



Photo-elicitation: Using photographs to read retail interiors through consumers' eyes[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Researchers studying experiences in retail environments have typically focused their attention towards positively examining the influence of individual atmospheric variables upon customer behavior. In this respect photographs are common environmental simulation techniques. This approach concerns not only researchers active in consumer culture, but also interior architects and retail designers, working in a disciplinary tradition that maintains that interiors function as “Gestalt” environments, interacting with their users. In this paper, the authors aim to develop understanding of retail environments as sites of complex sensory experiences and the application of photo-elicitation as an interpretive research methodology concerning experiences in retail environments. The paper discusses the results of two exploratory studies within selected retail environments, and demonstrates the value of photo-elicitation in gaining insight into experiences in retail interiors. Photo-elicitation thus contributes new knowledge of the retail environment, and adds value to positivistic research approaches that have predominated in this field.

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1. Study of retail interiors

Over the past thirty years hedonic behavior has formed a focus for research into customer experience, while marketing atmospherics (Kotler, 1973; Turley & Milliman, 2000) and servicescapes (Bitner, 1992) research have provided important lenses through which to develop knowledge of the effect of retail environments on both customers and employees. More recently, the co-creative relationship between producer and consumer has contributed to new knowledge of service encounters (Lusch & Vargo, 2006a,b). However, changing economic conditions since 2007 have contributed to uncertainties in consumer behavior in both mature and newly emerging markets. These developments create new challenges for retailers and designers to design retail interiors that appeal, interact and engage with customers. For researchers, these developments provide the context not only for studying retail interiors as dynamic spaces which mediate consumer behavior, but also for the re-assessment of research approaches to investigate the retail environment. Management researchers who focus on the question of how customers experience

retail environments tend to marginalize research methodologies of designers and their holistic, non-linear approach to design issues. Designers consider designed spaces as holistic totalities or “wholes” where various elements interact and all together determine how people experience spaces (Petermans, 2012). Hence the value of interpretive research and participant-based methodologies, as these approaches provide opportunities to gain insight into and phenomenologically deconstruct customer experiences in designed environments.

Given these developments, the aim of this research is to develop understanding of retail environments as sites of complex sensory experiences and the application of photo-elicitation as a research methodology. The research objectives are first to undertake a literature review of research approaches in both management and design disciplines that are used to obtain knowledge with regard to customer experiences in retail environments. The second objective is to explain visual methodologies and their application in social sciences, and the use of photo-elicitation in particular as a methodology for studying customer experiences in retail environments. The third objective is to analyze the application of photo-elicitation in two empirical research studies, and the final objective is to examine the contribution of photo-elicitation to research methodology.

The article is structured around an initial discussion of the literature relating to current research approaches into customer experiences in retail environments. Next, it focuses on visual research methodologies in general and photo-elicitation in particular. It continues with an explanation and analysis of case studies in a clothing and food store using photo-elicitation methodology, and concludes with an explanation

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of the contribution of photo-elicitation to research methodology, its managerial implications and future research opportunities.

2. Research approaches to gain insight into customer experiences in retail environments

The effect of the store environment on its consumers is reported in the literatures of environmental psychology, marketing, architecture and design (Greenland & McGoldrick, 1994, 2005), which demonstrate that consumer behavior towards stores and store patronage is influenced, at least to some degree, by the store environment (Baker, Grewal, & Parasuraman, 1994; Baker, Levy, & Grewal, 1992; Baker, Parasuraman, Grewal, & Voss, 2002; Davies & Ward, 2002; Donovan & Rossiter, 1982; Lam, 2001). Both positivistic and interpretive research approaches obtain insights into consumers and their experiences in retail environments, which are summarized in the next section.

2.1. Positivistic research approaches

When focusing on the question of how consumers experience retail environments, two disciplinary strands of research are significant. First, environmental psychology provides a theoretical foundation to emotional responses through the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) model, defined by Mehrabian and Russell (1974) and subsequently developed for retail environments by Donovan and Rossiter (1982) to examine consumer behavior through the Pleasure–Arousal–Dominance model (Fiore & Kim, 2007). Their influence is found in the servicescapes concept, which specifically focuses on customer and employee interactions and behavior mediated by the physical environment (Bitner, 1992). Second, research in “atmospherics” (Kotler, 1973) has developed understanding of consumer evaluations of atmospheric cues and their influence on behavior in retail environments (Turley & Milliman, 2000). The atmospherics research tradition focuses on the influence of individual variables, mostly controlled by the retailer, on consumer responses (Verhoef et al., 2009). These theoretical frameworks have made a substantial contribution towards behavioral studies in store environments, and following the conventions of quantitative research has sought relationships between variables, systems of organization, verifiable facts and lawlike generalizations. Data collection through experimentation and surveys is used to explain phenomena and build theory (Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Creswell, 2003).

2.2. Interpretive research approaches

Interpretivism provides an alternative paradigm to post-positivistic, quantitative research design. It aims to gain insights into customer experiences in retail environments, and holds that in retail practice, multiple stimuli interact and influence consumers' in-store experiences (Healy, Beverland, Oppewal, & Sands, 2007; Sands, 2008). As consumers' overall perceptions about a specific store can also influence their overall preference for that store (Thang & Tan, 2003), the interest is increasing for undertaking research in retail settings more “holistically”. Finding its origins in phenomenology and Gestalt thinking about designed environments, that is, a frame of reference wherein a place is considered to be a totality, a whole where various elements interact so that users experience the space as more than the sum of its constituent parts, researchers aim to explain how consumers perceive and are influenced by the entire in-store atmosphere (Healy et al., 2007; Sands, 2008).

The centrality of the consumer in the shopping environment finds support too in Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), which explains that research in the customer–environment relationship has often minimized the importance of the consumer, their situation and context (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Mariampolski, 1999; Penalzoza, 1999). The CCT stream of literature focuses on consumers' use of a designed space for the

production of personally significant experiences, meanings and purposes (Arnould, Price, & Tierney, 1998; Sherry, 1998).

Notably, business and management research tends to marginalize the methodologies of designers themselves and their holistic, non-linear approach to design problems. It has long been understood that buildings can have a symbolic meaning beyond their instrumental purpose (Berg & Kreiner, 1990; Rapoport, 1982). More overtly, the outcome of the design process in commercial projects that integrate both the exterior and interior of the store is consistent brand communication (Din, 2000). Drawing on the visual strength of the brandscape, postmodernist architecture and design consciously communicate retail brand identity (Riewoldt, 2002; Brauer, 2002). From these perspectives, retail interiors, which need to be designed or studied, should be approached as holistic totalities, as “wholes” where various elements interact and determine how consumers feel and behave in a space. Hence the relevance of interpretive research (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Carù & Cova, 2007), in which researchers make use of participant-based methodologies for studying consumer behavior and experiences in designed environments.

Despite the clear advantages of positivistic approaches, it is argued that they have a limited practicality for gaining insight into customers' impressions about design attributes (Pullman & Robson, 2007). Interpretive approaches and visual research methodologies in particular, are appropriate when the research aim is to understand consumer experiences in the context of designed spaces.

3. Visual research methodologies

From the viewpoint of different social and cultural research perspectives (Harper, 2002; Prosser, 2007; Schroeder, 1998, 2002), visual research can contribute to understanding both the symbolic and physical meanings of the built environment. Since Wagner's (1979) work on photography as a research method, researchers have increasingly demonstrated an interest “in handing the camera to those whose lives we wish to explore...because photography offers opportunities for research participants to express their subjectivities as – quite literally – their view of the world” (Warren, 2005, p. 865). From the first use of photography as a research method, visual research methods succeeded in disciplines with traditional ethnographic histories, namely anthropology and sociology (Berg, 2008). More recently, researchers in consumer behavior and marketing have reassessed photography and film as research methods to explore consumers' perceptions about and experiences of retail environments (Burt, Johansson, & Thelander, 2007; Kent & Kirby, 2009).

Within the field of visual research and its methodology, researchers have identified four visual research approaches, namely (1) acknowledging images as data themselves, that is, visual signs and symbols that allow to gain insight in the cultures and people that produced them; (2) using images as a way to truly document social, cultural and physical processes as they are happening; (3) employing images as stimuli to elicit information from participants whereby the image is produced by someone other than the research participant; and (4) using images to help participants to express their feelings, beliefs and so on, either as an aid to verbal narrative, or in place of it. In this respect, the visual material functions as a communicative tool whereby the research participants themselves produce the images (Harper, 2002; Warren, 2005). It is this approach that Wagner (1979) calls “native image-making”, also widely known as “photo-elicitation”, and it is this term that authors will use in the remainder of this paper.

Photo-elicitation refers to the methodology in which a researcher asks participants to take photographs that depict some aspect of their experiences (Warren, 2005). Afterwards, the photographs are inserted into a research interview, and act as a communication bridge between the interviewer and the interviewee. Collier (1957) initially proposed its use in social science research and the steady growth of interest

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