The impact of perceived return policy and website quality on e-customers’ apparel purchase- and return behavior

The investigation of strategies to control and decrease returns

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Abstract

The development of e-commerce has caused an important change in the flows of goods. A lot of products are bought by means of electronic Business-to-Customer (B2C) transactions, nowadays. To and fro driving vans, delivering products to the end consumer or transporting returns are conquering the city; the consequences are an increased burdening of the logistic web and the environment. The control of the enormous amount of traffic in the cities is really becoming a serious problem. Besides, the costs of dealing with returns are disproportionate compared to forward logistics.

An important part of the transport movements is caused by apparel returns and the amount of returns is still increasing. To deploy appropriate avoidance techniques, which can be utilized to decrease the amount of apparel returns, it is important to understand e-customers’ behavior. The main purpose of this investigation is to clarify if and how perceived return policy and perceived quality of information and customer support on websites in apparel e-commerce affect customers’ purchase and return behavior. E-retailers should know on which aspects of return policy e-customers set great store and which aspects of provided information and support on websites e-customers value most. This knowledge can help managers to develop and manage the most effective apparel return policy and website quality, in order to stimulate consumer demand, to increase sales and to reduce returns.

The most feasible method of investigation here is doing a survey on consumers. A convenient sample of college students is requested to complete a questionnaire that contained measures of e-customers’ awareness of return policy, customers’ valuation of quality of information on websites, customers’ satisfaction, customers’ willingness to buy online and product return frequency. The students are an appropriate sample because they are likely to have had experiences with the Internet and are likely to vary widely in their e-purchase and e-return experiences.

The most important empirical findings are that return policy has no influence on return behavior and return policy only affects purchase behavior of men. Purchase behavior of men and woman both predict their return behavior. Increased satisfaction and website quality don’t reduce, but increase apparel returns. Thus, purchase behavior, website quality and customers’ satisfaction all seem to have impact on apparel return behavior.

The practical implication for managers of online shops therefore is the necessity of keeping focusing on and investing in the leniency and clarity of pursued return policy. And the necessity of keeping focusing on and investing in professional, optimal supporting website quality, to increase sales. To reduce returns, managers should focus on influencing purchase behavior by offering more guidance, by providing more caring and individualized information and attention on websites, leading customers to make purchase decisions more thoughtfully.
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1. Introduction

The fact that more and more people want to live in the cities these days results in an increasing demand for frequent urban distribution. Besides, the development of e-commerce causes an important change in the flows of goods. Nowadays a lot of products are bought by means of electronic B2C transactions. People enjoy the comfort of delivering to the house. To and fro driving vans, delivering products to the end customer or transporting returns, are conquering the city and cause an increased superfluous burdening of the logistic web and the environment. An important part of the transport movements is caused by apparel returns and the amount of returns is still increasing. Lowering product quality, as a consequence of sourcing goods from emerging economies, liberal returns policies, buyer’s remorse and the enormous rise of Internet and home shopping are factors that have led to rise in this phenomenon (Bernon et al., 2007). Many of the causes, however, are consequences of poor practice within forward supply chains (Bernon et al., 2011).

The costs of dealing with returns are disproportionate compared to forward logistics and it has been likened to a process that goes the wrong way down a one way street, as typically supply chains are optimized around forward logistics (Lambert et al., 1982 in Bernon et al., 2011). Factors such as legislation and the continuous growth of competition in B2C e-commerce often force e-retailers to offer free apparel returns, even though such offers probably would not have been profitable otherwise (Lantz et al., 2013). It is obvious that the huge amount of apparel returns has to be reduced. The cost of returns is a major consideration of retailers and calls into question the viability of liberal return policies (Rosenbaum et al., 2011). Given their increased frequency and costs, it is important to understand what factors contribute to apparel returns and to investigate which avoidance techniques eventually can be utilized to decrease the amount of returns (Bernon et al., 2011). Therefore, understanding consumer behavior has become extremely important for retailers.

Researchers have indicated several relationships that exist in online selling environments. Yalabik et al. (2005) indicated that product return conditions can play an important role as critical component of customer service. Customers set great store on leniency of return conditions. Reinartz et al. (2002) therefore assume that customers will be likely to purchase more, when the pursued return policy is lenient. Su (2009) indicated that more than 70% of online customers consider return policies before making purchase decisions. Powers et al. (2013) found that knowledge of liberal return policies also encourages return behavior. Feeling confident with the pursued return policy plays an important role. It feels good and satisfies to consider taking no risk, while purchasing online. Customers’ satisfaction therefore is another important factor that affects customers’ purchase and return behavior. Li et al. (2002) revealed that websites’ quality significantly influences customers’ perception of the e-shopping experience and influences thereby customers’ feelings of satisfaction.

Consumer returns are in literature often viewed as a negative aspect of doing business. Hjort et al. (2013), however, believed that the most profitable customer is a repeat customer who frequently returns goods. Previous literature on the issue indicates that most organizations must
deal with product returns (Huscroft et al., 2013). However, there is limited literature on the impact of e-customers’ perceived apparel return policies and perceived quality, expertise, reliability of information on apparel websites. Especially, regarding to how business’ apparel return policy and customers’ perception of website quality specifically affect customers’ demands and returns. Research on the underlying motives and perceptions of e-customers’ behavior is therefore relevant. The results will probably include specific knowledge, which can be utilized to green the supply chain and to improve the performance and profitability of online shops besides. For green supply chain management can lead to improved economic performance, as indicated by Green et al. (2012).

More knowledge is needed about how online apparel customers in general value online shopping experiences. So, the purpose of my investigation is to find answers to following research questions:

- What is the impact of e-business’ apparel return policies on e-customers’ apparel purchase behavior?
- Which factors contribute to apparel purchases?
- What is the impact of e-business’ apparel return policies on e-customers’ apparel return behavior?
- Which factors contribute to apparel returns?
- What are the underlying motives of and relations between e-customers’ purchase and return behavior?
- How does customers’ perception of quality of websites influence customers’ level of satisfaction?
- How does customers’ satisfaction, due to customers’ perception of quality of websites, influence customers’ apparel purchase behavior?
- How does customers’ satisfaction, due to customers’ perception of quality of websites, influence customers’ apparel return behavior?
- How do variations in gender and age influence online apparel purchase and return behavior?

On the basis of the found answers to the research questions, firms can develop and create appropriate facilities to motivate and support customers by making well-considered purchase and return decisions, without damaging customers’ satisfaction. New found knowledge can reveal the underlying motives and perceptions of e-customers’ behavior. It can be utilized to investigate how apparel retailers can possibly deploy strategies to firstly ensure customers purchase the suitable apparel in one go and then to reduce incidents that lead to customers returning the product. New strategies can possibly be developed to convince and make online customers aware of the necessity to behave responsibly and thoughtfully while making purchase and return decisions. The final goal of this manuscript is to make a contribution to the existing literature by filling this gap.

In chapter 2, the results of the literature review will be reported, including the conceptual framework and hypotheses development. In chapter 3, the methodology will be described and justified, including the chosen method of investigation and data collection method. In chapter 4, the research results will be presented, including data analyses and hypotheses test. Chapter 5,
finally, will include the conclusions on basis of the research, including discussions, academic/managerial contributions, limitations and recommendations for future research.

2. Literature review

The main purpose of this investigation is to clarify how perceived return policy and perceived quality of information and customer support on websites in apparel e-commerce affect customers’ purchase and return behavior. Because of the high costs of returns, firms are interested in strategies to reduce the amount of apparel returns, without harming customers’ satisfaction and customers’ apparel purchase behavior. The revelation of the correlation between above-mentioned variables is needed to develop and manage the most effective return policy. It is important for e-retailers to know on which aspects of return policy e-customers set great store. Besides, e-retailers should know which aspects of provided information and support on websites e-customers value most.

2.1 Perceived return policies in relation to customers’ online apparel purchase behavior

Product return conditions play an important role as critical component of customer service in retail environments (Yalabik et al., 2005). When a customer experiences a discrepancy between his expectations and the perceived provided actual performance results, he may wish to complaint or to return the product to the retailer. Customers are reluctant to purchase when e-retailers do not offer protection mechanism; therefore, return services are more important for e-shopping than for traditional shopping (Yalabik et al., 2005).

In general, customers seem to set great store on return policies that are lenient. Online shops that pursue lenient return policies offer their customers possibilities to return products that does not fit customers’ needs, without charging shipping or restocking costs. They offer refunds without further restrictions. On the other hand, customers seem to dislike restricted return policies. They experience it as a disadvantage and risk, when enacting a return is an uphill battle with great difficulties: when they have to pay for return postage, when they have to pay a restocking fee, when store credits are offered for returns instead of cash-back returns or when refunds are offered with strict time restrictions. Lenient return policy however, can lead the customer to perceive less risk in making purchases (Bower et al., 2006). Perceived lenient return policy can lead to higher levels of customer trust and commitment and loyalty.

Feeling confident with the pursued return policy of an e-shop plays a role in customers’ purchase decision making. E-customers are free in choosing an online shop. It feels good to consider taking no unnecessary financial risk, while ordering an item online. When no costs are charged, the barrier is low to return the item, in case a customer regrets to have ordered it. Especially in the apparel section, customers often doubt about the right size, color and combination of items. Lenient return conditions are an invitation to order the item in different sizes and colors, to be sure to have ordered the suitable apparel. These findings lead to the assumption that the customer is likely to purchase even more from the firm, because he or she is comfortable returning any product that does not fit his or her needs (Reinartz et al., 2002).
E-return services have been identified as the focus signal for e-retailers attempting to improve their services, where customers associate e-return services with high quality after sales services and perceived value (Parasuraman et al., 2005). Return policy has become a factor of competitive value. The growing competition in e-Business to Customer commerce almost forces e-retailers to provide generous e-return conditions. Lantz et al. (2013) conclude that factors such as legislation and competition often force e-retailers to offer free returns even though such offers probably would not have been profitable otherwise. Retailers therefore find that clearly communicating their returns policy will provide a signal to consumers about the more intangible aspects of the product and service quality, probably leading to increased sales (Wood, 2001). This explains why firms invest in sending marketing communications, concerning their return policy and other services, to current and prospective customers, to increase customers’ awareness and heighten customers’ interest in purchasing products from the firm (Petersen et al., 2009).

Su (2009) indicated that more than 70% of online customers consider return policies before making purchase decisions. The awareness of return policies such as return compensation, can obviously stimulate consumer demand and correspondingly increase sales. Bower et al. (2006), for example, showed in their field study that customers who experience a free-based product return are more likely to purchase more than a customer who experiences a fee-based product return.

Based on above mentioned literature the following hypothesis is developed:

H. 1: E-customers’ perceived apparel return policy is positively related to e-customers’ apparel purchase behavior

### 2.2 Perceived return policy in relation to apparel return behavior

In apparel e-commerce lenient return policies are rather common. Customers are often able to return garments to the online retailer for a full refund with no questions asked. The consequence is that customers often don’t take special effort to order the suitable apparel online in one go. While return policies such as return compensation can stimulate consumer demands and correspondingly increase sales, these policies may result in increasing returns and higher return costs (Li et al., 2013). Lantz et al. (2013) investigated real-e-customer behavioral responses to free delivery and free returns. The results of this study suggest that a lenient return policy was found to be associated with increased order frequency and increased probability of returns. Powers et al. (2013) found that knowledge of liberal return policies encourages returns, as the liberal policies make returns easier to accomplish.

Due to the leniency of apparel return policies the potential for customers purchasing garments with no intention to keep them is an obvious danger in e-commerce (Hjort et al., 2012). The awareness of the ability of returning garments to the online retailer for a full refund, will therefore probably influence the frequency of apparel returns. Kang et al. (2009) found that consideration of return policies was positively related to apparel return behavior. It is likely that
offering liberal return conditions encourage customers to order easily, not thoughtfully. Evidence was also found that lenient delivery and returns policies seem to reinforce (r)e-tail borrowing behavior (Hjort et al., 2012). When customers, due to the awareness of a free-based product return, are more likely to purchase more and often, the consequence is that the frequency of returns will increase too. However, when a customer is aware of costs that will be charged by every return and the level of effort to go through to enact an e-return is high, he will probably do his best to order the desired product in one go and try to avoid returns.

On the basis of above mentioned assumptions the following hypothesis is stated:

H. 2: E-customers’ perceived apparel return policy is positively related to e-customers’ apparel return behavior

2.3 E-customers’ apparel purchase behavior in relation to apparel return behavior

Customers’ apparel purchase behavior depends on the perceived pursued apparel return policy and on customers’ intentions and preferences. Customers, who feel confident and satisfied with the provided return conditions, easily decide to make online purchases. They don’t experience any risk and tend to make spontaneous, unreflective purchases. The consequence of thoughtless, immediate purchases however, is that they frequently result in regret and decisions to return (Kang et al., 2009).

An obvious danger in fashion e-commerce is customers who purchase apparel with the deliberate intention to return such items once they have been used satisfactorily (Piron et al., 2000). Their fraudulent behavior increases the amount of returns.

Another category of customers are fashion innovative customers. Their need for variety and interest in experimentation explains their apparel purchase behavior. They shop frequently and consider returning purchased apparel as a part of their shopping process. They purchase at least some items with the intention of returning them to the retailer (Rogers, 2003). Overall, it is therefore to be expected that as customers purchase more products, they will return more products (Bonifield et al., 2002).

For customers’ apparel purchase behavior in relation to apparel return behavior following hypothesis will be stated:

H. 3: Customers’ apparel purchase behavior is positively related to apparel return behavior

2.4 Perceived website quality in relation to customers purchase behavior

E-commerce firms depend on people visiting their sites, purchasing their products and becoming repeat customers (Smith et al., 2001). Customers have many apparel websites that they can use as alternatives. There are almost no barriers to switch to other web sites if performance is unacceptable (Bhatti et al., 2000). The perceived website quality and customer service support is proposed to influence customers’ online purchase behavior. Several marketing studies have shown that enjoyment, as a result of perceived website quality, impacts website user behavior,
including buying behavior (Koufaris, 2002). Menon et al. (2002) established that the levels of arousal and pleasure, experienced by consumers on the web due to the provided website quality, influenced their later shopping behavior. Important factors whose present is required are credibility, expertise and reliability.

Concerning the aspect ‘credibility’, Éthier et al. (2006) state that it is important to develop high quality websites, because their quality impacts the cognitive process, leading to several emotions (such as satisfaction, belief and confidence), which, in turn, influence the likelihood of making a purchase. Cao et al. (2005) identify information quality (accuracy and relevance) as critical to website success in e-commerce. They found to this aspect that information accuracy and information relevance are closely related to customers.

With regard to the aspect ‘expertise’, Éthier et al. (2006) indicate that competitive advantage could be sought in developing websites that are flawless and impeccable, visually attractive (graphics, audio, video), easy to navigate, rich in product information and content and supportive of communication exchanges with visiting customers. Their results indicate that e-commerce web sites should be designed to reduce loading and searching time, make searching easier, and make the site secure, because customers are most concerned with finding complete, timely information, searching fast and placing orders securely. A quality website should also be designed appealing.

Concerning the aspect ‘reliability’, Ranganathan et al. (2002), indicate that effective (leading to web visitors’ satisfaction and trust) B2C websites should serve as a major source of information; provide complete, reliable information on the products and services; allow for quick access to information through links; and provide decision aids to help in evaluating the alternatives. Websites should offer electronic means of interactivity to consumers. To increase the reliability B2C websites should incorporate security measures and adopt privacy practices in order to develop customer trust. Gefen et al. (2003) also hold that trust is a critical aspect of websites in e-commerce.

While the objective quality of an e-commerce website is important, the impulsiveness of a customer is also a critical factor. Wells et al. (2011) found that high-quality websites influence high impulsive consumers purchase behavior more positively, compared with low-quality websites. Thus, experienced completeness and relevance of provided information, the expertise and efficacy of supporting interactions with representatives of the online shop and the attractiveness and user-friendliness of the interface have impact on customers’ purchase and repeat purchase behavior.

On the bases of this knowledge, following hypothesis is stated:

H.4: The perceived quality of apparel websites (credibility, expertise, reliability) has a positive impact on customers’ apparel purchase behavior
2.5 Perceived website quality in relation to apparel return behavior

Customers in e-business sacrifice the benefit of physical inspection of a product. (Mukhopadhyay et al., 2004). Each customer, however, plans to purchase the representative product. But, prior to purchase, customers are uncertain about the product’s fit with their tastes. Customers don’t know the exact value they will receive until they buy the product and try it (Davis et al., 1998). This increases the likelihood that customers will have some dissatisfaction with the product and would like to return it (Mukhopadhyay et al., 2004). Therefore, e-customers set great store on the functionality and reliability of websites. Customers search for need-related information (Li et al., 2013). The quality of online information (Bhatti et al., 2000), the relevance and accuracy of information, the use of multi-media elements (Huizingh, 2000), a high quality interface design and the capability for customer feedback (Light et al., 2001) are important factors that an e-commerce web site must have in order to satisfy customers’ needs effectively. The present of these factors supports customers to make the most suitable purchase in one go and reduces thereby the probability that return decisions will be made.

Éthier et al. (2006) demonstrated in their study that website quality affects the evaluation of an online shopping experience. The more positive the shopping evaluation, the higher the intensity of the emotions of liking and joy and the wish to keep the product. However, the more negative the evaluation of the shopping experience, the higher the intensity of dislike and frustration, probably resulting in return decisions. Various factors lead to the return of a product. However, many of the causes are a consequence of poor practice within forward supply chain (Bernon et al., 2011). The perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use of web sites (Cao et al., 2005) therefore, impact customers’ search for need-related information, support customers by making the right purchase decision and impact the evaluation of the online shopping experience, eventually affecting the amount of returns.

Based on aforementioned arguments, following hypothesis is stated:

H.5: The perceived quality of apparel websites (credibility, expertise, reliability) is negatively related to customers’ apparel return behavior

2.6 Perceived website quality related to customers’ satisfaction

While the B2C market is growing, the competition for market share is also increasing in many retail sectors. Therefore, to remain competitive, e-retailers have to invest time and money to design, develop and maintain high quality websites, since customers are more likely to shop on websites that exhibit high quality attributes (Éthier et al., 2006). Website design features can be regarded as motivator factors that contribute to user dissatisfaction and satisfaction with a website (Zhang et al., 2000). Important factors are those whose present make a website functional and serviceable, and whose absence cause dissatisfaction. Better website quality and performance results can guide the customers’ complete transactions smoothly and attract them to revisit the Internet store. Worse quality, however, can hinder customers’ online shopping moves, probably leading to dissatisfaction (Zhang et al., 2000).

Websites’ quality is depended by websites’ information content, information presentation, interaction between customers and vendors, navigation, searching mechanism, security, site
technical feature and media richness. These factors have been demonstrated to significantly influence customers’ online shopping attitudes (Li et al., 2002). Other important factors whose present is required to make a website businesslike, efficient and serviceable are credibility, expertise and reliability. They play a role in e-commerce website quality and customers’ perceptions and reveal and illustrate the complexity of this phenomenon. Website quality is in general highlighted as an important managerial tool to impact customers’ cognitive perception of the e-shopping experience, leading to several emotions such as confidence, trust and satisfaction, probably effective in many retail sectors.

On the bases of this knowledge, following hypothesis is stated:

H.6: The perceived quality of apparel websites (credibility, expertise, reliability) is positively related to customers’ satisfaction

2.7 Customers’ satisfaction in relation to purchase behavior

Customers’ satisfaction is a positive emotion and is expected to influence customer behavior positively. Li et al. (2002) argued that e-customers’ satisfaction can be defined as the extent to which consumers’ perceptions of the online shopping experience confirm their expectations. Most consumers form expectations of the product, vendor, service and quality of the website that they patronize before engaging in online shopping activities. These expectations influence their attitudes and intentions to shop at a certain Internet store and consequently their decision-making processes and purchasing behavior. If expectations are met, customers achieve a high degree of satisfaction, which influences their online shopping attitudes, intentions, decisions and purchasing activity positively (Ho et al., 1999; Jahng et al., 2001; Kim et al., 2001).

Developing high quality web sites seems to be important, since their quality impacts the cognitive process leading to emotions such as customers’ satisfaction and, in turn, impacts the likelihood of making a sale (Éthier et al., 2006). Moon et al. (2011) investigated the relationship between the level of e-satisfaction and the probability of shopping at the same e-retailer. Their results supported the relationship between e-shopping satisfaction and customers’ purchase behavior.

On the bases of this knowledge, following hypothesis is stated:

H.7: Customers’ satisfaction has a positive impact on customers’ apparel purchase behavior

2.8 Customers’ satisfaction in relation to return behavior

Customers who experience post-purchase dissonance may seek to undo the effects of their regretted choice by returning the product in question (Gilovich et al., 1995). Sweeney et al. (2000) found that emotional dissonance, as a result of an e-shopping experience, may be a common underlying cause of product returns. Emotional dissonance is a sense of disappointment or sadness, e.g. due to unreliable information on a website. After buying a product e-customers sometimes wonder if they had been fooled or whether there was something wrong with the deal they got (Sweeney et al., 2000).
Yalabik et al. (2005) argued that customers who experience a discrepancy between their expectations and the perceived provided actual performance results are not satisfied and wish therefore to complaint or to return the product to the retailer. Li et al. (2013) argued that reduced customers’ satisfaction, due to low service quality, leads to frequent returns. High quality service, on the other hand, satisfies the customer and reduces the number of returns. Powers et al. (2013) stated that both emotional dissonance and product dissonance were found to be positively related to product return frequency.

In order to characterize the development of the current online environment, Hsieh (2013) investigated customers’ experiences with firms that alter facts on a website slightly, with firms that make promises on the site which are not fulfilled, with firms that fail to provide the support it should and with firms that break formal or informal agreements on the site to its own benefit. A model is proposed to predict e-return service customers’ behavior. The results confirmed that perceived opportunism (dissatisfaction) has a mediating effect on e-return service behavior and customers’ trust. In general, it can be stated that satisfaction during an online shopping experience impacts customers’ return behavior.

Based on aforementioned arguments, following hypothesis is stated:

H.8: Customers’ satisfaction is negatively related to customers’ return behavior

2.9 Gender as a moderator

Hansen et al. (2009) have investigated shopping orientation and online apparel purchases across different gender-related contexts. They argued that variations in gender could be expected to influence online apparel behavior. The results support the expected differences in men’s and women’s shopping orientation and purchase apparel behavior online. Females seem to perceive higher level of risk for online shopping, while they set great store on assurance (including clear return conditions, as an offered protection mechanism) and therefore tend more often to hesitate making purchases online. White et al. (1989) argued that an increase of perceived risk has a negative correlation with a willingness to buy.

Powers et al. (2013) investigated the underlying reasons for product returns. The antecedent ‘consideration of liberal return policy’ is examined in terms of their influence on product returns. In addition, the moderating role of gender is reported. It was found that consideration of liberal return policies reduces both emotional and product dissonance. Gender moderated the linkage between emotional dissonance and return frequency. From their results it appears that males have a greater propensity to have an emotional response that precedes returns.

With above mentioned findings, following hypothesis on gender will be established:

H. 9: Gender plays a moderating role in the relationship between e-customers’ perceived apparel return policy and e-customers’ apparel purchase behavior
H.10: Gender plays a moderating role in the relationship between e-customers’ perceived apparel return policy and e-customers’ apparel return behavior
2.10 Conceptual framework

![Figure 1. Conceptual framework](image)

As shown in the conceptual framework (Figure 1), there exists a significant direct relationship between the independent variable ‘e-customers’ perceived return policy’ and the dependent variables ‘e-customers’ apparel purchase behavior’ and ‘e-customers’ apparel return behavior’. The variable ‘e-customers’ apparel purchase behavior’ acts as a mediator, through which the independent variable ‘e-customers’ perceived return policy’ is able to influence the dependent variable ‘e-customers’ apparel return behavior’. The perceived return policy impacts customers’ purchase behavior. Experiencing a lenient apparel return policy stimulates customers’ purchase decision making, with consequences for customers’ more return behavior; as it is to be expected that as customers purchase more products, they will return more products.

The mediation that occurs here is partial mediation, because the mediating variable ‘e-customers’ apparel purchase behavior’ accounts for some, but not all, of the relationship between the independent variable ‘e-customers’ perceived return policy’ and the dependent variable ‘e-customers’ apparel return behavior’. There is not only a significant relationship between the mediating variable ‘e-customers’ apparel purchase behavior’ and the variable ‘e-customers’ apparel return behavior’, but also some direct relationship between the variables ‘e-customers perceived return policy’ and ‘e-customers’ apparel return behavior’. E-customers’ apparel purchase behavior partial predicts e-customers’ apparel return behavior, while controlling for e-customers’ perceived return policy.
The variable ‘customers’ satisfaction’ also plays a mediating role. While perceiving positive online shopping experience emotions like joy, liking and satisfaction arise, due to the provided website quality, with consequences for customers’ more purchase and less return behavior. Negative online shopping experiences lead to the rise of emotions like frustration, disappointment and dissatisfaction, also with consequences for customers’ less purchase and more return behavior. The variable ‘customers’ satisfaction’ acts as a mediator, which represents the generative mechanism through which the focal independent variable ‘perceived quality (credibility, expertise, reliability) of websites of online apparel shops’ is able to influence the dependent variables ‘e-customers’ apparel purchase behavior’ and ‘e-customers’ apparel return behavior’.

The mediation that occurs here is partial mediation, because the mediating variable ‘customers’ satisfaction’ accounts for some, but not all, of the relationship between the independent variable ‘perceived website quality’ and the dependent variables ‘e-customers’ apparel purchase behavior’ and ‘e-customers’ apparel return behavior’. There is not only a significant relationship between the variable ‘customers’ satisfaction’ and ‘e-customers’ apparel purchase behavior’ and ‘e-customers’ apparel return behavior, but also some direct relationship between ‘perceived website quality’ and ‘e-customers’ apparel purchase behavior’ and ‘e-customers’ apparel return behavior’. Customers’ satisfaction partial predicts customers’ purchase and return behavior, while controlling for perceived website quality.

Thus, e-customers’ apparel purchase behavior and e-customers’ apparel return behavior can be predicted and explained by perceived apparel return policy, by perceived website quality and by the mediating variable ‘customers’ satisfaction’. The dependent variable ‘e-customers’ apparel return behavior’, can also be partial predicted and explained by the mediating variable ‘e-customers’ apparel purchase behavior’, while controlling for e-customers’ perceived return policy.

The variable ‘gender’ is a moderating variable; it is a variable that affects the strength of the relationship between the dependent variables ‘e-customers’ apparel purchase behavior’ and ‘e-customers’ apparel return behavior’ and the independent variable ‘e-customers’ perceived apparel return policy’.
3. Methods

3.1 Research design
In this section the methodology, including the chosen method of investigation and data collection method, will be described and justified. The main purpose of the current study is to enlarge the scope of research on return policies and quality and expertise of websites in B2C relationships, especially regarding how perceived business’ return policy and customers’ perception of website specifically affect customers’ demands and returns. Based on the review of literature a research framework has been developed and hypotheses have been derived.

In order to test the hypotheses I chose a quantitative approach in the form of a survey on consumers; a questionnaire is developed and the survey is conducted among students. The survey is a design that is most commonly used for the purpose of scoring opinions and doing market research. The aim of the survey is to map the opinions of a large number of people by means of a questionnaire (Vennix, 2006). The survey design is suitable when the research questions are focusing on ‘what’ questions (Yin, 2003). Thus, given the purpose of the current study, doing a survey is the most feasible approach in order to reveal the statistic relationships between the relevant variables and to test the hypotheses and find answers to the developed research questions.

The questionnaire consisted of five sections. The first section consisted of a measure of participants’ perceived return policy. The second section contained the measure of the perceived overall quality of websites of online apparel shops. The third section consisted of a measure of participants’ satisfaction. The fourth section contained the e-customers’ apparel purchase behavior and the fifth section contained the apparel return behavior measure.

In order to prevent respondents from becoming bored or tired with responding to the questionnaire and to avoid response bias that might develop, some statements were changed from being positively stated to beginning negatively stated.

3.2. Data collection
To conduct a quantitative analysis, a convenience sample of college students at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences was requested to complete a questionnaire that contains measures of e-customers’ perceived apparel return policy, e-customers’ valuation of quality of apparel websites, e-customers’ satisfaction and e-customers’ apparel purchase and return behavior. Respondents are randomly selected. The respondents are an appropriate sample because they are likely to have had experiences with the Internet and they are also likely to vary widely in their
trust of and satisfaction with e-tail sites and their e-apparel purchase and e-apparel return experiences.

To collect data, managers were contacted for permission to approach students in their courses to participate in the research. The topic of research is briefly outlined to potential participants and they were asked to decide, whether they want to participate in the research or not. Respondents, who were willing to participate, were asked to indicate their level of agreement with several statements. The size of the original sample amounted to 194; in total 194 responses were received. Respondents with inconsistent answers, for example conflicting responses of mutually exclusive options or questionnaires that were not fully completed, were omitted. The final sample size was 176, thus 176 valid questionnaires were used for further analysis, to test the proposed hypotheses and research model. 37.5 % of the respondents were female, 62.5 % were male. 40.3 % of the respondents were younger than 20 and 58.5 % of the respondents were aged between 20 and 30. None of the respondents was over 30.

3.3 Measures
To form the survey, items from different literatures were combined together, because these items have already been validated and tested. Five categories of statements were developed to assess the hypotheses. The aspect ‘overall quality of apparel websites’ is divided in three subcomponents: credibility, expertise and reliability. To make these theoretical concepts measurable, Likert scales are used.

Respondents are asked politely to indicate their level of agreement with the statements in the questionnaire collection on a 5-point Likert scale; strongly disagree-disagree- neither agree, nor disagree-agree-strongly agree. Respondents are not asked to answer one direct question about the concept, but are requested to react on various statements, related to the concept. To improve data quality ‘Don’t know’ options are included to avoid the risk of data contamination by respondents guessing answers that, in reality, they are unable to answer. The final measurement of the abstract concept will be achieved by adding up the results of the various items, concerning the same concept. To measure in one way, some results have been reversed scored, because the concerning statements were expressed negatively.
3.4 Data analysis

After data collection, statistical analysis is carried out to test the gathered data; data collected from the survey are integrated by SPSS, Version 21. Based on the topic of the study, the results of the literature review and the amount of collected quantitative data, several statistical methods, including reliability (internal consistency) analysis, correlation/regression analysis and multicollinearity diagnostic, are applied and considered.

Internal consistency analysis is applied to demonstrate the consistency of the results, ensuring that the various items, measuring the different constructs, deliver consistent scores (Byrne, 2001). To measure the internal consistency of items in a scale, Cronbach’s Alpha test will be used (Janssens et al., 2008). True variance is measured by alpha, and the coefficient of Cronbach’s alpha is generally in the range 0 – 1. The alpha must not be lower than 0.5. Scale reliability is established with Cronbach’s alpha in excess of 0.7, and the most acceptable value is usually higher than 0.7. All items in a scale are summed together to create a score for each participant on each measure. The significance of the factor loadings will be checked to test construct validity; convergent validity is demonstrated if the factor loadings for each indicator with its intended factor is at least 0.4 (Power and Jack, 2013).

The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test will be run to test the normality. If not normally distributed, the Wilcoxon signed rank - test can be used to compare the mean scores of respondents younger than 20 and respondents aged between 20 and 30. If normally distributed, the T-test can be applied to compare the mean scores. The F-test (Levene’s test for equality of variances) will be used to demonstrate the equality of variance of the scores of the respondents younger than 20 and of respondents aged between 20 and 30.

F-Test: If significance < 0.05 → equal variances are not assumed
   If significance > 0.05 → equal variances are assumed
T-Test: If significance < 0.05 → means differ significantly
   If significance > 0.05 → means don’t differ significantly

Before the hypothesis testing major assumptions of multiple regression procedure are tested. All variables are tested on multicollinearity. Multicollinearity is the undesired situation where the correlations among the independent variables are strong. Multicollinearity can be detected by measuring the variance inflating factors (VIF) and the tolerance value. When the tolerance value is smaller than 0.1 and the VIF-value is higher than 10, collinearity is considered as problematic (Field, 2000) and variables have to be removed.

Correlation/regression analysis is used to test the several relationships between variables. Spearman’s rho correlation analysis is used for the not normally distributed variables. Pearson’s correlation analyses is used for the normally distributed variables. The resultant coefficients can be positive or negative, ranging from -1 to +1. The positive value indicates that the two variables move toward the same direction. If the value of one variable increases, then the value of the other variable also increases. The negative value indicates that the two variables move against each other. If the value of a variable increases, then the value of the other variable decreases. The
coefficient value of 0.000 indicates that there is no relationship between the two factors. Spearman’s rho correlation analysis is used to test the moderating role of gender. The mediator role of several mediating variables will be indicated after applying the mediation analysis.
4. Results

4.1 Reliability and convergent validity

Table 1 shows the factor loadings and Cronbach’s alpha for all factors. The result shows that the test has good reliability and no factors should be deleted; all scales exhibited acceptable reliability coefficients. All the factor loadings exceed the threshold value of 0.4, supporting the unidimensionality of the scales.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measures</th>
<th>Factor loadings</th>
<th>Reliability (Cronbach’s alpha)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Perceived return policy of online apparel shops</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. I am familiar with the return policy of several online apparel shops</td>
<td>0.625</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The return policy of online apparel shops is likely to be honored</td>
<td>0.799</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Online apparel shops provide trustworthy return information</td>
<td>0.567</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Online apparel shops pursue a return policy with too many restrictions</td>
<td>0.619</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Perceived quality (credibility, expertise, reliability) of websites of online apparel shops**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Credibility</th>
<th>Factor loadings</th>
<th>Reliability (Cronbach’s alpha)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5. Websites of online apparel shops provide relevant information</td>
<td>0.662</td>
<td>0.760</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Websites of online apparel shops provide timely, updated information</td>
<td>0.731</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Websites of online apparel shops provide reliable information</td>
<td>0.712</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expertise</th>
<th>Factor loadings</th>
<th>Reliability (Cronbach’s alpha)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8. Websites of online apparel shops have well-organized hyperlinks</td>
<td>0.772</td>
<td>0.796</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Websites of online apparel shops are easy to navigate</td>
<td>0.724</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Online apparel shops offer well-trained live customer service people to support online shoppers</td>
<td>0.630</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reliability</th>
<th>Factor loadings</th>
<th>Reliability (Cronbach’s alpha)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11. Online apparel shops keep their promised competitive prices on the web site to its customers</td>
<td>0.549</td>
<td>0.789</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Online apparel shops keep their promised return conditions</td>
<td>0.637</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Online apparel shops don’t charge hidden costs</td>
<td>0.721</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Online apparel shops display the availability of products on the store’s web site</td>
<td>0.654</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Online firms can be trusted</td>
<td>0.573</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Measures

Customers’ satisfaction

16. Websites of online apparel shops are user-friendly.
17. Websites of online apparel shops are responsive to my requirements.
18. I’m satisfied with online apparel shops’ web design.
19. I am content about the security of financial transactions over the Internet.
20. My perception of the online apparel shopping experience confirms my expectations.

E-customers’ apparel purchase behavior

21. I frequently place an apparel order online.
22. Strategies employed by the apparel e-retailer (e.g. product reviews, free sample, valuable resources for customers, online communities) encourage me to buy and return to the site.
23. I am impulsive when purchasing apparel online.
24. I take special effort to choose the suitable apparel online in one go.
25. I will do more business with online apparel shops in the coming time.

E-customers’ apparel return behavior

26. I frequently return apparel I bought online.
27. I sometimes decide not to return an item despite regretting the purchase.
28. I consider returning purchased apparel as a part of my shopping process.
29. I sometimes return apparel once they have been used satisfactorily.
30. I avoid returns because I consider the apparel return process a drain on my time and effort.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measures</th>
<th>Factor loadings</th>
<th>Reliability (Cronbach’s alpha)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Customers’ satisfaction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Websites of online apparel shops are user-friendly.</td>
<td>0.648</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Websites of online apparel shops are responsive to my requirements.</td>
<td>0.723</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. I’m satisfied with online apparel shops’ web design.</td>
<td>0.436</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. I am content about the security of financial transactions over the Internet.</td>
<td>0.430</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. My perception of the online apparel shopping experience confirms my expectations.</td>
<td>0.583</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-customers’ apparel purchase behavior</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.716</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. I frequently place an apparel order online.</td>
<td>0.649</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. Strategies employed by the apparel e-retailer (e.g. product reviews, free sample, valuable resources for customers, online communities) encourage me to buy and return to the site.</td>
<td>0.651</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. I am impulsive when purchasing apparel online.</td>
<td>0.645</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. I take special effort to choose the suitable apparel online in one go.</td>
<td>0.565</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. I will do more business with online apparel shops in the coming time.</td>
<td>0.761</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-customers’ apparel return behavior</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.729</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. I frequently return apparel I bought online.</td>
<td>0.768</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27. I sometimes decide not to return an item despite regretting the purchase.</td>
<td>0.753</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28. I consider returning purchased apparel as a part of my shopping process.</td>
<td>0.606</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29. I sometimes return apparel once they have been used satisfactorily.</td>
<td>0.665</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30. I avoid returns because I consider the apparel return process a drain on my time and effort.</td>
<td>0.853</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1.* Factor loadings and reliability (Cronbach’s alpha)
4.2 Variances and mean

The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test revealed that variable ‘e-customers’ perceived return policy’ was not normally distributed. To compare the mean scores of this variable the Wilcoxon rank test was used. This test revealed that the mean scores don’t differ significantly (p > 0.05).

The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test revealed that the scores of the variables ‘perceived website quality’, ‘customers’ satisfaction’, ‘e-customers’ apparel purchase behavior’ and ‘e-customers’ apparel return behavior’ were normally distributed. The histograms and normal probability plot of residuals indicated that these variables are assumed to be normally distributed.

The F-test and T-test revealed that, except for the variances of variable ‘apparel return behavior’ (p < 0.05), no significant differences in variances and mean scores are found. Thus, age has no significant influence on the scores of the respondents.

Table 2 shows the results of the F-test and the T-test.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>F-test</th>
<th>Equal variance assumed</th>
<th>Equal variance not assumed</th>
<th>T-test</th>
<th>Mean don’t differ significantly</th>
<th>Mean differs significantly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceived website quality</td>
<td>F = 0.545</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>T = 0.059</td>
<td>p &gt; 0.05</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>p &gt; 0.05</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customers’ satisfaction</td>
<td>F = 0.049</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>T = 0.404</td>
<td>p &gt; 0.05</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>p &gt; 0.05</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customers’ apparel purchase behavior</td>
<td>F = 0.233</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>T = -1.353</td>
<td>p &gt; 0.05</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>p &gt; 0.05</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customers’ apparel return behavior</td>
<td>F = 4.240</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>T = -0.398</td>
<td>p &gt; 0.05</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>p &lt; 0.05</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Results of the F-test and T-test
4.3 Hypothesis testing
The multicollinearity measuring revealed variance inflation factor values (range = 1.0 - 2.0) of 1.000 and a tolerance value of 1.000 for all explanatory variables. These values indicated the explanatory variables were not highly correlated with each other and the collinearity assumption was not violated.

Conceptual framework and results

![Conceptual framework and results of the hypothesis testing](image)

**Figure 2.** Conceptual framework and results of the hypothesis testing

After testing the hypothesis it can be stated that hypothesis 1, 3, 4, 6, 7 and 9 are supported by the data and therefore will be accepted. Hypothesis 2, 5, 8 and 10 are not supported by the data and therefore will be rejected.

The fifth hypothesis predicted a **negative** correlation between the perceived overall quality of apparel websites and customers’ apparel return behavior. Pearson correlation analysis revealed
that the perceived quality of websites was significantly and positively correlated with customers’ apparel return behavior. Thus, hypothesis 5 was not supported and therefore will be rejected.

The eighth hypothesis stated that customers’ satisfaction is negatively related to customers’ return behavior. Pearson correlation analysis revealed that customers’ satisfaction was significantly and weakly positively correlated with customers’ return behavior. Therefore, hypothesis 8 was not supported and thus will be rejected.

Spearman’s rho correlation analysis revealed a significant positive correlation between male’s and a non-significant correlation between female’s perceived apparel return policy and apparel purchase behavior. Thus, gender plays a moderating role. Therefore, hypothesis 9 was supported and will be accepted. Spearman’s rho correlation analysis revealed a non-significant correlation between female’s and male’s perceived return policy and return behavior. Thus, hypothesis 10 was not supported and therefore will be rejected.

Table 3 shows the results of the hypothesis testing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
<th>Test</th>
<th>Result</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H.1</td>
<td>Spearman’s rho correlation analysis</td>
<td>accept</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H.2</td>
<td>Spearman’s rho correlation analysis</td>
<td>reject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H.3</td>
<td>Pearson correlation analysis</td>
<td>accept</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H.4</td>
<td>Pearson correlation analysis</td>
<td>accept</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H.5</td>
<td>Pearson correlation analysis</td>
<td>reject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H.6</td>
<td>Pearson correlation analysis</td>
<td>accept</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H.7</td>
<td>Pearson correlation analysis</td>
<td>accept</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H.8</td>
<td>Pearson correlation analysis</td>
<td>reject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H.9</td>
<td>Spearman’s rho correlation analysis</td>
<td>accept</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H.10</td>
<td>Spearman’s rho correlation analysis</td>
<td>reject</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Overview of the results of the hypothesis testing
4.4 Mediator test

As shown in the conceptual framework the variables ‘e-customers’ apparel purchase behavior’ and ‘customers’ satisfaction’ are assumed to act as a mediator. A variable can act as a mediator when both regression coefficients, from independent and dependent variable and from mediator and dependent variable are significant.

E-customers’ apparel purchase behavior can act as a mediator when the regression between the independent variable e-customers’ perceived apparel return policy and the dependent variable e-customers’ apparel return behavior is significant and the regression between the assumed mediator and the dependent variable is significant. The mediator test revealed that the regression coefficient from the independent and dependent variable is not significant (p > 0.05); therefore variable ‘e-customers’ apparel purchase behavior’ does not act as a mediator, through which the independent variable e-customers’ perceived return policy’ is able to influence the dependent variable ‘e-customers’ apparel return behavior’.

E-customers’ apparel purchase behavior can act as a mediator when the regression coefficient of the independent variable ‘perceived quality of websites’ and the dependent variable ‘e-customers’ apparel return behavior’ is significant and the regression between the assumed mediator and the dependent variable is significant. The mediator test revealed a non-significant regression between the mediator and the dependent variable (p > 0.05) and between the dependent and the independent variable (p > 0.05). Thus, the assumed mediator e-customers’ apparel purchase behavior’ and the independent variable ‘perceived quality of websites’ both don’t have predicting influence on the independent variable ‘e-customers’ return behavior’. Therefore, e-customers’ apparel purchase behavior does not act as a mediator, through which “perceived quality of websites’ is able to influence ‘e-customers’ apparel return behavior’.

The variable ‘customers’ satisfaction’ is assumed to act as a mediator, through which the independent variable ‘perceived website quality’ can influence the dependent variable ‘e-customers’ purchase behavior’. The mediator test revealed that the regression coefficients are significant; the mediating variable ‘customers’ satisfaction’ (p < 0.05) and the independent variable ‘perceived website quality’ (p < 0.05) both have predicting influence on the dependent variable ‘e-customers’ purchase behavior’. Therefore, ‘customers’ satisfaction’ has a mediating role.

The variable ‘customers’ satisfaction’ was also assumed to act as a mediator, through which the independent variable ‘perceived website quality’ could influence the dependent variable ‘e-customers’ return behavior’. The mediator test revealed a non-significance (p > 0.05) between the assumed mediator and the independent variable. Therefore, ‘customers’ satisfaction’ cannot act as a mediator in this relationship, does not have predicting influence on e-customers’ return behavior.
5. Discussion, conclusions, and recommendations
In this chapter the results of this research will be discussed, followed by managerial implications for retailers, limitations and recommendations for further research.

5.1. Discussion
The first hypothesis concerned the relationship between e-customers’ perceived apparel return policy and e-customers’ apparel purchase behavior. Supported by Su (2009) who indicated that more than 70% of online customers consider return policy before making purchase decisions, the results indicate the impact of perceived return policy on purchase behavior; in general, e-customers seem to set great store on return policies that are lenient. The awareness of lenient return policies obviously stimulates consumer demand and correspondingly increases sales.

The theoretical expected differences in men’s and women’s shopping orientation and purchase apparel behavior online (Hansen et al., 2009, Powers et al., 2013) however, are not supported as expected by the empirical findings. It is true that, regarding to the influence of gender, the empirical findings indeed indicate that gender plays a moderating role. But, the theoretical expected relationship between female’s perceived apparel return policy and female’s apparel purchase behavior, is not found, while correlation between male’s perceived apparel return policy and purchase behavior is found. Male’s perceived return policy is a predictor for male’s purchase behavior, while female’s perceived return policy has no influence on female’s purchase behavior.

The expectation (Hansen et al., 2009) that woman perceive higher level of risk for online shopping, while they set great store on assurance (including clear return conditions, as an offered protection mechanism) and therefore tend more often to hesitate making purchases online, is not supported by the empirical findings. A plausible explanation could be that the former gender – based differences with regard to Internet usage and purchasing, ‘the gender gap’, doesn’t exist any longer. Nowadays, clothing is one of the categories with more women than men purchasing online. Women are more involved in fashion and clothing than men. Women may thus have greater knowledge about clothing than men, which may affect their perceived ability to find suitable items online. Women feel more confident in selecting the right clothes (Noble et al., 2006), while males are less confident in selecting clothes without guidance from store personnel. Feeling less confident could probably explain the influence of male’s perceived return policy on males’ purchase behavior.

The second hypothesis concerned the correlation between e-customers’ perceived return policy and e-customers’ apparel return behavior. Even though supportive literature has been found for the statement that apparel return behavior is positively related to consideration of return policy (Kang et al., 2009), the results don’t support this hypothesis. There is no correlation found between perceived return policy and return behavior. How customers perceive the return conditions, doesn’t affect their return behavior. Customers obviously return their purchases,
when they regret the purchase decision, regardless of the return conditions. This is in line with Powers et al. (2013), who state that customers who experience post purchase dissonance may seek to undo the effect of their regretted choice by returning the product in question; cognitive dissonance therefore may be seen as the immediate influence on product returns. Return policy is thus not the expected tool to decrease the amount of returns. Customers are not kept from returning items by any return policy.

Regarding to the relationship between e-customers’ perceived apparel return policy and e-customers’ apparel return behavior the empirical findings indicate no differences between men and women. Also, gender plays no moderating role here. This is in line with Bohn (2005), who found in his cross-cultural study of e-commerce exploring factors that influence individual customer behavior, that offering guarantees on the Internet is very important for all individuals, independent of gender or cultural values.

Hypothesis 3 stated the relationship between customers’ purchase and return behavior. In line with Kang et al. (2009), who suggests that unreflective purchases (stimulated by perceived lenient return policy) frequently result in regret and decision to return, the results support this hypothesis. E-customers’ purchase behavior is a predictor for e-customers’ return behavior. In general, it is obviously to be expected that as customers purchase more products, they will also return more products (Bonifield et al., 2002).

The fourth hypothesis stated the relationship between the quality of apparel websites and customer purchase behavior. Correlation/regression analysis revealed that this hypothesis has to be accepted, like supporting literature that has been found. Several marketing studies have shown the impact of perceived website quality on website user behavior, including buyer behavior (Koufaris, 2002).

Even though supportive literature (Ethier et al., 2006) has been found for accepting hypothesis 5, stating that the perceived website quality is negatively related to return behavior, the empirical findings don’t support the theoretical expectations. The results indeed indicated an existing relationship. However, instead of a negative correlation, as assumed, the results revealed a positive relationship between the perceived website quality and the return behavior.

The unexpected empirical findings can be explained by the fact that high quality of a website implicates that making a return is an easy job and no uphill battle with great difficulties. A high quality website is user-friendly, guides the customers’ transactions smoothly and doesn’t hinder customers’ online shopping moves. A plausible explanation for the increasing amount of apparel returns, in spite of the high degree of website quality, is the fact that ordering the right apparel item in one go isn’t an easy job. Especially in the case of apparel, purchasing the most appropriate size and color can be difficult. The most appropriate size a customer needs is not always the same, but depends on supplier, design and style of the item. Besides it is difficult to estimate how the ordered apparel will look, if the customer will be satisfied about the suitability of the item. Most e-customers take into account that it can happen that the ordered size is wrong or that the color or design will be disappointing. E-customers therefore consider the probability of having to return an ordered item as a part of the purchase process. Customer returns are an
inherent element of shopping online due to the customers’ inability to experience a particular product prior to ordering (Hjort et al., 2012).

On the basis of the results of the empirical investigation, hypothesis 6 can be confirmed in line with the findings of Li et al. (2002), who stated that website quality in general is an important managerial tool to impact customers’ cognitive perception of the e-shopping experience, leading to customers’ satisfaction.

As assumed and supported by theoretical expectations (Li et al., 2002), hypothesis 7, stating that customers’ satisfaction is positively related to purchase behavior, has to be accepted. The empirical findings indicate that the degree of satisfaction affects the degree of willingness to buy and intention to buy in future. In line with Li et al. (2002), customers’ satisfaction can be defined as the extent to which customers’ perceptions of the online shopping experience confirm their expectations. The mediator test also revealed that customers’ satisfaction has a mediating role, through which the perceived website quality can influence e-customers’ purchase behavior. Customers’ satisfaction and perceived website quality both have predicting influence on e-customers’ purchase behavior.

It is theoretical expected that customers’ satisfaction is negatively related to return behavior, as stated in hypothesis 8. According to Li et al. (2013), reduced satisfaction leads to return behavior, but high quality service is expected to satisfy the customer and reduce the number of returns. The empirical findings, however, indicate the opposite and refute this hypothesis. The fact that reduced satisfaction leads to frequent returns (Hsieh, 2013, Li et al., 2013; Powers et al., 2013) obviously doesn’t implicate that increased satisfaction automatically leads to less returns. A plausible explanation for the huge amount of apparel returns, in spite of the high degree of customer satisfaction, is the fact that returning an e-item is a rather anonymous action. The fact that the e-customer doesn’t have the confrontation with the shop assistant, doesn’t have to interact with a member of staff in person, doesn’t have to explain what’s wrong, when returning items, will further increase the potential of returns (Hjort et al., 2012). E-customers can return ordered items regularly, without feeling uneasy. When customers are satisfied and familiar with the return policy, returning an item is no difficulty, but just an easy job to do.

5.2. Conclusions
Although a great deal of research has been conducted on e-shopping behavior involving the purchase of products (Powers et al., 2013), relatively little is known about what may cause the customer to return a product. The results of this research contribute to the literature by identifying and clarifying if and how perceived return policy and perceived website quality influence product purchases and product returns.

The most important conclusions on basis of the research are that perceived apparel return policy and perceived quality of websites positively affect e-customers’ purchase behavior. E-customers’ purchase behavior, perceived website quality and satisfaction positively influence e-customers’ product return behavior. The results indicate no relationship between perceived return policy and e-customers’ return behavior. However, a positive relationship between perceived website quality and e-customers’ return behavior and between customers’ satisfaction and e-customers’ return behavior was found, where a negative correlation was assumed. Gender only plays a role
in the relationship between e-customers’ perceived apparel return policy and e-customers’ apparel purchase behavior. Age doesn’t influence customers’ purchase and return behavior; no differences in behavior between respondents under 20 and between 20 and 30 were found.

5.3 Recommendations for practitioners
The empirical findings indicate that return policy indeed has impact on e-customers’ purchase behavior, especially on males’ purchase behavior. The recommendation for managers of online men’s apparel shops therefore is to keep focusing on the quality and clarity of the pursued return policy. Positively perceived return policy may compensate men being less confident in selecting the right clothes and may probably increase the amount of e-purchases by men.

The perceived quality of websites influences the satisfaction of customers and with that e-customers’ purchase behavior. Keeping investing and focusing on professional website quality is therefore here the best device.

As the results reveal, the perceived return policy has no influence on e-customers’ return behavior. Thus, return policy is no tool to reduce the amount of returns. E-customers’ purchase behavior, however, is a predictor of e-customers’ return behavior. This finding leads to the recommendation for managers to focus on how e-customers’ purchase behavior can be changed into desired behavior; into customers making purchase decisions more thoughtfully, into customers willing to do one’s best to order the desired items in one go.

To support customers by making the most appropriate purchase decision, online shops could ask customers with purchase intentions to fill in their personal measurements of body, feet and color of hair and eyes. Based on this information professional personnel can give customers personal advice about the most appropriate size and color of the desired items. Besides, other items (clothes, belts, shoes, bags), that match well with the ordered item, can be suggested (also with color and size advice). This way, the customer is helped to compose a complete outfit that goes together and that can be ordered in one go.

The avoidance of returns could be improved by offering the e-customer more guidance, by providing caring (i.e. empathy) and individualized information and attention. This could probably result in more appropriate purchase decisions, leading to a decrease of the amount of returns.

5.4 Limitations and recommendations for further research
This research was specifically focused on apparel purchase- and return behavior. A limitation of this research is the fact that all the respondents were students at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, aged between 20 and 30. It would also be interesting to investigate behavior of customers of online apparel shops, who are part of the employed population or part of the retired population. Respondents region (Amsterdam region) can also be seen as a limitation. The findings of this research may not apply to customers of other regions.
For further research it would be interesting to investigate the relationships between perceived return policy and website quality and purchase and return behavior of customers of online shops that offer other items than apparel.

The empirical findings reveal the important predicting influence of purchase behavior on return behavior. Further research could clarify if e-customers are interested in more offered guidance from the online shop, if they are in general receptive to advices from the personnel of the shop and if they are aware of the burdening of the environment by returns and the necessity of decreasing the amount of returns. Further research could possibly reveal if providing more guidance and individualized attention is an appropriate strategy to improve the avoidance of returns.
References


