

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

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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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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. Boedeker, 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

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