Place Attachment: The Social Dimensions of the Retail Environment and the Need for Further Exploration

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of our study was to explore the social dimensions of the retail environment. While factors such as atmospherics, service and tenant variety contributed to our participants' perceived pleasurable shopping experiences, the social dimensions of shopping were important because they fulfilled consumers' social needs. Indeed, for some of our participants, the social connection, whether it was direct or indirect, was more or equally important to their perceived pleasurable shopping experiences, as it contributed to whether they perceived the shopping experience to be pleasurable or not. Based on our preliminary findings, we suggest that there is a need for place-related identity concepts in retail research.

INTRODUCTION

In the past, being a shopper was often perceived to be synonymous with being a purchaser (Shields 1992b); but as Tauber's (1972) study revealed, people often have different motives for going shopping, from role-playing and self-gratification to seeking social experiences outside the home. The purpose of our study was to explore the social dimensions of the retail environment in order to investigate what factors contributed to consumers' pleasurable shopping experiences, and whether these factors directed consumers' retail patronage choices. Based on our preliminary findings, we suggest that there is a need for place-related identity concepts in retail research. As Clarke and Schmidt (1995) note, the way place has been defined in marketing literature, to date, has been very narrow in its focus. Retail literature has tended to focus on the physicality of the location, whereas, in disciplines such as geography and psychology, place is viewed in terms of its temporal, spatial, natural and social dimensions.

BACKGROUND

In both marketing literature and sociology literature, the experiential aspects of consumption have been regularly investigated because researchers have long acknowledged that 'consumption does not occur in a vacuum, products are integrated threads in the fabric of social life' (Solomon 1983, p.319). As Woods (1981), cited in Holbrook *et al.* (1984, p.728) states: consumers 'engage in imaginative, emotional and appreciative consumption experiences'. As one of our participants below reinforces:

Sally (28yrs documentary production researcher): And that's part of the experience…in second-hand stores you'll have a different experience, and in another store you'll have another kind of experience, if you go to a book store then you've got the smell of the books. I've always really loved the smell of the books and you just pull them out from the shelves and sitting down on the floor, and being able to just flick through. So I guess you just don't go for one kind of experience when you go browsing you look for a whole lot.

These types of consumption experiences are concerned with feelings, fantasies, and fun, and are very much multisensory and emotive (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). However, one could propose that the interaction one has with others in the retail environment, whether it is direct or indirect, also contributes to consumers' multisensory and emotive retail experiences. However, despite the fact that disciplines such as sociology, geography and environmental psychology view the retail environment as a haven for social activity (e.g. Relph 1976; Morris 1988/2001; Miller, Jackson et al. 1998), very few researchers within the area of marketing or retail have investigated the social nature of the retail environment in terms of how retail sites or servicescapes are consumed within a social context (e.g. Goodwin and Gremler 1994; Tombs and McColl-Kennedy 2003); how people identify with retail sites and other persons within these sites (e.g. Sirgy, Grewal et al. 2000); the influence that such identifications may have on directing retail patronage choice (e.g. McGrath and Otnes 1995); or the emotional ties one establishes with places (Borghini and Zaghi 2006). And yet, as some sociologists contend, the retail environment is primarily a social environment (Prus and Dawson 1991; Shields 1992; Miller, Jackson et al. 1998). The reasons why people become attached to different locations extend well beyond the location's physical characteristics, the types of products it sells and/or the level of service it provides. As Prus and Dawson (1991, p.149) discovered, 'the desirable or enjoyable features of shopping tend to revolve around the ways in which people *involve their selves* in shopping activity'.

This has important implications for the marketer because, as it has been suggested *conceptually*, consumers are forming social links with others through their consumption activities (Aubert-Gamet and Cova 1999; Cova, 1997). Accordingly, Cova (1997) and Aubert-Gamet and Cova (1999) suggest conceptually that the link between consumers is perhaps becoming more significant than the actual product. We propose that the environment also facilitates these social links. While products may link people to one another via symbolic consumption, locations can also link people. For example, friendships can be nurtured through retail sites (e.g. Joan and Mary might only meet each other at café X), and relationships may be maintained via the patronage of certain locations (e.g. mother and daughter ritually shop together at Mall X). The consequence of this is that, while some forms of consumption may decrease, others may increase because consumers will choose locations not only for their use value (e.g. location X sells product x, y and z) but for their 'link value'. Therefore, we propose that social interactions within the retail environment may influence how one perceives and identifies with the environment, as well as influence how these sites are experienced, and socially constructed. Whilst we acknowledge that there has been much research within sociology with respect to the social dimensions of shopping and the retail environment (e.g. Shields 1992; Falk and Campbell 1997; Miller 1998; Miller, Jackson et al. 1998), we argue that marketers should take ownership of the "shopping environment" and study it from a social dimensions perspective.

METHOD

Our preliminary study employed an interpretivist methodological approach because we were interested in exploring the participants' lived experiences (Crotty 1999). Since this study was interested in how individuals construct meaning, qualitative meth-

ods were used. The advantage of using qualitative methods is that it enables one to focus on ordinary events that happen in 'real life settings' (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

Using the snowballing technique, whereby each interviewee is asked by the interviewer to recommend other potential participants for the study (Spreen 1997), purposive sampling took place. However, to avoid possible network bias, we used multiple starting points when contacting women (McMahon 1995). Twenty women ranging in age from 18 to 74 were recruited and interviewed individually. We recruited women because we wanted to eliminate any possible gender effects because the interviewer was also a woman. However, we acknowledge that it would also be interesting to investigate male consumers and their experiences within the retail environment at a later date. Interviews varied in length ranging from one to two hours, were unstructured in nature, and took place in participants' homes. Pleasurable shopping experiences were restricted to physical settings, such as shopping centres, malls and so on.

Following phenomenological principles, thematic analysis was used to analyze the verbatim texts. The advantage of using thematic analysis is that it not only involves systematically analyzing the text and looking for patterns within the text, it is also an iterative approach, whereby initial categorization may be changed and moved in relation to other texts (Dittmar and Drury 2000, p.119). Two independent judges were recruited to assist with the thematic analysis. Initially this was performed individually, but later all researchers discussed and resolved issues of disagreement. The goal of the analysis was not to seek a single truth; rather the goal was to ensure the plausibility of our interpretation and trustworthiness of the data (Wallendorf and Belk 1989).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The initial findings revealed that a number of factors influenced participants' perceived pleasurable shopping experiences and patronage motives. However, due to the page limit constraints we will only focus on the social dimensions. We define "social dimensions" as those factors that link people to each other, to their community, to their society. Three main themes relating to the social dimensions of the retail environment emerged: The *Social Connection Factor*, *A Sense of Community*, and *Cultivating Commercial Friendships*; although we do acknowledge that there is some overlap. We define *social connections* as the social link one feels with others either *directly*, e.g., one interacts with people in the retail environment, or *indirectly*, e.g., one feels a social connection with others in the retail environment but may not feel the need to interact directly with others in this environment; *a sense of community* is the desire to feel a sense of belonging and connection with one's community; and lastly, *cultivating commercial friendships* can be defined as the desire to create good social experiences within the retail environment. However, due to the page constraints, we will not focus on *cultivating commercial friendships* as our findings support previous research (e.g. Gwinner, Gremler et al. 1998; Price and Arnould 1999).

The social connection factor

Lorna (74yrs retired book keeper): When I used to mind the two little ones, *Glenfield* before it changed [the old mall before it was renovated], used to have Christmas school holiday entertainment. And if I was minding the children on those particular days I would take them up to watch it. And you know everybody there, people chat and you chat and all the kids would sit down on the floor and watch it and participate. It's really good.

One of the most revealing findings in this study was the social connection factor. Whilst Cova (1997) suggests conceptually that people purchase products in order to form links with others, we propose that the retail environment itself also facilitates these links. Some of our participants formed attachments with various retail sites because they perceived these locations to be conducive to social interaction. Both Lorna (above) and Mary (below) refer to their favorite places when discussing why they regularly patronize these locations. In both cases, it was the contact they had with others, as well as the location that made the experience enjoyable.

Mary (40yrs retail assistant): We go out for fun. When there's the two of us, we go out for fun. Most of it is done through the different op shops [regular second-hand shops] on *The Shore* when we go out. And we have fun. And it's just because of the person you're with. It causes or adds to the fun, not what you're doing, it's the person you're with that causes the fun.

Shields' (1992b) argument that the market-place is an important space because it encourages social connection and provides a sense of belonging certainly resonated with some of our participants. This was particularly relevant to Kerry, a recent British immigrant, who had few friends in NZ. Kerry frequently visits "the mall" in her local area whenever she feels the need to experience a social connection.

Kerry (33yrs postgraduate psychology student): Certainly from going to the shopping mall I'd say because yeah, I'm very much going out to meet people. Or not to meet people, just to be around people. I mean it's almost like you feel a connection in that you know that people are there for the same kind of reasons that you're there for. I mean it's a very loose connection but you know, it's a connection of sorts...

Indeed, for many of the participants, it was the social contact with others, which contributed to their pleasurable experiences when visiting their favorite retail sites, whether it was indirectly as Sue's comments below suggest, or directly as in Lorna's case (see below).

Sue (52yrs secretary): Oh yeah I like the social contact, all the people the buzzy people…I think it's nice just seeing other people and seeing what they're wearing and, seeing all the little human dramas that are going on.

Lorna: Well every week I just wander in a have a look at a lot of these shops you know…I will chat to different ones [people] too. You know, I can give a smile on the way up the escalator and you know quite often if a couple of people are looking at something, you might sort of discuss it with them, although you don't know them from Adam.
Interviewer: Does that sort of make it nicer?
Lorna: Well I enjoy that, that's why it doesn't worry me shopping on my own. They might think "oh funny old girl" but it doesn't worry me.

Aubert-Gamet and Cova (1999) speak of current retail environments as being nonplaces, places in which people wander about invisible to others, i.e., invisible to other shoppers, invisible to sales staff. But the results from this study suggest otherwise. Participants from this study did interact within the shopping environment, whether it was directly or indirectly. And just like the findings in McGrath and Otnes' (1995) study, strangers in the shopping envi-

ronment were often quite happy to interact with other shoppers, for a variety of reasons. One reason being, to feel a sense of connection.

Sue: Well that's another thing. I think people maybe do go to the mall because they don't know their neighbors now, because we've lost that sense of community so at least going to the mall is your NEIGHBORHOOD. In a sense isn't it, I mean that's your neighborhood, you get to know it, the same as you would have years ago when you went to the local grocer and the local butcher and the local dairy and the little post office, you know those places don't exist anymore, so the mall is perhaps your, you know, community, it's your community neighborhood perhaps….

For some of our participants the social connection factor was often the main reason for going shopping, hence supporting sociology and environmental psychology research that suggests that people become attached to locations for the social connection (e.g. Low and Altman 1992).

Kerry: And just sometimes I won't have any particular desire to buy anything but I will go to the shopping mall [refers to a specific mall] just to be around people.

As Manzo (2003) states, one's relationship to places can be a conscious process as well as an unconscious one.

Because regularity and routine are part of our way of being-in-the-world, indeed we are not always conscious of our feeling for place (Hester 1993). Moreover, places that provide comfort and security tend to be places with which we are familiar, so we may be attached to them on an unconscious level (Manzo 2003, p.53).

Meaning may also be attributed to one's sense of place. People often acquire a sense of belonging and purpose via personal attachments with a physical location (e.g. Relph 1976), which in turn may give meaning to their lives. It is one's sense of place or rootedness that gives one a sense of belonging. If we move from retail and services literature to related areas in geography, psychology and sociology, we find recognition that the identity of place is not only restricted to its physical characteristics (e.g. Proshansky et al. 1983; Shields 1992; Miller et al. 1998), it is also related to the social constructions of place–those perceptions formed by individuals and groups (Lalli 1992). As Lalli (1992) states, it is a person's relationship with place and how they identify with place, not the identity of the place itself, that gives meaning to place.

Sense of community

Supporting the community or creating a "sense of community" was another reoccurring theme that emerged from our findings. In particular, locally owned shops were perceived by some of our participants as being representative of a community's spirit, unlike globally owned stores. And strip centres (shops that line a street) were perceived by some of our participants as being more in tune with community values when compared with malls because they believed strip centres were better at representing a local community's essence (e.g. uniqueness, hardworking values, local people, local businesses contributing to the community). This theme was probably best summed up by Toni, a 26-year-old television researcher:

Toni: …I feel best when I buy things from people that I like…compared to say the mall [versus strip centre], there's a

sense in both of those cases of people really putting their heart and soul into something. And I think that's the difference between going and buying at *Esprit* or somewhere compared to a second-hand shop that someone owns or even a designer shop that someone owns. You know they've actually really put some effort into it and it's not like it's just coming from the Swedish head office.

This is an interesting finding because we are dealing with perceptions rather than fact. In reality, the locally owned store may operate just like the globally owned store. And yet, one can relate Toni's comments back to self-esteem motives. People will often seek experiences that will contribute to his or her self-concept (Sirgy 1982; Markus and Kunda 1986). Toni's attitude may also tie in with the consumer resistance trend among small interest groups, or socially conscious consumers (Follows and Jobber 2000), as these sentiments are echoed by several of the participants in this study.

Sally: I do quite often consciously buy in smaller shops. Individually rather than brand big named shops because I'd rather support buying in a smaller community rather than something you know, big.... and *Borders* is the kind of contention mark for me. It's such a great shop but at the same time it is ultimately the American multinational.

One could therefore suggest that a pleasurable shopping experience, as well as one's level of attachment to a location, may also be influenced by an organization's identity. As Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) maintain, consumers' identification with certain companies often helps to satisfy one or more important self-definitional needs. If a person believes that his or her self-concept is incongruent with the store's image, he or she may experience uneasiness. If the organization's identity and values are not congruent with a consumer's values, the consumer may choose to shop elsewhere. Interestingly, some of the participants were often conflicted, as highlighted by Sally's comments above, and Tracy's comments below. The implication for retailers, therefore, should be to try and alleviate this tension. It would appear that some of our participants are searching for stores with which to identify with–such stores appear to be smaller and reflect the community to which they see themselves belonging to, and strongly identify with.

Tracy (21yrs university student): But I like the idea of department stores in the old fashioned way. But then I hate chain stores with a vengeance. Because I think, even though I buy at a lot of them, I just don't agree with the politics of them, I think they're pushing out nice boutique stores and you know, I hate to say it, but the mom and pop stores.

We would therefore suggest that the store's identity and/or retail location's identity is important to one's sense of community and even one's sense of belonging. The challenge for new shopping areas or areas that are undergoing change is to create or maintain a sense of community that reflects the values of the community in which the retail environment is situated.

A pervasive theme in Rowles' (1983) study was 'insideness'. She investigated place attachment in terms of its physical, social and autobiographical dimensions. 'Insideness' consists of three components–'physical insideness', familiarity of the physical environment; 'social insideness', integration with the community; 'autobiographical insideness', historical dimensions/ remembered

places–this relates to a sense of self (Rowles 1983). As Rowles (1983, p.308) states, 'imbuing places with meaning as [an] expression of one's identity serves several purposes'-it creates a sense of belonging, provides a sense of continuity between the present and future, and it plays a role in the adaptation of personal identity. 'To abandon these places either physically or, more importantly, cognitively, is to give up identity' (Rowles 1983, p.308). Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996, p.206) go on to note that one's attachment with a place may help to support and develop aspects of an individual's and/or group's identity. Consequently, changes within the servicescape, for some people, may represent a sense of loss and hence a loss of identity.

Betty (70yrs retired shop keeper): Oh yes. I mean when you're travelling, you know how you stop off at little towns. Each little town has got the old fashioned drapery store and things like that. That's FABULOUS to go in and look around. It's amazing what they've got that these shops haven't got…Well I don't know whether it's, I shouldn't say they're back waters because they're thriving places some of them, but yeah, it would be the culture of the town. It's a feeling of, a little humming little business centre. And it's not all offices in the streets. And you know it's a SHOPPING centre, it's not a BUSINESS centre.
Interviewer: Whereas…
Betty: Takapuna I think is more of a business centre now, isn't it. You know, there's banks and cafes, eating places. You can name on your hands how many shops that you could spend all day going in and looking at. I mean Birkenhead is more fun to go through, going up and down that street, looking at all their shops, than it is to go to Takapuna. It's different.

And yet, it is often during times of change that our feelings about places become conscious (Brown and Perkins 1992). As research shows, when there is a disruption to our daily lives, such as a burglary, relocation or disaster, it is accompanied by an increased awareness of our environment (Manzo 2003, p.53). This too could apply to the retail environment–for example, when a retail location's identity undergoes change due to physical or social transformations, one may become more aware of their local retail environment. For some people, they might experience a sense of loss whereas for others they might welcome a change. Overall, retail developers need to understand the relationship people have with place. Interestingly, Betty (see above) makes a distinction between shopping centres and business centres. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why some Central Business Districts (CBD) lack a positive shopping atmosphere; they are viewed as business hubs rather than community hubs, and individuals or groups can no longer identify with these locations.

DISCUSSION

Based on the findings from this study, we maintain that the social dimensions within the retail environment may influence one's perceived pleasurable shopping experiences and consequently retail patronage behavior. Understanding the social dimensions of the retail environment and the shopping experience should not be undervalued because understanding our retail environment from the consumer's perspective can lead to better management of the environment. Secondly, few studies in marketing and retail literature have investigated the social and communal aspects of the retail environment and the influence this may have on retail patronage. It is becoming increasingly important to view these sites as 'community spaces' (White and Sutton 2001) because people play a role in

shaping the identity of place, just as they do in shaping self-identity. While factors such as atmospherics, service and tenant variety contributed to our participants' perceived pleasurable shopping experiences, the social dimensions of shopping were also important as they fulfilled consumers' social needs. Indeed, for some of our participants, the social connection, whether it was direct or indirect, was more or equally important to their perceived pleasurable shopping experiences, as it contributed to whether they perceived the shopping experience to be pleasurable or not. This may consequently influence consumers' retail patronage behavior. Therefore, the question marketers and retailers need to ask themselves is, how well are we accommodating these social needs?

FUTURE RESEARCH

This exploratory research suggests a number of propositions to guide future research.

Proposition 1. Current marketing theories have limited ability to expand our understanding of how people consume space and assign meaning to space.

Accordingly, we suggest future research should draw upon theories outside the discipline of marketing, such as place-related identity (e.g. Proshansky et al. 1983), to better understand how people consume space and assign meanings to place; a sentiment also expressed by Borghini and Zaghi (2006). *Place* defines who we are and helps to answer the "Who am I" question and yet we as humans also define *place*. Consequently, one should view place not just as a point of geographical interest but also as something that may reveal essential information about the human ways of being-in-the-world (Stefanovic 1998, p.33). By understanding place in terms of its cultural identity and the rituals that eventuate in places, Clarke and Schmidt (1995) suggest that service organizations can enhance the overall environmental encounter.

Place-related identity is a term that is used within environmental psychology to explore the relationships between people and place (Lalli 1992). We suggest that the exploration of place attachment, a concept more commonly used in geography and environmental psychology, may further enrich marketing's understanding of retail patronage. And yet, place attachment is particularly relevant to retail research because the retail environment is primarily a social environment (Prus and Dawson 1991; Shields 1992; Miller, Jackson et al. 1998). Hence, the following proposition:

Proposition 2. The reasons why consumers become attached to retail locations extend beyond the locations' physical characteristics, the service component, and/or the types of products they sell.

Consequently, an exploration of place attachment is particularly relevant to retail research. Place attachment is the concept of people being bonded to places (e.g. Low and Altman 1992; Eisenhauer, Krannich et al. 2000). It involves an interchange between emotions (affect and feelings), cognition (thought, knowledge, and belief) and practice (action, behavior) (Low and Altman 1992; Vorkinn and Riese 2001). However, an attachment to a place does not have to be individually specific; groups and communities can collectively share attachments to places (Low and Altman 1992; Vorkinn and Riese 2001). At the same time, the degree to which one forms an attachment, i.e., the level of intensity can also vary (Rubinstein and Parmalee 1992).

When exploring retail literature, one can also make comparisons with recreation research. Within outdoor recreation research

there was a tendency to identify a setting's features when exploring visitors' motivations (Williams, Patterson et al. 1992). In other words, the commodity view of recreation places dominated recreation research (Williams *et al.* 1992). Like recreation research, much of the focus in retail literature has been on the physical characteristics of the location, in addition to the service component–but as Williams *et al.*'s (1992, p.42) study found, emotional attachments to a recreation place could not easily be captured by multiattribute concepts, i.e., the setting's attributes. We maintain that this also holds true for the retail environment, and suggest future research may care to examine the following proposition:

Proposition 3. Emotional attachments to retail environment cannot be explained only in terms of the setting's attributes, rather there is likely to be an interchange between emotions (affect and feelings), cognition (thought, belief and knowledge), and practice (action, behavior).

One's attachment to a retail location can also serve a number of functions for individuals, groups, and cultures (e.g. Low and Altman 1992; Eisenhauer, Krannich et al. 2000). On the one hand, place attachment provides one with a sense of security, familiarity, and continuity between the present and the past, as well as a sense of control and relaxation in one's everyday life. On the other hand, place attachment links people with others, links friends, families, subcultures and so forth (Low and Altman 1992, p.10), hence creating a sense of belonging (Rowles 1983). As Low and Altman (1992, p.10) state, 'place attachment may contribute to the formation, maintenance, and preservation of the identity of a person, group, or culture'. And yet, place is also moulded by the very people who occupy it. Hence the following proposition is posed for future consideration:

Proposition 4. Place is co-created by the consumers' interaction with the retail environment.

Findings from the study also highlighted other areas for potential research. It would appear that some consumers are searching for stores with which to identify with. If he or she believes that his or her self-concept is incongruent with a store's image, he or she may experience uneasiness and hence shop elsewhere to alleviate this conflict. Some of the participants were conflicted about shopping in certain locations/stores due to their sense of social responsibility. Consequently, retail managers ought to carefully consider tenant variety in both malls and strip centres. But, perhaps more importantly, retailers of multinational stores ought to consider incorporating strategies into their management practices to alleviate consumer tension and/or resistance, which may necessitate them to become more community focussed at a local level. Hence, proposition five:

Proposition 5. Consumers prefer to patron stores with which they identify, therefore considering the consumer and the dominant culture is essential for retailers.

Secondly, since community (or the perception of community) appears to be an important component for some of our participants, we suggest that retailers should attempt to create unique identities (and capture the community's spirit) when developing new retail sites, particularly if it is a franchise chain (i.e. malls). It appears that heterogeneous environments are preferable over homogeneous ones. Not only will this encourage people to identify with their local shopping centres, it may also encourage people to visit neighbouring franchise malls.

Lastly, it would be worthwhile to explore the retail environment from both from a male perspective and a female perspective to see how similar or dissimilar their shopping experiences are. How important is the social dimension for males–an environment that has generally been perceived as a gendered one (e.g. Jansen-Verbeke 1987; Shields 1992; Woodruffe 1997; Miller, Jackson et al. 1998). We suggest the following:

Proposition 6. Place attachment in a retail environment is more likely to be of importance to females than it is to males.

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