What's the Buzz about the Store? A Comparative Study of the Sources of Word of Mouth and Customer Satisfaction and their Relationships with Sales Growth

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Abstract

This is the first study to systematise the "buzzables" in retailing that drive word of mouth (WOM) and to compare the argued relationship between WOM and sales growth with the relationship between customer satisfaction and sales growth. The results build on data from 27 retail chains in seven categories in the Scandinavian retail market, panel data from 3000 households and 1000 customer interviews. The results show that satisfaction and WOM are equally important for growth. Contrary to the previous literature, which has maintained that unique and extreme features drive WOM, it is rather common factors such as value for money, quality and range of goods that encourage WOM.

Keywords

Buzz, Word of Mouth (WOM), customer satisfaction, sales growth

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1 Introduction

Since the beginning of the 1980s, the understanding and handling of customer satisfaction has been one of the most important strategic tools for achieving financial success for chain stores and other organisations (Westbrook 1981; Fornell 1992; Anderson/Fornell/Rust 1997; Johnson/Fornell 1991; Fornell/Johnson 1996; Johnson/Nader/Fornell 1996).

New and rather controversial findings show that customer satisfaction as a means to achieve – and an indicator of – financial success is not, in all situations, relevant and decisive. Quite the contrary, it can be misleading, – particularly if a company is aiming for growth and profitability (Reichheld 2003, 2006; Reichheld/Markey 2006). According to Reichheld (2003), the chain store K-Mart presented their best results ever in the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ASCI) in the same year they filed a petition for bankruptcy. Instead, Reichheld showed that WOM (word of mouth (WOM)) and the willingness to recommend a brand, a product or service to a friend, colleague or family member are more decisive factors behind success in terms of sales growth. Despite a number of attempts (e.g. Morgan/Rego 2008), nobody has thus far succeeded in proving or disproving Reichheld's rather controversial statement about the great importance of recommendation and the lesser importance of customer satisfaction for growth and financial success (Keiningham/Aksoy/Cooil 2008).

Apart from Reichheld's controversial observations and statements, the financial advantages of WOM have been pointed out in a number of scientific studies. For example, Villanueva et al. (2008) found that Customer Lifetime Value was higher when the customer was recruited through WOM rather than by traditional communication. Dinesh/Minakshi/Dhruy (2008), who studied the decisive attributes of online retailing and repeat purchases, demonstrated that WOM was the single most important factor compared with the attributes of traditional store profiles such as easy to find, relative prices and choice.

Originally, Reichheld suggested that companies should understand the reason for growth by means of a simple index based on a single question (e.g. Net Promoter Score (NPS)) as a response to a critique of the extensive indexing, abundant questions and black box analyses of customer satisfaction. However, he was subsequently criticised for oversimplifying the matter somewhat (Grisaffe 2007). However, companies do need to understand why they are heading in a certain direction as well as why customers recommend them and why they do not: "Certainly Reichheld's NPS can reveal something about the company's overall health. However, that single score cannot provide all the information needed to guide targeted strategic improvement actions" (Grisaffe 2007, p. 40).

Research on satisfaction regarding retailing and stores offers exactly the degree of information Grisaffe (2007) asks for, and it has discovered a number of general dimensions that seem to drive satisfaction. Westbrook (1981) developed the best-known and used scale, or instrument, to identify the dimensions and sources of satisfaction concerning retail stores. By handling these resources, or sources of satisfaction, the store or retail chain can understand how to satisfy their customers. If it were possible to find the equivalent for the sources of customer recommendations (i.e. the aspects of store marketing such as products, prices, location, advertising and personnel that drive recommendations and NPS), then companies would gain a better understanding of how to drive sales growth and financial success, and not only keep pace with customers' expectations and satisfaction.

There are several articles stressing the importance of WOM for retail stores (Bolen 1994; Murphy 2006, 2007; Srinivasan/Anderson/Ponnavolu 2002), but again with little reference to how a buzzworthy offering is created in a store. The factor usually found to influence WOM in the literature is customer satisfaction (Wangenheim/Bayón 2007; Anderson 1998; Swan/Oliver 1989; Naylor 1999). Studies consistently show positive WOM as a result of high-ranking customer satisfaction (Sudaraman/Mitra/Webster 1998; Swan/Oliver 1989; Westbrook 1987). It is thus clear that there is a link between satisfaction and WOM, but satisfaction cannot explain WOM itself, and probably not all satisfaction factors driving WOM. Such explanations and sources may be in line with Pine/Gilmore's (1999) experiential framework based on entertaining and educating experiences or that unique and visible products and offerings have greater buzz value than others, as Dye (2000) maintains.

There is widespread research and literature about why people talk about personal motives but thus far no systematic research about what is said during a conversation and what it is about a store's offering that triggers a recommendation. The question we ask ourselves is whether there are general dimensions in such offerings to which people relate. Must the store's concept be extreme, surprising or visually extraordinary in order to drive WOM, or is it just about performing well on the basic and traditional satisfaction attributes?

One of the main purposes of this study is to explore and identify the customer values and store attributes contained in customers' evaluations that influence people to speak about and recommend a retail store or retail chain as well as to engage and relate to likeminded consumers. Such knowledge could be valuable for strategic and tactical store management when developing new or already established store concepts.

Reichheld (2006) proposed that in 12 out of his studied 14 industries, WOM was the most important or second most important factor that drove growth. However, neither in Reichheld's articles nor in those of others dealing with the connection between WOM and growth is anything said about retail marketing. The second purpose, therefore, concerns the clarification of the connection between recommendations and growth within retailing. In other words, is there a measurable and empirical connection, how strong is it and is it stronger than the link between customer satisfaction and growth?

2 Literature Review

2.1 Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction has always been one of the main pillars of the marketing concept (Kotler 2003). Theoretically, most scholars regard satisfaction as a post-purchase evaluation and a result of the comparison between perceived product performance and expectations (e.g. Anderson/Sullivan 1993; Veloutsou et al. 2005), generally referred to as confirmation theory (Oliver 1980). In spite of general agreement at a conceptual level, Churchill/Surprenant (1982) stated that if the experience does not differ greatly from expectations, disconfirmation or expectations are not involved in the evaluation process. As a result, they concluded, that satisfaction with consumption over time is explained by experiences alone. They also found that customers re-evaluate their expectations if they do not match performance and thus adapt their expectations to performance over time. Later empirical studies confirmed that purely performance-based models are better at explaining why customers are satisfied than so-called gap models that compare experience and performance.

Most research on satisfaction in the services industry differentiates between two types of satisfaction: transaction-specific satisfaction and general satisfaction (Dabholkar 1993, 1995; Dabholkar/Shepherd/Thorpe 2000). The former refers to the level of satisfaction of a single experience and service encounter (Jones/Suth 2000), in this case, a store visit. General satisfaction represents satisfaction as the sum of all previous encounters with the service company, updated after each transaction (Jones/Suth 2000). It is thus a fundamental indicator of the company's previous, present and future performance (Anderson/Fornell/Lehmann 1994). Transaction-specific customer satisfaction, by contrast, is more relevant in connection with tests of new products or in so-called critical encounters where the whole relationship might be at stake. Satisfaction has also been described as the feeling that results from the individual subjective evaluation of different results and experiences associated with the purchase or use of a product (Babin/Griffin 1998).

The link between customer satisfaction and recommendation is usually described as recommendation being a consequence of satisfaction (Heskett/Jones/Loveman 1994; Bitner 1990; Reichheld 2003). The relationship between satisfaction and recommendation has been found to be non-linear in the sense that only very dissatisfied or very satisfied customers tend to recommend (e.g. Anderson 1998; Hart/Johnson 1999).

Customer satisfaction within service and retail stores can lead to loyal customers and thereby profitability (Hallowell 1996; Gilbert/Veloutsou 2006); thus, it is of great concern for most companies. The greater the satisfaction among customers, the greater is the possibility that they will return and participate in positive WOM behaviour (Hallowell 1996). This gives satisfaction an important role in retaining and attracting customers.

Westbrook (1981), in perhaps the most recognised retail satisfaction model, showed that customers engage in a number of activities in a retail store, which lead to a variety of experiences when they visit the store. He maintained that customers' satisfaction with a chain store is based on a number of characteristics. Westbrook (1981) also compiled a list of store attributes (24 in total) from previous research and tested them as sources of satisfaction with chain stores among their customers. He found the following eight underlying and significant factors: satisfaction with 1) store salespersons, 2) store environment, 3) merchandising, 4) service orientation, 5) products/service, 6) the store's clientele, 7) the value/price relationship and 8) special sales.

Huddleston et al. (2009) found similarly functional factors in a study of grocery stores and customer satisfaction, namely service, price, product assortment and quality, which all had positive effects on satisfaction. Further/Burns/Neisner (2006) established that such emotions as delight, happiness, joy and enthusiasm were of importance, even though the cognitive evaluation of various attributes had a greater effect on satisfaction.

2.2 WOM

Apart from a few articles on WOM and online retailing (Dinesh/Minakshi/Dhruy 2008), there is very little to be found on WOM and retailing (for an exception, see Brown et al. 2005; Gauri/Bhatnagar/Rao 2008; Paridon 2004). WOM, in general, can be perceived as the earliest and most established term of research that encompasses an informal mode of communication between non-commercial parties concerning the evaluation of products and services (e.g. Brooks 1957; Dichter 1966; Arndt 1967). Within this field, a number of approaches contemplate the person engaging in WOM. One such, and perhaps the most used, regards opinion leadership and the suggestion that WOM primarily is spread through influential and well-connected opinion leaders (Katz/Lazarsfeld 1955). By identifying, understanding and motivating such, companies may fire up WOM and sales. Often, terms such as influentials and hubs are used.

The alternative point of view is the focus of this paper, which is more related to the marketing concept that argues that anyone can recommend and does so by free will, often as a result of satisfaction (Hart/Johnson 1999). Here, we see terms such as promoters (Reichheld 2003, 2006), evangelists, advocates and accidental influencers (Watts/Peretti 2007) rather than opinion leaders or influencers. The terms promoters (Reichheld 2003, 2006) and accidental influencers (Watts/Peretti 2007) stress that anyone – a friend or family member – can be a sender and influencer. In both cases, this concerns a person who is enthusiastic about a product and recommends it to a friend or acquaintance without having the motives or characteristics of an opinion leader. The receiver listens to the sender because he/she has a relationship with the latter, implying that he/she knows and relies on the sender (Schiffman/Kanuk 1995; Arndt 1967).

The number of general and formal studies of WOM is considerable. Although closely related fields of research, such as satisfaction and adoption/diffusion, have an interest in the attributes and characteristics in offerings and innovations that generate customer satisfaction, very little has been explored on the driving characteristics of WOM. The field of adoption/diffusion has identified five generic attributes that cause innovations to successfully spread: Big Relative Advantage, High degree of Compatibility, Low degree of Complexity, Trial ability and Observability (e.g. Rogers 1995). However, there is no reason to accept that these five dimensions are transferable to WOM, as a high degree of complexity and low degree of observability are factors assumed to stimulate WOM in such a manner that it creates situations in which a buyer asks for advice and relies on friends and their recommendations (Brooks 1957; Bristor 1990).

Much research borders on opinion leadership and focuses on the sender's personal motives (e.g. Paridon 2004; Engel/Kegerreis/Blackwell 1969; White/Argo/Dahl 2005; Richins/Root-Shaffer 1988). However, some research on the personal motives of WOM does not draw upon opinion leadership. Even though personal motives are not the focus of this study, a brief summary of those that can get the sender to talk might help us interpret and understand the results of the present study.

Satisfaction or dissatisfaction – in several studies, customer satisfaction has been pointed out as most important factor for WOM in general and for positive WOM in particular (Swan/Oliver 1989; Anderson 1998; Richins 1983; Bone 1992).

Gaining attention means that products or services replace other topics of conversations and that involving a product in a conversation is a way of 'having something to say' (Dichter 1966). Similar suggestions can be found in Rosen (2002).

Showing connoisseurship, namely talking about specific products or brands, functions as proof that you are following the right trends and have refined taste in certain categories that you value (Dichter 1966). Silverman (2001) argued that one of the reasons for giving WOM is that experts in certain subjects enjoy showing their expertise; in other words, they like to influence non-experts.

Feeling like a pioneer, namely the novelty of a specific product or brand, can provide a person with a feeling of being part of what they stand for and with an opportunity to identify him- or herself with a certain group (Dichter 1966; Bone 1992).

Suggesting status, namely talking about products in a higher social status segment, makes it possible for the speaker/consumer to improve his or her social status (Dichter 1966). Liu (2006) found similar motives around cultural products and entertainment.

Altruism and 'spreading the gospel' means the speaker wants to help out, almost like a kind of modern type of grooming, and can persuade the listener into using a product by enlisting a "good cause" (Dichter 1966; Rosen 2002).

Seeking confirmation of own judgment – people tend to need other people (followers) to justify or reassure their buying decisions by listening to the another person's advice (Dichter 1966; Brooks 1957). A few of the most frequent objectives of giving WOM can be found within self-confirmation theory.

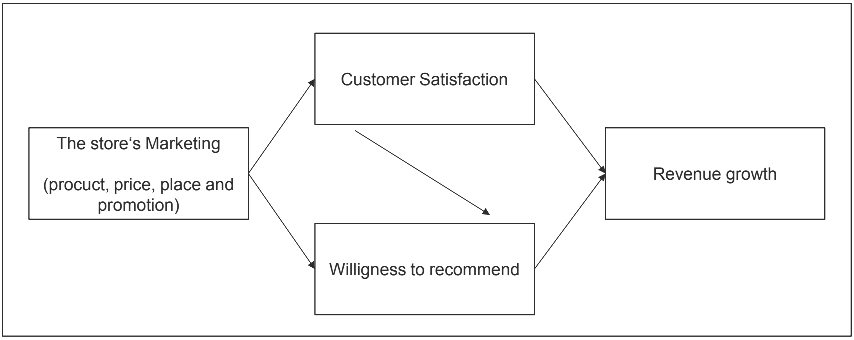
Asserting superiority means that the speaker gives WOM in order to exercise power or to assume leadership over the listener, but also to test if the listener respects the speaker by noticing if the advice is taken into consideration (Dichter 1966).

Personal relevance and commitment comes from involvement and loyalty to a brand or product (Reichheld 2006; Brown et al. 2005; Dick/Basu 1994).

Economic motives – for one's own economic gain (Rosen 2002). For example, if you can convince a friend to join your telephone operator, you can receive a bonus or make low-priced calls.

Figure 1 summarises the different parts of the study and their relationship to each other.

Figure 1: Model showing the Relationship between Marketing (Experience of the Store), Customer Satisfaction, Recommendations and Sales Growth



3 Methods

The data were collected in Sweden, where this project concerning recommendations and stores – in a unique cooperation between the university and international market research company GfK – has been in progress since 2006. This means that the project has had access to valuable market and household panel data. Roughly speaking, within the frame of this project we have used all existing market data from the summer of 2006 to the summer of 2009. Apart from the access aspect, Sweden is, from an international retail perspective, a very interesting and successful country with a long marketing tradition. Here, concepts and chain stores such as IKEA and H&M have been conceived, which have subsequently conquered the world. Both these concepts are included in the data from which our conclusions are drawn. From a satisfaction theoretical perspective, the Swedish market has been studied in several prominent articles (Anderson/Fornell/Lehmann 1994; Fornell 1992; Magi 2003).

The report is founded on three investigations: (a) a pilot study – an explorative investigation of 200 consumers who have been given the opportunity to write freely about their favourite stores and which they would recommend; (b) a survey – a standardised attitude measurement among 300 consumers in order to find which store characteristics drive recommendations; and (c) a market study – a survey of 900 consumers divided into nine categories who have been asked to state how satisfied they are and how willing they are to recommend three different stores in a given category. The attitude measurement is then compared with the growth of the chain stores from August 2006 to July 2009.

3.1 Pilot Study

Parts (b) and (c) were limited to individuals in Sweden's largest cities: Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö. Together 20 % of Sweden's population lives in these three cities. These cities were chosen because it is here that new shops and concepts are established first and in competition with international retail chains. This should create the best conditions for exploring recommendations as well as providing international relevance for the research results.

The explorative interviews were carried out using the same web panel but new respondents by means of a random selection of participants aged between 16 and 65 years. After naming the store, they were asked to recommend to a friend with a lifestyle similar to themselves, who is visiting their town to buy clothes and other goods. The respondents were then given the opportunity to say why they would recommend this store and what they would say. Altogether, there were 400 recommendations furnished with different reasons. These were completely open and on average consisted of 10 words. A proposed method in order to understand a company's strengths in a recommendation context can be found in Reichheld (2006) and McConnell/Huba (2003):

1. Imagine that a friend, acquaintance or relation, preferably of the same sex and age as yourself, is visiting the town where you live for a few days. If this person asks you where he or she should go to buy clothes, which shop or chain store (not a shopping mall or department store) would you recommend?
2. Why would you recommend this store and what would you say? Please give your reasons in full.
3. Is there any other store that does not sell clothes that you would recommend this person visit during their stay?
4. Why would you recommend this one and what would you say? Please give your reasons in full.

3.2 Survey

This second and more standardised study takes over where the explorative study ends, i.e. it sets out to test the degree of the generality of each of the spontaneous answers. The analysis builds primarily on explorative factor analysis to see how the different attributes recommended interact and on regression analysis to see how these attributes and factors in turn influence the willingness to recommend. Traditional multivariate analyses were necessary and structural equations were not possible because the most important variable, in this case the degree of recommendation, must build on one question according to Reichheld. Structural equations require that each of the constructs build on more than one questionnaire item in the dependent variable. Moreover, the study is, considering that the research in this field is very limited, explorative in character, and this conflicts with structural equations, which prefer a certain test of established frameworks and deductively generated hypotheses (Diamantopoulos/Siguaw 2000).

Each respondent was asked to answer 60 questions about two different stores in the categories of women's wear or interior decorating, or stores selling household appliances/electronic articles. These three categories were selected because they were the most commonly referred to in the pilot study (results not presented here). They were asked to answer questions concerning stores in the respective category they were most engaged in. The two stores consisted of the one they would most want to recommend and the one they would least want to recommend. In this way, we obtained the greatest possible variation in the degree of recommendation.

3.2.1 Customer Satisfaction Measurement

The most established scale to measure overall customer satisfaction is the one used in well-known national customer satisfaction indices (Anderson/Fornell 2000). The scale was adapted to a retail setting in Magi (2003).

Four questions concerned general customer satisfaction and recommendations: 1) How satisfied are you with store xxx? (very dissatisfied – very satisfied); 2) How well does store xxx match your expectations? (not at all – completely); 3) Imagine a perfect yyy store. How close to this ideal is store xxx? (not at all close – very close); and 4) How likely is it that you would recommend retailer xxx to a friend or colleague? (not at all likely – extremely likely). Altogether, 24 of the 60 questions were taken from Westbrook (1981) and his "sources of retail satisfaction index" (see ibid, Appendix). The remaining questions (32) concerned the unique characteristics of the store that emanated from the qualitative interviews. In the first round of analysis, all variables that had a bivariate correlation to intention to recommend under 0.40 were removed. That meant that 18 out of the 24 Westbrook items and seven (not presented in the report) out of the 32 unique questions were removed, leaving 31 questionnaire items for the further analysis of the sources of recommendations.

3.3 Market Study

The first introductory study aimed at clarifying the connection between NPS and sales growth in retailing; in other words, is there any connection, if so how strong is it, and whether it is stronger than the connection between customer satisfaction index (CSI) and growth? GfK, which together with AC Nielsen supply most sales data to European retail industries, was used for collecting the market as well as survey data.

The database was built on household panels consisting of 3000 Swedish households that report their purchases every week. Here, we bought data concerning nine categories (books, women's wear, menswear, children's clothes, DVD/CD/games, sport articles, groceries, building materials and DIY merchandise) for the period 2006 to 2009. For each category, three brands were randomly chosen for the survey. The stores' penetration rates (proportion of Swedish households that visited them during the past 12 months) in August 2006 varied from 2.5 % to 54 %. In all, we looked at 27 retail store chains.

The attitude questions were also collected with the help of GfK and its web panel. A total of 1000 randomly chosen individuals were interviewed and for each store brand 100 respondents were interviewed. The connection between CSI, NPS and sales growth was analysed with the help of simple regression analysis and the determination coefficient, which measures the effect of NPS and CSI on changes in revenue growth over the three-year period.

4 Results

4.1 Connection between Recommendations, Customer Satisfaction and Sales Growth

A total of 1,900 individuals were interviewed about nine categories and 27 retail chains. Each respondent had to answer questions with regard to three different brands within that specific category. Respondents' demographic profiles correspond with those of Sweden as a whole; the percentage of men was 51 %, with an average age of 46 years and an average annual income of 250,000–300,000 SEK. The answers to the questionnaire concerning the brands were then linked to the development in sales growth between 2006 and 2009.

Fornell (2006) suggested that a 10-point scale should be used for measuring satisfaction and Reichheld (2003) suggested an 11-point scale. However, as different scale structures for the two constructs can directly impact on the result, a neutral and more traditional seven-point scale was used (Table 1). The correlation to sales growth was instead studied using three ways of assessing customer satisfaction and recommendation. Using the clean seven-point scale, recommendation had a slightly higher correlation to sales growth than customer satisfaction had (0.48 vs. 0.42). However, when we used the approach suggested by Reichheld to calculate NPS (taking the top box responses and subtracting them from the lower box values, the tables were turned: the satisfaction index had the highest correlation to sales growth (0.49 vs. 0.44). Using the two top box scores as the basis for the subtraction recommendation had a slightly higher correlation to growth (0.50 vs. 0.46). The conclusion is that the two constructs are very even and that the way one executes the subtraction in order to measure NPS and customer satisfaction can influence the results.

Table 1: Corrections between Growth and different Ways to measure Recommendations and Satisfaction

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. Change in sales 2006–2009	1,00						
2. Likely to recommend	0,48*	1,00					
3. CSI	0,42*	0,71**	1,00				
4. NPS (7 = Promoters)	0,44*	0,94**	0,76**	1,00			
5. CSS (7= Very satisfied)	0,49**	0,77**	0,88**	0,86**	1,00		
6. NPS (7+6 = Promoters)	0,50**	0,99**	0,70**	0,91**	0,74**	1,00	
7. CSS (7+6= Very satisfied)	0,46*	0,77**	0,86**	0,86**	0,99**	0,73**	1,00

Figure 2 is a scatter plot where the sales growth or decline as a percentage between 2006 and 2009 was plotted against the clean seven-point scale (answering the question “How likely it is that the customers of each brand would recommend it to friends and family?”). A single linear regression shows that recommendation score in the matrix can explain 23 % (R-square linear 0.23) of the growth during the latest three-year period. Although this is not a high coefficient, it is nevertheless a significant relationship, showing that there is a link between the degree of recommendation and sales growth in retailing.

Figure 3 shows that there is a significant and similar, but somewhat lower, correspondence (R-square linear 0.23) between CSI and sales growth between 2006 and 2009 among the 27 retail companies included in the study.

Figure 2: Matrix showing the Degree of Recommendation in Relation to Growth in Market Shares between 2006 and 2009

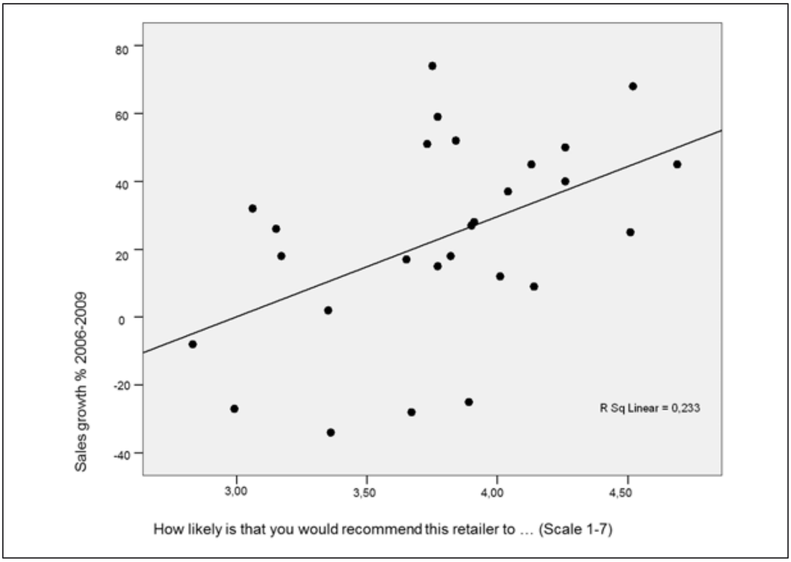
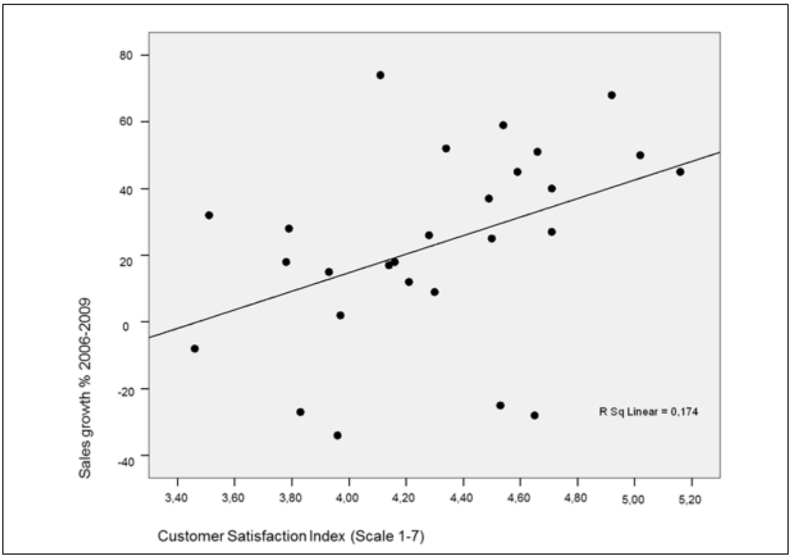


Figure 3: Matrix showing Customer Satisfaction in Relation to Sales Growth in Market Shares between 2006 and 2009



Finally, a multiple regression analysis where satisfaction and recommendation were competing towards sales growth during the three-year period was carried out. The results (see Table 2) show that although they independently have significant correlations to sales growth, when used in the same regression model, recommendation is the only significant variable, showing that satisfaction has little contribution to add into the equation.

Table 2: Multiple linear Regression Analysis (dependent Variable of Sales Growth, independent Variables Satisfaction and Recommendation)

	St. Beta coeff.	Sign.
Recommendation	0.48	0.00
Satisfaction	0.09	0.77
Adj. R^2	0.23	
F-value	7.58	
Sign.	0.01	

4.2 What is Said – The Pilot Study

The 200 respondents were then given the opportunity to speak freely about the stores they would recommend, and among the clothes stores 50 % of the answers were distributed over five of the largest retail chains: H&M (Swedish), followed by Dressman (Norwegian), MQ (Swedish), KappAhl (Swedish) and Lindex (Swedish). The responses provide a good reflection of the turnover and development in this industry. All five are international chains. Among the non-clothes stores, the responses were more dispersed and distributed among smaller and slightly more specialised chains, such as interior design shops, home appliances/electronics and so forth. Twenty % went to large international chains such as IKEA and Media Markt, 30 % to local unknown chains and the rest to smaller national chains.

Table 3: Percentage of Respondents that spontaneously mentioned each Aspect

	Fashion/clothing (N=200)	Other retailing (N=200)	Total (N=400)	Rank total
Selection and range	31 %	49 %	40 %	1
Price	25 %	40 %	33 %	2
Quality and performance	17 %	37 %	27 %	3
Personnel and service	9 %	17 %	13 %	4
Exploration	21 %	3 %	12 %	5
Unique and different	15 %	7 %	11 %	6
Specific product or brand	4 %	10 %	7 %	7
Atmosphere	6 %	0 %	3 %	8
Personal relevance	0 %	5 %	3 %	9

Table 3, which is an explorative summary of the spontaneous answers, shows that the most common reason for recommending a certain store is “Selection and range” (31 % in fashion and clothes, 49 % in other retail), followed by “Price” and some aspect of “Quality or performance”. The table shows that for stores selling other things than clothes and fashion (Other retailing), “Exploration” advances from eighth place to third, thus winning over the quality and performance aspects. “Unique and different” tends to be more important for other stores, just as for the store’s atmosphere. Below are respondents’ quotes that relate to each of these nine dimensions.

Selection and range are expressed in terms of wide range, variation in price, style and quality, everything one needs, suits everyone, for all occasions and can always find something. This seems to be an expression for assurance and that customer would visit the store for nothing. Examples of what consumers say include:

> *“Good choice”, “Good selection”, “They have a lot to choose from and in different sizes”, “There is a good mix of clothes at different prices”, “Because they have a wide range and many different kinds of clothes”, “There is something for everyone”, “It is the only large and well-stocked bookstore”.*

Price can imply cheap, good prices, value for money and so on. An aspect of price is that some individuals think that it should be cheap, but for most it seems to be a question of value for money or that, in a certain store, one can find the same goods but at a better price than in other stores that sell the same kinds of products and brands. Most often, the price is mentioned in combination with another attribute, such as value for money. When the respondents speak of prices, they say, for example:

“Good clothes at a good price”, “Good prices for good products”, “Good products at reasonable prices”, “Good and cheap designer clothes”.

Quality and performance concern quality, style, coolness and relevance. Here, the recommendations concentrated on what was sold and offered, rather than the actual refinement value. Examples of consumer quotes are:

“Smart and well-chosen garments”, “They usually always have something nice regardless of the kind of garment you are looking for”, “Beautiful handcraft, personal and of good quality”, “Things that make impression”.

Personnel and service implies competence, customer treatment and service. Thus, it concerns both employees’ attitudes and competencies as well as how this is delivered. Examples of what was said about the staff include:

“Pleasant, welcoming, knowledgeable staff”, “In this store you have competent and knowledgeable staff who can suggest…”, “Because they are knowledgeable and do not try to push goods that you don’t need, on the contrary they can sometimes advise against a product and suggest something cheaper”, “It feels as if it is unusual to be treated in this way nowadays when most shops only want to push their goods”.

Exploration implies that something is fun, interesting, inspiring or brightens one’s day. If we perform a content analysis of exploration, it is more a matter of learning and inspiration in relation to what is offered than issues within retailing that are usually associated with entertainment/events. Some of the responses included:

“You feel happy there”, “There are really exclusive goods there that are fun to look at”, “Many well-known people shop there”, “It’s fun to go and look and they often have campaigns and cheap films”, ”Because they have a lot of nice things to look at and there is almost always something you want to buy”.

Unique and different means that something can be unique, be one of few in Sweden, own label, different appearance or unusual. The most common terms used were, for example, unique and different:

“Different and cool products”, “Often have individual clothes that are fun”, “They have very original clothes”, “Quite a unique shop in Sweden”, “Smart and unique clothes”, “Slightly more exclusive shops (the other chains are everywhere)”, “You can find unique and smart things there”, “They have more different interior decoration de-

tails", "Many small, nice and different things that suit my style…they have very original clothes", "They have different and nicer useful things from new designers".

Special products and labels can be about satisfying certain exclusive segments and specific needs – a certain brand, size or age segment. The latter two often indicate that a store specialises in offering special labels, special sizes and products for specific segments. Those who have recommendations say:

"Good clothes for larger and older men", "For people like us", "Because it is a super toyshop that specialises in wooden toys and other environmentally friendly, educational and unusual toys", "They have brilliant interior design stuff and jewellery, and the cosmetics department is super cool".

Atmosphere seems to include such aspects as nice and cosy, newly constructed buildings and fresh interior. This feature does not occur particularly often but, when mentioned, seems to have something to do with recently built, bright and clean interiors, i.e., a dimension that can be costly for the store or chain in question. Examples of what is said:

"The store is bright and clean with very nice products", "Because of its atmosphere", "The atmosphere is absolutely fantastic", "You feel nice and calm and can browse around as long as you like", "A bright and cosy store", "Exciting environment, exotic and good food/restaurants".

Personal relevance is about the store suiting precisely the person who is going to make the recommendation or his/her friend or acquaintance. It shows how the recommending customer carries out a segmentation and matching profile for the store. It is clear that the customer does this job for the store:

"I would recommend this store if it matches the style of the person who asks about it, and nothing else", "It depends on what kinds of stores the person is looking for", "It stocks clothes that I like and that I think this person would have liked", "They have nice clothes, a good collection for you".

4.3 How the Characteristics are Linked and how they Drive Recommendations – The Survey

In this section, the results are presented and the quantitative investigation based on 300 respondents in the three cities of Gothenburg, Malmö and Stockholm analysed. A total of 300 respondents (100 from each city) were included in the investigation: 54 % were women and the mean age was 38 years. Eighty-six respondents chose to give their opinions on fashion and clothes stores, 82 on interior design stores and 134 on stores selling home appliances/electronic products. Each respondent was asked to give his/her opinion on two stores, namely one they would definitively recommend and one that they would not recommend. Thus, the investigation was built on a basis of 600 observations.

Based on the explorative and qualitative investigation and the nine dimensions, 34 concrete questions were generated for the questionnaire – about three to five questions per dimension. In the next stage of the investigation process, 58 single (24 from Westbrook and the 34 from the qualitative searches) store attributes were correlated using Pearson's one-tailed test of correlation against the degree of recommendation with the aim of sifting out the attributes that had the least impact. All attributes (without any regard to whether they were found in Westbrook's study or the pilot study) that correlated with a recommendation that was lower than 0.45 were removed from further analysis. The value 0.45 was chosen because we tried to make a simple model with as high a degree of explanation as possible, and this particular value meant that we ended up with 32 variables. Six of the total number of 32 variables came from Westbrook's CSI. Then, the remaining store characteristics were correlated against each other by means of an explorative factor analysis. The aim of the factor analysis was both to create a simpler picture and to identify the basic dimensions. The results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Factor Analysis – Principal Component Model – Varimax Rotation

		Experience and quality	Prices and goods for everyone	Personnel	Atmosphere	Unique and se-lected
1a.	Has fabulous products (.74)	0.76				
1b.	It's fun to shop here (.80)	0.74				
1c.	You can always find something interesting here (.79)	0.74				
1d.	To shop here makes a good impression on others (.61)	0.71				
1e.	I am often positively surprised (.75)	0.69				
1f.	Inspires me (.73)	0.61				
1h.	*Carries merchandise of good quality (.77)	0.61				
1j.	The different departments of the store have good assortments (.72)	0.57	0.47			
1k.	Is different and stands out from others (.74)	0.57				
1l.	The store looks after its staff (.69)	0.55		0.47		
1m.	They are confident and reliable (.77)	0.49	0.46			
2a.	*The general price level of the store is good (.58)		0.80			
2b.	Have attractive price offers and campaigns .60)		0.74			
2c	It's easy to shop here (.60)		0.73			
2d.	Everyone is welcome here (.53)		0.67			
2e.	*You get value for your money (.69)		0.67			
2f.	Has a selection that meets all needs (.66)	0.49	0.64			
3a.	Has interested staff (.61)			0.77		
3b.	*Has friendly salespeople (.60)			0.75		
3c.	*Has helpful salespeople (.64)			0.73		
3d.	Here the staff enjoy their work (.62)			0.70		
4a.	Is newly built and bright and clean (.65)				0.76	
4b.	Has a nice and stylish assortment (.75)	0.57			0.67	
4c.	*The store has an attractive interior (.71)				0.64	
4d.	Has a lot of new goods and the latest trends (.57)				0.63	
4e.	Here you can see there is a thought behind everything (.65)				0.56	0.50
5a.	When you shop here you feel you are part of a community (.60)					0.80
5b.	There is at least one area where this store is a specialist (.47)					0.64
5c.	Here you can find more than you would expect of a store like this one (.63)					0.61
5d.	Represents hospitality (.62)				0.47	0.59
5e.	I can daydream here (.62)	0.50				0.56
Cumulative degree of explanation in % KMO 0.93; Significance 0.00		23 %	40 %	54 %	66 %	78 %

*= Included in Westbrook's CSI. The figures within brackets are the correlations with the recommendation question. The figures in the columns are the correlations with each respective factor 1. All values under 0.45 are omitted from the table.

The factor analysis shows that the attributes can be divided into five dimensions or factors: F1 “Exploration and quality”; F2 “Prices and something for everyone”; F3 “Personnel”; F4 Atmosphere”; and F5 “Unique and selected”. Taken together, these capture 78 % of the variation in the material, which is an accepted threshold value (Hair et al. 1995). The structure is logical, possibly with the exception of the first factor “Exploration and quality”, which is rather scattered. However, it is, even so, not entirely illogical that the quality of an assortment makes it exciting and fun to go shopping in a certain store, particularly as the judgments with regard to exploration from the qualitative investigation were actually related to merchandise and quality. Relating to the qualitative and explorative study and the nine initial dimensions, we see that “Quality and performance”, “Exploration”, and “Specific product or brand” lands under F1, “Selection and range”, “Price” and “Personal relevance” lands under F2, “Personnel and service” is basically F3, “Atmosphere” is F4 and “Unique and different” is basically F5. In conclusion, a correlation analysis of the relationship between each item and recommendation followed by a factor analysis narrowed the initial nine dimensions found in the explorative study down to only five dimensions.

Table 5: Regression Analysis showing the Impact of the Recommendation Factors on the Degree of Recommendation and Customer Satisfaction

	Recommendation			
Satisfaction:	**St. Beta coeff.**	**Sign.**	**St. Beta coeff.**	**Sign.**
Exploration and quality	0.60	0.00	0.61	0.00
Prices and something for everyone	0.40	0.00	0.39	0.00
Personnel	0.26	0.00	0.25	0.00
Atmosphere	0.29	0.00	0.23	0.00
Unique and selected	0.22	0.00	0.28	0.00
Adj. R^2	0.71		0.70	
F-value	42.55		42.19	
Sign.	0.00		0.00	

The regression analysis in Table 5 shows that the five factors are significant and can explain 71 % of the variation in the degree of recommendation. At the same time, the same factors can explain 70 % of customer satisfaction in a store.

Table 6: Regression Analysis showing the Impact of Customer Satisfaction Factors on the Degree of Recommendation and Customer Satisfaction

	Recommendation		SAT	
	St. Beta coeff.	Sign.	St. Beta coeff.	v
Personnel	0.34	0.00	0.37	0.00
Assortment and premises	0.49	0.00	0.56	0.00
Prices and complaints	0.32	0.00	0.30	0.00
Advertising and offers	0.36	0.00	0.28	0.00
Adj. R^2	0.57		0.60	
F-value	38.86		44.7599	
Sign.	0.00		0.00	

Table 6 shows the corresponding regression analysis that was carried out by a factor solution (see Appendix) that was only based on Westbrook's CSI. The results show that Westbrook's CSI could explain 57 % of the variation in willingness to recommend and 60 % of the variation in customer satisfaction. This implies that this recommendation index is 14 % and 10 % better than Westbrook's CSI in explaining customer satisfaction recommendation and customer satisfaction, respectively.

Table 7: Summary of the Regression Results and Determination Coefficients for each Category of Stores included in the Study

	Women's Fashion		Interior Design		Home Appliance/ Electronics	
	St. Beta coeff.	Sign.	St. Beta coeff.	Sign.	St. Beta coeff.	Sign.
Exploration and quality	0.57	0.00	0.69	0.00	0.54	0.00
Prices suiting everyone	0.27	0.01	0.66	0.00	0.24	0.04
Personnel	0.34	0.00	0.15	0.24	0.28	0.01
Ambience	0.44	0.00	0.17	0.19	0.20	0.07
Unique and selected	0.23	0.03	0.23	0.07	0.31	0.01
Adj. R^2	0.77		0.65		0.68	
F value	17.51		11.18		14.89	
Sign.	0.00		0.00		0.00	

Table 7 shows that the questionnaire is best at explaining what drives recommendations for a fashion store (77 % of the variation in degree of recommendation could be explained by the five factors) followed by stores selling home appliances/electronic products (0.68) and interior design stores (0.65).

"Exploration and quality" are the most important for triggering recommendations, whatever the kind of store. "Personnel" and above all "Atmosphere" are more important for a women's fashion store than for the other stores. “Price suiting everyone” is a very important factor for the interior design store, but not for the clothes or electronics stores. “Uniqueness” is significant but not decisive for any of the stores.

5 Discussion

The first, and perhaps most basic insight, gained from this study is the result that shows that for 27 of Sweden’s best-known retail chains – varying from –40 to +80 % in sales growth – there is an equally statistically significant link between customer satisfaction and sales growth as there is between recommendation and sales growth. This does not support Reichheld’s controversial assertion from 2003 where recommendation is described as a far better determinant of sales growth than customer satisfaction. By contrast, when the two compete in the same equation model, satisfaction adds nothing to the explanatory power. With the approach of this study, we would instead argue that satisfaction and recommendation are so closely related and instead it could be the idea that recommendation is closer to purchase and sales in the evaluation process of the customer (see Figure 1) that explains the result. The relationships are significant but not very strong between either of the measurements and their relationship with sales growth. One explanation for the low correlation in a retail context could be that growth in retailing sometimes means that satisfaction cannot follow the pace of rapid growth. In contrast to product sales growth, retail sales growth means that retailers need to start up many new stores. It can take several years before a new store is adapted to customer expectations. Furthermore, studying the results in detail shows that it is not only new fast-growing concepts that cannot keep up with customer satisfaction. Common to the declining brands with high customer satisfaction is that they are 30- to 50-year-old national chains losing sales to international price- and value-positioned retailers such as the American retailers Amazon or Toys ‘R’ Us or the German retailer Lidl.

An interesting conclusion is that the study participants speak about rather traditional matters. Neither the explorative nor the quantitative measurement supports the notion that, in the first place, it concerns “outrageous things” (Dye 2000). Instead, it is quality, entertaining shopping experience, price and range of assortment that is involved.

If we compare the sources of WOM that have emerged from this investigation with Westbrook’s (1981) traditional sources of customer satisfaction, we see that there are a number of added features such as fun, interesting, exciting, inspiring and brightens your day. However, in the main study we see that these attributes also influence customer satisfaction. Similarly, we see that uniqueness is an aspect that plays a significant role in making recommendations.

However, uniqueness is a unusual attribute with regard to customer satisfaction (it is more common in brand research; Keller 1993).

The results of the main study demonstrate large differences in those attributes that drive recommendations in different categories. It can, therefore, be difficult to draw any general conclusions about the order of priority in which different store attributes drive recommendations. In all three categories, however, it was shown that the diversity of the goods on offer is absolutely the most important factor. Here, it can be whether the products are good, special, of high quality or trendy. The store's exploration factor, namely that it is fun to shop there, interesting, educational and so on, seems to be firmly linked to the merchandise rather than to service or atmosphere.

Price is very important for creating recommendations. This study shows clearly that it is about being price-worthy not cheap. Previous research suggests that when we find something that is worth its price, we are naturally willing to pass this information on to friends and acquaintances. What is surprising, in light of previous research, is the importance of price. In practically every other qualitative statement, we find price included in the equation, such as "They have quite a lot of clothes I think are nice and not too expensive". During the 1980s and 1990s (see for example Parasuraman/Zeithaml 1994), much of the research on customer satisfaction was closely linked to quality and service quality, which in turn was negatively correlated with price. The range of goods and that there is something for everyone seems to be a dimension of the recommendation that takes into consideration the probability that the person we give our recommendation to will also find something in the store. Thus, it does not need to be a matter of the actual range of goods; we believe that the greater the range, the greater the probability is that you can match the needs of an acquaintance with the goods in the shop.

Personnel is a debated subject. Many researchers and consultants (see for example, Bäckström/Johansson 2006; Heskett/Jones/Loveman 1994) propose that personnel represent the main route to competitiveness, differentiation and success. However, the results from the present study show that their impact is average and that in interior design stores the staff are the least important reason for driving recommendations.

5.1 Managerial Implications

The study shows that merchandise is central to creating recommendations. Although there is nothing new about this, it can easily be forgotten when the on-going discussion concerns the importance of competing with service, creating added value, events and even entertaining happenings. It is usual for stores to use instruments such as buzz marketing, competitions, shows or guerrilla marketing to create conversations and entertaining shopping experiences. Other things are also important triggers but the merchandise on offer is absolutely the most important. In concrete terms, an interesting and entertaining store would first be created by means of an attractive and interesting assortment. This also seems feasible if we assume that recommendations correlate with sales – purchases.

The assortment in a shop seems to be a central feature in this connection. It seems that the greater the assortment, the higher is the degree of relevance for the shop, namely the greater the chance that a customer succeeds in matching the shop's assortment with the friend's demands/needs.

In the qualitative measurement, there seemed to be an attribute that the store ought to suit or match the receiver's needs or personality. Segmenting and matching a heterogeneous assortment against heterogeneous demand is a basic function in marketing. The results on this point show that recommendations work as a segmenting tool where customers with an insight into what is offered and an awareness of another person's needs work as a connection between a selection of goods and demand.

Table 8 shows the results in the form of a detailed checklist of attributes that drive recommendations for stores. These are divided into six main dimensions and the list can be used as a scorecard or checklist, and possibly converted into a questionnaire. It is important that the chosen attributes agree with the chain store's brand strategy, namely what we are known for today and what we want to stand for.

Table 8: Summary of what drives Recommendations and WOM for Stores

Dimensions	**Attributes**	**Examples**
Exploration and inspiration:	Concerns entertainment, inspiration and unusual surprises where the assortment is central.	- Has attractive products - It is fun to shop here - You can always find something interesting here - Gives me inspiration - Often makes me positively surprised
Status and exclusivity:	Concerns quality and prestige, which also puts the sender in a good position.	- When I shop here it makes a good impression on others - Has good quality merchandise - Has a good assortment - Is different and stands out from others
Price and value for everyone:	Here it is a matter of reliability and there being something for everybody and for all needs. It is also a matter of being able to find everything in one and the same place.	- Has a good assortment - In general has a good price level - Has attractive price offers and campaigns - Gives value for money - It is easy to shop here - Everyone is welcome here - Has an assortment that covers all needs - Is safe and reliable
Personnel and service:	Concerns not only that the staff is capable and willing, but also that they seem to like their jobs and are enthusiastic, i.e., “living the brand”.	- Has enthusiastic staff - Has friendly shop assistants - Has helpful shop assistants - The staff like their jobs here - The store looks after its employees
Atmosphere and style:	Concerns the appearance of the premises both regarding what is there and what is on offer in the premises that should preferably be modern and trendy.	- Is newly built and nice and clean - Has a nice and stylish assortment - The shop has an attractive appearance - Has a lot of new goods and the latest trends - Here there is a thought behind everything
Unique and selected:	The customer should feel that he/she is a unique and chosen person, but this is equally true regarding the merchandise.	- To shop here makes you feel part of a community - There is at least one area that this store really specialises in - Here you can find more than you expect from a shop like this one - Stands for hospitality - Here I can daydream

The attributes shown in this list are practically identical to those in the analysis; however, we have chosen to place them in a more social context as discussed by Dichter (1966). They are connected with what is within the control of the store or chain or with social and self-corroborating motives. It is important that we understand both of these phenomena. It can be a matter of talking about the exquisite quality of a store’s merchandise with the aim of increasing one’s own status, for example showing that one buys, or has experience of, certain items and qualities. It can also be a matter of showing that one is smart and knows where the best or most price-worthy items can be found. Another social aspect is the altruistic one, namely that you want to help and recommend places with all price levels or places you know have something for everyone.

5.2 Limitations and Future Research

Although this study is limited to nine categories, naturally recommendations and issues that drive recommendations should be relevant for other categories. Future studies should be able to validate the results in order to see to what extent it is the same attributes and dimensions in the store's offerings that drive recommendations.

The main points of studying theoretical concepts and their relationships with growth and financial performance are not only that it is possible to explain growth, but also that should be used as a prediction for future growth. In this study, the attitude measurement was made at the end of the measuring period, but it is possible to carry out this measurement at the start of a three-year period with the aim of comparing its relevance in relation to CSI or other accepted measures such as intention to buy, preference or loyal attitude.

When one reads the open responses, there also seems to be a difference in who initiates the conversation – is it the sender or the receiver? If the receiver asks the question, then the attributes can to a greater degree be directed towards the receiver. These might also be less connected with status and self-corroboration. It is rather a matter of altruistic motives and thus other attributes, in the line of he/she "Has clothes I like and which I think that this person would have liked". The fact that satisfaction and recommendations were so similar might be that the approach of the study was receiver-initiated. Perhaps unique is something that more relates to sender initiatives, whereas quality and wide range are triggered when asked for advice. This distinction between sender- and receiver-initiated WOM has not been put forward in previous research. Future studies could thus analyse the differences between discussions initiated by the receiver and by the sender.

Appendix

	Personnel	Assortment + premises	Prices + com-plaints	Advertising + offers
Has helpful salespeople	0.81			
Has available salespeople to help you	0.80			
Has polite salespeople	0.79			
Has friendly salespeople	0.76			
The store is clean and tidy	0.68			
Easy to find what you are looking for	0.57	0.51		
Has a good assortment		0.83		
Has a wide selection of merchandise		0.71	0.42	
Has modern and fashionable merchandise		0.70		
Has a good layout and location of different departments	0.42	0.69		
Is a spacious store		0.68		
The quality level of the merchandise is good	0.48	0.49		0.43
Is well stocked		0.45		0.45
Is fair in making adjustments when you have problems with products you have bought	0.42		0.75	
Is willing to exchange products you do not want	0.41		0.74	
Has convenient opening hours			0.72	
The general price level of the store is good			0.70	
You get value for money		0.47	0.49	
The store is conveniently placed			0.46	
Other customers and visitors do not spoil the shopping experience				0.74
Runs good sales				0.72
The store's advertising is good				0.68
Has a good charge account and credit poli-cies			0.47	0.64
The store has an attractive interior		0.55		0.57
Cumulative explanation value in %	20 %	39 %	55 %	70 %
KMO 0.93; Sign. 0.00				

Factor analysis Westbrook's scale

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