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# **Exploring the Everyday Retail Experience: the Discourses of Style and Design**

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In contrast to earlier studies focusing on spectacular retail store environments, this study concentrates on examining ordinary retail stores and everyday retail experiences. The article explores how different sorts of retail environments influence consumers' experience and behaviour. The research uses a comparative case study and employs the theoretical framework of geosemiotics. Investigating three different stores from the perspective of architectural style reveals that cultural meanings are firmly attached to interior style design and these can be traced in customers' retail experiences. Our findings suggest, firstly, that stores' focusing solely on functional aspects such as the efficient use of space, standardization and self-service rather than also considering aesthetic issues leads to rather neutral and uninteresting retail experiences. Secondly, they show that the retail store environment affects the social relationships that consumers establish in commercial locations. Thirdly, the study indicates that customers' overall retail experience is linked to their perceptions of the store's social and environmental responsibility and moral values. On the whole, this research advances our theoretical understanding of everyday consumption experiences.

## **Exploring the Everyday Retail Experience: the Discourses of Style and Design**

### **1. Introduction**

In recent years there has been vivid discussion in the field of consumer culture research of the retail experiences which different sorts of branded retail environments are able to provide for consumers (Hollenbeck et al. 2008; Kozinets et al. 2002; 2004; Peñaloza 1999; Sherry 1998; Sherry et al. 2001). Consumer culture theory has mainly concentrated on investigating world-famous brands and their flagship stores, extraordinarily entertaining retail environments and consumption activities (e.g. Nike Town Chicago, American Girl Place Chicago, World of Coca-Cola Atlanta, ESPN Zone Chicago, Las Vegas). This has highlighted the role of spectacle (Firat and Venkatesh 1995) and entertainment in customers' retail experiences. Previous studies of shopping experiences have addressed consumer experiences as 'memorable' (Pine and Gilmore 1999), 'extraordinary' (LaSalle and Britton 2003), and 'spectacular' (Borghini et al. 2009).

Indeed, for today's consumers, commercial spaces are places not only for doing necessary routine shopping (Addis and Holbrook 2001), but also for spending their leisure time and enjoying themselves (Bloch et al. 1994; Falk and Campbell 1997; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982; Jones 1999; Kozinets et al. 2002; 2004; Sherry et al. 2001), for socializing and being around with other people (Aubert-Gamet and Cova 1998;

Bloch et al. 1994; Johnstone 2012; Johnstone and Todd 2012; Rosenbaum 2006).

So far there has been little discussion about less spectacular retail environments and the ordinary consumption experiences (Carù and Cova 2003) which everyday retail environments may bring about. Thus, the aim of this article is to explore how consumers' retail experiences are constructed in everyday retail environments. We examine the environments of three retail stores from different sectors of retailing – an optician's, an eco-store and a bookstore – in order to explore how consumer experiences are constructed in different kinds of store environments, and to highlight the multidimensionality and diversity of everyday retail experiences.

Consumption experience has become an important element in understanding consumer behaviour and in designing products and services (Carù and Cova 2003; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). While there are numerous definitions of experience, consumption experience has often been defined as a personal occurrence with emotional significance which includes consumers' interaction with the products or services consumed (Carù and Cova 2003, 270). Healy et al. (2007) suggest that the retail experience takes place in a physical space and in an "emotional labyrinth". An experience occurs as the outcome of human interactions with environmental clues and it is inherently personal, existing in the mind of an individual who has been engaged at an emotional, physical, intellectual, or even spiritual level (Pine and Gilmore 1999). Extraordinary, hedonistic retail experiences involve amusement, fun and play (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982; Arnold and Reynolds 2003), while everyday shopping experiences are primarily characterized as carrying out duties, bearing responsibility and caring for neighbours, encapsulating both moral and social values (Miller 1998, 35).

Today, commercial spaces are a part of the everyday environment and structure people's practices, and therefore retailing stands in a close relationship to everyday culture (Cassinger 2010, 5; Scott 2009, 139). We have chosen for the objects of this study three different kinds of shops that sell ordinary products and that do not display extraordinary or festive environments. The shops are located in the shopping area in the city centre and there is nothing special about them. In other words, consumers use them as part of their everyday life. We understand everyday life as a social construction which is founded on interaction between subjective meanings and external conditions produced by objective structures. People are seen not just as passive objects but rather as active subjects who shape the surrounding reality by altering and individualising things creatively in order to make them their own. (de Certeau 1984.)

More specifically, the objectives of this study are to examine how consumers interpret and experience different types of retail stores, and how this is reflected in the social action that takes place in the stores. As moral dimensions of consumption play an important role in everyday life, we aim to explore how consumers' perceptions of the stores' social and environmental responsibility are connected with the overall retail experience. Basically, this research aims to advance our theoretical understanding of everyday consumption experiences.

This study draws on consumer culture research (Arnould and Thompson 2005), which has developed a branch of research that examines retail theory from the cultural perspective (Borghini et al. 2009). This body of research has given insights into the ways in which consumers engage in shopping to realize a variety of life projects (Arnould 2005) and has put emphasis on consumer agency, showing that consumers play an active

role in the co-production of retailing sites (e.g. Cova 1997; Kozinets et al. 2004; Peñaloza 1999; Sherry 1998a, 1998b; Sherry et al. 2001).

To sum up, consumer experiences in retail environments have previously been studied from various approaches. Studies drawing on a cultural approach have been able to illuminate the nuanced nature of extraordinary experiences in different festive or spectacular retail environments. This paper aims to extend previous understanding by applying a cultural approach (Borghini et al. 2009; Carù and Cova 2003; Kozinets et al. 2002; 2004; Peñaloza 1999; Sherry 1998; Sherry et al. 2001) to the study of more ordinary retail environments and more everyday experiences.

This article is organized as follows. First there is a review of the relevant literature concerned with retail experience within the field of retail research. Then the principles of data collection are described, the methodological framework is presented and the mode of analysis is explained. This is followed by the presentation of the results from the empirical study. Finally, conclusions are drawn and future research lines are proposed.

## **2. Theoretical Background: Retail experience and space**

The influence on consumer behaviour of retail space and the atmosphere in retail stores has been studied since the 1960's. Most early studies adopted a behavioural approach and explored consumer responses to the physical stimuli in retail stores (Aubert-Gamet 1997; Aubert-Gamet & Cova 1999; Turley and Milliman 2000).

However, the stimulus-response approach is nowadays commonly considered insufficient because it considers the consumer as a passive object rather than an active participant (Johnstone and Todd 2012). The emphasis on behavioural approaches left gaps in our

understanding of the holistic nature of consumers' spatial retail experiences and failed to take into account the social components of the environment (Aubert-Gamet and Cova 1999; Baker et al.1992; Bitner 1992; Turley and Milliman 2000).

Studies exploring consumers' image perceptions have concluded that image is a holistic, global impression (Zimmer and Golden 1988; Keaveney and Hunt 1992), and that affect or emotion may be an important part of image perceptions (Zimmer and Golden 1988; Darden and Babin 1994). While image studies have emphasized the various dimensions of psychological perception, they have not paid attention to the social nature of retail environments (Johnstone 2012; Rosenbaum 2006). Retail image reflects consumers' perception of retail spaces, which is connected with retail patronage behaviour. However, as contemporary retail environments are far from uniform and therefore cannot all be characterized in the same terms, and as they are designed to convey strong emotional and social meanings, the scope of retail image is inadequate to encompass consumer experience.

Semiotic approaches have highlighted the role of material objects as signs in the construction of consumption environments (Floch 1988). According to this view, signs are regarded "as objects, as material forms that are used and manipulated by social processes, especially advertising and commercial marketing" (Gottdiener 1998, 33). Themed environments provide material spaces in which consumers can fulfil their fantasies and desires. Semiotic studies have deepened our understanding of the complexity of environments and the interaction between customers and environments. However, they have not considered consumers as actors, or active agents taking part in the construction of the environment. (Aubert-Gamet 1997). Semiotic approaches have

failed to shed light on how people in particular social contexts actually interpret texts, which may require contextual approaches (McQuarrie and Mick 1992).

Consumer experiences have also been examined from the phenomenological approach as situated in the life-world (Thompson et al. 1989; 1990 ). This approach entails the view that a consumers' experience is a pattern that emerges in the current experiential context and can only be described as it is "lived" from a first-person view (Thompson et al. 1989, 137). Joy & Sherry (2003) studied aesthetic experience in the museum context, focusing on the links between embodiment, movement and multisensory experience. Culturally oriented studies have addressed the holistic nature of experience as well as the emotional and social nature of consumption. Sherry (1998a) suggested that consumers appear to evaluate spatial experiences holistically rather than according to specific attributes. He also highlighted the emotional role of places in consumers' lives, emphasizing that consumers do not exist apart from their surrounding place (Sherry 2002). Retail spaces, it has further been argued, are not only physical locations but include as well a social aspect and serve as sites for personal and emotional experiences (Rosenbaum 2006; Sherry 1998a; 2002).

Several studies have presented detailed analyses of the rich experiences created in marketplace interactions: looking at thematized spaces (Gottdiener 1997; Kozinets 2002; Kozinets et al. 2004; Maclaran and Brown 2005), cultural consumption in museums (Goulding 2000; Hollenbeck et al. 2008), and 'spectacular consumption' (Belk 2000; Peñaloza 1999; Sherry 1998b). In these studies, consumption experience has been seen as culturally constructed. The cultural approach has made it possible to highlight the emotional, social and ideological sides of consumption, and thus uncover the interactive



and contextual character of consumer experience. Essentially, design elements and aesthetic aspects of consumption environments are captured by the culturally constituted experience.

Previous literature has discussed the various dimensions pertaining to consumption experience. These dimensions are useful in describing the nature of culturally constructed retail experience. The emotional aspect of consumption experience is well recognized in previous research (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982; Kemp and Kopp 2011; Tumbat 2011). Shopping has been seen as an emotional activity guided by pleasure-seeking motives, in which the consumer often seeks multi-sensory, imaginative and emotional satisfactions (Arnould and Reynolds 2003; Babin et al. 1994; Carù and Cova 2003; Holbrook 1999). Apart from this, shopping has been seen as a way of socializing (Bloch et al. 1994; Johnstone 2012; Johnstone and Todd 2012; Rosenbaum 2006). Social interaction among and between customers and retail staff is considered important today (Marrewijk and Broos 2012), as postmodern consumers are looking for the “linking value” in products and services (Aubert-Gamet and Cova 1999; Cova 1997).

Kozinets et al. (2004) suggest that consumers are an active part of the retail environment, becoming co-creators of the retail experience. Even in seemingly overpowering spectacular consumption environments, consumption is negotiated dialectically: consumer and producer interests are embedded in one another in a process of “interagency”. Consumers enjoy and actively participate in a dialectical relationship with the marketer in the retail setting.

Recently, attention has been drawn to the ability of retail environments to affect consumers ideologically. Borghini et al. (2009) discuss the role of moral and ethical

considerations and values in retail experiences. Their ethnographic exploration of American Girl Place sought to understand the ideological function of the retail brand in the lives of its consumers. Borghini et al. (2009) define retail brand ideology as an extensive representation of moral and social values throughout the physical retail environment.

Many retailers seek to differentiate themselves from their competitors by offering their customers deliberately created emotional sensations through the design of the shopping environment. While experiences are often considered to be very significant and unforgettable, in practice they vary in terms of intensity, from ordinary everyday life experiences to these more extraordinary experiences. Whereas memorable experiences involve extraordinary feelings or a flow experience, ordinary or mundane experiences refer to the simple pleasures of everyday events (Carù and Cova 2003) and responsibilities (Miller 1998). The majority of consumers' shopping activity occurs in the context of everyday life, but few studies have discussed the retail experiences taking place in ordinary shops.

### **3. Methodological considerations**

To understand the diversity of experiences and meanings associated with different kinds of retail environments, we employ in this study comparative case research design. This research approach allows us to examine in different contexts an object of study which cannot be captured by remaining in a single site (Miles and Huberman 1994). While the comparative case research design provides a means to build a solid research frame, the analysis employs geosemiotics, a theoretical framework to study the social meanings of the material placement of signs and discourses and people's actions in

the material world (Scollon and Scollon 2003). Geosemiotics is a variant of mediated discourse analysis which integrates other approaches drawing upon interactional sociolinguistics, social semiotics, critical discourse analysis and humanistic geography (Lou 2014). We use the term discourse in a broad sense to refer to a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories and statements that produce a particular version of events. Everyday language as well as the material and visual environment around us are made up of fragments of different discourses. (Fairclough 1995; van Leeuwen 2005, 95; Scollon and Scollon 2003.) Geosemiotics enables us to explore how language and signs make meaning in relation to where and when they are physically placed in the world, and highlights the links to social action. This multidimensional framework consists of three overlapping sub-systems which depict the modes in which language can be located in the material world: interaction order (including speech, movement and gesture), visual semiotics (including text and images), and place semiotics (all the other non-linguistic symbols that directly or indirectly represent languages), on whose intersections social action is always placed (Scollon and Scollon 2003, 13).

(Figure 1)

[Insert figure 1 here]

Figure 1. The interpretive framework of geosemiotics (Adapted from Scollon and Scollon 2003, 10)

The guiding principle for the selection of the retail stores was that they should exemplify different branches of retailing and differ from each other in terms of store design and style. The chosen stores were from different sectors of retailing: a bookshop, an optician's and an eco-store. All three shops were located in a small city in the centre of

Finland. Our data involved regular observation sessions, accompanying and interviewing some shoppers on a tour of the three research sites, and so-called shopping diaries.

The data collection period lasted 22 months and included 30 observation sessions ranging from 2 to 4 hours, resulting in a data set of approximately 350 pages and hundreds of photographs. Both passive and active observation methods were used. During quiet moments the researcher took advantage of the opportunity to interview shop assistants, off the record. On the whole, the observational data provided a preliminary basis for understanding how different kinds of retail spaces produce different patterns of social interaction and a certain atmosphere. Since retail experiences are not directly accessible by observing people's behaviour (Bruner 1986), it was important to conduct interviews in which consumers had the chance to express orally or in writing their own experiences and understanding of the retail environments that they were in. Hence, 17 accompanied shopping interviews (Lowrey et al. 2005) were carried out to get a closer insight into shoppers' behaviour, thoughts and feelings in different contexts (Healy et al. 2007). The interviewees were chosen by means of chain-referral sampling; the range of respondents represented equally both males and females, of various ages from 13 to 54, and diverse professions and occupations. The researcher took each interviewee on a shopping tour that included visits to all three retail stores in order to capture the interviewees' immediate and fresh response to each environment. Each interview consisted of three separate discussions which took place immediately after the store visits. The interviews lasted from one and a half to two and a half hours, during which the interviewees were asked open-ended thematic questions regarding their personal perceptions, feelings and experiences. The sessions were audio taped and transcribed

verbatim. The data were supplemented by 12 “shopping diaries” in which third year marketing students wrote about their experiences and impressions after visiting the stores.

The approach to handling and interpreting ambiguous data could be described as constructivist, as it focuses on analysing the construction of cultural and social meaning through the material environment (Schwandt 2003). Meanings are understood to be produced in social interaction bound to a specific context and shared through language (Berger and Luckmann 1967). We embarked upon the analysis by scanning through the data, identifying major themes, and formulating robust conceptual ideas. After the preliminary analysis we sorted the whole corpus of data with the help of ATLAS.ti software. The coding was informed by geosemiotics, from which the three main categories were derived: visual qualities (visual semiotics), social qualities (interaction order) and atmospherics (place semiotics) (Scollon and Scollon 2003). In the following step, we sorted out the data by more accurately creating sub-categories based on characteristics (adjectives), actions (verbs), and relations (pronouns) to mine the richness of the data more deeply and in more detail, and to reveal the properties of the categories. Gradually, the special characteristics of each store type emerged and gave us an insight into the differences in the retail experiences stimulated by the different sorts of environments.

#### **4. Findings**

The analysis provided important insights into the variety of experiences that different kinds of retail environments are able to bring about for consumers and the interpretations that they put upon them. As Sherry (1998a) found, the interviewees evaluated their spatial experiences holistically rather than according to specific attributes,

often using concepts such as atmosphere, feeling, or style when describing their retail experiences. What they experienced varied considerably from one research site, i.e. from one store, to another.

The optician's belongs to a retail chain called "Instrumentarium", which is a retail brand owned by a company called Instru Optiikka, a market leader in the sector in Finland. The store is located in a shopping centre in the city centre. The storefront is made of glass, which affords an open view into the oblong retail space. The visual impression made by the store is of spaciousness, with the white decor and overall simplicity celebrating the values of modernist design principles. The store's bright lighting, predominantly white decor and the feeling of an open, unrestricted space make it modern in style. One of the interviewees describes his experience of the store as follows:

"In a way this store spoke to me but it wasn't really an aesthetic experience. The colours were mainly limited to white and red, and that reminded me of a modern work of art which involves a variety of straight strokes like this (demonstrates with his hands) and only a few colours. Certainly, this store reminded me of a piece of modern art. I didn't really like the look of the store, but in my opinion the store might appeal more on the intellectual level, like modern photography for example." (Male, 33 years)

The optician's represents modern retail design and we therefore label it a **modern store**. (Photo 1) Modernism as an architectural style is usually connected with urbanization, industrialization, minimalism, streamlined geometric shapes and technology (Forty 1986, 206; Sparke 2008, 130-131). The roots of modern aesthetics were developed in the early 20th century as a reaction to the elitism of 19th century historically based styles. According to modernist architectural theory, structures express meaning through their form rather than through symbolic references. Thus, one of the key beliefs behind

modernism was the idea that form follows function. The appearance of modern architecture was characterized by new construction methods and materials, such as steel, iron, glass, plastic, and laminated wood, which made it possible to construct open plan interior spaces and to work with high levels of transparency. Modernism also incorporated a resistance to ornament and colours and scope for rapid stylistic change. It strove to create functional, enduring and democratic architecture, which led to a new concept of the aesthetic. (Berman 1988; Dormer 1990, 49-50; Forty 1986, 92; Gottdiener 1998, 44; Heynen 2009; van Leeuwen 2005, 69-71; Sparke, 2008, 12, 17, 113, 123-124, 147, 152.)

The second shop is an eco shop which provides products and food supplies that are made locally and meet standards for environmental-friendliness. The visual environment of the eco shop is characterized by an abundance of colours, goods and materials. (Photo 2) The shop is a traditional brick and mortar building situated close to the town centre on a relative busy road and opposite a small park. Large windows on three sides offer an open view into the colourful store space. The shop contains two rooms which are connected by an open doorway. The bigger room is dedicated to a range of items, such as environmentally friendly cosmetics, jewellery and household textiles made from recycled materials. The smaller room contains organic food supplies and natural health products and is reminiscent of a small-scale farmers' market. The shop provoked many similar comments from the interviewees, with a female informant (22 years) saying:

“Different kinds of scents wafted through the air in the shop. The orchestration of furniture, decoration and product assortment was lovely and I am sure that they have really paid a lot of attention to it. The shop hasn't been built following some standard, but rather it resonated with personality and uniqueness. The shop was

decorated with antique furniture, old showcases and shelves which were not quite similar in colour or style but which matched well together. Somehow the shop brought to mind nature and the countryside, and in some way also simplicity.”

Vintage style decoration and imaginative displays are reminiscent of the romantic style and we therefore call this a **romantic store**. Romanticism cannot be considered a uniform philosophy but more a mode of feeling (Campbell 1987, 181). Unlike the modern worldview, romanticism, which flourished in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, asserted the idea of “dynamic organism”, emphasizing diversity, individuality and imagination rather than modern values such as universalism and rationalism. The romantic store design has its origins in the ideology of romanticism and its successor, the Arts and Crafts movement, which articulated to some extent the ideas of romanticism in a visual and architectural language that flourished from the second half of the 19th century to the early years of the 20th century. The visual language of romanticism opposed the classical aesthetic tradition built upon austere symmetry, uniformitarianism and an idealized representation of nature. (Campbell 1987, 148-149, 181.) The Arts and Crafts movement cherished traditional craftsmanship, preferred “authentic” and natural materials and favoured romantic folk styles in decoration. The romantic style was inspired by nature and a search for aesthetic design as a reaction against mass-produced industrial commodities. (Blakesley 2009; Crook 1987, 69-97)

The bookshop is a part of a retail chain called the “Finnish Bookstore”, which is a widely known brand and market leader in the book sector in Finland. (Photo 3) The store is situated in the pedestrian district in the city centre. Its fairly modest façade consists of plain shop windows displaying a few recently published books. The store is designed with two different spatial areas, the ground floor and the lower ground floor, and they are



connected by a broad staircase. The ground floor is a showroom for novelties, bestsellers, novels, and books on popular hobbies, whereas the lower ground floor offers other items such as textbooks, office supplies, games and toys, and cut price books. The store design is in keeping with the brand's graphic presentation and conveys the impression of a strictly managed concept store. One of the interviewees analyses his perception of the bookshop in the next quotation:

“In a way everything is pretty neat but the prevailing atmosphere is really nothing special. Everything seems to be quite well-looked after and you can find lots of different kinds of books there. If you already know what you'll find there you don't actually get a strong feeling about it. That is to say, there is nothing that could surprise me.” (Male, 20 years)

Altogether, this store does not acknowledge any particular architectural style but rather prioritizes its goods both in layout and display, at the expense of stylistic and symbolic qualities. Hence, in this research, the bookstore is referred to as a **pragmatic store**. The name pragmatic store stresses its function as a place where goods are distributed to customers both efficiently and functionally.

The categorization we have introduced above of modern, romantic and pragmatic emerged from our analysis of the diverse data. It draws upon architectural styles and movements to identify the unique characteristics of each store and to gain a deeper understanding of the underlying significance of different kinds of retail environments. To justify this combination of two fields of study, Schroeder and Borgeson (1998) suggested that the conventions of art history, when framed with a solid social science perspective, might offer a contribution to cultural research. In this study, the concept of style is understood not solely as the superficial visual traits of a specific historical epoch but as a

holistic worldview concealing lifestyles, ideologies, and historical trajectories that take material form in interior design, which projects certain values and principles (van Leeuwen 2005, 143-144; Scollon and Scollon 2003, 15).

In the sections that follow, we will explore in detail how consumers' retail experiences are constructed in these retail settings. Using the theory of geosemiotics, we will discuss how consumers experience the visual and material environments of each site and the kind of social interaction these retail settings tend to induce.



Photo 1. The interior of the modern store “Instrumentarium”



Photo 2. The interior of the romantic store “Katriina’s store”



Photo 3. The interior of the pragmatic store, “the Finnish Bookstore”

	Product portfolio	Year of foundation	Number of outlets	Market position	Number of staff (in the shop under scrutiny)	Business idea and values
The optician Instrumentarium  (Owned by Instru Optiikka Ltd.)	Glasses, contact lenses, sunglasses, eye care services	1900	130 in Finland	Market leader in Finland in 2012	5 full-time opticians and 7 full-time shop assistants	Instrumentarium devotes itself to customer service and quality products. Their declared goal is to offer the best way to restore the full vision of each customer individually.
The eco shop Katriina's store	Ecological food and cosmetics, handicraft novelties	2009	2	-	2 full-time shop assistants, several part-time employees	The retailer's slogan is: "Good for nature – good for you"
The book store "The Finnish Bookstore"	Books, office supplies, gifts and a variety of games and pastimes	1912	57 outlets in Finland	Market leader in Finland in 2012	6 full-time shop assistants and 8 part-time employees	The Finnish Bookstore is a specialized multichannel bookshop which offers quality products for learning, personal development and recreation. The values of The Finnish Bookstore are responsibility, quality and accessibility.

Table 1. Summary: details of retail stores.

#### **4.1. The modern store**

The modern store provides an environment in clear contrast with the domestic milieu, leading to experiences that are almost the complete opposite of those one has at home. The interviewees described the store as a clinical and rather stark environment which communicated high-quality service, expertise and efficiency but did not really encourage one to spend any extra time there. In many interviews, the atmosphere in the shop was compared to a pharmacy, hospital or doctor's surgery. The white, stripped-down interior creates a sense of sterility and purity while the salespersons' uniforms, white doctor's coats, further reinforce the association with health care institutions. Thus, these symbols articulate the discourse of medicine. The modern store also appeared to express professionalism and technological advance. Centrally located customer service

desks with computers, the rather strange equipment used for eye examinations and the salespersons' white coats signalled not only expertise in the field and but also technical proficiency. The impression of expertise and good service was mostly based on the respondents' visual perceptions of the sales staff's uniforms. A body of literature attests that the appearance of personnel plays a significant role in people's inferences regarding their competence, professionalism, and care, embodying a rich variety of symbolic and semiotic meanings (for example Shao et al. 2006; Solomon 1998).

Despite the store's large and open layout, customers did not feel encouraged to browse around and try out and test different products freely. For some reason, the well organised product display made respondents worried about disturbing the perfect arrangement of the goods on the shelves. One of the interviewees describes her hesitation when trying on glasses:

“First I thought that I could try on some pairs of glasses. But then I decided that I wouldn't try them on. After all there are so many germs on hands and if everyone touched some of the glasses...and then one might drop them accidentally and then the fancy and expensive glasses would break.“ (Female, 21 years)

On the other hand this could also be interpreted as respect for the order and professionalism that the place signalled to customers. Although the open-plan interior might signify unlimited freedom to browse around the store, in reality the path through the store is relatively fixed. The modern store is constructed in terms of the service process, which means that each phase has its own segregated spot within the store. Neither customers nor sales personnel have set places but they both move around the store according to the stage of the service process in which the customer is involved. Paradoxically, the role of the customer in the modern store is relatively passive. In fact,

the shelves displaying glasses around the walls are the only place where customers are able to exercise any freedom of choice in the store. Even though shop assistants share the same open space with customers most of the time, there is a substantial gap between the two groups: the relationship between customers and salespersons is distant and hierarchical. The social distance between salespersons and customers is described in the following statement, where the informant articulates her interpretation of the ambience in the store:

“I have always received quite good service here. But I felt that they (the sales staff) were really high authorities. In my opinion, the atmosphere was almost authoritarian and I got the feeling that I should look up to the sales assistants. Perhaps it was partly because of the coats they wore. Thus, they are pretty serious people working there. It is not the kind of store where the sales assistants would greet you in a friendly and cheerful way and ask whether you need help but it is more like serious business...the staff want to present themselves as real professionals.” (Female, 25 years)

This division is manifested especially at the stage when customer and sales assistant settle down at the customer service desk in order to complete the purchase; the role of customer is to respond, to answer the questions that the salesperson poses while typing the information into the computer in front of him or her. Also the relationship between customers is remote because the spacious store prevents random encounters. In this modern store consumers do not get involved in finding new, alternative ways of using and consuming the space, but rather they let the service process and sales staff guide them through the prepared shopping performance (Moisio and Arnould 2005).

The aesthetic aspect of customer experience is based on perceptions of simplicity and clarity, which suggest holiness. It draws on the capacity of modernism to create an

impression of spaciousness and immateriality, thus turning the focus from material to spiritual things. On the other hand, the modern interior design and lavish use of space were also interpreted as pretentious; the retail environment was seen as an exclusive and expensive up-market store. The vocabulary of modern design articulates the ideal that space should be designed for a specific purpose, eliminating all unnecessary elements. Modernist aesthetics, even almost a hundred years after its emergence, has the ability to communicate to today's consumers a message of incomparable advance and technological mastery. (Table 2)

#### ***4.2. The romantic store***

The informants considered the shop to be a cosy, delightful, intimate, and peaceful place which no one could visit in a rush. The visual display of items and the multidimensionality of different materials, colours and scents steeped in nostalgia created a unique and old-fashioned atmosphere. Essentially nostalgia involves a wistful longing for an idealized past which is somehow connected to personal experience (Chase and Shaw 1989; Davis 1979; Goulding 1999; Holbrook and Schindler 2003). The profusion of handcrafted products and the vintage decoration construct a kind of temporal stratification, which encourages customers to remember their own past, to immerse themselves in the retail experience (Carù and Cova 2006) and to go “treasure hunting”. One of the interviewees described her feelings in the following way:

“In a way it felt like returning to the past because of an old-fashioned hit playing in the background, in which a female singer was singing softly. The walls were covered with floral wallpaper, which was similar to wallpaper that my grandmother has in her place. Then they had a large assortment of natural and organic products.



Somehow the shop conveys the feeling that you really are shopping in an old time general store.” (Female, 21 years)

The colourful and slightly bohemian interior design, warm colouring, relatively free combination of diverse styles in furniture and unique decoration resembled features of home and signalled authenticity (Chronis and Hampton 2008) to the respondents. Thus, the romantic store articulates the discourse of authenticity (Beverland and Farrelly 2010; Boyle 2003). The rambling figure-of-eight layout seems to offer customers a certain degree of intimacy and encouragement to browse around the place, without being under the salesperson’s supervisory gaze. Kent (2003, 738) asserts that actually smaller spaces afford customers opportunities to create idealized room settings, drawing on positive emotions about home, leisure and personal identity. The symbolic properties of hominess (McCracken 1989, 171) are evidently present in the shop. In many cases, the interviewees used comparisons to home and grandmother’s place when describing their experience visiting the shop. The small scale and the cosiness have a simplifying power, making the romantic store environment more comforting and understandable; it is on a “human scale” (McCracken 1989, 171).

The spatial setting of the romantic store constitutes a relatively free and secluded subject position for customers, allowing them the chance to browse in the shop with some privacy. The sales assistant stands firmly behind the checkout desk and gives customers help when needed. The interviewees considered her/him to be a sympathetic and friendly servant of the customer, someone who enjoys working in the store. This is depicted in the following passage, where the informant describes his visit to the romantic store:

“Warm and friendly would be pertinent expressions to describe the atmosphere of the shop. The salesperson behind the checkout desk asked me whether I needed help and the other person offered juice for me to taste. But neither of them was pushy and when I told them that I was just looking around, then I could freely browse around the shop.” (Male, 26 years)

The interviewees thought that the romantic store could be a place for everyday social interaction, in contrast to large supermarkets, which are built on the principles of efficiency, self-service and standardization. The romantic store seems to serve as a place which is socially stimulating and provokes random encounters and casual conversations, thus responding to customers’ intrinsic social needs. Because of the limited space, customers are able to hear each other’s and the salesperson’s conversations, and this can increase the feeling of connectedness between customers and staff even if there is no likelihood of more intimate dialogue. Price and Arnold (1999, 51) call relationships that emerge in marketplaces between service provider and customers commercial friendships; they are bound to commercial exchange, which provides the opportunity for social interaction while also defining the limits of the relationship. (Table 2)

Customers’ aesthetic experiences in such stores rest upon the multisensory play of diverse scents, the decor, materials, music, handcrafted products and tastes, all of which combine to create a colourful and abundant fairy-tale world. A compelling sensory richness and the strong impression of uniqueness seem to stir the imagination, encouraging feelings of nostalgia and awaking inspiration.

#### ***4.3. The pragmatic store***

The visual appearance of the store is dominated by hundreds of books on the shelves and on the display tables, like a mosaic. The interviewees described the street

level store space as feeling almost like a library, while the lower ground floor resembled an ordinary shop with its less systematic layout, a wide selection of goods and slightly cramped passageways. Despite the fact that the respondents considered visiting the shop to be a relatively positive experience, the environment in itself did not seem to stir any strong emotions or feelings, as the following passage from one of the interviews shows:

“Well, in my experience this store didn’t really invoke any special feelings or atmosphere. In a way people were just browsing and buying some gifts or something like that. As a matter of fact, I usually love visiting bookstores. However, this bookstore was a very neutral place, even though there were a lot of all kinds of stuff...I love books and that is why I enjoy spending time in bookstores. Otherwise it was a really neutral place.” (Female, 25 years)

Even though the store interior is admittedly convenient for browsing, little attention has been paid to creating an emotionally affecting or memorable atmosphere. According to the interviewees’ interpretations, such a chain store with its standardized concept, rational and transparent layout and clear organisation is not capable of conveying the sort of warm and intellectual feeling that one can get in independent bookstores. Functional factors such as a simple layout, and clean interior display (Baker et al. 1994) are predominant, while aesthetic elements such as architectural materials and style have not been the main concerns in planning. The pragmatic store appears to encapsulate discourses of convenience and efficiency.

The pragmatic store environment encourages customers to spend time, browse freely around the store and turn over the pages of the books, but it does not provide a range of sensations. Commercial environments that are poor in sensorial stimulation and prioritize efficiency and order tend to produce neutral, ordinary, distant customer

experiences which neither feed the customers' imagination nor appeal on the personal level (Carù and Cova 2003). On the other hand, the familiar store concept was also experienced as a trustworthy place where everyone is welcome to drop in at any time and where certain items can always be found when needed. The following quotation taken from one of the informant's statements illustrates the connection between the environment and the social aspect of the pragmatic store:

“It is quite nice to browse there because there is enough space between the shelves and getting past other customers is easy. I feel that the customers don't even notice each other. Since the store is so spacious, customers can freely browse around the store - and usually they read hunched over a book. It is almost like being in a library. In a way people try to be a bit invisible there.” (Female, 25 years)

The spaciousness of the store and its wide aisles ensure privacy for everyone to browse through the selection of books by themselves. In fact customers do not seem to even notice the other customers around them. The pragmatic store, with its emphasis on functionality and self-service, seems to cut the social links (Carù and Cova 2003) between people through its spatial arrangements. The staff do not share the same space as the customers because they are mostly standing behind the cashiers' desk taking the money or helping customers who need assistance finding a certain book. For this reason, they do not have a large impact on customers' overall retail experience. Indeed, the sales staff seem to remain quite distant to customers, even though they do sometimes seem to try to approach customers proactively in the store. Even though offering assistance seemed to be relatively organized and deliberate, interviewees interpreted these encounters as rather random, friendly gestures rather than service. In most cases, the only interaction between customers and salespersons took place briefly at the moment of

actual purchase at the checkout desk. As a whole, the pragmatic store suggests the ideal of the self-service store: somewhere that is easy to drop into but which does not engage customers either emotionally or socially. This produces rather neutral retail experiences that are constructed mainly around the goods for sale. However, the pragmatic store is also seen as a trustworthy and familiar store because it prioritizes its goods rather than aiming to create an unforgettable ambience or exceptional experience through its store design. It is a simple and casual store where the customer is able to satisfy his/her needs from what is offered there. (Table 2)

The aesthetic appeal of the pragmatic store is tied to its goods and its familiarity. The few aesthetic experiences that the pragmatic store was able to give depended basically on the range and display of goods available, and the convenience of the familiar brand. Thus, most of the aesthetic experiences in the pragmatic store were linked to what was for sale rather than to any simple enjoyment of being in the store. The following table summarizes the essential findings from each retail environment.

	Discourses	Subject positions	Symbols	Metaphors
The modern store	-Discourses of medicine and technology	-Relatively passive -“Patient”	-Simplicity -Use of white in interior design -Computers -White doctor’s coats -Waiting space in front of optician’s room -Open space interior	-Hospital, -Pharmacy -“Uncharted territory”
The romantic store	-Discourses of authenticity and naturalness	-“Friend” -Free and confidential	-Warm colours in interior design -Traditional, handcrafted furniture -Homely decoration -Organic vegetables and fruit -Products made of recycled materials	-Home, -Grandmother’s house -Old time general store
The pragmatic store	-Discourses of efficiency and convenience	-Self service -Freedom (to browse around)	- Clear floor plan - Chain store appearance: uniform graphic image and furniture	-Library -Ordinary store -“Neutral place”

Table 2 Comparison of modern, romantic and pragmatic stores.

#### ***4.4. Retail experience and responsibility***

The three store types differ from each other in terms of visual appearance, sense of place and social interaction. Especially the modern and the romantic stores could be seen almost as opposites, offering different kinds of spatial experiences and resting upon distinct discourses and ideologies. The modern store represents sophisticated elegance, technological advance and functionality while the romantic store stands for cosiness, naturalness and individuality. The modern store communicates expertise and scientific accuracy while the romantic store is associated with the domestic sphere and traditional values. The pragmatic store, in turn, encourages customers to engage with what it is

selling, emphasizing approachability and the easy availability of its stock rather than creating a refined or stylish ambience. The following table summarizes our findings about the various meanings of different styles of retail stores. (Table 3)

[Insert Table 3 here]

Table 3. Summary of discourses, subject positions, symbols and metaphors.

Design and overall style, expressed through a store's interior decoration and architecture, are used to reinforce the values associated with a retailer (Gottdiener, 1998). Responsibility is a part of the retail experience communicated by elements of the store design. In the romantic store, the material environment as well as the visual style of the store communicated the values and ideology of sustainability in terms of locality, eco-friendliness and social equity. The product assortment, consisting of locally produced, organic and natural products, together with the visual decorative cues that evoke an idealised past, created a feeling of authenticity (Boyle 2003; Chronis and Hampton 2008), which convinced informants that the retailer is really committed to carrying his/her responsibility and really promoting ethical and sustainable merchandizing. Also the good service and unreserved interaction and cooperation between sales assistants and customers gave the impression that the retailer is really taking care of his/her customers.

In the modern store, the customers' understanding of how responsible the retailer is closely attached to trust in the shop assistants' expertise and their willingness to look after customers' health and wellbeing. The modern, minimalist environment seemed to

strengthen customers' belief that the retailer is using the latest technology and following scientific developments and thus offering the best possible quality to its customers.

In the pragmatic store, the aspect of responsibility did not seem to arise. In this case, interviewees' notions of the responsibility of the retailer seemed to focus principally on product details. According to the interviewees' comments, the pragmatic store could be interpreted as a responsible retailer because it meets customers' needs, offering their goods at affordable prices and leaving less important aspects such as experiences and a pleasing environment aside. From this standpoint, meeting customers' expectations appears to be the sign of a responsible retailer and the austerity of the store a sign of integrity and sincerity. On the whole, customers appear to draw conclusions on the responsibility of the retailers and the fairness and eco friendliness of their merchandise on the basis of the surrounding visual, spatial, material and social environment. These perceptions have an influence on overall retail experience.

## **5. Discussion**

This paper provides a novel way of considering retail experience and highlights the wide range of different experiences that are to be found in everyday retail environments. Ordinary experiences can be richly described using the cultural theoretical approach and geosemiotics. Our analysis shows that everyday experience can be multifaceted and can also contain, apart from a hedonistic side, social, aesthetic and ideological elements.

In contrast to earlier studies focusing on spectacular brand stores, this study concentrated on investigating the characteristics of conventional speciality retail store environments and retail experiences. On the whole, the results of our study indicate that



instead of being just passive recipients, consumers actively interpret and make sense of their quotidian retail experiences in interplay with the surrounding visual, material, spatial and social elements. The findings of the study are consistent with Kozinets et al. (2004), who showed that spectacular experiences depend on the consumer actively participating and co-creating the experience. Nevertheless, our comparative research setting indicated that different sorts of retail spaces produce different sorts of positions for customers: the modern store offered a relatively constrained and controlled subject position whereas the romantic and the pragmatic stores offered substantially freer subject positions.

Our findings accords with the earlier research (Arnold and Reynolds 2003; Dawson, Bloch, and Ridgway 1990; Kozinets et al. 2002; Sherry 1998b) suggesting that different types of stores provoke different emotional and affective responses. The results demonstrated that the modern and the romantic stores were able to provide relatively intense but contrasting emotional experiences while the pragmatic store failed to call forth any emotional responses. Exploring the different kinds of stores from the perspective of architectural styles revealed how cultural meanings are firmly attached to architecture and interior style design. This finding accords with the study by Doyle and Broadbridge (1999), who found that simply product-based strategies are unlikely to lead to an improved customer response; alternative methods have to be used to effectively communicate what the retailer can offer – his / her activities, values and range. Past research has addressed the relationship between design and retail experience (e.g. Baker et al. 1992), but stylistic and comparative aspects have not been discussed before. These findings give us a deeper understanding of the role of style and store design in retailing.

Our research indicated that social interaction varied from one type of store environment to other. Social interaction between customers and sales staff in the modern store was relatively formal. The store space seemed to construct a stage for a pre-scripted plot in which the shop assistants led the customers. The modern store functioned almost like a machine, following the ideology of modernism also in this regard (van Leeuwen 2005, 71). The romantic store, in turn, demonstrated an aspiration to provide a store where humanity and authenticity could be found, in its multisensory ambience and variety of ecological products, and in the friendly encounters it offered between customers and salespersons. From the perspective of social linkages (Aubert-Gamet and Cova 1999; Johnstone 2012; Price and Arnould 1999, Rosenbaum 2006), the romantic store diverged from the modern and pragmatic stores in that it offered a friendly and equal relationship between sales personnel and customers. Altogether, the social action taking place in the romantic store could be described as friendly and homely negotiation based on cooperation and mutual trust between the customers and the personnel. Several studies have illustrated that sales personnel play an important role in constructing retail experience for consumers (Baker et al. 1992; Hollenbeck et al. 2008; Marrewijk and Broos 2012; Pettinger 2004). Our findings emphasize the capacity of a retail setting incorporating temporal layers and sensorial richness together with friendly customer service not only to resonate with customers' feelings but also to humanize and personalize the whole retail environment and the retailer's brand, bringing both customers and staff socially closer to each other and underpinning the social link between them. In contrast, a store which operates solely on an ideology of efficiency and self-

service, like the pragmatic store, reduces the social links between customers and sales staff.

Borghini et al. (2009) found that ideology can be incorporated into consumers' retail experience through a well-designed multifaceted physical experience. In this paper, we suggest that store design and the style of the retail environment carry cultural meanings and ideologies which are relatively persistent in the culture. These cultural and symbolic meanings guide and govern consumers' retail experiences. As illustrated in this study, different architectural styles, such as modernism and romanticism, involve values, worldviews, power relations, and ideologies which can be traced in consumers' retail experiences.

Since retail store environments are able to communicate and reinforce the values associated with a retailer (Gottdiener 1998), we explored how the different sorts of store environments influence customers' impressions of how ethical and how responsible a retailer is. The study indicated that customers interpret the responsibility of the store in various ways. The modern store conveyed expertise and trust, on the basis of which the customers were inclined to connect the retailer with responsibility. The consumers' interpretations of the moral values of the romantic store were related to the sociable and caring atmosphere, the evidence of the appreciation of nature and the respect for traditions and the past. Lastly, the responsibility of the pragmatic store was attached to its reputation for reliability and stability, its steady provision of certain products rather than of particular retail experiences. Previous studies have not described how store environment as a whole might influence consumers' understanding of the retailer's

values and responsibility (Brunk 2010), but has mainly concentrated on researching perceived responsibility from the perspective of communication (e.g. Jones et al. 2006).

This study has illustrated that everyday retail experiences are constructed in the dynamic interplay between customers and the visual, social, and spatial environment. These experiences include a rich repertory of social interaction, sensory perception, and emotions yet they are more discreet and simpler than so called extraordinary consumption experiences (Carù and Cova 2003). In addition, our study implies that values, such as responsibility, may play a role in the customers' construction of their holistic retail experience. Routine retail experiences might not be unforgettable or spectacular but they are part of people's everyday life and therefore they are important and meaningful. On the whole, this exploration is intended to sharpen our understanding of the role of architecture, design and style in structuring and producing consumers' retail experiences in everyday life and to extend the cultural side of retail research.

## **6. Conclusion**

This research confirmed the view that store environments do have an impact on consumers' everyday life. It is therefore important for retailers to give up store design which is solely based on efficiency and functionality and move towards the design of quality environments which contribute to improving people's everyday environments. Thus, appreciation of the significance of the dimensions of a high quality store environment and understanding how those dimensions are interpreted by customers and how they influence their perception of the retailer may help the retailer to develop a retail strategy which supports different sorts of values - the social, aesthetic, emotional or experiential - through store architecture and store design. In the ever more competitive

contemporary retail environment, retailers have to find new ways of differentiating themselves from their competitors, and one area of differentiation is the store environment and the retail experience induced therein. To enhance their customers' retail experiences, companies could pay attention to design, material environment and space, aspects which seem to be crucial to how consumers construct their shopping experience.

Finally, we must consider the limitations of the results presented here. In this study, we included only a limited selection of stores: three different types of speciality retail stores that represented three (speciality retail) sectors. It is possible that a study that collected data from other types of store environments would give a different picture of consumers' retail experiences. In terms of future research, we would encourage scholars to further investigate how different kinds of retail environments, retail stores, shopping malls, and department stores, impact on consumers' everyday life through the different retail experiences they offer. Such research could lead to a fresh theoretical understanding of the dimensions of the physical retail environment in which consumers are able to place themselves, and it could also pave the way for new ideas about how to create retail environments that will enrich people's everyday lives.

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