Creating and consuming experiences in retail store environments: Comparing retailer and consumer perspectives

Kristina Bäckström*a,*, Ulf Johanssonb

aDepartment of Service Management, Lund University, Campus Helsingborg, Sweden
bDepartment of Business Administration, Lund University, Sweden

Abstract

This article investigates the substance of arguments about an experience-oriented economy and experience-seeking consumption in retailing. Employing a case study research approach \( (n = 7) \) and the Critical Incident Technique \( (n = 252) \), we show how retailers as well as consumers relate to in-store experiences. The results point out that retailers’ use ever more advanced techniques in order to create compelling in-store experiences to their consumers. In contrast, the depiction given by consumers reveals that their in-store experiences to a large extent are constituted by traditional values such as the behavior of the personnel, a satisfactory selection of products and a layout that facilitates the store visit.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, discussions on the growing economic importance of experience-based consumption have become a dominant theme in literature where consumer preferences are of concern (e.g. Wikström et al., 1989; Boedeker, 1995; Hopkinson and Pujari, 1999; Pine and Gilmore, 1999; LaSalle and Britton, 2002; Annamma and Sherry, 2003; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004a, b). An increased focus on experiences is also evident in the retail sector as it has been suggested that it is important to create emotionally engaging experiences for in-store consumers (e.g. Forseter, 2000; Mahler, 2000; Shaw and Ivens, 2002; Smith and Wheeler, 2002). Several research articles concerned with “experiential retailing” (Kim, 2001), “entertaining experiences” (Jones, 1999; Ibrahim and Ng, 2002a, b), “entertaining and shoppertainment” (Buzz, 1997) have also been published in recent years. However, whereas the focus on experiences is widely spread, in practice as well as in theory, knowledge about how to induce the experiences referred to is more rare. The literature that emphasizes the importance for retailers to focus on the inducement of experiences often lacks both definitions of central concepts and empirical support. For instance, the basic concept of ‘experiences’ is left largely undefined and moreover, seldom analyzed with any regard taken to the unique features that characterize the retail store environment (e.g. Mathwick et al., 2001; Schmitt, 1999, 2003). Hence, the question of what signifies this sort of experience-driven consumption and how these experiences may be created in retail store settings is unspecified and unclear. All in all, there is a need for closer investigation of whether, and if so, to what extent the sort of experience-oriented behavior that recently has received much attention is in fact present in today’s retail stores.

This article explores what is beyond notions of an increasing experience-orientation, from a retailer as well as a consumer perspective. Using the Critical Incident Technique (e.g. Flanagan, 1954; Bitner et al., 1990), we analyze consumers’ descriptions of their in-store experiences in order to reach a deeper understanding of what characterize consumers’ experiences in retail settings. Moreover, in order to receive additional understanding of what experiential

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*Corresponding author.

E-mail address: kristina.backstrom@msm.lu.se (K. Bäckström).
consumption may actually imply in the retail sector today, case study research involving a number of retail firms within the Swedish retail sector has also been conducted. Thus, what empirical support is found for the current statements concerning an experience-seeking consumer? How is the (presumed) experience-orientation constituted, from the retailers’ point of view? What is important for retailers to consider in order to satisfy in-store consumers and hence, to survive in the retail sector in the future? And moreover, is there a harmony between what retailers strive for and what consumers seek?

The paper starts by outlining a theoretical framework, built on literature from retail management, as well as consumer behavior and environmental psychology. This framework is intended to give some guidance as to what creates pleasurable experiences in retail stores, based on existing research. However, existing research is quite vague concerning the concept ‘experience’ and there is a need to further the understanding. Accordingly, following the framework we present new empirical data with the ambition to understand what companies and consumers feel creates experiences in the store. The company cases are presented first, followed by the consumer data. These perspectives are then compared and conclusions drawn.

2. Theoretical framework

Our theoretical framework deals with the aspects that traditionally are said to influence consumers’ in-store experiences. The framework has two parts; personal variables and situational variables. The first part has to do with characteristics related to the consumer that might influence their experiences, whereas the latter include aspects in the store environment that might influence consumers. Separating personal and situational variables is, however, not always straightforward. For instance, atmospherics is here seen as a situational variable but it typically relates to personal variables such as for instance mood. However, in our attempt to create a framework that singles out aspects that may influence consumers’ in-store experiences, such a dividing still serves its purpose. This division is supported by Jones’ (1999) study where retailer factors (controlled by the retailer) are distinguished from customer factors (out of retailer control and associated with the consumers themselves).

2.1. Personal variables and their influence on consumers in-store experiences

According to the literature, a number of personal variables influence consumers’ in-store experiences. Some even argue (Jones, 1999) that factors related to the consumer are more important than factors controlled by retailers. Thus, shoppers to a larger extent attributed entertaining in-store experiences to customer factors, i.e. to factors that they themselves controlled.

Research on consumers’ experiences typically relate to consumer values (e.g. Holbrook and Corfman, 1985; Babin et al., 1994; Mathwick et al., 2001). Value has been defined as an interactive relativistic preference experience, characterizing a subject’s experience of interacting with some object that may be any thing or event (Holbrook and Corfman, 1985). When focusing on consumption experiences, value perceptions are said to be based upon interactions involving either direct usage or distanced appreciation of goods and services (Mathwick et al., 2001). Pleasurable in-store experiences are often said to reflect different types of hedonic values (e.g. Babin et al., 1994; Bloch et al., 1994; Falk and Campbell, 1997; Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982; Jones, 1999), and to be characterized by intrinsic satisfaction, perceived freedom, entertainment and escapism (Babin et al., 1994; Falk and Campbell, 1997; Jones, 1999; Sit et al., 2003). Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) defined hedonic consumption as those facets of consumer behavior that relate to the multisensory, fantasy and emotive aspects of product usage experience. Thus, hedonic shopping value has been described to reflect shopping’s emotional worth (Bellenger et al., 1976), and furthermore to be more subjective and personal than its utilitarian counterpart and result more from fun and playfulness than from task completion (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). Previous research suggest that experiential value offers both extrinsic and intrinsic benefits (e.g. Babin and Darden, 1995; Mathwick et al., 2001). In a retail context, extrinsic benefit may typically derive from shopping trips that are utilitarian in nature and hence as a consequence of the shopper accomplishing a certain task (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982; Babin et al., 1994). Intrinsic value, on the other hand, may be obtained from appreciation of an experience for its own sake, apart from any other consequence that may result (Holbrook, 1994, p. 40, in Mathwick et al., 2001).

As Jones (1999) has noted, research that has related shopping and entertainment has taken a number of various directions. For instance, researchers often discuss consumer motivations for specific shopping trips. It is commonly argued that people shop for both hedonic and utilitarian reasons (e.g. Boedecker, 1995; Tauber, 1995; Jones, 1999), and that a positive mood can result from consumers pursuing either type of shopping (Martineau, 1958; Ibrahim and Ng, 2002a). Thus, a shopping experience could evoke value either through successfully accomplishing its intended goal or by providing enjoyment and/or fun (Babin et al., 1994). As has been described by researchers previously (e.g. Tauber, 1995; Jones, 1999; Bloch et al., 1994), consumers may engage in shopping as a means of socializing with their friends. Research also supports the notion that some consumers have an enduring tendency to shop for entertaining or recreational purposes. These consumers have often been referred to as recreational shoppers (Bellenger et al., 1977; Bellenger and Kargaonkar, 1980; Williams et al., 1985). Furthermore, as Jones (1999) states, research has also described entertaining shopping
experiences as experience specific, suggesting that consumers may have entertaining experiences regardless of their motivations or enduring tendencies to enjoy the shopping process.

In addition, variables such as age (Kruger, 2001) and attitude to time (Chetthamrongchai and Davies, 2000; Soars, 2003) have also been found to influence consumers' in-store experiences. Related to the latter is the element of time pressure (Gross and Sheth, 1989) that has been described to influence shopping behavior. Consumers' mood has also proved to be an important personal variable (e.g. Swinyard, 1993; Spies et al., 1997). Spies et al., (1997) argue that a certain mood may exert influence on the way store visits are experienced. It has been argued that negative moods are more influential than positive moods (Babin and Darden, 1996) and that consumer mood is directly related to store image, which in turn have a bearing on consumer behavior (Sherman and Smith, 1987). Mood is furthermore seen as greatly affected by small aspects of in-store factors (e.g. smile of salesperson, etc.) (Sherman and Smith, 1987). Other personal variables that may influence consumers' experiences are gender (Dholakia, 1999), task and financial resources (Babin et al., 1994; Jones, 1999). Type of involvement has also been related to experiential consumption (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). Product involvement has for instance been connected to pleasurable or entertaining shopping experiences (e.g. Ohanian and Tashchian, 1992; Jones, 1999).

2.2. Situational variables and their influence on consumers in-store experiences

Most of the work in retail management concerning situational variables that influence consumers' in-store experiences emanate from environmental psychology. Here the emotional impact of physical stimuli has been focused upon, as has the effect that physical stimuli has on behaviors. The work of Mehrabian and Russell (1974) has been especially influential and is based on the study of emotional responses (pleasure, arousal and dominance) as well as behavioral responses (approach–avoidance) to environments (for a more detailed discussion on approach-avoidance behavior see atmospherics below). This work has been expanded and tested by several researchers. The work of Gordon Foxall is noteworthy (e.g. Foxall and Greenley, 1999, 2000; Foxall, 1997; Foxall and Yani-de-Soriano, 2003) as some of his studies directly concern service settings. His model, the behavioral perspective model (BPM), indicates how environmental and situational influence on consumer choices can be conceptualized. The work of Robert Donovan and John Rossiter (Donovan and Rossiter, 1982; Donovan et al., 1994) has also been influenced by the Mehrabian-Russell framework and introduced this framework to retailing and service settings.

In retail management literature, following and parallel to the work mentioned above, there has been a long line of research on the conceptualization of the dimensions, tangible as well as more ephemeral, which constitute consumers' visit to retail stores (e.g. Milliman, 1982; Sparks, 1992; Baker et al., 1994; Doyle and Broadbridge, 1999; Burt and Carralero-Encinas, 2000). In literature that seek to conceptualize the different aspects that may influence in-store experiences and behaviors, these have been referred to in terms of some general dimensions, such as; atmospherics, design, and the social dimension (e.g. Baker, 1986; Sullivan and Adcock, 2002).

Atmospherics is the area that has received the most attention and can be described as relating to factors in the store environment that can be designed or manipulated in order to create certain emotional and behavioral responses in the consumer (Kotler, 1973). Definitions of store atmosphere varies from exclusively including subtle aspects such as music (e.g. Yalch and Spangenberg, 1990), scents (e.g. Spangenberg et al., 1996), and colors (e.g. Bellizzi and Hite, 1992) to also including aspects of the physical environment that constitutes the store, such as for example store decorations (Hoffman and Turley, 2002). Hoffman and Turley (2002) give a holistic view of the concept:

Atmospherics are composed of both tangible elements (the building, carpeting, fixtures, point-of-purchase decorations) and intangible elements (colors, music, temperature, scents) that comprise service experiences. (Hoffman and Turley, 2002, p. 35)

The authors argue that positive store atmosphere is crucial in order to offer experiences rather than just products and services. They suggest that atmosphere is of great importance specifically in a service context due to its abstract nature. By consistently seeking to control and add substance to the atmosphere of retail stores, retailers may influence consumers when they are evaluating what type of service and what type of products are on offer (Hoffman and Turley, 2002, see also e.g. Foxall and Greenley, 1999, 2000; Foxall and Yani-de-Soriano, 2003). Research on atmospherics has been concluded to influence a wide variety of consumer behaviors (for an overview see Turley and Milliman, 2000). It has been shown that a positive atmosphere can lead to approach behaviors, which implies that consumers stay longer in the store, spends more money or that the propensity for impulse buying increases (Donovan and Rossiter, 1982; Foxall and Greenley, 2000; Sherman et al., 1997; Spies et al., 1997). Some even relate atmospherics to the possibility of creating long-lasting consumer relationships (Babin and Attaway, 2000). A negative atmosphere, it is argued, may however lead to avoidance behavior, such as a desire to leave the store or a sense of dissatisfaction (Donovan and Rossiter, 1982; Turley and Milliman, 2000). Studies of singular atmospheric elements, such as scents or music, have shown that these directly influence consumers' in-store experiences. For example, the presence of scents that are not naturally associated with the products sold in a store influences consumers' perception of that store in a negative way (Ellen and Bone, 1999). A scent that has positive
connotations to consumers often creates feelings of having spent less time in the store than is actually the case (Spangenberg et al., 1996) and so can music. Consumers listening to music familiar to them experience that they spent less time in the store than consumers made to listen to unfamiliar music (Yalch and Spangenberg, 2000). However, it is a thin line. Foxall and Yani-de-Soriano (2003, see also Foxall and Greenley, 1999) point out that obvious attempts to create pleasure and arousal responses can be counterproductive; ambient music and other forms of entertainment may produce avoidance rather than approach behavior by consumers.

The atmosphere in a retail store environment has further been shown to affect consumers’ mood in different ways. A positive store atmosphere has, for example, been shown to improve consumers’ mood which in turn can lead to making the experience of the store visit more positive (Spies et al., 1997).

While atmospherics is commonly used to describe the rather intangible aspects of the store environment, store design is normally applied to signify the more tangible elements present in the interior store environment. Design has for example to do with the overall style that is expressed through the store’s interior decoration and architecture and may be used to reinforce the values associated with a specific brand name (Gottardiener, 1998). Discussions on store design typically relate to store layout and display. Display is often described as the design of the way in which articles are presented in the store to facilitate and stimulate consumer purchasing behavior (e.g. Buttle, 1984). When store layout is of concern, many argue that positive experiences may arise if the store makes it easy for the consumers to find the product they are looking for, when the layout of the store seems logical, when there are sufficient signs, etc. (e.g. Bitner, 1992; Spies et al., 1997; Jones, 1999). Primarily, the design of a store has to fill certain fundamental demands, such as offering a fresh and clean environment. However, it has been suggested that handling a retail store’s interior environment today stretches far beyond performing adequately on what can be said to be hygienic factors (e.g. Wakefield and Baker, 1998). Today many would even classify shopping and store browsing as a form of entertainment itself (Buzz, 1997; Kim, 2001; Sit et al., 2003), and consequently, over the last couple of years, design has gained in status in retail management. It is argued that the role of retail designers has progressed from plain shopfitting to the provision of entertainment and inspiration to customers (e.g. Riewoldt, 2000; Mintel, 1999).

The social dimension consists of all the interactions (e.g. physical, emotional, etc.) consumers have with other members of society (Sullivan and Adcock, 2002). For instance, consumers are influenced by the cultural and societal contexts that surround them, with respect to their behavior, values, including also patterns of consumption and shopping behavior (e.g. Miller, 1998; Sullivan and Adcock, 2002). When retail stores are of concern, however, it is primarily the influence of personnel and other customers that is emphasized when analysing customers’ experiences. Several has for instance focused on the interaction that takes place between the customer and the personnel during service encounters and argued that it is essential in creating consumer satisfaction and service quality (e.g. Gummesson, 2002; Grönroos, 2000). Berry and Parasuraman (1991) argue that consumers may tolerate variations in their experiences, and still consider them acceptable. They term this the “zone of tolerance,” indicating that consumers do not expect service at one given level. Rather they accept an adequate level to the service, but if it goes beyond that into a desired level, the service may generate a more positive response by the consumer. Consumers’ statements have reported store personnel to be a contributing factor to entertaining store experiences especially when the staff have a capacity to offer extraordinary service or to allow consumers to shop without being under constant surveillance (Jones, 1999). Moreover, the mood (Kelley and Hoffman, 1997) or credibility of salespersons (Swinyard, 1995) seems to be important in order for good service encounters to occur. Employees’ actions have also shown to have a profound effect on consumers’ loyalty to the store (Macintosh and Lockshin, 1997).

3. Methodological considerations

The research involves data collection from both companies and consumers. The first part involves case studies (Yin, 2003; Bryman, 1989) of 7 retail firms in the Swedish retail sector. To achieve a nuanced representation of how retailers relate to in-store experiences today, representatives from clothing(1), home electronics(1), home furnishings(1), books(1), sports articles(1), and groceries(2) were chosen. In the groceries case two retailers were chosen, representing different store formats. Only one of the chosen retailers work exclusively in Sweden, others work throughout Scandinavian and a couple on a global scale. An important aspect when concerned with the selection of cases was that the research was to be focused upon everyday consumption of consumers. Hence, the retailers included in the study all represent large organizations involving high numbers of employees and huge sales. In-depth interviews were held with managers responsible for the development of the store concept within each of the case firms. The interviews were semi-structured in the sense that a numbers of questions were prepared in advance. These concerned aspects such as the retailers’ overall view on in-store experiences today and what experiences in their stores might be comprised of, but even more specified questions on the implements used in order to induce such experiences were included. However, the interviewer did not strictly follow this ‘guide’, rather the managers were encouraged to start out with describing the view on in-store experiences held within their company and with this as point of departure, the interviewer occasionally put in
questions that according to the view presented appeared as appropriate. The interviews all lasted between 1.5–2.5 hours and were later written out in their whole in order to facilitate the analysis.

The method used to generate data on consumers’ experiences in retail stores is called The Critical Incident Technique (e.g. Bitner et al., 1990; Jones, 1999; see also Flanagan, 1954). This is essentially a classification technique employing content data analysis of stories or critical incidents (Bitner et al., 1990). The method invites individuals to describe certain incidents and may be used in order to analyze consumers’ descriptions of both negative and positive critical incidents (e.g. Jones, 1999). As such, not simply any one incident is considered, but incidents that are memorable because they were considered particularly positive or negative.

The empirical material here analyzed is composed of information collected from a total of 252 consumers. First, a pilot study was conducted where data was obtained from 52 first-year university students enrolled in a service management education. Having tested the mode of procedure and verified its efficiency with regard to the purpose of the project, a second sample of 200 consumers was used. This time consumers were contacted by telephone and if they agreed to participate, a questionnaire was sent to them by mail. The questionnaire contained careful instructions on how to fill it in including contact information that they were encouraged to use if they had any inquiries. As in the pilot study, the instructions were; ‘Describe your most recent in-store experience that you recall as especially positive (negative). (Describe as explicitly as possible what was positive/negative and in what store you experienced this).’ These consumers represented a sample more representative than in the pilot study, thus constituting consumers of both sexes from all over the nation, with ages varying from 16 and up. The statements collected from the respondents cover retail trades such as groceries, clothing, cosmetics, home decoration and furnishings, sport items, electronics, etc.

The first step in the analysis of the consumers’ statements was to produce a crude sorting of data. In this process the aim was twofold; to find themes in the texts that could be related to aspects traditionally referred to be of concern in consumers’ in-store experiences and; to investigate the possible presence of themes that lie outside these aspects. In line with the explorative approach taken, the ambition was to identify all the aspects that had been involved in the formation of an experience, those occurring frequently in the texts as well as aspects that were less frequent. Having reached an overall view of the themes included in the material, each text was then thoroughly analyzed and all relevant aspects of the formation of the experience in question was identified and listed. As the content of the list grew, several themes were discernible and more structure could be added to the material by adding sub-themes to already existing themes. The result was, eventually, a coherent list of all occurring aspects in the accounts that the respondents had given of their in-store experiences, as well as their frequency of appearance.

4. Results

In the following sections empirical findings from the case study research and from the consumers’ statements will be presented. Finally a comparison is made, drawing attention to similarities and differences between retailers and consumers perspectives.

4.1. Retailers creation of experiences in retail stores

The retailers all pointed to the fact that attention on in-store ‘experiences’ have increased. With one exception, they all emphasized increasing efforts to create experiences for consumers. They also agreed that the market demands an increased experience-orientation, as competition increases and consumers are more focused on emotional sides of shopping today. The retailers moreover regarded an attractive store environment a key aspect to succeed as an experience-oriented firm. Three of the case firms were in the very last stages of profound changes in their store concepts when the interviews took place. These changes included everything from new core values, new store designs and new ways of organizing the everyday work. The reasons for implementing this were in all of these cases linked to enhance consumers’ experiences. However, all retailers stated that the physical store environment seems to be ever more significant in order to attract consumers today:

We make a lot of efforts in order to make more experience-based stores. I think that many today know that we have to create experiences but we still do not know quite what to fill them with … (Home electronics)

When defining the experiences they sought to create for their consumers, associations to concepts such as ‘consumers delight’, ‘pleasure’, and ‘inspiration’ were made. Although different terms were used it was obvious that the retailers were highly focused on the providing of hedonic value. However, a glimpse of a more utilitarian perspective was also present, mainly from the grocery trade:

Creating experiences in our stores is a lot about rationality, low prices, simplicity ... Everything under the same roof … (Grocery superstore)

Shopping is here referred to as work, and hence time and money are described as key concepts rather than delight or pleasure. However, a focus on rationality is not entirely representative of the grocery trade as a whole. In the grocery city-store considerable efforts to enhance pleasurable shopping experiences were to be seen.

An over-all increase in experience-orientation can be seen among the various retailers in the many activities they in fact pursue in order to satisfy the consumer of today. Thus, the retailers have incorporated a number of (more or less) new implements in their everyday practices in order to
create compelling in-store experiences. Fig. 1 exhibits what experiential consumption consists of according to the retailers. Consistent with the retailers overall focus on how to stimulate hedonic consumption, the emphasis is on such aspects rather than on the more utilitarian. In the following sections each of the dimensions included in the model are further presented.

The retailers’ statements show that many retailers consider education and knowledge intermediary to be important to create pleasurable in-store experiences to consumers. Thus, the retailers emphasize educating or helping in-store consumers, i.e. providing adequate instructions and first-rate knowledge about how to use the products on sale, etc.

We are good at knowledge, although we want it to be felt even more … We want more people to take part of the knowledge we have, in a mechanical way as well as through our personnel. We want to signal this to the consumers in as many ways as possible … (Sports articles)

All the retailers emphasized the importance of adding various sorts of informative material to their store environments. For example, home electronics emphasized the necessity to include careful instructions in the store about how to use their products:

The customers need instructions, for instance on how you download games. It’s like going to a museum where you may learn more about mammoths. (Home electronics)

The retailers also use more and more technological solutions in order to make the knowledge transfer easier and fun. According to the retailers, including automatic machines, display screens, computers, and opportunities to surf the Internet in the store environment is becoming increasingly valuable in order to educate in-store consumers, and to enhance their in-store experiences.

Moreover, all the retailers gave emphasis to the importance of inspiring in-store consumers as a means of creating pleasurable in-store experiences. This was done in several ways, although centred on efforts to present products in interesting and stimulating ways.

We have to present the clothes in an interesting way, the consumers need to get tips and ideas. That is our definition of experiences, it has a lot to do with visual merchandising. (Clothing)

One example of how the retailers sought to inspire their consumers was to suggest possible ways of using the products. This could be done by complementing the displays with additional items that in one way or another were related to the products presented, or by presenting new combinations of products in their displays:

Sometimes we only provide solutions, sometimes solutions combined with inspiration. For instance, when the Vasa ski-race is on, this might imply a digital screen broadcasting the race in the store … (Sports articles)

We do not want to be rational any more, we do not want to have shampoo in one place and briefs in another … We want to inspire consumers! (Clothing)

Our results also suggest that retailers are increasingly focused on innovation and new combinations of products. Several of the retailers in our study were engaged in the creation of store environments where cross-shopping is facilitated, i.e. store environments where multiple types of products are presented together. Combining product categories that traditionally have not been sold together seems to be a key implement in enhancing consumers’ in-store experiences today. For instance, in the clothing business cosmetic articles are included, in the book trades a coffee shop, and sports shops talk of future plans to increase their selection to also include a limited selection of nature cures:

We also plan to give more space to sports ‘accessories’, like specialist literature, magazines, well-chosen … And DVD movies, with sports! That’s included in a number of stores already and they sell quite god. (…) Moreover,
we may very well have a limited selection of products from nature-cure medicine, relating to sports. (Sports articles)

Another trend in making retail stores more experience-oriented seems to be the inclusion of opportunities for consumers to acquaint themselves with the in-store products, whether these are clothes, furniture, home electronics or sport articles:

Before the phones were locked up in glass boxes and you only presented facts about the products. And prices. Thanks to our new concept we have been forced out of this! We have gone from products to content! And content demands performance … That one is allowed to test and feel … (Home electronics)

In some places you can see signs and roped-off areas signaling ‘do not touch’. We want our consumers to enter and to test and try out! They should feel as home. (Home furnishing)

By permitting, and even encouraging, consumers to try out their products, the retailers in our study intended to enhance the possibility of pleasurable in-store experiences to take place as well as to visualize what they are actually able to do for the consumer.

Attracting consumers’ senses is not new. As we have seen, using for instance music or scents to stimulate in-store consumers has been acknowledged before. However, an increased focus on differentiating by in various ways stimulating consumers’ olfactory senses, sight, perception of touch, hearing and sense of taste, can be seen. Thus, our results revealed that traditional atmospheric elements are used in new ways in order to stimulate the senses of today’s consumers. For instance, several retailers stated that the music played in their stores were given increased attention and they now use external help to find music customized for specific stores. All in all, an increased focus on atmospheric elements is revealed; the retailer within the book trade had for instance just initiated a co-operation with a Norwegian company specialized on store atmosphere.

The retailers used a number of methods to stimulate consumers’ senses. Several of the retailers pointed to the value of creating store environments that are full of life.

With help from technology we can make things happen. Something moves, something makes sounds. Here we have gone further than our competitors! (Home electronics)

We absolutely want (tailors) dummies with movements! (Sports articles)

The retailers include movements in their store concepts using plasma screens, touch screens and television sets with rolling commercials or music channels. Digital material, as have been argued before, thus seems to be a key aspect in order to entertain in-store consumers and according to the depiction given by the retailers it is quite right a central part of the new store concepts presented.

Visiting stores may also serve as a break from everyday life. Escapism and recreation are words often used, but the view expressed by retailers point in a different direction, i.e. activating the consumer and stimulating as many senses as possible. However, some of the retailers emphasized shopping as a means of relaxation as well. For instance, as opposed to what much research has indicated lately, the retailer representing the book trade emphasized that their store was not meant to be a social place of meeting. Rather, their vision was to create a store environment where the consumers might devote time to themselves, in piece and quiet.

Furthermore, all retailers included special arrangement or activities in order to create pleasurable experiences to their consumers. In the grocery city-store this might imply a chef demonstrating how to prepare certain meals; within a sport store this could mean suppliers in the store providing consumers with information about their products; in home furnishing or book stores it might imply lectures related to the respective consumption areas.

4.2. Consumers experiences in retail stores

The aspects mentioned by the consumers in our study may be divided into two overall groups; retailer factors and consumer factors (cf. the study of Jones, 1999). The factors included in the individuals’ statements are presented in Tables 1 and 2 below.

In contrast to what has been shown in previous literature, consumers’ statements here gave larger room for retailer factors. Thus, retailer factors were to a greater extent associated to the consumers’ descriptions of both positive and negative in-store experiences than were consumer factors. In the sections below, the factors included in the consumers’ statements are further discussed and more examples on each of the aspects’ influence on individuals’ in-store experiences are given.
Table 1
Examples of retailer factors that influence consumers’ in-store experiences (the table is developed from Jones tables, see Jones 1999, p. 133)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Retailer factors</th>
<th>Positive experiences</th>
<th>Negative experiences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personnel</td>
<td>“I asked a salesperson who was unpacking merchandise, and she immediately left that and assisted me in find what I was looking for, instead of just giving me instructions as most salespeople do.”</td>
<td>“There is a store in the city where I live named ‘Ur&amp;Penn’. The personnel there are generally disagreeable. You feel like you are troubling the staff. I once wanted to switch battery in my clock and the female attendant asked me what kind of worthless clock I wear and pointed out that I definitely not had bought it in her store. That’s a bad attitude!!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service elements</td>
<td>“Overripe bananas that the kids can eat for free in the store, then there is no nagging from the children …”</td>
<td>“The new checkout system with hand scanners was worthless. You still had to take your items out of the trolley even though you had registered them with the scanner. And then back with them in the trolley again!! Then you had to go to another desk and finally pack the merchandise into bags. I do not do my shopping there any more.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selection</td>
<td>“It’s nice with a store that is concentrated on food articles. Often I think most grocery stores are about having ‘everything’ and they mostly look like gift shops.”</td>
<td>“When I arrived at the cereal shelf it turned out that the shelf with the product I wanted was completely empty. This is not the first time. Sometime it feels as if they cannot order merchandise until the shelves are already empty.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Price</td>
<td>“They had everything for a ten crona coin’ (one US $) week. I went there and bought everything I needed and even more.”</td>
<td>“When I was shopping in my nearest store and came to the cash point it turned out that the fruit juice I had taken wasn’t on special offer, contrary to what the promotion leaflet that I had received said. The special offer was only valid for a limited number of products in that specific line of fruit juices.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design</td>
<td>“The store was aesthetically pleasing both in the exterior and in the interior.”</td>
<td>“The plain concrete floor and the very sterile store interiors makes it feel boring.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Display</td>
<td>”The shop-window was arranged in an interesting and colourful way. Of course, the clothing was in my taste but it was especially the arrangement of it that created an interest in seeing more, with accessories and jewellery.”</td>
<td>“It is hard to grasp what’s actually on offer!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Layout</td>
<td>“Inside the store there is plenty of space where you may walk with your cart. It is easy to find what you want.”</td>
<td>“It’s a store that I love as a rule, but since it’s that large I get very annoyed when they refurnish and move things around. It takes a while before new signs are up! Walking all over this giant store looking for something, just a couple of items, takes forever!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atmospherics</td>
<td>“Scents reminding you of new cars and leather. So right!”</td>
<td>“I cannot think of a specific store but what I don’t like is when music is played too loud in the store.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2.1. Retailer factors influence on consumers in-store experiences

Many of the consumers’ in-store experiences were created through interactions (or lack of interactions) with the store personnel. It is obvious that interaction between the personnel and consumer is crucial for how consumers perceive service encounters. Often, very subtle aspects in the personnel’s behavior contribute to positive feelings, e.g. a smile, good wishes for the future, holding the door or swiftly being available for the consumers. It was obvious that positive in-store experiences were created when the personnel made extra efforts and stretched beyond the ‘necessary’ service level. Consumers’ experiences, positive and negative, also related to the competence of the personnel: their ability to provide helpful advices, to give suggestions on what might suit the consumer, or to handle complaints well:

After the purchase I discovered that one of the shoes I’d bought was damaged. In the store there was no other pair left and on discovering that, I was immediately offered a price reduction. But above all, I was offered to return the shoes if they should turn out to have any other damages. And I was offered this guarantee despite the fact that I had received a reduction in price. The reduction and the guarantee made the shoes I bought a very satisfactory purchase. Everything worked out very smoothly.

The individual statements included a number of elements related to the service offered in the store, however not explicitly related to personnel or any other of the retailer factors traditionally mentioned when referring to the store environment (i.e. design, layout, atmosphere, etc.). Negative in-store experiences that appeared from such aspects concerned for instance opening and closing times or inadaptable service systems and solutions. On the other hand, positive in-store experiences related to when the store environment provided additional service elements in terms of, for instance, automatic machines offering fresh
As in previous research, retailer prices were also shown to contribute to the creation of consumers’ in-store experiences, negative ones as well as positive. Not surprisingly, prices influence consumers’ experiences positively when perceived as good, or when certain sales bargains could be made:

It all ended with me leaving the store with a dressing gown and a wonderful quality jacket that was the last one so I got 25% off. I was happy for several days after that!

Interestingly, consumers seemed to value unexpected and spontaneous discounts, for instance when personnel seemingly made certain exceptions on the consumers’ behalf. On the other hand, high prices or perceptions of an unfair pricing often enhanced negative experiences.

With regard to the store selection, a variety of items to choose between could create positive in-store experiences, whereas insufficient choice often contributed to the opposite. Consumers seemed to react particularly negative when there was a lack of basic everyday commodities, or when the store lacked in products that were on a special offer. Moreover, a number of aspects related to the selection concerned the characteristic of the products offered. Not surprisingly, products with short expiry dates or products that did not look fresh were often mentioned as factors that contributed to negative experiences. Furthermore, rich selections of perishables, well-assorted delicatessen counters or fish departments, or counters where consumers themselves can pick delicacies often bring forth positive in-store experiences.

A counter where you yourself could pick frozen fish and shellfish. (...) Counters were you yourself could pick olives, capers, nuts, etc—you choose how much you want. It’s a pleasure to shop!

A number of aspects related to design was also mentioned by the individuals. However, the influence of design on the individuals’ positive in-store experiences was rather sparsely described. Consider for instance the following example:

The store was aesthetically pleasing both in the exterior and the interior.

Stores that recently have been renovated attracted the most attention when it comes to features related to store design. Interestingly, aspects related to design were far more pronounced in the statements depicted by the students that participated in the pilot study. These results indicate that aspects of design may be of greater importance to a younger target audience. As compared to the material as a whole, only the statements made by the students (i.e. the pilot study) support the notion that design is of amplified importance to consumers in retail settings of today.

The way products are presented in the store seemed to enhance especially positive experiences. With regard to display of products, facilitating and making it easy for the people to find them, and the whole shopping experience simply took much time. I was tired and it was nice weather outside.”
consumer to accomplish his or her intentions behind the visit becomes apparent. Thus, by increasing the availability of the products offered, the consumer visit becomes easier which in turn contributes to a positive experience. The results showed for example that positive experiences can be achieved when the range of products offered are categorized by color, trade mark, style, etc. The descriptions also gave examples of additional means of accentuating the range of products in a store. In a clothes shop this could include, for instance, that the products are made more exposed to the consumers by the staff wearing items on sale in the store.

As opposed to features of design, aspects related to the store layout were frequently mentioned in the material as a whole. The results showed that store layout may contribute to positive experiences when the store provides an environment where the consumers can easily find the product he or she is looking for, when the planning of the store seems logical, when there are sufficient signs, etc. Accordingly, negative in-store experiences may arise from store environments perceived as jumbled, when the presentation of products is not logical, the planning of the store difficult to grasp, or when the store is overcrowded. Thus, the aspect of making it easy for consumers to accomplish their intentions with the visit is important:

IKEA Skärholmen is a dull experience—everything is messy, it feels as if the products are thrown out in the store at random. The urge to buy things is minimal there. (...) You spend a lot of time trying to find what you’re looking for—it’s really hard work in that store! The premises are not logically formed, which is also annoying. Suddenly you find yourself in a place that you had no intention of visiting. It really is not a particularly nice experience!!

Aspects related to store atmosphere, i.e. certain lighting, colors and scents, were mentioned in consumers’ descriptions of positive as well as negative in-store experiences. For instance, scents that correspond with the products sold in the store may influence consumers’ in-store experiences in a positive manner. Moreover, atmospherics were often mentioned in positive terms in relation to small store environments, which by some obviously were perceived as cosier. As a contrast, larger store environments were occasionally mentioned as more stressful and as providing negative atmospheric cues, thus giving rise to negative experiences.

4.2.2. Consumer factors influence on in-store experiences

Compared to factors controlled by retailers, factors relating to the consumers emerged with less frequency. However, consumer factors did influence the in-store experiences that were recalled. For instance, our results support the notion that social aspects influence individuals’ in-store experiences, especially in a positive sense. Social aspects were here connected to other in-store consumers and were particularly true in smaller towns where it was common for consumers to come across other consumers that they know:

All of my store experiences are positive. Since I live in a small village, almost everyone knows each other, even in the stores.

Thus, visiting stores can fulfill certain social needs within consumers. Besides this, few other social aspects where mentioned by the consumers. Hence, shopping as an opportunity to socialize with friends was not referred to at all.

Many of the respondents indicated that they had a certain task in mind during the situations referred to in their statements (e.g. finding a gift or a certain item). The results often showed that positive in-store experiences arise when the consumers had accomplished that special task. While task is utilitarian, fulfilling a task can also be pleasurable. This was shown in our material for instance when consumers referred to pleasurable shopping experiences by describing situations when they got their hands on products that had been hard to find. Reversely, failing to accomplish a task could give rise to negative experiences.

From our data it is difficult to study whether product involvement in fact has contributed to the creation of a certain experience. However, some individuals indicated that the pleasure of browsing through potential purchases and finding desired objects was the only source of positive experiences.

Time was mentioned in the context of consumers being short of time, and when a specific store visit influenced an individual’s possibility of managing the store visit within a certain amount of time:

In the queue at Maxi [a large food store] I had a customer in front of me with a whole bunch of coupons. The store had run out of the products in question or the products had not been properly signposted in the store. As a result, the customer had taken the wrong products. Standing there waiting while this was cleared up took about 10 minutes and was very frustrating indeed! Especially when you yourself only have a tiny basket with a few products in. Murphy’s law, you always end up in the wrong line!!!

Hence, the aspect of time was here included from a rather utilitarian perspective, suggesting that stores that manage to offer a fast service may succeed in attracting task-oriented consumers and contribute to a positive experience for them.

Concerning consumers’ mood our results support the notion that a certain mood may influence the way store visits are experienced. Thus, when in a good mood, consumers tend to evaluate their in-store experiences positively, when feeling worn-out or tired consumers may experience store visits in less positive ways.
4.3. Experiences in retail stores—comparing perspectives

To a certain extent a match was found between the accounts given by the retailers’ and the consumers’ statements. Consumers reveal that they occasionally appreciate retailers with a high level of knowledge of the products on sale, opportunities to try out products in the store, or advanced service in terms of free coffee, fruit, etc. However, overall there is a marked difference. As we have seen, the majority of the retailers included here agreed that there seem to be an increased demand for experiences among consumers and that it is crucial for retailers to focus on enhancing consumers’ in-store experience. The retailers devoted considerable resources to implement ever more advanced techniques in order to create exciting experiences. The emphasis placed by consumers was, however, quite different.

The statements by retailers and consumers in Table 3 show the differences concerning what constitute the experiences sought by consumers in retail stores of today, as well as how these can be created. Retailers focused on creating exciting consumer experiences for instance by including unique product displays, new combinations of products, opportunities to try out products in the store environment, or by stimulating multiple senses. In the consumers’ statements such features were absent. Instead, basic things like the behavior of personnel, layout, prices, selection, etc. were important. Hence, our results indicate that for consumers the small things create experiences, e.g. a smile when entering a shop or the fact that the personnel takes an interest in in-store consumers rather than chit-chatting with each other. Also, consumers’ statements are often practical or utilitarian rather than hedonistic. For example, presence of the products sought, personnel that handle consumers’ complaints, repurchases and exchanges in smooth ways or other aspects of the store environment that facilitate consumers visit are seen as positive. Consider for instance the following quotation that is derived from one of the consumers’ statements:

Yet another negative experience followed when it turned out that not one single of the 6–7 jumpers that I tried on were available in my size. The nice arrangement of products doesn’t really matter much then.

Comparing accounts, one can reflect on the absence of aspects related to the personnel’s attitudes or behavior in the reports given from the retailers. It would seem that the behavior of the personnel is given low priority by retailers when creating in-store experiences. However, as is clear from several consumer accounts, what the personnel does is important to create good or, indeed, bad in-store experiences:

We had decided to buy what we came for and when we lined up to pay, the assistants were busy with other customers paying for their goods. When it was our turn, the assistants started to talk about common friends and other things of private character. Despite our attempts to get noticed, their conversation continued for about 8–10 minutes. They didn’t pay us any attention, whereupon we threw the queue ticket away and demonstratively left the store.

5. Concluding discussion

By investigating retailers’ and consumers’ views on in-store experiences of today, this paper expands the existing literature in which a presumed increase in experience-orientation is in focus. Our study explores what is actually behind notions of such an increase, from retailers’ as well as from consumers’ point of view. This paper has shown that when consumers’ in-store experiences are in focus, there are considerable differences between retailers’ and consumers’ opinions on what constitutes pleasurable
experiences and how these might be induced in store environments. Whereas retailers are strongly focused on finding new ways of enhancing consumers in-store experiences, consumers’ description of memorable in-store experiences are still, to a very large extent, constituted by traditional values. Thus, the retailers included in the study revealed an increased use of technological solutions, a focus on hybridizations between various sorts of trades, as well as an augmented concern for design elements. The consumers, on the other hand, gave larger scope for aspects such as layout, price, selection, personnel, etc., in their descriptions of the recollected experiences. It is furthermore interesting to notice that the retailers’ depiction of what constitute experiences desired by consumers in-store emerged as rather homogenous. It is just one of the retailers, the one within the grocery superstore, that by any means deviate from the picture drawn of today’s experience-oriented consumer. When the consumers’ statements are of concern, it is also interesting to note that in-store experiences seem to be constituted by the same dimensions regardless of whether they are taking place in clothing stores or grocery stores.

While many aspects found in the retailers’ and the consumers’ statements have been covered in previous literature, our results suggest that existing theories within retail management literature may be further developed. For instance, the ways in which retailers try to create in-store experiences stretch far beyond the dimensions traditionally referred to when in-store experiences are of concern (e.g., atmospherics, design, and social dimension). Thus, it might be interesting to expand the framework here suggested by devoting further attention to aspects such as those discussed by the retailers (see Fig. 1). Moreover, consumers reveal a complexity in the interaction that takes place between the in-store consumer and the store environment that has, to our knowledge, seldom been expressed in previous literature. For instance, while previous studies are often focused on the influence of individual variables on consumers’ in-store experiences, our results indicate that there is a need to expand the vision and investigate how various elements of the store environment interact in their influence on consumers’ experiences. There seems, furthermore, to be scope for additional investigations on how various aspects of the personnel’s behavior influence consumers’ in-store experiences.

Our study also makes a contribution from a more practical point of view. The results indicate that retailers need to focus more on traditional values such as the behavior of their personnel, an aspect that only occasionally was given attention by the retailers. It is important to notice however, that since the retailers were engaged in describing the innovative implements used by them in order to enhance consumers’ experiences of today, it may come natural that the more traditional aspects received minor attention, suggesting that the depiction given by the retailers might not do full justice to the attention actually directed to personnel from the retailers’ point of view. However, the consumers’ statements clearly imply that they many times are dissatisfied with store personnel’s behavior or attitudes. Hence, our results strongly suggest that how to educate and motivate store personnel to approach in-store consumers in a satisfactory manner seems to be a central question for retailers in the future.

It is also important to state that the difference in emphasis between retailers and consumers does not necessarily imply that consumers of today do not want the sort of experiences that retailers seek to induce. For instance, it is possible that consumers today take pleasant and exciting store environments for granted and that this may be a reason for the fact that aspects related to for instance design and display were not given larger scope in their statements. However, even if the results do not necessarily imply that consumers do not appreciate the sort of experiences that retailers seek to induce, it is clear that fundamental issues such as consumer-store personnel interaction, tidiness, a sense of clear orientation in a store layout, a satisfactory selection etc. need to be considered first. Regardless of whether a retailer has put efforts on a new design, rude personnel will make the consumers turn back and never return.

Finally, the consumers that participated in this study represent ‘all sorts of consumers’ and the stories referred to in their statements concern ‘all types of shopping trips’ and thus also various types of consumer motives. It is possible that a study entirely focused on so called recreational shoppers would give a different picture with regard to the content of consumers’ in-store experiences. Although a minority, it is important to acknowledge that some consumers did mention the presence of additional service elements in store environments such as fresh water, coffee or fruits offered free of charge, inclusion of coffee bars in the store, opportunities to try out products before making purchases, etc., as positive experiences. This suggests that providing excellent service in this sense might have a value, although that is not a priority for the average consumer.

References


