Investigating customer shopping experience in South African shopping centres

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DEDICATION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This dissertation is dedicated to my grandmother, Matsie Ditshego, whose enduring presence has been my guiding light. I owe my journey to you, for I am only here because of the foundation you laid. Through every trial, you've been my unwavering support, my north star, without whom this accomplishment would not be possible. Kea leboga, Mma.

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ABSTRACT

The customer shopping experience is a comprehensive construct encompassing various factors crucial for meeting and surpassing customer expectations. Understanding its nuances is imperative for businesses striving to excel. This experience not only involves different constructs but also serves as a precursor to elements such as customer loyalty, retention, trust, and satisfaction.

Technological advancements have brought significant shifts across industries, enhancing operations and processes. The retail sector, in particular, has witnessed profound changes due to technology. The growth and evolution of this industry are closely tied to technological advancements, providing opportunities to expand into diverse platforms. In recent years, there has been a notable transition from physical shopping centres to online retail platforms.

Despite physical shopping centres being a longstanding fixture in the retail industry, the emergence of e-commerce, social media, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic have disrupted their traditional role.

This study aimed to investigate the factors influencing customer shopping experience in South African shopping centres. Existing literature lacks a comprehensive examination of these factors, particularly in the context of physical shopping centres in South Africa. Therefore, this study delved into various aspects influencing customer shopping experience in these physical spaces.

The research employed a qualitative approach and an exploratory research design. A non-probability purposive sampling method was utilised to select and recruit participants for in-depth interviews. Data analysis followed the Morse and Field approach with ATLAS.ti 23 used for coding, categorial, and thematic analysis. Four themes emerged, comprising 19 categories.

The findings revealed diverse factors influencing customer shopping experience. Although subjective, customers consistently expressed a desire for convenience, good service, escapism, and tactility. The study also highlighted that these influencing factors encompass both tangible and intangible aspects. Organisations must consider multiple elements when curating the customer shopping experience within physical shopping centres.

KEY TERMINOLOGIES IN THIS STUDY

Activities

It is posited that shopping centres provide a variety of activities, including restaurants, games, outdoor pursuits, and cinemas (Ayeni, 2020:19).

Aesthetics

Aesthetics are a dimension that actively involves and enhances the visual responses of customers. Aesthetics refer to what a customer sees, touches and senses, such as: architecture, ambiance and atmosphere (Bapat & Hollebeek, 2023:838).

Browsing

Browsing occurs when a customer engages in the activity of inspecting products within a retail store without immediate intent to make a purchase (Chen *et al*., 2019:1129).

Customer shopping experience

Li *et al.* (2019:412) define customer shopping experience as a concept that is a culmination of different factors but hold the view that customer experience is subjective and internal. These factors include reactions and interactions that customers have with a product, brand, and organisation. Customer shopping experience is not viewed as a deliberate action, but rather a spontaneous reaction that stems from in-context stimuli (Keyser *et al*., 2020:437).

Escapism

Customers may desire to get away and experience a different reality outside of their normal lives. To this end, marketers can create experiences where the customer can exist in a world that is different from their everyday lives (Ali *et al.*, 2014:278).

Shopping centre

Ali *et al*. (2021:40) describe a shopping centre as a place where shopping activities take place and multiple retail outlets operate. Activities that take place within shopping centres may vary from one shopping centre to another.

Socialisation

Socialisation takes place when customers establish their own identities and choose to exchange those identities with others (Idoko *et al*., 2019:189).

Uniqueness

The uniqueness of shopping centres is created by different elements such as the interior and exterior design, ambience, lighting, accessories, architecture and the actual offerings of the shopping centre (Kusumowidagdo & Sachari, 2015:8).

Value co-creation

Value co-creation is the process characterised by challenges in empirical observation, as it arises from the coordinated endeavours of two or more actors within a specific relational and phenomenological context (Melis *et al*., 2023:700)

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION AND CONCEPTUALISATION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The introductory chapter of this research paper outlines the nature and structure of the study. This chapter commences with an introduction to the background to the research, followed by the study's research problem and the foundation of the research study. This chapter then summarises the primary and secondary research methodology applied to achieve the planned objectives. The chapter concludes with a clear and concise synopsis of each chapter in the study.

In the last decade, the global retail market has experienced significant changes in terms of its functionality and operational activities. Retailers have diversified their offerings and the manner of delivery through the inclusion of technology and the use of digital channels (Cantrell *et al.,* 2020:843). This can be attributed to numerous factors, but the leading one is the dominance of technology and, as of more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic (Rossolov *et al*., 2021:3144). As of late, both academics and practitioners have been increasingly focussed on the imminent retail apocalypse that involves traditional shopping centres. As online retail spaces have grown in the past few years, traditional shopping centres have done the exact opposite (Lee *et al*., 2022:94). Due to the strong preference for digital shopping channels, it is important to consider that the growth of one platform may lead to the demise of another (Asmare & Zewedie, 2022:60). The results from a study conducted by Park *et al*. (2021:69) indicate that there has been an increase in the number of customers who shop online which has caused an overall increase in online purchases, resulting in a decline in the number of customers shopping at physical shopping centres.

Lee *et al*. (2022:95) emphasise that the retail industry (in terms of physical shopping centres) faces a possible calamity. In the past decade, customers have slowly but surely moved towards virtual means of shopping and the COVID-19 pandemic has acted as a catalyst in cementing the approaching downfall of shopping centres globally (Rossolov *et al.,* 2021:3144). According to Park *et al*. (2021:70), statistics indicate a substantial decline in customer footfall at shopping centres globally whilst simultaneously recording a significant increase in online shopping. This alludes to the fact that customers are rapidly replacing traditional shopping at physical stores with online shopping, which will ultimately result in the downfall of shopping centres (Pretorius & Cloete, 2020:46).

Experience refers to events or moments in time that engage customers in a personal manner and that create relationships and bonds between an individual, a product, a brand, or an organisation (Keyser *et al*., 2020:437). Therefore, the customer shopping experience becomes a foundation where solid ties are formed and can be used as a method to capture the target market. In the context of shopping centres, experience may become tools that are applied to contest shopping centre decay (Mende & Noble, 2019:87). Marketers have identified multiple activities that may be used to create valuable shopping experiences for customers that could aid in increasing customer footfall and lengthen browsing times whilst simultaneously retaining existing customers (Ali *et al*., 2021:41). These activities include, but are not limited to, the creation of leisure and recreational activities (Ali *et al*., 2021:43). Therefore, it is imperative that organisations create positive customer shopping experiences that will increase footfall in shopping centres.

Positive customer experiences create associations between the customer and the physical place where the experience occurred and build emotional and sentimental bonds between the customer and the place (Terblanche, 2018:52). According to Rosenbaum-Elliot *et al*. (2018:40), emotional associations that stem from positive customer experience led to the formation of attachment. The authors continue to explain that when a customer has formed an attachment to a brand, product, or place then they are more likely to show an improved intention to purchase products at that place.

Therefore, the aim of this study was to explore the customer shopping experience in South African shopping centres. The results of this study will allow shopping centre owners and managers to gain a more holistic understanding of how customers experience physical shopping centres and to identify and address gaps in their current experiential offerings. The results of this study will further provide shopping centres with guidance on how to provide and enhance a desirable customer experience to improve competitiveness and increase foot traffic and ultimately increase revenues.

1.2 BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH PROBLEM

This section gives a clear outline of the background to the study. The section concludes with the identified research problem.

Asmare and Zewdie (2022:59) suggest that the retail industry is in the midst of a significant change due to different reasons; however, at the forefront is the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic acted as a catalyst that accelerated change that was bound to happen within the retail space. In an article by Pentz *et al*. (2020:230), the authors describe shopping centres as “limping entities”, even before the pandemic hit in the latter parts of 2019. Asmare and Zewdie (2022:61)

highlight the fact that shopping centres were struggling to compete with online shops prior to customers being forced to stay away due to the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, small and large retailers had begun the process of migrating from brick-and-mortar establishments to digital platforms. Online shopping has been a root cause of concern for shopping centres and retailers overall, as these platforms have challenged the norms and forced traditional shopping centres to reassess their position and offerings to their customers (Pentz *et al*., 2020:230).

The growth and development of technology have redefined the retail environment (Asmare & Zewdie, 2022:60). In 2020, it was reported that there has been a rapid increase in customer spending toward non-traditional retailers (Martínez *et al.,* 2021:600). Childs *et al*. (2020:263) define non-traditional retailers as pop-up shops, fashion subscription services and consumption models created for trading merchandise. These non-traditional retailers make use of technology and digital channels to create a holistic experience for their customers (Ansari & Mohitkar, 2018:34). Their business philosophy is customer-centric; it focuses on catering to the needs and wants of the customer (Childs *et al*., 2020:264). The existence and growth of non-traditional retailers are considered as the starting point of the retail apocalypse (Mao, 2021:548). Mao (2021:549) suggests that the emergence of non-traditional retailers may have led to large traditional retailers closing their doors. Traditional retailing is considered to be a brick-and-mortar establishment (Martínez *et al.,* 2021:600). As early as 2018, the retail industry was said to be going through an evolution that would restructure the existing environment forever (Ansari & Mohitkar 2018:35).

A study conducted by Hu and Jasper (2018:151) paints a different picture of shopping centres as compared to their current reality. Customers view shopping centres as a social arena where they participate in different activities and experiences that do not include traditional shopping. During the time that the study was conducted, the retail space was applauded, and shopping centres were the desired medium for marketing and advertising (Hu & Jasper, 2018:151). These sentiments were echoed in a study conducted by Kiriri (2019:258) where the increasing development of shopping centres was closely studied. In the article, the growth of shopping centres is described as “drastic” specifically on the African continent, stating that the number of shopping centres being developed in Africa doubled between 2011 and 2018. The majority of these newly developed shopping centres are situated in South Africa (Ntlhe, 2023:271).

Sandler and Kim (2019:2) identified two main causes of the retail apocalypse, one of which is the change in consumption patterns of customers. The change in consumption patterns indicated that customers have different needs that they wish to fulfil in brick-and-mortar establishments. Salvi

and Bhargava (2019:3557) oppose the retail apocalypse, as customers visit brick-and-mortar establishments for social reasons and not to purchase goods and services. Salvi and Bhargava (2019:3557) point out that customers' needs have changed over the years and that these needs are the main reason that customers continuously leave shopping centres empty-handed. An additional cause of the retail apocalypse has been identified as the state of financial issues for large retailers (Sandler & Kim, 2019:2). In their article Sandler and Kim (2019:2) point out that large retailers were facing the possibility of bankruptcy which was caused by multiple factors. Before the global pandemic, the traditional retail industry was grappling at straws to redefine and rebuild in order to compete with the digital world (Alflayyeh *et al*., 2020:3548). In 2018, marketers predicted that online retail would be on par with traditional retailing by the year 2023 (Ansari & Mohitkar, 2018:35).

The global pandemic introduced new problems for traditional retailers and shopping centres. Beckers *et al.* (2021:1) explain that before the emergence of COVID-19, the traditional retail industry was under strong scrutiny and there were plenty of retail stores closing their doors. Retailers had already begun the shift from brick-and-mortar establishments to online platforms (Ansari & Mohitkar, 2018:35). Governments all around the world implemented restrictions that halted physical shopping and forced customers to explore the online retail space (Beckers *et al*., 2021:1).

It is important to recognise that the global pandemic has forced customers to live, think and buy differently (Jo *et al*., 2021:2). Alflayyeh *et al*. (2020:3547) suggest that changes in the buying behaviour of customers brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic will be long-lasting and will have long-term effects on the existing retail structure. The global pandemic has caused changes in income levels and customers have chosen to prioritise their primary needs over leisure and entertainment (Alflayyeh *et al.,* 2020:3548). Hanninen *et al.* (2021:3) express the view that the events of the pandemic resulted in a 10-year digital leap for online retailing within the space of a year. COVID-19 has also propelled a multi-faceted channel integration where traditional retailers incorporate technological advances into their offerings to aid in their attempts to offer a seamless customer shopping experience (Hanninen *et al*., 2021:4).

The integration of different platforms with the aim of creating a service interface that will offer a seamless customer shopping experience is known as *omnichannel retailing* (Neslin, 2022:111). Omnichannel retailing melds traditional shopping at a brick-and-mortar establishment with digital experiences and ensures that retailers offer a seamless experience on all their platforms (Lim *et al.*, 2022:2). Digitalisation, social media, and big data have transformed the retail industry in a manner that compromises the core of traditional shopping (Chai & Lo, 2020:1). The

aforementioned (digitalisation, social media, and data) act as tools and platforms that are used by retailers to collect information of customers (Neslin, 2022:11). Retailers use the information that has been collected to synchronise physical stores with online platforms. This approach allows customers to dictate how and when they want to shop. Customers may purchase clothing or items online and collect these products at a physical store (Chai & Lo, 2020:1).

South Africa is described as a complex market because of the market dynamics in the country (a mixture of third-world and first-world economies). However, even with its complexities, the country houses a flourishing and competitive retail industry. The retail industry in South Africa mimics the global scene regarding its trends and changes (Pentz *et al.,* 2020:228). The growth and adoption of technology on the global scene are completely different to that of South Africa. In 2016, the online retail space in South Africa accounted for a mere one percent of total retail sales (Pentz *et al.,* 2020:230). This is very telling about how much the public in South Africa gravitated towards traditional shopping centres during that period. In 2020, there was a significant increase in online shopping in the country as more and more customers shied away from physical retail spaces (Githahu, 2020).

Lee *et al*. (2022:95) have expressed the view that the retail sector is looking at a major shift post-pandemic. The likelihood of the retail sector going back to what is deemed normal is very low and the industry should look at strategies to attract customers back to brick-and-mortar establishments (Ntlhe, 2023:271). Post-pandemic life will force organisations to offer more than just their products or services but rather a full experience to customers. Pentz *et al*. (2020:235) are of the opinion that the shopping centre is no more. For shopping centres to survive the new age they need to reinvent and offer customers a whole new shopping experience.

Given the changing retail landscape with customers substituting physical shopping centres with online shopping channels, a study that examines customer shopping experiences at physical shopping centres is an absolute need in the context of sustaining and reviving shopping centres in South Africa. Customer experience has not been studied post COVID-19 in the South African shopping centre context. The aim of the study was to delve deeper into existing literature on customer experience in a physical retail context and to gain a more profound understanding of how customers experience physical shopping centres. The study aimed to gain insight into why customers would prefer shopping at a physical shopping centre as opposed to shopping online, how they experience the shopping experience, and identify any discrepancies which may exist that could be addressed by shopping centre owners and managers in South Africa.

1.3 PRELIMINARY LITERATURE OVERVIEW

This section of the study will commence with a discussion of the customer shopping experience. The section will continue with a brief discussion of the eight dimensions that have been identified as having a profound influence on customer shopping experience when shopping at a physical shopping centre.

1.3.1 Customer shopping experience

Li *et al.* (2019:412) refer to the customer shopping experience as a multi-dimensional construct that encompasses different facets. Customer shopping experiences are not a construct that can easily be defined as a singular point or idea. Keyser *et al.* (2020:437) support this notion by defining the customer shopping experience as a psychological construct that is deeply rooted in interactions between the customer, brand, product, and the organisation. The authors continue to explain that the customer shopping experience, as a psychological construct, houses multiple components such as sensory, cognitive, and emotional components. Meng *et al*. (2023:474) affirms that the customer shopping experience is subjective and internal. The customer shopping experience is based on an individual and not a collective. Thus, the challenge inherent when defining the customer shopping experience stems from the fact that customers are diverse and complex in nature, which makes it difficult to posit the construct as a singular idea (Meng *et al*., 2023:474).

Yliehto *et al*. (2021:663) note that customer shopping experiences need to be viewed from a broader scope and state that moments before, during and after the actual experience should be examined critically. An examination of these three phases provides a holistic picture for marketers and will exemplify the importance of the customer shopping experience. Alhouti *et al*. (2015:416) indicate that marketers recognise the importance of the customer shopping experience and note that experience does not only influence a customer's intention to purchase but also plays a crucial role in shaping customer perception.

There has been a huge paradigm shift in the customer shopping experience over the past few years (Ylilehto *et al.,* 2021:661). This is due to several different reasons, but the leading cause is the dominance of technology; shopping experiences are said to be heavily influenced by the advancement of technologies. Innovation has brought about a different element to customer experience. It indulges in the personalisation of experiences that physical shopping centres cannot do as they cater to a mass market. The adoption of technology has provided retailers with the opportunity to create a personalised world outside of the traditional shopping centre (Calvo *et al*., 2023:1179).

Lemon and Verhoef (2016:69) explain that providing a positive customer shopping experience is an integral part of a customer's journey. Thus, the customer shopping experience has become a leading objective for many organisations. Customers can interact with organisations on countless touchpoints on various online channels and media platforms (Calvo *et al*., 2023:1179). This has intensified the need for organisations to develop and create departments and positions that are centred around the customer shopping experience (Zimmermann *et al*., 2023:275). Roozen and Katidis (2019:250) support these sentiments and further explain that organisations are moving to replace quality with the customer shopping experience. Marketing practitioners prioritise defining and improving the customer shopping experience which they regard as a prerequisite to achieving customer loyalty, customer satisfaction and customer spending (Roozen & Katidis, 2019:248).

Tseng and Yazdanifard (2015:1038) criticise past research that views the customer shopping experience as a reaction; the customer experience is rather something that is formed and created in the mind of a customer. The customer shopping experience is a 'take-away' that customers leave with after they have interacted with an organisation. This 'take-away' is formed by an amalgamation of various amounts of sensory information that a customer encounters (Batsakis *et al*., 2023:833). Activities of the retail sector are different to those of online shopping. Customers may be faced with limited options and information at a brick-and-mortar establishment, whereas online shopping provides a plethora of options and information. For this reason, Batsakis *et al*. (2023:834) highlight that the creation and existence of an enjoyable shopping experience could be the deciding factor.

Over the years, scholars and marketers have attempted to define the customer shopping experience in its full essence. Hu and Jasper (2018:152) studied the conceptualisation of the customer shopping experience and found that even with the pools of literature that exist on this specific construct, many have failed to devise an effective tool that marketers can use to assess and measure the customer shopping experience. Prior research has set a benchmark for new research; however, the research does not seek to understand the customer shopping experience from the customer's own view/account or from a memory (Hu & Jasper, 2018:155). Hu and Jasper (2018:155) identified eight dimensions that could have an influence on the customer shopping experience when shopping at a physical shopping centre. These eight dimensions include aesthetics, escapism, browsing, socialisation, activity, shopping for fashion, uniqueness and service.

1.3.1.1 Aesthetics

For many the aesthetic dimension is often limited to a visual sensory experience, however, aesthetics encompasses more than what meets the eye. Aesthetics are what a customer sees, hears, smells and touches; this specific dimension engages all the customer's senses (Bapat & Hollebeek, 2023:838). Cassel (2015:28) highlights those details such as the interior and exterior design, the layout, the scent and the colours on the walls play an important role when creating a certain ambience and atmosphere in a physical shopping environment. The minor details that make up a physical environment are categorised as atmospheric cues (Cassel, 2015:28). The aesthetic dimension is precise in nature and varies from one customer to the other; one customer may indulge in the look and feel of a place whilst the other is intrigued by the ambience created by the said place (Lai *et al*., 2020:1803). Thus, it is important for retailers (shopping centres) to create sensory stimulation for customers (Cassel, 2015:28). In their study of the Batu Cave (Malaysia), Musa *et al*. (2017:114) found that the aesthetic dimension involves more than just what is tangible. The participants reported an unpleasant smell from their visit which detracted from their experience.

The aesthetic dimension requires customers to immerse themselves within an environment or event without participating in or altering the environment or the event (Hu & Jasper, 2018:151) In previous studies, many associated this dimension with visits to recreational places such as a museum, the zoo and parks (Walean *et al*., 2023:2043). The customers are not actively participating in the activities but are rather indulging in the said events. The aesthetics dimension allows the customer to interpret the physical environment on their own terms, and because of this, studies have identified and recognised that aesthetics play an integral role in consumer behaviour and consumer decision-making (Sharma & Rather, 2015:22). Aesthetics may seem like a relatively insignificant aspect in the construct of customer shopping experience; however, it is notable to state that studies have shown that aesthetics play a key role in creating a positive customer experience and maintaining interest and involvement in retail shopping (Bagdare, 2015:12; Sharma & Rather, 2015:26).

1.3.1.2 Escapism

Customers seek to get away and create a different reality for themselves outside of their normal lives, hence marketers are required to create experiences where the customer can exist in a world that is different from their own (Ali *et al.*, 2014:278). Musa *et al.* (2017:114) explain that escapism comprises four different elements, namely psychological, physical, cultural and nostalgia. Musa *et al.* (2017:115) refer to psychological escapism as a customer's mental and psychological experience (i.e., a customer watching a movie). Physical escapism is the customer's active

involvement in a said activity (i.e., touching clothing items, touching food items when grocery shopping or interacting with an employee of a retail store). Cultural escapism refers to a customer experiencing another culture outside of their own culture or the cultures of individuals that they know personally. Nostalgia involves the customer recalling previous experiences or visits to a specific place, like a particular shopping centre (Musa *et al.,* 2017:115).

1.3.1.3 Browsing

Browsing refers to when a customer participates in the act of examining products within a retail store with no intention of purchasing the product at that very moment (Chen *et al*. 2019:1129). Window-shopping, also known as browsing, is an important aspect of the overall shopping experience for any customer. This activity can be viewed as an experiential aspect of shopping as it offers the customer the ability to touch, feel and immerse themselves in a product that they are considering purchasing (Bagdare, 2015:14). According to Reynolds *et al.* (2012:678) when a customer browses, there is no current intent to purchase. However, the time the customer spends browsing may be a turning point; when a customer is given access to touch the products, to look at the designs and to feel the newness it may lead to impulse purchases (Bagdare, 2015:14). Nthle (2023:272) considers browsing as a leisure activity for customers. Customers who participate in browsing activities are those who find pleasure in shopping activities. Browsing is considered as a form of customer shopping experience that taps into all five senses as well as a customer's emotions (Reynolds, 2012:1129). Browsing may lead to socialisation if a customer engages with other customers or staff whilst looking at products.

1.3.1.4 Socialisation

Socialisation takes place when customers establish their own identities and choose to exchange those identities with others (Idoko *et al*., 2019:189). Through the exchange of personal information, customers build connections and relationships. There has been an immense change in social structures over the years as customers use different platforms as their habitats for their social lives (Idoko *et al*., 2019:189). Researchers have identified a trend where customers use shopping centres as social spaces. Thanasi-Boçe *et al.* (2021:226) state that a common reason that customers use shopping centres as a social space is their desire to see and be seen. Shopping centres are no longer primarily dedicated to the purchase of goods and services but are now used for excursions, meetings, and social interactions. Young customers and middle-class customers are typically those who use shopping centres for social purposes (Thanasi-Boçe *et al.*, 2021:225).

AlMutawa (2020:51) explains that shopping centres serve different social purposes for different customers. Some customers use shopping centres as a place to meet new people, while others use them as a meeting place for friends and families. Tortorici and Alefjord (2020:6) highlight that the use of shopping centres as a social space allows customers to fulfil their psychological needs. A noteworthy observation is that customers who visit shopping centres with the intention to socialise may realise that they need to purchase a particular item or engage in other activities.

1.3.1.5 Activity

Shopping centres have turned into hubs for recreational activities, retail entertainment and a centre for social activities for customers (Makgopa, 2018:122). Makgopa (2018:122) indicates that in its infant years, shopping centres were created for the sole purpose of purchasing goods, however, today shopping centres are becoming a lifestyle destination for customers. In a study conducted by Nasim and Shamshir (2018:87), activities performed by customers at physical shopping centres vary in terms of age and gender. In the study, most women visit a shopping centre to purchase clothing, shoes and home products. On the other end of the spectrum, men visit shopping centres to purchase leisure products, listen to music and test electronic products (Nasim & Shamshir, 2018:87).

Ayeni (2020:19) posits that shopping centres house multiple activities like restaurants, games, outdoor retail, and cinemas. Activities vary from one country to another (first world countries and third world countries), and the size of the shopping centre dictates the activities that may be found there. Customers have been found to prefer visiting shopping centres where they are able to eat, watch a movie, play games, and shop for fashion (Nasim & Shamshir, 2018:87).

1.3.1.6 Shopping for fashion

Prolific online fashion retailers such as Fashion Nova, SHEIN and Pretty Little Things have changed the face of fashion retail shopping and has created a completely new dimension for customers (Demir & Koksoy, 2021:1858). The use of technology has introduced a new world of fashion shopping for customers. The need for the customer to go to a physical store to purchase a clothing item is slowly but surely diminishing (Choi *et al*., 2015:1). Although technology presents new opportunities for fashion shopping, studies show that translating in-store shopping experiences to online platforms has proven to be difficult (Blazquez, 2017:97). Clothing requires high involvement from the customer; customers need to feel, touch, and fit the said clothing items. Therefore, customers are required to visit brick-and-mortar stores to execute the aforementioned activities. Brick-and-mortar establishments provide the instant gratification for customers when they purchase clothing items (Blazquez, 2017:98). Customers who prefer to shop online need to

check websites and advertisements before they consider going into a physical store to purchase clothing (Choi *et al*., 2015:1). Therefore, by providing a unique and positive shopping experience, customers would be more likely to visit a physical shopping centre out of their own free will.

1.3.1.7 Uniqueness

There have been immense changes to the architecture and interior design of shopping centres over the years. Kusumowidagdo *et al*. (2015:1) explain that current and future developments of shopping centres will prioritise experience. The place-human relationship binds customers to experiences created in certain environments by means of affecting all senses. Studies indicate that customers pay close attention to certain factors when they choose their place of purchase (Kunc *et al*., 2016:27). Factors like quality service, variety of goods, atmosphere, cleanliness, shops, and the architectural attractiveness of a shopping centre all play a decisive role in the customer's decision to shop at a specific place (Kunc *et al*., 2016:27). The uniqueness of shopping centres is created by different elements such as the interior and exterior design, ambience, lighting, accessories, architecture and the actual offerings of the shopping centre (Kusumowidagdo & Sachari, 2015:8).

The attributes that contribute to the uniqueness of shopping centres are mostly based on the preference of the customer as some attributes are tangible and others are intangible. Tangible attributes include the design, parking, location, centre facilities, and retail outlets within the shopping centre. Intangible factors refer to factors like customer service, atmosphere, safety and security, reputation, and hours of operation (Gomes & Paula, 2017:4). Customers are looking to spend their money in establishments that create a memorable shopping experience and that provide superior customer service (Bonfanti & Yfantidou, 2021:1304).

1.3.1.8 Service

Quality service is defined as an attitude towards the superiority of a service or lack thereof and where service is assessed through the expectations and perceptions of the customer (Kushwaha *et al*., 2017:274). The service that a customer receives plays a crucial role in their overall shopping experience, hence service experience has become a key concept for marketers (Bueno *et al*., 2019:784). Service experience is a service process that triggers the customer's mental, behavioural, and emotional response which leads to memory creation (Bueno *et al*., 2019:784). Service experience may be viewed from three main angles, namely *servicescape,* service delivered by employees and core service (Tsou *et al*., 2019:5) Tsou *et al.* (2019:5) explain that *servicescape* refers to the physical environment where the service takes place (i.e. the shopping centre); employee service is described as the performance of the employees; and the core service

refers to the actual service offered by the establishment. A positive service experience increases the likelihood of customer satisfaction and purchase intention (Tsou *et al.,* 2019:5).

1.4 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1.4.1 Primary objective

The primary objective of this study was to investigate customer shopping experiences in South African shopping centres.

1.4.2 Secondary objective

The following secondary objectives were derived from and are aimed to support the primary research objective:

1. Provide an overview of existing literature based on the constructs utilised in this study.
2. Investigate the factors that motivate participants to shop at a physical shopping centre.
3. Explore and describe the experience of participants when shopping at a physical shopping centre.
4. Explore and describe the value derived by participants when shopping at a physical shopping centre.
5. Explore and describe the factors that contribute to the attractiveness of a physical shopping centre.

1.5 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Prior to commencing with a marketing research study, the identification of a suitable philosophical undertone or paradigm on which the research is conducted is required (Zukauskas *et al.*, 2017:1). Kamal (2019:1388) defines a paradigm as a representation of the researcher's beliefs and values. The paradigm that researchers adopt dictates the researcher's investigation in terms of the methods used for data collection as well as how the data will be analysed. Braun and Clarke (2022:175) are of the opinion that a paradigm helps the researcher to understand and clarify the purpose of the study, and to produce a coherent analysis. The notion and importance of a research paradigm were explained by Kuhn (1970) as a guiding principle for a researcher regarding the "right way" to conduct the research.

For the purposes of this study, an interpretivist paradigm was adopted. An interpretivist paradigm was implemented when exploring the meaning of the data collected and then determining why those meanings were relevant (Braun & Clarke, 2022:289). Pervin and Mokhtar (2022:421) assert that an interpretivist paradigm is based on the premise that human experience and the social environment shape reality. Thus, an interpretivist paradigm is an appropriate paradigm to implement when conducting research on consumer behaviour based on experience against a specific social backdrop. When conducting interpretive research, the focus is on the participant's subjective experiences, notions and beliefs (Rehman & Alaharthi, 2016:55). By conducting an interpretivist study, the researcher was able to obtain further depth by seeking experiences and perceptions of a particular social context and therefore, a qualitative approach to conducting the study was more suitable (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020:39).

Qualitative research is conducted when a more profound and deeper understanding of a topic or phenomenon is sought by using in-depth exploratory studies (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020:40; Van Rensburg *et al*., 2017:99). According to Rahman (2017:103), more precise details of a participant's life, lived experiences, behaviour, emotions, and opinions can be obtained by conducting qualitative research. In addition, qualitative research has a flexible structure which allows participants the freedom to answer as honestly as possible. Some of the methods used to collect data when conducting qualitative research include face-to-face interviews, observations and focus groups (Mishra & Alok, 2015:3). For the purposes of this study, a qualitative approach was implemented in this study, as the study's aim was to investigate customer shopping experiences in South African shopping centres. The researcher's aim was to gain an in-depth understanding of how participants experience shopping at physical shopping centres in South Africa, and how such experiences can be enhanced to improve customer footfall.

The next step of the research process was to identify a suitable research design. A research design informs the way the tasks and components of the research must be arranged. In qualitative research, however, any task or component may need to be reconsidered or rearranged as the research progresses. These components may include the activities involved in collecting and analysing data, the manner in which theory is developed and modified, the elaboration on or refocusing of the research questions, and the methods used to ensure rigour (Maxwell, 2013:2). According to Lambert and Lambert (2012:255), some of the more popular research designs when conducting qualitative research include ethnography, grounded theory, and phenomenology. A phenomenological research design is typically implemented when the aim of a study is to investigate, analyse and understand the lived experience of a participant and the meanings attached to such experiences. In addition, the characteristics that make a specific experience meaningful to the participant are explored. By so doing, participants can be better understood,

and marketers can use this insight to create effective and desirable experiences for customers, leveraging and magnifying the impact of such experiences (Ziakas & Boukas, 2014:57). For the purposes of this study, the study adopted an inductive phenomenological research design as it aimed to understand customers' shopping experience when shopping at a physical shopping centre. Furthermore, the meaning of such experiences will be sought to deduce how marketers can improve lived experiences of customers when shopping at a physical shopping centre in South Africa in order to improve customer footfall.

1.5.1 Literature investigation

In an effort to gain a full and comprehensive insight for this study, a multitude of sources were consulted. These sources included but were not limited to academic articles, books and expert reports. The use of these sources was to ensure that this study consists of relevant and accurate information that was used to formulate a strong theoretical background. The information and data collected were concerned with the research problem and constructs. The following databases were utilised to obtain the relevant data and information that is needed for this study:

- A-Z publication finder
- EBSCOhost
- Emerald insight journals
- Google scholar
- JSTOR
- ScienceDirect

1.5.2 Target population

Lamb *et al*. (2015:211) describe a target population as a population of interest where this specific group of participants hold information that a researcher requires to reach the objectives of the study. A study's target population is usually defined in terms of elements, extent, and time. *Elements* refer to the individuals who participate in a study according to specific criteria; the *extent* refers to the geographical boundaries in which the research study will be conducted; and the *time* refers to the period in which data will be gathered from the population under consideration (Esteban-Bravo & Vidal-Sanz, 2021:637).

For the purposes of this study, the sampling elements were defined as individuals aged 18 and older, who had visited a physical shopping centre in the past six months, and who reside in the Western Cape. The sampling population is therefore the Western Cape province of South Africa. The time during which the data was gathered was from December 2022 to January 2023.

The study was conducted in the Western Cape of South Africa. Besides the Gauteng province, the Western Cape houses the second largest number of shopping centres in South Africa (Bell, 2020). According to Ntlhe (2023:271) the relationship between the economic and social effects of shopping centre developments in South Africa is strong, with many centres playing a significant role in both societal well-being and economic vitality. Moreover, the incorporation of social elements into the shopping experience has transformed the shopping centre environment into an integral aspect of the local community's cultural identity (Ntlhe, 2023:271). In addition, at the time of conducting this study, little to no research had been conducted on customers' shopping experiences at physical shopping centres in the Western Cape, albeit the second largest concentration of shopping centres in South Africa.

1.5.3 Sampling

A sample can be described as a smaller subset of a larger population. When the population size is too vast for the study to include all possible members or observations, samples are drawn. A sample should accurately reflect the entire population rather than express a bias toward a single attribute of the population (Kenton, 2021). The subsequent sections provide a brief discussion of the various elements of the sampling plan, including the sampling frame, the sampling method, and the sample size.

1.5.3.1 Sampling frame

A sampling frame is a complete list of probable items used to draw a sample for a study (Berndt, 2020:225). For the purposes of this study, the researcher was unable to acquire a sampling frame. Therefore, an appropriate non-probability sampling method was used to draw a suitable sample from the target population.

1.5.3.2 Sampling method

Sampling methods are broadly categorised into two main categories, namely probability and non-probability sampling (Singh & Ajay, 2014:3). Berndt (2020:225) explains that the use of probability sampling requires the researcher to obtain certain knowledge on the chosen target population. Therefore, a sample frame or list of all participants is a necessity and prerequisite for conducting a probability sample. Probability sampling is used when every element in the population has a

definite and known probability of being a part of the final sample. This sampling method includes simple random, stratified random and clustered sampling (Mishra & Alok, 2017:10).

Non-probability sampling is subjective and is based on the selection that the researcher makes beforehand (Berndt, 2020:225). Therefore, this sampling technique does not include the whole population, but rather a subset of the population under consideration. Non-probability sampling is identified as a sampling method that is easy, quick, and straightforward and includes purposive, convenience, and quota sampling (Mishra & Alok, 2017:8).

For the purposes of this study, non-probability purposive sampling was used. Purposive sampling is based on the researcher's own judgement and is often used to select the most appropriate sampling elements to include in a study based on certain criteria (Babin & Zikmund, 2016:348). The inclusion criteria according to which prospective participants were judged are as follows:

- Participants were required to be 18 years of age or older for ethical reasons.
- Participants must have visited a physical shopping centre in the Western Cape in the past six months.
- Participants were required to reside in the Western Cape province.

Participants were invited to participate in the study by means of posting an invitation on various Facebook pages of shopping centres located in the Western Cape Province (Appendix D). These shopping centres include Canal Walk, Somerset Mall, V&A Waterfront, Cavendish Square, Tyger Valley Centre, Cape Quarter Lifestyle Centre, The Point Mall, Garden Route Mall, and Eden Meander Lifestyle Centre. Prior to posting the invitation to participate in the study on each shopping centre's Facebook page, permission was obtained from the page administrator. The invitation stated the aim of the study, the inclusion criteria of the study, and a clause containing details about participating in the study, highlighting that participation was voluntary and that responses would remain anonymous. The invitation informed prospective participants that interviews would take approximately 60 minutes to complete and would commence online by using the Microsoft Teams or Zoom applications.

A formal invitation to participate in the study was forwarded to prospective participants who were interested in taking part in the study (Appendix B) on the same communication channel that they used to communicate with the researcher (i.e., via Facebook Messenger or email). The official information required the participant to share available dates and times with the researcher as to when they would be able to participate in the interview and on which platform (Microsoft Teams

or Zoom). The researcher then scheduled a suitable date and time with the participant by sharing a link to the session with them.

Together with the confirmation of the date and time of the interview, the researcher sent a consent form (Appendix C) that had to be signed by the participant prior to taking part in the interview. A week prior to the interview, the researcher also shared the interview guide (Appendix A) with the participants so that they were able to prepare accordingly by reviewing the questions that were asked during the interview. A reminder of the interview session was sent to the participant two days prior to the date of the interview.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed in order for further analysis to commence. The transcriptions were completed by a professional transcriptions company based on the Potchefstroom Campus of the North-West University known as *Language Matters*.

1.5.3.3 Sampling size

For the purpose of obtaining appropriate and precise findings, researchers need to ensure that an accurate sample size is determined (Kang, 2021:1). Nayak and Singh (2021:85) indicate that sample size determination plays a vital role in the research process in any field of study. Qualitative studies typically have much smaller sample sizes than quantitative studies (Mishra & Alok, 2015:3). According to Dukes (1984), a qualitative sample size of five to eight participants is acceptable in a homogeneous group and will provide sufficient data for the researcher to analyse effectively. Creswell (2013) is of the opinion that three to ten participants will suffice for a phenomenological study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) affirm that 12 to 20 participants are required for a study in which interviews are conducted. However, the guidelines provided by these authors lack a clear and detailed rationale (Sim *et al.*, 2018:620). Instead, when making use of purposive sampling in a qualitative study, the point of data saturation is mostly used to determine sample size (Morse, 2015:587). According to Hennik and Kaiser (2022:2), the point of data saturation refers to the point in data collection when no new insight is realised and when data begins to repeat so that further data-collection is redundant. At this point, the sample size has been reached. **For the purposes of this study**, data was gathered until the point of saturation was reached. Point of saturation was reached after nine interviews.

Table 1-1: Sampling plan for the study

Design elements	Application to empirical study
Sampling element	Participants aged 18 years or older who have visited a physical shopping centre in the Western Cape in the past six months and who reside in the Western Cape province.
Extent	Western Cape
Time	December 2022 to January 2023
Sampling method	Non-probability purposive sampling
Sample size	Depends on when the point of saturation is reached. Nine interviews were conducted before point of saturation was reached.

1.6 INTERVIEW GUIDE

For the purposes of this study, in-depth unstructured interviews were used to explore and investigate the lived experience of customers when shopping at physical shopping centres in the Western Cape. According to Ataro (2020:20), the preferred method for gathering data when conducting a qualitative phenomenological study was by means of conducting interviews. Prior to conducting the in-depth interviews with participants, the researcher underwent extensive training in the interview process. In addition, the researcher's supervisor attended the interview sessions to monitor the process and to ask additional questions that the researcher may have missed. The first interview was a pilot interview, conducted in the same manner that all the subsequent interviews were conducted by using participants with the same characteristics as those from the study's target population.

The interview guide (Appendix A) comprises various questions regarding the reasons why participants would rather opt to visit a physical shopping centre as opposed to browsing for or buying products online. In addition, questions were asked pertaining to the customer experience of physical shopping centres, and the value derived when frequenting a physical shopping centre. Lastly, participants were asked what they found attractive about a physical shopping centre, and what they would suggest shopping centres do to make it a more attractive option for customers to visit or do their shopping at. Interviews lasted for approximately 60 minutes.

1.7 DATA ANALYSIS

According to Nayak and Singh (2021:143) the analysis of qualitative data begins at the moment of observation or interviewing. Analysing data in its infancy stage allows the researcher to identify problems and concepts in a timely manner. The data collected underwent a process of preliminary

preparation which consisted of editing and cleaning the data of any inconsistencies. The method that was used to analyse the data will be discussed in the subsequent sections.

1.7.1 Data preparation

Once data had been gathered by means of conducting in-depth interviews it would undergo a process of preparation where the audio recordings would be transcribed for further analysis to commence (Nayak & Singh, 2021:160). For the purposes of this study, recordings were transcribed by *Language Matters*, a video and audio transcription services agency that is based on the Potchefstroom Campus of the North-West University. The transcriptions were uploaded to ATLAS.ti 23, a computer programme that was used for coding, categorisation and thematic analysis. The researcher read through all the transcripts and compared them with the original recordings to ensure correctness prior to continuing with the coding process.

1.7.2 Method of data analysis: Morse and Field Approach

Once data had been gathered by means of conducting in-depth interviews it would undergo a process of preparation where the audio recordings would be transcribed for further analysis to commence (Nayak & Singh, 2021:160). For the purposes of this study, recordings were transcribed by *Language Matters*, a video and audio transcription services agency that is based on the Potchefstroom Campus of the North-West University. The transcriptions were uploaded to ATLAS.ti 23, a computer programme that was used for coding, categorisation and thematic analysis. The researcher read through all the transcripts and compared them with the original recordings to ensure correctness prior to continuing with the coding process.

Morse and Field (1996:103) explain that for theory to emerge from raw data, a process of complete immersion and familiarity needs to take place. Data needs to go through a process of conjecture, verification, correction and modification before it is transformed into valuable theory. The Morse and Field approach consists of four steps that may occur sequentially, namely comprehend, synthesise, theorise and re-contextualise.

1.7.2.1 Step 1: Comprehend

Comprehension is achieved when the researcher can prepare a thorough description of the phenomenon that is being studied. Any new data that may be presented does not add or subtract from the given description (Beck *et al*., 2010:320). For the purposes of this study, the researcher conducted an extensive literature review prior to gathering the data by means of conducting in-depth interviews. This allowed the researcher to identify any interesting insights gained during data collection. According to Morse (1994:26), the researcher should practise caution, however,

to ensure that the perceptions gained of the topic at hand when conducting the preliminary literature review do not affect or contaminate the evidence gathered. Open coding was used in order to ensure the separation of preconceived ideas and new ideas obtained (Saldana, 2016:148). According to Williams and Moser (2019:48), open coding is the first level of coding in which textual and regularly occurring indicators are compared to previously identified indicators. This allowed the researcher to obtain a better understanding of the phenomenon under study.

1.7.2.2 Step 2: Synthesise

Morse and Field (1996:105) explain synthesis as the sifting stage of the data. This is when researchers can confidently explain and describe the norms. A point of synthesis has been reached when the researcher can confidently describe the feelings and behaviour of the participants without referring to notes. The coding process forms part of the synthesising stage, which can be defined as a process of assigning a word or phrase to a portion of textual or visual data (Williams & Moser, 2019:46). For the purposes of this study, the ATLAS.ti 23 programme was used to aid with the coding process. The researcher analysed the transcripts line by line to identify inductive codes. When engaging in line-by-line analysis, the researcher implemented horizontalization. The process of horizontalization requires the researcher to be amenable to any comments or ideas obtained during the gathering of data and treat each response with equal value (Moustakas, 1994:122). Axial coding, the second level of coding, will then be used to cluster the assigned codes into categories. According to Williams and Moser (2019:50), axial coding identifies relationships between open codes to develop categories. The researcher continued the analytical process by reviewing and subsuming the identified categories with the aim of suggesting emerging theories.

1.7.2.3 Step 3: Theorise

The process of theorising data involves systematically sorting data. In this phase, researchers are able to devise alternative explanations for the phenomenon under study (Beck *et al*., 2010:320). For the purposes of this study, a comparison of the various interpretations and explanations was made to determine which one best suited the existing data. This process continued until the most adequate and suitable theories were obtained. During the theorising phase of data analysis, bracketing and intuiting were used. Dorfler and Stierand (2021:787) explain that bracketing occurs when the researcher maintains an open mind towards the data gathered and the interpretation thereof by bracketing out any preconceived ideas or interpretations of the phenomenon under study. Once the researcher completed the bracketing process, intuiting ensues, in which the researcher must become immersed in the phenomenon

under study in order to understand the phenomenon by focusing on preceded research (Greening, 2019:90).

1.7.2.4 Step 4: Re-contextualise

This phase develops the theory until a point where the theory may be considered to be applicable to other settings or research (Beck *et al*., 2010:320). For the purposes of this study, the theories that have been identified in the literature review and the results of the face-to-face interviews were integrated for the purpose of re-contextualisation.

1.7.3 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness refers to the overall quality that is associated with a study. According to Guba (1981:80), trustworthiness is determined by considering four criteria, namely credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

- **Credibility (in preference to internal validity)** looks at whether the findings of the research correlate and are a true reflection of the original data that has been collected (Kyngas *et al*., 2020:42). Credibility comprises two factors; one ensures the believability of the findings, and the other is the steps that are taken to showcase the credibility in research reports (Connelly, 2016:435).

- **Transferability (in preference to external validity)** refers to the degree to which the findings of the study will be applicable to other projects and fields (Kyngas *et al*., 2020:46). Stahl and Kind (2020:27) maintain that transferability seeks to expand understanding and meaning by transferring findings from one context to another.

- **Dependability (in preference to reliability)** refers to the assessment of the quality of the different processes that data goes through before it reaches a point of theory generation. Dependability also describes consistency from the starting point until the end (Kyngas *et al*., 2020:44). Stahl and King (2020:27) refer to dependability as the trust in trustworthiness.

- **Confirmability (in preference to objectivity)** measures the degree to which the findings of the study support the collected data (Kyngas *et al*., 2020:46). Confirmability refers to the process of getting as close to objective reality as qualitative research can get by not constructing one's own reality, but rather to pursue objectivity (Stahl & King, 2020:28).

Table 1-2 provides an explanation as to how the researcher ensured that every criterion was met for the purposes of this study.

Table 1-2: Provisions to be made by the researcher to address trustworthiness

Quality criterion	Provision to be made by the researcher
Credibility	• Prolonged engagement with the topic under study. • Adoption of well-recognised research methods. • Iterative questioning in data gathering dialogues. • Negative case analysis. • Member checks of data collected, and interpretations/theories formed. • Thick description of phenomena under scrutiny. • Examination of previous research to frame findings.
Transferability	• Provision of background data to establish the context of the study and a detailed description of the phenomena in question to allow comparisons to be made. • Describe the methods and time frames for the gathering of data.
Dependability	• Peer Scrutiny is when another researcher will read and react to the data gathered, the methods of analysis and the findings of the study. • Bracketing, both during the gathering of data and the analysis of data. • Reflexive auditing is when the researcher describes their involvement in the decisions made in the research process.
Confirmability	• Admission of researcher's beliefs and assumptions. • Recognition of shortcomings in the study's methods and their potential effects. • In-depth methodological description to allow the integrity of research results to be scrutinised. • Use of diagrams to demonstrate the "audit trail".

Source: Adapted from Shenton (2004) and Stahl and King (2020).

1.8 CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY

The customer shopping experience has been applied to a variety of fields and industries, and subsequently, there is a world of literature that exists on this concept. The knowledge gained from conducting this study will contribute significantly to the existing literature on customer shopping experiences. The study will also provide insight into the way the identified factors contribute to the customer shopping experience. This study aimed to uncover a phenomenon that will detail how the customer shopping experience can be utilised to make physical shopping centres more attractive to customers. With the knowledge and information gained from this study, marketers could devise effective and efficient marketing strategies by highlighting those factors that are deemed desirable by customers when looking for a unique experience when shopping at a physical shopping centre. To formulate appropriate strategies that will enhance and aid shopping centres. By so doing, physical shopping centres will be able to attract a higher customer footfall, and ultimately improve profitability levels. Additionally, Shopping centres play an important role not only in the economy but in communities at large. Redefining ways to uplift shopping centres also implies that the communities in and around those shopping centres will be uplifted.

Enhancing the customer shopping experience will give shopping centres the edge over other retail platforms.

1.9 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The proposal for this study was submitted to the Scientific Committee of the School of Management Sciences at the North-West University. The proposal was closely assessed prior to approval. Once the members of the Scientific Committee approved the proposal, it was submitted to the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences (EMS-REC) to obtain ethical clearance. Ethical clearance was first sought prior to gathering the data.

Participants were not coerced into participating in this study as they were given the opportunity to either agree or disagree to participate in the study. Participants were required to be 18 years of age or older.

Prior to taking part in the interview, participants were required to sign a consent form (Appendix C). By completing and signing the form, participants provided voluntary consent to partake in the study. The form stipulates that the identity of the participants and their responses will remain anonymous and confidential. Participants were assigned a unique number that was used during the data analysis process and to quote their responses in the results chapter of the study.

1.10 OUTLINE OF THE PROPOSED CHAPTERS

- **Chapter one: Introduction and conceptualisation**

  The first chapter consists of an introduction to the study, and it provides an extensive overview of the study. The overview includes the research problem (which outlines trends and changes in the retail industry), the objectives (primary and secondary) and the research methodology.

- **Chapter two: Retailing and customer experience**

  Chapter two provides a thorough and clear literature discussion of the identified construct, customer shopping experience. Chapter two presents to the reader a discussion of the South African retail industry with a specific focus on the current state of affairs pertaining to physical shopping centres and the retail apocalypse. This chapter also provides the reason why physical shopping centres need to adapt their offerings to customers by incorporating new and novel experiences into their plans of operation.

- **Chapter three: Research methodology**

  Chapter three is dedicated to the research methodology of the study, and it discusses how the methods and processes that have been chosen have been utilised to achieve the primary and secondary objectives of the study.

- **Chapter four: Empirical findings**

  This chapter provides a thorough analysis of the data that has been gathered and provides conclusions on the hypotheses that have been developed. The chapter concludes by stating the acceptance or rejection of the hypotheses.

- **Chapter five: Conclusions, recommendations, and limitations**

  This chapter states the conclusion of the study based on the results and findings of the study. It makes sound and solid recommendations to the South African retail industry (shopping centres). It includes the limitations that have been identified during the course of the study.

CHAPTER 2 RETAILING AND CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a comprehensive discussion of the retail industry, customer shopping experience and the various factors that impact customer shopping experience. The chapter commences with a detailed description of the retail industry by unpacking the past, present, and possible future state of the industry. The chapter concludes by providing and in-depth look into customer shopping experience and the eight factors that influence customer shopping experience.

Like most industries, the retail industry has experienced a significant shock over the past few years. This shock has led to a series of events that forced the industry to tailor its offerings differently. Therefore, this chapter delves into the recent events surrounding the retail industry and the impact of those events. The retail industry is one of the industries that require its functionality and operations to be on par with the presiding trends and changes as it serves a wide range of customers.

Customer experience has been at the forefront of many product and service offerings. Over the last few years, there has been significant growth in the utilisation of customer experience in different industries. Marketers have noted that customer experience presents excellent dynamics specific to each industry.

This chapter is divided into main sections, the first being an in-depth look into the retail industry. Following that, a thorough discussion of customer shopping experience and the eight factors that impact this construct is presented. In this manner, this chapter provides a clear and concise perusal of the identified phenomena.

2.2 RETAIL INDUSTRY

Competitive in nature, the retail industry consists of individuals and organisations that hold particular expertise in selling goods and services. These individuals and organisations assemble a set of business activities with the sole purpose of enhancing the value of products and services for the benefit of the customer (Pantana & Vannucci, 2019:298). The retail industry has been segmented into different categories, namely product, channel distribution and services (Malhotra *et al*., 2020:395).

- **Product:** These are tangible items that are either durable or perishable. These items can be seen, touched, evaluated, stored, and consumed by a customer (Meiners, 2022).

- **Channel distribution:** These channels are utilised by businesses or intermediaries to ensure that their products or services reach the customer (Nie *et a*l., 2019:32).

- **Services:** These are intangible and not visible to the naked eye, and the customer cannot take ownership of their purchases (Meiners, 2022).

By considering the different categories and definitions associated with retail, it is clear that these are wide in scope and cannot be restricted to a singular definition. Table 2-1 presents various definitions of retailing obtained from the literature.

Table 2-1: Towards a definition of the term retailing

Definition	Author(s)
Retailing is defined as a business activity that focuses its marketing efforts to satisfy the final customer based on the business of selling goods and services with the intent of distribution.	Goworek & McGoldrick (2015:2)
Retailing consists of a set of events that market products and services to customers for their household and personal use.	Bascur & Rusu (2020:5)
Retailing is the act of purchasing merchandise in bulk from a wholesaler or from a manufacturer with the intent to sell the merchandise and associated services to the customer with the intention to satisfy their personal needs.	Malhotra *et al*. (2020:395)
Retailing is a business activity where physical stores are utilised as platforms to buy and sell large commodities.	Yang *et al.* (86:2288)

The definition of retailing used in this study is formulated by using various elements from the definitions provided in Table 2-1. To this end, retailing is defined as a combination of activities that businesses implement to ensure that the end product is delivered to the customer for their personal use and with the intent of satisfying their unique needs (Bascur & Rusu, 2020:5; Goworek & McGoldrick, 2015:2; Malhotra *et al*., 2020:395; Yang *et al.,* 2021:2288).

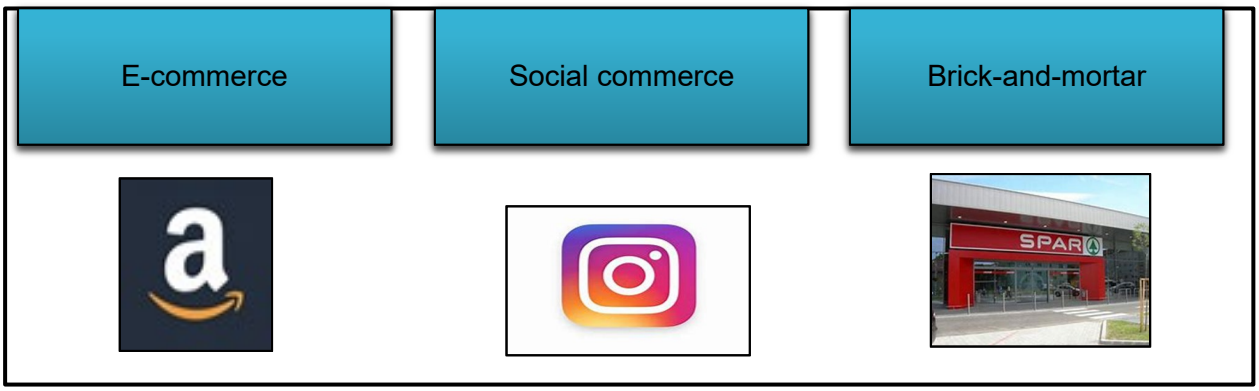
2.2.1 Retail platforms

Retail spaces are changing. Their functionalities, designs, operations and practices have evolved over the years (Pantano & Vannaucci, 2019:297). Ceylan (2019:2631) supports this sentiment by outlining that the definition of a retail space has changed throughout the years. The author explains that the retail industry exists within greater commercial settlements. As these settlements grow and transform, they have an impact on the traditional retail space. Jacob (2024) explains that changes within the retail industry is viewed as cyclical. The author argues that the evolution of the retail industry is premeditated, and heavily depended on live events and trends. Innovation

is fundamentally connected to the involvement of the retail industry. The changes that take place in the retail industry are primarily sparked by innovation, or they occur as a response to societal changes that are triggered by innovation and technology (Guimaras, 2019:21).

A simple, clear and concise definition of retailing does not fully encapsulate its true essence. In its simplest form, retailing is an exchange (Hameli, 2018:69). Retailing has been identified as one of the oldest business practices (Hameli, 2018:69). Characterised by its dynamism, retailing has significantly contributed to a number of transformations within communities, cities and economies (Guimaraes, 2018:160). The contribution of retailing is traced back to the simple trade of battering (Smith, 2023). Defined as an exchange of goods and services without the involvement of money, battering is recognised as the earliest inception of retailing (Smith, 2023). However, the nature of retailing has evolved over the centuries. Its fundamental activity, however, remains unchanged: getting customers the goods and services that they desire (Marhamat, 2022). Spacey (2017) identifies various retail platforms that businesses use to get their products to the customer. The three main retail platforms that have been identified are e-commerce, social commerce and brick-and-mortar. While three prominent platforms currently dominate the retail industry, Forbes predicts that in 2024, there will be a significant rise in hybrid shopping, which combines elements of both online shopping and brick-and-mortar retail (Jacob, 2024). The following sections delve into three primary retail platforms, starting with e-commerce, social commerce and brick-and-mortar. Figure 2-1 illustrates three distinct retail platforms: e-commerce, social commerce, and brick-and-mortar.

Figure 2-1: Retail platforms



Source: Author's own depiction

2.2.1.1 E-commerce

Technology advances have enabled the growth of e-commerce in different industries. Over the last five years, there has been a significant growth in global e-commerce sales (Jung *et al*., 2022:94). Global e-commerce sales were noted to be above two trillion dollars in 2017 and experts predict that these sales will triple in the year 2023 (Jung *et al*., 2022:94). It is important to

note that the global COVID-19 pandemic has been a catalyst for the growth of online sales (Svatosova, 2022:155). Prior to the pandemic, some businesses had forged solid foundations within the retail industry through the use of technology and online platforms (Svatosova, 2022:155).

Ives *et al.* (2019:2) highlight that technology fuelled businesses have created a threat for traditional retailers. These businesses are seen as retail disrupters. Alibaba and Amazon are two notable businesses who have joined the market through the use of innovative techniques and strategies (Schmuck & Benke, 2020:1259). Moiseev *et al*. (2023:2) describe Alibaba and Amazon as a benchmark and leaders in the global e-commerce sector. Over the years, these two companies have built strong and credible digital capabilities by integrating different business models (Wu & Gereffi, 2018:331).

The Alibaba group is a group of businesses with the sole purpose of providing and curating a platform for customers that makes it easy to buy and sell products anywhere in the world (Havinga *et al*., 2016:13). Amazon, in turn, is an online retailer that offers customers a variety of products at their fingertips. The business began as an online bookstore in the 1990s, but has now grown significantly, and has different product offerings that aim to satisfy the needs of millions of customers (Wu & Gereffi, 2018:330).

Amazon Go is an example of a retail disruption. The concept enables customers to purchase groceries while eliminating traditional supermarket touchpoints. It gives customers independence and offers convenience while integrating traditional shopping activities with modern advances (Ives *et al*., 2019:3). Indeed, Alibaba's creation of platforms that enable buyers and sellers to get access to different markets around the globe has been deemed as a disruption to the retail chain (Havinga *et al*., 2018:333). These two e-commerce giants have created platforms that have forced traditional retailers to consider migrating their offerings from physical stores to online platforms (Schmuck & Benke, 2020:1259).

2.2.1.2 Social commerce

Social media is a salient example of a retail disruption. These are interactive platforms that allow customers and businesses to create a dialogue amongst themselves (Ayodeji & Kumar, 2019:80). Wang and Huang (2023:200) describe the integration of e-commerce with social media platforms as social commerce. The authors argue that the emergence of social commerce has resulted in customers being empowered. The use of social media to buy and sell products essentially entails the transfer of power from the seller to the buyer (Wang & Huang, 2023:201). Zhang and Benyoucef (2016:96) note that social commerce emerged in the early 2000s amid the growth of social networking sites. The authors draw attention to the most significant difference between

traditional e-commerce sites and social commerce. Social media platforms allow customers to build and sustain online communities that may evolve into reference groups (Zhang & Benyoucef, 2016:96).

Social media has proven to be a useful tool in the world of retail. The various platforms allow businesses to build and maintain relationships with their customers. Through these relationships, businesses are able to harness valuable insights and gather critical information (Busalim & Hussin, 2016:1076). Ibrahim and Wang (2019:33) elaborate on this sentiment, pointing out that in 2015, there were over 65 billion engagements between brands and customers across all social media platforms. Social media offers brands a glimpse into the minds of their customers. Although there is a great deal of data available for businesses to use to their advantage, it is crucial that businesses can analyse the data at their disposal (Ibrahim & Wang, 2019:35). Mainardes and Cardoso (2019:456) found that there is a positive correlation between the use of social media and brick-and-mortar establishments. The authors highlight that when brick-and-mortar establishments build a healthy and prominent social media presence, this will positively impact customer loyalty and trust (Mainardes & Cardoso, 2019:456).

2.2.1.3 Defining brick-and-mortar establishments

Brick-and-mortar establishments are defined as traditional businesses that have physical stores where a customer can browse or purchase a product or service (Teixeira, 2021:1261). Unlike online stores, brick-and-mortar establishments offer customers the opportunity to interact with employees or service providers (Makgopa, 2016:22). This gives the customer an opportunity to ask questions when there are uncertainties regarding a product or service (Etumnu & Widmar, 2020:2). Brick-and-mortar establishments also enable customers to touch and test products (Boysen *et al*., 2021:362). Four types of brick-and-mortar stores have been identified: convenience, speciality, grocery and super stores (Boysen *et al*., 2021:362).

- **Convenience stores:** these are defined as stores situated in different locations. These stores carry relatively inexpensive products that require little shopping effort from the customer. The purpose of convenience stores is accessibility; hence they are situated in many different locations (Lamb *et al*., 2015:87)

- **Speciality stores:** these are brick-and-mortar stores that offer customers specialised products (Lamb *et al*., 2015:87). Treub (2023:2) expand on this definition by highlighting that speciality stores offer a single product line. However, the product line of choice is offered in depth by the store. Examples of these are bookstores, music stores and electronic product stores (Treub, 2023:2).

- **Grocery stores:** these are physical stores that carry and sell food, beverages and non-food items for household use (Etumnu & Widmar, 2020:2). Examples of grocery stores in South Africa are Checkers, Woolworth and Pick n Pay (Pasiya, 2021).

- **Department stores:** these are large stores that offer customers a wide variety of merchandise, all found in one place. Examples of these are Makro and Game stores in South Africa (Etumnu & Widmar, 2020:4).

By considering the above definition of brick-and-mortar establishments and the type of establishments that exist, this study categorises shopping centres as brick-and-mortar establishments.

2.2.2 Towards a definition of shopping centres

Shopping centres are considered to be traditional retailing outlets. Traditional retailing outlets use physical stores to sell commodities bought in large quantities. These commodities are sold to the customer or a smaller social group in relatively small quantities (Sun *et al.,* 2022:2288). Ernst (2021:4) notes that one of the main reasons why shopping centres were created was to encourage human interaction. Decades later, shopping centres have seemingly become a hub for social interactions for customers between themselves, friends and family (Hu & Jasper, 2018:151). Hu and Jasper (2018:152) explain that customers no longer visit shopping centres for the sole purpose of purchasing goods and services. Although they are successful entities, shopping centres have had to refurbish themselves in such a way that they are able to serve the changing customer needs and align with customer behaviour (Porfirio & Guimaraes, 2019:22). Centres have had to refurbish themselves in such a way that they are able to serve the changing customer needs and align with customer behaviour (Porfirio & Guimaraes, 2019:22).

Table 2-2: Defining shopping centres

Definition	Sources
Shopping centres are defined as venues that provide a shopping experience and customers use these venues for recreational purposes and entertainment	Makgopa (2018:122)
A shopping centre is a building or a group of buildings that have multiple stores that operate within the retail industry that sell products to the end-user.	Orr (2023:103)
A shopping centre is a structure or a set of structures where customers can participate in the movement of products by purchasing goods and services that are offered at the stores found in the shopping centres.	Garai (2022:638)

2.2.2.1 The shopping centre: a brief historical overview

According to Ernst (2021:3), one of the earliest conceptions of a shopping centre, were stores that lined both sides of a main street. The sole purpose of these stores was to accommodate pedestrians, vehicles and customer interactions. Ernest (2021:4) further explains that as the population grew, the need to develop shopping centres that would accommodate a changing population emerged. The inception of the strip mall took place in the 1920s in Los Angeles, followed by the creation of an atrium mall in the 1950s (Hameli, 2018:69). Today, brick-and-mortar establishments such as shopping centres house more than only department stores. Indeed, shopping centres have been compelled to reinvent themselves to ensure that they continuously and consistently meet the needs and wants of the customer (Hu & Jasper, 2018:152).

The development of shopping centres was initially concentrated in certain towns or cities with the purpose of creating a sense of ease and convenience for the customer (Hameli, 2018:70). Guimaraes (2018:161) notes that shopping centres were facilities that contributed significantly to supply to the populace. Guimaraes (2018:161) explains further that shopping centres that are located in deprived areas offer various social functions to the local communities and surrounding areas.

The inception of shopping centres meant convenience for customers. Customers could go from one store to the other, all under one roof (Man & Qiu, 2021:14). Man and Qiu (2021:14) point out that the emergence of shopping centres changed customer preferences and behaviour. Retailing is considered a method of convenience of selling goods and services to customers (Deshmukh, 2021:44). However, before the development of shopping centres customers had the task of going from one stand-alone store to the other in order to acquire goods and services that met their needs and wants (Man & Qiu, 2021:14). Shopping centres offered a solution by creating establishments that boasted supermarkets, hypermarkets, clothing stores, cinemas and restaurants all within the same building (Deshmukh, 2021:44). Salvi and Bhargava (2019:3557) indicate that shopping centres do not only form part of the retail industry but can be considered as a separate industry driven by real estate.

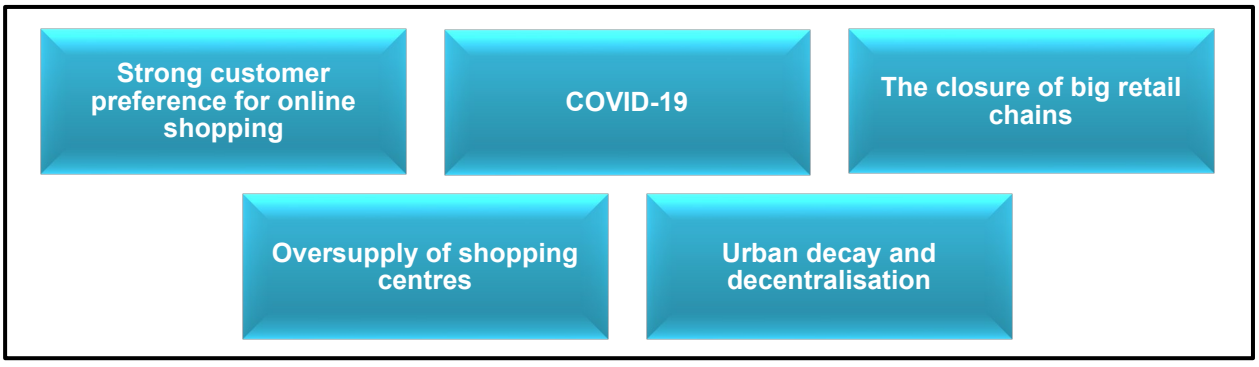
The retail landscape is changing; this has forced shopping centres to innovate. The changes that are seen in the retail landscape cannot be attributed to a singular source. Over the years, trends, customer behaviour, customer needs, innovation, the evolution of technology and a pandemic have shifted the manner in which retailers serve their customers (Reformat & Opitek, 2021:2480). Traditional retailers have been forced to adopt strategies that would allow them to reconstruct their retail businesses (Sun *et al.,* 2022:2290). An integration of technology and digitalisation has been at the forefront of many strategies (Pantano & Vannaucci, 2019:298). It is important to note

that digitalisation has been viewed as one of the most important transformations in the retail industry. Digitalisation has offered the retail industry business opportunities that have allowed them to modify their offerings and services (Pantano & Vannucci, 2019:298). Moreover, for many retailers, digitalisation was a lifeline as the COVID-19 pandemic brought business activities to a drastic halt. Indeed, digitalisation or technology, COVID-19 and the closure of traditional retailers have been identified as the main causes of the retail apocalypse (Sun *et al*., 2022:2290).

2.3 THE RETAIL APOCALYPSE

The retail apocalypse refers to a process that has led to the widespread closure of various commercial properties (Marcuende & Lloberas, 2022:1). This process has had a significant effect on social, cultural and economic systems around the world (Marcuende & Lloberas, 2022:1). From a global perspective, the apocalypse is fuelled by the surge of e-commerce businesses (Mao, 2021:22). However, over the last few years, the COVID-19 pandemic has also played a significant role in the acceleration of the retail apocalypse. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, retailers faced operational and structural changes as the industry saw many businesses migrate to digital platforms and online stores (Hanninen *et al.*, 2021:4). However, although the abovementioned factors have spearheaded the apocalypse; it is important to highlight that the causes of the retail apocalypse differ from one economy to the other (Mende & Noble, 2019:84). Figure 2-2 depicts five main causes of the retail apocalypse.

Figure 2-2: Five causes of the retail apocalypse



Source: Adapted from Broll (2019), Goldberg (2018:171), Markowitz (2020), Moon *et al*. (2021:4) and Vader (2021).

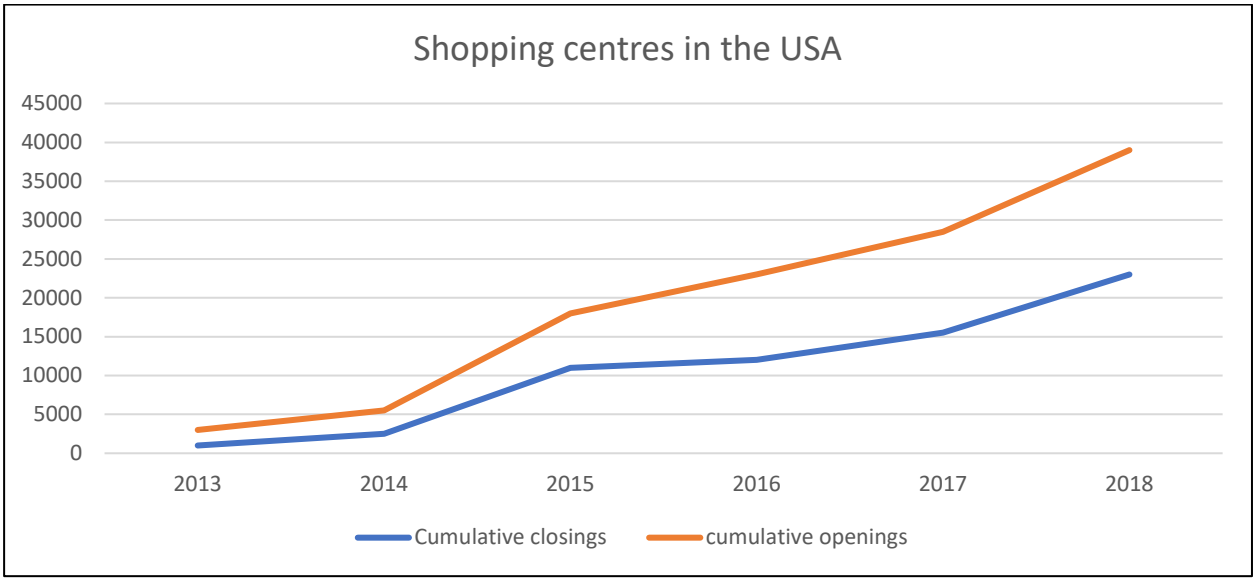
2.3.1 The closure of large retail chains

Townsends *et al*. (2017:1) predicted that the United States of America would see the opening of close to three thousand stores in the first three quarters of the year. However, in the same year, the country experienced a closure of over six thousand physical stores. Bhattarai (2019) predicts

that the USA will witness over seventy-five thousand clothing, electronic, and furniture stores closing their doors by the year 2026.

Figure 2-3 depicts the growth and contraction of commercial properties in the USA in a period of five years. Dating back to the year 2013, experts predicted that there would be growth in the development of physical stores across the USA. Although a measure of growth was witnessed between the years 2013 and 2014 and thereafter, there is a clear trend of more accumulative closures.

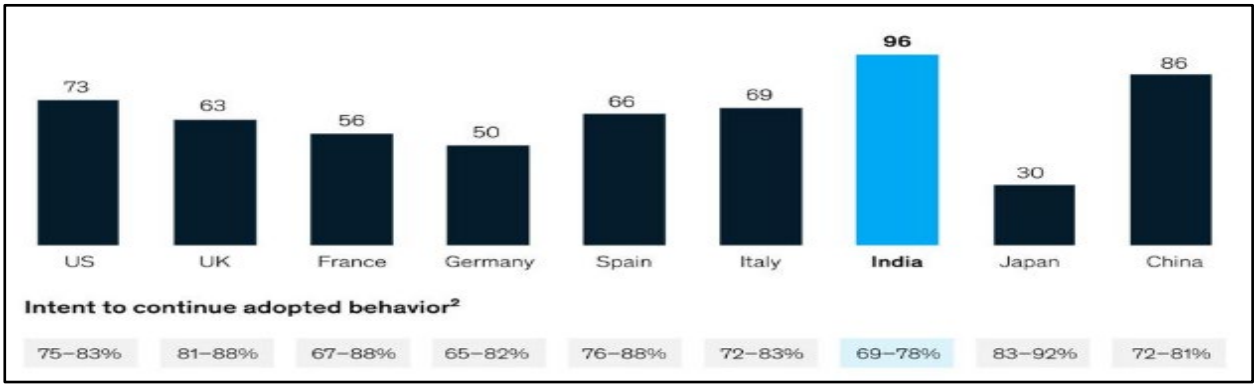
Figure 2-3: Contractions and expansions of commercial property in the USA



Source: Adopted from Townsends *et al*. (2017).

Solis (2021) explains that the COVID-19 pandemic did not only accelerate the retail apocalypse but caused further disruption in the retail industry around the world. Customers are looking for better and more intuitive ways of shopping (Heins, 2023:353). Figure 2-4 depicts how customers around the world have adapted their behaviours to current circumstances. Figure 2-4 further illustrates how customers in some of the world's most notable economies adapted their shopping behaviour during the COVID-19 pandemic. Solis (2021) notes that customers in these economies adapted to online shopping during lockdown.

Figure 2-4: Change in customer behaviour globally



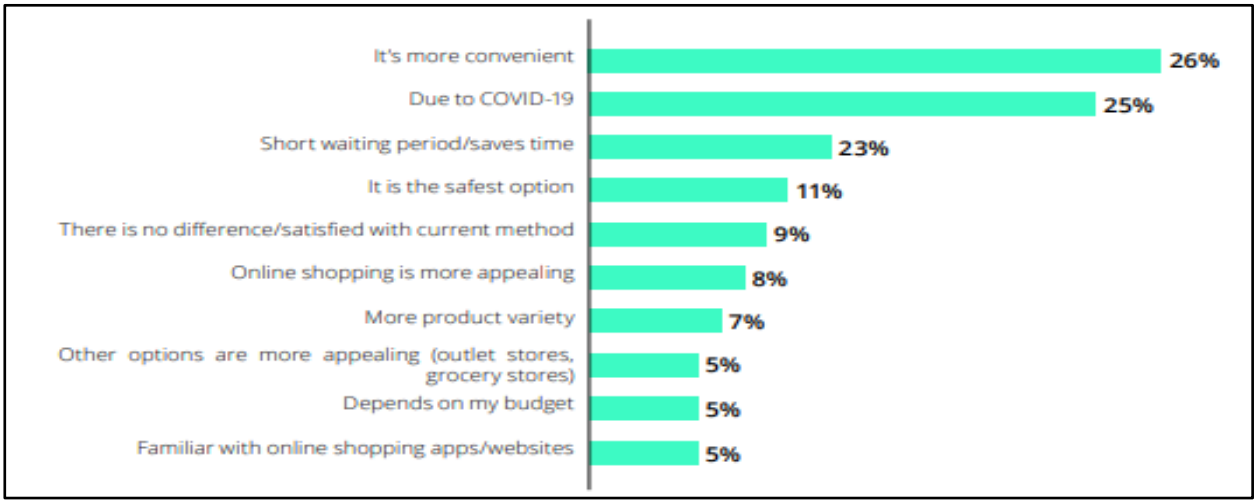
Source: Adopted from Solis (2021)

Like the rest of the world, South African customers have shown changes in buying behaviour and patterns (Makgopa, 2016:25). With an increase in the number of active online shoppers in South Africa, the local retail landscape trends emulate those of first-world economies. However, in South Africa, the retail apocalypse is driven by another complex factor: the power crisis. Over the last few years, "load shedding' has created unprecedented challenges for traditional retailers operating in South Africa (George, 2023). More and more South African customers are migrating to online shopping platforms to serve their shopping needs. Power outages have made it difficult for businesses across all industries to remain secure and sustainable (Govender, 2023). Indeed, giant retailers such as the Shoprite group have incurred profit losses due to consistent power cuts (Peters, 2023). The chief executive officer (Pieter Engelbrecht) of the Shoprite group has explained that the retailer has spent over half a billion rand to curb the effects that power cuts have on the business (Peters, 2023). Therefore, as the growth of online shopping and technological advancements continue to ravage what is left of traditional retailers. It is important to ask the question: are power crises a catalyst to the looming retail apocalypse in South Africa?

Customers are looking for convenience and security and have chosen to turn to online shopping for this (Deloitte, 2021:4). In a report compiled by Deloitte in 2021, online shopping in South Africa had shown significant growth. As of 2019, the e-commerce market was estimated to be worth three billion dollars in net sales (George, 2021:5). Deloitte predicted that by the year 2024, the South African e-commerce market would continue its robust growth with an estimated nine per cent growth each year.

Figure 2-5 illustrates reasons why South African customers have turned to online shopping. The figure shows that the majority of active online shoppers in South Africa are customers who yearn for ease and convenience. As seen in Figure 2-5 below, COVID-19 has played a significant role in the growth of online shoppers in South Africa (Deloitte, 2021:5).

Figure 2-5: The growth of online shopping in South Africa



Source: Adopted from Deloitte (2021:5)

2.3.2 Technology

The growth and development of technology have redefined the retail environment (Asmare & Zewdie, 2022:60). In 2020, it was reported that there has been a rapid increase in customer spending towards non-traditional retailers (Childs *et al.,* 2020:262). Childs *et al*. (2020:263) define non-traditional retailers as pop-up shops, fashion subscription services and consumption models created for trading merchandise. These non-traditional retailers use technology and digital channels to create a holistic experience for their customers (Ansari & Mohitkar, 2018:34). Their business philosophy is customer-centric; it focuses on catering to the needs and wants of the customer (Childs *et al*., 2020:264). The existence and growth of non-traditional retailers are considered to be the starting point of the retail apocalypse. Mao (2021:549) suggests that the emergence of non-traditional retailers may have led to a number of large traditional retailers closing their doors.

The use of technology in the retail industry has enabled the creation of online shopping platforms (Mao, 2021:549). Online shopping has been a root cause of concern for shopping centres and individual retailers, as these platforms have challenged the norms and compelled traditional shopping centres to reassess their position and offerings to their customers (Pentz *et al*., 2020:230). Retailers have found the need to adapt to new technologies to improve and create retail management strategies aimed at correlating modern retailing to customer needs and wants (Pantano & Vannucci, 2019:297). Srinvasan *et al*. (2021:29) express that customers are increasingly attracted to the use of technology, because it broadens the scope of the information, products and services they are exposed to. However, the most significant reason why customers use it is convenience.

Digitalisation and innovation have transformed the traditional retail space over the last two decades. The inclusion and integration of the aforementioned factors have restructured the essence of traditional retailing (Neslin, 2022:111). Digitalisation has been a root cause of concern for shopping centres and retailers overall, as new and exciting platforms have challenged the conventional norms and forced traditional shopping centres to reassess their position and offerings to their customers (Pentz *et al*., 2020:230).

The inclusion of technology in retailing is not limited to the evolution of online shopping. Still, it includes using technological devices, equipment, mobile apps, interactive window displays and contactless payments (Pantano & Vannaucci, 2019:297). Technology is seen as a disruptor here, because it renders old approaches irrelevant as it introduces new skills and approaches to the economy. Technology is also viewed as a productivity optimise, or rather, the ultimate optimiser. Technological innovations are set to be the catalyst for future growth in many industries (Degryse, 2016:9). Valenduc and Vendramin (2017:124) echo these sentiments as they outline digital technologies permeating throughout the economy and society, especially since the rise in the use of mobile applications and tools. Digital platforms have experienced significant growth over the last two decades; however, digital platforms have thus also been the direct beneficiaries of the global COVID-19 pandemic (Hardaker, 2022:310).

2.3.3 The COVID-19 pandemic

In December of 2019, an outbreak of an unknown disease in the province of Wahun, China was set to change the world at large (He *et al*., 2020:719). At the time of the outbreak, the medical fraternity had no distinct description or name for it (He *et al*., 2020:719). Health professionals later identified the virus as a severe acute respiratory syndrome (Baloch *et al*., 2020:271). Reuschke and Felstead, (2020:209) note that one never assumed that there would come a time when the world had to take a step back and businesses had to shut their doors. The effects of the pandemic were felt globally, from small businesses to large enterprises, and the pandemic forced businesses to change and alter their operations.

2.3.3.1 The COVID-19 pandemic and the world economy

The global COVID-19 pandemic created a series of problems for the world economies and financial activities. Economic activities came to an abrupt halt as the spread of the virus increased rapidly (Awasthi & Mehta, 2021:46). However, the pandemic also presented the world with opportunities and challenges. For a large part, businesses had to find a way to maintain and grow their businesses in the midst of a world crisis (Jung *et al.,* 2022:94). Svatosova (2022:157) explains that the pandemic has encouraged customers to reconsider their shopping habits, and this has led to customers developing new habits. The restriction in movement during the lockdown

periods forced customers to embrace online shopping and home deliveries (Svatosova, 2022:157).

2.3.3.2 The COVID-19 pandemic in the retail industry

Asmare and Zewdie (2022:59) suggest that the retail industry is in the midst of a significant change due to different reasons; however, at the forefront of these reasons is the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic acted as a catalyst that accelerated changes that were bound to happen within the retail space.

In an article by Pentz *et al*. (2020:230), the authors describe shopping centres as "limping entities", even before the pandemic hit in the later part of 2019. Asmare and Zewdie (2022:61) highlight that shopping centres were already struggling to compete with online shops prior to customers being forced to stay away due to lockdown measures during the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, many small and large retailers had thus already begun the process of migrating from brick-and-mortar establishments to digital platforms.

The pandemic has propelled brick-and-mortar establishments to consider online distribution as a significant part of their distribution strategies (Lee *et al*., 2022:94). Svatosova (2022:156) indicates that brick-and-mortar establishments have had to reconfigure their strategies in order for them to remain competitive and profitable. The author notes that COVID-19 has created a shift, not only in the manner that organisations conduct business but also the manner in which customers behave (Svatosova, 2022:155). Marketers are constantly studying customer behaviour. For example, studies that were conducted during the pandemic have shown a pattern of panic buying (Awashti & Mehta, 2021:46). Baarsma and Groenewgen (2021:408) support this sentiment, noting that the online sales of non-perishable foods increased at the start of the pandemic. Online expenditure of daily groceries increased during the first lockdown, and this was due to two reasons. The first reason relates to empty shelves due to panic buying, and the second reason was the fear of contracting the virus (Baarsma & Groenewegen, 2021:408).

The eruption of COVID-19 created a shift in customer buying behaviour and shopping patterns. Ali (2020:268) suggests that COVID-19 has accelerated the rate at which customers move from brick-and-mortar establishments to online platforms. Hanninen *et al.* (2021:3) express that the events of the pandemic resulted in a 10-year digital leap for online retailing within a space of a year. The global pandemic introduced new problems for traditional retailers and shopping centres. Beckers *et al.* (2021:1) explain that before the emergence of COVID-19, the traditional retail industry was already under great scrutiny – and there were plenty of retail stores closing their doors. Retailers had already begun the shift from brick-and-mortar establishments to online platforms (Ansari & Mohitkar, 2018:35). COVID-19 has also propelled a multi-faceted channel

integration where traditional retailers incorporate technological advances to their offerings to aid in their attempts to offer a seamless customer experience (Hanninen *et al*., 2021:4)

2.4 THE CUSTOMER SHOPPING EXPERIENCE

2.4.1 The customer journey

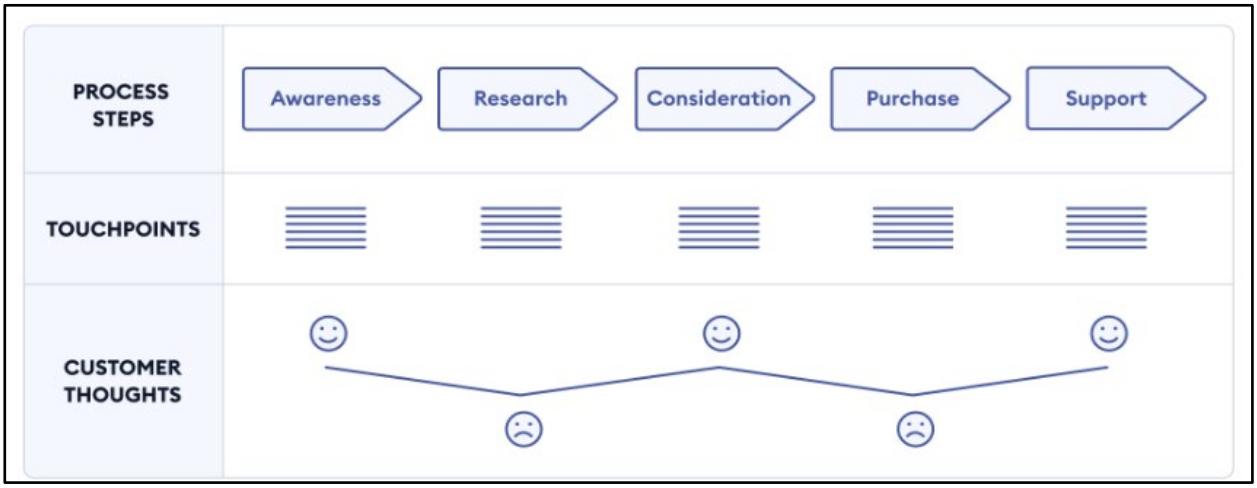
The customer journey is an important element in retail and business structures as a whole. COVID-19 amplified the importance of this, as retailers had to reconfigure their views on customer buying behaviour (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016:79). The reconfiguration came as customer needs and wants changed due to the ailing circumstances that were spearheaded by the pandemic (Ali, 2020:268). Rosenbaum *et al*. (2016:3) suggest that understanding the customer journey can be a significant tool in understanding customer experience. When studying customer experience, it is thus important to take the customer's journey into consideration (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016:78). Understanding and identifying the customer journey enables marketers to curate meaningful customer experiences (Koch *et al*., 2023:8).

The customer journey is defined as interactions between the customer and a service provider. These interactions are sometimes repeated actions on the customer's part (Koch *et al*., 2023:8). The customer journey plays a critical role in helping businesses to create strategies that are centred around the customer. The ability to curate a customer's journey transcends into formulating a strong and solid customer experience (Dhruv & Roggeveen, 2020:102)

Miranda and Watts (2022) state that understanding the customer journey enables marketers and practitioners to adequately curate customer experience before, during and after the purchase of a product. Lemon and Verhoef (2016:86) explain that the creation of successful customer experiences starts with the understanding of the customer's journey from the customer's perspective. The notion of a customer journey can be used as a tool to manage and understand customers (Grewal & Roggeveen, 2020:3).

Figure 2-6 depicts the customer journey as a visual tool that can be used to assess a customer's wants, needs and problems (Miranda & Watts, 2022). The figure also shows that the customer journey is not a complete process without considering the involvement of a business's touchpoints. According to Miranda and Watts (2022), the customer journey consists of five steps. Each step evokes different emotions and thoughts for the customer. Therefore, it is important that retailers have a well-structured customer journey system in place in order to understand consumption and customer experience (Grewal & Roggeveen, 2020:3).

Figure 2-6: The customer journey map



Source: Adopted from Marinda and Watts (2022).

According to Juwaheer (2013:179), consumption is a lifestyle, and shopping centres are the temples of consumption. In this sense, it is essential for shopping centres to create an environment that provides and displays meaningful experiences for customers (McColl-Kennedy *et al*., 2018:9). Over the years, customers have evolved, which has forced organisations to reassess and restructure their strategies to serve their customers accordingly. Therefore, organisations have made customer experience a core strategy (Ylilehto *et al*., 2021:661). The consensus is that organisations want to create products and environments that do not only fulfil needs, but enhance and maximise experiences (Calder *et al*., 2018:221). Gilboa *et al*. (2019:153) explain that customer experience has become a fundamental objective for retail orientated organisations. The retail industry has experienced a significant growth over the last few years. The industry has become intensely competitive with the growth and evolution of technological innovations (Bonfanti, 2020:1295). The author further explains that the integration of customer experience may be a great solution to the competitive nature of the retail industry.

Yliehto *et al*. (2021:663) note that customer shopping experience needs to be viewed from a broader scope and state that moments before, during and after the actual experience should be examined critically. Examining these three phases provides a holistic picture for marketers and can demonstrate the importance of the customer shopping experience. Alhouti *et al*. (2015:416) indicate that marketers recognise the importance of customer experience and note that experience not only influences a customer's intention to purchase but also plays a crucial role in shaping customer perception.

2.4.2 Towards a definition of customer experience

Customer experience is a construct that cannot be defined from a single point or idea; it is a complex and multi-faceted construct that varies from customer to customer (Alhouti *et al*., 2015:415). Li *et al*. (2019:411) indicate that since there are various definitions for customer experience, researchers from different industries have not reached a consensus a definition. The complexities of defining customer experience are fuelled by the differences in industries, organisational structures, the size of organisations and the customer (Li *et al*., 2019:412). For example, large organisations rely on technology to create and curate customer experiences, while small organisations utilise their human resources to create personal experiences for customers (Li *et al*., 2019:412).

Defining customer experience is often dictated by the industry of focus. While some industries or businesses look at the entire customer journey, others pick a moment in time to define customer experience. Table 2-3 lists various definitions of customer experience from different authors.

Table 2-3: Defining customer experience

Definition	Source
Customer experiences stem from the relationships that a customer creates when they interact with a product or service	McColl-Kennedy *et al*. (2018:8)
Customer experience can be defined as a beginning to end journey. It comprises various touchpoints and makes use of cognitive, affective and sensory components.	Gahler *et al*. (2023:192)
Events or activities that engage customers in a personal manner.	Gilboa *et al*. (2019:153)
Customer experience is an internal and subjective construct that a customer experiences when they interact with multiple touchpoints and channels of an organisation.	Li *et al*. (2019:410)

The definitions that have been listed in Table 2-3 are utilised to formulate the definition of customer experience for the purpose of this study. To this end, customer experience can be defined as an unsystematic process that involves a customer's interactions with a product, service and environment before, during and after a purchase. Customer experience is internal and reactive and utilises the customer's senses holistically (Gilboa *et al*. 2019:153; Li *et al*. 2019:410; McColl-Kennedy *et al*. 2018:8; Naserrmoadeli *et al*. 2013:128).

2.4.3 The customer experience and value co-creation

Customer experience involves nuances that concern multiple touchpoints with which the customer interacts (Gilliam *et al*., 2022:675). Gilliam *et al*. (2022:675) suggest that customer

experience stems from value co-creation. Historically, it was the organisation's responsibility to create value for their customers. More recently, the new dynamics indicate that customers have become a part of the process of creating value (Dieck & Han, 2022:110). Value is defined as the relationship between what a customer benefits and what they are willing to sacrifice (Priharsari & Mastio, 2019:765). Thus, value co-creation is defined as a collaborative effort from all parties involved: the customer and the organisation (Fuentes *et al*., 2019:697). Gilliam *et al*. (2022:675) note that stakeholders are involved in the creation, monitoring and inhabitation of customer experience. The creation of value goes far beyond a product's lifecycle, because value is created through interactions between the customer and the employees – and these essentially enhance customer experiences.

Kurtulus and Cengiz (2021:293) explain that customer experience was conventionally treated and viewed as an element of good service quality and customer satisfaction. However, in recent years, scholars and researchers have advocated for customer experience to be viewed as a distinct construct. Indeed, Lemon and Verhoef (2016:74) argue that customer experience is not an antecedent of customer focused constructs. Rather, customer experience is broad and multidimensional, which points to the fact that constructs such as customer satisfaction and service quality may be components of customer experience (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016:74). Customer experience broadens customer-focused constructs leading towards a more expansive view of these. It is important to note that customer experience reflects a customer's holistic perspective, whereas constructs such as service quality reflect a functional perspective (Mishra, 2022:335).

Tseng and Yazdanifard (2015:1038) criticise past research that views customer experience as a reaction; rather, customer experience is formed and created in the mind of a customer. The customer shopping experience is a 'take-away' that customers leave with after they have interacted with an organisation. This 'take-away' is formed by an amalgamation of various types of sensory information that a customer encounters (Zhang *et al*., 2023:552). Ko (2020:270) describes customer experience as a lived journey. The author outlines that it is important to understand that pleasurable experiences are not isolated to a single moment in time. Lemon and Verhoef (2016:71) explain that customer experience is a construct that acknowledges all the phases that a customer experiences when purchasing a product or service.

2.4.4 Measure of customer experience

Hu and Jasper (2018:151) explain that a satisfactory shopping experience is critical to attracting customers to shopping centres. The authors devised measures that they considered to have a

significant impact on customer shopping experience in shopping centres. The following sections peruse the eight measures that have been outlined by Hu and Jasper.

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Gerea and Herskovic (2021:395) describe customer experience as a differentiating strategy in a competitive market such as the retail industry or industries that aim to build a customer-centric approach. Lemon and Verhoef (2016:73) maintain that a customer centric approach is a good starting point when designing customer experience strategies.

Organisations and customers have the ability to curate memorable customer experiences. Barbu *et al*. (2021:1415) explain that during the purchasing process, customers focus on maximising utility, gathering information and enhancing their personal experiences. Even though customer experience has enjoyed attention from practice and academia, there is no common understanding of what customer experience entails (Kuuru & Narvanen, 2019:1242). Becker and Jaakkola (2020: 630) suggest that customer experience ranges from extraordinary to mundane.

Customer experience is not segregated to only brick-and-mortar establishments, Bleier *et al*. (2019:98) explain that customer experience on online platforms differs from physical environments. The authors argue that online platforms are more controlled which gives

organisations leeway to curate a certain experience for customers when they utilise their online platforms (Bleier *et al*., 2019:98). Customers can interact with organisations on countless touchpoints on various online channels and media platforms (Tseng & Yazdanifard, 2015:1038). This has intensified the need for organisations to develop and create departments and positions that are centred around customer shopping experience (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016:69). Shopping experiences online are activated through verbal and visual stimuli, this allows marketers an opportunity to curate a controlled and memorable experiences for customers.

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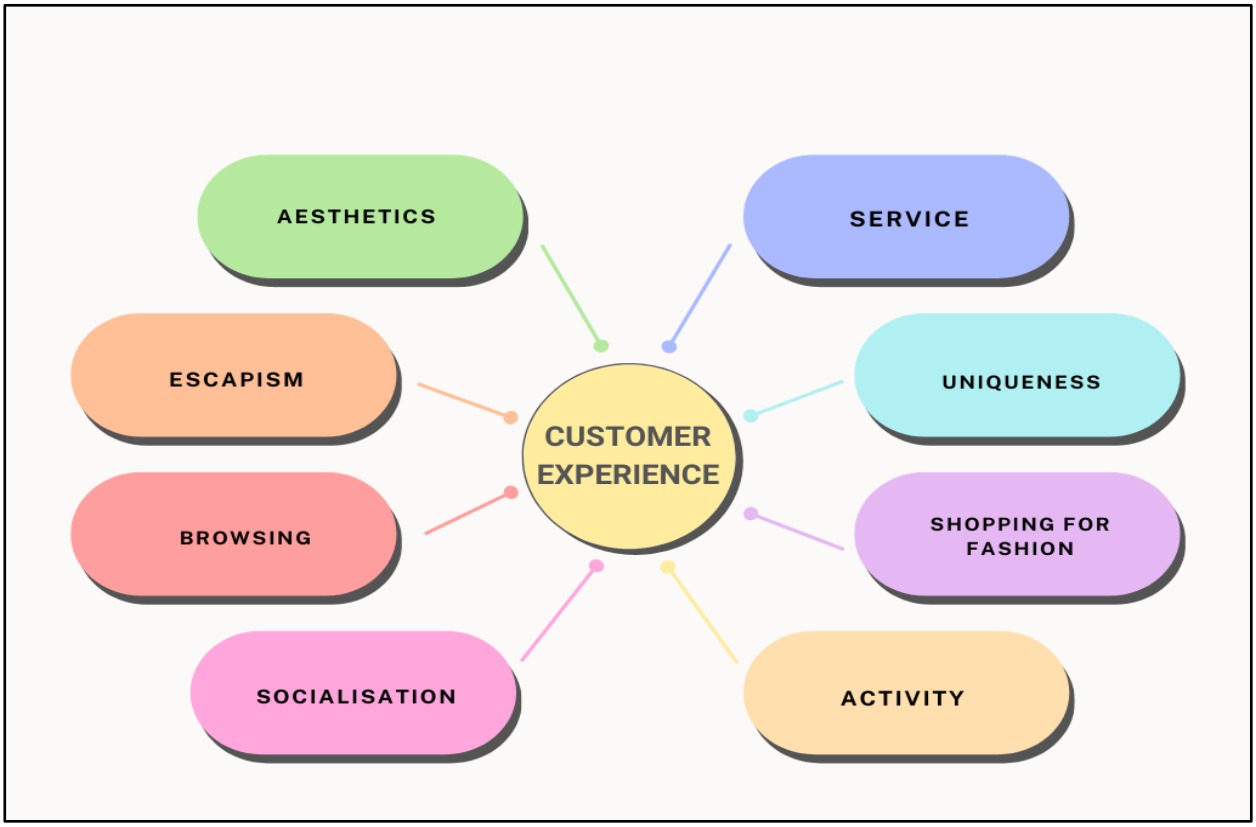
2.4.5 Factors affecting customer experience

In their paper, Hu and Jasper (2018:151) explain that a satisfactory shopping experience is critical to attracting customers to shopping centres. The authors devised measures that they considered to have a great impact on customer shopping experience in shopping centres. The following sections dissect the eight measures that have been outlined by Hu and Jasper. The eight measures that have been identified are: aesthetics, escapism, browsing, socialisation, shopping for fashion, uniqueness, activity and service. Figure 2-7 depicts the customer experience and the eight measures listed above.

Figure 2-7: Eight factors affecting customer experience



Source: Author's own depiction.

2.4.5.1 Aesthetics

According to Sheng and Teo (2012:141), aesthetics is associated with a customer's visual sensory response. Authors and scholars describe aesthetics as a dimension that engages and maximises the customer's visual responses. While much of past research focused on aesthetics as a visual domain, Sheng and Teo (2012:141) suggest that the aesthetic experience also involves the appreciation of service quality, design, layout and environment. Lai *et al*. (2020:1804) support these sentiments, explaining that aesthetics entails more than what meets the eye. Rather, the aesthetic experience indulges different human senses such as sight, taste and smell (Lai *et al*., 2021:1804). Existing research presents a measure of consensus regarding aesthetics, where aesthetics is viewed as a differentiating factor that enhances customer experience, whether it is on a digital platform or in a brick-and-mortar establishment (Sheng & Teo, 2012:141; Lai *et al*., 2021:1805).

Ameen *et al*. (2021:328) suggest that aesthetics relates to the experiential value that customers derive from directly interacting with an environment or a product. The authors further highlight that a shopping centre's aesthetic experience is categorised into three segments, namely senses, entertainment and dramatic effect. The senses refer to the five human senses; entertainment

refers to the appreciation derived from an aesthetic experience; and dramatic effect is the unique architectural designs (Ameen *et al*., 2021:328).

Research in retail marketing has found that factors such as decor, design, layout, the offering of food, and architecture are important in creating unique and memorable customer shopping experiences (Manajemen, 2022:212). The importance of aesthetics in a brick-and-mortar establishment is amplified by the fact that the customer shopping experience requires a customer to engage and utilise their senses. Sharma and Rather (2015:22) state that when customers engage and immerse themselves in their physical environment, this may alter or affect their behaviour and decision-making process. Furthermore, Ameen *et al*. (2021:330) note that shopping centre experiences encourage customers to engage their senses, thus amplifying the importance of aesthetics in brick-and-mortar establishments.

Kiriri (2019:268) highlights that aesthetics refers to a customer's appreciation of a brick-and-mortar establishment through, for example, colour, art and music. Customers' attraction to and appreciation of a shopping centre's aesthetics vary from one customer to the next. While some are captivated by the details in interior design, others are attracted to architecture and innovation. The relation between shopping centres and aesthetics is found in the tangible elements of a shopping centre (Luthfy & Nugrohu, 2019:26). These authors further elaborate that when considering the aesthetics of a shopping centre, there are two key factors, namely layout and design. Although physical attributes are important in the elevation of a shopping centre's aesthetics, some customers prefer brick-and-mortar establishments to create a distinct ambience and atmosphere (Lai *et al*., 2020:1803). Creating a distinct ambiance in brick-and-mortar establishments allows customers to escape into worlds that are detached from their own (Ali *et al*., 2014:278). This points to the notion of escapism.

2.4.5.2 Escapism

Customers may desire to get away and experience a different reality outside of their normal lives. To this end, marketers can create experiences where the customer can exist in a world that is different from their everyday lives (Ali *et al.*, 2014:278). Musa *et al.* (2017:114) explain that escapism comprises four different elements, namely psychological, physical, cultural and nostalgia. These authors (Musa *et al.,* 2017:115) refer to psychological escapism as a customer's mental and psychological experience (i.e. a customer watching a movie). Physical escapism is the customer's active involvement in a particular activity (i.e., touching clothing items, touching food items when grocery shopping or interacting with an employee of a retail store). Cultural escapism refers to a customer experiencing another culture outside of their own culture or the cultures of individuals that they know personally. Nostalgia, finally, involves the customer recalling

previous experiences or visits to a specific place, such as a particular shopping centre (Musa *et al.,* 2017:115).

- **Psychological escapism:** Stenseng *et al*. (2021:320) explain that escapism is often viewed as a negative result of media consumption. The authors argue that although escapism may have negative impacts, there are also positive psychological outcomes associated with escapism. To this end, the authors argue that psychological escapism can be a form of self-expansion.

- **Physical escapism:** Physical escapism differs from psychological escapism. Psychological escapism is a passive form of escaping, whereas physical escapism is an active form. Physical escapism engages all the senses and is therefore considered to be a multisensory experience (Bodnár, 2019:25).

- **Cultural escapism:** This form of escapism entails a complete immersion into different cultures, traditions and ways of doing things (Kristberga, 2021:323).

- **Nostalgic escapism:** Nostalgia is another form of passive escapism. The act of nostalgia requires an individual to tap into their emotions and memories (Sedikides & Wildschut, 2022:8).

2.4.5.3 Browsing

Browsing refers to when a customer partakes in the act of examining products within a retail store with no clear intention of purchasing the product at that very moment (Chen *et al.,* 2019:1129; Reynolds *et al.,* 2012:1090). Window shopping, also referred to as browsing, is an important aspect of the overall shopping experience for any customer (Bagdare, 2015:14). This activity can be viewed as an experiential aspect of shopping as it offers the customer the ability to touch, feel and immerse themselves into a product that they may be considering purchasing (Bagdare, 015:14). According to Reynolds *et al.* (2012:678), when a customer browses, there may be no current intent to purchase. However, the time the customer spends browsing may be a turning point; when a customer is given access to touch the products, look at the designs and feel the newness thereof, these may lead to impulse purchases (Bagdare, 2015:14). Ntlhe (2023:272) considers browsing also as a leisure activity for customers. Customers who partake in browsing activities are those who find pleasure in shopping activities. Browsing is considered to be a form of customer experience. Indeed, browsing taps into all five senses and also into a customer's emotions (Reynolds, 2012:1129). When a customer physically goes to a shopping centre and

browses through different shops, this gives them an opportunity to socialise not only with their families and friends, but also with other customers (AlMutawa, 2020:51).

2.4.5.4 Socialisation

Socialisation takes place when customers establish their own identities and choose to exchange those identities with others (Idoko *et al*., 2019:189). Through the exchange of personal information, customers build connections and relationships. There has been salient changes in social structures over the years, as customers use different platforms as their habitats for their social lives (Idoko *et al.,* 2019:189). As of 2010, researchers have identified a trend where customers use shopping centres as social spaces (Olla *et al*., 2023: 130). AlMutwa (2020:55) states that a common reason why customers use shopping centres as social spaces is based on their desire to see and be seen. Shopping centres are therefore no longer primarily dedicated to the purchase of goods and services, but are now used for excursions, meetings and social interactions (Oll *et al*., 2023:129). Specifically, researchers identified young customers and middle-class customers as those who mostly use shopping centres for social purposes (Oll *et al*., 2023:129).

AlMutawa (2020:51) explains that shopping centres therefore serve different social purposes for different customers. Thus, some customers use shopping centres as a place to meet people, while others use them as a meeting place for friends and families. Tortorici and Alefjord (2020:6) highlight that the use of shopping centres as a social space allows customers to fulfil certain psychological needs. A noteworthy observation is that customers who visit shopping centres with the intention to socialise may realise that they need to purchase a particular item.

2.4.5.5 Activity

Shopping centres have turned into hubs for recreational activities, retail entertainment and centres for social activities for customers (Makgopa, 2018:122). Makgopa (2018:122) indicates that in its infant years, shopping centres were created for the sole purpose of purchasing goods; however, today shopping centres have become lifestyle hubs for customers. In a study by Nasim and Shamshir (2018:87), activities performed by customers vary in terms of gender and age. In the study, most women visit a shopping centre to purchase clothing, shoes and home products. On the other side of the spectrum, men visit shopping centres to purchase leisure products, listen to music and test electronic products.

Ayeni (2020:19) posits that shopping centres offer multiple activities such as restaurants, games, outdoor activities and cinemas. These activities are fairly standard across the globe. Activities

available in shopping centres vary from one country to another (first-world countries and third-world countries), and the size of the shopping centre dictates the activities that may be found there. Customers have been found to prefer visiting shopping centres where they can eat, shop, watch a movie and play games (Nasim & Shamshir, 2018:87). Thus, marketers find value in shopping centres that cater to different customer needs. One of the most salient reasons customers visit shopping centres is to either browse or purchase clothing (Blazquez, 2017:98).

2.4.5.6 Shopping for fashion

The need for the customer to go to a physical store to purchase a clothing item is slowly but surely diminishing (Choi *et al.,* 2015:1). Prolific online fashion retailers such as Fashion Nova, SHEIN and Pretty Little Things have changed the face of fashion retail shopping and has created a completely new dimension for customers (Demir & Koksoy, 2021:1858). The use of technology has introduced a new world of fashion shopping for customers. Although technology presents new opportunities for fashion shopping, studies show that translating in-store shopping experiences to online platforms has proven difficult (Blazquez, 2017:97). Clothing requires a high level of involvement from the customer; customers need to feel, touch and fit the said clothing items. Therefore, customers are required to visit brick-and-mortar stores to perform these activities. Brick-and-mortar establishments provide instant gratification for customers when they purchase clothing items (Blazquez, 2017:98). Also, customers who prefer to shop online thus need to check websites and advertisements before they consider going into a physical store to purchase clothing (Chandra *et al*., 2022:840).

2.4.5.7 Uniqueness

There have been profound changes to the architecture and interior design of shopping centres over the years. Hou *et al*. (2023:1049) explain that current and future developments of shopping centres will prioritise experience. The authors further stipulate that the place-human relationship binds customers to experiences created in certain environments through all senses. Recent studies have shown that customers pay close attention to certain factors when they choose their place of purchase (Kunc *et al*., 2016:27). Factors like quality service, variety of goods, atmosphere, cleanliness, shops and the architectural attractiveness of a shopping centre all play a decisive role in the customer's decision to shop at a specific place (Kunc *et al*., 2016:27). The uniqueness of shopping centres is created by different elements such as the interior and exterior design, ambiance, lighting, accessories, architecture and the actual offerings of the shopping centre (Kusumowidagdo & Sachari, 2015:8).

The attributes that contribute toward the uniqueness of shopping centres are mostly based on the preference of the customer; some attributes are tangible, and others are intangible (Gomes & Paula, 2017:13). Tangible attributes include the design, parking, location, centre facilities (child friendly facilities) and the retail outlets within the shopping centre (Gomes & Paula, 2017:3). Intangible factors are the customer service, atmosphere, safety and security, reputation and hours of operation (Gomes & Paula, 2017:4). Customers are looking to spend their money in establishments that create a memorable shopping experience for them, and where the uniqueness of a shopping centre contributes to the overall shopping experience (Bonfanti & Yfantidou, 2021:1304).

2.4.5.8 Service

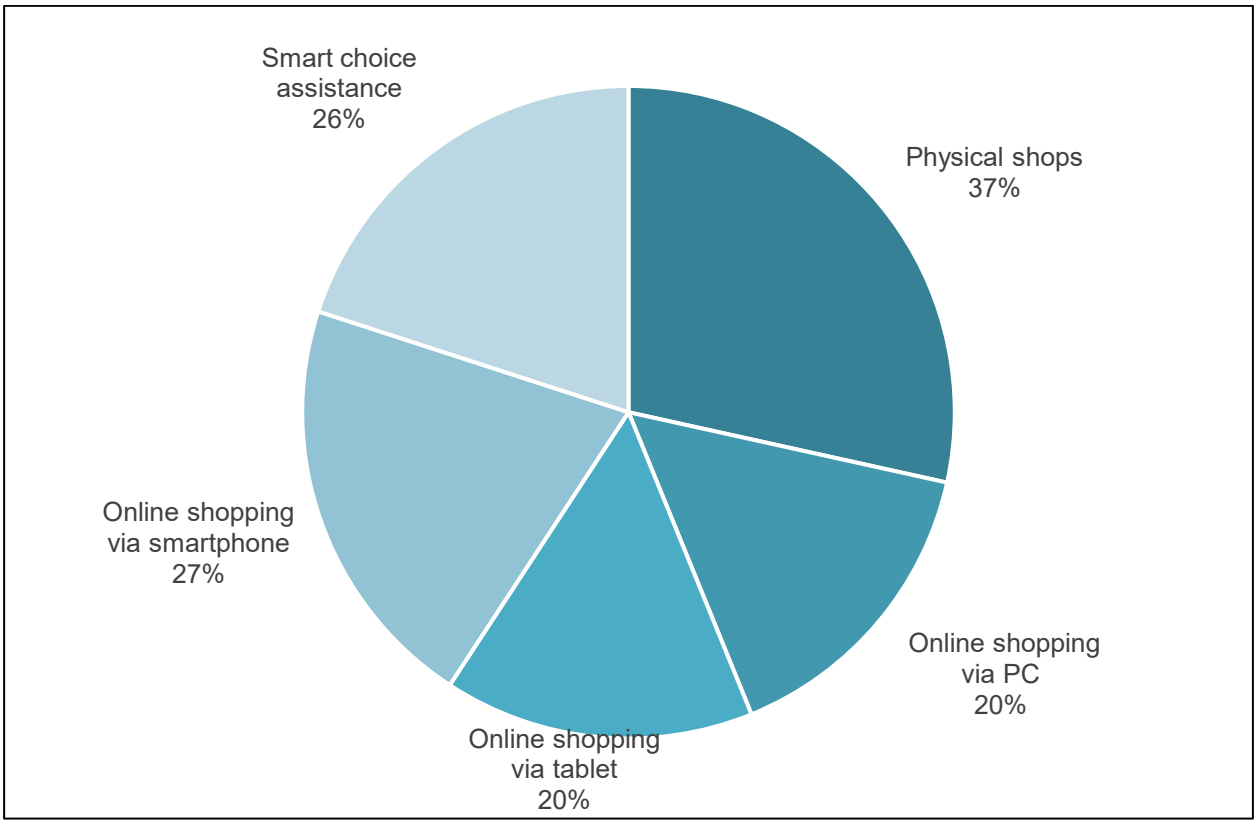
Quality service is defined as an attitude towards the superiority of a service or lack thereof, where service is assessed through the expectations and perceptions of the customer (Kushwaha *et al*., 2017:274). The service that a customer receives plays a crucial role in their overall experience, and to this end, service experience has become a key concept for marketers (Bueno *et al*., 2019:784). Service experience is a service process that triggers the customer's mental, behavioural and emotional responses – which, in turn, lead to a memory creation (Bueno *et al*., 2019:784). Service experience may be viewed from three main angles, namely the servicescape, service delivered by employees, and core service (Tsou *et al*., 2019:5) Servicescape refers to the physical environment where the service takes place (the shopping centre) (Tsou *et al*., 2019:5). Employee service, in turn, is the performance of the employees, and the core service is the actual service offered by the establishment (Tsou *et al*., 2019:5). A positive service experience increases the likelihood of customer satisfaction and purchase intention (Tsou *et al*., 2019:5).

2.5 THE SOUTH AFRICAN RETAIL INDUSTRY

South Africa is described as a complex market because of the market dynamics in the country (a mixture of third-world and first-world economies). However, even with its complexities, the country houses a flourishing and competitive retail industry (Pentz *et al.,* 2020:228). The retail industry in South Africa mimics the global scene with regards to its trends and changes. The adoption of technology is a prime example of this (Pentz *et al.,* 2020:228). However, the growth and adoption of technology on the global scene is completely different to that of South Africa. In 2016, the online retail space in South Africa only accounted for a mere one percent of the total retail sales (Pentz *et al.,* 2020:230). This is very telling of how much the general public in South Africa gravitated towards traditional shopping centres during that time period. In 2020, there was a significant increase in online shopping in the country as more and more customers shied away from physical retail spaces (Githahu, 2020). Indeed, a report compiled by PWC in 2021 shows the growth of

non-traditional shopping channels in South Africa (PWC, 2021). Figure 2-8 shows the channel preferences for South African customers in the year 2021.

Figure 2-8: South African customer channel preferences



Source: Adapted from PWC (2021)

2.5.1 The South African consumer

Pillay (2022) describes South African customers as lively and community-centric individuals who enjoy forming part of a community, whether in their inner circles or external parties. The author explains that the COVID-19 pandemic ceased the opportunity for South Africans to be social with their various communities (Pillay, 2022). Businesstech (2022) notes that in the last two years, online shopping in South Africa has increased by 38%. This is mainly due to the restriction of movement implemented by the government. During the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, customers moved toward shopping in their local/community shopping centres, and for some this meant that they had limited options – and hence the growth in online sales in South Africa over the last two years (Businesstech, 2022).

Makgopa (2018:124) explains that the use of shopping centres in South Africa is not only restricted to grocery shopping. Pillay (2022) supports this statement in a recent article where the author outlines that South African customers view shopping centres as more than a place where they can partake in shopping activities. In a study conducted in 2018, Makgopa (2018:125) found

that customers visit shopping centres for the purpose of dining out, shopping for clothing and accessories and groceries. In a recent study, Senachai and Julagasigorn (2024:1) found that South African customers seek comfort and a secure environment.

2.6 CONCLUSION

The goal of this study is to participate in research outputs that can help to develop a more holistic understanding of the customer shopping experience in the South African retail industry. A salient part of this study is to understand the retail apocalypse, its roots and its potential ramifications in the South African market. Through the investigation of the changes and trends in the retail market globally, this study seeks to dissect the different facets that have led to noticeable changes. The present chapter explored key factors such as the digital disruption which propelled by technological advancements and innovation. A key component of this chapter comprises the literature pertaining to the eight factors that influence customer experience. The literature perused in this chapter supports the definition that customer experiences are not isolated moments and are often deemed memorable. The chapter purports that customer experience is a continuous and a consistent journey that consists of multiple role-players.

CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

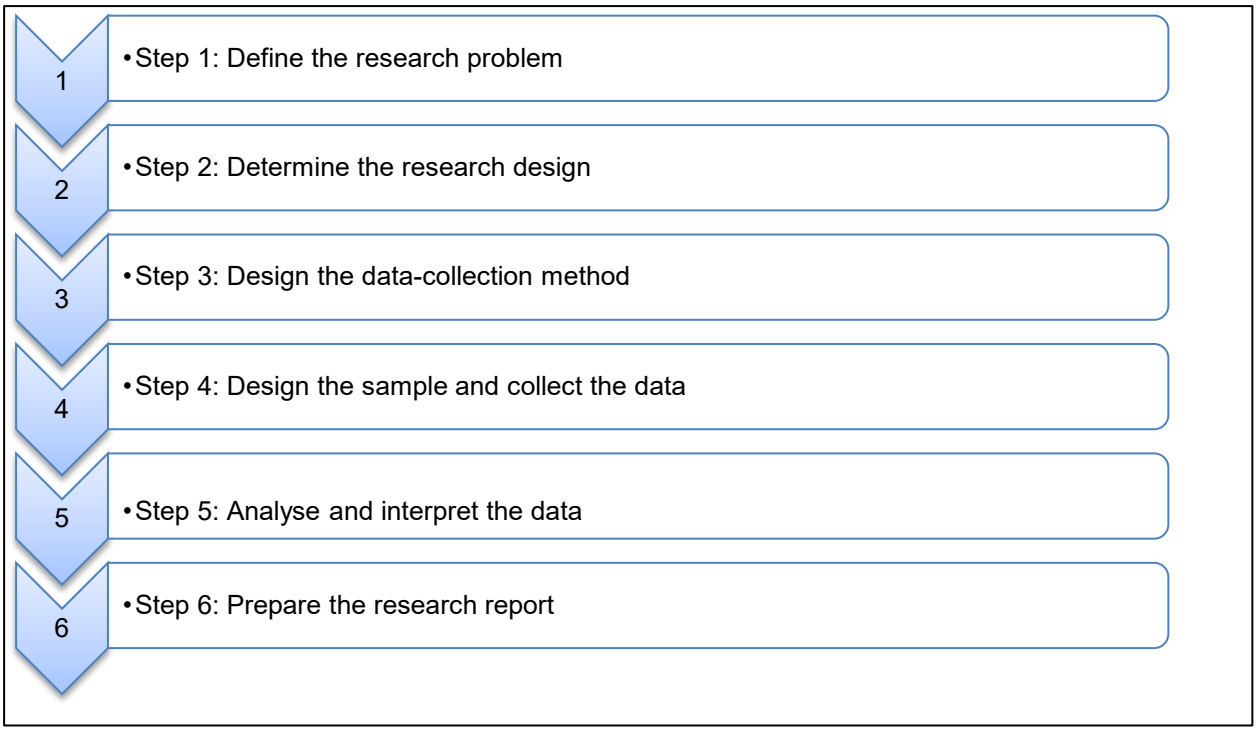
Research entails the systematic and scientific search for information on a specific topic (Bougie & Sekaran, 2020:1). Nayak and Singh (2021:1) define the research methodology of a study as a research strategy that interprets ontological and epistemological principles to create a blueprint that details how research should be conducted. The authors further explain that the research methodology outlines the procedures and practices that guide the research being conducted.

This chapter outlines the research methodology that governs the study by considering the identified research problem and the methods implemented to attain the research objectives of the study. The chapter commences with an overview of the marketing research process with specific reference to the six steps it comprises. The chapter continues by providing a description of the research problem and the primary and secondary research objectives that have been devised for the study. Thereafter, the research paradigm is discussed, followed by a comprehensive description of the research design, sampling plan and the methods employed for data collection and analysis. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how trustworthiness was ensured and how ethics was addressed.

3.2 THE MARKETING RESEARCH PROCESS

Marketing research is a process that utilises scientific methods to identify and dissect marketing opportunities and problems. It is a systematic search for knowledge and information collecting and analysing data. Marketing research seeks to thoroughly examine and determine solutions to existing marketing problems. By identifying marketing challenges, marketers can develop marketing strategies that are aimed at improving the final product or service offering (Babin & Zikmund, 2016:5; Feinberg *et al*., 2013:5; Malhotra, 2015:28). Figure 3-1 depicts the marketing research process comprising six interrelated steps.

Figure 3-1: The marketing research process



Source: Adapted from Babin and Zikmund (2016:62).

3.2.1 Step 1: Define the research problem

To define a research problem is to identify a core challenge that a business, industry or economy is facing (Babin & Zikmund, 2016:6). The identification of a research problem is considered one of the most important steps when conducting research. By identifying a research problem, the foundation of a research study is formulated (Burns & Bush, 2017:35). The research problem that was identified for this study is briefly discussed subsequently.

Kolassa (2021:4) suggests that the retail industry is in the midst of its most significant change yet due to various reasons: technology and innovation, social commerce and e-commerce. However, over the last three years, COVID-19 has been at the forefront of the causes that have led to a change in the retail industry. The pandemic is considered to be a catalyst that has accelerated change that was bound to happen within the retail space (Kolassa, 2021:4). Carlon (2021:6) describes physical commercial properties as limping entities. The author highlights that physical retail spaces were already facing challenges (the growth of e-commerce) prior to consumers being forced to stay away due to the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of these challenges include the influx of new trends within the retail sector that saw businesses closing their doors and online shopping platforms being created. Carlon (2021:6) suggests that online shopping and e-commerce have been a root cause of concern for physical retail spaces as digital

retail platforms have challenged the norms and forced traditional retailers to reassess their position and offerings to their customers.

Positive customer experiences create associations between the customer and the physical place where the experience occurred and, thus, build emotional and sentimental bonds between the customer and the place (Nyamekye *et al.,* 2022:3). According to Rosenbaum-Elliot *et al*. (2018:40), emotional associations that stem from positive customer experiences lead to the formation of attachment. The authors continue to explain that when a customer has formed an attachment to a brand, product, or place they are more likely to show a strengthened intention to purchase or impulsively purchase products.

3.2.1.1 Research objectives

A research objective can be defined as the main goal that a research study aims to achieve. Research objectives are derived from the identification of the research problem. The objectives of a research study act as navigating tools for market researchers to focus on the key variables of a research study (Berndt & Boshoff, 2018:103; Burns *et al*., 2017:34). According to Brown *et al*. (2018:14), a distinction can be made between primary and secondary objectives. Primary objectives emphasise the overarching goal that the researcher aims to accomplish by conducting the research, whereas a secondary objective is devised to support and broaden the primary objective.

By considering the research problem that has been identified for this study, the primary objective of this study is to investigate customer shopping experience in South African shopping centres. The secondary objectives that derive from and aim to support the primary objective are as follows:

1. Provide an overview of existing literature based on the constructs utilised in this study.
2. Investigate the factors that motivate participants to shop at a physical shopping centre.
3. Explore and describe the experience of participants when shopping at a physical shopping centre.
4. Explore and describe the value derived by participants when shopping at a physical shopping centre.
5. Explore and describe the factors that contribute to the attractiveness of a physical shopping centre.

3.2.2 Step 2: Determine the research design

The next step of the research process is to identify a suitable research design. A research design informs the way the tasks and components of the research must be arranged. These components

may include the activities involved in collecting and analysing data, the way theory is developed and modified, the elaboration on or refocusing of the research questions, and the methods used to confirm trustworthiness (Maxwell, 2013:2). Akhtar (2016:66) explains that the research design acts as a blueprint that is used when conducting research. The author affirms that it articulates an action plan for the collection and analysis of data. The author further explains that the research design anticipates and specifies decisions that are connected to the data to be collected.

Prior to commencing with a marketing research study, the identification of a suitable philosophical undertone or paradigm on which the research is conducted is required (Zukauskas *et al.*, 2017:1). Kamal (2019:1388) defines a paradigm as a representation of the researcher's beliefs and values. The paradigm that researchers adopt dictates the researcher's investigation in terms of the methods used for data collection and how the data will be analysed. Braun and Clarke (2022:175) are of the opinion that a paradigm helps the researcher to understand and clarify the purpose of the study, and to produce a coherent analysis. The notion and importance of a research project were explained by Kuhn (1970) as a guiding principle for a researcher regarding the correct method to conduct the research.

3.2.2.1 Positivist paradigm

A positivist paradigm outlines a holistic view of research, which is rooted in what is known in research methods as the scientific method of investigation (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017:30). Positivism is founded on the theory that there is a single reality and that in order to know and understand this single reality, the study of a phenomenon must take place with independence and detached impartiality (Davies & Fisher, 2016:20). To determine a single reality in a manner that is impartial, the positivist paradigm assumes a process of experimentation that is utilised to explore observations and answer questions (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017:30). Hypotheses are an important aspect of the positivist paradigm. Hypotheses are presented in question form about the underlying relationa among phenomena (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016:53). Experimental evidence is collected, and the evidence is analysed and conveyed in the form of a theory. The theory explains the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016:53). Positivism is preferred for research, which aims to understand observations in terms of facts or measurable entities (Davies & Fisher, 2016:20).

3.2.2.2 Critical theory

The ontological position of the critical theory is based on historical realism (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016:57). It is presumed that reality exists, but it has been moulded by cultural, political, ethnic, gender and religious dynamics that interact with each other (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016:57). The epistemological position of the critical theory underlies social constructs, it holds the belief that

knowledge is to be socially and historically created (Davies & Fischer, 2016:23). The Critical theory places its investigation in social justice subjects. It seeks to address the political, social and economic injustices, which lead to social oppression, conflict, struggle, and power structures at whatever levels these may occur (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017:35).

3.2.2.3 Interpretivist paradigm

Pervin and Mokhtar (2022:421) assert that an interpretivist paradigm is based on the premise that human experience and the social environment shape reality. Thus, an interpretivist paradigm is an appropriate paradigm to implement when conducting research on consumer behaviour based on experience in a specific social setting. When conducting interpretive research, the focus is on the participants' subjective experiences, notions and beliefs (Rehman & Alaharthi, 2016:55). By conducting an interpretivist study, the researcher will be able to gain further depth by seeking experiences and perceptions of a particular social context and therefore, a qualitative approach to conducting the study will be more suitable (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020:39).

For the purposes of this study an interpretivist paradigm was adopted. An interpretivist paradigm was implemented when exploring the meaning of the data collected and then determining why those meanings are relevant (Braun & Clarke, 2022:289). In addition, an interpretivist paradigm has been selected due to the investigation of customers, experiences in a physical shopping centre environment (Rehman & Alaharthi, 2016:55). Table 3-1 provides a summary of the characteristics of the three paradigms discussed in this section.

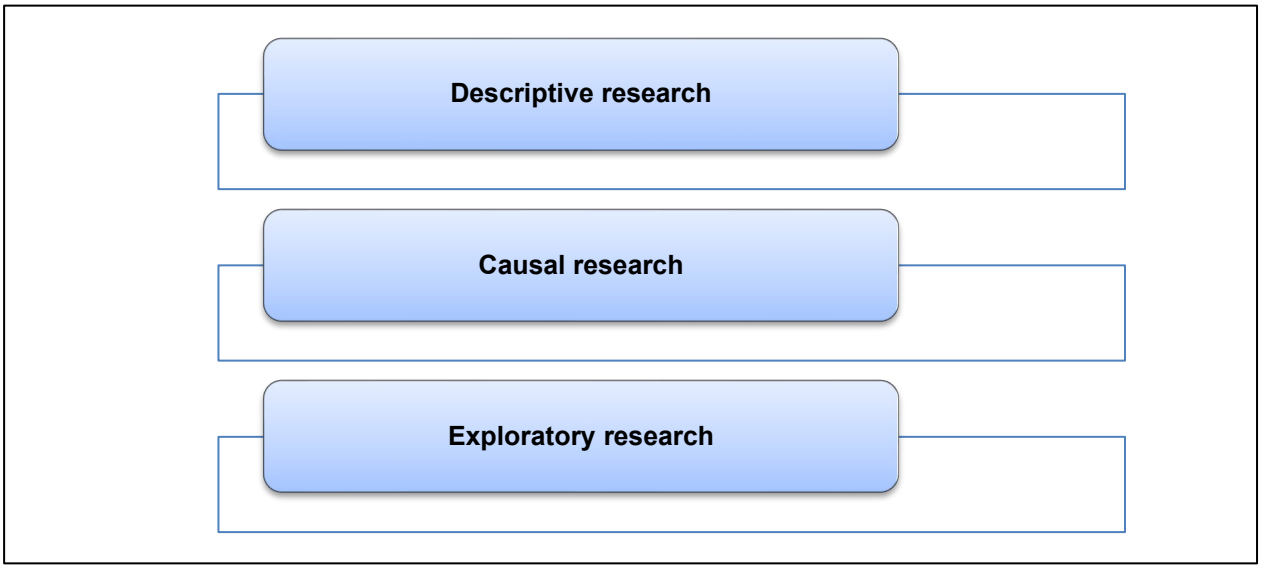
Table 3-1: Characteristics of select research paradigm

Characteristics	Positivist	Interpretive	Critical Theory
Aim	The creation of predictive and generalisable data	Describing, exploring and understanding of experiences	Creating awareness and stimulate social change
Ontology	Consists of a single reality: the real world is driven by natural causes	Consists of multiple realities that are created by individuals	Historical realism
Research methods	Qualitative	Quantitative	Quantitative
Criticisms	Does not consider individual experiences	Transferability is limited	There is no guarantee of its core aim of emancipation

Source: Adapted from Davis and Fisher (2018:22).

Babin and Zikmund (2018:67) identified three types of research designs, namely descriptive, causal and exploratory. Figure 3-2 depicts the three types of research designs.

Figure 3-2: The types of research designs



Source: Adapted from Babin and Zikmund (2018:67).

3.2.2.4 Descriptive research

Descriptive research refers to statistical research that is used to describe and understand a phenomenon that exists (Akhtar, 2016:68). This type of research design seeks to uncover respondents' characteristics. Descriptive research enables researchers to determine who their customers are, what they like, which products or brands they prefer and where they shop (Burns *et al*., 2017:99). According to Hair *et al*. (2017:36), descriptive research allows the researcher to obtain and describe detailed information from respondents.

3.2.2.5 Casual research

Causal research refers to a type of research design that measures the proportionality among variables (independent and dependent) that have been identified in a study (Burns *et al*., 2017:110). To determine the results of this type of research, researchers create an experimental design where the environment is controlled. In a controlled environment, there are instances where one of the variables may be manipulated by the researcher (Akhtar, 2016:68; Brown *et al*., 2018:16).

3.2.2.6 Exploratory research

Exploratory research is used when a researcher wants to gain insights into a phenomenon where very little is known (Akhtar, 2016:68). Exploratory research is qualitative in nature because it is often used to review existing data or to conduct in-depth interviews and focus groups to collect data. Though the findings of exploratory research may be inconclusive, significant insight is provided into the topic that is being studied (Hair *et al*., 2017:37; Nayak & Singh, 2021:68).

For the purposes of this study an exploratory research design was selected. An exploratory research design aligns with the main purpose of this study. An exploratory research design was chosen due to the minimal research that is available concerning customer experience in the retail industry in South Africa.

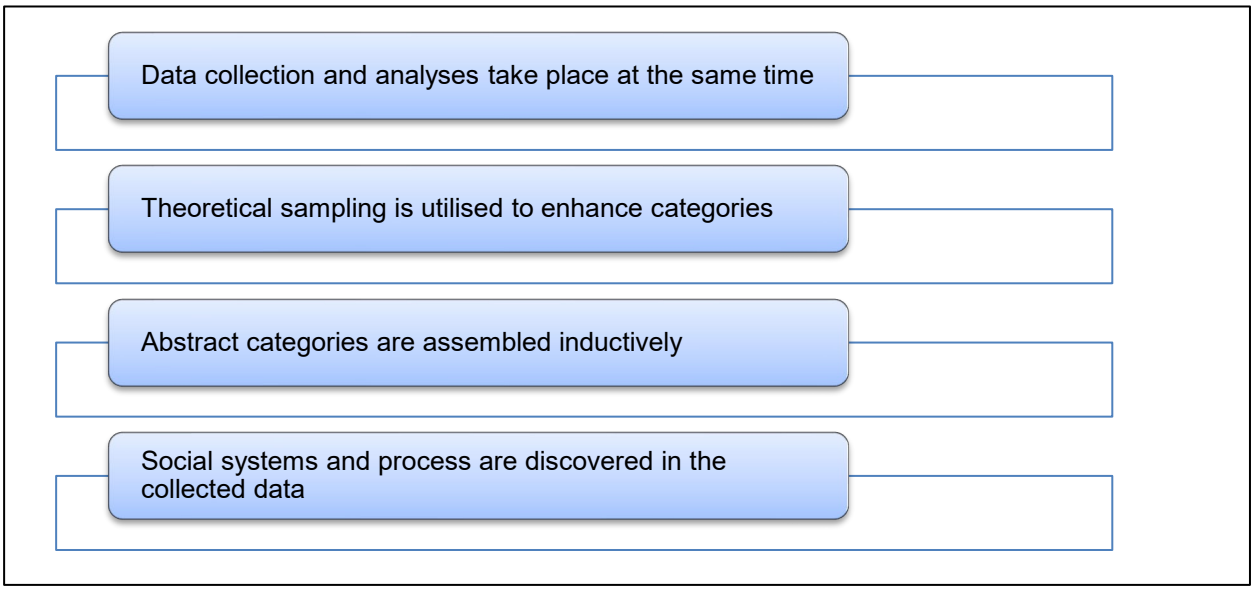
3.2.2.7 Qualitative research designs

Exploratory research designs can further be classified into grounded theory, qualitative descriptive, and phenomenology designs. Each of the exploratory designs is discussed in more detail subsequently **(**Lambert & Lambert, 2012:255).

3.2.2.8 Grounded theory

Grounded theory is defined as a research method focused on the generation of theory, which is rooted in data that has been methodically collected and analysed (Noble & Mitchell, 2016:34). Grounded theory is a process of collecting and analysing data to generate a theory. Through the generation of a theory, researchers are able to explain a phenomenon of interest (Chong & Yeo, 2015:258). There are three grounded theory designs, namely the systematic design, the emerging design, and the constructivist design (Chong & Yeo, 2015:259). The grounded theory method provides critical strategies to improve researchers' theoretical analyses. The grounded theory helps them to create new theories in their discipline and the greater research literature (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021:306). Figure 3-3 depicts four characteristics of the grounded theory research design.

Figure 3-3: Characteristics of the grounded theory



Source: Adapted from Noble and Mitchell (2016:34).

3.2.2.9 Qualitative descriptive design

Qualitative descriptive design is a term used in qualitative research for research that is both exploratory and descriptive in nature. Qualitative descriptive design has been acknowledged as significant and appropriate for research problems focused on determining the who, what, and where of experiences (Kim *et al*., 2016:105). A qualitative description design is mainly appropriate where information is acquired from those experiencing the phenomenon under investigation (Bradshaw *et al*., 2015:1).

3.2.2.10 Phenomenology

Phenomenology refers to the study of the phenomena. Phenomenology is mainly focused on the how rather than the what of objects (Zahavi, 2016:7). Phenomenology is focused on the analytical and descriptive experience of phenomena by individuals in their everyday lives (Hirsch, 2015:251). Manen (2017:775) supports Hirsch; the author explains that phenomenology is used to examine how a specific group of individuals have certain experiences. Phenomenology, therefore, is more interested in first-hand descriptions of a phenomenon than it is in uncovering how participants experience life (Zahavi, 2016:7). The purpose of doing a phenomenological study is to look closely at the phenomena under investigation and to explore the multifaceted world of lived experiences from the participants Qutoshi (2018:218).

According to Lambert and Lambert (2012:255), some of the more popular research designs when conducting qualitative research include ethnography, grounded theory, and phenomenology. A phenomenological research design is typically implemented when the aim of a study is to investigate, analyse and understand the lived experience of a participant and the meanings attached to such experiences. In addition, the characteristics that make a specific experience meaningful to the participant are explored. By so doing, participants can be better understood, and marketers can use this insight to create effective and desirable experiences for customers, leveraging and magnifying the impact of such experiences (Ziakas & Boukas, 2014:57).

For the purposes of this study, an inductive phenomenological research design as it aims to understand customers' shopping experience when shopping at a physical shopping centre. Furthermore, the meaning of such experiences will be sought to deduce how marketers can improve lived experiences of customers when shopping at a physical shopping centre in South Africa in order to improve customer footfall.

3.2.3 Step 3 Design the data collection method

Data is described as different types of information arranged in a particular manner. Therefore, data collection is defined as a process where information is collected, measured and analysed (Kabir, 2016:202). The information gathered is used to obtain solutions for research problems, provide answers and for forecasting purposes. Data collection is the third step in the marketing research process and is regarded as a fundamental component of a research study. Without the collection of data, businesses, industries and economies would be unable to answer problems clearly and concisely, to strategise and to make decisions (Joubert *et al*., 2016:112; Kabir, 2016:202; Mooi *et al*., 2018:28). Burns and Bush (2017:110) confirm that two types of data can be collected, namely secondary data and primary data.

3.2.3.1 Secondary data

Secondary data refers to data that has been collected previously by another researcher, research institute or an organisation. This data is found in journal articles, textbooks or newspapers (Nell, 2019:78). Secondary data stems from two main sources: internal data (this is data that is available within the business) and external data (data that is published and/or electronically available from outside the business) (Iacobucci & Churchill 2015:143).

For the purposes of this study, in an effort to gain complete and comprehensive insight, a multitude of secondary sources were consulted. These sources include but are not limited to academic articles, books and expert reports. The use of these sources will ensure that this study consists of relevant and accurate information that will be used to formulate a strong theoretical background. The information and data collected is concerned with the research problem and constructs.

Secondary data was collected by means of conducting a literature review (presented in Chapter 2).

3.2.3.2 Primary data

According to Hair *et al*. (2017:66) primary data is data that is collected for the first time. This data is usually collected directly from the respondents or participants of the research study. The data is used to solve or answer questions about a research problem. According to Joubert *et al*. (2016:175) primary data can be collected by means of quantitative or qualitative research.

Quantitative research is the complete opposite of qualitative research, as quantitative data deals exclusively with numerical data (Van Rensburg *et al.,* 2017:99). Quantitative research involves the systematic analysis of an observable phenomenon through the use of statistical and

mathematical techniques (Mishra & Alok, 2015:3). The use of these statistical and mathematical techniques allows the researcher to answer questions such as who, where, what, and how (Apuke, 2017:40). Qualitative research, on the other hand, seeks to understand social interactions, quantitative research aims to test hypotheses, investigate causes and effects and make reasonable and well-informed predictions (Apuke, 2017:42). Burns *et al.,* (2017:143) highlight that the quantitative research consists of structured questionnaire that is distributed to a large pool of participants, these questionnaires consist of predetermined responses. Methods of quantitative research include survey research, experimental research and case-study research (Pandey & Pandey, 2015:12). The most significant advantage of using this approach is that it allows the researcher to investigate a larger population (Rahman, 2017:16).

(a) *Observation method*: Observation is identified as a primary data collection method. Observation research takes place when a researcher looks at data by observing the behaviour of natural or social systems under investigation (Esteban-Bravo & Vidal-Sanz, 2021:39). Observations are conducted either in a controlled environment (i.e., a laboratory) or in a natural setting. Using the observational method is appropriate to situations where the data is: observable, short-term and repetitive (Gravetter & Forzano, 2019:321)

(b) *Surveys*: Surveys are a primary data-collection method that is used to determine a group of people's attitudes, opinions or experiences by asking a series of questions about the topic under study (Clow & James, 2014:35; Creswell & Creswell, 2018:155). Surveys provide researchers with quantifiable and numeric results that assist in describing trends (Creswell & Creswell, 2018:155). Survey data collection can be categorised into three main categories: self-administered surveys, telephone-administered surveys; and interview-administered surveys (Coulston *et al*. 2017:26).

Qualitative research is concerned with non-numerical data, it is considered more naturalistic than its counterpart (Mishra & Alok, 2015:3). Van Rensburg *et al.* (2017:99) affirm this by stating that qualitative research uses non-numerical data such as behaviour, images, and written documents. Researchers use this specific data when the aim is to establish an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon (Van Rensburg *et al.,* 2017:99). Qualitative research can tell a tale of the participant's life, lived experiences, behaviour, emotions and opinions (Rahman, 2017:103). Qualitative research methods include face-to-face interviews, observations and focus groups. Rahman (2017:104) lists many benefits of using qualitative research; this approach allows researchers access to a participant's feelings, emotions, and opinions. Qualitative research enables researchers to understand the participant's experiences in specific environmental settings. Lastly, qualitative research has a flexible structure which allows participants the freedom to answer as honestly as possible (Rahman, 2017:104).

Qualitative research is conducted when a more profound and deeper understanding of a topic or phenomenon is sought by using in-depth exploratory studies (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020:40; Van Rensburg *et al*., 2017:99). According to Rahman (2017:103), more precise details of a participant's life, lived experiences, behaviour, emotions, and opinions can be obtained by conducting qualitative research. In addition, qualitative research has a flexible structure which allows participants the freedom to answer as honestly as possible. Some of the methods used to collect data when conducting qualitative research include in-depth interviews, observations and focus groups (Mishra & Alok, 2015:3).

(a) *In-depth interview*: In-depth interviews are personal discussions that take place between an interviewer and a single research participant (interviewee). Mooi *et al*. (2018:15) explain that an in-depth interview requires the interviewer to ask probing questions to an interviewee. The participant is encouraged to speak freely, and share their thoughts, ideas and beliefs regarding a particular topic. There are three types of in-depth interview questions: unstructured, structured and semi-structured (Oulddjaballah, 2023:459)

(b) *Focus group*: A focus group refers to a small group of participants who gather with the aim of discussing a research topic. A focus group is led by a moderator who leads and guides discussions among the participants (Babin & Harris, 2018:65). The purpose of a focus is to dissect a discussion and use the social dynamics of the group (with the moderator). The moderator will stimulate the participants to disclose underlying attitudes, opinions and reasons for behaviour (Kabir, 2016:221).

For the purposes of this study: A qualitative approach will be implemented in this study by means of conducting in-depth interviews, as the study seeks to investigate customer shopping experience in South African shopping centres. The researcher would like to gain an in-depth understanding of how participants experience shopping at physical shopping centres in South Africa, and how such experiences can be enhanced to improve customer footfall. In addition, at the time of conducting this study, little to no research had been conducted on customers' shopping experiences at physical shopping centres in the Western Cape, albeit the second largest concentration of shopping centres in South Africa.

3.2.3.3 Interview guide design and layout

Various studies have employed qualitative methods to investigate participants' experiences, opinions and beliefs that cannot be measured statistically. Contrasting to quantitative studies, the researcher is the main instrument in the data collection. Interview questions are the core of interviewing. Moreover, an in-person interview is broadly recognised as an appropriate technique

for qualitative studies (Mujid *et al*., 2017:1074). Table 3-2 shows the advantages and disadvantages of in-depth interviews.

Table 3-2: Advantages and disadvantages of in-depth interviews

Advantages	Disadvantage
An in-depth allows the participant to be the focus of attention, ensuring that the participant feels that their input is matters and is valued by the researcher.	In-depth interviews may become costly because they may require a highly trained and skilled interviewer and In-depth interviews need to be transcribed making it costly.
An in-depth interview allows the researcher to build rapport with the participant, allowing the participant to engage freely.	In-depth interviews are labour intensive; therefore, a researcher is unable to conduct many interviews.
An in-depth interview can be held anywhere and does not require special equipment/facilities.	There is a reliance on the researcher to analyse the primary data produced from the interviews.
An in-depth interview allows the participant to share their own thoughts and opinions without being influenced by others.	Qualified and reliable researchers are not always available to conduct interviews
The researcher is able to respond to nonverbal cues.	
A one-on-one interview allows the researcher to alter the flow of the conversation if/when it is required.	
The researcher is able to gain valuable insights during the interview because the researcher is able to probe	

Source: Adapted from Brown and Suter (2014:30); Feinberg *et al.* (2013:219); Malhotra (2010:188); McDaniel and Gates (2010: 107-108).

The interview guide was created prior to the commencement of the in-depth interviews. The interviewer's guide was designed to ensure that during the in-depth interview, the interviewer was able to ask probing questions to the participants while participants were encouraged to answer questions freely. Thus, enabling participants to candidly share their thoughts, ideas and opinions. The interviewer's guide was designed to be semi-structured, consisting of open-ended questions. Open-ended questions allow the conversation to flow naturally. Semi-structured interviews require an interview guide, with questions that address the main research objective of the study. The guide is not meant to be read verbatim for all the interviews. The main purpose of the interview guide is to provide structure and a natural flow of the conversation (Adeoye-olafunde & Olenik, 2021:1362).

For the purposes of this study, in-depth interviews were conducted by making use of an interview guide comprising semi-structured questions. The interview guide that was utilised in this study was created by carefully considering the secondary data and information attained from the literature study, assessing questionnaires from similar studies and the inclusion of the objectives of the study. The following sections were included in the interview guide:

- **Section A:** the introduction to the study (5 minutes) – in this section the interviewer thanked the participant for participating in the study. The interviewer was given a brief overview of the study in order to prepare the participant for the discussion.

- **Section B:** the motivation to frequent physical shopping centres (20 minutes) – in this section the researcher aimed to dissect what had been the participant's main motivation during the times he/she visited a physical shopping centre. The researcher asked specific questions pertaining to the participant's motivations.

- **Section C:** Experience (15 minutes) – section C aimed at establishing the participant's personal experience when visiting a shopping centre from the moment they arrived at a shopping centre until they departed. In this section the researcher asked probing questions to establish whether the atmosphere, employees and the structure of a shopping centre impacted on the participant's experience.

- **Section D:** Value (10 minutes) – in this section the researcher aimed at gaining insights about the type of value that participants derive from visiting a physical shopping centre. The researcher asked probing questions with the aim to investigate whether participants derived any monetary, social or physical value when visiting a shopping centre.

- **Section E:** Attractiveness (8 minutes) – the researcher aimed to investigate what participants deemed as attractive at a shopping centre. The researcher also questioned the participants by querying what they believed could be added to a shopping centre to improve the overall attractiveness of a shopping centre.

- **Section F:** Closure (2 minutes) – the researcher thanked the participant and asked the participant whether he/she had any closing remarks.

3.2.3.4 Steps followed in conducting the in-depth interviews

A succession of steps is required when setting up an in-depth interview with a research participant (Guba & Lincoln, 1981:182) and they are as follows:

- **Identification:** Judgement (purposive) sampling method was used to identify possible participants. All the possible participants were contacted by the researcher personally. The researcher provided the background to the study to possible participants and sought to find participants who qualify to participate in the study.

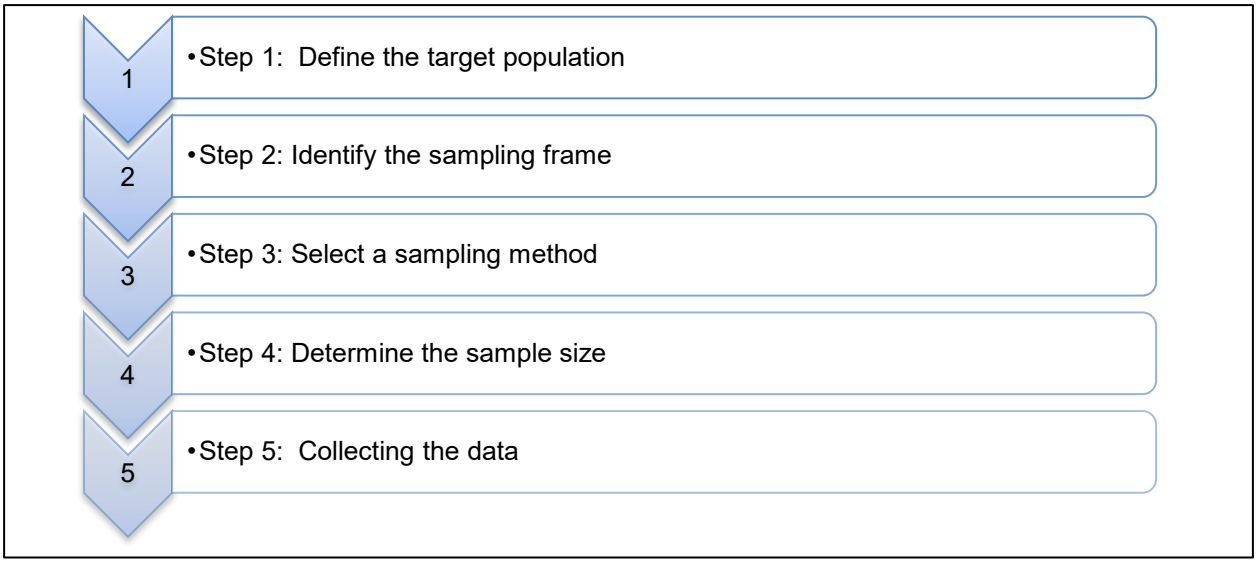
- **Invitation:** All the participants who qualified and agreed to be participants in the study were sent a letter of invitation by email. The letter of invitation contained a brief overview of the study. The participants also received a consent form from the researcher.

- **Appointment:** A total of fifteen participants were invited to participate in the interview process, and a total of nine participants responded and agreed to participate. The interviews were conducted through online video conferencing services: Zoom and Microsoft Teams. In addition to using Zoom and Microsoft Teams, two devices were utilised to capture interactions between the researcher and the participant.

3.2.4 Step 4: Design the sample and collect the data

The next step in the marketing research process is designing the sample and collecting data. A sample can be described as a smaller subset of a larger population. When the population size is too vast for the study to include all possible members or observations, samples are drawn. A sample should accurately reflect the entire population rather than have a bias toward a single attribute of the population (Kenton, 2021). The subsequent sections provide a brief discussion of the various elements of the sampling plan, including the sampling frame, the sampling method, and the sample size.

Figure 3-4: Steps in the selection of a sample as applied in this study



Source: Adapted from Babin and Zikmund (2016:340).

3.2.4.1 Step 1: Define the target population

Lamb *et al*. (2015:211) describe a target population as a population of interest where this specific group of participants hold information that a researcher requires to achieve the objectives of the study. A study's target population is usually defined in terms of elements, extent, and time. *Elements* refer to the individuals who participate in a study according to specific criteria; the *extent* refers to the geographical boundaries in which the research study will be conducted; and the *time* refers to the period in which data will be gathered from the population under consideration (Esteban-Bravo & Vidal-Sanz, 2021:637).

Table 3-3: Sampling plan for this study

Design elements	Application to empirical study
Sampling element	Participants aged 18 years or older who have visited a physical shopping centre in the Western Cape in the past six months and who reside in the Western Cape province.
Extent	Western Cape
Time	March 2023 to June 2023
Sampling method	Non-probability purposive sampling
Sample size	Depends on when the point of saturation is reached

The target population for this study included participants aged 18 and older, who have visited a physical shopping centre in the past six months, and who reside in the Western Cape. The sampling extent is therefore the Western Cape province of South Africa.

The study was conducted in the Western Cape of South Africa. Besides the Gauteng province, the Western Cape houses the second largest number of shopping centres in South Africa (Bell, 2020).

3.2.4.2 Step 2: Identify the sampling frame

A sampling frame is a complete list of probable items used to draw a sample for a study (Berndt, 2020:225). **For the purposes of this study**, the researcher was unable to acquire a sampling frame. Therefore, an appropriate non-probability sampling method was used to draw a suitable sample from the target population.

3.2.4.3 Step 3: Select a sampling method

Sampling methods are broadly categorised into two main categories, namely probability and non-probability sampling (Burns & Bush, 2017:251).

(a) **Probability sampling:** Berndt (2020:225) explains that the use of probability sampling requires the researcher to obtain certain knowledge about the chosen target population. Therefore, a sample frame or list of all participants is a necessity and prerequisite for conducting a probability sample. Probability sampling is used when every element in the population has a definite and known probability of being a part of the final sample. This sampling method includes simple random, stratified random and clustered sampling (Mishra & Alok, 2017:10).

(b) **Non-probability sampling**: is subjective and is based on the selection that the researcher makes beforehand (Berndt, 2020:225). Therefore, this sampling technique does not include the whole population, but rather a subset of the population under consideration. Non-probability sampling is identified as a sampling method that is easy, quick, and straightforward and includes purposive, convenience, and quota sampling (Mishra & Alok, 2017:8).

Table 3-4: Methods of probability and non-probability sampling

Probability	Non-probability
Simple random: this is considered the easiest form of probability sampling. Every member of the population has a chance to be selected and form part of the sample.	**Convenience:** an easy form of selecting a sample. The researcher selects members of the population that are easily available.
Stratified random: Each member of the population is assigned to a subgroup (stratum) thereafter, a simple random sample is selected from each subgroup.	**Purposive:** the researcher will rely on his/her own judgement when selecting members of the population to form part of the sample.
Clustered: Members of the population are assigned to a cluster. Thereafter, the clusters are selected randomly, and each member of the cluster will form part of the sample.	**Quota:** the researcher will select a sample that produces the similar proportions as the population proportions on easily identified variables.
Systematic: Each member of the study population is listed, a random start is selected, then members of the population are selected at equal intermissions.	**Snowball:** Members of the population are selected to form part of the sample. The members selected are asked by the researcher to assist in identifying potential participants.

Source: Adapted from Nayak and Singh (2021:82).

For the purposes of this study, non-probability purposive sampling was used. Purposive sampling is based on the researcher's own judgement and is often used to select the most appropriate sampling elements to include in a study based on certain criteria (Babin & Zikmund, 2016:348). The inclusion criteria on which prospective participants will be judged are as follows:

- Participants are required to be 18 years of age or older for ethical reasons.

- Participants must have visited a physical shopping centre in the Western Cape in the past six months.

- Participants are required to reside in the Western Cape province.

3.2.4.4 Step 4: Determine the sample size

For the purpose of obtaining appropriate and precise findings, researchers need to ensure that an accurate sample size is determined (Kang, 2021:1). Nayak and Singh (2021:85) indicate that sample size determination plays a vital role in the research process in any field of study. Qualitative studies typically have much smaller sample sizes than quantitative studies (Mishra & Alok, 2015:3). According to Dukes (1984), a qualitative sample size of five to eight participants is acceptable in a homogeneous group and will provide sufficient data for the researcher to analyse effectively. Creswell (2018) believes that three to ten participants will suffice for a phenomenological study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) affirm that 12 to 20 participants are required for a study in which interviews are conducted. However, the guidelines provided by these authors lack a clear and detailed rationale (Sim *et al.*, 2018:620). Instead, when using purposive sampling in a qualitative study, the point of data saturation is mostly used to determine sample size (Morse, 2015:587). According to Hennik and Kaiser (2022:2), the point of data saturation refers to the point in data collection when no new insight is realised and when data begins to repeat so that further data collection is redundant. At this point, the sample size has been reached. **For the purposes of this study**, data was gathered (nine interviews) until the point of saturation was reached.

3.2.4.5 Step 5: Collecting the data

The last step of the sampling process is data collection. Data collection is a method of methodically gathering and analysing variables' measures in order to address the research problem, test theories, and interpret findings (Kabir, 2016:202).

For the purposes of this study, in-depth unstructured interviews were used to explore and investigate the lived experience of customers when shopping at physical shopping centres in the Western Cape. According to Ataro (2020:20), the preferred method for gathering data when conducting a qualitative phenomenological study is by means of conducting interviews. Prior to conducting the in-depth interviews with participants, the researcher underwent extensive training in the interview process. In addition, the researcher's supervisor attended the interview sessions to monitor the process and to ask additional questions that the researcher may have missed. The first interview acted as a pilot interview, conducted in the same manner that all the subsequent

interviews would be conducted by using participants with the same characteristics as those from the study's target population.

Participants were invited to participate in the study by means of posting an invitation on various Facebook pages of shopping centres located in the Western Cape province. These shopping centres include Canal Walk, Somerset Mall, V&A Waterfront, Cavendish Square, Tyger Valley Centre, Cape Quarter Lifestyle Centre, The Point Mall, Garden Route Mall, and Eden Meander Lifestyle Centre. Prior to posting the invitation to participate in the study on each shopping centre's Facebook page, permission was obtained from the page administrator. The invitation stated the aim of the study, the inclusion criteria of the study, and a clause containing details of participating in the study, highlighting that participation was voluntary and that responses would remain anonymous. The invitation informed prospective participants that the interviews would take approximately 60 minutes to complete and were concluded online by using the Microsoft Teams or Zoom applications.

3.2.5 Step 5: Analyse and interpret the data

The fifth step in the marketing research process entailed the analysis and interpretation of data and had to commence once the data had been collected (Malhotra, 2019:374). According to Nayak and Singh (2015:143), the analysis of qualitative data begins at the moment of observation or interviewing. Analysing data in its infancy stage allows the researcher to identify problems and concepts in a timely manner. The data collected undergoes a process of preliminary preparation which entails editing and cleaning the data for any inconsistencies. The method that will be used to analyse the data will be discussed in the subsequent sections.

3.2.5.1 Data preparation

Once data was gathered by means of conducting in-depth interviews it underwent a process of preparation where the audio recordings had to be transcribed for further analysis to commence (Nayak & Singh, 2015:160). Transcripts are text records taken from audio or video recordings (Burns & Veeck, 2020:7). Transcription entails a change of medium (i.e., changing from a voice recording to a written or typed document). Effective and efficient transcription is time-consuming.

For the purposes of this study, recordings were transcribed by *Language Matters*, a video and audio transcription services agency that is based on the Potchefstroom Campus of the North-West University. The transcriptions were uploaded to ATLAS.ti 23, a computer programme that was used for coding, categorisation and thematic analysis. The researcher read through all the transcripts and compared them with the original recordings to ensure correctness prior to continuing with the coding process.

3.2.5.2 Data analysis: The morse and Field approach

Morse and Field (1996:103) explain that for theory to emerge from raw data, a process of complete immersion and familiarity needs to take place. Data needs to go through a process of conjecture, verification, correction and modification before it is transformed into valuable theory. The Morse and Field approach consists of four steps that may occur sequentially, namely comprehend, synthesise, theorise and re-contextualise.

3.2.5.2.1 Step 1: Comprehend

Comprehension is achieved when the researcher can prepare a thorough description of the phenomenon that is being studied. Any new data that may be presented does not add or subtract from the given description (Beck *et al*., 2010:320). According to Morse and Field, (1994:104) once the in-depth interviews have been completed and data has been collected, the interviews need to be transcribed, checked, adjusted and coded. This enables the researcher to make sense of the information accumulated. The stage of comprehension is achieved once the researcher has collected sufficient data to compile a thorough, detailed and intelligible description (Morse & Field, 1996:104; Richards & Morse, 2013:122). The comprehension of the data collected is supported by reviewing the literature of the study (Boeije, 2010:23). A literature review assists the researcher to formulate a theoretical framework.

Coding is an important aspect that is required to achieve comprehension, it allows the researcher to meticulously sort through the collected data and unveil fundamental implications in the study (Morse & Field, 1996:104). Coding is the process of categorising data into identified segments (Phakiti, 2014:161). Morse and Field (1996:104) regard a line-by-line analysis of an interview transcript to be the most suitable form of coding. A line-by-line analysis requires the researcher to be attentive to each line of text (Chenail, 2012:266). Through a line-by-line analysis of the interview transcript, the researcher is able to assign codes to different concepts in the text (Ravitch & Carl, 2016:104). Prior to coding, the researcher needs to assess the entire dataset to avoid interpreting or quoting the participants' answers incorrectly (Belk *et al*., 2011:51). In order for comprehension to be reached, and for a researcher to reach a point of saturation, the collection of data has to continue until no new themes and information developed from the last three interviews (Fusch & Ness, 2015:1408; Lewith *et al.*, 2011:51).

For the purposes of this study, the researcher conducted an extensive literature review (Chapter 2) prior to gathering the data by means of conducting in-depth interviews. This allowed the researcher to identify any interesting insights gained during data collection. According to Morse (1994:26), the researcher practised caution; however, to ensure that the perceptions gained of the topic at hand when conducting the preliminary literature review do not affect or

contaminate the evidence gathered. Open coding was used in order to ensure the separation of preconceived ideas and new ideas obtained (Saldana, 2016:148). According to Williams and Moser (2019:48), open coding is the first level of coding in which textual and regularly occurring indicators are compared to previously identified indicators. This allowed the researcher to obtain a better understanding of the phenomenon under study.

3.2.5.2.2 Step 2: Synthesise

Morse and Field (1996:105) explain synthesis as the sifting stage of the data. This is when researchers can confidently explain and describe the norms. A point of synthesis has been reached when the researcher can confidently describe the feelings and behaviour of the participants without referring to notes. Synthesise involves extracting data and meticulously putting the pieces together to form common themes (Loiselle & Profetto-McGrath, 2010:320). Data synthesis may be described as a process that allows the researcher to integrate the collected data with the aim of interpreting, analysing, describing and concluding on the research evidence (Ring *et al*., 2011:4). The coding process forms part of the synthesising stage, which can be defined as a process of assigning a word or phrase to a portion of textual or visual data (Williams & Moser, 2019:46).

For the purposes of this study, the ATLAS.ti 23 programme was used to aid with the coding process. The researcher analysed the transcripts line by line to identify inductive codes. When engaging in line-by-line analysis, the researcher will implement horizontalization. The process of horizontalization requires the researcher to be amenable to any comments or ideas obtained during the gathering of data and treat each response with equal value (Moustakas, 1994:122). Axial coding, the second level of coding, was then used to cluster the assigned codes into categories. According to Williams and Moser (2019:50), axial coding identifies relationships between open codes to develop categories. The researcher continued the analytic process by reviewing and subsuming the identified categories with the aim of suggesting emerging theories.

3.2.5.2.3 Step 3: Theorise

The process of theorising data involves systematically sorting data. In this phase, researchers are able to devise alternative explanations for the phenomenon under study (Beck *et al*., 2010:320). During the theorising step, the researcher has the ability to select alternative explanations to compare the data. This continues until the researcher identifies the most suitable explanation to describe the data (Theron, 2015). Nelson (2016:567) identified two types of theorising: low-level inward facing theorising and abstract outward facing theorising. Low-level inward facing theorising is described as explanations of the data that has limited meaning. Abstract outward facing theorising is described as explanations of data that has meaning and

makes sense to research participants (Nelson, 2016:567). Harding and Whitehead (2012:146) encourage the process where a number of different people should be involved when theorising takes place. This encourages multiple viewpoints to emerge, which produces more accurate results and provide a comprehensive explanation of the data. After the results are achieved and compared, a theory emerges from the data (Morse & Field, 1996:125).

For the purposes of this study, a comparison of the various interpretations and explanations were made to determine which one was best suited for the existing data. This process continued until the most adequate and suitable theories had been obtained. During the theorising phase of data analysis, bracketing and intuiting were used. Dorfler and Stierand (2021:787) explain that bracketing occurs when the researcher maintains an open mind towards the data gathered and the interpretation thereof by bracketing out any preconceived ideas or interpretations of the phenomenon under study. Once the researcher has completed the bracketing process, intuiting ensues, in which the researcher must become immersed in the phenomenon under study in order to understand the phenomenon by focusing in preceded research (Greening, 2019:90).

3.2.5.2.4 Step 4: Re-contextualise

This phase develops the theory until a point where the theory may be considered to be applicable to other settings or research (Beck *et al*., 2010:320). According to Harding and Whitehead (2013:142) re-contextualisation provides an understanding of the concepts that were used and highlights how the relationships amongst the concepts were formed.

For the purposes of this study, the theories that have been identified in the literature review and the results of the face-to-face interviews were integrated for the purpose of re-contextualisation.

3.2.5.3 Trustworthiness in qualitative research designs to ensure rigour

Trustworthiness refers to the overall quality that is associated with a study. Reliability is defined as the extent to which a measurement reproduces consistent results (Malhotra & Birks, 2006:140). Validity refers to the appropriateness of the measure to assess or review the constructs it intends to measure (Bush & Burns, 2014:112). It is important to note that both reliability and validity concern trustworthiness (Anney, 2015:273). According to Guba (1981:80), trustworthiness is determined by considering four criteria, namely credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

- **Credibility (in preference to internal validity)** looks at whether the findings of the research correlate and are a true reflection of the original data that has been collected (Kyngas *et al.,* 2020:42). Credibility comprises two factors; one ensures the believability of the findings, and

the other involves the steps that are taken to showcase the credibility in research reports (Connelly, 2016:435).

- **Transferability (in preference to external validity)** refers to the degree to which the findings of the study will be applicable to other projects and fields (Kyngas *et al*., 2020:46). Stahl and Kind (2020:27) maintain that transferability seeks to expand understanding and meaning by transferring findings from one context to another.

- **Dependability (in preference to reliability)** refers to the assessment of the quality of the different processes that data goes through before it reaches a point of theory generation. Dependability also describes consistency from the starting point until the end (Kyngas *et al*., 2020:44). Stahl and King (2020:27) refer to dependability as the *trust* in trustworthiness.

- **Confirmability (in preference to objectivity)** measures the degree to which the findings of the study support the collected data (Kyngas *et al*., 2020:46). Confirmability refers to the process of getting as close to objective reality as qualitative research can get by not constructing one's own reality, but rather to pursue objectivity (Stahl & King, 2020:28).

Table 3-5 provides an explanation as to how the researcher went about ensuring that every criterion is met for the purposes of this study.

Table 3-5: Provisions made by the researcher to address trustworthiness

Quality criterion	Provision made by researcher
Credibility	• Prolonged engagement with the topic under study. • Adoption of well-recognised research methods. • Iterative questioning in data gathering dialogues. • Negative case analysis. • Member checks of data collected, and interpretations/theories formed. • Thick description of phenomena under scrutiny. • Examination of previous research to frame findings. • The results of the interviews were submitted to two experienced researchers in the field of qualitative research (Prof. Alfred Henrico and Mr. Johan Gouws) to confirm the findings of the study and provide their input on these findings.
Transferability	• Provision of background data to establish the context of the study and a detailed description of the phenomena in question to allow comparisons to be made. • Describing the methods and time frames for the gathering of data.

Table 3-5: Provisions made by the researcher to address trustworthiness (continued)

Quality criterion	Provision made by researcher
Dependability	• Peer scrutiny was used in which another researcher read and reacted to the data that was gathered, the methods of analysis used, and the findings of the study. The results of the interview sessions were submitted to two professional qualitative researchers (Prof. Alfred Henrico and Johan Gouws) in order to verify the codes and analysis of the data. Bracketing was done both during the gathering of data and the analysis of data. • Reflexive auditing is when the researcher describes their involvement in the decisions made in the research process.
Confirmability	• Admission of researcher's beliefs and assumptions. • Recognition of shortcomings in the study's methods and their potential effects. • In-depth methodological description to allow the integrity of research results to be scrutinised. • Use of diagrams to demonstrate the "audit trail". • Furthermore, the results and findings of the interview sessions were submitted to two experienced researchers in the field of qualitative research (Prof. Alfred Henrico and Mr. Johan Gouws) to confirm findings of the study.

Source: Adapted from Shenton (2004) and Stahl and King (2020:26).

3.2.6 Step 6: Prepare the research report

This step of the marketing research process involves the findings and reporting on these findings. This step will determine if customer shopping experience has a significant impact of shopping centres in South Africa. The findings will be presented in Chapter 4 of the study.

3.3 Conclusion

The methodology utilised in this study is outlined in this chapter, detailing each step of the marketing research process. The research problem and objectives were defined, followed by an exploration of the research design and the selection of an appropriate methodology. Justification for the chosen sampling method was provided, along with an explanation of how the research findings were collected, interpreted, and analysed. Chapters 4 and 5 present the study's findings and conclusions, respectively. The findings reported in Chapter 4 are based on the interpretation categories identified in the study.

CHAPTER 4 EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to present the study's empirical findings after applying the research methodology set out in Chapter three. This chapter provides an overview of the research questions asked in the in-depth interviews. It further describes the categories and themes outlined in the second stage of the Morse and Field approach to analysing qualitative data. Chapter four continues by providing a comprehensive description of the findings identified in each category. This chapter concludes by summarising core findings related to each theme.

4.2 RESEARCH RESULTS

This section delves into the results of the study and provides a detailed explanation of the main objectives of the in-depth interviews. The section links the literature and objectives of the study to each question asked during the in-depth interviews. The section further explains the relations between the questions, categories and themes identified.

4.2.1 Aims of in-depth interview questions and relation to literature, objectives and interpretation categories

The empirical results are illustrated by the relation among the questions in the in-depth interviews, the research objectives (Chapters 1 & 3), the literature review (Chapter 2) and the categories and themes identified using the Morse and Field approach. Table 4-1 acts as a point of departure that illustrates the aforementioned relations.

Table 4-1: The aims of in-depth interview questions and their relation to literature, objectives and interpretation categories (continued)

In-depth interview question: **B1. Thinking about the last time you visited a physical shopping centre, please explain to me why you decided to visit the physical shopping centre as opposed to browsing or shopping online.**			
Aim	To investigate the factors that motivate participants to shop at a physical shopping centre.		
Research objective	Secondary research objective 2		
Literature	Chapter 2		
Theme	1	Category	A, B, C, D

Table 4-1: The aims of in-depth interview questions and their relation to literature, objectives and interpretation categories (continued)

In-depth interview question: **B2. Please tell me how you experienced your visit to the shopping centre from the moment you arrived at the property until you departed.**			
Aim	To explore and describe the experience of participants when shopping at a physical shopping centre.		
Research objective	Secondary research objective 3		
Literature	Chapter 5		
Theme	2	Category	A, B, C, D
In-depth interview question: **B3. What value do you derive from visiting a physical shopping centre.**			
Aim	To explore and describe the value derived by participants when shopping at a physical shopping centre.		
Research objective	Secondary research objective 4		
Literature	Chapter 5		
Theme	3	Category	A, B, C, D, E
In-depth interview question: **B4. Please explain to me some of the reasons or factors that make a visit to a physical shopping centre attractive.**			
Aim	To explore and describe factors that contribute to the attractiveness of a physical shopping centre.		
Research objective	Secondary research objective 5		
Literature	Chapter 5		
Theme	4	Category	A, B, C, D, E, F

This section concludes by providing categories and themes identified by using the ATLAS.ti 23 software package for analysing qualitative data and applying the Morse and Field approach. The details relating to the data analysis and indications of how the categories and themes have been identified, including the codebook devised during the analysis process, can be found on the CD-ROM included at the back of this dissertation. Table 4-2 specifies the thematic and categorical outline for the empirical research results and acts as an introduction to the results deliberated in the subsequent sections.

Table 4-2: The thematic and categorical framework for empirical research results

	Category (A)	Category (B)	Category (C)	Category (D)	Category (E)	Category (F)
Theme 1: *Motivation for customers to frequent physical shopping centres.*	Convenience	Tactility	Therapeutic	Trust		
Theme 2: *Experience when frequenting physical shopping centres.*	Atmospherics	Customer Service	Hygiene	Safety		
Theme 3: *Value derived when frequenting physical shopping centres.*	Browsing	Economic	Service	Social	Relaxation	
Theme 4: *Attractive factors of physical shopping centres.*	Aesthetics	Layout	Stores	Staff	Security	Unattractiveness

The categories identified in relation to each theme are deliberated below. The research results relating to each identified category are also discussed. Once the results are presented in relation to each category, the main results with respect to each theme are summarised.

4.2.2 Theme 1: Motivation for customers to frequent shopping centres

This section provides a detailed discussion pertaining to the motivation for customers to frequent physical shopping centres in South Africa. The section further details the research results for the four categories identified as illustrated in Table 4-2.

4.2.2.1 Category 1(A): Convenience

Category 1(A) reflects the motivation for customers to frequent physical shopping centres based on the convenience of visiting a physical shopping centre.

The participants were asked what their motivation was to frequent physical shopping centres instead of shopping online. A large majority (a large majority refers to 5 or more participants) of participants deem it convenient to touch, feel, and physically experience a clothing item before purchasing it. Most of the participants expressed the view that it was convenient to visit a physical shopping centre. Some participants expressed the view that an activity such as grocery shopping was most convenient when visiting a shopping centre. However, a few participants indicated that they do not deem a visit to a physical shopping centre as convenient.

Figure 4-1: Category 1(A) research results – Theme 1

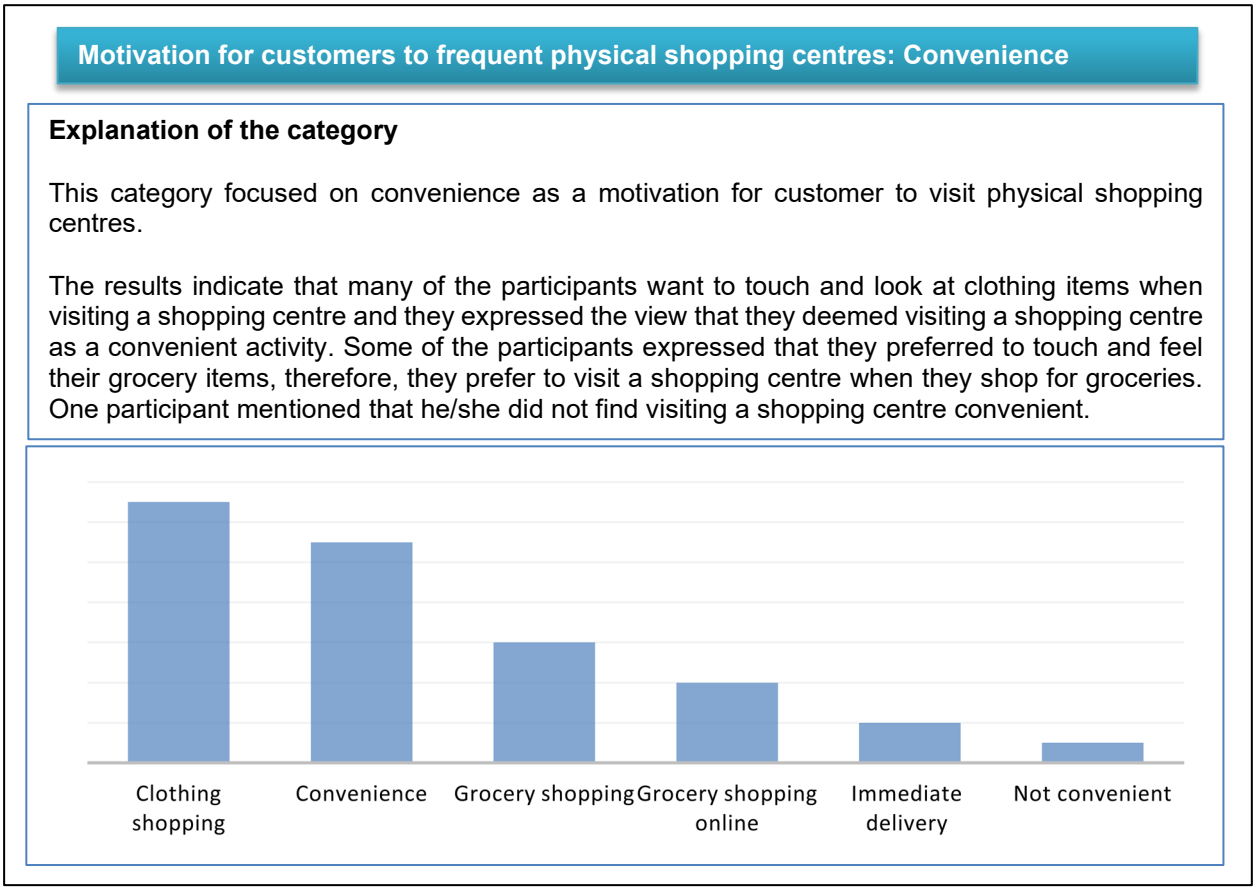


Figure 4-1: Category 1(A) research results – Theme 1 (continued)

Supporting verbatim quotes:

"Where food is concerned, I would prefer to see physically the product, pick it up and hold it in my hand and decide then if I want to buy it."

Participant 9

"Imagining myself in it, will be better than seeing it online because maybe when I get the clothing it's not going to be the same."

Participant 2

"It makes shopping more convenient for me."

Participant 1

4.2.2.2 Category 1(B): Tactility

Category 1 (B) considers tactility as a motivation to frequent physical shopping centres. This is based on the customer's ability to touch, see and physically experience products in-store.

The study's findings show that many participants preferred to experience and see a product physically. Most of the participants indicated that they preferred to touch a physical product before purchasing the product. A few participants expressed that they found it ideal to visit a physical shopping centre as they could fit clothing items before purchasing.

Figure 4-2: Category 1(B) research results – Theme 1

Motivation to frequent physical shopping centres: Tactility

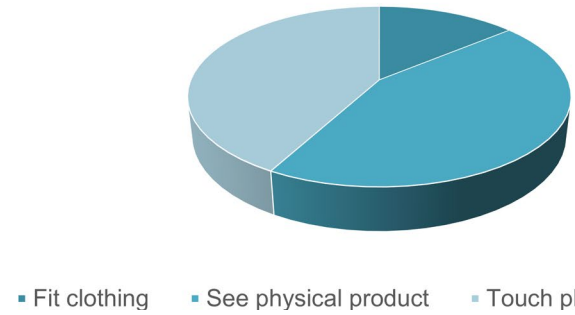
Explanation of the category

This category considers tactility as a motivation for customer to visit physical shopping centres.

The results indicate that many of the participants prefer to experience a product physically. The participants further indicated that it is ideal for them to touch a product physically when they visit a physical shopping centre.

The results also showed that a few participants preferred to fit clothing items, hence, they visit a physical shopping centre.

Figure 4-2: Category 1(B) research results – Theme 1 (continued)



Supporting verbatim quotes:

"And with clothes the last time I went shopping I went to buy clothes and before deciding to go to the mall actually, I went online and looked for a few things online but you can't feel items online that's the reason I prefer going to the mall cause if I am at the mall then I can look for a size and try it on then when I leave the shop then I'm almost certain that whatever item I'm leaving with its what I want and it fits properly."

Participant 2

"I would like to fit it to see if it fits me."

Participant 1

4.2.2.3 Category 1(C): Therapeutic

Category 1(C) considers a therapeutic element as motivation for customers to frequent physical shopping centres.

The results of the study shed light on a therapeutic element that customers derive when visiting a physical shopping centre. Most participants considered escapism a motivating factor when visiting a physical shopping centre. Most participants highlighted that the activity of browsing through different stores at a physical shopping centre is a form of therapy for them; it allows them to escape from their everyday lives and exist in a different reality. A few participants expressed that visiting a physical shopping centre is retail therapy; they can process their daily frustrations, stress and disappointments when shopping at a physical shopping centre.

Figure 4-3: Category 1(C) research results – Theme 1

Motivation to frequent physical shopping centres: Therapeutic

Explanation of category

The results of the study indicate that many participants consider browsing for products as a motivation to frequent a physical shopping centre.

Most of the participants also consider escapism as motivation to frequent to visit a physical shopping centre.

While a few participants mentioned that retail therapy is a motivation to frequent a physical shopping centre.

Supporting verbatim quotes:

"… I find it very therapeutic for me and, time also, I don't know, it just makes time go faster as well, you know? Maybe after 2 hours that I spend, 2 or 3 hours that I spend at the mall, I feel a little bit better."

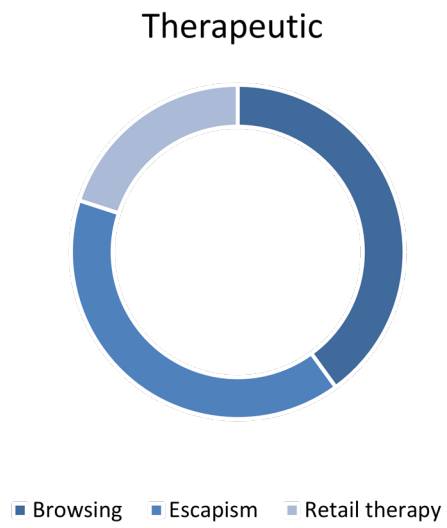
Participant 3

"I just zone out and I'm in my own world."

Participant 1

"In terms of clothing, I actually have to go there, cause yeah, I'm also a bit of a, I wouldn't say fashionista, but I'm a fashionable guy. So, I actually have to take my time. Browse through."

Participant 5



4.2.2.4 Category 1(D): Trust

Category 1(D) considers trust as a motivation for customers to frequent physical shopping centres.

The results of the study indicate that most participants frequent physical shopping centres to avoid delivery disappointment from online stores, as they know exactly what they are buying. Participants feel that at times when buying items online, they are disappointed upon delivery, as it is not always the item that they thought they'd be receiving in terms of the quality, size, texture or functioning of the item. They express that shopping at a physical shopping centre allows them to obtain products immediately without having to wait for delivery. A few participants pointed out that they choose to visit a physical shopping centre because they do not trust online stores because what they see is not always what they get. Some participants also shared their concerns about concluding transactions online by means of providing their credit card or banking details.

Figure 4-4: Category 1(D) research results – Theme 1

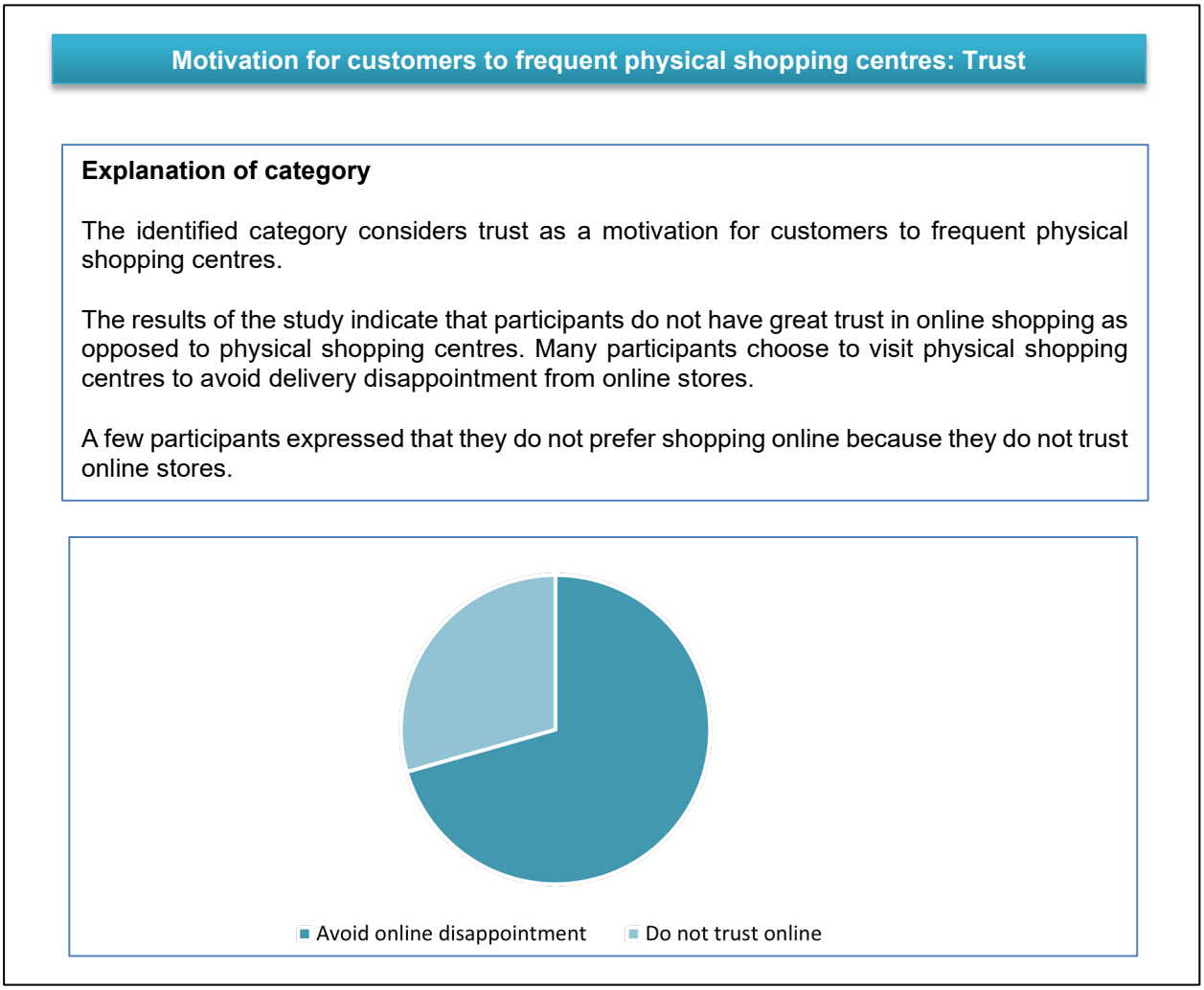


Figure 4-4: Category 1(D) research results – Theme 1 (continued)

Supporting verbatim quotes:

"Sometimes when you buy things online it's a bit misleading in terms of like the size or like the quality of the material or something."

Participant 7

"You never know what you're gonna get online, they could just package anything for you without really checking the expiry date or how fresh the produce is."

Participant 4

4.2.3 Theme 2: Experience when frequenting physical shopping centre

The following section outlines a detailed discussion in relation to the experience customers derive from frequenting a physical shopping centre.

4.2.3.1 Category 2(A): Atmospherics

Category 2(A) reflects on atmospherics as a factor that impacts a customer's experience when visiting a physical shopping centre.

The findings of the study reflect that participants had an array of elements that they considered to have an impact on the atmosphere of a shopping centre. The results indicate that most participants pay attention to the music that is played in a physical shopping centre. While some participants expressed that they like the music that is played at a physical shopping centre, a number of participants indicated that they were indifferent to the music that is played in a physical shopping centre. However, some participants highlighted that music is a factor that they are cognisant of when visiting a shopping centre. A few participants stated that music increases their browsing time.

A number of participants expressed that they pay attention to the scent when they enter a physical shopping centre. Some participants further explained that they enjoy it when a shopping centre has some sort of scent present. A few participants specified that a pleasing scent increases browsing time at a shopping centre.

A handful of participants mentioned that they do not notice the lighting of a physical shopping centre. A few participants indicated that they dislike lighting, notice decorations and appreciate good directional signage when visiting a physical shopping centre.

Figure 4-5: Category 2(A) research results – Theme 2

Experience when frequenting physical shopping centres: Atmospherics

Explanation of category

The identified category pertains to atmospherics as a factor that impacts experience when customers visit a physical shopping centre.

The results indicated that most of the participants liked music when visiting a physical shopping centre, while some of the participants were indifferent to the music that plays at a physical shopping centre during a visit. A handful of participants indicated that they do not notice the music that is played in a physical shopping centre. A few participants indicated that they paid attention to music in a clothing store and it increased their browsing time when they were visiting a physical shopping centre.

The study indicated that some of the participants do not notice scents in a shopping centre. A handful of participants like the scent while one participant mentioned that scent increases their browsing time.

Supporting verbatim quotes:

"One thing that stresses me about going to a shopping centre is like the lights are too bright sometimes ..."

Participant 7

"I first notice the smell, the scent."

Participant 5

"It depends on what song they are playing."

Participant 9

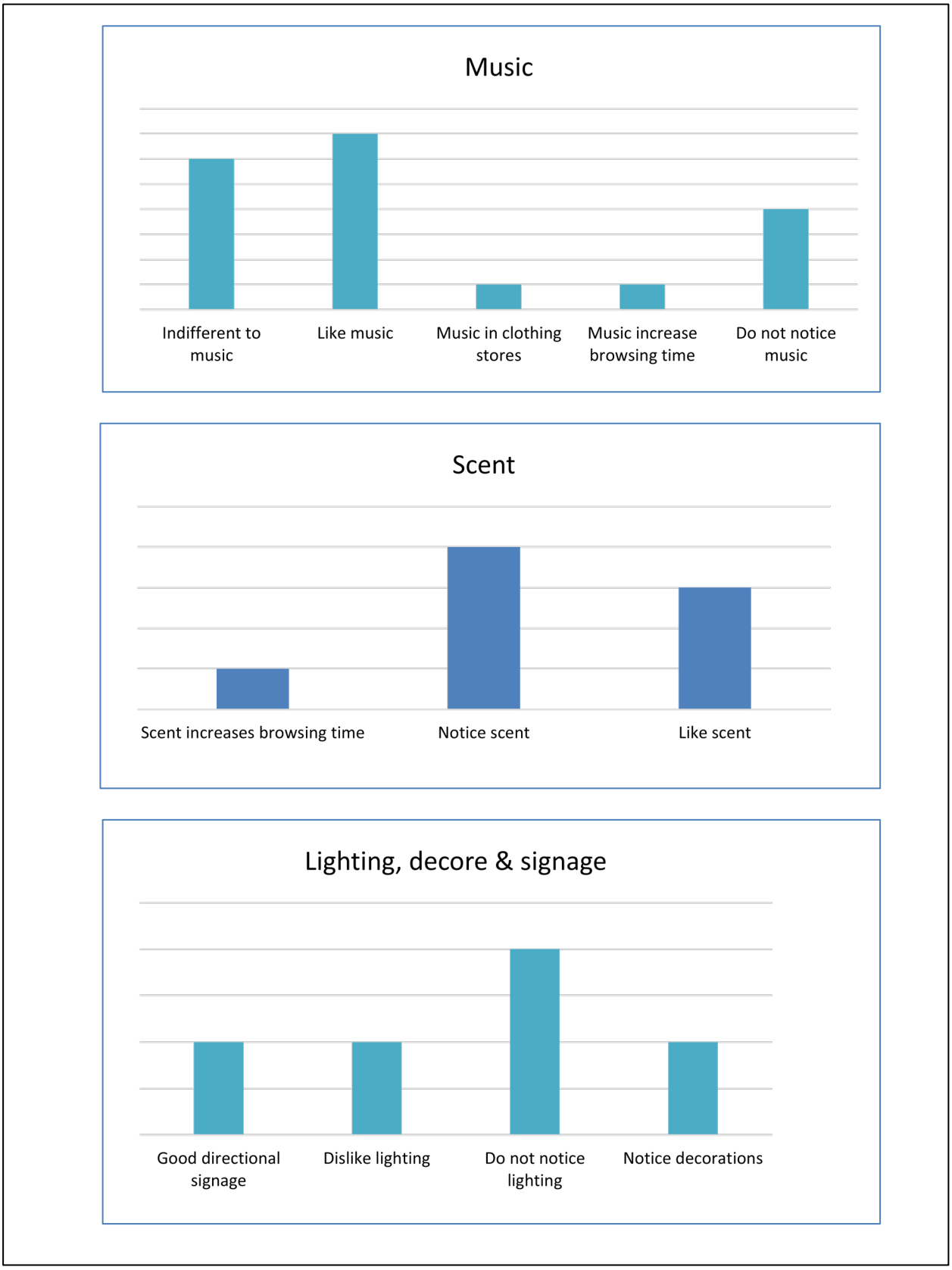
"… I am like okay can just sit and do a little bit of eye shopping just for the music."

Participant 1

"…it would be the same in a mall is you have music that you really like you'll be happy doing your shopping."

Participant 4

Figure 4-5: Category 2(A) research results – Theme 2 (continued)



4.2.3.2 Category 2(B): Customer service

Category 2(B) considers customer service as a factor that plays a fundamental role in experience when customers are frequenting physical shopping centres.

The results of the study show that most participants desire good customer service when they visit a physical shopping centre. A handful of participants expressed the view that they were indifferent to the customer service that they received, while some mentioned they have not experienced bad customer service. Some participants expressed they do not favour long queues when they are at a physical shopping centre. Some of the participants mentioned that they enjoyed interacting with friendly staff.

A few participants highlighted that bad service encourages them to stay away from shopping centres. A small number of participants indicated that they do not like the parking structures/systems when they visit a physical shopping centre. A small number of participants highlighted that the wide product offering at a shopping centre adds to their service that they receive at a physical shopping.

Figure 4-6: Category 2(B) research results – Theme 2

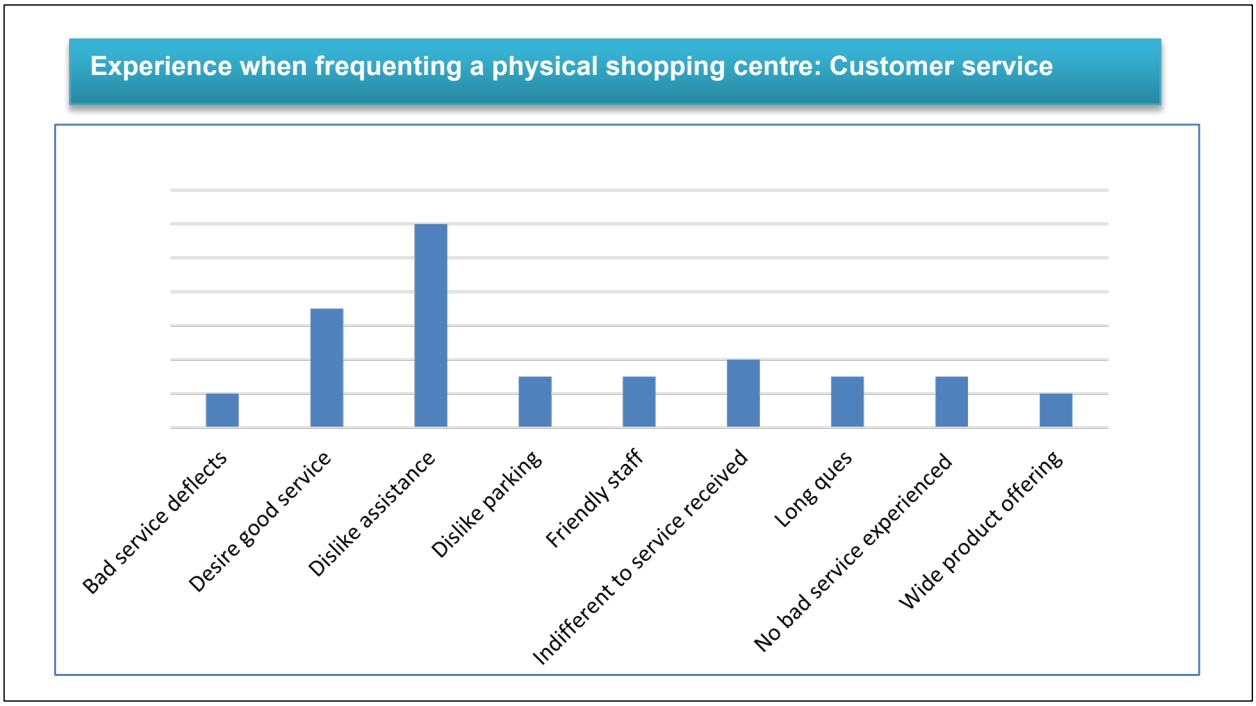


Figure 4-6: Category 2(B) research results – Theme 2 (continued)

Explanation of category

This category considers customer service as a factor that influences experience when customers frequent physical shopping centres.

The results of the study show that most participants desire good customer services while some participants are indifferent to the service they receive. Some participants pointed out that they have not experienced/received bad service. A number of participants mentioned that long queues were not favourable. A few customers highlighted that they enjoyed interactions between themselves and staff members. A few participants expressed that bad services encouraged them to stay away from specific shopping centres. The results show that participants were not in favour of the parking systems at a physical shopping centre. A small number of participants indicated that a wide range of products that they are able to get a physical shopping centre has an impact on how they perceive the service they have received.

Supporting verbatim quotes:

"… because being friendly to other people makes them also friendly to you."

Participant 9

"I'd think twice like if I got below par service about going again."

Participant 7

"I am big on service."

Participant 3

4.2.3.3 Category 2(C): Hygiene

Category 2(C) reflects on hygiene as a contributing factor to the experience a customer derives when frequenting a physical shopping centre. The findings of the study indicate the participants found unhygienic areas demotivating and most of the participants indicated that they pay close attention to the hygiene of physical shopping centres. A few of the participants pointed out that they preferred and desired hygienic spaces. Some of the participants expressed that they do not appreciate unhygienic shopping centres. A small number of participants pointed out that unhygienic bathrooms are not desirable.

Figure 4-7: Category 2(C) research results – Theme 2

Experience when frequenting physical shopping centres: Hygiene

Explanation of category

This particular category focuses on hygiene as a factor that contributes to the overall experience of a customer at a shopping centre.

The findings show that participants pay close attention to the hygiene at a physical shopping centre. The majority of the participants highlighted that they viewed unhygienic areas or spaces as demotivating. A number of participants pointed out that they were cognisant of hygiene while at a physical shopping centre.

A few participants have a strong desire of hygienic areas. The study found that participants do not enjoy experiencing unhygienic shopping centres. A small number of participants expressed that they do not enjoy unhygienic bathrooms.

Supporting verbatim quotes:

"In most shopping centres hygiene is a problem especially in bathrooms."

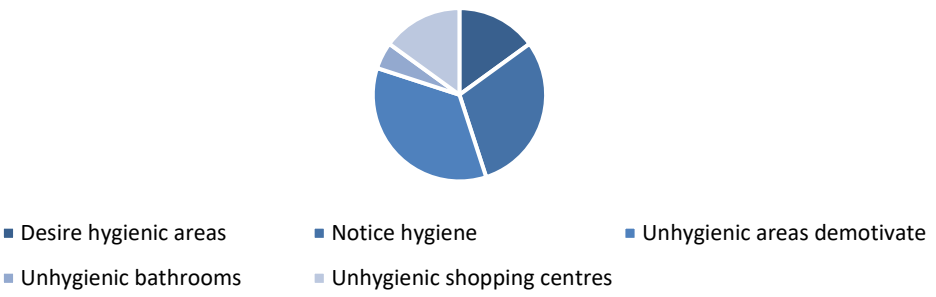
Participant 1

"…When I go into a shop or a mall and it's not aesthetically pleasing or the tidiness is not there, I think I will turn around and go somewhere else."

Participant 2

"I have experienced a lot of untidy shopping centres which I think can be improved…"

Participant 4



4.2.3.4 Category 2(D): Safety

Category 2(D) considers safety as a factor that impacts customer shopping experience when frequenting a physical shopping centre.

The results of the study indicate that most participants desire a safe environment when visiting a physical shopping centre. A few participants expressed that whey they visited a physical shopping centre, there was no visible security presence.

Figure 4-8: Category 2(D) research results – Theme 2

Experience when frequenting physical shopping centres: Safety

Explanation of category

This category pays specific attention to security as a defining measure for customer experience when frequenting a physical shopping centre.

The results of the study indicate that most of the participants have a strong desire for a safe environment when visiting a physical shopping centre.

A few customers pointed out that some shopping centres do not have a security presence.

Supporting verbatim quotes:

"It definitely needs to be like a second home, you know? In the sense of safety, you know? Is it going to be safe?"

Participant 3

"The last time I went like I didn't really notice like security guards and stuff."

Participant 7

"I am gonna consider my safety."

Participant 4

4.2.4 Theme 3: Value derived when frequenting physical shopping centres

This section provides a detailed discussion relating to the value derived when frequenting physical shopping centres.

4.2.4.1 Category 3(A): Browsing

Category 3(A) considers browsing as a value that customers derive when frequenting a shopping centre.

The results of the study show that many participants enjoy touching and feeling products when visiting a physical shopping centre. Some of the participants like the variety of stores and products that are offered at a physical shopping centre. A few of the participants expressed that they enjoyed window shopping when at a shopping centre. While a handful of participants indicated that they derived value from being able to fit clothing items when they frequented a physical shopping centre. A small number of participants mentioned that they were able to see the latest trends when they were at a shopping centre.

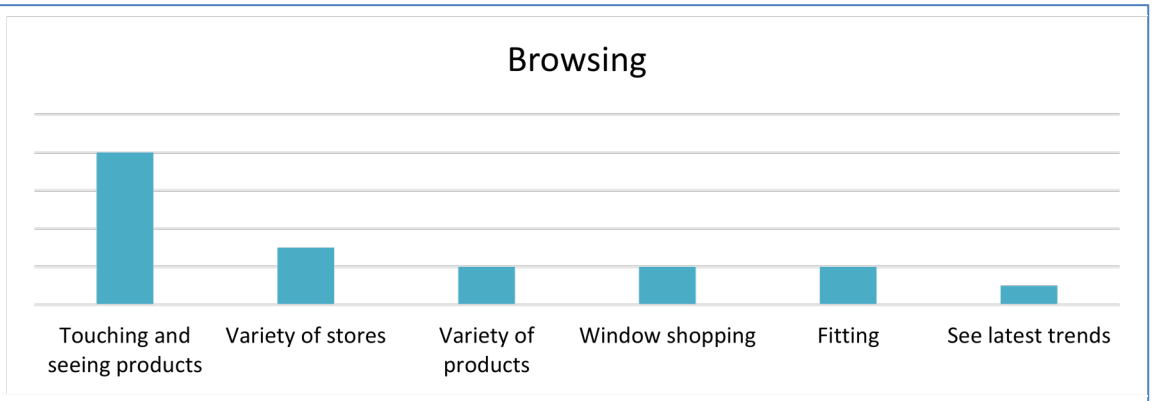
Figure 4-9: Category 3(A) research results – Theme 3

Value derived when frequenting physical shopping centres: Browsing

Explanation of the category

The identified category considers browsing as a value that is derived when frequenting physical shopping centres.

The results of the study indicated that most participants appreciate touching and seeing products when visiting a physical shopping centre. The results also indicated that the participants enjoy the variety of stores and products that they have at their disposal at a shopping centre. A few of the participants expressed the view that they enjoyed window shopping and fitting clothing items when they frequent a shopping centre. A small number of participants expressed the view that they were able to see the latest trends when visiting a physical shopping centre.



Supporting verbatim quotes:

"I value seeing the quality and you know touching the product.

Participant 8

"Especially with clothes I prefer going to the store and seeing it because I feel like I would get my money's worth if I see it, try on at the store."

Participant 2

"I think for the fact that there are restaurants in the shopping centres, I love that …"

Participant 3

4.2.4.2 Category 3(B): Economic

Category 3(B) considers economic elements as value that is derived when frequenting a physical shopping centre.

The results of the study indicate that most of the participants expressed that they feel they have spent their money well after visiting a physical shopping centre. Some of the participants indicated that there were more specials at a shopping centre as opposed to online stores. A few participants expressed that physical shopping centres have cheaper prices than online stores.

Figure 4-10: Category 3(B) research results – Theme 3

Value derived when frequenting physical shopping centres: Economic

Explanation of the category

This category considers economic elements as value that customers derive from visiting a physical shopping centre.

The results show that most of the participants expressed that when visiting a physical shopping centre, it feels like their money was well spent. Some of the participants indicated that shopping centres have more specials compared to online stores. While a few participants mentioned that the prices are cheaper at a physical shopping centre as opposed to online shopping.

Supporting verbatim quotes:

"Prices online are most definitely hyper inflated. I don't know the reason behind that, cause there is also a delivery fee on top of the hyper inflated prices …"

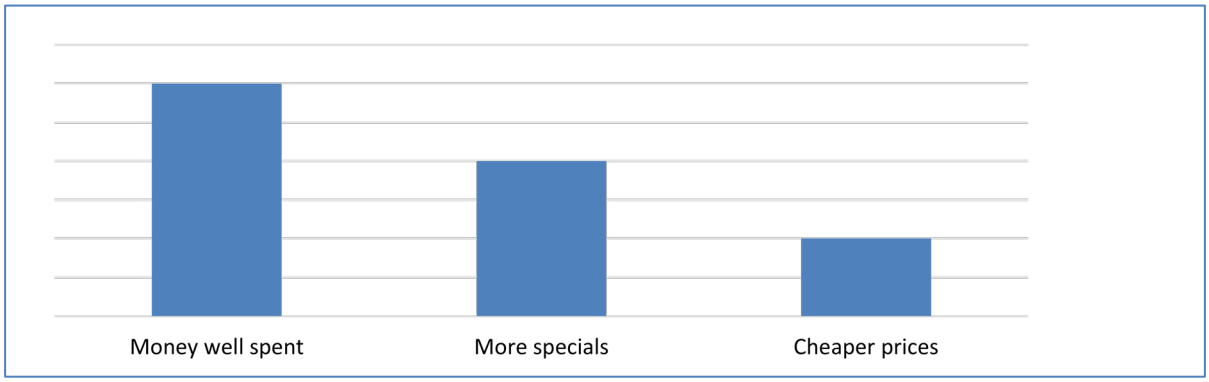
Participant 5

"I get more value for money if I had to choose …"

Participant 7

"Sometimes you just find all these random deals that just you think that you need it …"

Participant 4



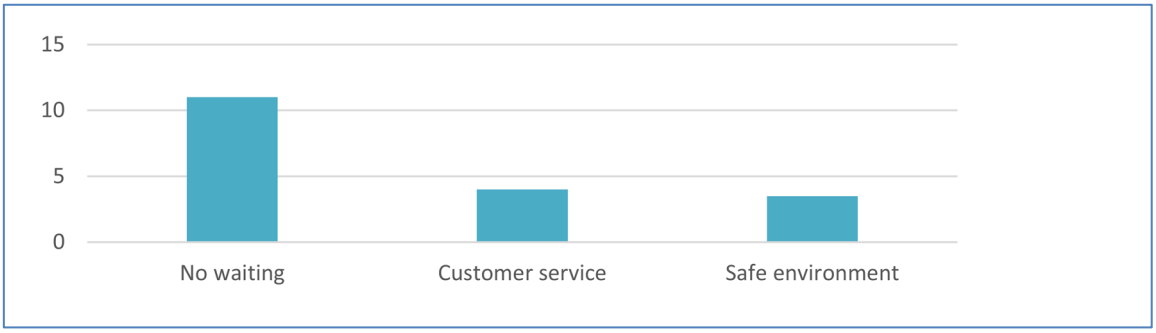
4.2.4.3 Category 3(C): Service

Category 3(C) considers service as a value that customers derive when frequenting a physical shopping centre.

The findings of the study indicate that most participants appreciate that there are able to get their products instantly and that there is no waiting period. Some of the participants expressed that they received good customer service when visiting a physical shopping centre. A few participants expressed the view that a physical shopping centre is a safe environment for them.

Figure 4-11: Category 3(C) research results – Theme 3

Value derived when frequenting physical shopping centres: Service



Explanation of the category

This category considers service as an element that customers derive value from when frequenting a physical shopping centre.

The results indicate that most participants expressed that there is no waiting when visiting a physical shopping centre.

Some of the participants highlighted that they derived value from the good customer service that they receive when frequenting a physical shopping centre.

A few of the participants mentioned that a physical shopping centre is a safe environment for them.

Supporting verbatim quotes:

"When I go to a shopping centre, and I get to take what I see and pay for it and with it in my hand."

Participant 1

"One annoying thing about shopping online is having to wait … "

Participant 7

4.2.4.4 Category 3(D): Social

Category 3(D) considers the social factor as a value that customers derive when frequenting physical shopping centres.

The findings of the study show that participants who visit a physical shopping centre enjoy talking and interacting with other people when they are at a physical shopping centre.

Figure 4-12: Category 3(D) research results – Theme 3

Value derived when frequenting physical shopping centres: Social

Explanation of the category

This category considers social factors as value that customers derive when frequenting physical shopping centres.

The results of the study show that most participants enjoy talking to other customers/staff when visiting a physical shopping centre.

Supporting verbatim quotes:

"For me it's more that personal interactions, it doesn't necessarily have be with the staff …"

Participant 4

"… Sometimes you go shopping and you just meet this customer, and you just talk about something like oh life this and that."

Participant 8

4.2.4.5 Category 3(E): Relaxation

Category 3(E) considers relaxation as a factor that impacts the value that customers derive when frequenting physical shopping centres.

The results of the study show that most participants find frequenting physical shopping centres as therapeutic and they derive value from this activity.

Figure 4-13: Category 3(E) research results – Theme 3

Value derived when frequenting physical shopping centres: Relaxation

Explanation of the category

This category considers relaxation as a value that customers derive from visiting a physical shopping centre.

The results of the study show that most participants consider visiting a physical shopping centre as a therapeutic activity.

Supporting verbatim quotes:

"I find it therapeutic"

Participant 1

"If I need to relax or just, ja, relax, I would go to the mall to do that"

Participant 2

"It's more like some sort of dopamine, when I shop"

Participant 5

4.2.5 Theme 4: Attractive factors physical shopping centres

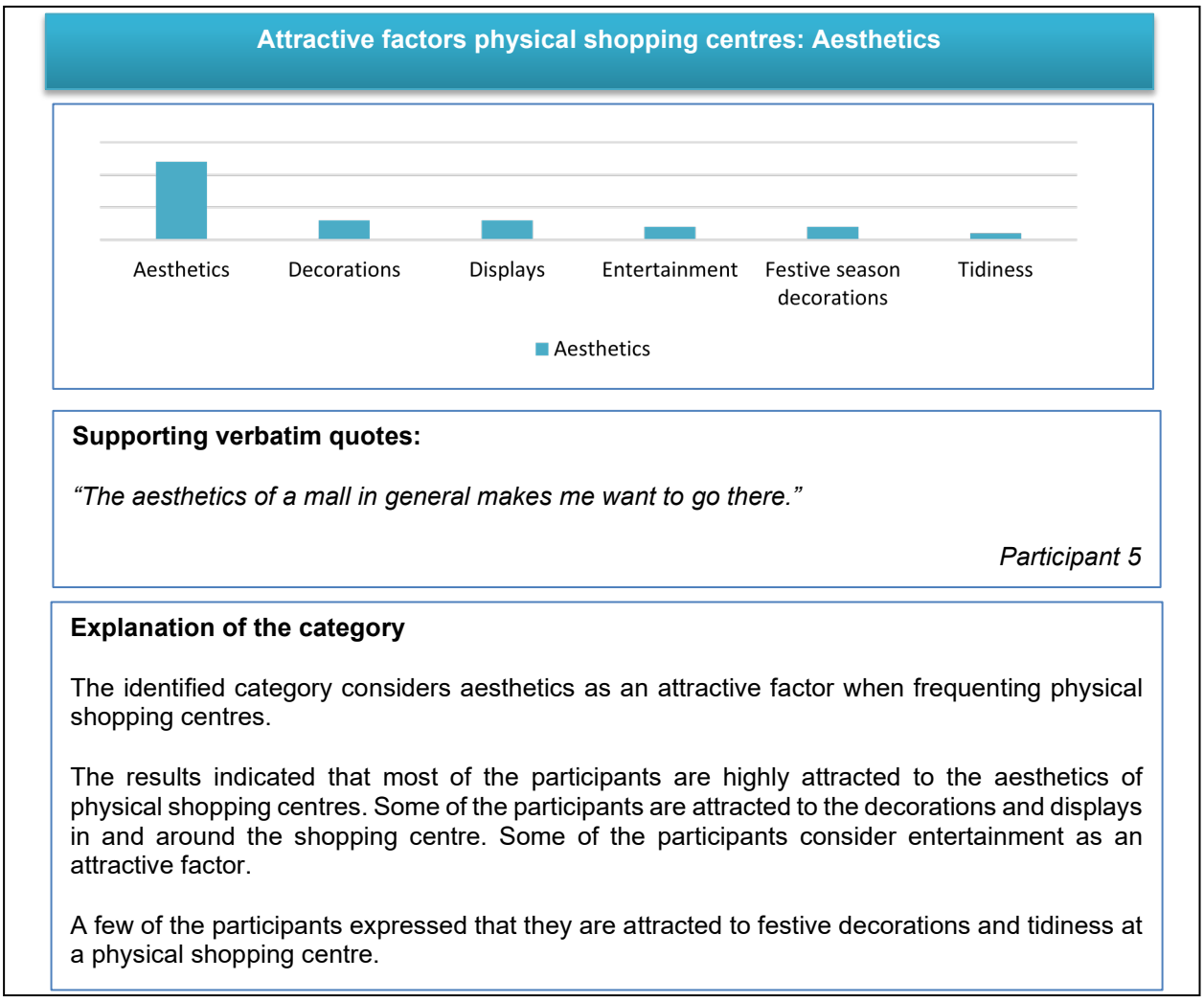
This section provides a detailed description in relation to attractive factors physical shopping centres.

4.2.5.1 Category 4(A): Aesthetics

Category 4(A) considers aesthetics as an attractive factor for customers when frequenting physical shopping centres.

The results of the study show that many participants are attracted to the aesthetics of physical shopping centres. Most participants are attracted to the decorations and displays at a shopping centre. Some of the participants are attracted to the entertainment offered at shopping centres. A few of the participants are attracted to festive decorations when visiting a physical shopping centre. A small number of participants are attracted to the tidiness of a shopping centre.

Figure 4-14: Category 4(A) research results – Theme 4



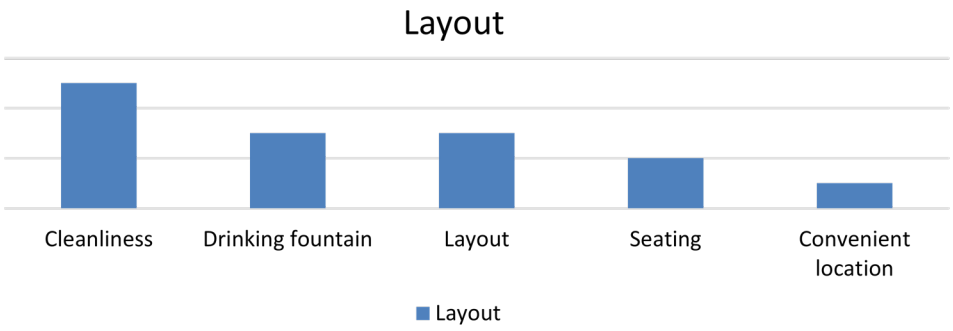
4.2.5.2 Category 4(B): Layout

Category 4(B) considers the layout of a shopping centre as an attractive factor of a physical shopping centre.

The findings of the study indicate that a majority of the participants find the cleanliness of a shopping centre an attractive quality. Some of the participants expressed that the addition of drinking stations/fountains would add an attractive element to shopping centres. Some of the participants mentioned that the layout of a shopping centre enhances the attractiveness of a shopping centre. A few participants expressed that an addition of more seating would improve the attractiveness of a shopping centre. A small number of participants mentioned that a convenient location is an attractive quality.

Figure 4-15: Category 4(B) research results – Theme 4

Attractive factors physical shopping centres: Layout



Supporting verbatim quotes:

"Clean, please give me a clean shopping centre."

Participant 3

"Having a good layout of the mall."

Participant 4

Explanation of the category

This category considers layout as an attractive factory of a physical shopping centre.

The results of the study indicate that a large majority of the participants find cleanliness attractive. Many participants expressed that they would want the inclusion of drinking fountains at shopping centres. Some of the participants expressed that the layout off a shopping centre adds to the attractiveness of a shopping centre. A few of the participants expressed that additional seating should be made available and a convenient location enhances a shopping centre.

4.2.5.3 Category 4(C): Stores

Category 4(C) considers stores as an attractive factor of a physical shopping centre.

The results of the study show that most of the participants expressed the view that coffee shops or the addition of coffee shops can make a shopping centre more attractive. Some of the participants viewed a shopping centre as a one stop shop. A few of the participants mentioned that bookshops are an attractive factor and expressed that small stores that have online stores make things easier and more convenient.

Figure 4-16: Category 4(C) research results – Theme 4

Attractive factors physical shopping centres: Stores

Explanation of the category

This category considers stores as an attractive factor of shopping centres.

The findings of the study indicated that most of the participants stated that coffee makes a shopping centre more attractive. Some of the participants viewed a shopping centre as a one stop shop which is an attractive factor for them. A few of the participants declared that bookshops are an attractive factor. A handful of participants expressed that stores should have an online presence.

Supporting verbatim quotes:

"A coffee shop or something like that, I will stay a bit longer."

Participant 2

"Having that one-stop-shop for all types of things."

Participant 3

4.2.5.4 Category 4(D): Staff

Category 4(D) considers staff as an attractive factor when frequenting a physical shopping centre.

The results of the study show that most of the participants consider quality service delivery from the staff as an attractive factor at a shopping centre. A few of the participants consider the appearance of the staff when at a shopping centre.

Figure 4-17: Category 4(D) research results – Theme 4

Attractive factors physical shopping centres: Staff

Explanation of the category

This category considers the staff of a physical shopping centre as an attractive factor.

The results of the study indicated that most of the participants expressed that quality service delivery from the staff is an attractive factor at a shopping centre.

A few of the participants indicated that the appearance of the staff when at a shopping centre is important and contributes to the attractiveness.

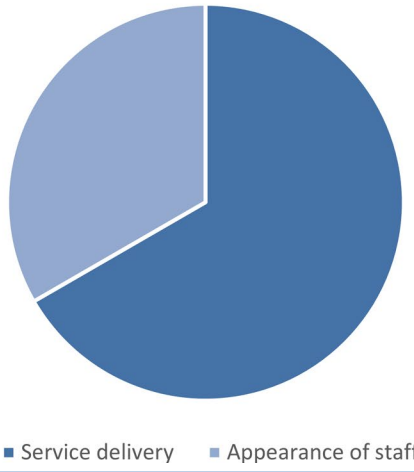
Supporting verbatim quotes:

"…The sales person needs to be dressed nicely …"

Participant 9

"I feel like I like the service delivery…"

Participant 3



4.2.5.5 Category 4(E): Security

Category 4(E) considers security as a factor that impacts the attractiveness of a physical shopping centre.

The findings indicate that most of the participants expressed that security is an important aspect that makes a shopping centre attractive. Some of the participants indicated that secure parking enhances the attractiveness of a shopping centre.

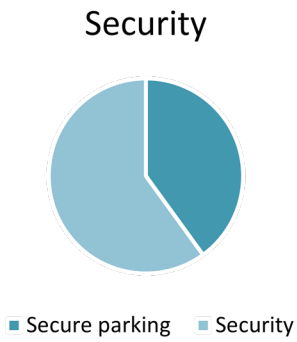
Figure 4-18: Category 4(E) research results – Theme 4

Attractive factors physical shopping centres: Security

Explanation of the category

This category considers security as an attractive factor at a shopping centre.

The results of the study indicated that most of the participants mentioned that security is important, that it makes a shopping centre attractive to them. A few of the participants indicated that secure parking enhances the attractiveness of a shopping centre.



Supporting verbatim quotes:

"…if there are more securities around, I'd definitely feel safe."

Participant 8

"Those are the shopping centres that I really love, the ones that take our safety into consideration."

Participant 3

4.2.5.6 Category 4(F): Unattractive

Category 4(F) considers unattractiveness as an important component to ensuring that physical shopping centres are attractive to customers.

The findings of the study show that a large majority of the participants dislike large crowds that can be found at a shopping centre. A portion of the participants indicated that they dislike the layout of a shopping centre, dislike rude employees and dislike long queues. Some of the participants mentioned that they dislike unhygienic bathrooms and the parking fees of a physical shopping centre. A few of the participants expressed that they dislike festive decorations, the lack of variety and limited ATMs at a physical shopping centre.

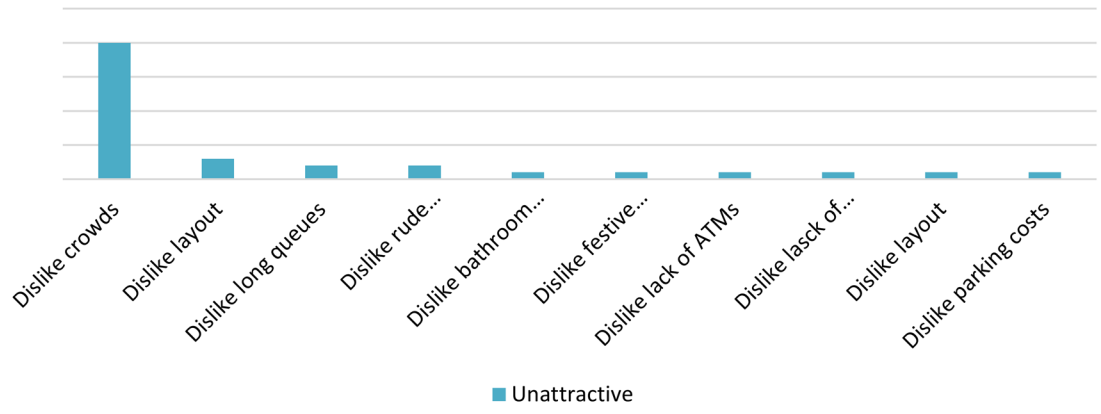
Figure 4-19: Category 4(F) research results – Theme 4

Attractive factors physical shopping centres: Unattractive

Explanation of the category

This category considers unattractive factors as an important aspect to ensuring the attractiveness of physical shopping centres.

The results of the study show that the majority of the participants dislike large crowds A portion of the participants expressed that they dislike the layout of a shopping centre, dislike rude employees and dislike long queues. A handful of the participants expressed that they dislike unhygienic bathrooms and the parking fees of a physical shopping centre. A few of the participants expressed that they dislike festive decorations, the lack of variety and limited ATMs at a physical shopping centre.



Supporting verbatim quotes:

"I find it so overwhelming when I walk into a shopping centre and I find it busy"

Participant 1

Table 4-3: Summary of empirical research results

Theme 1: Motivation for customers to frequent physical shopping centres			
Categories	1(A)Convenience	1(B) Tactility	1(C) Trust
	1(D) Trust		
Main finding 4.2	It can be concluded from the results gathered from the in-depth interviews; a large portion of participants appreciate the convenience of visiting a physical shopping centre. Participants expressed that they find comfort knowing that they have the option to walk into a physical shopping centre that they trust and purchase what they want without the inconvenience of waiting, experience delivery disappointment and without the fear that they have purchased an item that they will not be satisfied with. Furthermore, participants see frequenting a physical shopping centre as a therapeutic activity that allows them to escape their daily lives. Participants highlighted that visiting a physical shopping centre is a trust form of retail therapy that assists with releasing stress and anxiety.		
Theme 2: Experience when frequenting physical shopping centres			
Categories	2(A) Atmospherics	2(B Customer service	2(C) Hygiene
	2(D) Safety		
Main finding 4.3	The findings from the study indicate that the atmosphere that is created at a physical shopping centre plays a pivotal role ensuring that customers are able to maximise their experience at a physical shopping centre. The findings showed that participants pay attention to small details that either minimise or amplify their experience at a physical shopping centre. Participants highlighted factors such as: music, lighting and scent. These factors were described as contributing elements to the overall experience. Participants expressed that the abovementioned factors have urged them to stay longer at a shopping centre and even motivated them to make a purchase. Additionally, participants expressed the quality of the customer service that they received impacted greatly on their experiences. Hygiene and safety were highlighted as factors that play a fundamental role in creating a good experience for customers.		
Theme 3: Value derived when frequenting physical shopping centres			
Categories	3(A) Browsing	3(B) Economic	3(C) Service
	3(D) Social	3(E) Relaxation	
Main finding 4.4	The results of the study indicated that participants derive value from a variety of different factors. The ability to browse through multiple stores and products when at a shopping centre was highlighted as valuable. Participants highlighted that browsing offers them an opportunity to be exposed to many different products. Browsing does not only allow exposure but offers the participant the opportunity to touch, see and experience products physically which was noted elements that hold great value. Participants expressed that a shopping centre offers more for their money as opposed to online stores. Participants are noted as saying that shopping centres have more economic value. Furthermore, participants find that interacting with fellow customers and staff members presents an opportunity for participants to flex their social muscles. Lastly, participants expressed that visiting a physical shopping centre is a form of relaxation.		

Table 4-3: Summary of empirical research results (continued)

Theme 4: Attractive factors of physical shopping centres			
Categories	4(A) Aesthetics	4(B) Layout	4(C) Stores
	4(D) Staff	4(E) Security	4(F) Unattractive
Main finding 4.5	The main findings of the study indicated that participants are greatly attracted by the aesthetics of a physical shopping centre. The results found that participants are lured to physical shopping centres that offer a variety of aspects that are easy on the eyes. The layout of a shopping centre was identified as an important aspect of the attractiveness. Participants noted that they desire a layout that offers convenience and ease when navigating through a shopping centre. The variety of stores that are found under one roof was highlighted as an important feature of the attractiveness of a physical shopping centre. Staff members were also identified as determining factors of the attractiveness of a physical shopping centre. The study also found that there are plenty of aspects that participants do not find attractive in relation to physical shopping centres. The main cause of unattractiveness for participants was identified as an overly crowded shopping centre. Participants expressed that they dislike being in an environment that is overcrowded. Participants highlighted lack of seating, ATMs and rude employees as an unattractive factor.		

4.3 CONCLUSION

The empirical data that was gathered during the investigation is present in this chapter. A summary of the objectives and questions of the in-depth interview are presented at the beginning of the chapter. The chapter gives an in-depth description of the nature of the in-depth questions and their relation to the secondary objectives. The chapter further describes the relation between the literature, secondary objectives and the thematic and category elements that they cover. The chapter brings forth the category and thematic framework which is the foundation of the cat and reporting of the empirical findings. The chapter concludes with a summary of the key findings from the in-depth interviews.

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND LIMITATIONS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter sets out to address the research objectives developed for this study. The chapter commences with a concise overview of the study, followed by conclusions and recommendations pertaining to each of the study's research objectives. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the encountered limitations and recommendations for future research.

5.2 OVERVIEW

This section offers an overview of the study's objectives, the themes explored in the literature review (Chapter 2), and the research methodology (Chapter 3) used to address these objectives. The purpose is to establish the necessary context for the conclusions and recommendations discussed in Section 5.3 for each of the study's objectives.

As discussed in Chapter 1, the primary objective of this study is to investigate customer shopping experience in physical shopping centres in South Africa. As previously discussed, the retail industry has undergone significant changes in recent years. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic was a catalyst for change within the retail space and the global economy. Although the pandemic has given rise to changes in consumer behaviour and also had a bearing on their decisions as to where they conduct most of their shopping, the global economy has already experienced a shift prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, with increasing numbers of customers moving from brick-and-mortar establishments to online stores. Scholars and professionals have coined the shift as a "retail apocalypse". It has been described as imminent, and it has been said that the world might experience the demise of traditional shopping centres (Lee *et al*., 2022:94).

Considering the increase in online customers, it is essential for traditional retailers to curate strategies that will aid in increasing footfall in traditional retail spaces. Customer shopping experience has been identified as a crucial aspect of every customer's shopping journey. Creating a distinct customer experience produces competitive advantages, and strengthens physical retailers' position in a highly competitive market. The curation of a unique customer experience also offers physical retailers the opportunity to create systems and practices that will encourage desirable outcomes in the future.

The identified challenges, as well as their practical and theoretical infancy highlighted, are salient reasons to investigate customer shopping experiences in shopping centres in South Africa. The

aim of this study is to assist scholars, professionals and academics in their research towards implementing relevant customer experience strategies that can adequately meet the needs and wants of the customer.

A literature study was formulated relating to the key concepts of customer shopping experience, the retail industry and shopping centres in South Africa. The literature overview (Chapter 2) forms the theoretical basis of the study, and aimed to provide the necessary background to salient concepts identified for this study. A thorough background discussion ensures an understanding of the customer shopping experience with a specific focus on physical shopping centres in South Africa. The literature study delivered insightful and meaningful contributions in terms of the theoretical and empirical implications of this study.

Chapter 2 aimed at exploring customer shopping experience in the South African retail industry. The South African retail industry has proven to be unique in its nature and functionality; however, the industry has also shown that it emulates certain global retail trends. The chapter commenced with delving into different aspects of the retail industry. It provided clear insights into the retail industry both globally and locally. The chapter identified different retail platforms that have emerged and developed throughout the years. The identified retail platforms are as follows: e-commerce, social commerce and brick-and-mortar establishments.

The chapter further discussed the *retail apocalypse* and its contributing factors identified as strong customer preference for online shopping; COVID-19; the closure of larger retail chains; urban decay; and an oversupply of shopping centres. Technological advancements were identified as an essential factor contributing significantly to the increase in online shopping. The chapter highlighted the impact of digitalisation and its contribution to transforming the traditional retail landscape. Also, Chapter 2 explored the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and its effect on the global economy as well as the retail industry. It was noted that the pandemic encouraged retailers to employ technology and digital platforms to create a holistic experience for customers. Chapter 2 concluded by highlighting the customer shopping experience and eight factors that impact customer experience, namely aesthetics, escapism, browsing, activities, shopping for fashion, service, uniqueness and socialisation.

The key aspects pertaining to the literature review are presented in Table 5-1.

Table 5-1: Key aspects of the literature review

Key aspects	Reference(s)
A comprehensive review of retailing practices pertaining to physical shopping centres were discussed.	Section 2.2 Table 2-1, 2-2 Figure 2-1
The particularities of the retail apocalypse were discussed, including its definition and causes.	Section 2.3 Figure 2-2, 2-3, 2-4, 2-5
The impact of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic was discussed with specific focus on the world economy and the retail industry	Section 2.3.3
A detailed discussion about customer shopping experience and its relation to customer journey was undertaken.	Section 2.4.1 Figure 2-6
A comprehensive review was undertaken into customer shopping experience. Specific attention was awarded to defining customer experience, the relationship between customer experience and value co-creation, and factors that affect customer experience.	Section 2.4.2 Table 2-3 Figure 2-7, 2-8

The literature overview provided a foundation for the process followed in Chapter 3, where a structured methodological approach detailed the methods applied to investigate the customer shopping experience in physical shopping centres in South Africa. The study implemented interpretivism as its primary research philosophy. The theory development technique utilised in this study was inductive. An exploratory research design was selected due to the qualitative nature of the study. Secondary data was collected to form a comprehensive theoretical understanding of the customer shopping experience.

Based on the elementary nature of the customer shopping experience within the South African retail industry, primary data was gathered by using a qualitative research approach by means of conducting in-depth interviews with identified participants. To ensure the efficiency of the investigation, participants were encouraged to share their thoughts, ideas and feelings freely. A non-probability purposive sampling method was used to recruit participants (Section 3.2.4.3). The data gathered was analysed by implementing the Morse and Field approach. A qualitative data software package (ATLAS.ti 23) was used for analysing the data, of which the findings were presented in Chapter 4. The categories and themes identified from the results provided insights into considerations required to achieve a distinct customer shopping experience when frequenting physical shopping centres in South Africa.

5.3 ADDRESSING THE RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The subsequent sections address each of the objectives developed for this study. Table 5-2 provides an indication of how the study's research objectives are related to the literature review and the empirical analysis.

Table 5-2: Summary of the links between the research objectives, literature review, and empirical study

Research objectives	Literature Review	Empirical study
Primary research objective		
This study was conducted to investigate customer shopping experience in South African shopping centres.	Chapters 1 & 2	In-depth interview questions 1, 2, 3 and 4
Secondary objectives		
1. Provide an overview of existing literature based on the constructs utilised in this study.	Chapters 1 & 2	
2. Investigate the factors that motivate participants to shop at a physical shopping centre.	Chapter 2	In-depth interview question 1
3. Explore and describe the experience of participants when shopping physical shopping centre.	Chapters 1 & 2	In-depth interview question 2
4. Explore and describe the value derived by participants when shopping at a physical shopping centre.	Chapter 2	In-depth interview question 3
5. Explore and describe the factors that contribute to the attractiveness of a physical shopping centre.	Chapter 2	In-depth interview question 4

Conclusions and recommendations relating to each secondary objective were formulated based on the empirical research findings presented in Chapter 4, including the literature review presented in Chapter 2. The following section discusses the conclusions and recommendations relating to each of the study's research objectives.

5.3.1 Conclusions and recommendations

5.3.1.1 Secondary objective 1

Secondary objective 1 aimed to provide an overview of the literature of this study, namely shopping motivation, customer experience, perceived value and attractiveness.

Table 5-3: Conclusions and recommendations: Secondary objective 1

Literature findings: Secondary objective 1
To address this objective, a literature review relating to the critical components of the customer shopping experience was completed and discussed in Chapter 2 of this study. Chapter 2 presented the theoretical foundation for this study to commence with the empirical investigation presented in Chapter 3.
In its simplest form, retailing is described as an exchange between a buyer and a seller (Hameli, 2018:69). Although the core concept of retailing concerns simplicity, the various components of retailing in a holistic sense tell a different story. The evolution of retailing has led to the growth of a highly competitive industry that consists of individuals and organisations who aim to enhance the value of products and services for the customer's benefit (Pantana & Vannaucci, 2019:298). Three main components of retailing have been identified, namely channel distribution, products and services (Malhotra *et al*., 2020:395). Therefore, retailing cannot be limited to a singular definition as it comprises multiple platforms. Technological advances and digitalisation have encouraged the growth of the retail industry. Beyond brick-and-mortar establishments, retailing includes digital platforms such as e-commerce and social commerce. E-commerce has indeed been recognised as a retail disruption (Ives *et al*., 2019:3); its emergence and growth introduced a new world of retailing and introduced customers to a new way of shopping. E-commerce encouraged retailers to utilise innovative techniques and strategies to reconfigure retail systems, operations and functionalities (Schmuch & Benke, 2020:1259). Social commerce integrates social media and e-commerce, including stores that are entirely operated by and rely on social media platforms (Ayodeji & Kumar, 2019:80). The uniqueness of social commerce is lodged in its ability to encourage businesses to build and maintain meaningful relationships with their customers (Busalim & Hussin, 2016:1076). Brick-and-mortar establishments offer tangible experiences where customers can touch, feel, browse and purchase products (Teixeira, 2021:1261). These are classified as traditional retailers, and include convenience stores, speciality stores, grocery stores and department stores. Shopping centres are categorised as brick-and-mortar establishments. These are traditional retailers that use physical stores to sell commodities bought in large quantities and then sold in smaller quantities to customers (Sun *et al*., 2022:2288). Shopping centres house a variety of stores under one roof, with the aim of providing convenience and accessibility to customers (Hameli, 2018:70).
The surge of e-commerce has fuelled a widespread closure of physical commercial properties (Marcuende & Lloberas, 2022:1). Added to this, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has played a significant role in the acceleration of the retail apocalypse. There are five main causes of the retail apocalypse, namely customer preference for online shopping, COVID-19, closure of commercial properties, urban decay and an oversupply of shopping centres (Broll, 2019; Goldberg, 2018:171; Markowitz, 2020; Moon *et al*., 2021:4; Vader, 2021).

Table 5-3: Conclusions and recommendations: Secondary objective 1 (continued)

Literature findings: Secondary objective 1
A change in buying behaviour has been identified as an essential factor that has led to an increase of online shopping (Makgopa, 2016:25). Customers have shown a strong preference for online shopping over the last few years. Deloitte (2021:4) highlights that more than anything, customers yearn for convenience and security, which has led to many turning to online shopping. This is not only a global trend or pattern; online shopping has increased in South Africa as well. Deloitte (2021:4) documented that many South African customers who have turned to online shopping have highlighted ease and convenience as motivating factors. Customer experience is complex and multi-faceted (Alhouti *et al*., 2015:415). Customer experience cannot be defined linearly because experience is subjective (Li *et al*., 2019:412). Mirander and Watts (2022) note that to curate a distinct customer experience, marketers need to understand the customer journey. Defined as interactions between the customer and a service provider, studying a customer's journey enables marketers to understand customers' needs at every point of the buying process (Folstad & Kual, 2014:196). Therefore, the customer journey is a reminder that customer experience needs to be viewed from a broader scope (Yliehto *et al*., 2021:663). Customer experience is defined as relationships that customers build with every interaction they have with an organisation, product or service (Naserrmoadeli *et al*., 2013:128). Customer experience is internal and reactive and it engages all human senses holistically (McColl-Kennedy *et al*., 2018:8). A satisfactory shopping experience is crucial to attracting customers to shopping centres (Hu & Jasper, 2018:151). There are eight measures that were devised by Hu and Jasper (2018) (aesthetics, escapism, browsing, socialisation, activity, shopping for fashion, uniqueness and service). The authors consider these measures to have a significant impact on customer shopping experience in shopping centres.
South Africa has a competitive retail industry. Although it mimics global trends and patterns it is also rather unique (Pentz *et al*., 2020:228). Before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, South African customers were fairly resistant to online shopping because it was perceived to be unsafe and risky (Pentz *et al*., 2020:230). However, the surge of the pandemic changed the South African retail landscape. More and more customers gravitated towards online shopping because it became convenient and safe during a difficult period in time (PWC, 2021). In light of this, the literature emphasises the importance of a distinct customer experience for the South African customer (Pillay, 2022).

5.3.1.2 Secondary objective 2

Secondary objective 2 aimed at investigating factors that motivate participants to shop at a physical shopping centre.

Table 5-4: Conclusions and recommendations: Secondary objective 2

Literature findings: Secondary objective 2
Customer motivation is driven by a variety of factors that differ from one customer to another. The literature outlines convenience and ease as factors that motivate customers to utilise physical shopping centres. Guimaraes (2018:161) adds that shopping centres were developed to meet customers' yearning for ease and convenience. The literature also highlights that the inception of shopping centres meant that customers were able to locate a variety of shopping centres under one roof which they deemed as convenient (Man & Qiu, 2021:14). Also indicated in the literature is that customers are more likely to turn to a shopping platform that offers them a sense of convenience (Deloitte, 2021:4). High-involvement products require the customer to physically experience them before purchasing, and brick-and-mortar establishments provide customers the opportunity to touch, test and immerse themselves into a product before purchase (Bagdare, 2015:14). Therefore, when a customer needs to purchase a high-involvement product, they prefer to visit a brick-and-mortar store (Blazquez, 2017:98).
Secondary objective 2 was addressed in the main findings in section 4.2.2. Conclusions and recommendations relating to the factors that motivate participants to shop at a physical shopping centre are provided subsequently.
Conclusions: Secondary objective 2
Conclusion 2.1: The findings indicate that participants have a preference for ease and convenience when shopping at a physical shopping centre in South Africa. Participants prioritise taking instant possession of their purchased items.
Conclusion 2.2: A sizable proportion of participants indicated a desire to touch, see and experience products personally. This indicates that customers have a preference for tactility.
Conclusion 2.3: The findings of the study indicate that shopping centres have a lot more to offer to customers than tangible items. Participants indicated that they derive a sense of escapism when frequenting a physical shopping centre, which gives them an opportunity to escape their reality for a brief while and to exist in an alternative reality.
Conclusion 2.4: The study's findings highlight the significant role of trust in influencing customers' motivation to visit physical shopping centres. Participants expressed that they are more inclined to frequent these establishments in order to prevent potential disappointments, such as receiving products of subpar quality or functionality, when compared to online orders delivered at a later date.
Conclusion 2.5: Participants prioritise taking instant possession of their purchased items.

Table 5-4: Conclusions and recommendations: Secondary objective 2 (continued)

Recommendations: Secondary objective 2
Recommendation 2.1: To ensure that participants can proceed with their shopping journey with ease and limited hassles, retailers can include quick checkout systems by streamlining the checkout process to lessen waiting times. This can be done by implementing contactless payment options, self-checkout kiosks, or dedicated in-store pickup counters.
Recommendation 2.2: To ensure that retailers promote tactility within shopping centres, they can encourage customers to touch and feel products when visiting a physical shopping centre by incorporating signage in grocery stores and clothing stores. Shopping centres can create sample stations around the shopping centres. These stations could range from perfume stations, clothing stations, furniture stations and food stations that may allow customers to taste food options offered at their favourite restaurants or grocery stores in the shopping centre.
Recommendation 2.3: To capitalise on customers', need to escape their reality when frequenting a physical shopping centre, retailers can consider investing in gratifying and inviting interior design. This may include the introduction of comfortable seating areas and greenery-dominated areas. Soothing colours, lighting and background music may introduce customers to an alternative reality. Physical shopping centres may consider including spa-like amenities. These may include but are not limited to massage chairs, wellness centres/areas, and spa services. To enhance relaxation, retailers may include calming scents and aromatherapy.
Recommendation 2.4: Retailers can introduce customer testimonials and reviews to not only build a relationship with their customers, but to also build trust. These reviews can include positive experiences shared by regular customers where they can discuss attributes such as the safety of the shopping centre and their experience with employees (including security guards).
Recommendation 2.5: To promote taking instant possession of purchased products, shopping centres can include instant gratification messaging. This can emphasise the fact that when one purchases at a shopping centre, there will be no waiting period in order for a customer to take ownership of what they have purchased. Taglines such as "Shop Now, Enjoy Now," or "Get it Today, enjoy it Today" can be considered.

5.3.1.3 Secondary Objective 3

Secondary objective 3 aimed to explore and describe the experience of participants when shopping at a physical shopping centre.

Table 5-5: Conclusions and recommendations: Secondary objective 3

Literature findings: Secondary objective 3
Customer experience is described as a beginning to end journey, comprised of multiple touchpoints and integrates sensory, cognitive and affective components (McColl-Kennedy *et al*., 2018:8). The literature findings indicate that customer experience was once viewed as an element of service quality and customer satisfaction (Kurtulus & Cengiz, 2021:293). In recent years, scholars and academics have advocated for customer experience to be recognised as a distinctive construct (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016:74). The literature findings highlight that customer experience is multi-dimensional, and that constructs such as satisfaction and service quality are in actual fact components of customer experience (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016:74). Mishra (2022:335) notes that the provision of good service enhances customer experience. Customer experience is considered to be a lived journey that differs from one customer to another even if they interacted with the same touchpoints (Ko, 2020:270). Customer shopping experiences are therefore activated through different touchpoints in brick-and-mortar establishments and online platforms (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016:69). An in-depth understanding of which touchpoints and elements are deemed to be impactful is required. In this regard, the literature highlights that organisations need to be able to curate controlled and memorable experiences for customers using what has been identified as influential factors. Hu and Jasper (2018:151) identify eight factors that impact customer shopping experience. These factors are as follows: aesthetics, escapism, browsing, socialisation, activity, shopping for fashion, uniqueness and service). Sheng and Teo (2012:141) describe aesthetics in this context as a customer's visual sensory response. Literature findings outline décor, design, layout and architecture as critical factors in curating memorable customer shopping experience (Manajemen, 2022:212). The literature further explains that aesthetics also entails a customer's appreciation for music, lighting, colour and scent. The second factor that Hu and Jasper (2018) identify is escapism, defined as a way for customers to briefly exist in a different reality to their everyday lives (Ali *et al*., 2014:278). Musa *et al*. (2017:114) explain that escapism has four main elements: psychological, physical, cultural and nostalgic. Browsing is the third factor of customer experience that was noted in the literature review. Browsing refers to the examination of products in a retail store or online platform without the intention of purchasing a product at that moment (Chen *et al*., 2019:1129). Although there might not be an intention to purchase a product, Reynolds *et al*. (2012:678) explain that the time that a customer spends browsing, touching and experiencing a product may lead to an impulse purchase (Bagdare, 2015:14). Socialisation is the fourth factor identified, which takes place when customers establish their own identities and choose to share those identities with others. Activity is another factor that was identified by Hu and Jasper (2018). Shopping centres have turned into the hub for recreational activities, entertainment and social activities (Makgopa, 2018:122). The literature findings suggest that customers prefer visiting shopping centres where they can eat, shop, watch a movie and play games (Nasim & Shamshir, 2018:87).

Table 5-5: Conclusions and recommendations: Secondary objective 3 (continued)

Literature findings: Secondary objective 3
The sixth factor identified by Hu and Jasper (2018) is shopping for fashion. Blazquez (2017:98) notes that shopping for fashion is a high involvement activity that requires a customer to visit a shopping centre so that they can try on, touch and feel clothing items. Uniqueness is another factor that differs from one customer to another; the attributes that contribute towards the uniqueness of a shopping centre are mostly based on the preference of the customer (Gomes & Paula, 2017:13). These attributes could be tangible or intangible and include design, parking, location, centre facilities and retail outlets (Gomes & Paula, 2017:3). Service is the last factor identified by Hu and Jasper (2018) that they deem as a good measure of customer experience. Services are assessed through the expectations and perceptions of the customer (Kushwaha *et al*., 2017:274). A positive service experience increases the likelihood of customer satisfaction and purchase intention (Tsou *et al*., 2019:5).
Secondary objective 3 was addressed in main finding 4.2.3. Conclusions and recommendations pertaining to the experience of participants when shopping at a physical shopping centre in South Africa are subsequently provided.
Conclusions: Secondary objective 3
Conclusion 3.1: The results of this study underscore the pivotal role of physical shopping centre atmospherics in shaping the overall shopping experience. Elements like music, lighting, and scent wield a substantial influence on participants' perceptions and interactions within these brick-and-mortar retail spaces. Remarkably, participants exhibit diverse preferences regarding the attributes they associate with the shopping centre's atmosphere. Notably, music preferences span a broad spectrum, from individuals disliking overly loud music to lauding the presence of engaging, soft, and soothing melodies.
Conclusion 3.2: The results of the study indicated that although most participants do not want to be assisted or disturbed during their time at a shopping centre, a substantial number of participants desire good customer service when visiting a physical shopping centre. The results of the study also suggest that inadequate services deflect customers from revisiting a shopping centre, while friendly staff members enhance their experiences at a physical shopping centre.
Conclusion 3.3: The majority of participants derived pleasure from the cleanliness and tidiness of the physical shopping centre. Their hygiene-related preferences encompassed a spectrum of desires, including the necessity and desire for immaculate restroom facilities, well-kept spaces throughout the shopping centre, and overall tidiness that was visually appealing.
Conclusion 3.4: The study's findings indicate the desire for safety when frequenting a physical shopping centre. Participants indicated that they are more likely to revisit a shopping centre when they feel safe. A large portion of the participants highlighted that they observed no visible security measures when visiting shopping centres in South Africa.

Table 5-5: Conclusions and recommendations: Secondary objective 3 (continued)

Recommendations: Secondary objective 3
Recommendation 3.1: Retailers must consider customers' preferences for atmospheric features such as music, lighting and scent. Although customers have different tastes and preferences, it is essential for retailers to consider these three features and ways in which they can create a middle ground that will please the majority of customers.
Recommendation 3.2: Shopping centres may include a combination of natural and artificial lighting to create a lively and visually appealing atmosphere. Shopping centres may use lighting to their advantage by incorporating warm and cool lighting in different areas of the shopping centre to assist with enhancing product displays. Using different lighting, décor and music during festive seasons will create a positive atmosphere that may be appealing to customers.
Recommendation 3.3: Retailers may consider offering a diverse playlist to their customers, but they must ensure that the chosen music suits their target demographic. Volumes may be adjusted to ensure that customers are not overwhelmed. Retailers may also include a feedback channel for their music selection. This channel may encourage customers to share their preferred music when shopping. Thereafter, shopping centres may make informed decisions. This can be achieved through social media, either on their platforms or through a content creator.
Recommendation 3.4: To enhance the scent around a shopping centre, retailers may use subtle and pleasant scents.
Recommendation 3.5: Retailers must ensure that all their employees offer customers quality service. What is regarded as quality service differs; however, investing in training and skill development of all employees is essential. Continuously ensuring that employees can cater to customer needs through employee investment can enhance the service at a shopping centre. Retailers should also ensure that employees are well-trained, knowledgeable about the products, and possess exceptional interpersonal skills.
Recommendation 3.6: Retailers must ensure that they create hygienic spaces for customers. Places such as bathrooms need to be well managed and well taken care of. Ensuring that spaces such as the food court are kept clean and tidy is essential to achieve a hygienic space. Hygiene includes implementing a regular cleaning schedule that targets the most visited areas in a shopping centre, setting up recycling sites, hiring professional cleaning services cleanups and training employees to practice and follow sound hygiene protocols. Shopping centres can also encourage customers to provide feedback regarding the cleanliness and tidiness of the shopping centres.

Table 5-5: Conclusions and recommendations: Secondary objective 3 (continued)

Recommendations: Secondary objective 3
Recommendation 3.7: Retailers should consider investing in high-level security measures to ensure the safety of customers. The visibility of trained security guards at a shopping centre may enhance customer experience. Retailers should implement protection systems such as motion sensors, surveillance cameras and an anonymous report system. This can help customers to feel free to report a crime that they may have experienced at a shopping centre, or it can encourage shopping centre management to share safety tips with their customers. Security measures should be employed in parking spaces too. Shopping centres should display clear signage indicating the presence of security or cameras in different areas. The creation of safe zones in shopping centres to assist customers who need help or feel that they are unsafe is important.

5.3.1.4 Secondary objective 4

Secondary objective 4 aimed to explore and describe the value derived by participants when shopping at a physical shopping centre.

Table 5-6: Conclusions and recommendations: Secondary objective 4

Literature findings: Secondary objective 4
The literature findings indicate retailing is a set of business activities with the sole purpose of enhancing the value of products and services for the benefit of the customer (Pantana & Vannucci, 2019:298). Creating value is imperative to retailing. Historically, organisations have been solely responsible for creating value for the customer. However, in recent times customers have become a part of the process of creating value (Dieck & Han, 2022:110). The literature highlights that value goes far beyond a product's lifecycle. Value is created through interactions between customers, the customer and employee, and the customer and the product. All these components are deemed essential to enhancing customer experience. It is also important to note that value differs from one customer to the next. The literature highlights attributes such as aesthetics as direct descendants of the experiential value; customers derive this when they interact with an environment and product (Ameen *et al*., 2021:328). The literature also indicates that customers may derive value from interacting or socialising with other shoppers or even the shopping centre staff. Furthermore, the literature highlights good quality service as an essential aspect of value (Pantana & Vannucci, 2019:298). The literature explains that though service is intangible, providing high-quality service makes customers feel like they get more than what they pay for (Meiners, 2022).
Secondary objective 4 was addressed in main finding 4.2.4. Conclusions and recommendations pertaining to the value derived by participants when shopping at a physical shopping centre are provided subsequently.

Table 5-6: Conclusions and recommendations: Secondary objective 4 (continued)

Conclusions: Secondary objective 4
Conclusion 4.1: According to the findings of the study, participants appreciate the ability to browse through a variety of products when visiting a physical shopping centre. Participants showed a great appreciation for touching and seeing products.
Conclusion 4.2: The study results indicate that participants derive economic value from frequenting physical shopping centres. Participants indicated that when they choose to purchase items at a shopping centre, they can buy things for less, they get more for their money, and they felt they were more likely to get good discounts at a shopping centre than an online store.
Conclusion 4.3: The findings of the study show that participants derive value from the service they receive at a physical shopping centre. The service highlighted by participants include their interactions with shopping centre employees and the fact that the service they receive is immediate and has no waiting period. Participants indicated that there is no waiting period when they purchase items from a physical shopping centre, and that they can take instant possession of the items they purchase, instead of waiting for items to be delivered at a later date.
Conclusion 4.4: Many participants indicated that when frequenting a physical shopping centre, they can socialise with other customers or employees.
Conclusion 4.5: The findings of the study also indicated that participants enjoy having a variety of stores and products accessible to them.
Conclusion 4.6: Participants expressed that a visit to a physical shopping centre offers them an opportunity to relax and escape their realities.
Recommendations: Secondary objective 4
Recommendation 4.1: As indicated in the findings, participants showed a preference for browsing which increases the probability of a customer making an impulse purchase. Shopping centres may include pop-up shops as that may pique the interest of customers. They should include stations where customers may use advanced technology such as virtual reality (VR) to experience and interact with products.
Recommendation 4.2: Participants indicated that they prefer to visit a physical shopping centre because they derive economic value as opposed to online shopping. Retailers can capitalise on this by including price comparisons between online and a shopping centre. This may be achieved through signage or screen displays around the shopping centre or in different stores. Through promoting ongoing sales, they may be able to attract customers to shopping centres, using phrases such as "In-Store Exclusive Deals" or "Limited-Time Discounts.” Shopping centres can also price matches to assure customers that they are getting the same deals as they would get online.

Table 5-6: Conclusions and recommendations: Secondary objective 4 (continued)

Recommendations: Secondary objective 4
Recommendation 4.3: To ensure that a high level of customer service is provided to customers, shopping centres may offer customer personal shopping assistants who will guide them to stores, brands and products that suit their preferences. Shopping centres may also introduce loyalty programmes where customers may be able to gain points every time, they visit a specific shopping centre. The points may be redeemed through a voucher for all stores, monetary exchange or discounts. Shopping centres can also provide their in-house retailers with customer feedback to assist them with improving their own service.
Recommendation 4.4: To encourage customers to socialise while visiting a physical shopping centre, shopping centres can include social areas that are designated for socialising. This may include lounges, cafés and the creation of community events such as live music performances, cultural festivals, festive shows and art exhibits.
Recommendation 4.5: Participants expressed that they enjoy visiting shopping centres because they offer a variety of stores under one roof. To capitalise on this, shopping centres can include entertainment areas in a shopping centre. These areas would offer customers more than just an option to purchase products or services. The inclusion of live performances, outside concerts, VR and AR experiences and gaming stations will offer customers the variety that they are after.

5.3.1.5 Secondary objective 5

Secondary objective 5 aimed to explore and describe the factors that contribute to the attractiveness of a physical shopping centre.

Table 5-7: Conclusions and recommendations: Secondary objective 5

Literature findings: Secondary objective 5
Attractiveness is subjective to the customer, but factors such as cleanliness, store attractiveness, architecture and a variety of products may be classified as attractive elements of a shopping centre (Kunc *et al*., 2016:27). The literature explains that the attractiveness of a physical shopping centre includes different elements such as aesthetics, atmosphere, the variety of stores available, hygiene, different amenities and activities offered at a physical shopping centre. The aesthetics of a shopping centre is not limited to the design and décor, but also includes the environment and layout of the shopping centre (Sheng & Teo, 2012:141). Kiriri (2019:268) explains that some customers are attracted to interior design, while others are captivated by architecture and innovation.

Table 5-7: Conclusions and recommendations: Secondary objective 5 (continued)

Literature findings: Secondary objective 5
The literature also highlights that the attractiveness of a shopping centre may be due to the distinct or unique ambience of that shopping centre (Ali *et al*., 2014:278). Sometimes customers visit a physical shopping centre because of its uniqueness, and these attributes may be tangible or intangible. The include parking, location, safety, reputation and trading hours (Bonfanti & Yfantidou, 2021:1304). The literature highlights shopping centres as a lifestyle hub and notes that some customers are attracted to specific shopping centres because they add value to their lifestyles or align with their daily lives (Nasim & Shamshir, 2018:87).
Secondary objective 5 was addressed in section 4.2.5. Conclusions and recommendations relating to the attractiveness of physical shopping centres are provided subsequently.
Conclusions: Secondary objective 5
Conclusion 5.1: Most participants are attracted to physical shopping centres because of the aesthetics of a physical shopping centre. The attributes contributing towards the aesthetics of a shopping centre were identified as decorations, displays, entertainment and tidiness.
Conclusion 5.2: The results of the study indicate that the layout of a shopping centre impacts what they deem as attractive. Participants highlighted that factors such as cleanliness, drinking fountains and layout contribute towards the attractiveness of a shopping centre.
Conclusion 5.3: The results of the study show that the availability of a variety of stores has a bearing on the attractiveness of a shopping centre. Participants showed a keen interest in coffee shops and bookshops. Participants also expressed that shopping centres are one-stop shops, which is perceived as an attractive quality.
Conclusion 5.4: The results of the study show that participants appreciate the quality service delivery that they receive from shopping centre employees. Some participants highlighted that the appearance of the employees is also an appealing aspect.
Conclusion 5.5: The findings of the study highlight that security is an important aspect of the attractiveness of a shopping centre. Participants have a strong desire for secure parking and sound security.
Conclusion 5.6: Although the study's results indicated many elements that participants found attractive, there were elements that were highlighted as unattractive. Many participants showed a dislike for large crowds while some of the participants pointed out that they found the layout of shopping centres unattractive. Long queues, rude staff, and unhygienic bathrooms were some of the elements mentioned that contribute to the unattractiveness of a shopping centre.

Table 5-7: Conclusions and recommendations: Secondary objective 5 (continued)

Recommendations: Secondary objective 5
Recommendation 5.1: Retailers can consider curating their aesthetics in a distinct manner. This may include shopping centres having a modern look, an industrial feel or a vintage look. Building an interesting architectural entrance, maintaining clean and appeasing landscaping (greenery), using lighting to create an ambience and using seasonal decorations to enhance or change the aesthetics of a shopping centre quarterly are recommended.
Recommendation 5.2: Participants indicated that the layout of a shopping centre can be an attractive attribute. Shopping centres need to ensure that there are sufficient methods used to help a customer navigate through a shopping centre. This may include ensuring that the there are enough elevators and escalators, and including a mini shuttle service around the shopping centre.
Recommendation 5.3: The results of the study have shown that participants have an interest in bookshops and coffee shops. Shopping centres may consider incorporating coffee stalls from small local businesses, and a book station where customers can donate books.
Recommendation 5.4: Participants indicated that service is an attractive factor for them at a shopping centre. Shopping centres can enhance their service by providing efficient parking spaces to eliminate the struggle of finding parking space for customers. They should ensure that management is visible and approachable at a shopping centre. Shopping centres can also consider introducing a customer survey system where customers can give honest reviews of their experience. In addition, they can create a shopping centre app where customers can be updated about the latest deals, promotions or even shopping centre changes.
Recommendation 5.5: Secure parking was listed as an attractive quality of a shopping centre. Shopping centres can achieve this by creating efficient layout and design that make parking easily accessible so that customers can navigate through the parking area without getting lost. Here they can consider creating multiple payment options for parking such as being able to pay at a kiosk, scanning and paying the parking card with apps such as Snap Scanner or Zapper, and making provisions to pay with a credit or debit card (cardless transactions too). Technology can be used to assist customers in identifying open parking spots and visible security in the parking areas to make customers feel more comfortable and at ease.
Recommendation 5.6: Shopping centres can include a children's only bathroom. This will ensure the safety of children and bring a sense of comfort to the parents.
Recommendation 5.7: Retailers can consider adding a waiting or resting area (apart from places such as a food court). These spaces can be used by customers to sit and rest during busy days.
Recommendation 5.8: Shopping centres can consider incorporating water stations where customers can either fill up their water bottles or purchase a new one.

Table 5-7: Conclusions and recommendations: Secondary objective 5 (continued)

Recommendations: Secondary objective 5
Recommendation 5.9: Shopping centres can consider self-checkout services to combat the long queues. Shopping centres would have to be in agreement with retailers to include the abovementioned in most, if not all, retail outlets in a specific shopping centre. This may include the option to scan products using a mobile app while shopping and not waiting in a queue.
Recommendation 5.10: Shopping centres can regularly evaluate peak hours and liaise with retail outlets so that enough staff are made available for those days or hours.

5.4 LINKING ALL ASPECTS OF THE STUDY: RESEARCH OBJECTIVES, QUESTIONS, MAIN FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMMENDATIONS

Table 5-8: Links between objectives, questions, main findings, conclusions, and recommendations

Questions	Main Finding	Conclusions	Recommendations
Secondary objective 1: Provide an overview of existing literature based on the constructs utilised in this study to this study.			
Chapters 1 & 2	The conclusions and recommendations formulated for secondary objectives 2 to 5 were derived from the literature review conducted in Chapters 1 and 2		
Secondary objective 2: Investigate the factors that motivate participants to shop at a physical shopping centre.			
Question 1	4.2.2	2.1-2.5	2.1-2.5
Secondary objective 3: Explore and describe the experience of participants when shopping at a physical shopping centre.			
Question 2	4.2.3	3.1-3.4	3.1-3.7
Secondary objective 4: Explore and describe the value derived by participants when shopping at a physical shopping centre.			
Question 3	4.2.4	4.1-4.6	4.1-4.5
Secondary objective 5: Explore and describe the factors that contribute to the attractiveness of a physical shopping centre.			
Question 4	4.2.5	5.1-5.10	5.1-5.6

5.5 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Although the study was successfully completed, a number of limitations were found. The following limitations relating to the literature review were identified:

- During the research period, limited research was available on shopping centres or commercial properties in the South African context. Therefore, literature relating to shopping centres or commercial properties was mostly used from an international perspective.
- The research focused on the contrast between physical shopping centres and online shopping. However, it did not go into intricate detail of how the introduction of omni-channel can disrupt traditional retailing.
- While the present research addressed customer shopping experience in detail, it did not address customer experience post-purchase.
- The literature regards customer shopping experience as a retail strategy; however, it does not provide examples of how customer shopping experience has been used to combat a decrease in customer footfall in shopping centres internationally.

The following limitations regarding the empirical study were identified:

- Participants were mostly from the Western Cape, which could limit the generalisability of the findings to the wider population.
- The study focused on physical shopping centres and not retail outlets that can be found inside a shopping centre. Multiple elements may, however, influence customer experience when considering individual stores at a shopping centre.
- The study depended on customers' opinions and judgements. The insights provided by the participants were significant; but they may have been influenced by personal bias and personal experiences.

5.6 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

While this study has its limitations, these were carefully discussed and justified throughout the dissertation and these did not have a negative influence on the value of the study. Therefore, the limitations identified in this study could serve as areas for future research. The following recommendations are proposed for future studies:

- Future research could focus on customers' shopping experience in physical shopping centres quantitatively.
- Future studies could expand on customer shopping experience, and it can be curated in light of the growth of omni-channel retailing.
- Future studies could consider the customer journey as a foundation to build and curate distinct customer experiences.
- Future research could increase the number of participants and diversity to enhance the generalisability of findings.
- Future research may look into exploring customer segmentation to dissect how different demographics experience shopping centres.
- Future research may investigate the long-term impact of technological advances such as mobile apps, e-commerce and social commerce.
- Future research may investigate the differences between South African shopping centres and international shopping centres and identify gaps of improvement.
- Future research may study customer behaviour post the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact regarding customers frequenting a physical shopping centre.

5.7 CONCLUSIONS

This chapter provided an in-depth overview of the study, encompassing a review of relevant literature, empirical findings, as well as conclusions and recommendations related to the secondary objectives defined in the study. The chapter culminates with a discussion of the study's limitations and offers suggestions for future research.

Upon a comprehensive examination of the literature and the empirical analysis, it is evident that the customer shopping experience wields a substantial influence on the retailing landscape and the vitality of physical shopping centres. While the exact potential for success remains uncertain until customer experience strategies are effectively implemented in physical shopping centres, the findings of this study indicate that a deliberate and customer-centric approach to crafting the shopping experience may indeed confer a significant competitive advantage over online retail platforms.

It is essential to acknowledge that while customer experience has emerged as a potential solution to the challenges posed by the retail apocalypse, it necessitates a thorough consideration of multiple factors that can either augment or undermine the overall customer experience. Above all, this study underscores the invaluable nature of the customer experience, illustrating its potential to nurture and sustain relationships, cultivate spaces that cater to diverse customer needs and desires, and ultimately entice more customers to choose physical shopping centres as their preferred retail destinations.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview #:_____ Time:_____ Date:_____

Introduction to Interview and Elaboration of Study

My name is Bokamoso Mokone and I am a Master's student in marketing management at the North-West University in Potchefstroom. I would like to thank you for taking the time to participate in this study, and I look forward to talking with you about the topic at hand. The primary aim of this study is to investigate customer shopping experience at physical shopping centres in the Western Cape. In order for me to obtain this objective, I would like to ask you a few questions regarding your motivation for shopping at a physical shopping centre as opposed to shopping online, your experience when shopping at a physical shopping centre, and also gain a more profound understanding of the value, if any, you derive from shopping at a physical shopping centre. I will then also ask a few questions pertaining to factors that you consider to attract you to a physical shopping centre. Due to an array of different reasons, for example, the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, physical retail spaces like stores and shopping centres, are finding it increasingly challenging to attract customers. The results of this study will provide some guidance to the owners and managers of physical shopping centres in South Africa as to how they can improve customer experience to make shopping centres more attractive to customers. Do you have any questions so far?

The interview will last approximately 60 minutes and will be audio recorded. There are no right or wrong answers, so please feel free to answer my questions as comprehensively as possible. You can take as much or as little time as you require. If you are unsure about a question, please feel free to ask me for clarification. If, at any time you feel uncomfortable to wish to end the interview, please let me know.

Before we commence with the interview, I would just like to confirm the following for record-keeping purposes:

- Have you read and signed the interview consent form?
- Are you older than 18 years of age?
- Have you visited a physical shopping centre in the Western Cape in the past six months?
- Do you reside in the Western Cape province?

Thank you. Let us now commence with the interview.

[Ask questions below and probe accordingly]

Motivation to Frequent Physical Shopping Centres

For the past few years, customers have preferred to shop online rather than venture out to a physical shopping centre to purchase products. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this tendency, and as such, due to a lack of customer footfall, many physical stores and shopping centres closed. This is a pervasive issue in countries around the world. Thinking about the last time you visited a physical shopping centre, please explain to me why you decided to visit the physical shopping centre as opposed to rather browsing or shopping for items online?

Experience

Let's now consider your experience when visiting the physical shopping centre. Please tell me how you experienced your visit to the shopping centre form the moment you arrived at the property until you departed.

Value

Often times customers visit a physical shopping centre to derive value from partaking in a specific activity. What value do you derive from visiting a physical shopping centre?

Attractiveness

Please explain to me some of the reasons or factors that make a visit to a physical shopping centre attractive. These could be factors that are already in place, or they could be factors that you would like shopping centres to adopt or facilities that shopping centres could make available to customers to make them more attractive to customers.

Thank you, that concludes our interview. Is there perhaps anything you wish to add before we end the session?

I would once again like to express my sincere gratitude to you for partaking in this study. I am looking forward to sharing the results of the study with you once the study is completed. Please feel ensured that your personal information will remain strictly confidential throughout the research process, during analysis and upon reporting the results.

You are welcome to contact me or my supervisor at any time should you have any questions or queries regarding the study, and we shall gladly assist you. Thank you.

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS

Please refer to the CD-ROM included at the back of this dissertation.

APPENDIX C: LETTER OF INVITATION

NORTH-WEST UNIVERSITY ®
YUNIBESITI YA BOKONE-BOPHIRIMA
NOORDWES-UNIVERSITEIT

Private Bag X6001, Potchefstroom
South Africa 2520

Tel: 018 299-1111/2222
Web: http://www.nwu.ac.za

Dear (NAME OF PARTICIPANT)

REQUEST FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION IN A STUDY AIMED AT INVESTIGATING CUSTOMER SHOPPING EXPERIENCE IN SOUTH AFRICAN SHOPPING CENTRES.

I am currently conducting a study for a Master's degree in Marketing Management at the North-West University Potchefstroom campus, with a specific focus on investigating customer shopping experience in South African shopping centres. I would like to invite you to take part in my research study by partaking in an interview that will take approximately 60 minutes of your time.

Objective:

The objective of this study is to investigate customer shopping experience in South African shopping centres. The information that will be collected from this study will be used to assist and inform academia, organisations and practitioners on applicable strategies that may be implemented to make informed decisions in physical shopping centres.

Sample and methodology:

The researcher aims to conduct interviews with participants aged 18 years or older residing in the Western Cape province and who have visited a physical shopping centre in the past six months. Questions will be asked pertaining to your shopping experience at a physical shopping centre and factors that you consider to be attractive of a physical shopping centre. The interview sessions will be audio-recorded and transcribed for further analysis.

Confidentiality and anonymity:

If you choose to participate in this study, please note that it will be voluntary without any pressure from external parties. If at any point you wish to withdraw from the study, you are permitted to do so. The information you provide during the interview will remain confidential and your identity will be kept anonymous.

Results:

The results of this study will form part of a dissertation. Participants are permitted to request the results once the study has been completed.

Should you have any questions, please contact us at the contact details provided below.

Yours faithfully,

……

Ms. B. Mokone
Student / Researcher
School of Management Sciences
Faculty of Economic and
Management Sciences
Potchefstroom Campus
North-West University
T: 081 382 9645

E: bokamosomokone98@gmail.com

……

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Supervisor
School of Management Sciences
Faculty of Economic and
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North-West University
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APPENDIX D: CONSENT FORM

Private Bag X6001, Potchefstroom
South Africa 2520

Tel: 018 299-1111/2222
Web: http://www.nwu.ac.za

CONSENT TO PARTAKE IN STUDY

INVESTIGATING CUSTOMER SHOPPING EXPERIENCE IN SOUTH AFRICAN SHOPPING CENTRES.

		Please tick each box
1	I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions, and have had these answered satisfactorily.	☐
2	I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason, and without any adverse consequences or penalty.	☐
3	I understand that this project has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, EMS-REC (Ethics Committee).	☐
4	I understand who will have access to the data provided, how the data will be stored, and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.	☐
5	I understand how this research will be reported and published.	☐
6	I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint.	☐
7	I consent to being audio recorded.	☐
9	I give permission to be quoted directly in research outputs but only completely anonymously.	☐
10	I agree to take part in the study.	☐

Consent to process personal information

With this, I consent to the use of my personal information contained herein (as well as demographic information provided during the interview) and confirms that:		*Please tick each box*
1	the information is supplied voluntarily, without undue influence from any party and not under any duress.	☐
I acknowledge that I am aware that I have the following rights regarding personal information, which is collected. I have the right to:		
2	access the information at any reasonable time to rectify the information.	☐
3	object to the processing of the information in which case this agreement will terminate.	☐
4	access the information at any reasonable time to rectify the information.	☐

_____ dd / mm / yyyy

Participant signature Date

_____ dd / mm / yyyy _____

Name of person taking consent Date Signature

APPENDIX E: DATA ANALYSIS AND CODEBOOK

Please refer to the CD-ROM included at the back of this dissertation.

APPENDIX F: PEER CHECKING APPROVAL LETTER

NWU®
NORTH-WEST UNIVERSITY
NOORDWES-UNIVERSITEIT
YUNIBESITI YA BOKONE-BOPHIRIMA

Ms B. Mokone
Master's student
North-West University

Prof A. Henrico
Professor in Business Management
School for Management Sciences
North-West University
Potchefstroom
South Africa
Tel: 018 299-1421
Cell: 0767400660
Fax: 018 299-4910
Web: http://www.nwu.ac.za
Email: alfred.henrico@nwu.ac.za

24 October 2023

QUALITATIVE THEMATIC VALIDATION: MS BOKAMOSO MOKONE

This letter hereby serves to verify that I, Prof Alfred Henrico, have worked through the analysed data applicable to the above-mentioned student's dissertation, as it is presented in Atlas.ti 23. I have scrutinised the project file, codebook, as well as the thematic and categorical framework of the results.

To this end, I agree with the accuracy of the identified themes.

I wish Ms Mokone all the best.

Regards

Prof A. Henrico
Professor in Business Management

Mr. Johan Gouws
Lecturer
North-West University
Potchefstroom
South Africa

Ms. Bokamoso Mokone
Master's student in Marketing Management
North-West University
Potchefstroom
South Africa

12 October 2023

To Whom It May Concern:

PEER REVIEW OF BOKAMOSO MOKONE'S QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS

This letter verifies that I, Johan Gouws (Lecturer in Entrepreneurship and Business Management at the North-West University; Staff No. 24970190), meticulously reviewed the qualitative analysis of the transcribed data of Ms. Mokone's dissertation entitled "*Investigating customer shopping experience in South African shopping centres*". Moreover, I reviewed Ms. Mokone's use of the Morse and Field approach towards analysing qualitative data. Conclusively, this letter confirms that Ms. Mokone rigorously analysed the data and verified that the themes identified reflect both confirmability and dependability.

Yours faithfully

Mr. Johan Gouws

APPENDIX G: LETTER FROM LANGUAGE EDITOR

Declaration

This is to declare that I, Annette L Combrink, accredited language editor and translator of the South African Translators' Institute, have language-edited the dissertation with the title

Investigating customer shopping experience in South African shopping centres

by

BF Mokone

Prof Annette L Combrink

Accredited translator and language editor, South African Translators' Institute

Membership No. 1000356, Date: 8 November 2023

APPENDIX H: LETTER FROM TRANSCRIPTIONIST

Language Matters Pty Ltd
info@languagematters.co.za
082 920 2991
www.languagematters.co.za

Language editing – Translation – Transcription – Simultaneous interpreting

156 O R Tambo Street
Miederpark
Potchefstroom
2531

To whom it may concern,

RE: CERTIFICATE OF TRANSCRIPTION SERVICES AND QUALITY ASSURANCE

This certificate serves as confirmation that transcription services have been successfully rendered to **Bokamoso Mokone** by a professional language and transcription services provider according to quality standards.

Details of the transcription services:

Project Description: Participant interview recordings for a master's research study

Date of Commencement: 1 July 2023

Date of Completion: 19 September 2023

Number of Audio/Video Hours Transcribed: 296 minutes

Language: English

Transcription Format: Verbatim

The transcribed content has been reviewed and edited to ensure accuracy, consistency and overall quality to guarantee that the final transcript met the highest standards in terms of content fidelity and overall readability.

Should you have any concerns or require further information about the transcription services provided, please do not hesitate to contact info@languagematters.co.za or 0829202991.

Issued by: BGS Language Matters and Media Services Pty Ltd.

APPENDIX I: LETTER FROM TECHNICAL EDITOR

LEON DU PREEZ

TECHNICAL EDITING

Leon du Preez

Lecturer

North-West University

Potchefstroom

2531

20 November 2023

To whom it may concern:

DECLARATION OF TECHNICAL EDITING

This letter verifies that I, Leon du Preez, did the technical editing of Ms BF Mokone's dissertation entitled: *"Investigating customer shopping experience in South African shopping centres"* for the degree Master of Commerce in Marketing Management at the North-West University. The document has been edited (formatted) in accordance with the technical requirements of the North-West University as set out in the Manual for Higher Degrees Studies and Referencing Guide (NWU Harvard 2020). Notwithstanding, the editor's revisions are recommendations, and as such the implementation thereof remains the responsibility of the author. In addition, the editor will not be responsible for any changes made after the date of issue.

Sincerely,

Mr Leon du Preez