PHOTO-ELICITATION: USING PHOTOGRAPHS TO READ RETAIL INTERIORS THROUGH CONSUMERS' EYES

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ABSTRACT

Researchers studying experiences in retail environments have typically restricted their attention towards examining the influence of individual atmospheric variables upon customer behavior. In this respect photographs and video are common environmental simulation techniques. This research approach not only concerns researchers active in consumer culture theory, but also interior architects and retail designers. As holistic inspired practitioners, they maintain that interiors function as 'Gestalt' environments, interacting with their users. Inspired by their viewpoints, in this paper, the authors reflect on the use of the inductive, holistically inspired method of photo-elicitation in research concerning experiences in retail environments. In addition, they report on the application of photo-elicitation in two empirical projects. The findings demonstrate the value of photo-elicitation in gaining insight into customer experiences in retail interiors.

Keywords**:** photo-elicitation, retail design, retail interiors, customer experiences

1. STUDYING RETAIL INTERIORS

With the development of marketing research in co-creativity between producer and consumer (Lusch & Vargo, 2006a, 2006b) and studies of consumer experience, it has become important to re-assess the service environment. The rapid growth of consumption in developing economies, but also the continuing development of retail formats and omni-commerce in more mature markets, further supports the store environment as an important focus for new research and an examination of complementary research methodologies.

The aim of this research is to develop understanding of retail environments as sites of complex visual sensory experiences and the application of photo-elicitation as a research methodology. The article is organised firstly with a discussion of the literature relating to current research approaches used to obtain knowledge with regards to customer experiences in retail environments. Secondly to explain the visual methodologies and their application in social sciences, and the use of photo-elicitation in particular as a methodology for studying customer experiences in retail environments. Thirdly to analyse the application of photo-elicitation in two empirical projects. Finally, the authors discuss the contribution of photo-elicitation to research methodology together with managerial implications and future research opportunities.

2. RESEARCH APPROACHES TO GAIN INSIGHT IN CUSTOMER EXPERIENCES IN RETAIL ENVIRONMENTS

The effect of the store environment on its users is reported in the literatures of environmental psychology, marketing, architecture and design (Greenland & McGoldrick, 1994, 2005). In the past few decades, a range of studies have demonstrated that consumer behavior towards stores and store patronage is influenced at least to some degree, by the store environment

(e.g., Donovan & Rossiter, 1982; Baker, Levy & Grewal, 1992; Baker, Grewal & Parasuraman, 1994; Lam, 2001; Davies & Ward, 2002; Baker, Parasuraman, Grewal & Voss, 2002). There are various possible research approaches to obtain information about consumers in this respect and in this section the authors distinguish between positivistic and interpretive research approaches.

Positivistic research approaches

When focusing on the question how customers experience retail environments, two strands of research are significant. Firstly, environmental psychology provides a theoretical foundation to emotional responses through the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) model, defined by Mehrabian & Russell (1974) and subsequently developed for retail environments by Donovan and Rossiter (1982), to examine behavior through the Pleasure – Arousal - Dominance model (Fiore & Kim, 2007). Their influence is found in the 'servicescapes' concept which specifically focuses on customer and employee interactions in the physical environment (Bitner, 1992). Secondly, research in 'atmospherics' (Kotler, 1973) has developed understanding of consumer evaluations of and their subsequent behavior in the retail environment (Turley & Milliman, 2000). The atmospherics research tradition focuses on the influence of individual variables, mostly controlled by the retailer, on consumer responses (Verhoef, Lemon, Parasuraman, Roggeveen, Tsiros & Schlesinger, 2009). These studies tend to be dominated by positivistic research approaches, typified by verified facts, systems of organisation, lawlike generalisations, and tested hypotheses. Data collection via experimentation or surveys in which the use of questionnaires is one of the most common quantitative research tools, thus help to support or refute certain theories (Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Creswell, 2003).

Interpretive research approaches

Interpretivism provides an alternative paradigm to post-positivistic, quantitative research design. It aims to gain insights into customer experiences in retail environments, and holds that in retail practice, multiple stimuli interact and influence consumers' in-store experiences (Healy, Beverland, Oppewal & Sands, 2007; Sands, 2008; Author 1 & Author 3, 2010). As consumers' overall perceptions about a specific store can also influence their overall preference for that store (Thang & Tan, 2003), there is an increased interest for undertaking research in retail settings more 'holistically'. Inspired by writings originating in phenomenology and Gestalt thinking about designed environments (i.e., a frame of reference wherein a place is considered to be a totality, a whole where various elements interact so that users experience the space as more than the sum of its constituent parts), various researchers aim to explain how consumers perceive, and are influenced by the entire in-store atmosphere (Healy et al., 2007; Sands, 2008).

The centrality of the consumer in the shopping environment is supported by Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) which explains that existing research in the customer-environment relationship (i.e., in the atmospherics tradition) has often minimized the importance of situation and context (Mariampolski, 1999; Penaloza, 1999; Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Research in this stream of literature focuses on consumers' use of a designed space for the production of personally significant experiences, meanings and purposes (Arnould, Price & Tierney, 1998; Sherry, 1998). Notably, business and management research tends to marginalise the research methodologies of the designers themselves and their holistic, non-linear approach to design problems. It has long been understood that buildings can have a symbolic meaning beyond their instrumental purpose (Rapoport, 1982; Berg & Kreiner, 1990). More overtly, the outcome of the design process in commercial projects that integrate both the exterior and interior of the store is consistent brand communication (Din, 2000).

Drawing on the visual strength of the 'brandscape', postmodernist architecture and design consciously communicate retail brand identity (Riewoldt, 2002; Brauer, 2002). From these perspectives, retail interiors which need to be designed or studied should be approached as holistic totalities, as 'wholes' where various elements interact and determine how consumers feel and behave in a space. Hence the relevance of interpretive research (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Carù & Cova, 2007), in which researchers make use of participant-based methodologies for studying consumer behavior and experiences in designed environments.

Despite the clear advantages of positivistic approaches, they seem to have a limited practicality for gaining insight in customers' impressions about design attributes (Pullman & Robson, 2007). Interpretive approaches, and visual research methodologies in particular, are appropriate when researchers aim to gain insights into customer experiences in designed spaces. Taken into account that the researchers aimed to gain insight into customers' experiences in selected retail environments, rather than employing positivistic methodologies, they applied the interpretive approach of photo-elicitation.

3. VISUAL RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

The foregoing perspectives demonstrate that visual research can contribute to understanding both the symbolic and physical meanings of the built environment (Schroeder, 1998, 2002; Harper, 2002; Prosser, 2007). Within the field of visual research or visual methodology, different authors have identified four visual research approaches, namely (i) acknowledging images as data themselves, that is, visuals signs and symbols that allow to gain insight in the cultures and people that produced them (ii) often in anthropology, using images as a way to truly document social, cultural and physical processes as they are happening (iii) employing images as stimuli to elicit information from participants whereby the image is produced by someone other than the research participant and (iv) using images to help participants to

express their feelings, beliefs and so on either as an aid to verbal narrative, or in place of it. In this respect, the produced visual material functions as a communicative tool whereby the images themselves have been produced by the research participants themselves (Harper, 2002; Warren, 2005). This is the approach that the researchers will discuss further in the paper under the term of 'photo-elicitation'.

Since the publication of a text on photography as a research method by Wagner (1979), there has been a continuous growth '*in handing the camera to those whose lives we wish to explore…because photography offers opportunities for research participants to express their subjectivities as – quite literally – their view of the world*' (Warren, 2005, p. 865). From the first indications of the use of photography as a research method onwards, visual research methods mostly were successful in disciplines with traditional ethnographic histories, namely anthropology and sociology (Berg, 2008). Relatively recent, also researchers in consumer behavior and marketing have starten to become interested in photography as a research method to explore consumers' perceptions about and experiences in retail environments (e.g., Burt, Johansson & Thelander, 2005, 2007; author 2 & other author, 2009).

3.1 Photo-elicitation

Photo-elicitation refers to the method whereby a researcher asks research participants to make photographs that depict some aspect of their experiences (Warren, 2005). Afterwards, the photographs are inserted into a research interview, and act as a communication bridge between the interviewer and the interviewee. The method of photo-elicitation[i] was proposed for the first time by John Collier in 1957, as a means to overcome practical problems which he encountered in his research. From the 1990s onwards, there has been a steady growth of interest towards using photo-elicitation as a research methodology. This can be clarified by various developments: firstly, the recent rise of interest in photo-elicitation certainly is

indebted by researchers' everyday immersion in multiple visual signs and photographs, which has stimulated Warren (2005, p. 866) to propose that academic research also becomes '*subject to a visual turn*'. Secondly, the interest in photo-elicitation can be explained by the 'post-modern turn' (Warren, 2005) in social science which provides a methodological underpinning for visual research that overcomes problems in articulation and discourse. Derived from structuration theory, it accepts activity and practice, that everyone has high levels of 'practical consciousness' and that people are more knowledgeable than they actually can tell (Giddens, 1984). Thirdly, Warren (2005) indicates that for researchers active in organization studies (particular ethnographic studies) issues such as reflexive practice, subjectivity, and immersion in the worlds they research have become important. The subjective nature of photography lends itself particularly well to answer these calls, as '*the photograph almost literally acts a lens through which we see what others 'see' and importantly, deem important enough to 'capture' with a camera*' (Warren, 2005, p. 866). Fourthly, Pink (2007) argues that the visual is a multi-sensory encounter and should be integrated with other sensory modalities. She accepts that photographs are never merely visual but in fact invoke synaesthetic and kinaesthetic effects, as the visual provokes sensory responses. Some elements of human experience are best represented visually and Pink (2007) sees the relationship between visual and other senses as key to understanding how everyday experiences are constituted.

After having theoretically reflected on the interpretive, holistically inspired visual research method of photo-elicitation, in the following section the researchers present the results of two empirical research projects wherein they aimed to gain insight in research participants' in-store experiences with the help of photo-elicitation.

4. EMPIRICAL PROJECTS

4.1 Empirical research project one

4.1.1 Research design

The first research project was conducted at two food superstores in a large metropolitan area. One store had traded for over ten years, the other had traded for five years; both stores were located out of centre sites with large car parks. While the building design differed due to a change in corporate design policy, the principles of display and interior layouts were comparable. A sample of customers of twenty shoppers at each store representing family, older and younger segments of the market visited the store in the morning, afternoon and evening. All respondents were familiar with the store, and participated in the project during their normal mid-week shopping visit.

On arrival at the store, respondents were given instructions to take photographs that expressed their feelings about the store, and which meant something important or significant to them. The instructions were specifically reduced to avoid researcher bias (Burt et al., 2005). Each respondent was given a disposable camera, with instructions to use up all the film, typically twenty-seven photos. The photographs could be taken inside and outside the store, including the car park.

Thirty-four respondents completed their research task and the interviews with these respondents took place 7-10 days after the photographs were taken. Each interview was scheduled in a form of ''guided conversation'' (Zaltman, 1996). Each respondent was handed the pack of photographs and asked to sort them into meaningful themes (elements) of their own devising; where they sought guidance, respondents were asked to choose 5-8 themes although they could have as many or few as they liked. The elements were expressed as a

single noun, or occasionally in short descriptions, using the respondents' own words or where difficult to summarise, negotiated with the interviewer.

The second stage of analysis used a modified repertory grid technique, in which 166 constructs and their meanings were identified by respondents. In the next stage of analysis, following Reynolds and Gutman's (1988) laddering technique, only complete responses to each emergent and implicit pole were used to examine higher level values. In the final stage of the research respondents were asked to make a selection from their photographs, and to stick these to a sheet of paper in any way that represented their experience of the store. The montage enabled the respondent to highlight significant photographs or themes and provided a means of referencing and validating the earlier analyses.

4.1.2   Research results

The respondents collectively took 816 usable photographs. In the first stage, the respondents sorted them into a total of 227 elements, with a range of 5-9 elements per respondent (mean 6.8). Each element was represented by more than one photograph and typically consisted of 3-4 photographs. These were recorded and interpretative analysis of the respondents' descriptions, agreed by two researchers, led to the grouping of photographs sharing common element characteristics. The aim was to identify the significant features of the environment from how the respondents had taken the photos and what they meant to them. Products formed the largest group, and these were sub-divided by their focus on specific attributes, for example 'meat', and generic ones, such as 'favourite products'. Fresh produce and newly cooked (bakery, meat) foods were significantly represented in this group. The third largest cluster consisted of 'dissatisfied' elements (20). 'Dissatisfied' was specifically defined by the respondents by what was perceived to be missing from the store, notably by absence of products demonstrated in messy displays and presentations. The store environment was the

fourth largest group, followed by photographs of layouts and displays (17), these groups were typically identified in neutral or positive terms. Respondents approved of neat well-stocked displays, tidy aisles and a general sense of a cornucopia of products, in contrast to 'dissatisfied' elements. Trolleys, checkouts and general obstructions were agreed by the researchers as 'hindrances' - to be negotiated around - and 'access' was assessed separately as a generic issue relating to elements that included customer circulation and shelf heights. Customer service and 'people' related to the company's efforts to look after its customers and formed a separate category to 'services', which included general service provision, for example, the café.

Turning to the 'store environment' group of photographs; these were defined by the spatial and structural arrangement of the store and divided by exterior and interior elements. The respondents' engagement with the building was almost universally in terms of its functionality, which reflected their personal concerns and interests. External access to the store, from finding an appropriate parking space to negotiating trolleys and pushchairs into the entrance were clearly identified. Trolleys, their accessibility and availability outside the building, their usefulness and ability to cause obstructions were cited, in their own right, as elements by respondents and were implicated in obstructions. The entrance and exit form the store's boundary, as was demonstrated in both store environments and also elements described as checkouts. The physical margins of the store were typified by security barriers, functional surrounds, and corporate communications through signage and notices. Respondents summarized the areas as 'boring' and 'organised' in the sense of being controlled, although the checkouts need to be very carefully organized to avoid frustration setting in and to achieve a successful 'end of visit' experience. Recycling facilities also needed to be treated carefully; for those respondents who had an interest in recycling, the

facilities were shown to be inadequate and at worst demonstrated tokenism towards environmental responsibility.

In the second stage of the analysis the largest category of constructs concerned products (39) and reflected the number of product photographs sorted in the earlier stage into elements. Respondents explained the photographs' meaning in terms of choice and availability in the store, and the use of products for different purchasing occasions.

The store environment (32) was the second largest category of constructs and included the meanings of space and types of space both inside and outside the building. In this context the category was broadened from the first stage to include store layouts and safety issues concerning the physical environment, and also store signage (having a spatial dimension) as a medium of communicating information.

In the laddering phase the respondents' constructs relating to the physical environment generally defined the store as a physically safe place, operationally functional and ultimately, pleasing to be in. A second theme that emerged was respondents' criticism towards the store and company, and these were manifested by explaining their experience of practical problems in finding products, and corporately, were suspicious of being manipulated by the store on prices.

Three steps were typically achieved in each ladder, and the values were interpreted as *my time*, which reflected the value of the effective use of time, *a stress-free life*, which drew on the consumers' own knowledge and perceptions of organization and space. The remaining values were identified as *satisfaction*, the fulfillment in achieving shopping objectives and *happiness*. With further interpretative analysis these were reduced to fundamental emotional states, 'happy' and 'unhappy'. Happiness was typified by contentment, but also contemplation about the store, defined by being in a reflective state about what the store is and might be. The

two stores were separately analysed, and showed that at the older store A, 33 constructs demonstrated states of happiness and 40 unhappiness, while at B, 51 were happy and 28 unhappy. In examining the built environment, Store B's location was more spacious, its car park and perimeter easier to negotiate and its larger size, enabled its interior spaces to be stock more products in what was perceived to be a more organized state.

The final stage of the analysis demonstrated two approaches, the first explicitly or implicitly described a shopping journey. The car park and access to the store was specifically highlighted as elements by two respondents, but also featured in a number of 'stories' in the mapping of the store, as the start and end point of the store visit. This approach involved the creative engagement of the respondent and through the choice of photographs, clearly drew attention to significant elements in the shopping experience. These supported findings from the earlier stages of analysis but also demonstrated the importance of specific details in the store. For instance, one respondent had worked in health and safety and had a heightened awareness of the store almost exclusively in these terms. This approach was more typical of the female respondents. The second approach was characterised by using the photographs to list favourite aspects of the store, and tended to focus on products. This more functional style was preferred by male respondents.

4.2   Empirical research project two

4.2.1 Research design

The second research project was conducted at a shoe and fashion store, located in a shopping city in Belgium. The retail environment in its whole is relatively large (it is about 750 square meters). This store's main product offering concerns shoes from well-known brands for men, women and children of different ages, but they also offer clothing and accessories. Thirty-

eight customers, of whom half of the sample already was familiar with the store, were invited individually to the retail environment on one of three ordinary weekdays in April 2010. Upon arrival at the entry of the store, the research participants received a digital photo camera and were asked to photograph anything in or outside the store which triggered an experience for them during their store visit, or which made a certain impression on them. As in empirical research project one, instructions to research participants were reduced to avoid researcher bias (Burt et al., 2005).

Immediately after their store visit, a researcher interviewed each of the participants individually, whereby he or she organised each interview around the photographs that each of the interviewees had collected. The interviews took place in the store itself, so that participants could elaborate on their photographs while having the possibility to point at details in the store environment itself. In addition, this procedure facilitated participants' partaking in the research project.

In line with recommendations of Fontana & Frey (2000) and Legard, Keegan & Ward (2003), a list of key topics and issues to be covered during the interview was prepared. In each of the interviews, the focus was on the interviewees' perspectives on and ideas about customer experiences in the selected store case. Taken into account that 'customer experience' is an abstract concept to talk about, each interview started at 'surface' level (Legard et al., 2003), with general questions about the research participant's impressions of the retail environment, its design and its product offerings. The interviewer together with the research participant then started to discuss the total sample of photographs which the concerned research participant had collected. The interviewer then asked the participant to select three photographs which particularly impressed them or which were the most typical examples of elements in or outside the store which triggered an experience for them during their store visit. The use of follow-up questions allowed us to further explore these specific photographs.

Finally, the interview concluded with the interviewer asking the research participant to select and elaborate on one photograph that, according to their opinion, captured the best their in-store experience.

All the interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. In the analysis, the researchers focused on tacking back and forth between the transcripts of the interviews and the respondents' photographs.

4.2.2 Research results

On average, each of the research participants collected 15 photographs to capture their in-store experience (the highest number of photographs per participant was 47, the minimal number was 3). Most research participants indicated that they had been able to photograph anything in or outside the store case which made a specific impression on them. When the interviewer asked the participant to select three photographs that mainly captured their in-store experiences, they principally chose photographs which referred to (i) the retail interior such as the children's department (ii) elements of the store's retail design, such as the diversity of lighting fixtures used throughout the store (iii) particular products, for instance shoes, which particularly appealed to them. When the interviewer ultimately asked the research participant to select one photograph that truly captured their in-store experience, they usually chose an image which referred to the store's retail design. Analyses on the interview transcripts and the photographs demonstrated that the in-store experiences of the research participants could be captured by two main themes: (a) perceptions and experiences concerning the store's retail design (b) the product assortment and visual merchandising in the retail environment.

4.2.2.1 Perceptions and experiences concerning the store's retail design

When research participants reflected on their perceptions and experiences of the store, they often used the adjectives 'chic', 'luxurious', 'contemporary', 'trendy', 'beautiful', 'special' and 'fancy'. The store's retail design was evaluated as being richly coloured, full of contrasts, extraordinary, dark, overwhelming, original, playful and artistically. Apart from the children's department, the colors and materials were mostly evaluated to be rather dark. However, none of the interviewed participants seemed to have been disturbed by these choices, as they seemed to agree that it fitted perfectly within the special, heterogeneous retail design. Research participants also often discussed the mix of 'new and old' design elements throughout the store. According to their opinion, every corner of the store seems to be designed differently, resulting in an eclectic overall design. While looking at her photographs (photograph 1 and 2), one participant for instance indicated that the retail environment '*is a healthy mixture of ... baroque elements, like for instance this chandelier here ... while over there, they just used downlighters ... it a a mix of different things ... a mixture of styles. I think it's eclectic. ... It is something different from other stores, which helps this store to differentiate from others*'

Please add photographs 1 and 2 here

Most research participants really liked this design approach, as they got the impression to be surprised all the time. In addition, they got the feeling that almost every customer would feel appealed by the design of at least one of the in-store areas.

Most research participants also referred to the children's department and its design, and to the cash register and its design. They really discussed these in-store areas as eye-catching zones.

Throughout the transcripts, it became clear that resrach participants appreciated these places for their functional qualities, but also because of the appealing, hedonically pleasing way in which they had been designed. Next to eye-catching in-store areas, research participants also discussed physical eye-catching elements which were used in the design of the store case. The numerous lighting fixtures for instance, all different, which have been used throughout the store, were highly discussed. Notably, participants also discussed the presence of a cupboard in-store which is full of coloured glass bottles, and the presence of a diversity of couches. The interviewees not only valued their presence as eye-catching elements but also because they allow customers to sit at ease in-store, relax for a moment and enjoy the pleasant environment.

4.2.2.2 The product assortment and visual merchandising in the retail environment

Our analyses also revealed that most participants referred to the broad and large product range, available in the selected store case. There were products available for men, women and children, ranging from shoes and clothing to accessories.

Although most research participants indicated that they particularly liked the broad and large product offerings, some participants complained about what they called '*an abundance of products*'. For some of the participants, this abundance also resulted in them evaluating the retail environment as chaotic and as rather messy. As one participant for instance said: '*I think there are too many shoes present in a relatively small place*'. Different participants not only made photographs of the present product offerings to offer the interviewer an insider's perspective in their in-store experiences and their evaluation of the broad and large product offerings of the store case. Occasionally, participants also photographed in detail one particular element of the store's product offerings, for instance because they particularly liked or disliked a particular shoe. Some participants, although a minority, also chose such a

photograph when being asked to select one photograph that truly captured or represented their in-store experience.

Relating to the visual merchandising, research participants were particularly attentive to the way products were presented to the customer. Also the colorful and playfully designed children's department often came to the fore in this respect. The merchandise and their presentation thus seemed to be highly valued in the participants' perception of the store.

4.3 Discussion of results

In the researchers' viewpoint, the results of the empirical projects have demonstrated that undertaking photo-elicitation studies can have different advantages. Firstly, photographs generated by respondents themselves have proven to be valuable 'can-openers' or reminders of store-related perceptions and experiences which could be difficult to identify from traditional positivistic research approaches. In the interviews, the photographs help and allow respondents to reflect on their experiences and share their perceptions on various issues. In addition, looking back at photographs can help them remember certain elements (Pullman & Robson, 2007) which they otherwise, in interviews with words alone, could forget. Secondly, interviews combining visual and verbal information do not elicit more information than interviews using words alone, but rather a different kind of information. In the second empirical project for instance, various respondents whom already were familiar to the store told the researcher that while walking through the store with the camera in their hands, they paid attention to and photographed aspects which they had never noticed before. This issue corresponds to the viewpoints of Harper (2002) and Pink (2006), who indicate that photography can deliver insights which are unattainable by text or observation alone. Pullman & Robson (2007, p. 142) use the terms '*rich source of information*' in this respect.

Thirdly, our results demonstrate that photo-elicitation as a method of data collection is unobtrusive and avoids the formal rigidity or strange feeling which people often experience in in a traditional positivistic research approach or in a conventional verbal interview situation. This corresponds to Warren's (2005) and Creswell's (2009) findings. As such, photo-elicitation seems to propel not only less hesitant but also more direct responses by the interviewees to the photographs (Emmison & Smith, 2000). Fourthly, in standard in-depth interviews (i.e., limited to the verbal aspect) and in traditional positivistic inspired research approaches, there is the challenge to set up 'communication' between two persons who rarely share the same background. In photo-elicitation studies, respondents are enticed to talk freely about their perceptions, impressions and experiences from their proper viewpoint, while using their own language and their own vocabulary. In this way, respondents are empowered: it is what they make of their proper photographs that counts. Collier & Collier (1986) agree, and indicate that they consider combining photographs with open-ended interviews to be a useful tool to obtain knowledge, as they are convinced that nobody knows the situation of the research participants better than the research participants themselves. Also Harper (2002) agrees, and indicates that photographs may lead research participants to new or refreshing views concerning their social existence. As such, '*they are able to deconstruct their own phenomenological assumptions*' (Harper, 2002, p. 21). Fifthly, our findings demonstrated that photo-elicitation is an appealing research approach towards respondents. Walking through a designed environment while trying to capture their in-store experience not only is a pleasant and appealing 'task' for consumers. It also enables them to make their ideas on a rather abstract topic, in our case a designed environment, concrete. As such, the use of photographs adds to the depth of understanding consumers' perception of and experiences in retail interiors. This corresponds to viewpoints of Rose (2007), who indicates that photographs are particularly good at capturing the 'texture' of places. Pictures carry a wealth of visual

information, can show details in a moment, and also things that are hard to describe in writing.

5. CONCLUSION

More than thirty years ago, Markin, Lillis and Narayana (1976, p. 43) observed that '... *an environment ... is never neutral. The retail store is a bundle of cues, messages and suggestions which communicate to shoppers*'. The results of both empirical projects demonstrate that photo-elicitation combined with interviews provides a rigorous research approach that helps to gain in-depth visual and verbal insight in the meanings, perceptions and experiences which consumers experience in a retail environment.

In terms of implications, photo-elicitation offers researchers, retail managers, interior architects and retail designers the possibility to truly connect with customers and learn what they think about a certain designed environment. Retail managers, interior architects and retail designers all highly value understanding the consumer perspective on a designed environment, as they usually do not learn about this perspective in their daily work. Therefore, this kind of input can be valuable for their future projects (Author 1 & Author 3, 2011). Understanding the user / consumer perspective on design and its potential implications is crucial for these stakeholders, as design is an important feature in consumer decisions (Norman, 2004).

This article reflected about the interpretive method of photo-elicitation in research concerning experiences in retail environments, whereby the findings of two empirical studies were presented. Further research is desirable to substantiate the studies' findings. Indeed, firstly, the context wherein the concerned studies were organised was rather limited (i.e., two food superstores and a shoe and fashion store). It would be valuable for future research to explore

to what extent the findings could be elaborated to other retail environments. Secondly, the sampling procedure for both studies was theoretically driven. It seems worthwhile for future research to take other individual characteristics such as shopping orientation, education or occupation into account as they seem to be important determinants of how people experience retail environments (Caru & Cova, 2007). Thirdly, it seems valuable for future research to elaborate on the issue if photographing in-store experiences can distort participants' actual experiences, since people do not usually takes photographs of themselves or their experiences while going to a store. However, Venkatraman & Nelson (2008) already have indicated that there is no evidence that people, enrolled in photographing their proper experiences, distorted their experiences in a particular way. Fourthly, after have experimented with digital as well as non-digital photography, the researchers are clear proponents of digital photography. It is immediate so that photographs can be discussed on a much shorter term than is the case when making use of non-digital photography. As such, making use of digital cameras in a photo-elicitation study not only saves time, but also costs less, as no chemical processing is necessary anymore and researchers nor research participants have to set an extra date to discuss the photographs in an interview (Warren, 2005). As such, digital photography can be considered to be an extra aid which researchers can use to help prevent participants from forgetting certain details and to avoid participant fatigue. Finally, it seems worthwhile for future research to elaborate on the use of photo-elicitation in other than retail interiors. A museum for instance seems to be an interesting case of a designed environment which seems open to the use of photo-elicitation to gain insight in people's experiences.

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PHOTOGRAPHS

Photograph 1

Photograph 2

i In the remainder of this paper, what the researchers label as 'photo-elicitation', Wagner
(1979) calls 'native image-making', that is the research approach whereby photographs are
generated by research participants themselves to help them express their feelings, beliefs,
opinions etcetera as a kind of aid to verbal narrative.