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Virtually the same: understanding consumer experiences in the digital retail environment

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A call to arms

Retailing is heralded as undergoing a sea-change – with consumers touted as moving their purchasing from high-street to digital store. This is evident in industry commentary:

Physical retail will no longer be a channel for buying... Rather, these spaces will act as living, breathing physical portals into brand and product experiences. They will become places we go to learn, be inspired, see and try new things, experiment and co-create… My advice to retailers is to stop thinking "stores" and start thinking stories. Stop thinking "product" and start thinking productions.

Doug Stephens, 17 June 2018: https://businessoffashion.com/articles/opinion/to-save-retail-let-it-die

Irrespective of this prophecy's truth, understanding consumers' relationships to what is undoubtedly a changing retail landscape, where the digital environment is becoming more central, is critical. Extensive research considers the physical or virtual retail environment. This is variously framed, drawing on themes including: retail atmospherics (e.g. Helmefalk & Hultén, 2017); servicescapes (e.g. Ballantyne & Nilsson 2017); store environments, and the sensory [often stimulus-organism-response frameworks] (e.g. Garaus, 2016; Fujiwara, Resnick, Cassidy, & Brown, 2017). Research in this domain has yet to develop an integrated position on how to comprehend consumer retail environment experiences – particularly when that environment is virtual.

Aim: This research aims to provide an overview of the perspectives taken to frame consumer interactions with retail environments. It then considers how combining these approaches

affords a more comprehensive and holistic understanding – one that enables the development of both additional conceptual insight, but also an inclusive position for retailer' virtual retailing developments.

Perspectives on consumers and retail environments

There is a well-established tradition of academic work examining how consumers are influenced by, and interact with, shopping environments – both physical and virtual (see Belk, 1973 to Teng, Ni and Chen, 2018). However, there is considerable diversity of treatment within such work on the retail environment and its interpretations.

The psychological

The psychological perspective ranges from the conceptualization of: the external environmental drivers (e.g. Monga & Gürhan-Canli, 2012); retail cues (e.g. Bava, Jaeger & Dawson, 2009); moderators (Reynolds-McIlnay, Morrin & Nordfält, 2017); or mediators (Imschloss & Kuehnl, 2017) within consumers' response to retail environments. Such views are influenced by cognitive, social and aesthetic psychology, as expressed in consumer behaviour and marketing. In such conceptualizations, the consumer is *affected* by the stimulus and responds to it – albeit cognitively, affectively and behaviourally (see Foxall, Oliveira-Castro, James & Schrezenmaier (2011) for discussion). Irrespective of the setting – physical (e.g. Verhoef, Lemon, Parasuraman, Roggeveen, Tsiros, & Schlesinger, 2009), online (e.g. Dulabh, Vazquez, Ryding & Casson, 2018) or virtual (e.g. Krasonikolaski, Vrechopoulos, Pouloudi & Goula, 2013) – retail interactions are explored within a stimulus-response context, adopting a range of research methods. Only the behavioural view progresses towards the creation of another stimulus [information] that is used to 'share meaning' through the notion of the 'informational reinforcement'. This position begins to

align with a view of consumer behaviour not just as a series of discrete consumptive acts, but as an act of expression.

The sociological or human geographical

In doing so, it moves somewhat to include more sociological, or human geographical, perspectives. Such views represent another influence on retail environment research, which focuses on the sociology of consumption, as well as psychology. Here much rests on theories such as modern symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934). This perspective foregrounds the importance of the social context in which interaction takes place, centring on the study of social actions and social objects (McCall & Simmons, 1966), and how people weave together their behaviour to enable them to make sense of the world and exist within it. This weaving is enacted through the negotiation and sharing of meaning. This provides the basis for action (behaviour) and reaction (to the retail environment). As such, the theory rests on a duality that is not openly present in psychological theories – that centre on the individual. Work here is as much about understanding what consumption means as an act of self-expression and communication, as it is in considering the consumers' behaviour in communicating that identity. Behaviour is driven by the notion of establishing, maintaining and altering self in, and through, communication (Stone, 1965) in response to the use of virtual reality to stimulate positive consumer behaviour (Herpen, van den Broek, van Trijp & Yu, 2016).

The cultural

The framing above focuses on the 'point' of communication as the director for behaviour, and whilst broader issues such as culture play a role, they do not act as a foundation. Others, such as social-psychologist Kaiser (1998), seek to understand consumer behaviour through a broader cultural lens. This draws on a larger cultural framework that emphasizes cultural objects and

their relation to belief systems from an interdisciplinary stance. A view that integrates contributions from a wide range of human sciences – including anthropology, consumer behaviour, cultural studies, psychology, semiotics and sociology. Hence culture is a mechanism to help derive solutions to problems – both known and familiar (weekly shop at the supermarket) or unknown and unfamiliar (purchase of first car) – encountered as part of living within a community. Culture therefore directs both the process of choice and action by creating the platform for the formation and interpretation of meaning. Culture can also be seen as the seat for the interplay of historical meaning and resistance to it. Here, culture is viewed as being (re)formed and maintained through the potential tension created by historic meaning and individuals' potential attempts to redefine and alter those very meanings (Davies & Ward, 2002). If such a perspective is taken, the consumer's interaction with a retail environment is set against this broader social and cultural backdrop to frame process and action.

Each perspective – cognitive, emotional, behavioural, symbolic and cultural – are not entirely mutually exclusive. For example, the cognitive has been augmented by the emotional and the behavioural attends to some degree to the symbolic and cultural (Verhoef et al., 2009). What they do perhaps exemplify is a difference in tradition that could be characterized as 'consumer verses consumption behaviour' centred. Working to draw these elements together offers the potential for a more considered appreciation of consumer experiences to develop both additional conceptual insight, but also an inclusive position for virtual retailing developments.

Methodology

The integrated analysis adopted here presents a multi-layered approach, where each perspective contributes an additional level of interpretation. A common dataset of video recorded shopping journeys from fifty females' (aged 18-35) is analysed to capture a holistic overview of participants' experiences. Individuals were provided within a scenario where the need to

purchase a dress for an evening event was established. Each participant was then able to engage with both physical and digital retailing environments.

The psychological analysis focusses on interpretation of each participant's physical engagement with retail stimulus and their resultant action. These behaviours are modelled using a flow chart method adopted by Betteman (1970) and Reid *et al.* (2015). Flow charts are then analysed based on King's (2004, 2012) template analysis technique to establish the core consistencies within participants actions. These actions establish the dimensions of the retail environment that must be simulated to facilitate a fashion purchase decision within virtual reality.

Within the sociological or human geographical analysis, as the framework is concerned with self-expression and communication, spoken conversations is analysed to reveal the ways in which the consumer connects and engages with the retail environment. The spoken word is coded and analysed using a thematic approach. Data are managed using qualitative data analysis software (QSR NVivo), making it easier to assign codes to emerging themes and to identify relationships between them. As a result, speech is disaggregated into a series of 'fragments' that are then regrouped under a series of thematic headings (Silverman, 2010, p.238). Codes in this case are categories, words and phrases describing an explicit segment of the data, whereas themes are phrases and sentences describing 'subtle and tacit processes' (Rossman and Rallis, 2012, p.277) that emerge from the use of codes (Saldaña, 2013, p.14). The analysis provides an insight into participant interaction, personal expression and identity.

As the cultural perspective used here focuses on meaning from interpreted data, this is collated from the signifiers outlined in the process of the shopping journey. The points of cultural reference are taken from consumers' interactions with the garments and the external influences imposed upon them such as familial interactions, social standards and expectations. This

conversation is localized in its referencing and is derived from a practice as research methodology. A focus on 'object-based' learning treats objects (i.e. the verbal discussion) as vectors for dialogue across disciplines. Virtual mapping of the conversation enables the object to be abstracted. By using Hudek (2014) as a starting point for a discussion and mapping of the project, this can continue the dialogue on what constitutes the 'objectness' of things. It also enables an exploration of positions that are anti-object; theories of the experimental, the liminal or mental object; and the role of objects in performance. The object becomes a prism through which to reread contemporary culture and better understand its recent past, present and potential future.

The three data analysis approaches are brought together by considering the broad propositions of, and taking inspiration from, those such as Jackson and Mazzei (2012) – although we have not eschewed approaches such as coding – and later work by Higgins, Madden, Berard, Lenz Kothe, & Nordstrom. (2016). Here we appropriate the notions of 'patchwork' and so "…take this 'amorphous collection of juxtaposed pieces [and join them] together…' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 476) using different theories to create smoother spaces of thought." (Higgins et al, 2016, p.4).

Ways forward

Progressing from this holistic perspective, this research determines a multi-dimensional, conceptual foundation for the development of virtual retailing experiences. All perspectives describe consumers' behaviour and the ways they experience stimuli, retail spaces and their internal belief systems. By exploring the retail phenomenon from multiple perspectives, the design of the retail platforms can meet consumers' holistic consumption needs. Existing literature restricted to its individual values prevents this progression of both retailing theory and evolution of successful retail spaces for industry. This study aims to empirically define the

dimensions of retail environments from multiple perspectives and to establish how a true simulation can be defined within a virtual world.

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