CUSTOMER LOYALTY-RELATED MARKETING MEASURES IN FASHION MARKETS

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Abstract

The textile industry has been massively affected by structural changes in recent years. The fashion market is currently in a phase of stagnation. This means that market saturation has been reached, competition between companies and retailers has increased, and predatory competition has set in. Gains in market share are mainly achieved through an aggressive pricing policy, for example, through earlier price reductions. Nonetheless, there are still uncertainties regarding specific product mix-related marketing measures in fashion markets. There is a lack of scientific evidence about the exact proportion of product mix-related marketing measures used.

As an aim, this study focuses on the effects of various influencing factors on consumer loyalty. Factors examined include product quality, product selection, service quality and price-to-performance ratio. To investigate the proportion of the chosen marketing measures, a conceptual model was proposed, four hypotheses were derived.

In order to shed more light on fashion markets related marketing measures, the research methodology of cross-sectional face-to-face survey research was applied. For this purpose, randomly sampled fashion shoppers were asked to answer a questionnaire, using tablets. The collected data were then analysed using multiple regression and evaluated.

Implications for Central European audience: The study has derived some remarkable key findings that contrast with other non-fashion markets. First of all, service quality is not the most important factor, whereas product quality is an important criterion for the price-to-product ratio and consequently, for customer loyalty. Finally, practical guidelines are provided, limitations discussed and suggestions for future research provided.

Keywords: fashion market; customer loyalty; product mix; marketing
JEL Classification: M31

Introduction and research objectives

The clothing industry has been massively affected by structural changes in recent years. The clothing market is currently in a phase of stagnation. The number of department stores located in Germany has fallen by over 39% over the last 15 years (Handelsblatt, 2015). In addition, the number of department-store customers has also fallen steadily since the year 2000 (Fösgen, 2006; Sievers & Fetsch, 2013). This means that market saturation has been reached, competition between companies and retailers has increased, and predatory competition has set in. Market-share gains can mainly be achieved through an aggressive pricing policy, for example, through earlier price markdowns (Bruhn & Hadwich, 2007; Sievers & Fetsch, 2013).

In addition, a change in competitive structures can be seen in the fashion market. The turnover of clothing discounters and food discounters who also sell clothing is rising steadily. As a result, discounters are gaining greater and greater market shares, while clothing retailers are losing as a result (Bruhn & Hadwich, 2007).

Furthermore, observations of the clothing market show that fashion is becoming increasingly dynamic. Fashion cycles follow one another faster, and the predictability of cycles has decreased. So-called vertical companies such as Zara or H&M can be cited as examples of dynamization. With up to 12 collections per calendar year, the frequency of product-range introduction has increased. The advantage of the acceleration lies in the possibility of adapting the assortment to the purchasing behaviour of the customers at short notice (Bruhn & Hadwich, 2007; Sievers & Fetsch, 2013).

The fourth special feature of the fashion market directs attention to the consumer side. In addition to increasing price awareness and purchase delays due to expected price reductions, customer loyalty is declining, and customer expectations are increasing. Clothing companies are confronted with competition primarily involving quality, price, cost and time (Bruhn & Hadwich, 2007).

Ultimately, the "...subjective perception [of a customer] is decisive for the purchase decision..." (Purper, 2007). Since a positive customer perception also influences the preference for and choice of a shopping centre and the customer loyalty to that centre, a department store must guarantee its customers a high "feel-good factor" (Purper, 2007). This could be, for example, due to a pleasant shopping atmosphere, the friendliness and professional competence of the sales staff or the availability of a comprehensive service (Purper, 2007).

Consequently, these developments in the retail sector illustrate how important customers and customer loyalty are for a department store today. A positive store image is, for example, a prerequisite for a longer customer stay and for more shopping, which in turn might lead to more sales and greater profit (Kalka, 1996). As a result, the question arises as to how fashion stores can increase their customer loyalty in practical terms.

The aim of the study is to determine the factors of customers loyalty to fashion retail shops. It is assumed that the price-to-performance ratio, product quality, service quality and product selection are the decisive factors in customer loyalty, enabling practical guidelines to be provided for sales personnel and businesses. Consequently, this leads to the following research questions. What kind of product mix-related specific marketing measures

are required, for fashion sellers to deal with the increasing competitive pressure? What is the relevance of these measures?

The paper begins by reviewing the extant literature regarding theories and models, as well as the fundamental factors affecting consumer behaviour. Relevant hypotheses are derived, and data are collected, analysed and evaluated.

1 Literature review, hypotheses and operationalization

Fashion warehouses are clothing retail shops with large sales areas extending over several floors. The fashion house is, therefore, a more precisely defined term than the department store, as the latter also offers other goods apart from clothing. However, in some cases, the range of products offered by fashion stores also includes other product groups that are not directly related to clothing, such as jewellery or fragrances. Other typical characteristics of department stores and fashion stores are a medium-to-high price level, good equipment and a comparatively high service intensity (Duden, 2014). Fashion stores are dependent on a sufficient number of walk-in customers and regular customers, which is why they are usually located in the centres of large or medium-sized cities (Seyffert, 1972). Small towns, on the other hand, rarely have larger department stores or fashion stores. This is where marketing measures are required in order to attract customers and to maintain their loyalty. Small and medium-sized fashion stores do not use the internet as an additional distribution channel; therefore, the role of the internet was not included in this study.

Marketing is defined by the American Marketing Association (AMA) as "the activity, set of institutions and processes for creating, communicating, delivering and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners and society at large". The fundamental aim of marketing is to connect businesses with customers by building a strong relationship in order to meet customer expectations. Effectively, marketing is an attempt to modify behaviour and to stimulate demand (see also Smith, 1983). McCarthy and Perreault (1960) proposed a fundamental conceptual marketing approach termed the 4Ps, which is generally accepted within consumer-goods circles. The 4Ps approach refers to four marketing instrument areas: product (including product design, packaging, brand and service), place (distribution channels), promotion (personal selling, advertising, sales (revenue), promotion and publicity) and price (see also Frey, 1956; Kotler, 2006). In addition, Borden (1965, p. 368) defined the "marketing mix" as "the interrelationships among the marketing decision variables (marketing instruments)". Furthermore, according to Balachandran and Gensch (1974), "one of the most challenging questions is how to determine the optimum marketing mix". This statement also specifically applies to product mix-related marketing instruments, termed product mix measures.

Given the fact that satisfied customers will only remain loyal to the company if no other company (competitor) provides a better offering such as quality, price, service. Consequently, customer satisfaction, as defined by Johnson and Fornell (1991), is a fundamental and therefore, underlying concept for success in business activities. Dissatisfied customers will express their dissatisfaction in three different ways. The first possibility is migration. In the future, the customer will consume in a targeted manner at a competitor company and will no longer generate sales. It is also possible that the customer does not react at all. As a third option, the customer may lodge a complaint against the company. In cases of either customer satisfaction or dissatisfaction, it is possible that the

customer's impression will be expressed via word of mouth (WOM), influencing existing or potential customers, resulting in either positive advertising in the event of satisfaction or negative advertising in the event of dissatisfaction (Homburg & Rudolph, 1998). Consequently, customer satisfaction has an important direct and indirect effect on the company's success through the factors and effects described above and consequently on the customer loyalty (see also Faullant, 2007; Kotler, 2006).

The "determinant attributes" defined by Myers and Alpert (1968), in relation to consumers' product choices, can also be applied to customer loyalty. Determinants are all attributes which are decisive for the choice of shopping location, i.e., which are used in the assessment of the fashion house by the potential customer and thus determine preferences and shopping behaviour. Myers and Alpert (1968) identified the following object-specific determinants: price, product selection, personnel, atmosphere and individual and institutional conditions. With regard to fashion stores, the typical product mix-related characteristics include product quality, product selection (assortment) and service quality.

Price-to-Performance Ratio

In order to explain the influence of prices on purchasing behaviour, Müller-Hagedorn (2002) developed the Trier model for the relationship between choice of shopping location and price assessment. Price perception takes place on two levels. Prices can be perceived unconsciously, and thus price differences between products can be identified. Furthermore, price perception describes the reaction to a price assessment, i.e., including the price difference directly in the purchase decision. Price knowledge is particularly concerned with the question of which prices (if any) the consumer remembers afterwards. Price knowledge is acquired in relation to the past, i.e., the last purchases made, and reused in the current period as available knowledge at the points of sale (Müller-Hagedorn, 2002).

The consumer makes a subjective judgement about the absolute price (Müller-Hagedorn, 2002). He or she evaluates the price of the product alone, in isolation from all non-price components. Judgements about the price competitiveness depend on the current perception of the prices and comparison with previously demanded prices (price knowledge). Diller (2007) describes the final assessment of the price level of a shopping centre as its "price image" and assesses purchasing from a qualitative point of view. The customer will judge for himself or herself whether he or she regards the price of a product as justified or not (Lenzen, 1984). Price decisions are, therefore based on the perceived product value. In order to implement an efficient and/or customer-oriented pricing strategy, one needs to estimate how specific customers can be approached. Therefore, the price should be set so that customers perceive the price-to-performance ratio to be as appropriate as possible (Kotler, 2006). As a result, it can be stated that product-related marketing measures result in a better perceived price-to-performance ratio.

Consequently, based on the findings from the literature review, a conceptual model is formulated for the exogenous variable and the endogenous variables, as shown in Figure 1, to explain the relationships among product quality, product selection, service quality, price-to-performance ratio and customer loyalty. As a result, the following model is suggested.

Figure 1 | Suggested customer loyalty conceptual model
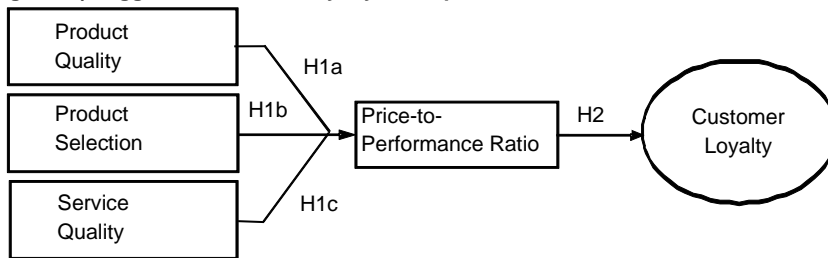
Source: authors

The suggested conceptual model enables the development of appropriate hypotheses and the discussion of the expected variable interactions as well as variable definitions.

Product Quality

In the process of a purchase decision, product quality plays a major role. The quality management and assurance system DIN EN ISO 8402 defines quality as "the totality of characteristics of a unit with regard to its suitability to fulfil defined and presumed requirements" (Pfitzinger, 2002). A distinction can be made between two types of quality evaluation: (1) the quality of the design is evaluated, i.e., the garment is solely evaluated according to its appearance and (2) the functional quality of the product is assessed. In this sense, whether the selected item meets the consumer's requirements is examined (Krebs et al., 2004).

The range of premium and low-budget products often leads to different product-quality levels (Schweizer, 2004). In practical terms, garments from different suppliers must be closely evaluated before a purchase decision is made. Therefore, suitable products must be selected that will fulfil the potential consumers' requirements (Filip, 1997). Consequently, the following hypothesis is proposed.

H1a: Product quality has a direct positive effect on the price-to-performance ratio.

Product Selection (Assortment)

It is important to conduct the purchase of goods in such a way that the products meet the expectations and demands of the customers. Overall, customers should perceive the product selection positively (Kilgus, 2002). In general, the product selection in the salesroom is mainly determined by the actual marketing strategy. The company's buyers purchase the goods by determining which products, colours and sizes need to be in stock. A distinction is made between permanent and temporary product selections (Nemeth, 2010). Furthermore, defining a specific product selection is not only a question of following trends and correctly interpreting market forecasts, since "the times are over when it was enough to buy goods and then distribute them without any problems; today, every retailer must take targeted measures to improve the sales of his goods (=marketing)" (Kilgus, 2002).

In conclusion, product selection (assortment) can be defined as the totality of all products offered to the customer, depending on time and size. As a result, retail companies must try to process a large volume of collected data and interpret these data correctly. Internal and

external market data must be merged and structured. In order to plan the purchase of goods, it is necessary to evaluate the derived data. Hence, the following hypothesis is proposed.

H1b: Product range has a direct positive effect on the price-to-performance ratio.

Service Quality

In the past, the "concept of service orientation played a minor role in both scientific literature and trade practice" (Drews, 1998). However, nowadays, great importance is placed on comprehensive services, especially in clothing retailing. According to Drews (1998), service has become an important differentiation attribute of retailers.

Personal contact with the customer starts with the activity of the service personnel. Already, in this situation, it is decided whether the consumer stays in the shop and considers a purchase, or whether he or she leaves the shop. The staff and the consulting quality play a sustainable role and influence the long-term success of a company. The customer evaluates the competence of the sales staff with respect to technical, communicative and social components (Kreller, 2013). The friendliness and the external appearance of the employees also influence the consumer when a purchase decision is made. The sales staff must find the right degree of determination and persuasiveness, without appearing aggressive or intrusive. The terms of service and additional services are differentiated in the literature. Barth (1996) defines "additional services" as services that lead to an increase in purchasing convenience. Furthermore, according to Berekoven et al. (2009), the services of retail companies include services that are provided in addition to the main service or product.

The significance of sales staff for customer satisfaction and therefore, loyalty with regard to their advice quality, is emphasized in the scientific literature (Deppisch, 1997). In the specialist retail trade particularly, the advice quality and the employees' commitment to customer interests play a vital role (Müller-Hagedorn, 2002). This represents a possibility for differentiation from price-aggressive competitors. In addition to this, external qualities such as the appearance of the personnel must also be considered as part of the consulting quality (Schenk, 1995). The consulting ability, friendliness and personal commitment of the employees appear to be particularly important for customer loyalty. These aspects are, therefore, suitable criteria for indicating a positive customer perception (Schenk, 1995).

In this paper, all services that make purchasing more convenient or that the retailer offers in addition to the main products, are defined as additional services of the company. It is assumed that these additional services lead to better customer perception (Barth, 1996). The following hypothesis is proposed.

H1c: Service quality has a direct positive effect on the price-to-performance ratio.

Customer Loyalty

Customer loyalty is an essential criterion for company development and revenues. Customer loyalty can be connected to purchase frequency. Consequently, a customer is regarded as loyal when he or she makes repeated purchases from the same retailer. Kotler (2006) defines loyalty as "a deeply held commitment to re-buy or re-patronize a preferred product or service in the future, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having

the potential to cause switching behaviour". According to Fornell (1992), customer loyalty is a relevant factor for the company's future success and growth. A satisfied customer is very likely to continue to remain loyal to the company, ensuring future turnover. Therefore, it can be assumed that customer satisfaction, based on the perceived product quality, product selection and services, results in loyalty. In the scientific literature (Kotler, 2006), it is agreed that customer loyalty improves profitability and reduces the costs of acquiring new customer relationships, which are higher than those required to maintain existing customer relationships. In order to ensure customer loyalty and to maintain a good business relationship, a long-term commitment from all participating interested groups is required (Wilson, 1995), leading to a positive relationship with other involved parties (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Consequently, it can be concluded that two pre-eminent factors are present: (1) a behavioural factor resulting in a repeated purchase and (2) an attitudinal factor based on preferences and impressions (Alejandro et al., 2011). The following hypothesis is consistent with these findings.

H2: A better price-to-performance ratio results in greater customer loyalty.

The next step involved defining the variables to be utilized (code plan), as shown in Tab. 1 below.

Table 1 | Definition of variables (code plan)

Variable Name	Hypothesis	Variable Type	Variable Values	Measurement Level
Product Quality (PRODQUAL)	H1a	Independent	1- to 6-point Likert scale (Likert, 1993)	Ordinal
Product Selection (PRODSEL)	H1b	Independent	1- to 6-point Likert scale (Likert, 1993)	Ordinal
Service Quality (SERVQUAL)	H1c	Independent	1- to 6-point Likert scale (Likert, 1993)	Ordinal
Price-to-Performance Ratio (PRIPER)	H2	Mediator	1- to 6-point Likert Scale (Likert, 1993)	Ordinal
Customer Loyalty (CUSTLOY)	H2	Dependent	1- to 6-point Likert scale (Likert, 1993)	Ordinal

Source: authors

2 Methodology

A cross-sectional face-to-face survey based on a short-standardized questionnaire was conducted to collect the data (Bortz & Döring, 2006; Möhring & Schlütz, 2010). The survey was divided into three parts, an introduction, the main part and a final part.

After an introduction to the survey given by the interviewer that aimed to arouse the interest of participants and motivate them to participate, serving as an icebreaker, the main part of the survey began, following a standardized method. Since shoppers tend to be rather busy, the survey had to be kept short. The questions were capable of being answered quickly, with little cognitive effort (Möhring & Schlütz, 2010). All questions were asked in reference to two local fashion stores (doubling the size of the data set to 674). The survey was completed by providing sociodemographic data and a postcode. For all variables, a six-point Likert scale was used (Likert, 1993). In order to avoid answer tendencies based on

social desirability, the questions were postulated appropriately (Schumann, 2006) and anonymity was guaranteed.

The survey was conducted in Ravensburg, Germany. Since the overall sample of the fashion store customers was unknown, the street-intercept method using random sampling as a subset in order to represent the entire group was conducted. In social science, street-intercept is a commonly used and proven methodology for data collection (Bush & Grant, 1995; Miller et al., 1997; Nowell & Stanley, 1991). The survey took place in front of the two fashion stores with customers entering or leaving the stores. The survey was conducted at each store on three half-days (Tuesday morning, 0900 – 1300; Thursday afternoon 1300 – 1700; Saturday; 1100 – 1500). Every third person that passed-by was asked for participation. Tablets connected to the EFS Survey/Unipark online tool were used for data entry. These included in total 222 (65.9%) women and 115 (34.1%) men. The respondents can be considered as rather young: 24% were about 21 years old. The majority of the participants was either local or from the surrounding area. The participants' average age was 33.7 years, ranging between 13 and 86 years.

3 Data analysis

Multiple regression analysis was used to test the hypotheses. Multiple regression analysis is defined by Hair et al. (2009) as "a general statistical technique used to analyse the relationship between a single dependent variable and several independent variables". The use of multiple regression involves multiple data requirements. Firstly, observations must be statistically independent. Secondly, normality and linear relationships between the dependent and independent variables must be present. Thirdly, there must be homoscedasticity (Hair et al., 2009; Kleinbaum et al., 1998).

Consequently, prior to carrying out the multiple regression analysis, the researchers confirmed that the sample was sufficiently large (Hair et al., 1995; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007) and verified the distribution normality of the collected data (Fabrigar et al., 1999). Next, residual plots were used to test for linearity and homoscedasticity. No clear patterns were found, and hence the assumption of linearity and homoscedasticity was confirmed. Since there was no evidence to the contrary, all relationships were assumed to be linear (see also Hair et al., 2009; Kleinbaum et al., 1998; Kaplan, 1995). To detect potential autocorrelation, a Durbin-Watson test was used. The obtained value of 2.025 exceeded the rule-of-thumb value of 1.0 (Gujarati, 2003). Therefore, it was assumed that no autocorrelation was present and that valid statistical tests could be performed.

Various model selection methods are described in the literature (Kleinbaum et al., 1998). Independent variables are chosen using model selection methods such as forwards, backwards, stepwise and simultaneous entry (Hair et al., 2009; Kleinbaum et al., 1998). Stepwise entries may be problematic and should only be used for predictive rather than explanatory models (Hair et al., 2009; Cohen & Cohen, 1975). The current study utilized simultaneous entry methods since the study's purpose was to test hypotheses rather than to predict the values of dependent variables.

For the first construct (see Fig. 1), with price-to-performance ratio (PRIPER) as the dependent variable, the multiple regression analysis results (see Tab. 2) were significant (Sig. = 0.000), with an F-value of 7.822 which exceeded the calculated critical F-value (1.853). The adjusted R^2 value was 0.134. The relatively low R^2 value can be justified by

the complex nature of the sales process (Cohen & Cohen, 1975). Additionally, regression analyses in sociology studies have generated similar variance values (McKee et al., 2001; Wild et al., 2004).

Table 2 | Product-to-Performance ratio variable construct regression results

Multiple R = .881 R^2 = .775   Adjusted R^2 = .774   F = 745.318
(Sig. = 0.000; $F_{critical}$ = 3.812; p-Level = 0.01)

Dependent Variable: Product-to-Performance Ratio (PRIPER)

Independent Variable	Beta (standardized)	t	Sig.	Hypo.
Product Quality (PRODQUAL)	.518	14.459	.000	H1a (supported)
Product Selection (PRODSEL)	.333	9.408	.000	H1b (supported)
Service Quality (SERVQUAL)	.081	2.772	.006	H1c (not supported)

Source: authors

The multiple regression analysis revealed that product quality (PRODQUAL) is positively and significantly related to the price-to-performance ratio (PRIPER) (Beta = 0.518; Sig. = 0.000), as proposed in H1a. Similarly, as proposed in H1b, product selection (PRODSEL) has a positive and significant effect on price-to-performance ratio (PRIPER) (Beta = 0.333; Sig. = 0.000). The analysis results also show that service quality (SERVQUAL) is weakly positively related to the price-to-performance ratio (PRIPER) (Beta = 0.081; Sig. = 0.006). Consequently, hypotheses H1a and H1b can be supported, whereas H1c cannot be supported.

In the next step, the second part of the construct (see Fig. 1), customer loyalty (CUSTLOY), was analysed as a dependent variable by conducting a linear regression analysis (see Tab. 3).

Table 3 | Customer loyalty variable construct regression results

Multiple R = .485 R^2 = .236   Adjusted R^2 = .234   F = 200.280
(Sig. = 0.000; $F_{critical}$ = 6.740; p-Level = 0.01)

Dependent Variable: Customer Loyalty (CUSTLOY)

| Independent Variable	Beta (standardized)	t	Sig.	Hypo.
Price-to-Performance Ratio (PRIPER)	.485	14.152	.000	H2 (supported)

Source: authors

The second regression analysis revealed a significant positive correlation between the price-to-performance ratio (PRIPER) and customer loyalty (CUSTLOY) (Beta = 0.485; Sig. = 0.000), supporting hypothesis H2.

4 Discussion and conclusion

In reference to the given research task, the present study has investigated product mix-related specific marketing measures for fashion sellers. In addition to this, the current research addresses extant research gaps and offers theoretical and practical contributions in order to enhance customer loyalty, resulting in increased turnover.

In general, the proposed conceptual model was supported. The assumption was made that customer satisfaction significantly and directly affects customer loyalty (Anderson & Sullivan, 1993; Bolton & Drew, 1991; Fornell, 1992). In contrast with the previous findings of Johnson et al. (2001) and Lenka et al. (2009), a low correlation between service quality and the price-to-performance ratio was found. This contradictory finding can be explained by the fact that the investigated fashion stores in the city centre of Ravensburg, where the study took place, provide similar service quality. On the other hand, product quality followed by product selection were shown to be decisive factors for the price-to-product ratio. Regarding customer loyalty, the price-to-product ratio factor plays a relevant role. This is supported by previous findings (see also Kotler, 2006). As a result, this leads to the following presented conceptual model (see Fig. 2).

Figure 2 | Finalised customer loyalty conceptual model
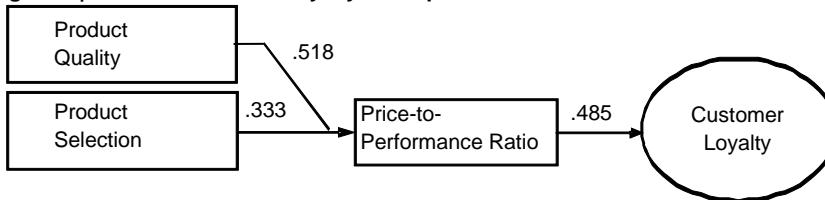
Source: authors

In practical terms, fashion stores should try to enhance product quality while maintaining the existing price level. This can be achieved by focusing on the suppliers with regard to the delivered product quality. An expansion of the product selection may also be helpful.

Though the current study's methodology resulted in acceptable reliability and validity, limitations are still present. The study's location represents a potential limitation. The fact that the survey was conducted in the German city of Ravensburg and investigated the fashion market (as an illustrative example) raises the question of whether the findings can be generalized to other business markets and different cultural environments. In this context, generalizations can be made. According to Reidenback, Cooper and Harrison (1984), there are two basic problems with outshopping studies, namely, the generalization of results and development of theory. In future, it is suggested that an expanded study should be conducted, including more markets and locations and a larger sample size. In addition, future research could use a different design to examine the causal relationships posited by the theories and could be conducted in other industries and other countries or different global regions.

Furthermore, it should be added that our survey provides only a snapshot of customer characteristics on the days when it was carried out and not a comprehensive evaluation that can be applied to all customers. Future research should study the influence of other marketing factors in relation to the derived model. In particular, marketing activities related

to pricing, distribution, promotion and personal sales should also be assessed in terms of the suggested model.

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