry as it was based on previous research conducted primarily in the United Kingdom, United States, Australian, and New Zealand contexts.

An exploratory, sequential mixed method research design was implemented in two phases. Phase I focused on: (a) examining merchandising positions and responsibilities and (b) identifying S&K required for apparel merchandising professionals to fulfill their positions and responsibilities in the South African retail industry. A phenomenological approach was followed for Phase I. Data were collected through semi-structured, individual in-depth interviews from a purposive sample comprising 16 merchandising professionals working in the South African apparel retail industry. The merchandisers provided first-hand accounts of their daily/professional experiences (Chapter 4). An extensive list of 29 S&K types and 116 individual dimensions was derived from their perspectives of what S&K they needed to do their jobs effectively and efficiently (Chapter 5).
The successive Phase II aimed to prioritize the S&K identified in Phase I. To prioritize the list of merchandising S&K, an adaptive conjoint analysis survey was employed. A total of 172 merchandising professionals completed the electronic, self-administered survey generated through Sawtooth Software Inc. Based on the prioritized merchandising S&K in Phase II, the general apparel merchandising competency framework was adapted specifically for the South African retail industry (Chapter 6).

**Summary of the Results**

This dissertation followed a journal format that consists of three articles prepared for publication in relevant journals. Articles 1 and 2 report the results of the phenomenological approached completed for Phase I, and Article 3 employed the adaptive conjoint analysis survey (Phase II).

**Article 1**

This article was prepared for the *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*. The purpose of this article was to investigate the positions and responsibilities of merchandising professionals in the South African apparel retail industry. The findings indicated that four distinct positions in the South African retail industry are similar to different merchandising roles reported in extant international literature. In most companies, merchandising departments: (a) employed professionals in four positions such as buyer, planner, product developer, and sourcing coordinator; (b) the four positions had specific responsibilities and were organized according to the flow of apparel product lifecycle; and (c) frequent internal interactions between different positions took place to perform certain responsibilities. Even though discrete positions had a range of diverse responsibilities specific to these roles, the synergy between positions was critical to produce and deliver products that were commercially successful for their target consumers and profitable for their companies. This
was confirmed by the many overlaps in positions and responsibilities that occurred indicating fluidity between roles and an emphasis on team orientation in merchandising departments.

**Article 2**

Article 2 was prepared for the *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*. This article examined what S&K are required for merchandising professionals to fulfill the expectations regarding their positions and perform their responsibilities in the South African apparel retail industry. The apparel merchandising competency framework directed the identification of S&K for professionals. Through the analysis of the participants’ perspectives, a comprehensive range of 29 S&K types and 116 individual S&K dimensions were identified:

- Ten soft skills: four interpersonal soft skills (communication, diplomacy, teamwork, and leadership) and six intrapersonal soft skills (flexibility, administrative/managerial, positive attitude, responsibility, self-management, and integrity).
- Seven hard skills: two technical skills (math-related and technology) and five thinking/conceptual skills (problem solving and decision-making, critical thinking, innovation, metacognition, and strategic thinking).
- Eleven explicit knowledge types: four general apparel knowledge (textiles, fashion and consumer markets, manufacturing, and sustainability) and seven merchandising knowledge types (sourcing, marketplace awareness, business, product development, retail operations, assortment management, and marketing).
- Tacit knowledge included professional experience.

**Article 3**

Article 3 was prepared for the *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*. The purpose of this article was to prioritize the list of merchandising S&K identified as relevant for the South African apparel retail industry. An adaptive conjoint analysis survey, using Sawtooth
Software Inc., was employed to prioritize 29 merchandising S&K types and 116 individual S&K dimensions that described them. The 29 S&K types were prioritized based on their relative importance score (RIS) ranging from 4.55 to 1.57, with communication receiving the highest (RIS = 4.55) and sustainability the lowest (RIS = 1.57). The average utility value (AUV) of individual S&K determined the dimensions important to have within each S&K type. Fifty-eight individual S&K dimensions with positive AUVs were identified as important. Based on the research results, the apparel merchandising competency framework was adapted for merchandising professionals S&K in the South African retail industry.

Implications

This study has implications and contributions that educators, the retail industry and government could find useful. Important educational implications that emerged from this research point to the priority of S&K that should be stressed in curricula and where to focus available resources. Educators not only have to foster competent graduates with limited resources, but they also need to keep up with the changing needs and the requirements of the retail industry. Liaising with retailers can hold various benefits for educators and graduates, such as access to advanced technology and software used in the retail industry, internships, and exposure to real-life learning and teaching experiences. It could also lead to collaborative involvement to align industry needs with curricula and drive research agendas to continually assess and address merchandising S&K gaps in the industry.

Insights into merchandising positions, responsibilities, and required S&K obtained from this study could provide educators with a better understanding of what industry expects from graduates. This could also inform merchandising curricula development and student assessment to prepare future professionals for the demands of the retail industry. To further connect S&K development and graduate preparedness, teaching practices, learning outcomes,
and assessment should include aspects such as active learning, real-life simulations, case studies, and internships to gain professional experience.

For retailers, the results can inform formulating clear job descriptions for merchandising positions as well as defining joint areas of responsibilities to manage expectations and enable professionals’ performance. Retailers can use the results of this study to structure merchandising departments to streamline decision-making, add value for consumers, and be cost effective, without straining key personnel. Additionally, retailers can determine which support and performance-enhancing initiatives to introduce to help merchandising professionals to perform well and achieve their targets. The results might also be useful for formulating recruitment policies to attract and appoint competent merchandising professionals. Prioritized S&K can guide corporate training in directing efforts and resources for developing critical competencies in their workforce, thereby, increasing retailers’ competitiveness within the industry.

Between 2013 and 2016, W&R Seta reports identified development of merchandising S&K as a national priority. The overall competitiveness of the South African retail industry is vital to the economic growth and employment capacity of the country. The results of this study could direct policy development and intervention initiatives to focus on improving ‘must have’ S&K for merchandising professionals in apparel retail, but also related retail fields such as food, electronics, interior, and others. Initiatives such as research grants and industry incentives can induce urgent implementation of S&K development and training programs in education and, especially, retail. Additionally, providing bursaries/scholarships for students studying merchandising-related degrees can ensure well-educated and competent graduates for the retail industry. The results of this study might be useful for benchmarking the South African retail industry with other developing and developed countries’ retail industries to gain insights regarding how to address S&K gaps. Investing in well-trained and
competent merchandising professionals could contribute to better productivity, living standards and the overall competitiveness of the South African retail industry.

The contribution to the literature regarding S&K required for apparel merchandising professionals in the 21st century can be itemized as four dominant aspects. First, a deeper understanding of what merchandising positions and responsibilities in an emerging market such as South Africa was obtained. Second, an important theoretical contribution of this study is development of the apparel merchandising competency framework. This framework allows for the organization of prioritized apparel merchandising S&K. It is a valuable tool that can be adapted to the changing needs and requirements of the retail industry and applied to any national industry, as was demonstrated in the current research. The proposed apparel merchandising competency framework can be helpful to: (a) focus resources to relevant S&K required; (b) ensure that prioritized S&K are included in curricula development and the training of professionals, (c) facilitate retailers’ recruiting processes, corporate training programs, and the professional development of employees; and (d) guide governmental policy development. Third, from a methodological perspective, this study used a mixed method research design, which helped to not only identify all S&K useful for merchandising positions, but also prioritized these S&K in terms of importance by establishing three distinct groups of S&K: must-have, fairly important, and nice-to-have. Finally, the adaptive conjoint analysis survey that typically used to determine consumer preferences was applied in a different context, by surveying industry professionals regarding relevant merchandising skills and knowledge. The study demonstrated that this statistical method can be effectively adapted for use in other studies and disciplines, beyond consumer behavior.

**Limitations of this Study**

This study had several limitations. The results from this study should be applied with caution to other retail industries as this research investigated a specific sector within a
specific emerging market. For Phase I, it was attempted to include only participants with apparel related majors. This might have resulted in biased perspectives of the required S&K for merchandising professionals. Participants with majors in marketing, retail, business, and/or financial management could have different views about certain skills and knowledge based on varying disciplines and professional backgrounds.

The adaptive conjoint analysis technique used in Phase II, resulted in a very laborious survey to complete by participants because of the many S&K types (29) and individual S&K dimensions (116) they had to rate. This resulted in a relatively high drop-out rate and a completion rate of 48%. In the future, caution should be taken to limit the number of types and individual S&K included in research and presented in a survey.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

As this study focused on a specific context, future studies could focus on replicating this study in other emerging or developed markets. Other studies could include comparing S&K required for merchandising professionals working in different size companies, for example, multi-national versus small businesses; or types of retailers like specialty stores, department stores, or discount stores; or the format of retailers, a corporation versus privately owned. An interesting observation was made during the recruitment process of Phase I: many merchandising personnel working in the industry did not have any tertiary education. This confirms the Wholesale and Retail Sector Education and Training Authority report that entry into the South African retail industry requires a lower level of education than many other industries (W&R Seta, 2013). Future studies could investigate relationships between level of education, professional experience with and without education and success in the South African retail industry. Little is known how acquired S&K from university transfer to the industry experience and contribute to the success of individuals and companies in the South African apparel retail industry. Studies tracing graduates from university through
employment could also shed light on best program and curricular practices of how to teach the prioritized S&K in apparel and merchandising-related programs, the development of S&K, and their transference to the industry.

This study only reported the aggregated values (averages) across the sample of 172 professionals employed in four distinct merchandising positions of buyer, planner, product developer, and sourcing coordinator. Future studies could examine important S&K for the four distinct merchandising positions (e.g., buyers, planners, product developers, and sourcing coordinators). Such research could provide valuable comparisons regarding specific ‘must have’ S&K types for specialized merchandising positions, because some S&K might be important for product developers but not for planners and vice-a-versa. The results could inform justification for educators to develop specialization programs aimed at preparing graduates for specific merchandising positions, as many apparel and textile programs in South Africa focus on preparing graduates for a broader spectrum of positions and responsibilities.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A. APPROVAL OF INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Date: 10/27/2017
To: Bertha M Jacobs
    PO Box 12084 Clubview 0042
    Centurion, South Africa
CC: Dr. Elena Karpova
    1072 LeBaron Hall
From: Office for Responsible Research
Title: Identifying and prioritizing merchandising skills and knowledge for the South African apparel retail industry: Application of a competency domain framework
IRB ID: 17-517
Study Review Date: 10/27/2017

The project referenced above has been declared exempt from the requirements of the human subject protections regulations as described in 45 CFR 46.101(b) because it meets the following federal requirements for exemption:

- (2) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey or interview procedures with adults or observation of public behavior where
  - Information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects cannot be identified directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; or
  - Any disclosure of the human subjects’ responses outside the research could not reasonably place the subject at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to their financial standing, employability, or reputation.

The determination of exemption means that:

- You do not need to submit an application for annual continuing review.
- You must carry out the research as described in the IRB application. Review by IRB staff is required prior to implementing modifications that may change the exempt status of the research. In general, review is required for any modifications to the research procedures (e.g., method of data collection, nature or scope of information to be collected, changes in confidentiality measures, etc.), modifications that result in the inclusion of participants from vulnerable populations, and/or any change that may increase the risk or discomfort to participants. Changes to key personnel must also be approved. The purpose of review is to determine if the project still meets the federal criteria for exemption.
- Non-exempt research is subject to many regulatory requirements that must be addressed prior to implementation of the study. Conducting non-exempt research without IRB review and approval may constitute non-compliance with federal regulations and/or academic misconduct according to ISU policy.
- Detailed information about requirements for submission of modifications can be found on the Exempt Study Modification Form. A Personnel Change Form may be submitted when the only modification involves changes in study staff. If it is determined that exemption is no longer warranted, then an Application for Approval of Research Involving Humans Form will need to be submitted and approved before proceeding with data collection.

Please note that you must submit all research involving human participants for review. Only the IRB or designees may make the determination of exemption, even if you conduct a study in the future that is exactly like this study.

Please be aware that approval from other entities may also be needed. For example, access to data from private records (e.g. student, medical, or employment records, etc.) that are protected by FERPA, HIPAA, or other confidentiality policies requires permission from the holders of those records. Similarly, for research conducted in institutions other than ISU (e.g., schools, other colleges or universities, medical facilities, companies, etc.), investigators must obtain permission from the institution(s) as required by their policies. An IRB determination of exemption in no way implies or guarantees that permission from these other entities will be granted.
APPENDIX B. PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT LETTER FOR PHASE I

Dear [Merchandising professional’s name],

Trust you are well. I am currently enrolled for my PhD. I received your name and email from one of my former student/industry contact [person’s name]. I am investigating skills and knowledge required for merchandising professionals to fulfil their positions and perform their responsibilities in the South African apparel retail industry.

I am looking for participants to interview for the first phase of my study who:

- are currently employed in product development, buying, planning, or sourcing positions,
- have at least two years working experience in the South African apparel retail, and
- hold a clothing or fashion related degree.

If you are interested in participating, the face-to-face interviews will be conducted in the following cities on the following dates:

- Pretoria and Johannesburg, 20-27 November and 10-14 December 2017,
- Cape Town, 28 November-2 December 2017, and
- Durban, 6-8 December 2017.

The individual interview will last between 60 and 90 minutes and will be recorded with your permission. No personal details or company/retailer information will be asked during the interview. I am only interested in the skills and knowledge you use to do your job. We can meet at a time and place convenient for you.

If you are interested in participating, please reply to this email. If you know of someone else who fits the criteria and might be interested, you can reply with their name and email-address, and I will personally contact them.

Kind regards,
Bertha Jacobs
APPENDIX C. INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Title of Study: Merchandising positions, responsibilities, skills, and knowledge in the South African retail industry
Investigator: Bertha Jacobs, Ph.D. Candidate, Iowa State University

This form describes a dissertation research. Your participation in the study is completely voluntary. Please discuss any questions you have about the research or about this form before deciding to participate.

Introduction
The purpose of this study is to investigate skills and knowledge required for merchandising professionals to fulfill their positions in the South African apparel retail industry. You are invited to participate in this study because you are a merchandising professional in the South African apparel retail industry.

Description of Procedures
If you agree to participate, you will be interviewed about your daily job responsibilities and skills and knowledge needed to fulfill these responsibilities. The interview might last between 60 and 90 minutes. With your permission, your responses might be digitally recorded. You should experience no risks or discomforts from participating in the study. Your responses will be kept confidential and will only be used for data analysis purposes. Only the investigator will have access to the interview data. Your identity will be kept confidential. The interview data that will have no identifiable information. Published results of the study will not include participant names or other identifiable information.

Costs and Benefits
You will not have any costs from participating in this study. If you decide to participate in this interview, you will be compensated with a gift card to the value of R200 (equivalent of 15USD) as a small token of appreciation for your time. It is anticipated that the information gained in this study will be useful for curriculum development and better preparation of future apparel merchandising professionals and benefit the overall competitiveness of the South African retail industry.

Participant Rights
Participating in this interview is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part or to stop participating at any time, for any reason, without penalty or any negative consequences. You can skip any questions that you do not wish to answer. If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury, please contact the IRB Administrator, +1(515) 294-4566, IRB@iastate.edu, or Director, +1(515) 294-3115. If you have questions about this study, please contact Bertha Jacobs, bertha.jacobs@up.ac.za, +27(083) 3747084.

Consent and Authorization Provisions
Your signature indicates that you voluntarily agree to participate in this research, that the study has been explained to you, that you have been given the time to read the document, and that your questions have been satisfactorily answered.
Thank you for participating in this study!

Participant’s Signature ___________________________ Date ____________

Participant’s Name (Print) ___________________________

Researcher’s Signature ___________________________ Date ____________

Researcher’s Name (Print) ___________________________
APPENDIX D. DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Age: __________

2. Gender: Male ______ Female ______ Other _____________

3. What is the highest level of education that you have completed?
   Baccalaurean degree ___________
   Masters ___________
   PhD ___________
   Other (please specify) ___________

4. Please indicate a full description of the specialization (major) of your degree(s) (e.g., BS Fashion retail management) and the institution from which you received your degree(s).
   Degree 1: ____________________________ Institution: _________________ Year: _____
   Degree 2: ____________________________ Institution: _________________ Year: _____
   Degree 3: ____________________________ Institution: _________________ Year: _____

5. What type of company do you currently work for?
   Specialty retailer ______
   Own label/private brand retailer ______
   Departmental retailer ______
   Discount/Off-price retailer ______
   Online retailer ______
   Other (please specify) ____________________________________________

6. Please indicate the company’s location in South Africa.
   City: _____________________
   Province: _________________

7. What is the size of the company?
   Store count: _________________
   Employee count: _________________
   Gross sales per year: _________________

8. Is it a South African or international company? ___________________________________

9. What is your current job title? __________________________________________

10. How long have you been in your position at the company? _______________

11. Number of years of your overall industry experience. _____________________
APPENDIX E. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview Date: _______________________

Interview Venue/location: ________________________

Introduction
Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. I am interested in your current position and your daily responsibilities. I am particularly interested in the skills and knowledge you think are important in doing your job. There are no right or wrong answers, I am only interested in your experiences and opinion.

Opening questions
Could you please describe your career to date? The companies you worked at and your position(s) at those companies? How long have you been in those position at the respective companies and what were your responsibilities? You don’t have to include any companies’ names if you are not comfortable, you can just provide a description of the company, e.g., large retailer, small boutique, etc.

Focus: Current position and responsibilities
The next section is about your current position and responsibilities.
- Can you explain to me what your current position entails?
  o Where does your specific position fit in the company?
  o What are your interactions with other departments within the company?
- Can you give me a rundown of your daily/weekly/monthly responsibilities?
  o Have your responsibilities changed over time?
  o What were the reasons for these changes?
  o What additional aspects did you need to learn to be able to perform the new responsibilities?
- What or who do you depend on to get your work done effectively and efficiently?
  o Is there anything else you need or depend on?
- How does your position differ from that of other merchandising personnel (e.g. a product developer/buyer/ sourcing personnel/ distribution person)?

Focus: Knowledge
The next section is about the knowledge you need in your position.
- When you first started working in the retail industry…
  o What was helpful to know in your first years working in the industry?
  o What did you learn that you still use today in your position?
    ▪ Prompt about different things participant mentioned to have learned.
- In doing your daily responsibilities, what are important things to have knowledge about?
  o Prompt about different responsibilities the participant mentioned above
    ▪ What do you need to know to complete this …[task]?
    ▪ Why is this important to know [this]?
    ▪ How and where did you acquire this knowledge? [Learn it as a student/on the job training/in some other way]
  o Can you think of anything else you need to know to do your job?
- You mentioned [business knowledge/ textiles/ manufacturing etc.].
- How important do you think [this knowledge] is in your position?
- How has your professional experience helped you in doing your job?
- If you had to advise educators, what knowledge would you recommend they teach future industry professionals? Why?

**Focus: Skills**

The next section focuses on skills you think are important to have in your position.
- Think about your daily responsibilities you described earlier, what skills are needed to do them?
  - Prompt about different responsibilities the participant mentioned.
    - What skills are needed to do [this task or that task]?
    - Why are these skills important to do [this task or that task]?
- Are there any other skills that you have not mentioned?
  - Think back about a challenging situation or problem you had. How were you able to resolve it?
- To work in your position, what personal qualities or traits are important?
  - Why do you think so?
- What type of people-related or interpersonal skills are important in your position?
  - Why do you think so?
- If you had to advise educators, what skills would you recommend they teach future industry professionals? Why are these important?

**Focus: Success, effectiveness, and efficiency**

The next section is about success, effectiveness and efficiency.
- How would you describe someone who is effective and efficient in a position like yours?
- How would you describe a competent person in your position?
- Just complete the following sentences:
  - To be better at a job like mine, one needs the ability to …
  - To succeed in the apparel retail industry, one needs to be able to …

I’ve asked all the questions I had, is there anything else you would like to add about skills and knowledge needed in merchandising positions?
Dear [Merchandising professional],

I am a lecturer at the University of Pretoria and doing my PhD about the skills and knowledge required for apparel merchandising professionals in the South African retail industry.

If you are currently employed in the clothing, fashion and/or retail industry, and hold a position in buying, planning, product development, sourcing, or merchandising, will you please complete my survey?

The survey takes about 20 minutes to complete. If you started and dropped out due to work pressure you can access the link and start again. To reach more participants it will help a great deal if you can please refer friends or co-workers in the industry at the end of the survey or forward the link to them.

Please take note no personal or company information will be asked. Your participation is completely voluntary, and your responses are anonymous. Your participation in this study is extremely valuable and will help in training and preparing future apparel merchandising professionals with the desired skills and knowledge. The Institutional Review Board has approved this study. Should you have any comments or questions please feel free to contact me at bertha.jacobs@up.ac.za or 083 3747084.

Please click on the link to complete the questions: https://voice.consulta.co.za/Community/se/2EA0F6797064EB90

Thank you in advance for your participation.

Bertha Jacobs
APPENDIX G. ADAPTIVE CONJOINT ANALYSIS SURVEY

Examples/screenshots from online ACA survey.

Example of screening question
Examples of demographic questions in ACA survey
Your unique pass code is:

TxB32018

Please do not click on the submit button at the end of the page until you have fully completed the survey.
Please use the NEXT button to click you through to the next question.

Please indicate the specialization area of your highest qualification:

- Business management
- Clothing retail management
- Entrepreneurship
- Fashion design
- Fashion management
- Financial management (general)
- Logistic management
- Product development
- Retail management (general)
- Sourcing
- Textile design
- Other (Please specify)
Examples of build your own task

```
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>Not Desirable</th>
<th>Somewhat Desirable</th>
<th>Very Desirable</th>
<th>Extremely Desirable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Developing multiple solutions</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Having more than one solution to a problem</td>
<td>○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reactive</td>
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<tr>
<td>Responding in a fast manner to questions or problems</td>
<td>○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○</td>
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<tr>
<td>Decisiveness</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Making decisions quickly and effectively with little hesitation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intuition to make decisions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Knowing something instinctively, without the need for conscious reasoning (gut feeling)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Diagnosing problems</td>
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<td>Identifying the nature and causes of problems</td>
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Click here once you have fully completed the questionnaire above.
Your unique pass code is:
TxS32018

Please do not click on the submit button at the end of the page until you have fully completed the survey.

Please use the NEXT button to click you through to the next question.

Please rate how desirable the following skills and knowledge are for a merchandising position like yours.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>Not Desirable</th>
<th>Somewhat Desirable</th>
<th>Very Desirable</th>
<th>Extremely Desirable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commercial appeal</td>
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<tr>
<td>Product profitability for the company and viability for target customers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sizing and fit</td>
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<tr>
<td>Understanding different body types, fit, measurements, sizes, etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Product aesthetics</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attributes and features of apparel products (e.g., style, design elements and principles) that contribute to an appealing product</td>
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<tr>
<td>Line (range) development</td>
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<tr>
<td>Creating new products and specifications (technical packs), Approving samples, seals, lab dips, strike-offs/prints, fabrication, etc.</td>
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Next
Examples of screening task
Your unique pass code is:

TxB32018

Please do not click on the submit button at the end of the page until you have fully completed the survey.

Please use the NEXT button to click you through to the next question.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Not Important</th>
<th>Somewhat Important</th>
<th>Very Important</th>
<th>Extremely Important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intermediate software skills</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Using software programs (e.g., Microsoft Office) to create and modify spreadsheets, presentations, and word documents</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Computer-aided-design software</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Using software for creating and presenting design concepts (e.g., Adobe Illustrator, Photoshop, Corel Draw)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Next

Click here once you have fully completed the questionnaire above.
Examples of pair-wise profile task
Your unique pass code is:
TvB32018
Please do not click on the submit button at the end of the page until you have fully completed the survey. 
Please use the NEXT button to click you through to the next question.

If two candidates were identical in all other ways, which skills and knowledge set would you refer for your position?

Commercial appeal
Product profitability for the company and viability for target customers

Product aesthetics
Attributes and features of apparel products (e.g., style, design elements and principles) that contribute to an appealing product

Reliable
Can be trusted and depended on to deliver consistent, quality outputs

Pedantic
Working accurately and paying attention to detail

Retail work
In-store experience (e.g., serving customers, helping to display merchandise)

Company structure awareness
Organisation of departments within company, the roles/positions, and flow of authority

Supportive
Providing encouragement, emotional comfort, or backing when needed

Helpful
Willingness to assist in getting tasks done

Distribution
Delivering, warehousing, and allocating products to stores to make it accessible to target consumers

Quick response
Process to shorten product cycles to make their product manufacturing process more agile and responsive to market demand

Strongly Prefer Left
Somewhat Prefer Left
Indifferent
Somewhat Prefer Right
Strongly Prefer Right

Click here once you have fully completed the questionnaire above.
Example of calibration task