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The sensory retail environment of small fashion boutiques

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Abstract

Purpose – The literature holds few contributions regarding the sensory environment of small, privately-owned retail stores. Hence, this paper seeks to explore the sensory experience of patrons of a small boutique.

Design/methodology/approach – The study uses photo-elicitation to examine the experience of the sensory retail environment of patrons of a small fashion boutique in the North West of England. Participants were asked to "show me how it feels to shop here" by taking photographs to depict their sensory in-store experiences. Follow up interviews were carried out to explore the participants' sensory experiences and then qualitative content analysis was used to identify the typical "likes" and "dislikes" regarding aspects of the sensory environment.

Findings – The findings reveal that it is not just tangible things that can affect a shopper's experience, but store traits such as smell, lighting and presence of owner-manager can also influence a consumer's experience.

Research limitations/implications – By providing an illustration case study, this paper provides a visual method for researching shopping experience from a sensory perspective. This research concerned small fashion boutiques. Other research as well as this study indicates that studies of sensory environments in other kinds of boutiques could produce different findings.

Practical implications – The paper is intended not only to equip small fashion retailers with an understanding of why some customers dwell and return to browse, but also to help them discern what it is that shoppers want to experience while shopping. Managerial implications are offered with the aim of converting patronage into sales to support survival of small fashion retailers.

Originality/value – This paper contributes to the literature on small to medium-sized enterprise fashion retailing and the sensory experience of fashion shopping. The identification of sensory touch points in small fashion boutiques helps owner-managers to understand female shoppers and provides a handrail for thinking up new ways of improving shopping experiences.

Keywords Small to medium-sized enterprises, Fashion retailing, Store environment, Sensory shopping/experience, Female shoppers, Vintage, Photo-elicitation, Fashion, Shopping, Consumer behaviour, Women

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

As consumer decision making has shifted from the rational to the emotional and experiential (Kim *et al.*, 2009), fashion retailers are increasingly investing in experiential retailing to provide a differentiated retail experience and encourage consumers to dwell and consume. For example, US casualwear retailer Abercrombie & Fitch differentiates its brand through a unique in-store experience which taps into all five senses and aims to transport the consumer into an atmosphere that is authentic to each sub-brand: with dim lighting and spotlights reminiscent of a nightclub, model-like

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sales assistants, loud energetic music and the brand's signature scent pervading the air, Abercrombie & Fitch creates a lively, charged store atmosphere. The UK retail industry is experiencing a paradigm shift as a result of the economic slowdown and the rise of e-commerce and multi-channel retailing, which is manifesting itself in the relocation of multiple retailers away from high streets in secondary locations to out-of-town shopping centres and key locations (Knowles, 2011). This presents an opportunity for independent retailers to prosper in high streets in secondary locations by providing a differentiated experience to draw consumers in. However, although academic research has identified the increasingly important role of hedonic value as retailers try to respond to consumers' desire for entertainment and excitement within the shopping experience (Gilmore and Pine, 2002; Sit *et al.*, 2003; Kim *et al.*, 2009; Srinivasan and Srivastava, 2010), there is a lack of research on consumer perceptions of experiential retailing in the fashion SME context. Although large fashion retailers can afford to host seekers of experiential shopping experiences in flagship stores (Anderson *et al.*, 2010; Moore and Doherty, 2007; Gilmore and Pine, 2002), small boutiques have fewer resources available and face pressure to convert "recreational" visits to purchases. It is of interest therefore to conceptualise how customers experience retail atmospherics in small fashion boutiques for we can only begin to design atmospherics conducive to influencing purchase decision making once we understand how customers experience in-store atmospherics.

In pursuit of this goal, the paper is structured as follows: first, we contextualise the significance of SMEs in the British economy. Second, we review the literature on experiential retailing to determine current knowledge of in-store sensory experience. Third, since we were interested in collecting data on how shoppers relate to the sensory retail environment, including the products on display, other people in the store, and how they feel when they are shopping, it was deemed appropriate to develop a sensory methodology using visual research methods. Research shows that working with photographs that are made as part of a research project is especially valuable because:

> […] they can convey something of the feel of […] places, space and landscapes, specifically those qualities that are in some way visible: they can suggest the layout, colour, texture, form, volume, size and patter of the built environment, for example, and can picture people too. Photographs can thus capture something of the sensory richness […] (though not all, of course: They cannot convey sound and can only suggest touch) (Rose, 2012, p. 298).

Next, the results of a visual exploration of the sensory retail environment within a small fashion boutique in the North West of England, comprising five female research participants and consisting of five photographic images are presented, in order to generate fresh insight and develop newer understanding of the shopping experiences of female fashion shoppers. Finally, managerial implications are offered on ways for small fashion boutiques to harness sensory retailing to convert patronage into sales.

SMEs in fashion retailing

As a mature industry sector with relatively low barriers to entry, retailing is highly competitive and strategic differentiation may be easily imitated (Brush and Chaganti, 1998). It is difficult for SMEs to compete against larger competitors on the basis of price or differentiation due to their inability to achieve economies of scale and scope (Porter, 1985). However, factors such as product quality, customer service philosophy, physical evidence, the owner-manager's personality or the store ambience are capable of providing differentiation in a SME retail context (Roper and Parker, 2006). Therefore,

by capitalising on "this experience economy, (where) consumers look beyond mere purchase and consumption to the unique and rewarding" (Kim *et al.*, 2009, p. 73), small fashion retailers may be able to achieve a niche competitive advantage by means of a differentiated servicescape or a unique consumption experience.

Brush and Chaganti (1998) referred to retail SMEs as "businesses without glamour" (p. 233), as they are less likely to experience the exponential growth or profitability curves of high tech or manufacturing businesses. Nevertheless, these businesses do represent the "economic core" (Kirchhoff, 1994) and make a significant contribution to private sector turnover and employment (BIS, 2011). Due to their low barriers to entry, retail enterprises also provide popular business start-up opportunities for individuals (Brush and Chaganti, 1998). Furthermore, as a result of changing consumer shopping habits, the growth of fashion e-commerce and international expansion opportunities, as well as a slow UK economic recovery, many fashion multiples have recently retrenched from high street locations (Knowles, 2011). Williams (2011) referred to the paradigm shift in UK fashion retailing which has resulted from the rise of e-commerce and the opportunities presented by multi-channel retailing:

> 10 years ago, maturity for a national fashion retailer was about 250 to 300 stores. Now it's 100 to 150 plus a transactional internet site (p. 25).

In November 2011, multiple fashion retailer Arcadia announced it would close 200-300 UK stores in the next three years (Harrison, 2011). As multiple retailers are set to focus their operations on key locations and large out-of-town shopping centres (Knowles, 2011), there is an opportunity for independent retailers to draw consumers back to the high street with a differentiated offer.

Experiential fashion retailing

Facing increasing competition, retail industry players have launched innovations in the shopping environment designed to increase the frequency and lengthen the duration of shopping trips (Michon *et al.*, 2007). As research suggests shoppers who dwell longer are more likely to spend, and spend more than those shoppers who stay in store for a shorter time (Lindeman, 2007), an effective store environment can influence the shopper's propensity to spend (Soars, 2009) and retailers increasingly acknowledge the positive impact of retail atmospherics on shopping behaviour (Chebat and Michon, 2003; Stoel *et al.*, 2004). Since womenswear makes up almost half of the UK clothing retail market (Keynote, 2009), the experience of female fashion shoppers has been regularly discussed (Michon *et al.*, 2007).

The use of experiential retailing principles is particularly relevant in the fashion sector. Since consumers tend to choose clothing to reflect a particular self-image (Kaiser, 1990; De Nora and Belcher, 2005) rather than for purely functional reasons, fashion purchases are considered to be a complex consumer product category (Mitchell, 1999). As such, fashion shopping can be categorised as hedonic or recreational rather than task-oriented shopping. With recreational shopping, consumers tend to pursue hedonic shopping motivations which go beyond the mere acquisition of products. By contrast, with task-oriented shopping, consumers tend to pursue utilitarian motives (Sullican and Heitmeyer, 2008; Wagner and Rudolph, 2010). Carpenter *et al.* (2005) found a positive relationship between the hedonic benefits desired by consumers and the uniqueness of the in-store shopping experience. Hedonic consumption includes those behavioural aspects related to multi-sensory, fantasy and emotional consumption which are driven by benefits such as "fun" in using the product

and aesthetic appeal (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982), suggesting that the experience of the purchase may be more important than the acquisition of the product (Park *et al.*, 2006).

In their study of Generation Y apparel shoppers, Sullivan and Heitmeyer (2008) found that experiential attributes of the shopping experience and shopping involvement influenced both patronage and repatronage decisions. Similarly, De Nora and Belcher (2005) study of music in the British clothing retail sector concluded that younger women were more likely to view clothes shopping as a leisure activity compared to older women, for whom shopping was perceived to be more utilitarian. As such, these younger women were more influenced by sensory variables such as in-store music than older clientele. Research suggests that successful deployment of the main principles of experiential retailing can have significant potential for increasing consumer engagement and encouraging purchases (Newman and Patel, 2004; Park *et al.*, 2006; Kim *et al.*, 2009). If retailers can increase purchases through increasing engagement, patronage and repatronage, what is it about the experience in experiential retailing that makes some customers return to spend time and time again?

The effects of retail atmospherics, décor, and the physical design of the in-store environment on consumer purchase decision making have long been recognised in academic literature (Kotler, 1973; Bitner, 1992). More recently, studies have shown that retailers increasingly acknowledge the positive impact of retail atmospherics on shopping behaviour (Chebat and Michon, 2003; Stoel *et al.*, 2004). Kent (2007) noted that as retail experiences have become more important so the store environment has taken on a greater significance, providing spaces for interactivity, socialisation and communication. An effective store environment may increase shopping value and induce consumers to exhibit increased approach behaviours and dwell longer in store (Stoel *et al.*, 2004).

Store environments communicate various messages to consumers and may bring about both aesthetic and instrumental value (Fiore and Ogle, 2000). An effective retail environment can command consumers' attention and mediate their inferences about merchandise, service quality and store image (Baker *et al.*, 1994; Yani-de-Soraino and Foxall, 2006). Environmental psychology research has shown that consumer behaviour is influenced by store environmental qualities, with those shoppers that experience pleasure and arousal likely to exhibit increased approach and dwell behaviours in store (Donovan and Rossiter, 1982; Stoel *et al.*, 2004). The three emotional responses of pleasure, arousal and domination mediate actual consumer behavior such as desire to affiliate with others in the setting, desire to stay in or escape from the setting, willingness to spend time and money, and to consume (Yani-de-Soraino and Foxall, 2006). Shoppers that dwell longer in a store are more likely to purchase and hence luxury stores have long since used subtle, welcoming techniques to encourage consumers to stay longer in their stores (Lindeman, 2007). For example, the use of different sensory elements such as in-store music, carefully chosen aromas, different textures and surfaces and lighting techniques help to create unique "micro-environments" within a conventional retail space (Kent, 2007). Such sensory stimuli can improve the shopper's experience and influence consumer behaviour in-store. The greater the sensory appeal of the retail experience, the more engaging it will be to the consumer (Soars, 2009).

Soars (2003, 2009) and Kim *et al.* (2009) have written extensively about the various ways in which retailers can use sensory stimuli to influence environments and

change consumer behaviour. Building on Bitner's (1992) categorisation of the three environmental dimensions of retail atmospherics which are; ambient conditions; space/function; and signs, symbols and artefacts, and drawing on Kotler's (1973) categorisation of store atmospherics (i.e. visual, aural, olfactory and tactile), Soars (2009) categorised retail atmospherics according to the four senses of sight, sounds, smell and touch. For Kim *et al.* (2009), the more sensory "touch points" involved in experiences of consumption, the more engaging it will be. In this view, stores can influence different types of emotions and stimulate decision making through appealing to more of the senses. From this, through using the right sensory stimuli, it is argued that the principles of sensory retailing can even calm and improve moods. Following Soars (2009) and in light of Kim *et al.* (2009), it is clear that some global sports apparel retailers, such as Puma and Nike, have begun exploring sensory enhancement designed specifically around customer needs. Relying primarily on Soars' (2009) categorisation, we will now outline how retailers are engaging with shoppers on a sensory level.

Sight

Soars (2009) outlines the importance of various colours. For example, yellow is the first colour the human eye notices and blue has a calming effect (Soars, 2009, p. 292). For Soars (2009), lighting is important because it can have a dramatic effect on a shopper's mood. "By varying lighting levels and colour", Soars (2009, p. 292) writes, "it is possible to influence how long shoppers linger too". In terms of visual merchandising and display in-store, the rise of fast fashion on the UK high street is evidenced by a number of retailers replenishing and introducing new stock to the sales floor on an increasingly frequent basis and therefore feeding fashion consumers' desire for constant change and novelty (Bruce and Daly, 2006).

Sound

In their study of the use of music in the British clothing retail sector, De Nora and Belcher (2005, p. 82) identified the role of music as "an aesthetic means through which consumer agency is articulated, changed and sustained". They found that music was most seductive to younger shoppers and those who were browsing, rather than older shoppers with a heightened sense of purpose. Soars (2009) notes that the "right" type of music can make a customer want to dwell, and citing others, she observes that a customer who dwells for 40 minutes is more than twice as likely to purchase than a customer who dwells for ten (Soars, 2009, p. 287). She further notes that music can also help reduce buyer uncertainty and effect product choice. Moreover, it can also "influence the disposition of shoppers [...] propensity to purchase, basket size and intent to repatronage" (p. 293).

Smell

The sense of smell is closely linked to emotions as it can trigger memories, giving rise to emotions (Soars, 2009; Kim *et al.*, 2009). Soars (2009) cited empirical findings which are particularly relevant to fashion industry: sales of womenswear doubled when "feminine scents" were used. While Soars (2009) writes, "aromatic marketing solutions can have a positive impact on behaviour in-store", she explicitly distances herself from making any judgements on the influence other types of smells can have on clothes shopping behaviour in-store. Parsons' (2009) study concluded that in a lingerie store, the use of an associated ambient scent such as perfume could enhance the shopping

experience. However, in a normally odourless store, the use of an inappropriate ambient scent may result in undesirable shopper behaviour. Recognising that ambient scent may be of greater interest than product-specific scents because it has the potential to affect consumers' perceptions of the entire store and all of the merchandise (Parsons, 2009; Soars, 2009), a whole new industry has emerged: the scent industry (Lempert, 2005), and a whole new field of research: scent marketing (Tan, 2008; Parsons, 2009) and sensory branding (Lindstrom, 2005; Kim *et al.*, 2009) is now in its embryonic stages of development.

One area where smell might be important is the retail sector for vintage clothing, whereby the smell may be described by some as "not pleasant". Does the "unpleasant" smell of vintage clothing appeal to the consumer looking for vintage? When does the smell of vintage become pleasant? Furthermore who decides what a pleasant aroma is and what is not? What does "vintage" feel like? What happens if your wear a "vintage" garment to try it on for size? Can you smell "vintage" on your hands after touching it/trying clothes on in-store? On this, smell is closely related to touch.

Touch

Finally Soars (2009, p. 294) explores the use of touch to support sensory enhancement, stating that touch fuels emotions for rational decision making. For example, from reading Soars (2009) we are reminded that shoppers picture through touch the weight of cloth and then go to the movies in their head, imagining how it would feel to wear. Findings (regarding the impact of sound – music – on the structure of buyer in-store conduct) reported in De Nora and Belcher (2005) also reinforce this view; that through their senses, shoppers go to the movies in their heads, picturing themselves wearing what they are touching in-store, or being in a place where they are playing this kind of music they are hearing in-store.

Regarding touch, Soars (2009) also notes that shoppers are likely to be irritated if touched from behind by other shoppers. This builds on retail anthropologist Underhill's (2000) concept of "butt brushing": if there is insufficient room to move around in a product area and shoppers come into physical contact with another shopper from behind, they are less likely to buy products from that area. Soars (2009) argues that Ikea has worked intelligently with the knowledge that channelling customers through their stores can go some way towards preventing customers from stepping back into narrow aisles or being stuck in one area. Wittingly or unwittingly, it would appear that Ikea has made good use of the principles of social navigation, controlling the flow of customers, to prevent "butt brushing". Soars (2009, p. 297) lends a final warning, noting that so much of what we experience in-store is outside of our control, perhaps it is time to draw up guidelines to help delineate innovation and intrusion. Following on from Soars (2009) and in light of the examples given (e.g. Puma, Nike, Ikea and Abercrombie & Fitch), it would appear that large organisations have taken the lead in managing the shoppers sensory in-store experience, but what potential might such understanding of the shoppers' sensory retail experience hold for small, private retailer/boutique owner?

Summary

Despite the economic significance of SME businesses in terms of turnover and employment, there is a paucity of academic literature on retail atmospherics in SME retail businesses, especially in the fashion sector. It is accepted that small companies are not scaled-down versions of large corporations (Welsh and White, 1981), and since

existing literature on experiential or sensory retailing focuses on mass market retail chains (Yalch and Spangenberg, 1990; Venkatraman and Nelson, 2008), shopping malls (Michon *et al.*, 2007) or luxury brands (Lindeman, 2007), there is a lack of understanding of whether or how the concepts of retail atmospherics and experiential retailing apply to small independent retailers. Furthermore, as the retail sector is highly competitive and notorious for its high failure rate (Brush and Chaganti, 1998; Watson and Everett, 1999), there is justification in exploring how small start-up enterprises can not only enter, but remain and prosper in the marketplace. Therefore, a case study of a small UK vintage fashion retailer permitted a qualitative exploration of how experiential retailing is applied in an SME fashion retail business. The trend towards purposefully wearing vintage clothing has increased in popularity in the last decade, partly as a result of being validated by a variety of influential celebrities and vintage fashion has therefore crossed over from being a niche subculture to become a mainstream trend (Palmer and Clark, 2005; DeLong *et al.*, 2005; Tungate, 2008; Beard, 2008; McColl *et al.*, 2010). In addition, due to the low start-up costs involved in purchasing second-hand stock, vintage boutiques present relatively low barriers to entry into the fashion retail sector and may therefore represent a good business opportunity for budding entrepreneurs.

Method

This study aims to broaden understanding rather than seek explanation (Stake, 1995) of the issues related to how experiential retailing may be applied in the SME context as a way of retail brand differentiation. Due to the dearth of qualitative literature on the effect of experiential retailing in the fashion sector, a case study approach was selected. A small vintage ladieswear retail business operating in a niche localised market in the northwest of England was selected as a single case study on the basis of it being a typical case: a lifestyle business start-up in the fashion sector which was set up as a sole proprietorship. It therefore fulfilled the definition of an SME as a company with a small market share, managed by the owner in a personalised way and free from outside decision-making control (i.e. shareholders). The store in question is located within a small parade of shops in a suburb rather than city centre. Rather than relying solely on passing trade, to maintain commercial longevity the owner's mission was to turn her boutique into a "destination store". Since growth in turnover is dependent on repatronage and patrons' word-of-mouth, encouraging new customers to travel to the store; and repatronage relies mainly on providing added value to customers through a differentiated retail experience (Stoel *et al.*, 2004; Fiore and Ogle, 2000), the owner wanted to understand exactly what it is that current patrons admire about the store and what is it, if anything, about the sensory environment within the store that draws them in. Working with the owner to generate fresher understanding, it was intended that the current research project would help lead to a sustained differentiated retail experience.

In the context of design research, Gilmore (2002) recommends using ethnography to help reveal previously unidentified user needs. For Gilmore (2002, p. 32), the advantage of studying small numbers is that you can gain an in-depth understanding of customers and from this it is possible to then inspire better design (i.e. in-store design). Moreover, previous research (Venkatraman and Nelson, 2008) provides the precedent for using photo-elicitation methods with small numbers. In their exploration of how young, urban Chinese consumers experience the servicescape of a Starbucks café using the photo-elicitation method, Venkatraman and Nelson (2008) involved seven research

participants in their study and included two photographs in the research analysis. March *et al.* (1991, p. 6) noted that a reliable learning process from a case of one is "one by which an organization develops a common understanding of its experience and makes its interpretation public, stable and shared"; and "a valid learning process is one by which an organization is able to understand, predict, and control its environment. Neither reliability nor validity is assured". With this in mind, potential participants in the study were identified with the help of the owner. The selection criteria for patrons involved in the study were as follows: the participant had to be female, she had bought at least two items of clothing/accessories from the shop spread over two separate visits to the store, she had visited the shop on at least one occasion and left without buying anything. The third criterion was considered to be important as it represents patronage and a willingness to linger, dwell and browse for leisure.

Razvi (2006) recommended equipping research participants with a digital camera with at least 5 megapixels, extra batteries and a blank memory stick because this can help ensure validity. In this study, participants were given an 8-megapixel digital camera and received a demonstration on how to operate it. After gaining informed consent from each of the participants to use their photographic images and quote their words from our follow-up interviews, ensuring anonymity, and reminding participants that they could withdraw from the study at any point during the research process, arrangements were made with each of the five participants to meet individually, outside the boutique in North West England.

Five participants were successfully recruited for involvement in the study. At each meeting with the participant outside the shop, after explaining the purpose of the study and answering any further queries regarding the nature of the study, participants were instructed to "take a photograph that best describes how it feels to shop here". Participants were also asked to enter the shop and told to "take as long as you need" while one of the researchers waited outside. Through the data collection phase it emerged that we had reached data saturation after the follow-up interview with our fifth participant. Photo-elicitation (Heisley and Levy, 1991; Harper, 2002; Hurworth, 2003) was the main method of inquiry.

Photo-elicitation involves inserting a photograph into the interview process which the participant made (Rose, 2012, p. 297) for the purpose of the research study (Harper, 2002). For Rose (2012, pp. 304-7), there are four key strengths in using this method. They are: first, "photographs carry a great deal of information" (p. 305) and by asking participants to elaborate what meanings are contained in the image(s) we gain insight into social phenomena that might ordinarily remain inaccessible and difficult to express if we were to rely on oral, aural or written data alone; second, the method is "particularly helpful in exploring everyday, taken-for-granted things" in the research participants' lives, allowing "the participants to reflect on their everyday activities in a way that is not usually done" (p. 306); third, research participants feel more empowered because they take a "central role in the research process" becoming "expert" in the interview (p. 306); and finally there is a view that "photo-elicitation demands collaboration between the research and the research participant" (p. 306). Rose (2012, p. 307) goes on to highlight a further benefit, stating that it is a good way of enrolling participants into a research project because "taking photographs is perceived as easy and fun". In view of this strength of the method but building mainly on Rose's (2012, p. 306) second strength outlined above, since we were interested in exploring patrons' everyday, taken-for-granted experiences of the boutiques sensory retail environment, it made sense to use photography in the interview process as a means of

accessing the largely emotional and ineffable aspects of the shopping experience. Moreover, recent research (Breazeale and Ponder, in press, p. 2) adds yet another precedent for using photo-elicitation to research consumer feelings, for in their study of consumer emotional responses to servicescapes, drawing on previous research, the authors described the method as being useful for reaching "a deeper level of human consciousness than words alone".

Procedure

A total of five photographs were produced[1] and five follow-up interviews, lasting an average of 60 minutes. In addition, follow-up telephone calls and e-mail correspondence enabled the researchers to clarify details, confirm interpretations of events and provided opportunities for participants to add, remove and/or modify what they were wished to convey through their photograph and their explanation of it, which produced copious notes. Using Soars (2009) as our analytical framework, these field notes were then used to generate insights into experiential retailing in the small fashion boutique. Following Warren (2002, p. 238), photographic images are presented alongside the research text not "used as "mere illustration" of the written word, (such as in the case of children's story books) placing them as subordinate and arguably superfluous to text"; following Warren (2002, p. 238) we have constructed this paper as an "image-text" and argue that "text should be seen as being beyond comparison – each offering a valuable contribution to the creation and communication of meaning, which is different from, but no better or worse, than the other". As in Warren (2002), neither our words (i.e. research text), or the images (i.e. participant-produced photography) "would be adequate alone" as seen together they create a "synergy" which adds greater resolution to our understanding of the sensory retail experience.

For Collier (1967, p. 5), although "photographs are precise records of material reality" (cited in Rose, 2012, p. 299), their value in the current study lay in the way this precision allowed for exploration of the participants' interpretation of their own lived reality through senses and bodily experiences within the fashion boutique. Since our study is concerned with analysing behaviour in commercial settings, in the tradition of Dion (2007), the camera is used as much more than just a tool:

> This is not a question of simply enriching text and photographic descriptions by adding sound and movement but of completely altering the role of the camera in the marketing research project so as to be more able to comprehend the individual's personal perception of his consumption experience (p. 75).

For Warren (2002), photographs can add to the richness of a study in two main ways. First, the photographs add to the verbal data through their imagery, and second the photograph can serve as a focus for the interview. Even if the researcher cannot understand a particular image because it is blurred for example, Warren (2002) argued that it can still mean a lot to the participant. Since we were interested in exploring the meaning shoppers attribute to the sensory retail environment in a fashion boutique, the photo-elicitation method of data collection is ideal for the purpose of the study.

Findings and discussion

The research objective was to determine what made the boutiques' patrons return time and time again. Since the current study is about the sensory retail environment in small fashion boutiques, we therefore also wanted to establish whether or not such repatronage was linked to the sensory environment. Our findings show that the main

part of the store had little to offer in terms of providing an entertaining, exciting and memorable sensory experience, which is what Sit *et al.* (2003) suggested young female shoppers desire. However, this was not the case with the part of the store where vintage clothes were on display.

Our findings help us to distinguish between two contrasting areas in the boutique: the vintage area and the "normal" (shop owners' descriptor) area. Compared to the "normal" area, the vintage area had more to offer the shopper by way of a sensory experience. Three research participants stated that their favourite part of the boutique was the vintage section. For these three patrons, they tended to visit the store mainly to browse this section. One of these "vintage shoppers" added that the main reason why she visited the store so often is because she knows the owner well, stating "I like to pop in for a chat, and end up buying something" (Participant 1). For this shopper, we might say that it is the friendship is what draws her in to the store and not the sensory retail environment of boutique itself *per se*. Consistent with previous research (Roper and Parker, 2006), the owner-manager's personality provides a point of differentiation for Participant 1. This invites the question, would the patron be visiting the boutique and buying if the owner was not her friend? From our data, it would seem not.

Through reading and re-reading transcripts, field notes and clarification follow-up e-mails, we will now present extracts alongside photographic images which highlight the patterns emerging from our data. Listening closely to the participants' perceived meaningful connections between relations with the owner, clothes on display, in-store sensory experiences (i.e. sight/sound/smell/touch), patronage and buying; we have organised our insights according to themes emerging from our review of the literature on experiential retailing, relying mainly on Soars' (2009) theoretical framework to address each aspect of the sensory retail environment in turn.

Sight

The boutique looked cramped for some participants and they lamented the lack of space to manoeuvre. Participant 1 took the following photograph (see Plate 1) because "It's the first thing I see when I walk into the boutique and maybe it's a bit wide for the shop". Such a lack of space made this participant describe the experience of entering the shop as being one of "confinement".

The idea that the clothes rail in the image above looks "a bit wide for the shop" goes some way towards illustrating Soars' (2009, p. 294) use of "butt brushing" theory in that such "confinement" might serve to put Participant 1 off browsing. Another participant draw attention to the fact that she felt "freer to move around in the vintage area" and reasoned that the reason why it looks crowded at the front of the store when you walk in is because "the clothes horse is the first thing you see".

A common theme related to navigation through the store, which was brought out by Participant 3 who reported "there is no natural route". Moreover, all participants stated that despite heading straight for the vintage area as soon as they enter the shop, none of them take the same route each time. One might interpret this to mean that such freedom to roam is welcomed and appreciated, however Participant 2 stated that "in another local boutique I like to visit, there is only one route you can and in fact I visit that store more often than I do this one". Further still, this highlights the preference of the vintage area over the "normal" area but it also invites the question, does this reflect young female shoppers' preference for vintage or is it because "the vintage part is spacious"?

Some participants expressed the desire to see different products on a regular basis. The following image taken by Participant 4 depicts a sight that she sees all too

Plate 1.
Feeling confined to small places

often: the same clothes rail with the same clothes on it. When prompted, she explained that she always walks towards the area in the photograph because it is right next to the counter where the owner sits. Later on in the interview she expressed that "she always notices when there is a change in stock and new stock comes in – which isn't very often, […] because the rail looks completely different". In this sense, as argued in Parsons (2011, p. 439), repeated exposure to visual stimuli can result in "the shopper quickly becoming bored or dissatisfied with the sensory stimuli and the benefits of positive affect diminished or lost altogether". On this, retailers would do well to experiment with creating visual stimuli in-store so as to prevent "stagnation" with repeated exposure (Parsons, 2011, p. 439) (Plate 2).

Participant 5 mentioned during the interview process that she "hated seeing the same dress in the same place […], coming back, week after week, seeing the same thing". Additionally, Participant 1 found the clothes horse in the normal part of the shop to be uninviting and off-putting: "I think it's tacky and it puts me off going near that side of the shop". From all this, support is found in our data for the well-established notion that hedonic consumers perceive value in excitement derived from the sight of new things. When patrons see the same items during return visits, our data suggests this does not encourage purchases.

Two of the research participants associated quality with careful arrangement of items in the vintage area of the store. For them, the vintage area did not seem to be "packed with clothes" and unlike "in other vintage shops where you sometimes see

Plate 2.
The desire to see new stock

clothes packed to the brim", when there is room to move around without butt brushing and the emphasis is on "quality over quantity", consumers are more likely to linger and roam.

Another aspect of the sensory retail environment that participants discussed during interviews is light. All five participants observed just how bright it was inside the boutique. This was expressed as something very positive, with Participant 2 stating that "the boutique reminds me of summer". From this, lighting in the vintage area was viewed as a unique selling point because vintage stores and vintage areas in other boutiques can sometimes look "dark and dingy". Soars (2009) notes that lighting is an important part of the sensory environment, and a relatively low cost way of both affecting a shoppers' mood and enhancing the sensory environment. Using sight alone however, to influence a shoppers' experience is too primitive as competitors are now tapping into other senses and customers now expect and want more than just visual entertainment and excitement in-store; they want their sense of sound, smell and touch to be aroused also (Kim *et al.*, 2009).

Sound

Apart from one participant who remembered hearing the radio playing in the background during one visit to the boutique, all participants reported that the boutique never played any music. When prompted, all participants said however, they would like to hear chart music playing, with one participant stating "but not too loudly […] just background music […] to browse to". This supports previous research reported in Soars (2009) which shows that the "right" music can have a positive impact on dwelling time, lingering and shoppers' intention to spend.

Participants also spoke about overhearing general conversation from other shoppers during visits but this was to be expected and did not detract from the shopping experience. Unwanted noise from over-zealous shop assistants in the form of

repeat questions however, was portrayed as being a real nuisance. One participant revealed: "I hate to be followed around by a shop assistant, asking do I need help every 5 minutes". Asking – do you need any help? Is there anything I can do for you? Would you like to try something on? – is something which participants expressed a distaste for and stressed that it would not encourage them dwell longer or spend money in the shop.

Smell

Although Rose (2012, p. 298) writes photographs can capture something of the sensory richness of the build and natural environment, "though not all" (i.e. sound), the participants who produced photographs of the vintage area used their image to depict "musky" smells (Plates 3 and 4).

When prompted, participants said that looking at the images triggered the unique and distinct smell you sense in any shop which sells clothes that have been pre-owned and worn by others. These participants spoke of "the vintage shop smell". In initial conversations, the "musky" smell was cast as something that might put some customers off buying clothes from the boutique however through deeper probing and further questioning with Participants 4 and 5 in our study we soon realised that for some shoppers, the "musky" smell verified that the vintage clothes were genuine. This was confirmed when we went back to the research participants for further questioning.

Plate 3.
Musky vintage

Plate 4.
Musky vintage

However, the shop did not always smell "musky". At times it smelled like coffee, at others it smelled of air freshener. In a naturally odourless store, these types of ambient scent are not congruent with the merchandise offer and therefore may detract from the shopping experience (Parsons, 2009). Participant 5 could not recall any smell at all and another identified "[…] a store down the road that always smells of sweets and I love that smell". All this suggests that smells in-store can stay with a customer long after they leave.

Touch

Touch was another theme that all the participants in our study hit on. All five participants stated that touch is an important part of buying clothes as they "like to know how it would feel to wear it" (Participant 3). The sense of touch was particularly also important for Participant 1 for whom "the metal [ornamentation] looks cold" as depicted in Plate 5. When talking about the clothes horse, she added, "I find myself being more attracted to the clothes on the wooden shelves as wood is a lot warmer". For her, "metal is just clinical and doesn't remind me of nice clothes".

Two participants spoke in detail on how the boutique used to have bags hanging up on shelves which meant that they were out of reach. The fact they remembered this and both spoke about them fondly but noted how they had always remained "untouchable" highlights their need and longing for touch in the sensory retail environment. Other items in the store however, were within reach. For Participants 4, the jewellery stand was singled out as her favourite part of the shop because "[…] in some places the jewellery is behind the counter or in a big glass box and you can't try it on or touch it". From all this, our data shows that it is not only the product on sale which customers crave (or want to avoid) touching, but the cultural artefacts the products are sitting or hanging on.

Conclusions

The research illustrated the craving that the women in our study had for a sensory experience whilst shopping in the boutique. The two contrasting parts of the shop are easily identifiable by the participants, not only by the change in clothing but also by

Plate 5.
Depicting touch in the shopping experience

the completely different smells the shopper is greeted with upon entering the different parts of the store. By comparing the two sections of the shop rather than looking at the sensory environment of the boutique as a whole, different perceptions of the sensory retail environment were revealed which highlighted the granularity and subjectivity of the experience of fashion shopping.

While the vintage area offered a "musky" smell that validated the authenticity of the vintage garments for sale, the "normal" area offered either no smell, or an inconsistency of scents including coffee and air freshener. On this, the vintage area "ticked more boxes" which goes some way towards explaining the relative success of this area within the store. In answer to the question we asked at the beginning of this study, it would appear that the vintage area provides a sensory environment that encourages repatronage. It is this area of the store which draws people back time and time again. We will now review the "lessons learnt".

Managerial implications

Following Soars (2009), implications for owner-managers are presented according to the order in which we have presented our findings: sight, sound, smell and touch.

Sight: shoppers need room to move to avoid butt brushing and owner-managers can go some way to offer more hints to visitors on how to navigate their way around the shop. Owners need to facilitate movement, flow and offer a natural route through the store. What do you want your customers to see? As fashion consumers now expect and thrive on constant change (Bruce and Daly, 2006), shoppers need to see regular turnover of stock in small fashion boutiques as well as in large high street retailers, in order to prevent boredom and stagnation (Parsons, 2011).

Sound: music is something that owner-managers of small fashion boutiques could pay more attention to – at least the owner-manager in our study might derive benefits from choosing the "right" music. For younger shoppers and browsers, music imparts a sense of occasion and ignites consumer passion, enabling them to transpose themselves into the places they might go wearing the item (De Nora and Belcher, 2005). Small fashion boutique owners would do well to afford patrons the opportunity to engage their fantasy to reflect the self-image they pursue.

Smell: the "musky" smell of vintage is a sigh of authentic and a unique selling point which owner-managers need not mask with air freshener.

Touch: owner-managers need to find a balance between displaying products and making them touchable; so shoppers can try on items to imagine how they might look in the places where they want to go wearing the clothes they buy in the boutique (De Nora and Belcher, 2005).

Future research

Our findings concerning the role of bad (i.e. "musky") smells have helped to identify a potentially fruitful area of study: the role (and importance) of smell in the retail sector for vintage clothes. Are there any other "bad" smells for example, that still attract customers or are of great importance in authenticating the shopping experience?

Although music can calm and influence mood (Soars, 2009), the literature on experiential retailing fails to consider other aspects of sound in the sensory retail environment such as chat. Is the sound of chatting in-store more important to the shopper than music? Or is one more important than the other in different shopping situations? When does music become less important and chatting more so?

Note

1. These images cannot be published due to copyright reasons however they can be obtained by contacting the corresponding author.

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