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Fast fashion requires fast marketing: The role of category management in fast fashion positioning

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## ACADEMIC PAPER

# Fast fashion requires fast marketing

Category  
management in  
fashion

## The role of category management in fast fashion positioning

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this article is to review the potential contributions of category management (CM) to the UK fashion sector and subsequently to establish evaluation criteria for the application of CM in the UK fashion sector.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Qualitative research was employed through an exploratory case study method.

**Findings** – Category management is limited in its application in the fashion industry. The study found that fashion companies adopted collaborative structures in order to implement a CM approach and a CM approach contributes to the development of a fast fashion business orientation.

**Research limitations/implications** – Exploratory case study method does not allow for the results to be generalised.

**Originality/value** – The paper proposes a model of the evaluation of the application of category management in the fashion sector.

**Keywords** Customer satisfaction, Supply chain management, Fashion industry, Retailing, Buyer-seller relationships

**Paper type** Research paper

### Introduction

“Fast fashion” – the term used to denote among other things, the strategies that Retailers adopt in order to reflect current and emerging trends quickly and effectively in current merchandise assortments (Ferne *et al.*, 2004) raises important issues with respect to the processes of effective merchandise management. Within the retail grocery sector, category management (CM) strategies have been adopted which seek to re-align retail buyer and manufacturer, (as supplier) relationships to make these more collaborative and hence more responsive to market opportunity. Defined as “the strategic management of product groups through trade partnerships, which aims to maximise sales and profits by satisfying customer needs” (IGD, 2002, p. 1), CM has proved to be an efficient and effective way for food companies to quickly respond to market trends as these emerge – and as such it is perhaps reasonable to assume that a CM approach may have application as a response to the effective management of fast changing fashion merchandise. Drawing from a review of the CM literature and based upon a multi-case study analysis of the merchandise management strategies of leading British fast fashion retailers, the aim of this paper is to examine the contribution of CM as a strategic business development tool for the adoption of a fast fashion positioning



with the fashion retail sector. The research findings provide the basis for the development of a conceptual framework which proposes that a CM approach contributes to the advancement and development of a fast fashion business orientation.

## Literature review

### Introduction

Category management has been described as a major innovation in retailing (Hogarth-Scott, 1999) and has been promoted as a mechanism to achieve closer working relations between suppliers and retailers (Hogarth-Scott and Dapiran, 1997). The need to achieve these closer working relations is due to changes in the retail environment which has shifted power from manufacturers to retailers (McGoldrick, 2002; Sparks, 1998; Varley, 2001). Both parties are realising their need to develop mutuality in their relationships (Hogarth-Scott, 1999). CM relies on collaborative and co-operative supply partnerships (Freedman *et al.*, 1997), achieved through cross functional interactions between suppliers and retailers (Varley, 2001). The traditional transactional approach to buying prevented companies gaining cost efficiencies in the supply chain and with this recognition, many have moved towards collaborative supplier partnerships (Varley, 1999). The move to collaborative systems has been widely researched in the grocery market (Dapiran and Hogarth-Scott, 2003), and there is also evidence of closer collaborative relationships in the UK fashion sector (Christopher and Peck, 1998; Greenbury, 1994 cited in Varley, 1999).

As well as providing for relationship stability, improved resource utilisation and profitability benefits, a further characteristic of successful collaborative relationships is the sharing of information (Dewsnap and Hart, 2004). Walker (1994, cited in Varley, 1999) concluded that collaborations between suppliers and retailers are driven by technological developments such as EDI and that these contribute to effective market responsiveness and even demand prediction. By pooling their resources, they can achieve greater consumer insight helping them to realise new opportunities to expand the industries total profit (Freedman *et al.*, 1997).

These characteristics of collaborative relationships are in line with those identified by Coopers & Lybrand (1996) cited in Fernie and Sparks (1998) as summarised in Figure 1.

Fernie *et al.* (2004) proposed that collaborative relationships are the latest stage in supply chain management evolution and in the context of the fashion sector the approach used to support these relationships has been identified as QR, which itself is a widely researched concept (Birtwistle *et al.*, 2003a, 2003b; Fiorito *et al.*, 1995; McMichael *et al.*, 2000). As well as supporting the development of agile supply chains, QR serves not only to promote collaborations but also to improve efficiencies in the supply chain.

### Fast fashion – the next stage of involvement

QR methods were developed in the USA between suppliers and fashion retailers to compete with off shore manufacturers (Birtwistle *et al.*, 2003a, b) notably, from the Far East and other international areas (Fernie, 1998). McMichael *et al.* (2000, p. 613) defined QR as:

[...] a consumer driven business strategy of cooperative planning by supply chain partners, to ensure the right goods, are in the right place, at the right time, using IT and flexible manufacturing to eliminate inefficiencies from the entire supply chain.

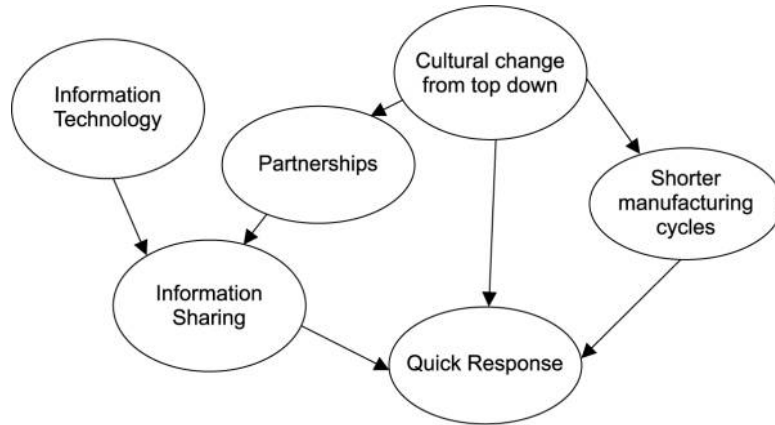
Current Relationship	Target Relationship
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• adversarial relationships</li> <li>• price</li> <li>• many suppliers</li> <li>• functional silos</li> <li>• short term buying</li> <li>• high levels of just in case inventory</li> <li>• expediting due to problems</li> <li>• historical information</li> <li>• short shipments</li> <li>• inefficient capacities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• collaborative relationships</li> <li>• total cost management</li> <li>• few alliance suppliers</li> <li>• cross functional</li> <li>• long term buying</li> <li>• compressed cycle times and improved demand visibility</li> <li>• anticipating due to continuous improvement</li> <li>• real time EDI</li> <li>• reliability focus</li> <li>• run strategy and synchronisation</li> </ul>

Source: Coopers and Lybrand (1996) cited in Fernie and Sparks (1998)

Figure 1.  
Characteristics of  
relationships

QR systems have only been made possible by the development of information technology such as EDI and EPOS (Christopher, 1998) and it has been suggested that advanced information technology is the key element of QR (Chandra and Kumar, 2001). The principle behind QR systems is that demand data is captured almost immediately and as close to the final consumer as possible (Christopher, 1998), which in turn allows orders to be based on real time data (Varley and Rafiq, 2004). Enabling technologies allow suppliers to be instantly informed of changes in inventory (McMichael *et al.*, 2000) rather than the information being delivered through traditional methods based on forecasts and purchase orders (Birtwistle *et al.*, 2003a, b; Fiorito *et al.*, 1995). As such retailers and suppliers must share confidential sales data based on individual stock keeping units in addition to order and scheduling information (Birtwistle *et al.*, 2003a, b; Varley, 2001; Fiorito *et al.*, 1995). Floor ready merchandise is then delivered to the store (Fiorito *et al.*, 1995) which entails the supplier providing goods with barcodes tickets, pricing information, hangers, security tags and garment information. This shortens the distribution cycle, reduces handling and distribution costs whilst increasing the accuracy of deliveries and improving in-stock situations (Perry and Sohal, 2000). The time between sale and replenishment of goods is significantly reduced (Fiorito *et al.*, 1995) which improves consumer choice and availability (Birtwistle *et al.*, 2003a, 2003b) and a reduction in prices for the consumer (Forza and Vinelli, 2000). These are salient points in the case of high fashion retailers as it provides them with a time-based competitive advantage (Birtwistle *et al.*, 2003a, b). QR is in essence being responsive to demand due to improved efficiencies in the supply chain while fast fashion is predicting and forecasting demand, with each being dependent on the other (Fernie *et al.*, 2004).

The key elements of a QR as detailed are summarised in the Figure 2.



**Source:** Adapted from Blackburn (1991) cited in McMichael *et al.* (2000)

**Figure 2.**  
Elements of quick response

There are benefits for both retailers and suppliers to be gained from adopting a QR strategy these are outlined in Table I. In order for both parties to reap the benefits they must be committed to sharing critical information and creating a delivery infrastructure that works to benefit both retailer and supplier (Giunipero *et al.*, 2001). Birtwistle *et al.* (2003) advises that the culture of organisations needs to change from adversarial to integrated partnerships for all parties to share the benefits. This reinforces the need for collaborative relationships seeking to achieve win/win goals. Christopher (1998) offers that further rewards could be gained if QR was adopted throughout the chain. QR systems are in essence a “pull concept” to supply chain management (Christopher, 1998) whereby product sales activate a sequence of events in the supply chain (Varley and Rafiq, 2004). Within this context, it has been argued that QR developments have served as an important platform for CM development, as well as being a precursor for fast fashion strategies. Fernie *et al.* (2004) states initially QR focused upon improving efficiencies in the supply chain, latterly the focus has moved to profitable growth as it is futile delivering product efficiently if they are “in the wrong assortment, displayed in the wrong part of the store” (Fernie *et al.*, 2004, p. 190). CM optimises the range of products in store as well as ensuring efficient promotions and replenishment (Varley, 2001).

Retailer benefits	Supplier benefits
Reduced costs	Reduced costs
Reduced inventory	Predictable production cycles
Faster merchandise flow	Frequency of orders
Customer satisfaction	Closer ties to retailers
Increased sales	Ability to monitor sales
Competitive advantage	Competitive advantage

**Table I.**  
Quick response implementation benefits

**Sources:** Birtwistle *et al.* (2003); Perry and Sohal (2000); Sparks and Wagner (2004); Varley (2001)

### Organising for fast fashion positioning – category management

QR requires changes in the way retailer-supplier relationships are managed, and this clearly provides a justification for a more collaborative approach that is inherent to CM, however CM demands an internal restructuring of the retailer (McGoldrick, 2002). Under CM, management must take a broader view of market opportunity and how traditional business functions should inter-relate (Varley, 2001; McGoldrick, 2002). CM is defined as:

[...] the strategic management of product groups through trade partnerships, which aims to maximise sales and profits by satisfying consumer needs (IGD, 2002, p. 1).

According to Wileman and Jary (1997) cited in Varley (2001, p. 132):

[...] the intersection of buying, merchandising and marketing is the heart of retail brand management, and its focus is category management.

Figure 3 contrasts the traditional approach with that of multi-functional, and it recognises the shift from distant and fragmented supply relationships to ones which are cohesive and collaborative in terms of providing an integrated, cross disciplinary perspective on market trends and opportunities.

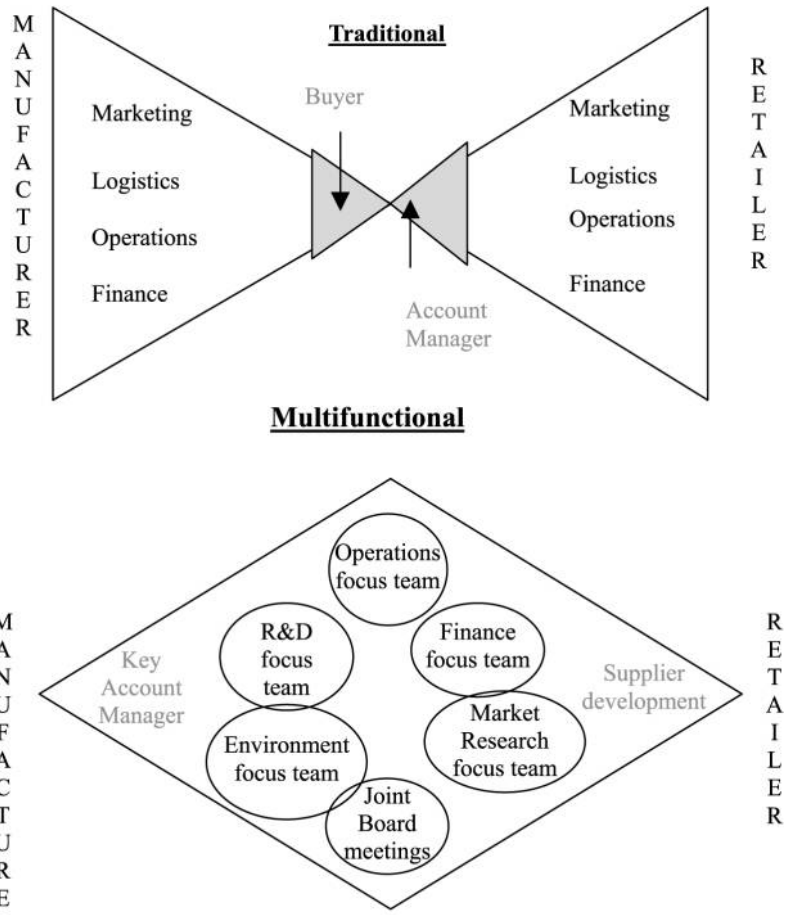
As a means of explaining the scope of CM, its key elements as identified by IGD, (2002) can be described as follows:

- *The consumer is at the centre of business decision making.* Categories should reflect how each retailer's consumer define the category through in – depth research of their decision making process. From this information, retailers can reflect an optimum product range for each category which will ideally satisfy their consumption needs.
- *Extending the marketing mix to the point-of-sale.* With 75 per cent of consumers brand decisions made in front of the fixture and often within three seconds, the category offering needs to be easy to shop to maximise sales and profits. Ranging, merchandising, pricing, new product introductions and promotions need to be reflect what consumers want to make decision making efficient and effective.
- *Closer working relationships between suppliers and retailers.* Category management can only work effectively if suppliers and retailers work together to grow the whole category to fulfil consumer needs. This requires a mind set change or suppliers to focus on growth of the whole category, including competitor brands, rather than purely focusing on their own individual brands. This closer relationship requires a greater level of trust and openness with a need share data and information to ensure that decisions are based on facts as well as consumer focused. Communication is required between managers at all levels through the supply chain not only at the buyer/sales interface.

As previously stated, the philosophy of CM is that participants mutually benefit from a re-engineered supply chain (Freedman *et al.*, 1997). Table II provides a review of the principal benefits identified as being derived from a CM approach for both retailers and supplier.

CM is not without its drawbacks and challenges. Among those identified include the need for business reorganisation (Fernie, 2004; McGoldrick, 2002); the displacing





**Figure 3.**  
Transformation of the interface between manufacturer and retailer

Source: Fiddis (1997) in Fernie *et al.* (2004)

**Table II.**  
Benefits from a CM approach

Retailer	Supplier
Improved sales	Improved sales
Improved customer understanding	Improved relationships with retailers
Improved loyalty	

Source: Freedman *et al.* (1997)

impact upon smaller suppliers (Varley, 2001) and the possibility that the product assortment that develops from a CM approach may result in homogenised product assortments. Yet despite these dangers, a major opportunity of the adoption of a CM approach is the opportunity to identify and respond to fashion trends as these emerge on the basis that:



- information sharing strategies are in place to exploit opportunities;
- sourcing capabilities are accustomed to short lead time; and
- mutual benefits are obtained from a fast fashion responsiveness.

Firstly, adoption of CM requires considerable reorganisation for the fashion retailer in particular (Varley, 2001). We have seen that the traditional functional roles are not viable for a CM approach (McGoldrick, 2002; Fernie, 2004) and need to change to a multifunctional approach (Varley, 2001; Fernie, 2004) which may be the biggest barrier to adopting CM (Fernie, 2004).

Secondly, smaller suppliers may be threatened (Varley, 2001) as it is mainly the leading suppliers and major manufacturers who are driving CM (McGoldrick, 2002). If larger suppliers are put in the position of running a category then they could abuse their power to improve their own market share (Varley, 2001). Varley (1999) concurs that in the context of the grocery sector, suppliers taking part in partnerships, are able to influence category management decisions and control space management.

In studies carried out in the food industry (Dapiran and Hogarth-Scott, 2003) it was found that CM has been adopted by retailers to counteract the power held by suppliers for their brands. Furthermore in earlier studies (Hogarth-Scott and Parkinson, 1993) retailers were found to dominate the (channel) relationship in the case of own brand relationships.

A further concern of CM implementation is that it may result in a lack of variety to customers in an effort to have “efficient” selections (Varley, 2001), which would have an effect on seasonal products (Varley and Rafiq, 2004) as periodic reviews and automatic replenishment, elements in CM, are geared for situations whereby demand is relatively stable (Varley and Rafiq, 2004) as in the case of the grocery industry (Fernie and McKinnon, 2003). This is in stark contrast to the fashion industry which is characterised by high volatility, shorter life cycles, low predictability and high impulse purchases. As such, it is important to acknowledge the unique characteristics of the fashion supply chain as these may have an impact on the application of CM.

Yet, despite these concerns, it is clear that the adoption of a fast fashion positioning requires that the relationships both internal and external to the organisation must be re-orientated so as to provide conditions which are flexible, collaborative and responsive. These in effect are the conditions that define and support the adoption of a CM approach.

Despite these apparent opportunities, little is known or understood about how CM can impact, influence and support fashion retailers’ strategies for the adoption of a fast fashion positioning. It is within this context that this empirical study was framed.

In essence, there are many synergies between the two concepts of fast fashion and category management, despite differences in the industry characteristics, it would follow that CM does have a role to play in the fashion supply chain.

### Methodology

In order to address the research aim a qualitative, exploratory study was undertaken. There is little research pertaining to the application of CM in a fashion context, the dimensions and characteristics of CM and the possible contribution of CM in an industry characterised by increasing dynamism, hence the exploratory nature of the study. The main purpose of this study was to evaluate the contribution of CM in the

fashion industry specifically in relation to their fast fashion positioning, moreover to establish an evaluation criterion for the application of CM in the UK fashion supply chain. Qualitative research seeks to answer the “how” and “why” (Saunders *et al.*, 2003) and it is in seeking to answer these “how” and “why” questions that led to the use of case studies (Yin, 2003; Easterby Smith *et al.*, 2003). A multiple case study was adopted, comprised of three companies, Retailer A, a department store reliant on brand manufacturers for fast fashion. Retailer B and C, both own brand fashion retailers aiming to deliver fast fashion positioning.

#### *Data collection*

Interviews with buyers from the three retailers were the main focus of data collection and deemed to be the most important and best method of gathering information (Yin, 2003). The research questions, listed below, were derived from the research aim with the themes of the questions merging from the issues arising from the review of previous studies.

*RQ1.* What is the nature and characteristics of relationships in fashion supply chain?

*RQ2.* What is category management in the fashion sector?

*RQ3.* How can category management be applied in the fashion sector?

*RQ4.* How can we evaluate the application of category management in the fashion sector?

#### *Data analysis*

Each interview was tape recorded and transcribed into a formal written style (Kuale, 1996). The data was analysed using content analysis to derive meaning and frequency patterns from the narratives (Yin, 2003) and identify themes across the cases which were then grouped together by means of a coding system (Wilkinson, 1996) which allows for a thematic framework to be applied to the data in a systematic way (Brunt, 1997). The final stage requires evaluation and discussion of the data in relation to the original aims of the study.

The limitations of this study are three-fold, firstly as it is exploratory in nature the results cannot be generalised which is further compounded by the dearth of previous studies to fully inform this study. Finally, in-depth interview bias can occur which is extremely difficult to rule out (Robson, 1993). This issue was overcome through the research design.

#### *Findings and discussion*

While claiming to have adopted a CM approach, the evidence provided by the three case study companies indicated that relationships with suppliers were indeed collaborative and that these were particularly important for the development of own brand merchandise. This is in part explained by their need to form close relationships in order to exploit market opportunities in efficient and cost effective ways within an area that was pivotal to the achievement of differentiation and profitability.

Table III identifies the characteristics exhibited by the retailers, as identified by Coopers & Lybrand in 1996, which reinforces the existence of collaborative relationships and a CM approach.

International sourcing did have a disruptive effect upon the fashion firms ability to deliver fast fashion that was both cost efficient and market responsive. In these circumstances, the fact that the companies had adopted a CM approach became critical in that their suppliers:

- absorbed the costs of “speedy” international delivery on the basis that high delivery costs would be off-set by increased sales volume;
- utilised idle production capability in closer to home markets in order to secure speedy delivery and scheduled core merchandise manufacturing in markets that were further a field;
- organised short production runs in order to provide quick availability, while balancing these with bulk orders in distant cheaper markets; and
- utilised idle capacity through their global networks to produce cost-efficient repeat and top-up runs.

### Category management within the fashion sector

While not always using the term “category management” the case companies each had formed a collaborative, solutions-based approach to business development with their suppliers and this was especially important for international sourcing. Central to their ability to respond to emerging market opportunity was their investment in information technology and their willingness to share business information. Retailer C provided the following definition of CM:

[...] being able to react to your market quickly, through EPOS system and being able to find people who can manufacture the goods and get them in as quickly as possible (retailer C).

Characteristics	Evidence
Collaborative relationships	“Definitely partnerships . . . we want the same thing at the end of the day, trade is tough then they will do what they can to help” (retailer A)
Few alliance suppliers	“It is best to deal with as few suppliers as possible . . . it is easier to manage” (retailer B)
Cross functional	All retailers worked in cross functional teams to a certain extent both internally and externally
Long-term buying	“A lot of our suppliers are established suppliers” (retailer A) “we have worked with some of our suppliers for over ten years, they have developed with us” (retailer C)
Real-time EDI	Although not all ran EDI, all used EPoS and no longer relied on historical information
Reliability focus	Reliability focus – all cases based a good partnership on the suppliers’ ability to deliver on time: “it is important we can rely on them to deliver when they say they will and of the right quality, quality is a big issue for us” (retailer C)

**Table III.**  
Characteristics of  
collaborative  
relationships

Furthermore, retailer C claimed to use QR systems because:

[...] we are interested in fast fashion as we aim to have new stock on the floor every week, we need quick response and information to be able to do that.

Enabling technologies is a key requirement of fast fashion. All case companies have EPOS systems installed, some where unsure of EDI systems. There was evidence of retailers sharing information with their suppliers, however it emerged that the retailers determined the parameters of information access:

I wouldn't give them a copy in black and white of what our sell through is . . .

The retailer then added that they had recently undergone an exercise whereby they wanted to discontinue suppliers due to adjacencies not being correct and told the supplier the sell through was worse than it was so that they didn't feel so bad.

Retailer B was much more open to sharing information with suppliers:

[...] yes we do share information, you share information on sales and what is selling really well that week because it is that information that moves your products on. . . You can also talk about other suppliers products that are selling though as well, it is not a problem.

This concurs with Varley's (1999) viewpoint that the information retailers provide is only as accurate as they make it.

As well as investing in technology and sharing information, the study noted the importance of corporate culture in the development of a CM approach. In order to maximise the opportunities of fast fashion, firms also needed to develop a culture that supports collaboration. Birtwistle *et al.* (2003) advised that the culture of the organisations had to change from adversarial to integrated partnerships for all parties to share benefits, all cases evidenced elements of integration between suppliers.

In the case of retailer A there was some evidence that at least communication was occurring across the organisations:

[...] communication is something we are encouraging. For example, the warehouse should be able to speak directly to whoever is in charge of logistics and distribution of the brand, they shouldn't need to go through us [buyers], the same with marketing, we have given them the name of contact so they can contact people directly.

This was also the case for the other firms as evidenced through this statement from retailer B:

[...] on the merchandise side they have their own contacts with suppliers and what you will probably find is there will be somebody else within the supplier base as well who will deal with the buying side of things so from my point of view I have a contact I am chasing samples from and negotiate costing with and then merchandising have another contact who they will negotiate deliveries and quantities and orders and things like that.

### **Fast marketing**

As well as demanding a change in culture, fast fashion also requires that the business structure personnel in ways that support product ranges in a coherent and consistent way. Fast fashion retailing requires a fast response – not only in terms of product, but also in terms of promotions and ranging supports.

Likewise, marketing is extremely important in the context of CM. Ranging, merchandising, pricing, new product introduction and promotion needs to reflect what consumers want, to make decision making efficient and effective (IGD, 2002). Furthermore, the underlying principle is retailer and supplier work together to “add value”:

“we do joint promotions with suppliers, they help with the markdowns” in addition . . . “suppliers helps towards costs of events and in store displays for their brands. Some of them even help towards cost of staff and new product development. We share the costs for most of these things”.

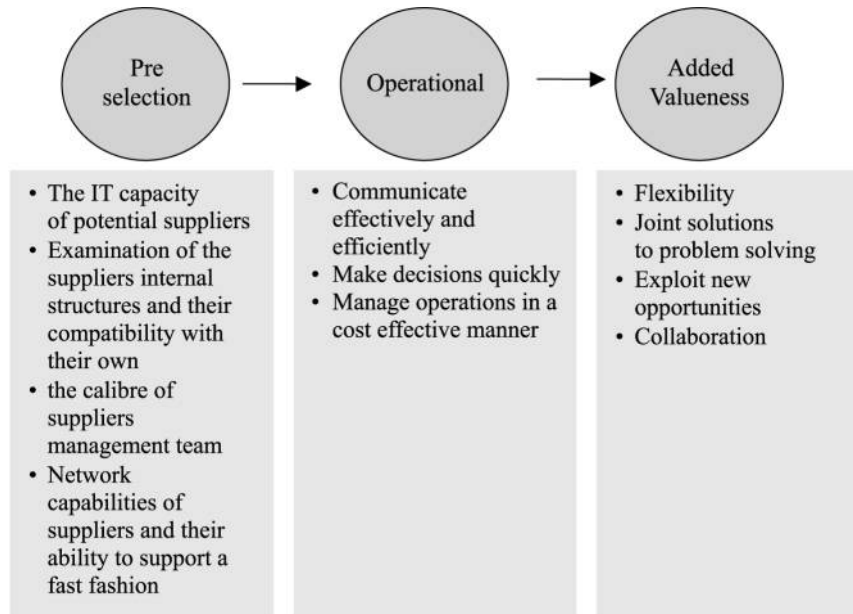
In summary, although the retailers do not always clearly or readily define their process as CM, they do to a significant extent carry out many of the activities associated with the CM process. Drawing on the key elements of CM, we can summarise the key findings of the empirical research in Table IV.

As Figure 4 highlights, the potential for collaboration was tested in a variety of ways, by the retailers who considered:

- the IT capacity of potential suppliers;
- examination of the suppliers internal structures and their compatibility with their own;

Key element	Findings
Consumer/shopper centre of business decision making	“We do try to predict on the basis of where the customer takes us from, our sales and our market research” (retailer C)
Extending marketing mix to point-of-sale	“We do joint promotions with suppliers, they help with the markdowns . . . the supplier helps towards costs of events and in-store displays for their brands. Some of them even help towards cost of staff and new product development. We share the costs for most of these things” (retailer A)
Closer working relationships with suppliers	Collaboration is apparent and important: “It is more like partnerships we have with them, I mean suppliers who are doing really well, who are always getting good product in for us and who turn things around really quickly for us, we will give them extra business” (retailer B)
Enabling technologies	All retailers possessed EPoS which they utilised. EDI was not fully installed or operational
Data sharing	Retailers were prepared to share their data with suppliers. With insight they were able to identify the benefits that this would provide: “Yes we do share information, you share information on sales and what is selling really well that week because it is that information that moves your products on . . . You can also talk about other suppliers’ products that are selling though as well, it is not a problem” (retailer B)
Culture shift	There is a culture shift towards cross-functional teams and cross communication among these functions: “Communication is something we are encouraging. For example the warehouse should be able to speak directly to whoever is in charge of logistics and distribution of the brand, they shouldn’t need to go through us, the same with marketing, we have given them the name of contact so they can contact people directly”

**Table IV.**  
Summary of key findings  
of empirical research on  
CM in fashion



**Figure 4.**  
Category management  
evaluation – a retailers  
perspective

- the calibre of suppliers management team; and
- net work capabilities of suppliers and their ability to support a fast fashion positioning.

At an operational level, the retailers stated that their evaluation of their suppliers depended upon their ability to communicate efficiently and effectively, to make decisions quickly and to manage operations in a cost effective manner. Perhaps most significantly, those suppliers with whom the retailers developed the most extensive relationships were those that could deliver consistent added value through their flexibility and innovative problem solving approaches. Figure 4 serves also to show the progression of CM relationships development from supplier selection to added value particularly in terms of how it serves to support a fast fashion positioning.

While the importance of partnerships in CM is well documented the impact of collaborative opportunities as a basis for partner selection has not been extensively considered in the literature. This study notes that collaborative potential is critical in supplier selection for the three case companies (see Figure 4) and that these considerations impact upon operational effectiveness and added value development.

### Conclusions

The aim of this study was to examine the contribution of CM in the development of a fast fashion positioning within the retail fashion sector. This study found that fashion companies adopted collaborative structures in order to implement a CM approach. It is clear that a CM approach to buyer-supplier relationships is pivotal to the development of a responsive merchandise strategy. As has now been noted, CM encourages

information sharing and promotes collaborative problem-solving which provide conditions that are conducive to market responsiveness. The study supports the development of a three-stage model, which puts collaboration and mutual exchange at the centre of partner selection and business development. Assuming that fast fashion strategies are established in order to exploit opportunities as these emerge, CM provides the opportunity for fashion companies to be well placed to develop responsive merchandise strategies. It establishes the conditions which support and promote the responsiveness required of fast fashion. In particular, CM promotes investment in technologies which not only review historical performance, but which also extrapolate future trends. The shift towards data exchange facilitates this process, as does collaborative problem solving that arises from the trust that data sharing supports. CM also engineers a change in internal company structures which also supports the development of collaborative arrangements. Previous studies have tended to view fast fashion solely in terms of product design and sourcing, and not from the perspective of those support functions, such as marketing and space management which provide a vital context and support for the realisation of full competitive advantage from a fast fashion perspective.

Table V highlights the key characteristics of relationships within the fashion industry in light of our study. It can be seen that these characteristics required for a CM approach are indistinguishable from those characteristics required for fast fashion.

### Future research

This study carried out in the context of the UK fashion supply chain, is limited by its scope and by its descriptive focus upon the relationships between CM and fast fashion. Yet, notwithstanding these issues, the paper makes an important contribution by highlighting that CM is an important facilitating dimension of fast fashion positioning. As such, the study provides an important direction for future research, which could focus for example upon the CM factors which best facilitate fast fashion strategies. Furthermore, the study may encourage other researchers to examine the ancillary dimensions of fast fashion, especially those relevant to marketing and retail operations management.

Finally, from a practitioner's perspective, this study encourages retailers and suppliers to consider CM and fast fashion not in terms of two unrelated business enterprises, but instead as two inextricably linked business strategies which support growth by providing for strong market responsiveness.

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Key characteristics of relationships in fashion sector

Requirements for fast fashion

Collaborative relationships  
Few alliance suppliers  
Cross-functional  
Long-term buying  
Enabling technologies  
Reliability focus

Flexibility to be responsive  
Fashion product  
Fast marketing  
Right data available (performance and trend data)  
Sharing of these data

**Table V.**  
Key characteristics of the  
fashion supply chain  
relationships

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