



Get the picture? Visual servicescapes and self-image congruity



Michael Breazeale ^{a,*}, Nicole Ponder ^{b,1}

^a Marketing, School of Business, Indiana University Southeast, 4201 Grant Line Road HH-214, New Albany, IN 47150, United States

^b Marketing, College of Business, Mississippi State University, Box 9582, Mississippi State, MS 39762, United States

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ABSTRACT

Examination of consumers' relationships with brands is available in depth only for the last decade. As brand relationship theory evolves from the early stages, researchers across disciplines have examined multiple theoretical traditions for guidance. To explore the reasons that consumers form relationships with some retailers, the authors borrow a method from the field of anthropology – the photo-elicitation technique. This method allows researchers to explore the deeply-held emotional responses that consumers have to retail servicescapes and provides insight regarding the specific factors that encourage the formation of lucrative relationships between consumer and retailer. The study finds and names five categories of relationships that differ on perceived self-image congruity and involvement: Perfect Matches, Mismatches, Fair-Weather Friends, Best Friends, and Acquaintances. A better understanding of these relationships may benefit both researchers and practitioners.

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1. Introduction

On the website for catalog retailer, The J. Peterman Company, founder John Peterman writes, “People want things that are hard-to-find. Things that have resonance, but a factual romance about them.” This concept is the basis for his successful retail operation and the inspiration for a popular recurring character on the television sitcom *Seinfeld*. As brands are positioned more on the basis of intangible attributes and benefits that exceed actual performance, a growing realization exists that the creation of a strong retailer personality and rich in-store experiences play a vital role in building retailer brand equity (Ailawadi & Keller, 2004).

Self-image congruence (SIC) is one mechanism through which retailer personality acts on consumer attitudes. “SIC” includes cognitive and affective assessments that a focal brand possesses qualities consistent with the consumer's own self-image (Sirgy, 1982). Marketing research has examined the role of SIC in consumer evaluations of malls (Chebat, El Hedli, & Sirgy, 2009; Chebat, Sirgy, & St James, 2006), services (Yim, Chan, & Hung, 2007), celebrity endorsements (Marshall, Na, State, & Deuskar, 2008), and brand sponsorships (Sirgy, Lee, Johar, & Tidwell, 2008). Empirical evidence suggests that SIC impacts consumer attitudes, preferences, and purchase intentions toward products and brands (e.g., Aaker, 1999; Sirgy, 1985; Yim et al., 2007).

Products consumed conspicuously or visibly versus inconspicuous and invisible products are more likely to invoke consumer personality

associations such as SIC (Sirgy, 1982). While consumers consume many products and services publicly, the bricks-and-mortar retailer may be the most visibly-consumed product of all. For other conspicuously consumed products, research focuses on the importance of reference groups in the formation of consumer-brand connections (e.g., Moore & Homer, 2008; Swaminathan, Page, & Gurhan-Canli, 2007; White & Dahl, 2007). No uncovered research, however, examines the role of the retail servicescape in creating personality associations for consumers. As a factor more easily manipulated by the retailer than a consumer's reference groups, this subject is worthy of research.

Therefore, the purpose of this research is to combine qualitative techniques (the photo elicitation method and content analysis) and quantitative methods (cluster analysis) to explore the ability of the visual retail servicescape (VRS) to help retailers form relationships with consumers. The study addresses the following specific research questions. (1) What are consumers' reactions to the VRS of a particular retailer? (2) How do consumers connect the retailer's VRS with their own self-concept? (3) What level of involvement with the retailer do consumers exhibit, based on the retailer's VRS? Based on answers to these questions, the authors discover five categories of consumer relationships with retailers: Perfect Matches, Mismatches, Fair-Weather Friends, Best Friends, and Acquaintances.

2. Literature review

2.1. Retail personality

Functional qualities and psychological attributes combine to suggest a retailer's personality, defining the store in the customer's

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 812 941 2523; fax: +1 812 941 2672.

E-mail addresses: mbreazea@ius.edu (M. Breazeale), nponder@cobilan.msstate.edu (N. Ponder).

¹ Tel.: +1 662 325 1998; fax: +1 662 325 7012.

mind. Intangible traits of retailer personality that include store layout and display, styling, and service facilities play a vital role in attracting customers to a particular retailer (Rich & Portis, 1964). This perceived personality then helps the consumer to form relationships with the brands whose personalities the consumer perceives as similar to his own (Aaker, 1997). The effects of such relationships include increased levels of consumer trust and loyalty (Fournier, 1998). But how does the perceived retail personality impact consumer decision making?

2.2. Atmospheric impact

Interior designers say that good design tells a story (Yanow, 1995). Whether the subdued drama of an elegant restaurant or the exotic romance of a carefully designed hotel room, the design should speak to the people who share the space. This idea is at the core of the retailing phenomenon called atmospherics (Kotler, 1973). An effective retail atmosphere allows for maximum “projection” (Kotler, 1973, p. 61) by a multitude of patrons, allowing consumers to interpret a meaning from the combined atmospheric cues in the environment. As Kotler (1973) predicts, atmosphere has become the primary product of many retail establishments and that atmosphere is a chief form of competition for retailers of similar product classes.

Emotional responses to environmental stimuli impact the length of time and the amount of money consumers spend in an environment (Donovan & Rossiter, 1982; Greenland & McGoldrick, 1996; Turley & Bolton, 1999; Turley & Chebat, 2002). Emotions also impact perceptions of time/effort and psychic costs (Baker, Parasuraman, Grewal, & Voss, 2002) and directly influence the amount of unplanned purchases (Kent, 2003). Indeed, Baker et al. (2002) find that consumers' perceptions of design cues contribute more to favorable retailer attitudes than either social cues (employee attitudes and actions) or merchandise cues (quality and value).

While multiple elements combine to create retail atmosphere (e.g., sounds, scents, crowding, haptic sensations), the visual element is the most diagnostic for consumers because visual stimuli are immediately accessible (e.g., Bellizzi, Crowley, & Hasty, 1983; Lurie & Mason, 2007). The human mind can only process a given amount of complex stimuli and often attempts to oversimplify circumstances and surroundings, abstracting only the meanings that appear most salient. Typically, consumers see a servicescape before they have the opportunity to process other pertinent cues, and as a result, form their opinion based on that visual impression. Thus VRS has important ramifications for retailers and their profitability.

3. Method

The focus of this study is ten national retailers (see Table 1), based on their advertising expenditures (e.g., Andrews & Boyle, 2008; Johnson, 2007), inclusion in popular press listings of top U.S. retailers, and references to the retailer in prior academic retailing literature. These retailers expend resources to attract customers by creating customer-pleasing store environments. Similarity in resources, focus on creating a unique environment, and national presence facilitate inclusion of these retailers in a grounded theory approach (Warden, Huang, Liu, & Wu, 2008).

Table 1
Retailers in the study.

Bass Pro Shop	Kohl's
Bath and Body Works	Lowe's
Best Buy	Starbucks
Fresh Market	Target
Hollister Co.	Wal-Mart

3.1. Photo elicitation

Surveys may tap the consumer's conscious thought processes, but are somewhat less effective at capturing affective processes (Morse, 2002; Zaltman & Coulter, 1995). Consumers often experience difficulty verbalizing their responses even immediately after leaving the servicescape in question (Donovan & Rossiter, 1982). The presence of other shoppers or sales personnel can also cloud attempts to uncover consumers' feelings while actually in the servicescape (Eroglu & Machleit, 1990; Michon, Chebat, & Turley, 2005). A method utilized by environmental psychologists to overcome such difficulties is the photo-elicitation technique (PET), which employs photographs to guide interviews or surveys.

The value of PET relates to the fact that visual imagery reaches a deeper level of human consciousness than words alone (Harper, 2002). Inclusion of images tends to evoke more emotional responses. A second benefit of PET is longer, more comprehensive responses than questions asked without visual prompts (Collier, 1957). Finally, PET can also increase the validity and reliability of a study by ensuring that all respondents have a common point of reference (Becker, 1975; Collier, 1987; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The technique is useful for consumer behavior research (e.g. Sherry, 1990; Wallendorf & Arnould, 1988; Westbrook & Black, 1985), and specifically for the study of consumer responses to servicescapes (e.g. Rosenbaum, 2005; Venkatraman & Nelson, 2008).

3.2. Sample

A team of forty-eight trained recruiters who were senior undergraduates in a personal selling course undertook a final course project of recruiting ten participants for this study. All recruiters participated in a three-hour training session stressing the use of their selling skills in qualifying participants and obtaining their commitment to thoughtfully complete the online instrument. Each recruiter followed up with their participants to ensure that they had completed the survey. After the recruiters returned the lists of participants, a randomly selected 10% of respondents received confirmation e-mails to ensure no discrepancies. Four hundred eighty-eight consumers participated in the survey. After removal of incomplete responses, 446 usable responses remained. The resulting sample was 55% female with an average age of 34.4 years (the youngest respondent was 18 and the oldest was 83).

3.3. Instrument

This research employs PET to explore consumers' attitudes toward the VRS. The primary researcher took high-quality digital photographs of the interiors of the ten retailers rather than securing photographs from the retailers themselves to obtain realistic images of average locations. Three judges familiar with the retailers examined the photographs to determine their representativeness and consistency of quality. To avoid potential bias created by recognizable brand names, photo manipulation software removed all retailer logos and pricing information. The researchers also took special care to avoid the inclusion of consumers in the images to negate any potential bias to respondents. See Fig. 1 for a sample photo block.

Each recruited participant completed an online survey regarding only one of the retailers and answered open-ended questions regarding their opinions of that retailer only. Each recruiter distributed ten website addresses, one for each of ten identical surveys designed to elicit responses regarding photographs of only one of the ten retailers. The recruiter randomly selected from that group the retailer website given to the participant. Participants had no knowledge of the name of the retailer they would be evaluating. A random drawing for a \$100 Amazon gift certificate given to one participant provided incentive to provide thoughtful responses.

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