Towards professionalising Canadian retail management careers

The role of vocational anticipatory socialisation

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to investigate patterns in the social construction of occupational jurisdiction and related professional career identity. It examines the agency associated with framing messages that influence perceptions about the professional nature and value of retail management careers. The aim is to identify sources which produce influential messages about perceptions about retail management careers and the content of these messages.

Design/methodology/approach – This study utilises a qualitative research methodology (focus-group interviews) to explore the observations of people involved with the monitoring and management of career messages. Two focus groups were conducted with a) nine Canadian retail practitioners and b) seven post-secondary educators from retail management education programmes.

Findings – The focus groups identify five sources of influential messages including (1) part-time retail work experience, (2) educational institutions, (3) parents, (4) retail industry/practitioners and (5) media. They also identify three content themes presented by these sources including (1) the importance of educational requirements, (2) the nature of occupational roles and (3) the value of the career.

Research limitations/implications – The significance and generalisability of the results are limited by the size and nature of the sample.

Practical implications – This study makes a practical contribution by identifying potential career awareness strategies.

Originality/value – This research makes a theoretical contribution by expanding understanding of the role of communication with career perceptions and with the related constitution of career professionalisation.

Keywords Professionalisation, Retail management careers, Vocational anticipatory socialisation

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Even though the retailing industry is a vibrant economic contributor (Merkel *et al.*, 2006), there remain prevailing perceptions that retail management is not a professional management career (Coulter, 2013). However, retail managers are vital contributors to

their communities, provide significant employment and services and engage in sophisticated and dynamic work (Levy *et al.*, 2011; Merkel *et al.*, 2006). The National Retail Federation (NRF) in the United States has recognised these diverse views, and in 2013, they launched a campaign titled "This is Retail" which focuses on promoting the professionalism of retail management careers. In addition, the Retail Council of Canada (RCC) launched the Canadian Retail Institute (CRI) to promote retail as a professional, fulfilling and rewarding career.

The purpose of this study is to investigate patterns in the social construction of occupational jurisdiction and related professional career identity. This study examines the agency associated with framing messages that influence perceptions about the professional nature and value of retail management careers. In particular, the objective of this study is to identify influential sources of messages which affect potential career entrants' perceptions about retail management careers and the content of the messages they encounter through these sources. Further, this research makes a theoretical contribution by understanding the role of communication on developing career perceptions and thereby shaping what constitutes the professionalisation of a career. This study also makes a practical contribution by identifying potential career awareness strategies. Prior to this study, there has not been a dedicated study focusing on stakeholders' perceptions of retail management as a career. Here, the Canadian retail industry provides the context for this investigation. Previous localised research on retail management career perceptions has been conducted in the United States (Oh, 2013; Rhoads *et al.*, 2002; Swinyard *et al.*, 1991; Tang *et al.*, 2014), the United Kingdom (Broadbridge *et al.*, 2007; Hart *et al.*, 2007) and Malaysia (Mokhlis, 2014). Notably, Canadian retailing has been characterised by certain jurisdictional conditions, including particular cultural, geographic, demographic and political characteristics that have affected the Canadian career environment (Rinehart and Zizzo, 1995).

The following sections provide discussions of the theoretical frameworks underpinning the study and of previous research related to retail management careers. The study's methodological approach is then described, followed by the data analysis and findings from this approach. We close with a discussion of implications, limitations and proposed future research.

2. Literature review
In order to understand the nuances in perceptions about retail management careers, this study draws upon the literature of social cognitive career theory (Lent *et al.*, 2002), vocational anticipatory socialisation (Jablin, 2001) and professionalisation (Muzio *et al.*, 2011; Abbott, 1988; Larson, 1979) to frame the discussion.

2.1 Social cognitive career theory and vocational anticipatory socialisation
Social cognitive career theory (SCCT) contends that individuals' career choices are affected by their expectations of career self-efficacy and outcome, which are framed by career interests, available options and individual performance and persistence (Lent *et al.*, 2002). Additionally, their awareness of options and career expectations is informed by messages from other individuals and environments. Previous research has described the formation of these vocational expectations as anticipatory socialisation (Jablin, 2001).

Vocational anticipatory socialisation (VAS) occurs when individuals are socialised to careers through experiences, communications with others and messages from media (Ellison *et al.*, 2014). Whilst SCCT studies tend to focus on understanding the factors that influence recipients of VAS messages, these studies have not examined the sources and content of messages in particular career contexts nor have they investigated how particular

occupational stakeholders view these messages. Previous studies have examined students' views of retail as a career, based on their perceptions as consumers and part-time employees (Broadbridge, 2003b; Foresight, 2001; Gunn *et al.*, 2017; Hart *et al.*, 2007; Oh, 2013; Swinyard *et al.*, 1991). However, there has been scant research attention paid to the observations of educators and retail practitioners dedicated to monitoring and managing these perceptions. This study focuses on the views of occupational stakeholders (i.e. educational institutions and industry representatives) about the sources and content of messages about retail management careers and therefore poses the following research questions:

RQ1. What are influential sources of VAS messages about retail management careers?

RQ2. What is the content of influential VAS messages about retail management careers?

2.2 Professionalism of retail management careers
Professionalisation is a process for achieving the status of a profession, where an occupational group has closure to non-members (Larson, 1979). Professional occupations are bound by jurisdictional claims about membership and occupational requirements – that is, who can participate and what they can do (Abbott, 1988; Arndt and Bigelow, 2005). Occupational groups gain "jurisdictional claim" over task-based expertise via educational credentials (Arndt and Bigelow, 2005; Reed and Anthony, 1992).

However, the jurisdictional boundaries of retail management are amorphous (Garud *et al.*, 2002; Bernhardt, 1999). People manage retail operations regardless of whether they have related knowledge or education. Retail management is commonly referred to as an "Accidental Career" and viewed as a non-intentional employment rather than a professional career choice (Retail Council of Canada, 2009). Entrants to the workforce regard retailing as a source of entry-level management positions, work experience and training, and they do not necessarily view retail management as a full-time career. Many managers use the acquired management skills to move to more career-oriented work, either in retailing or in other sectors, and there is little consensus about a distinct body of knowledge and educational requirements for retail management careers (Bernhardt, 1999). Consequently, perceptions about distinguishing characteristics of retail managers' career identities are ambiguous (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Bernhardt, 1999).

Perceptions about the professional image of retail management careers have also been ambiguous (Sparks, 1992). Retail management has been characterised as a poor career choice, rife with issues with recruitment and retention (Broadbridge *et al.*, 2007; Commins and Preston, 1997; Swinyard *et al.*, 1991). However, it has also been characterised as a worthwhile career choice in a dynamic industry. This discrepancy is reflected in a lack of understanding and awareness amongst potential employees about what to expect from a retail management career (Commins and Preston, 1997). Likewise, there is confusion amongst retailers about how to source knowledgeable/skilled employees (Hart *et al.*, 2007), amongst educational institutions about how to prepare employees (Mobley, 2004) and amongst sectoral associations about how to market and position career opportunities (Retail Council of Canada, 2009).

Increasingly, traditional retail formats have shifted to offer non-retailing services – that is, grocery stores offering banking services, and as formats have shifted, so has the nature of occupational jurisdictions. With the evolution of retail formats and technologies, the scope of careers and related roles and requirements has expanded (Hart *et al.*, 2007). Retail managers engage in all business functions, and their skill sets therefore encompass skills related to developing and implementing technological innovations, raising capital, purchasing, implementing financial and logistical systems, marketing and managing employees

(Broadbridge *et al.*, 2007; Merkel *et al.*, 2006). Their role is similar to other corporate management roles, which require higher education credentials as qualifications (Evetts, 2011). Previous research has examined the nature of general perceptions about retail management careers (Gunn *et al.*, 2017). However, there has been little research attention paid to the ways that VAS messages contribute to sensemaking about the professional nature of the career. In order to explore how VAS communications constitute professionalisation, this study poses the following research question following from the VAS message sources and contents identified to complement Research Questions 1 and 2.

RQ3. What is the nature of occupational stakeholders' agency and sensemaking in the professionalisation of retail management careers?

3. Methodology

This study utilises a qualitative research methodology (focus-group interviews) to explore the observations of people involved with the monitoring and management of career messages. The method was selected to provide a depth of insight that could not be achieved through traditional quantitative methods. Focus groups were the data collection method. This method is an effective tool in marketing education research (Williams and Katz, 2001), providing an opportunity to observe collective sensemaking about how perceptions of professional careers are formed (Wilkinson, 1998).

Data was collected through a semi-structured group interview process, which was moderated by one of the researchers who utilised an interview guide to facilitate the 1.5 hour discussions. Two focus groups were conducted and the characteristics of the focus group participants are detailed in Tables I and II. One focus group (Table I) included a sample of nine (9) Canadian retail practitioners. The practitioners were participants in the advisory boards of multiple-member educational institutions of the Canadian Retail Education Association (CREA). A description of the study and an invitation to participate were issued to the advisory board members, and all respondents participated in the study. Although the practitioners were from diverse sectors and organisations, the majority of the constituent CREA educational programmes focus on the apparel sector, and the study participants reflect this focus. Five participants were from apparel companies, one was from a major department store chain, one was from a professional association, one was from a retail recruiting consulting firm and one was from a grocery chain. All participants were responsible for recruiting employees for their organisation, except the representative from the professional association who was responsible for educational programmes.

The other focus group (Table II) was with seven (7) post-secondary educators involved with CREA retail management education programmes. Six of the participants were from

Code	Sector	Role
I1	Luxury men's apparel	HR manager
I2	Women's apparel	Senior recruiter
I3	Women's apparel	Recruiter
I4	Specialty apparel	VP operations
I5	Fast fashion apparel	HR manager
I6	Mass merchandiser – department store	Senior manager, talent acquisition
I7	Professional association	Education manager
I8	Retail recruiting consulting	President
I9	Grocery	Director of HR

Table I.
Retail industry focus group participants

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Table II.
Post-secondary
educators focus group
participants

Code	Type of institution	Level of focus – Programme (*P*) or institutional (*I*)	Role
E1	Community college	P – fashion business,	Programme coordinator
E2	Community college	I	Manager, student recruitment
E3	Community college	I	Recruiter, (high school audience)
E4	Community college	P – school of business	Dean
E5	Community college	P – school of management	Professor
E6	University	P – B. Comm – retail management	Programme academic coordinator
E7	Community college	P – centre for business	Programme coordinator

Community Colleges within the Greater Toronto Area, and one was from a University. Five of the participants were responsible for programme coordination and recruiting for their retail-related programmes, and two were responsible for student recruitment for their institution.

The focus group sessions were audio recorded, and two (2) researchers (in addition to the moderator) attended the focus groups and took notes. The audio recordings were transcribed (i.e. including hesitations and group responses) and thematic analyses were applied to the data.

As is the norm in rigorous qualitative data analysis, the audio tapes, field notes and transcripts were reviewed and the transcripts were thematically coded and discussed among the researchers to reveal themes and shared meanings. An initial review of the data resulted in the iterative development of a thematic code book, which was then used to revisit the data and apply the codes to the data for emerging themes. Exemplar quotes for the themes were also collected.

The interpretation process involved part-to-whole comparisons and was developed through much iteration. These interpretations were discussed and refined during the interpretive process.

4. Findings
The focus groups identified two career message themes related to the agency associated with framing perceptions about the professional nature and value of retail management careers. These themes were (1) five sources of influential messages and (2) three content themes included in the messages. These career message themes are portrayed in Figure 1, and the following sections provide evidence associated with these themes.

4.1 Sources of influential messages
There are multiple sources which provide influential messages to potential career entrants and which thereby contribute to the development of retail career perceptions. The sources include (1) part-time retail work experience, (2) educational institutions, (3) parents, (4) retail industry/practitioners and (5) media. We elaborate further.

4.1.1 Part-time work experience. Educators and retail practitioners identified secondary and post-secondary students as potential career entrants and stated that their perceptions of
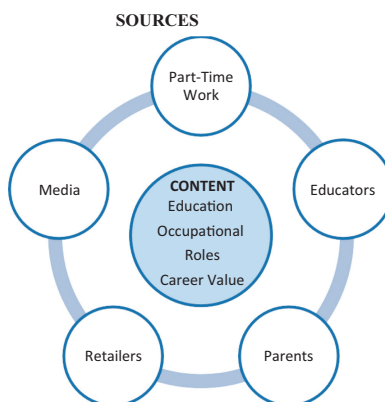
retail careers are often formed through their part-time retail work experiences, as many of them work while studying. The industry (*I*) focus group identified both positive and negative work experiences as influences as illustrated in the following exemplar.

I'm wondering too if it's people having kind of **mediocre experiences in retail** settings where kids are just folding clothes in a corner. (I2)

In addition, the educators' (*E*) focus group identified the influence of part-time employment on students' desire to distance their career trajectory from their high school experiences.

a negative is also that retail is a common **high school part time job** so you don't want to graduate and do what you did in high school. (E1)

Positive experiences countered students' previously held perceptions, suggesting that part-time positions that are oriented to providing a positive career message can alter perceptions about retail careers.

Many working in retail started part time in school. For example, we had a law student who worked part time during school and received her degree, realized she hated law and was good at her job- she instead went the route of District Manager. (I6)

4.1.2 Educational institutions. Secondary school advisors are identified as a source of information about retailing, although their view of the potential in these careers is limited. This is illustrated in the following quotes from the educators' focus group.

With **guidance counselors and teachers** and even parents, they don't see the end goal. (E6)

I also think it's a misunderstanding, **counsellors don't know how to explain** retail management. (E5)

When post-secondary students are studying in a programme where they are educated on the careers available in retail management, perceptions become more positive, as illustrated in the following quotes.

If they're in an **actual post-secondary, business program**, then they start seeing the differentiation. (E7)

What's interesting about that is that most of our successful grads come from commerce. **So they're doing something in commerce that's promoting retail as a career.** (I6)

4.1.3 Parents. Educators and industry identified parents as influential sources of information. Both groups described how parents often declare negative views of retail management which are related to parents' a) experiences as consumers, b) ignorance about the scope of careers or c) perceptions of the value of other careers.

a) **Parents** really don't see the value and it's sad because some of the students really have a passion for the industry, but I don't think the parent's perspective is going to change because they're just going by what they know as customers. (E1)

b) ***Parents*** *see being in retail as a very low-end job.* (E5)

c) **parents** think that they should go be an accountant, or a lawyer or something formal in that way, and people face a lot of that pressure from parents because maybe **parents don't understand** how much opportunity there is. (I8).

4.1.4 Retail industry. Both focus groups spoke about the influential role of the retail industry in developing perceptions about the professional nature of retail management careers. They also noted that industry should bear responsibility for crafting positive professionalising messages.

I think a lot of the **responsibility** for the perception of the retail market falls back on the **retailers** themselves. (E1)

But I agree that **retailers haven't stepped up** to make it a professional career. (E4)

4.1.5 Media. Educators and industry representatives identified social media as influential for creating negative perceptions about retail management careers, as illustrated further.

They have read negative things about working in our stores **online** (I9)

Social media was also identified as having a positive influence, particularly when visual depictions are used.

People love getting an **insider's view** and I think anything that's like **video image** based, anything that we post on **LinkedIn or on twitter** or on our job site that's **a video or a picture**, that tends to elevate the number of applications. (I2)

4.2 Content themes

The second theme of the focus groups' input is that the influential sources presented three types of message content about the professionalism of retail management careers including (1) educational requirements, (2) occupational roles, (3) value of the career.

4.2.1 Educational requirements. Participants in both focus groups identified that post-secondary education is increasingly a requirement for retail management careers, as illustrated in these quotes from the industry focus group.

This business allows people with a **lack of education to rise very quickly** through organisations, but **as retail become a much more complex industry**, particularly around product and analytics, and now multiple chains of distribution that is changing rapidly. (I9)

Store operations roles have always been challenging with new grads but we have created **new graduate programs for operations.** We hadn't done that in the past because we sought experience vs. education. (I4)

The groups identified that changes throughout the retail industry are driving the need for post-secondary education and that educational programmes can influence perceptions of careers in retail. In particular, the industry group described how applied/experiential learning opportunities within retail/business programmes create career value, as illustrated further.

Programs that force them to do **group projects and presentations** in front of their class and ensure they are creatively thinking outside the box and can be entrepreneurial to come up with a solution. (I4)

In particular, the industry focus group identified the role of formalised internship programmes in developing anticipatory socialisation (Jablin, 2001) of students throughout their educational programmes. They discussed how this socialisation process orients students' perceptions about career opportunities and the value of the career.

We're hoping this year we are going to pilot an **external internship program**, more focused at the department manager level to try to get grads and my long-term dream would be where students can come and work with us as part time sales advisors throughout their schooling and then once graduated roll into more of a department manager role. (I5)

We could roll out a more **formalized internship program** to offer so that retail management students and other students as well who have that as a mandatory criteria in order to graduate can take advantage of what employment opportunities we can offer and then when they have that much more of a connection they will hopefully want to work for us when they're done school because they see the value in the opportunities. (I9)

4.2.2 Occupational roles. Both focus groups described how perceptions of retail management roles are not well informed. As a result, related perceptions of career opportunities are inaccurate and/or uniformed about the nature and scope of these opportunities and related career paths, as illustrated in the following exemplars.

They have no idea what it is - They see cashiers and sales associates and this is the association. (E5)

What the public sees is in our store but they're not seeing what it is to look at your schedule and optimize it for your traffic patterns, they're not seeing how the store manager plans the budget, they're not seeing the whole creative piece that goes into building one of our amazing sets. (I9)

They can probably see through to a District Manager and to a Buyer. Buyer; trips to New York, sexy, "Devil wears Prada". They might see a Store Manager as a "glorified salesperson"- **they wouldn't understand the amount of math, strategy**, choices that you are faced with every day. (I4)

As illustrated earlier, perceptions of career roles are influenced by customer experiences with front-line positions. These experiences do not, however, illustrate the scope of the responsibilities and skills associated with management positions. Both of the focus groups identified that retailers have a particular responsibility for communicating messages which emphasise the vast array of career opportunities and the empowering nature of the work and of corporate cultures. The industry group also noted that industry and education should work together to craft career messages.

Industry needs to drive it! We need to talk to the **facts;** opportunities are immense, it is a culture of empowerment in stores and corporate. **The more industry can sit with educators the better.** (I7)

The industry focus group described specific messages about potential career paths, which retailers should utilise to create a positive perceptions. The messages should include a) descriptions of skill development, b) stories about successful career trajectories and c) clear succession strategies. These messages should be communicated through retailers' mass communication strategies, organisational structures/systems and energising orientation programmes.

a) For every marketing job I have, I have thousands. I don't need thousands, **I need them on my retail store floor and my retail leadership programs.** And it's a fabulous career, you're the CEO of your own building, you get to do a P&L, you get to lead people, learn about customers, merchandising, when I've described it to people, their minds are blown. (I6)

b) **What is missing online from a mass quantity perspective are all of the great stories of the people who have been in our business for five years**, who have grown from a style advisor, to a floor manager, to associate manager, store manager, district manager that are obviously happy with what they do. (I2)

c) There has to be clarity in the organisation, **how do you move from this step to this step**- what does the employee need to do and what does the company need to do for them. (I8), Fresh grad just received my Degree and am so excited but then have to go home and tell your **family** you are working at the mall. There has to be something more to say and you have to give that to them. You have to provide them with the talking points and documentation that shows career paths. (I6)

4.2.3 Value of the career. The industry focus group described how there are prevailing negative perceptions about the value of retail management careers and of the career's non-professional stature. They described how the public does not value these careers because they perceive that the working conditions (i.e. poor pay/benefits, poor hours, low growth, not challenging) are poor, the jurisdictional boundaries are amorphous (i.e. anyone can do it) and the occupation is not professional.

\We still **devalue or undervalue** it as a society and I think that, I've seen really talented sales advisors who are poised for management walk away from management opportunities because they had a potential for an unpaid internship or a job as like an admin or a clerk because it meant Monday-Friday sitting at a desk and somehow that is viewed as more, or better by society. (I1)

I think **retail is often perceived as very entry level,** high turnover**, low paying**, opportunities for advancement not likely, probably **not a lot of benefits**, perception would be **low growth**. (I9)

I think any customer service positions are deemed as, well, **anybody can do it, so it's not really that valuable.** (I5)

They don't see it as a professional occupation, like you're not professionals, you work in retail. (I2)

On the other hand, both focus groups described how these careers are also perceived to offer positive value. For example, messages about retail corporate cultures that feature flexibility and empowered decision-making are appealing.

Culture has come up, is it a culture where I can bring my whole self to work and actually have some **freedom** around making decisions and being able to have **flexibility** in my role. (I2)

What sells a lot of people is that they're **empowered** to make their own decisions. (I2)

In addition, messages about the quality of a retail brand's image also influence career perceptions. When people perceive that a retail brand is of high quality, the appeal of career positions with these retailers is likewise perceived to be positive, as these positions will provide entrants with an elevated career image.

Depends on who you are as a BRAND- **the higher calibre of your brand- the better applicant you attract. "You attract who you are"** (I5)

It's the vision that they sell, you're **accepted** because you have this product, you're elevated, and that's why they want to work for these companies. (E1)

The industry representatives also identified a difference between US and Canadian perceptions of these careers. They noted that US perceptions are more positive than Canadian perceptions, that retail careers are perceived to be more professional, with more value in the United States. The industry group also identified that the proliferation of post-secondary programmes in the United States (i.e. in comparison to the number of Canadian retail management programmes) had an effect on perceptions of retail management careers in Canada.

> I have had the luxury of spending time **in the US and the perception is Night and Day. Retail is a sought after industry.** (I4)

> I also worked in the Midwest and noted a distinct difference in the way retail management was regarded there **versus in Canada**. There were many more graduating post-secondary programs in retail and the expectation was higher. (I6)

5. Discussion

This study finds that there are multiple sources and types of influential messages that affect perceptions about retail management vocations. Whereas previous research has focused on generic VAS career influences, this study identifies the particular career messages associated with retail management careers. Table III summarises the sources and content identified in this study in contrast with those identified in established VAS research.

Career messages	Retail management careers (current study)	Generalised (Levine and Hoffner, 2006; Jablin, 2001)
Sources	Parents Part-time work Educators Media Retailers	Parents Part-time work school Mass media Friends
Content	*Educational requirements* (1) Post-secondary (2) Experiential learning (3) Formalised internships *Occupational roles* (1) Uninformed (2) Retailer responsibility (3) Emphasis • Skill development • Career trajectory stories • Succession strategies *Value of the career* (1) Negative aspects • Poor working conditions • Amorphous jurisdictional boundaries • Non-professional (2) Positive aspects • Flexibility • Empowered decision-making (3) Related to brand image (4) US/Canadian disparity	General requirements of work Positive aspects of work Negative aspects of work Advice/information about work/jobs

Table III.
Career messages – retail management careers and generalised careers

Research oriented to VAS identifies parents (particularly mothers), educational institutions, employers, mass media and friends as sources of vocational and career influence (Levine and Hoffner, 2006; Powers and Myers, 2017). Likewise, this study has found that most of these actors influence perceptions of retail management careers. However, whereas generalised VAS research identifies friends as significant influences, this study finds that the retail industry is an important influence on forming career perceptions. These findings contrast with previous retail management career research, which has not identified retailers' roles in communicating positive messages about career professionalism (Broadbridge, 2003a; Hart *et al.*, 2007, Oh and Weitz, 2008). This study's findings specifically determine retailers' agency in communicating the roles and value involved with retail management careers and identify how the use of social media with visualisation of career messages is an important communication tool.

VAS research has found that career aspirants are influenced by messages that frame information about potential vocations' general work requirements, positive and negative work aspects and advice/information about work (Powers and Myers, 2017). These messages are framed around five themes including value, expectation, prescription, opportunity and description messages (Myers *et al.*, 2011). Jahn and Myers (2014) further identify influential messages that emphasise personal fulfillment versus career details. These VAS messages and experiences shape potential career entrants' career frameworks which serve as guiding structures for developing career interests and for linking career aspirations with experiences. These frameworks are categorised as enjoyment-based, ability-based and goal-based (Jahn and Myers, 2014). This study extends these findings by providing specific recommendations about three themes of influential retail career messages, including a) the need for retail post-secondary education, b) the nature of retail management occupational roles and c) the value of retail management careers.

New formats, technological advances and global markets have influenced general perceptions about the nature of careers which are increasingly viewed as non-linear, discontinuous and self-directed (Sullivan and Baruch, 2009). Numerous technical, professional and vocational occupations have thereby raised educational standards to enhance career mobility and perceptions of professionalism (Thakor and Kumar, 2000; Marshall, 2008). Similarly, the increasing significance and scope of the retail industry have reshaped the nature of retail management careers and have increased the need for retail-focused post-secondary education programmes (Hart *et al.*, 2007; Merkel *et al.*, 2006). This study identifies the nature of retail practitioners' agency in enhancing the professionalisation of retail management careers. By establishing and communicating raised educational standards and requirements, these occupational stakeholders provide influential VAS messages, thereby making sense of the careers' professional nature.

This study confirms findings of previous studies of retail management programmes (Commins and Preston, 1997) that retail education programmes featuring experiential learning activities and formalised internship programmes are instrumental in advancing the career's professionalism (Gunn, 2014). Echoing the findings of previous research conducted with post-secondary students (Tang *et al.*, 2014; Oh and Weitz, 2008; Broadbridge, 2003a; Swinyard *et al.*, 1991), this study reports that post-secondary business students who have had a retail learning experience (i.e. a course, a case study, an internship, etc.) are able to discern their engagement with, aptitude for and value of retail management careers. Further, these students recognise that there are significant opportunities for advancement in retailing careers and that retail educational programmes and credentials contribute to these advancement opportunities (Broadbridge *et al.*, 2007). These findings echo findings of VAS studies in educational settings which identify how experiences shape entrants' perceptions of the enjoyment, ability and goals related to various career dimensions (Jahn and Myers, 2014).

Whereas the public is generally uniformed about the nature of retail occupational roles (i.e. beyond the front-line), this study and previous research (Oh and Weitz, 2008) have identified that retail organisations have primary agency in the communication of the scope of these roles. Retailers' recruitment and brand messages should therefore emphasise the skill development opportunities, career trajectory stories and succession strategies associated with management roles.

The value of retail management careers is perceived to encompass both negative and positive characteristics, echoing the findings of previous research (Broadbridge, 2003a, b; Broadbridge et al., 2007; Commins and Preston, 1997; Foresight, 2001; Swinyard et al., 1991). Negative perceptions are related to poor working conditions, amorphous jurisdictional boundaries and related indiscriminate hiring practices and a non-professional image. On the other hand, positive perceptions portray retail management careers as providing flexible work environments characterised by opportunities for empowered decision-making. A particular finding of this study is that perceptions about the value of these careers are related to perceptions of retailers' brand images. Retail management careers are considered appealing and more professional when they are associated with brands with high-quality/ socially relevant images.

This study's findings also identify differences in the nature of retail career identity in different jurisdictions. In particular, there are differences in perceptions about the value of retail careers between the United States and Canada. These differences can be attributed to variations in the respective retail landscapes. In comparison to its southern neighbour, the Canadian population is small and fragmented, making it a deterrent to the rise of Canadian, homogeneous retail operations (Hernandez and Biasiotto, 2001; Burns and Rayman, 1995). In addition, Canadian managers generally have lower education levels than US managers and executives, and the share of Canadian retail managers with a university education has been substantially lower than the average from all occupations (Retail Council of Canada, 2009). This study's findings thereby confirm that career messages from occupational stakeholders (i.e. industry and post-secondary educators) contribute to distinguishing the dimensions that constitute jurisdictional claims of a geographically defined occupation (i.e. Canadian retail management). These dimensions include career attributes, associations, considerations and influences that contribute to and constitute professional career identities (Lent et al., 2002). In particular, these messages influence how retail management education is perceived to contribute to the professionalisation of retail management careers.

6. Implications, limitations and future research

This study's theoretical contribution is that it emphasises the heuristic value of SCCT for presenting professionalising VAS messages about a specific career option. Whereas previous research has identified the nature of influential VAS messages (Powers and Myers, 2017), this study expands understanding of contextual influences by identifying the nature of specific retail management career messages. In particular, the nature of an occupational jurisdictions' environment is instrumental to entrants' perceptions of career self-efficacy and outcomes. In this localised study, perceptions of professionalism in Canadian retail careers underpin influential messages about entrants' access to education, types of roles and outcome-related value. In addition, this study's findings have multiple practical implications for retail and marketing educators and managers. Given that part-time employment has a significant influence on retail career perceptions, managers should establish and highlight career paths throughout the course of part- time employment opportunities.

Both parents and potential employees are influenced by their experiences as customers, and managers should therefore link customer experiences with retail careers. As the calibre of retail brands contributes to influential messages, retailers should emphasise socially responsible leadership through their company's reputation/value/brand messages. Engaging social media incorporating visualisation of career paths and stories should be utilised to communicate these messages.

Finally, the findings of this study specifically point to the need for retailers to collaborate with educators in the form of case studies, internships, networking events and guest speakers which can present influential career messages within post-secondary education. Retail and marketing educators should note that retailing curricula, course objectives and textbooks (i.e. Levy *et al.*, 2011) which describe realistic retail management career expectations are instrumental in promoting positive perceptions of the career's professionalism. To this end, collaborations with industry should be oriented to developing current, realistic learning experiences.

In traditional, long-term employer–employee relationships, the majority of recruiting and organisational socialisation is focused at the entry level. However, given the increasingly global and technological nature of retail operations, retail careers are increasingly boundaryless (Sullivan and Baruch, 2009) and are characterised by high degrees of self-direction and mobility. As a result, the retail-specific VAS messages/ processes should focus on multiple organisational types and levels and thereby recognize how potential career entrants have varying perceptions of the retail management of retail careers. For example, Gunn *et al.* (2017) identified four different cluster groups of potential retail career entrants (apathetics, interdependents, independents and enthusiasts) according to their perceptions of retail careers and further, identified related recruiting/ VAS processes for each group.

It is important to note that the significance and generalisability of the results are limited by the size of the sample. Expanding the investigation to include a larger and more diversified sample would promote a greater understanding of anticipatory professionalisation processes across heterogeneous groups. Perhaps, gaining insight from students in current retail management programmes may provide additional information on potential applicants of the industry. Further, our focus group contained practitioners from the apparel industry, and the perspectives and views surrounding this topic may differ from those of professionals in other retail industries. In addition, this study should be followed up by quantitative studies that examine the nature of the influence that each source has upon perceptions of retail management careers and the particular dimensions of the messages. Further research should extend the findings of this study by examining the temporal aspects of the development of career perceptions.

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