Clarifying the merchandising function: Analysis of merchandising roles and responsibilities in the South African apparel retail industry

Bertha Jacobs[a]* & Elena Karpova[b]

[a]Department of Consumer and Food Sciences, University of Pretoria, South Africa

[b]Department of Consumer, Apparel, and Retail Studies, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, USA

[a]Bertha Jacobs,

Department of Consumer and Food Sciences, University of Pretoria

Old Agricultural Building,

Room 3-18,

Hatfield, South Africa, 0002

bertha.jacobs@up.ac.za

[b]Elena Karpova

Department of Consumer, Apparel, and Retail Studies,

Bryan School of Business and Economics, University of North Carolina at Greensboro

PO Box 26170

Greensboro, NC 27402

karpova@uncg.edu

*Corresponding author: Bertha Jacobs bertha.jacobs@up.ac.za

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine merchandising roles and responsibilities from the perspective of professionals employed in the South African apparel retail industry. Data were collected through semi-structured, individual in-depth interviews. A total of 16 merchandising professionals were recruited to participate in the study. A phenomenological research design was followed. Atlas.ti software was used to analyze the transcribed interviews. The findings showed that merchandising departments in the South African retail tend to employ professionals in four distinct positions of buyers, planners, product developers, and sourcing coordinators. These merchandising roles, that make up the merchandising function, are essential in delivery products which are profitable and will satisfy consumers needs. The four positions also have distinct responsibilities that are organised according to the product lifecycle. Merchandising professionals rely on frequent daily interactions with each other through shared responsibilities and decision-making for some of the stages of the product lifecycle.

Keywords

1. Introduction

South Africa is a developing country that has the most advanced economy on the African continent, with a rapidly emerging formal retail sector combined with a traditional informal retail sector (PricewaterhouseCoopers [PwC], 2012). In the 2010s, the industry went through several major changes: (a) a fast-growing Black consumer market with a demand for unique luxury products; (b) the influx of international retailers (e.g., Zara, H&M, TopShop, Cotton On); and (c) the expansion of South African retailers into foreign markets (Hugo, Haskell, Stroud, Ensor, Moodley & Maritz, 2016). With numerous changes in local consumer markets

and the internationalization of South African retailers, merchandising became even more important to ensure retailers stay consumer-centric and maintain a competitive advantage (Grose, 2012; Hugo et al., 2016).

Merchandising is a strategic retail function that not only determines retailers' competitiveness but also contributes to the success of products, consumer satisfaction, and overall profitability (Varley, 2014). The merchandising function is directly responsible for the apparel products offered by a retailer (Choi & Gaskill, 2000) and involves developing, buying, planning, sourcing, and distribution of these products (Kunz, 2010). Apparel merchandising focuses on products with short and context-specific lifecycles and requires 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 of the development, sourcing, and procurement of new products from suppliers around the globe.

Although competent merchandising professionals are in high demand (Frazier & Cheek, 2016), there is minimal research investigating the positions they fulfill and the responsibilities they perform. Research examining the roles and responsibilities of merchandising professionals was mainly conducted in the context of developed economies with mature retail markets like the UK and the US (Choi & Gaskill, 2000; Goworek, 2014; Nobbs, O'Sullivan & Middleton, 2014). These studies mainly focused on buyers (Fiorito, Gable & Conseur, 2010; Goworek, 2014, Swindley, 1992), except for a few studies exploring buyers and merchandisers (Nobbs et al., 2014), buyers and product developers (Choi & Gaskill, 2000; Goworek, 2010), and sourcing personnel (Muhammad & Ha-Brookshire, 2011). Research conducted in a developing context such as China (Zhong & Mitra, 2020) and India (Manjeshwar, Sternquist & Good, 2013) focused mostly on buyer's decision-making process and not specifically on the roles and responsibilities within the merchandising

function. Despite the extensive coverage of the merchandising function in academic textbooks, we found very limited research on the dynamic nature of the merchandising function within apparel retail as well as the synergy between merchandising roles and responsibilities. Most of the existing evidence is primarily anecdotal and not research-based. Often merchandisers' responsibilities are highlighted within the contexts of mature retail industries such as the UK and US. Different contexts are not discussed, leaving gaps in terms of how different retailers and countries operate within the globalized apparel industry and might result in differences in merchandising positions and responsibilities (Bruce & Daly, 2006; Da Silva, Davies & Naudé, 2002); it is crucial to investigate the merchandising function particularly within an emerging retail market to gain a better understanding of the nature, challenges, and activities involved.

The purpose of this study was to explore and describe (a) the organization of merchandising roles across the apparel product lifecycle and within the merchandising function, (b) how the respective merchandising roles and responsibilities interlink within the South African apparel retail industry, and (c) how the responsibilities of each role contribute to deliver products that will satisfy consumer wants and needs as well as enhance retailers' performance. Understanding the demands of merchandising positions and responsibilities can help retailers in organizing these roles in their merchandising departments to be efficient in increasing business performance and profitability. Retailers might also be more successful in recruiting suitable professionals for specific merchandising positions (Hart, Stachow, Farrell & Reed, 2007). Furthermore, knowledge of different merchandising roles can help educators to prepare graduates and future employees better for the competitive global industry. Insights into what retailers expect from merchandisers can direct the curriculum to develop competent future professionals.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Merchandising roles and responsibilities

To stay competitive, apparel retailers have moved towards becoming consumer-led or consumer-centric organizations (Varley, 2014) and subsequently adapted their merchandising function to better fit this model (Ali, 2010). As merchandisers are instrumental in synchronizing retail functions and navigating globalized supply chains to deliver products that will satisfy consumer demand (Christopher et al., 2004), the merchandising function has evolved into a centralized, team-based function (Varley, 2014). Depending on the retailer's size (e.g., multi-national versus small business), type (e.g., specialty or discount store), and format (e.g., corporation versus privately owned), merchandising positions and responsibilities might vary (Kunz, 2010). In some companies, merchandisers have more traditional roles associated with buying and oversee activities related to the acquisition of products; however, they are not directly involved in product development. In other companies, such as private label retailers in the UK, merchandising roles have become 'more fluid' and often include responsibilities related to product development and sourcing (Goworek, 2010, p. 659). In a small business, merchandisers can cover an even greater range of responsibilities. Still, merchandising remains a specialized function with various positions organized within the department to synchronize processes throughout the apparel supply chain (Bruce and Daly, 2006). The four key merchandising positions outlined in the literature—buyers, planners, product developers, and sourcing personnel—are discussed below (Goworek, 2010; Nobbs, et al., 2014; Varley, 2014).

2.1.1 Buyers

Buyers are vital for the commercial success of products (Bruce & Daly, 2006). The main goal of buyers is to procure and select products for retailers' target consumers (Grose, 2012). Buyers are typically responsible for trend analysis and forecasting, consumer research

and range building (Nobbs et al., 2014). To make informed buying decisions, buyers continuously negotiate, collaborate, and communicate with other merchandising professionals, including planners, product developers, and sourcing personnel (Bahng & Kincade, 2014; Goworek, 2014). According to Zhong and Mitra (2020, p. 1362) the buyer role in a developing economy such as China, is 'at an emerging or growing stage'; whereas in the US and UK, buyer roles are relatively well established (Goworek, 2014; Fiorito et al., 2010).

2.1.2. Planners

Closely working with buyers are *planners*, who are responsible for the financial aspects and management of stock (Varley, 2014). The planner's role in the UK (Goworek, 2014; Nobbs et al., 2014) and the US (Clodfelter, 2015) is essential in reaching the retailer's financial objectives and profits. Their responsibilities include analysis of past sales and in-store 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).

2.1.3 Product developers

Product development is essential for offering unique goods and more variety to consumers (Varley, 2014). Within the merchandising function, the goal of *product developers* is to 'meet and interpret' changing consumer demands (Keiser & Garner, 2010, p. 18). A product development position 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 (Keiser & Garner, 2010). These professionals work closely with other departments within the company, like design, buying, and sourcing (Kunz, 2010). Retailers in the UK and US tend to have product

development departments responsible for creating products that will differentiate them from competitors, create a specific image, and contribute to gaining market share (Goworek, 2010; Choi and Gaskill, 2000).

2.1.4 Sourcing personnel

Sourcing is a strategic process to determine how and where apparel products or components will be produced or procured (Kunz, 2010). Within the merchandising function, sourcing-related responsibilities might include: vendor selection; assessing capacity and capabilities of suppliers; negotiating with vendors and building strong relationships; coordinating production; ensuring timely delivery, quality assurance and compliance; warehousing and distribution of finished goods that include logistics and transportation, receiving and allocation (Muhammad & Ha-Brookshire, 2011). Sourcing personnel are extensively involved in apparel imports and overseas manufacturing (Bruce & Daly, 2007). Global sourcing has become essential to retailers' success in developed countries (Muhammad and Ha-Brookshire, 2011).

2.2. Merchandising in South Africa

Following apparel companies in developed economies, South African retailers entered the global supply chain to source products from low labor cost countries (Hugo et al., 2016). Retail professionals (i.e., buyers and planners, brand managers, and supply chain and distribution managers) were noted as lacking sufficient expertise in South Africa, which undermines the industry competitiveness (Wholesale and Retail Sector Education and Training Authority, 2016). To address the urgent need and support one of the major industries in the country (Hugo et al., 2016; Wholesale and Retail Sector Education and Training Authority, 2018), a better understanding of what different merchandising roles entail in the emerging South African retail market is needed. In a recent study, Jacobs and Karpova (2020), identified an extensive list of skills and knowledge needed by merchandising

professionals to succeed in the South African retail industry. This extensive list of skills and knowledge required points to the varying and wide-ranging activities merchandisers are responsible for. 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 be successful in the global apparel retail industry. Therefore, exploring the scope and organization of merchandising positions and responsibilities in the South African retail industry was the focus of this study.

3. Method

3.1 Research design and data collection

A phenomenological approach was followed to explore merchandising roles and responsibilities within the South African apparel retail industry. This tradition provided a flexible interpretive framework for studying industry practitioners' perspectives and experiences related to their professional responsibilities (Creswell, 2013). Individual, in-depth interviews were used to collect data from a purposive sample of 16 merchandisers. The data collection method allows for a 'thick' description of everyday experiences from participants who are considered experts on the topic (Greeff, 2011). Individual interviews provided realistic perspectives of professionals' experiences, giving insights into their positions and responsibilities. Following Human Subject approval, participants were recruited. Merchandisers working in the South African apparel retail industry were identified through referrals from industry contacts and graduates from a clothing management programme. Professionals were invited to participate via an email that outlined the purpose of the study.

A small purposive sample of participants with experience of the situation is recommended for phenomenological studies (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 following criteria were used for the purposive sampling: (a) working in an apparel merchandising position for a minimum of two years, and (b) having an apparel-related bachelor's degree. This was to ensure participants have worked a reasonable time in their position and have a basic understanding of the apparel subject matter when discussing their respective position and responsibilities.

Two conditions directed the purposive sampling: sufficiency and data saturation (Greeff, 2011). Sufficiency ensured that the purposive sample reflected the range of merchandising positions (i.e., buyers, planners, product developers and sourcing coordinators), different retailer types and the retailers' locations in South Africa (e.g., Kwa-Zulu-Natal, Western Cape, and Gauteng provinces). Once data saturation occurred, the data collection stopped as no new information was emerging (Babbie & Mouton, 2001).

One of the authors travelled to three provinces in South Africa to interview participants at a convenient place and time. All professionals received a gift card (value $15 US) for participating in the study. An interview protocol with questions and probes guided the data collection process. Interviews lasted between 40 and 70 minutes and were recorded with the participant's permission. Examples of questions included: *What does your current position entail? Where does your specific position fit into the company? Please describe your daily responsibilities. How does your position/responsibilities differ from that of other merchandising personnel?*

3.2 Description of Participants

Table 1 presents a description of the research participants. The purposive sample comprised 16 female professionals aged between 27 and 45 years. Twelve of them had apparel-related bachelor's degrees, and three had apparel-related master's degrees. One participant did not have any tertiary education but was included in the study because of her high-profile position and extensive experience in the industry.

Table 1. Characteristics of participants

Pseudonym	Degree and academic major	Type of retailer	Region	Position or job title	Years in current position	Total years in retail
Amy	BS Clothing Management	Discount retailer	Western Cape	Buyer	2.5	12
Bea	BS Clothing Retail Management	Discount retailer	Western Cape	Senior buyer	1	19
Belle	BA Fashion Design	Discount retailer	Kwa-Zulu Natal	Product developer	7	10
Christine	BA Fashion Design	Specialty retailer	Western Cape	Product developer	1.5	6
Claire	BA Fashion and Textiles	Discount retailer	Kwa-Zulu Natal	Sourcing coordinator	1	2
Danni	BA Fashion Design	Specialty retailer	Gauteng	Product developer	5	20
Denise	MS Clothing Management	Discount retailer	Kwa-Zulu Natal	Planner	3.5	7
Isabelle	BA Clothing and Textiles	Specialty retailer	Western Cape	*Merchandising manager	6	12
Julie	BA Fashion Design and Technology	Specialty retailer	Western Cape	Product developer	5 months	19
Leigh	MS Clothing management	Specialty retailer	Gauteng	Buying manager	1.5	13
Lilly	MS Consumer Science	Department store	Western Cape	Buying manager	7	18
Lisa	No tertiary education	Specialty retailer	Gauteng	*Merchandising manager	3 months	17
Megan	BS Consumer Science	Discount retailer	Kwa-Zulu Natal	Buyer	1	10
Sally	BS Clothing Retail Management	Specialty retailer	Western Cape	Senior buyer	3	13
Yanna	BA Fashion	Specialty retailer	Gauteng	Planner	1	4
Zia	BA Commercial Fashion	Specialty retailer	Gauteng	Sourcing coordinator	3.5	7

Note: *Merchandising managers were mainly involved in buying and planning.

The participants were employed in the following merchandising positions: buying/merchandising managers (4); buyers (4); planners (2); product developers/quality assurance (4); and sourcing coordinators (2). Participants worked in different merchandising positions throughout their careers and for different retailers, which they were encouraged to discuss during the interview. For example, one product developer used to be a buyer; and the one planner started as a buyer and moved to planning. In addition to their current role, participants discussed other positions within the merchandising department in terms of delineation of responsibilities. Therefore, collectively, the participants were able to provide deeper and more meaningful accounts than just 16 current merchandising positions and responsibilities.

The professionals had between two and 20 years of work experience in apparel retail, with an average of 11.8 years. The participants were employed across ten retail apparel companies based in South Africa. The size of the companies ranged from 9 - 800 stores and from 45 – 3,000 employees. For confidentiality, pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the participants, and the companies' names were omitted from the interview transcripts.

3.3 Data analysis

The data analysis followed the process outlined by Creswell (2013). Interviews were transcribed verbatim by one of the researchers and analyzed with Atlas.ti software to ensure a systematic data analysis process. A priori coding was used as purposive sampling ensured participants from different types of roles to explore different positions within the merchandising function (Table 1). The transcripts were first open-coded to develop initial codes (Creswell, 2013). 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 text. Segments with the same code were grouped into categories and then clustered into themes (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). For example, within the planners' responsibilities theme,

five categories or main responsibilities were identified, namely, (1) managing orders and deliveries; (2) monitoring sales and product performance; (3) reacting to sales reports; (4) planning financial targets and allocating budgets; (5) reviewing and controlling inventory. The reviewing and controlling inventory category was developed from codes which linked to specific activities related to developing store grids, allocation strategies according to sales, controlling stock levels, and consolidation and replenishment of stock. Descriptions of themes were generated to present the research findings pertinent to merchandising positions and responsibilities (Creswell, 2013). Based on the data analyses, two overarching topical areas were formed: *(1) Merchandising Roles* and *(2) Merchandising Responsibilities*. Each overarching theme consisted of four themes related to the positions and responsibilities of buyers, planners, product developers, and sourcing coordinators.

4. Findings

4.1 Apparel merchandising roles

The first topical area described participants' positions and their roles within the structure of the company. Merchandisers clearly described their roles and what those entailed. Their responses included statements such as "I am a men's outerwear buyer", "I am a product developer within men's wear", and "I am a planner for ladies' fitness." They further discussed their position 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). 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, typically, those are all the roles. (Lilly)

When discussing their role, all participants described extensive internal interactions with other departments within the company, such as marketing, accounting, and stores.

4.1.1 Buyer role

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). Buyers agreed that they have a pivotal position as they manage many different processes and continuously interact with various functions inside and outside the retailer to deliver the right product: "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). There was a consensus that buying involves a range of strategic and operational decisions to produce the best product for consumers and to make sales. Megan explained: "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." Participants pointed out that buyers and planners work closely together: "We would be working with a planner, or we work across one or two planners" (Bea).

4.1.2 Planner role

Participants noted that planners are the "numbers people" (Megan), "work with the financial aspects of it" (Denise), "planners usually chase the figures" (Christine), and "not really involved in product, very much involve in figures" (Lilly). 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" (Megan). Like buying, planning is also a strategic merchandising role. The constant analysis of sales and product performance, as well as financial planning, ensure budgets are met, and the company makes a profit:

I have to do work on what strategic management has given to me. We need to set a budget for the year. 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)

4.1.3 Product developer role

Product developers typically work with buyers to interpret trends and styles, 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, 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 involved in fitting samples, checking measurements and specifications. Belle explained: "I am ensuring that the fits are correct, and the correct trims are being used, and the measurements are correct." Apart from interactions with buyers, product developers also deal with the internal laboratory personnel for fabric testing: "I work a lot with the buyers. The laboratory, we normally liaise with them when it comes to the fabrics" (Julie).

The product developer position was not present in all companies. At five retailers, buyers fulfilled product development tasks because no designated product developer position existed: "Product developers, we don't necessarily have [them] in our department. In [Retailer], that is a role that we basically fulfil ourselves" (Sally).

4.1.4 Sourcing coordinator role

Sourcing coordinators acted as the middleman between buyers and overseas or domestic 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 colour, with that print', and they would go chat to the suppliers" (Lilly). Sourcing professionals also looked for new products

to propose to buyers and to test for the season: "We will travel to China, and we'll source newness" (Zia). Isabelle explicated the role of sourcing coordinators: "Sourcing is seeing a lot of suppliers and know where to get the raw materials for your product." Four of the companies in this study employed sourcing coordinators. In other companies, common for South African apparel retailers, buyers sourced products themselves or outsourced the function to sourcing companies.

4.2 Merchandising responsibilities

The second topical area captured the range of activities and tasks merchandising professionals handled within the different positions. A matrix of merchandising responsibilities was developed for buyers, planners, product developers, and sourcing coordinators to illustrate overlapping tasks and activities within various positions (Table 2). The left column presents merchandising responsibilities that emerged from the interviews. Shaded areas indicate which merchandising position(s) oversees these responsibilities. The merchandising responsibilities follow the apparel lifecycle to structure the discussion of the themes within the topical area, as many merchandising departments are formed according to the stages that apparel products go through and the required activities to complete them (Grose, 2012).

Table 2. Merchandising roles and responsibilities in the South African retail industry

Merchandising Responsibilities	Merchandising Roles			
	Buyer	Product developer	Sourcing coordinator	Planner
Researching the market				
Forecasting trends	*	*		
Line planning and developing	X		*	
Range building				
Marketing and promotions				
Selecting and managing suppliers				
Approving samples and quality assurance (QA)	X			
Coordinating production	X			
Managing orders and deliveries				
Monitoring sales and product performance	*			
Reacting to sales reports	*			
Planning financial targets and allocating budgets				
Reviewing and controlling inventory				

Note: Shaded cells indicate the main responsibilities for the specific position**;**
* indicates responsibilities for a position that have shared decision-making or input from another position;
X indicates additional responsibilities for buyers, as some companies did not have product developers or sourcing coordinators.

4.2.1 Buyers' responsibilities

To execute a product strategy, buyers[1] handled a wide range of responsibilities that formed six themes: (1) researching the market; (2) forecasting trends; (3) range building; (4) marketing and promotions; (5) selecting and managing suppliers; and (6) approving samples and quality assurance (QA) (discussed under the product developers' responsibilities and Table 2). Some of the buyer responsibilities had shared decision-making and required only input from buyers, but were the main responsibilities of other positions. For example, monitoring sales and product performance was one of the planners' responsibilities but required the buyer's input to make decisions.

Researching the market involved evaluating consumer demand, competitors' offerings, and the retailer's position in the domestic market. Buying/merchandising managers

---

[1] When the term 'buyer' is used, it also includes buying/merchandising managers (Table 2).

agreed that monitoring their market share (the portion of a market controlled by the retailer) is a valuable way to find out where they stand: "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).

Lilly highlighted the importance of researching competitors and keeping a pulse on the consumer by visiting stores:

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 your store to see what the range looks like, 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: "My team tested tights [for men] 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 included activities in which buyers engaged to direct the season. The forecasting activities included interpreting trends for the target market(s), strategizing and forecasting the season and going on trend/buying trips. Sally 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."

In companies with product development positions, forecasting was a collaborative responsibility of buyers and product developers (marked with an asterisk in Table 2). In this case, product developers would complete the background work and then make joint decisions with buyers on how the trend information should be used.

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)

At companies with no product development positions, forecasting was the buyer's responsibility.

Range building involved creating a mix of products to satisfy the target market's needs and wants. After the in-depth strategizing sessions, the buyers travelled overseas on trend trips to get ideas and buy samples. Trend/buying trips were common for buyers before starting with range building: "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?" (Bea). Specific tasks included: selecting products, presenting ranges to management, and approval of ranges. According to all buyers, range planning started with the "blueprint" they created from their pre-season planning sessions and samples from their trend trip: "Those ranges are then presented to management and, once that is approved, you start with the process" (Lilly).

Marketing and promotions underscored the buyers' involvement with the marketing department regarding planning promotions, visual displays, product packaging and advertising campaigns: "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, this was a regular activity: "On a weekly basis, it is marketing. What is happening on the marketing calendar, what are you planning for marketing?" (Bea). Lilly clarified buyers' involvement in marketing and promotional activities:

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.

Selecting and managing suppliers described the responsibilities of establishing reliable suppliers, costing products, negotiating prices, fabrics, trims, and delivery. Managing supplier relationships was the main responsibility of buyers or sourcing coordinators, depending on the retailer (Table 2): "A big part of my job is going to suppliers and building suppliers' relationships" (Isabelle). Suppliers are regarded as "strategic partners" and their performance is vital to ensure the success of products.

Participants discussed the extensive information communicated to suppliers: "I would brief them [on] 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). After the brief, buyers or sourcing coordinators did product costing with suppliers. Simultaneously, every aspect of production (e.g., the costs of fabrics, trims, shipping, and delivery dates) was negotiated: "You develop with your suppliers your costings. Then it's all negotiating. So, that becomes part of your daily tasks" (Megan). Building and cultivating relationships with suppliers was an important responsibility and a vital part in achieving success: "A big part of my job is going to suppliers and building suppliers' relationships" (Isabelle).

4.2.2 Product developers' responsibilities

Product developers oversee the three major responsibility areas: (1) forecasting trends (discussed above, under the buyer responsibilities); (2) line planning and developing; (3) approving samples and quality assurance (QA). Line planning and developing tasks were completed in collaboration with buyers and sourcing coordinators (marked with an asterisk in Table 2).

Line planning and developing is an activity to generate value for retailers' consumer market(s) each season. Specific tasks included: analyzing competitors' samples; conceptualizing new products, selecting styles, colors and fabrication, and developing

technical specifications. In consultation with buyers, product developers 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" (Julie). Next, product developers working with buyers 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 the season should unfold; from what the first month would look like up through to the last month, and that would entail colour, silhouette, and fabric choices. (Christine)

Product developers handled creating technical specifications for each sample to be sent to factories: "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). If the product developer position was not present at a retailer, buyers would also be responsible for line planning and development. At larger retailers, in-house sourcing coordinators had partial input in the line development activities and 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). At other companies, sourcing coordinators were more involved in line development (Table 2):

> If we see a cool new watch, when we come back, 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)

Approving samples and quality assurance (QA) was a task completed by product developers if this position was present at a retailer. If not, it was the responsibility of buyers or sourcing coordinators. Typical responsibilities before approving bulk production entailed inspecting and approving pre-production and production samples (e.g., lap dips, trims, strike-

offs) and quality assurance regarding compliance to specifications, fit, measurements, color, and fabrication. Sally, a buyer working at a retailer that does not employ product developers, noted: "We develop new styles, and the supplier needs to submit lab dips and fabrics for testing." Claire stressed that it was vital to check different aspects of a product, such as prints (strike-offs) and construction because it is never right the first time: "Things come out wrong all the 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." Belle discussed the duties involved in QA checks:

> We measure samples and compare them to the measurements the suppliers had given us. We then compare those measurements to the spec we had produced on the QA side. If we don't approve it, they have to re-submit it. If we approve it, they can produce their PPS [pre-production sample]. If we approve the PPS, they can go ahead and make bulk.

4.2.3 Sourcing coordinators' responsibilities

Sourcing coordinators had four major responsibility areas focused on preparation for production and ensuring goods were manufactured and shipped on time: (1) selecting and managing suppliers; (2) approving samples and QA (discussed above, under the product developers' responsibilities); (3) coordinating production; and (4) managing orders and delivery.

Coordinating production focused on pre- and post-production processes to ensure goods were produced at the desired quality level and timeframe. Pre-production activities included sourcing products and materials, ensuring compliance, and authorizing production. Claire described pre- and post-production tasks she needed to manage to ensure timely delivery of products:

> I will place my order with my fabric supplier. After which, I must negotiate prices with my factories. Try to get things placed in 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.

Lily explicated that required compliance with various ethical standards at her company before production can be approved:

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 tracking orders and managing on-time delivery of products. Depending on the retailer, sourcing coordinators and planners were tasked with these responsibilities. Claire explained the process for managing orders:

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.

Scheduling and tracking deliveries were important activities for sourcing coordinators and planners: "Your planner is making sure your stock is arriving at the right time" (Isabelle). The planners agreed 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).

4.2.4 Planners' responsibilities

The responsibilities of planners emerged into five major tasks: (1) managing orders and deliveries (discussed under the sourcing coordinators' responsibilities); (2) monitoring sales and product performance; (3) reacting to sales reports; (4) planning financial targets and allocating budgets; (5) reviewing and controlling inventory.

Monitoring sales and product performance was the planners' responsibility that required input from buyers to make decisions (Table 2). The tasks included viewing store sales and evaluating reasons for best and worse sellers: "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 revolved around the performance of products: "'How are sales doing?" (Denise) and, "'Are we putting money in the till?" (Sally). To manage the risk of a product or capitalize on bestsellers, planners meet weekly with buyers to evaluate product sell-through: "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).

Reacting to sales reports builds on the preceding responsibility, *monitoring sales and product performance,* and includes tasks related to formulating and executing action plans to either increase performance or reduce risk. Planners and buyers use weekly sales reports to determine an appropriate course of action: "That information helps us to create immediate plans of action but also guides us regarding future buys and how we strategize going forward" (Leigh). Participants agreed that depending on product performance, planners decide how to "react to trade." This could involve re-styling, re-ordering, markdowns, and cancelling orders. This task involved joint decision-making between planners and buyers but from two different perspectives. Planners' typical strategies included sending more products to the store, consolidating the product from different stores, marking product down, and cancelling orders. Denise explicated these strategies: "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?" On the other hand, buyers looked into reimagining the product for future lines, or to discontinue it altogether: "If it is doing well, 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).

Planning financial targets and allocating budgets materialized from participants' responses about all the financial workings and calculations planners are responsible for to ensure profit. Specific tasks included: interpreting reports for developing sales forecasts, targets, budgets and reporting; calculating growth, gross margins, profits, and loss, and developing assortment plans. Planners had to interpret many reports to inform their financial planning, sales forecasts, re-forecasts, and budgets. Yanna described how these reports fit into her responsibilities:

> 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.

> Planners also report back on the various aspects of their portfolio against their set

targets. Yanna continued to explain: "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." Apart from financial planning and developing budgets, planners are responsible for various calculations: "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" (Sally). To meet their budgets and projected sales, planners would develop assortment plans which are detailed unit plans for the entire season. This task entailed putting units behind the range based on sales history and providing a buying plan for the buyer. Although buyers would give input, the planner handled planning the number of units per style, color, and size as well as the volume to achieve target sales:

> 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)

Reviewing and controlling inventory included the following tasks: developing store grids and allocation strategies to distribute stock according to sales, controlling stock levels (covers), and consolidation and replenishment of stock. Planners are in charge of stock management and making sure the size curve, styles, brands, and colors meet consumer demands. Denise explained that she formulates the allocation strategy based on analyses of the store and product performance: "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 inventory was a very important responsibility, as planners need to balance the stock ratios in stores to generate the sales they forecasted. There should be enough products in stores to sustain sales:

> Stock covers [are very important]. How many weeks of stock will last me in my store? 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." (Yanna)

5. Conclusions

In this study, apparel merchandising professionals working in the positions of buyers, planners, product developers, and sourcing coordinators were interviewed to understand their roles and responsibilities within South African apparel retail companies. This was the first research to our knowledge that examined the four different roles within the merchandising function in one study. The findings provide a deeper understanding of the organization of the merchandising positions, their interlinkages across the product lifecycle and what responsibilities are ascribed to these positions in South Africa. Based on the research results, three major conclusions can be drawn regarding the merchandising positions and responsibilities within the South African apparel retail industry:

a) Merchandising departments tend to employ professionals in four distinct positions of buyers, planners, product developers, and sourcing coordinators. Buyers and planners can be viewed as the main merchandising roles. All the companies had buyers and planners, but not all had product developers and sourcing coordinators;

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

c) Professionals in the merchandising department rely on frequent daily interactions between these positions to complete shared responsibilities for some of the stages of the product lifecycle to achieve strategic, financial, and regulatory goals.

Overall, the scope and structure of the four identified merchandising positions in South African retail is similar to merchandising positions in the developed markets, as reported by researchers from the UK and US (Goworek, 2010; Muhammad and Ha-Brookshire, 2011; Nobbs et al., 2014). However, these previous studies examined only one or two positions (e.g., buyer or sourcing manager). Because more merchandising positions and responsibilities were investigated it was possible to describe the many intersections between roles in a single study. The globalized nature of the apparel industry and the complex supply chains spanning across countries and continents might be an explanation of why merchandising roles and responsibilities in developed and developing markets appear to be similar. Further, South African retailers' entry into international markets forced merchandising roles to adapt to the changes in the global apparel industry, which has likely contributed to similarities in merchandising roles and responsibilities.

A major contribution of this study is documenting how the four roles interlink daily throughout the product lifecycle with the common goal of executing the retailer's product and profit strategies. Improving decision making and ensuring that the products complete their critical paths seamlessly is vital for retailers' performance (Da Silva et al., 2002). These

results highlight the importance of the merchandising department structure to organize effectively and outline responsibilities and tasks around the product value chain to achieve the retailers' goals (Grose, 2012). The findings explicitly define the scope of each of the four merchandising roles and the respective responsibilities specific to these positions (Table 2). Where responsibility 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, which will contribute to speedy decision-making and streamline business processes. As the findings provide clear descriptions for each role and define joint areas, retailers could utilize this information to create a clear structure of the merchandising department and hire professionals with relevant skills and knowledge for the different positions. This will ensure an effective and efficient merchandising function, contributing to a retailer's overall performance.

The findings of this study can be used to inform curriculum development in textiles and apparel to ensure graduates are prepared to perform merchandising responsibilities within the South African retail industry. Detailed descriptions of what distinct merchandising roles entail outline the industry expectations for these specific positions. This information could guide the development of specializations within programmes for students to concentrate in specific areas, for example, sourcing or buying, before entering the industry. Moreover, the range of identified responsibilities outlined in Table 2 could be used to design learning outcomes and content of courses. For example, understanding that the planner's role necessitates someone responsible for analytical and math-based tasks vs product developers who need to continually re-interpret products for changing markets might help educators develop content and assignments for their courses.

This study was completed in South Africa; therefore, the results regarding apparel merchandising roles and responsibilities are applicable to this context. 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, 1992), the processes, shared responsibilities, and strategies used by merchandisers might differ in other parts of the world. The extensive number of responsibilities merchandising professionals undertake point to a need for skilled workers. As competent merchandising professionals are in high demand (Wholesale and Retail Sector Education and Training Authority, 2016), future studies could investigate the different sets of skills and knowledge needed to fulfil the four merchandising positions and perform related responsibilities.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

References

Ali, S. & Ali, Z. (2010). *The role of merchandiser in managing the supply chain*. Available: at https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1312052/FULLTEXT01.pdf

Babbie, E. & Mouton, J. (2001). *The practice of social research*. South African edition., Cape Town: Oxford University Press.

Bahng, Y. & Kincade, D. H. (2014). Retail buyer segmentation based on the use of assortment decision factors, *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, *21*(4), 643-652.

Bruce, M. & Daly, L. (2006). Buyer behaviour for fast fashion, *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, *10*(3), 329-344.

Bruce, M. & Daly, L. (2007). Challenges of fashion buying and merchandising. In Hines, T. & Bruce, M. (eds.). *Fashion Marketing Contemporary Issues*. 2nd ed. New York, NY: Routledge. pp.78-96.

Choi, Y. E. & Gaskill, L. R. (2000). An analysis of mental processes, behaviors, and job satisfaction of apparel product developers and traditional retail buyers. *Journal of Business Research, 49*(1), 15-34.

Christopher, M., Lowson, R. & Peck, H. (2004). Creating agile supply chains in the fashion industry, *International Journal of Retail and Distribution Management, 32*(8), 367-376.

Clodfelter, R. (2015). *Retail buying: From basics to fashion*. London: Bloomsbury Academic Publishing.

Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.

Da Silva, R., Davies, G., & Naude, P. (2002). Assessing the influence of retail buyer variables on the buying decision-making process. *European Journal of Marketing, 36*(11/12), 1327-1343.

Fiorito, S. S., Gable, M., & Conseur, A. (2010). Technology: advancing retail buyer performance in the twenty-first century. *International Journal of Retail and Distribution Management, 38*(11/12), 879-893.

Frazier, B. J. & Cheek, W. K. (2016). An industry view of competencies for entry-level merchandising jobs: Application of the ITAA meta-goals, *Clothing and Textile Research Journal, 34*(2), 79-93.

Goworek, H. (2010). An investigation into product development processes for UK fashion retailers: A multiple case study, *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management. 14*(4), 648–662.

Goworek, H. (2014). An investigation into retail buying roles and responsibilities for own-label clothing: a multiple case-study. *The Journal of the Textile Institute, 105*(7), 760-769.

Greeff, M. (2011). Information collection: interviewing. In De Vos, A.S, Strydom, H, Fouché, C.B & Delport, C.S.L. (eds.). *Research at grassroots: for the social sciences and human service professions*. 4th ed. Pretoria: Van Schaik Publishers. pp. 341-374.

Grose, V. (2012). *Fashion Merchandising*. Lausanne: AVA Publishing.

Hart, C., Stachow, G. B., Farrell, A. M., & Reed, G. (2007). Employer perceptions of skills gaps in retail: issues and implications for UK retailers, *International Journal of Retail and Distribution Management*, *35*(4), 271-288.

Hugo, A., Haskell, C., Stroud, M., Ensor, C., Moodley, E., & Maritz, J. (2016). Prospects in the retail and consumer goods sector in ten sub-Saharan countries. *Retail-in-Africa, March, 2016.* Available at https://www.pwc.co.za/en/assets/pdf/retail-in-africa.pdf

Jacobs, B., & Karpova, E. (2020). Skills and knowledge for merchandising professionals: The case of the South African apparel retail industry. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 0887302X20935516.

Keiser, S.J. & Garner, M. B. (2010). *Beyond design. The synergy of apparel product Development*, 2nd ed. New York, NY: Fairchild Publications.

Kunz, G. I. (2010). *Merchandising: Theory Principles, and Practice.* New York, NY: Fairchild Books.

Manjeshwar, S., Sternquist, B., & Good, L. K. (2013), Decision making of retail buyers: perspectives from China and India. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, *16* (1), 38-52.

Muhammad, A. J. & Ha-Brookshire, J. E. (2011). Exploring job responsibilities and requirements of US textile and apparel sourcing personnel, *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, *15* (1), 41-57.

Nobbs, K., O'Sullivan, J., & Middleton, H. (2014). Exploring UK fashion buyers' and merchandisers' job roles. *Global Fashion Conference*. Retrieved from http://gfc-conference.eu/files_download/GFC2014/NOBBS.pdf

Pricewaterhousecoopers, (PwC). (2012). *South African retail and consumer products outlook: 2012-2016*. Available at http://pwc.co.za/en_ZA/za/assets/pdf/retail-and-consumer-products-outlook-2012-2016.pdf.

Swindley, D. (1992). The role of the buyer in UK multiple retailing, *International Journal of Retail and Distribution Management*, *20*(2), 3-15.

Varley, R. (2014). *Retail product management: buying and merchandising*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Wholesale and Retail Sector Education and Training Authority. (2016). *Sector skills plan 2016-2017,* available at. http://www.wrseta.org.za/downloads/2016-17%20WRSETA%20%20Sector%20Skills%20Plan.pdf

Wholesale and Retail Sector Education and Training Authority. (2018), *Sector skills plan 2019-2020*, available at https://www.wrseta.org.za/downloads/ Sector_Skills_Plan_2019_20.pdf

Zhong, Y. & Mitra, S. (2020), The role of fashion retail buyers in China and the buyer decision-making process, *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management: An International Journal*, pp. 1361-2026, DOI 10.1108/JFMM-