A Holistic Framework for Conceptualizing Customer Experiences in Retail Environments

Ann Petermans [1],*, Wim Janssens [2], and Koenraad Van Cleempoel [1]

[1] Hasselt University, Faculty of Architecture and Arts, Diepenbeek, Belgium
[2] Hasselt University, Faculty of Business Economics – Research Group Marketing, Diepenbeek, Belgium

Despite retailers' and designers' recognition of customer experience in retail practice today, a literature review on customer experiences revealed a lack of conceptualization of the phenomenon as such. Moreover, holistically inspired research on customer experiences in retail environments seems to be truly scarce. To compensate for these gaps, the authors firstly conceptualize customer experiences in retail environments through a literature review, and secondly, study customer experiences with the help of ethnographic interviews with retailers, designers and customers. The research results provide insight into what different aspects of the theoretical conceptualization of customer experience connote for the interviewees.

Keywords – Customer Experiences, Ethnographic Interviews, Interior Architecture, Retail Design, Retail Environments.

Relevance to Design Practice – This paper contrasts the findings of a literature review on customer experience with findings resulting from interviews on customer experience with retailers, designers and customers. The research results can help designers and retailers to learn more about customer experience and can assist them in translating these insights into retail design practice.

Introduction

Competing in today's global economy is becoming increasingly difficult. As customers often perceive products and services as homogeneous, retailers and designers try to differentiate themselves from competitors by directing the retail design of retail environments toward triggering memorable customer experiences, a process in which multiple tangible and intangible stimuli can interact (Carù & Cova, 2003, 2007a; Healy, Beverland, Oppewal, & Sands, 2007; Klingmann, 2008). Despite the growing recognition of the importance of customer experiences in retail practice, academic literature on this topic often lacks conceptualization of the phenomenon as such. Currently, a variety of terms are being used when discussing experiences in retail environments: while Carù and Cova (2003) for instance discuss "consumer experiences," "market consumption experiences" or "shopping experiences" in retail environments, Healy et al. (2007) reflect on "retail experiences." In addition, the concept of "experience" is layered. Trying to translate "experience" into Dutch, for instance, results in different concepts, ranging from "*beleving*" and "*belevenis*" (both falling within the meaning of German "*Erlebnis*") to "*ervaring*" (German "*Erfahrung*"). Although these translations of "experience" seem closely related to one another, each of them has a different connotation (Hekkert & Schifferstein, 2008; Sleeswijk-Visser, 2009). In addition to this vague or even absent conceptualization of customer experience, research on customer experiences in retail environments from a holistic perspective seems to be truly scarce (Jüttner, Maklan, & Klaus, 2009; Petermans & Van Cleempoel, 2010b; Petermans, 2012; Verhoef, Lemon, Parasuraman, Roggeveen, Tsiros, & Schlesinger, 2009). To date, research on store atmospherics and in-store experiences has typically focused on developing a detailistic, fragmented view of the influence of certain atmospheric cues on customer behavior. Designers, however, think and act holistically, and thus seem more interested in research that takes the total environment into account (Petermans & Van Cleempoel, 2010b; Petermans, 2012).

Aiming to address these shortfalls, the authors firstly conceptualize customer experiences in retail environments through a literature review, and secondly, they study customer experiences with the help of ethnographic interviews with a select group of stakeholders (retailers, designers and customers) who have been involved in the design and functioning of actual retail environments. We aimed to gain insight into the connotations that interviewees attached to aspects of the theoretical conceptualization of customer experience.

The opening section of the article presents a review of literature on different aspects that are inextricably bound up with the concept of customer experiences in retail environments. Subsequently, we report on the research design and results of the ethnographic interviews we undertook to study retailers', designers' and customers' viewpoints on customer experiences in retail environments.

*Corresponding Author: ann.petermans@uhasselt.be

Conceptualizing Customer Experiences: *Review of Literature*

An extensive review of the literature demonstrated that the "experience" construct (which is always linked to a particular "user") is not clearly associated with one particular basic discipline. Writings on experience can be found in a wide range of academic disciplines, including philosophy (e.g., Dewey, 1938; Reed, 1996), marketing and consumer research (e.g., Carù & Cova, 2007a; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Schmitt, 1999), cognitive science (e.g., Pinker, 1997), design sciences (e.g., Forlizzi, 1997; Norman, 2004; Hekkert & Schifferstein, 2008; Sleeswijk-Visser, 2009; Wright, McCarthy, & Meekison, 2003) and management practice (e.g., Pine and Gilmore, 1999). These various disciplines ascribed different meanings to the concept of experience and user experience (Carù & Cova, 2003; Sleeswijk-Visser, 2009). As a consequence, there is no general consensus on its definition (Sleeswijk-Visser, 2009). Moreover, the notion of (user) experience is so often used that it no longer seems always to correspond with the complexity that the concept entails (Redstrom, 2006). The diversity of disciplines that study experiences also corresponds with the diversity of experiences that make up individuals' daily lives, and experiences can occur with or without a market relationship (Carù & Cova, 2007a). In literature, a variety of terms are being used when discussing user experiences in retail environments, including "consumer experiences," "market consumption experiences," "shopping experiences" (Carù & Cova, 2003), "retail experiences" (Healy et al., 2007) and "consumption experiences" (Carù & Cova, 2003). Focusing our attention on the design of retail environments and the experiences this can trigger, we propose to label this type of experiences "customer experiences," inspired by the work of Carù and Cova (2003, 2007a) and Verhoef et al. (2009).

Ann Petermans is a postdoctoral researcher in Architecture and Interior Architecture in the Faculty of Architecture and Arts at Hasselt University. She has an MSc degree in communication sciences from Ghent University and a PhD in architecture from Hasselt University. Her PhD research, which she defended in September 2012, focused on the translation and investigation of the principles and practices of the "experience economy" within the discipline of interior architecture in general and retail design in particular. Her main research interests are design for experience, in designed environments and for diverse user groups, and research related to architectural and interior architectural well-being. She has presented her work at various international conferences and published, among others, in the *Journal of Interior Design*.

Wim Janssens is an assistant professor in the Faculty of Business Economics at Hasselt University. His research topics include marketing communications and consumer behavior with a special focus on multi-sensory and cross-modal marketing. He is a member of the editorial board of the *International Journal of Advertising*. His research has been published in, among others, the *Journal of Advertising*, the *European Journal of Public Health*, the *Journal of Business Research*, and *Environment and Behavior*.

Koenraad Van Cleempoel studied Art History in Louvain, Madrid and London, and obtained his PhD degree at the Warburg Institute, London. Since 2005 he has been engaged in establishing and directing a research unit in interior architecture at Hasselt University/PHL University College. Previously he has published on the relationship between art and science during the Renaissance period, especially in the field of scientific instruments; but currently his focus is on the theory of interior architecture, with particular attention to adaptive reuse of heritage sites and phenomenological and hermeneutical methods of researching spatial experience.

Input from Adjacent Disciplines

Taking into account the fact that retail design is an emerging discipline in the field of interior architecture—a discipline that is seeking a stronger body of theory (Clemons & Eckman, 2008; Marshall-Baker, 2000)—it may well benefit from valuable input from adjacent disciplines such as psychology, marketing and consumer behavior. In these disciplines, diverse authors have studied the topic of store atmosphere and the relationship between user behavior and the commercial environment (Bitner, 1992; Donovan & Rossiter, 1982; Mehrabian & Russell, 1974; Turley & Milliman, 2000). Moreover, in psychology, sociology, marketing and consumer behavior, authors have already focused on experiential marketing and the consumption experience in general (Carù & Cova, 2007a; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Edgell, Hetherington, & Warde, 1997; Schmitt, 1999). However, few studies have explored the concept of customer experiences in retail environments in depth, taking into account the theoretical backgrounds and empirical or interpretive research methods that appeal to most interior architects and retail designers (Petermans & Van Cleempoel, 2010b). The existing literature in retailing management and marketing, particularly in the stream of "atmospherics," typically focuses on developing insights into, and predictions about, the influence of certain individual atmospheric cues on customer experiences, such as music (Yalch & Spangenberg, 1990) or color (Brengman, 2002; for an overview see Turley & Milliman, 2000). The number of empirical studies that focus on the question of how different variables interact and influence customer emotions and responses in a shop interior, is limited (Baker, Parasuraman, Grewal, & Voss, 2002; Spangenberg, Grohmann, & Sprott, 2005). Although individual atmospheric variables are important in the development of a customer experience, in retail practice, multiple stimuli interact and influence the customer experience (Healy et al., 2007; Petermans & Van Cleempoel, 2010a). As Lo (2007) states, "instead of focusing on individual artefacts or the look and feel, designers are concerned with the quality of people's experiences and devise whole solutions informed by multidisciplinary insights" (p. 2). Most interior architects and retail designers, who intrinsically are phenomenologically inspired (Cupchik & Hilscher, 2008) are convinced that the final effects of individual variables may be dependent upon the customer's affective evaluation of the total environment (Holm, 2006; Nelson & Stolterman, 2003; Petermans & Van Cleempoel, 2010b). This viewpoint corresponds with the ideas of researchers active in "consumer culture theory" (CCT), a research tradition in consumer research. Over the last two decades, CCT researchers have published several writings in which they argue that existing research on the customer–environment relationship has often minimized the importance of situation and context (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Mariampolski, 1999; Penaloza, 1999).

Development of the Experience Web

Given the background discussed above, we conceptualize customer experiences (a) building on the insights of the literature on aspects of customer experience and in-store behavior (summarized in Table 1), while (b) approaching the concept of "customer

experiences" with a vocabulary and research methodologies closer to the realm of interior architects and retail designers. The literature ranges from conceptual articles to empirically grounded work. For each aspect in Table 1, we give an overview of relevant literature. In addition to the verbal description, we also opted to present our construct in a visual manner, called the "Experience Web" (see Figure 1).

As Table 1 and Figure 1 illustrate, we propose customer experience as a personal and subjective response that customers have to any interaction with products, services and different elements of a particular designed marketplace environment. Customer experiences can thus involve multiple communication channels (e.g., online platform, physical environment). As customer behavior is embedded in the customer's world and

Table 1. Overview of literature on aspects of customer experience.

Aspect	Literature
Every experience is personal and subjective.	Addis & Holbrook, 2001; Baron & Harris, 2008; Carù & Cova, 2003, 2007b; Filser, 2002; Fiore & Kim, 2007; Fornerino et al., 2005; Gentile et al., 2007; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Jüttner, 2009; Kilian, 2009; Klingmann, 2008; Kwortnik & Ross, 2007; Lanier & Hampton, 2009; Luomala, 2003; Meyer & Schwager, 2007; Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Pullman & Gross, 2004; Verhoef et al., 2009; Yu, 2006.
Experiences are time and context specific.	Davis et al., 2008; Dewey, 1938; Millan & Howard, 2007; Pullman & Gross, 2004; Verhoef et al., 2009.
Every experience involves input of the involved person, input from the environment, and a person–environment interaction.	Addis & Holbrook, 2001; Boztepe, 2007; Carù & Cova, 2007b, 2007c; Chronis, 2008; Filser, 2002; Fornerino et al., 2005; Gentile et al., 2007; Jüttner, 2009; Luomala, 2003; McClenaghan, 2007; Meyer & Schwager, 2007; Price et al., 1995; Pulh et al., 2005; Pullman & Gross, 2004; Verhoef et al., 2009; Yu, 2006.
Customer experiences may involve multiple communication channels.	Carù & Cova, 2007c; Gentile et al., 2007; Kozinets et al., 2002; Verhoef et al., 2009.
Customer experiences are spread over a period of time.	Arnould et al., 2002; Brakus et al., 2009; Carù & Cova, 2007b; Filser, 2002; Jüttner, 2009; Verhoef et al., 2009.
Experiences are dynamic: prior experiences influence future experiences.	Chronis, 2008; Luomala, 2003; Meyer & Schwager, 2007; Verhoef et al., 2009.
Experiences are holistic in nature.	Addis & Holbrook, 2001; Healy et al., 2007; Jüttner, 2009; Klingmann, 2008; Sands, 2008; Verhoef et al., 2009.
Customer experiences are staged intentionally.	Fornerino et al., 2005; Klingmann, 2008.
Most companies, when focusing on customer experiences, focus on a particular theme or narrative.	Carù & Cova, 2007b, 2007c; Filser, 2002; Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Pullman & Gross, 2004; Sands, 2008.
Customer experiences pay attention to multiple "experience realms."	Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Sands, 2008; Sands et al., 2009.
Every aspect of a company's offering and all in-store context elements need to be consistent with the theme.	Carù & Cova, 2007c; Lanier & Hampton, 2009; Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Pullman & Gross, 2004.
Customer experiences need to appeal to customers' senses as much as possible.	Carù & Cova, 2003, 2007b; McClenaghan, 2007; Pullman & Gross, 2004.
Emotion is key to customer experiences.	Carù & Cova, 2003, 2007b; Filser, 2002; Fiore & Kim, 2007; Holt, 1995; Gentile, Spiller, & Noci, 2007; Jüttner, 2009; Lo, 2007; McClenaghan, 2007; Oh, Fiore, & Jeoung, 2007; Pullman & Gross, 2004; Verhoef et al., 2009; Yu, 2006.
Focus on value.	Addis & Holbrook, 2001; Babin et al., 1994; Boztepe, 2007; Diep & Sweeney, 2008; Gentile et al., 2007; Holbrook, 1999; Jüttner, 2009; Mathwick et al., 2001; Oh et al., 2007; Pullman & Gross, 2004.
An environment intended to trigger customer experiences needs to focus on hedonic aspects.	Addis & Holbrook, 2001; Filser, 2002; Fiore & Kim, 2007; Fornerino et al., 2005; Frow & Payne, 2007; Gentile et al., 2007; Jüttner, 2009; Kim, 2001; Oh et al., 2007.
An environment intended to trigger customer experiences cannot neglect to focus on utilitarian aspects.	Addis & Holbrook, 2001; Filser, 2002; Fiore & Kim, 2007; Fornerino et al., 2005; Gentile et al., 2007; Jüttner, 2009; Kim, 2001; Oh et al., 2007.
Experiences involve customers at different levels.	Carù & Cova, 2003; Filser, 2002; Gentile et al., 2007; Lanier & Hampton, 2009; Oh et al., 2007; Verhoef et al., 2009.
Immersion is inextricably bound up with customer experiences.	Carù & Cova, 2003, 2007b, 2007c; Fornerino et al., 2005; Gentile et al., 2007; Klingmann, 2008; Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Sands, 2008; Sands et al., 2009.
Customer experiences need to engage customers.	Carù & Cova, 2003; Gentile et al., 2007; Klingmann, 2008; Lanier & Hampton, 2009; Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Pullman & Gross, 2004; Verhoef et al., 2009; Yu, 2006.
Designers need to strive to work out experiences that are memorable.	Carù & Cova, 2007b, 2007c; Fornerino et al., 2004; Kim, 2001; Klingmann, 2008; Kwortnik & Ross, 2007; McClenaghan, 2007; Oh et al., 2007; Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Pullman & Gross, 2004.

Figure 1. The Experience Web: Conceptualization of customer experience in retail environments.

closely related to a person's feelings and relationships, and to the surrounding society in which the concerned customer lives and functions, the construct is also time and context specific. In the interaction between the retail environment and the customer, both parties make different contributions to the overall customer experience. Following Verhoef et al. (2009), we state that customer experiences are spread over a period of time (including the search, purchase, consumption and after-sale phases of the experience). Customer experiences are thus not strictly limited to experiences at the point of sale. Given that prior experiences will influence future ones, it is a dynamic process. As customer experiences entail customer processes and responses, which are affected by (interactions between) aspects of the retail environment, situation, and customer characteristics, the concept is holistic.

The aspects summarized in the upper part of Figure 1 indicate that customer experiences are influenced by aspects or elements that a retailer or a designer can control (e.g., the choice to develop a particular retail design concept for a physical retail environment or for an online store platform), but also by elements that are outside a retailer's or designer's control (e.g., subjective character of customer experiences, their time and context specificity, dynamism, etc.) (Carù & Cova, 2007c; Fiore & Kim, 2007; Healy et al., 2007; Kilian, 2009; Verhoef et al., 2009). As a consequence, retailers and designers can never fully control the occurrence of customer experiences; they can only try to create and manage their contexts.

When trying to design these conditions, aspects of customer experience in the lower part of Figure 1 come to the fore. As already indicated in Table 1, these aspects have been thoroughly discussed individually in the literature. However, all together, they seem to be inextricably bound up with customer experiences in retail environments, and in our view, they truly allow one to design for experience in retail environments.

When designing for experience, one intentionally tries to stage an experience. In practice, most companies consequently choose to concentrate on a particular theme or narrative that appeals to the customer and characterizes the company. When developing such a theme, retailers and designers often try to combine elements of what Pine and Gilmore (1999) defined as "realms of experiential value." The four realms of experiential value (amusement, aesthetics, education, escapism) vary according to the customer's active or passive participation and his or her absorption or immersion in the experience. The dimension of participation in essence relates to the physical participation of the individual. The dimension of absorption/immersion concerns the sort of connection between the concerned individual and the context of the experience (Carù & Cova, 2003). Companies need to pay particular attention that every possible controllable aspect of a company's offering (e.g., tangible elements of the retail design of a retail environment) is consistent with the chosen theme and appeals as much as possible to their customers' senses. The

literature review also revealed that emotion and value-orientation are inextricably bound up with customer experiences. Emotional states, stimulated by the retail design of brick-and-mortar or online retail environments, can mediate customer responses toward product offerings and store environments (Fiore & Kim, 2007). When working on the design of experiential contexts in which customers will be immersed, retailers and designers must keep in mind that customer experiences need to deliver value to customers, since perceived value is characterized as the essential outcome of marketing activity (Mathwick, Malhotra, & Rigdon, 2001). When a customer experience succeeds in delivering value to the customer, it can become the key to long-term success (Diep & Sweeney, 2008; Sweeney & Soutar, 2001). When designing an environment with the aim to trigger experiences, designers and retailers need to pay attention not only to hedonic aspects but equally to utilitarian (functional) aspects. A review of the literature indicated that most of the time, customers seek an adequate balance between both (Fiore & Kim, 2007; Gentile et al., 2007). In the end, retailers and designers who try to design for experience mostly strive to involve the customer at different levels (for instance, cognitive and affective) and immerse them in the designed environment by engaging or connecting with them in a personal, memorable way. Finally, although research on customer experiences typically has focused on spectacular events and extraordinary experiences (Carù & Cova, 2003), in line with

other researchers (e.g., Carù & Cova, 2003, 2007a; Filser, 2002), the authors suggest that ordinary everyday experiences can also be, or become, memorable.

Attention to all the aspects of the Experience Web seems relevant for retailers and designers, as customers' overall perceptions about a store will influence their overall preference for that store (Thang & Tan, 2003). Pullman and Gross (2004) even state that customer experiences can encourage store and retailer loyalty, not only through a functional design, but also by creating emotional connection through an engaging, compelling and consistent context. To the best of the authors' knowledge, Table 1 is the first attempt in the literature to present a clear overview of all those aspects that are inextricably bound up with the concept of customer experiences.

The Experience Web as a Tool for Gaining Insight into Customer Experiences

The Experience Web shown in Figure 1 not only visualizes a summary of the aspects set out in Table 1, but can also be used as a tool to more deeply analyze customer experiences in retail environments. As Figure 2 illustrates, researchers can use the Experience Web as an instrument to gain in-depth insight into different aspects relating to experience:
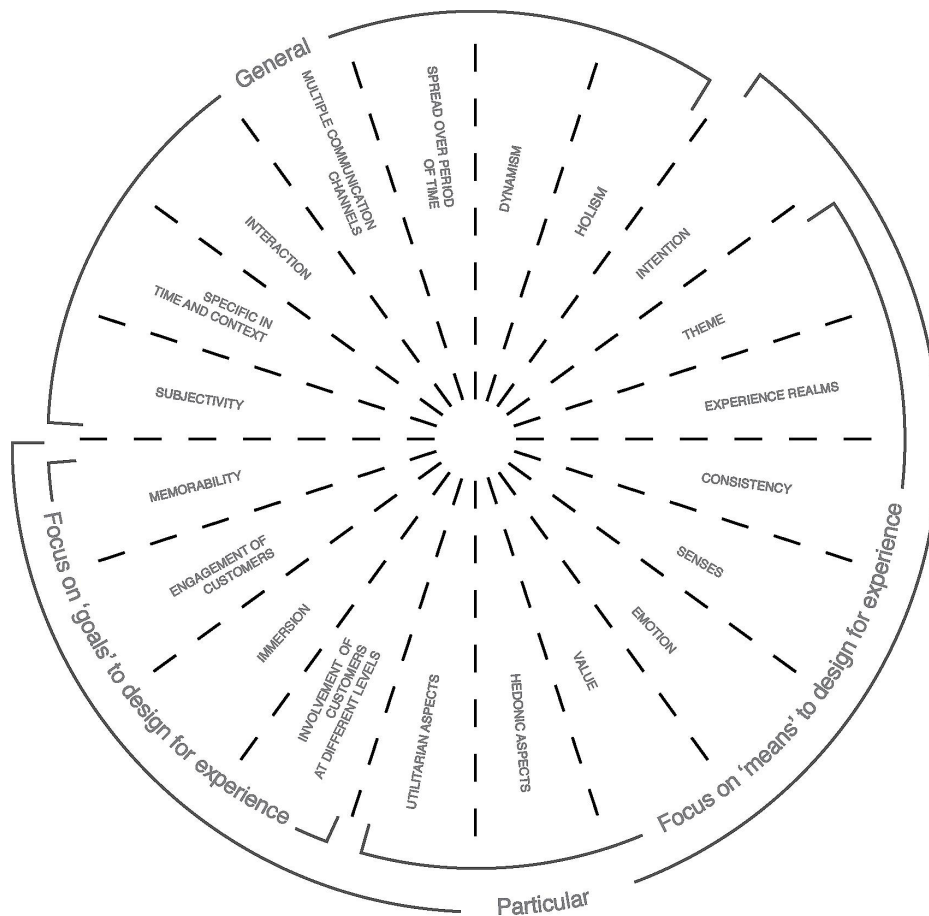

Figure 2. The Experience Web: Focus on different aspects relating to experience.

Figure 2 shows how the Experience Web can be used to focus on and reflect about "general" aspects relating to experience, i.e., aspects that are inseparable from experiences and that cannot always be controlled or influenced by a retailer or designer. In addition, the Experience Web can be used to concentrate on more "particular" aspects relating to experience, i.e., aspects that offer concrete perspectives for retailers and designers when they aim to design for experience. Next to a focus on "general" and "particular" aspects, the Experience Web also can be studied when focusing on "means" that designers can use as instruments to design for experience, ranging from the choice for and development of a theme or narrative that retailers and designers can use as a basis to build up a consistent story they want to tell with and within the store, to attention to the implementation of hedonic and functional aspects within the retail environment. And beyond focusing on "means" to design for experience, the Experience Web can be studied when focusing on "goals" that can result from designing for experience.

As this paper is a first attempt to gain insight into experiences in retail environments, in what follows, we focus on gaining insight into the broadest aspects related to experience, i.e., the "general" and "particular" aspects. Indeed, as well as developing a theoretical conceptualization of "customer experiences" through a literature review, the authors also aimed to interpretively study customer experiences in retail environments. In the following section, we report on ethnographic interviews with retailers, designers and customers, i.e., stakeholders who have all been involved in the process of designing and operating actual retail environments. This study was performed to articulate and understand the connotations that the interviewees attach to the "general" and "particular" aspects of the theoretical conceptualization of customer experience.

Studying Customer Experiences: *Research Methodology*

As argued above, research in retail design has been inspired by theoretical and methodological ideas from related subject areas. However, as described in the introduction and the literature review, interior architects tend to be rather skeptical about research results in which the importance of situation and context is minimized (Petermans & Van Cleempoel, 2010b). Mariampolski (1999) states that:

> … to gain new insights, we have to create new ways of understanding the settings and situations in which consumers make purchases and use products and services. Research practice that ignores context cannot claim to fully understand and present consumer behaviour. (p. 24)

Ethnography as a research model is rooted in cultural anthropology (Goulding, 2005), which relies on entering people's natural life worlds. Ethnographic researchers are convinced that what individuals believe, understand and act upon, cannot be detached from its context (Lloyd, 2000; Riemer, 2008). According to Mariampolski (1999), the main task of ethnography is "not only to watch, but also to decode human experience" (p. 18).

Given that ethnography typically takes a phenomenologically oriented research approach (Fetterman, 2008), it seems particularly well matched with interior architects' and retail designers' viewpoints. This is a key issue for us, given that the authors, in line with Jill Franz's (1994) recommendations for research in architecture, aim to approach the concept of customer experiences based on a vocabulary, and by applying research methodologies, close to the realm of our design peers.

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) explain that ethnographic methodologies aim to provide a holistic account of phenomena in their natural setting through understanding, description and interpretation. By working with people in their natural setting, and aiming to understanding insiders' perspectives of reality (Fetterman, 2008; Goulding, 2005), ethnographic practices seem essential for studying customer experiences in shop interiors (Healy et al., 2007; Suri & Howard, 2006). In ethnographic research, multiple data collection methods can be applied to a single phenomenon, allowing the researcher to triangulate the collected data (Goulding, 2005; Riemer, 2008). In the remainder of this section, we follow this line of reasoning, and we focus on the research design and the results of ethnographic interviews with retailers, designers and customers. We opted to do ethnographic interviews with these stakeholders, as they represent the parties involved in the process of designing, triggering and experiencing actual experiences in actual retail environments. By conducting interviews with them, we aimed to articulate and understand the connotations that the interviewees attach to aspects of the theoretical conceptualization of customer experience. The research questions were the following: how and why do retailers and designers decide to design a particular retail environment the way they do? Do they take the terms discussed in Table 1 and Figure 2 into account in their design process? And what connotations do they attach to them? How do customers experience these retail environments? Do they discuss the terms from Figure 2? In other words, with this research approach, we aimed to find out whether we were able to trace and link arguments used in the actual design process and in retail practice, with aspects that we were able to trace in the literature on customer experience. To formulate answers to these questions, we interviewed in depth six designers who had been involved in the process of designing different retail environments. In addition, three retailers and 10 customers also were willing to participate in our research project.

Ethnographic Interviews

Ethnographic interviews as a research method

Interviewing respondents in depth is one of the main data collection methods used in qualitative research (Legard, Keegan, & Ward, 2003). "In-depth interviews" are also known

in the literature as "unstructured" (Legard et al., 2003) or "ethnographic" interviews (Spradley, 1979). A basic research objective for employing this kind of interview is to understand what people know about themselves and the world they live in, and how they make sense of themselves and phenomena around them. Ethnographic interviews involve asking relatively open-ended questions of research participants, aiming to enable the researcher to learn about and understand the participants' ideas on the topic of interest (Spradley, 1979). A key feature of ethnographic interviews is the idea that the researcher is truly eager to learn from the interviewee (Fielding, 2006). In terms of operational processes, ethnographic interviews thus often involve a broad agenda, containing the issues to be discussed in the interview. But the exact order and way in which they are brought to the fore during the interview is quite flexible, so as to empower the interviewee to help shape the content of the interview (Arthur & Nazroo, 2003; Fielding, 2006). This kind of interview thus involves a higher level of openness on the part of the interviewer with regard to the interviewee than is common for other kinds of interview techniques (Fielding, 2006).

When studying relatively new domains, employing this interview method can be particularly useful. As Firmin (2008) states, "in such circumstances, it is not reasonable to ask a set of preestablished questions of the participant. Rather, researchers approach the interviews more inductively" (p. 907). Ethnographic interviews may also be particularly helpful when a research project's principal goal is depth, rather than breadth. In addition, doing ethnographic interviews comes closer to having friendly conversations with participants (Spradley, 1979), more than asking them to give their viewpoints with regard to a prescribed list of questions. Lastly, ethnographic interviews are performed in a "naturalistic" way, offering interviewees a particular amount of freedom to, for instance, alter the sequence of topics to be discussed. As such, they may provide insights that could not be assessed via a more structured mode of interviewing (Firmin, 2008). These arguments seem well matched with our first research goal, namely the conceptualization of customer experiences in retail environments. Interviewing individually retailers, designers and customers who have been involved in the process of designing, operating and experiencing different retail environments, allows us to find out whether and how their perspectives on and ideas about customer experience correspond with the aspects we were able to trace in the literature.

Procedure

In the first months of 2010, various interior architects and retail designers were contacted in our search for what Morse (1998) calls "good informants" (p. 73). According to Morse, good informants are those people who have the knowledge and experience the researcher requires, have the ability to reflect on the discussed topic, are communicative, have time and are willing to be interviewed. Our search for "good informants"

resulted in the setting up of interviews with six interior architects and retail designers, who individually all had been involved in the design process of various retail environments with particular attention to the triggering of experiences. These interviewees were selected firstly because they have a great deal of knowledge on how to design a retail environment. Their experience-based knowledge, however, often remains tacit. As the discipline of interior architecture is seeking a stronger body of theory (Clemons & Eckman, 2008; Marshall-Baker, 2000), it seems valuable to shed more light on this "tacit knowledge" (Collins, 2010; Polanyi, 1967). Secondly, by interviewing these practitioners, we aimed to attract the attention of our design peers by studying the concept of customer experiences based on a vocabulary, and studied by a research methodology, close to the phenomenologically inspired realm of interior architects and retail designers (Franz, 1994; Petermans & Van Cleempoel, 2010b). After obtaining the agreement of these six interior architects and retail designers, we selected one physical retail environment per designer that would function as a concrete starting point for the interviews. When selecting these cases, different criteria were used. First of all, we chose to select cases in three "central cities" in Belgium: Antwerp, Hasselt and Ghent. According to a recent study of the European Research Group of Cushman and Wakefield (2011)—the "Benelux Retail Monitor"—these cities are among the 30 main cities in the Benelux region according to their attractiveness as retail destinations (Bosteels, 2011). Secondly, we selected cases that, in our opinion, typify the works of the concerned designer. Thirdly, aiming to achieve insights into how retailers and designers relate to customer experiences in today's retail practice, the selected cases comprise different kinds of retail environment that vary in terms of diversity of product offerings and type of retail environment. The cases thus not only range from fashion stores, a shoe store, and a lifestyle store to a specialist food store, but also from stores selling high-priced luxury products that only are active at a single location in Belgium to a store selling more common, medium-priced products that belongs to a chain with more than 100 stores spread all over the country. Fourthly, all stores work exclusively in Belgium. Figures 3 to 7 provide an insight into the concerned stores.

The selection of these six cases also guided our search for "good retail informants." From the six retailers whom we contacted during the last months of 2010, three retail managers, each responsible for the development of the retail environment concept within one of the studied case firms, were willing to be interviewed by the first author. The other three retail practitioners were not willing to participate and indicated that they had to refuse due to work and time constraints. Besides designers and retailers, we also decided to interview two customers for each of the selected retail environment cases. Here also, the first author functioned as the interviewer. The interviews with customers were set up during the last months of 2010 and the first months of 2011. By that time, one retail environment case had closed down. For each of the five remaining cases, we interviewed two

Figure 3. Boutique fashion store.

Figure 4. Shoe store.

Figure 5. Lifestyle store.

Figure 6. Specialist food store.

Figure 7. Fashion chain store.

customers in depth about their in-store experiences. We applied a snowball method to compose our sample, as former experiences had taught us that ordinary store visitors generally are not eager to make time to participate in in-situ store-related research projects. The participants visited the actual stores on weekdays, during standard opening hours (in Belgium stores are most often open between 9 a.m. and 6 p.m.). Five participants were visiting the concerned retail environment for the first time, while the other five participants were already familiar with the retail environment they were visiting in the framework of this research. Their store visits each lasted approximately 10 minutes. The first author led the participants to each of the stores, but she waited outside while the participants visited the store. Immediately after the actual store visit, she interviewed the respondents about their customer experiences.

The interviews with two retailers took place in their retail environments, as these people indicated they preferred that particular setting. The interview with the third retailer and all the interviews with designers took place at these people's offices. Generally, these stakeholders were very open to sharing their viewpoints on customer experience, but as they are busy people, they preferred not to invest too much time. In addition,

these places can be considered to be a "natural setting" for the concerned interviewees, which is assumed to increase the likelihood of naturalistic responses (Adams & Cox, 2008).

In line with recommendations of Fontana and Frey (2000) and Legard et al. (2003), we prepared a list of key topics and issues to be covered during the interview. In each of the interviews, the focus was on the interviewees' perspectives on and ideas about customer experiences in retail environments. Taking into account that "customer experience" is an abstract concept to talk about, the designers and retailers were prompted to describe how a particular store concept for the selected retail environment case originated. In this way, we aimed to gain trust, essential to any interview's success (Fontana & Frey, 1998). Each interview started at a fairly "surface" level (Legard et al., 2003), and then follow-up questions allowed us to further explore specific cases that were particularly well known to the interviewees. The interviews with customers followed a similar design, starting with "surface-level" questions relating to the participants' concrete in-store experience at the concerned retail environment case. After some time, we shifted to more abstract questions on customer experience. We asked our interviewees about their viewpoints on customer experiences in retail environments and what experiences in the stores they owned, had designed or just had visited, might consist of. We also prepared questions on elements relating to a store's retail design, but more often than not the interviewer did not need to follow her topic list, as the interviewees started out discussing aspects spontaneously in the flow of the interview.

The interviews with retailers and designers lasted between one hour and one hour and a half, while those with customers lasted between 10 and 15 minutes. All the interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

The transcripts of the interview data were read multiple times, looking for patterns of thought and themes for further investigation (Fetterman, 1997; Ryan & Bernard, 2000). By analyzing the interview transcripts, we strove to make concrete the abstract concepts from Figure 2, the Experience Web. As such, Figure 2 functioned as a means to guide the analysis of the interview data.

All interviews were processed with ATLAS.ti version WIN 5.0 (Scientific Software Development, n.d.). Initial reading and re-reading of the interview transcripts was followed by assigning codes in ATLAS.ti to specific words, used by the interviewees, or to sections of text. Twenty terms resulting from the review of the literature functioned as a guide to code the interview data. Codes were assigned each time an interviewee discussed one of these aspects in literal terms, but also when, in our opinion, they clearly were talking about a certain aspect, related to customer experience, without actually using the label we employed in Table 1 and in Figure 2. Additional coding was performed throughout all interview transcripts, and coding was refined through repeated

inspection. The software not only helped us to study the data held within each code, but also to show coding as number of words or number of times a section of a primary document in ATLAS.ti had been assigned to a particular code (Bassett, 2008). Being able to process and analyze data in the form of frequencies is not unusual for ethnographic researchers, because this allows them to prepare graphic or visual representations of verbal data (Fetterman, 1997; Richards & Richards, 1998). As the work of knowledgeable qualitative researchers (e.g., Miles & Huberman, 1994; Richards & Richards, 1998) and expert information designers (e.g., Segel & Heer, 2010; Tufte, 2008) demonstrates, the use of visuals in research allows one to convey complex information quickly yet coherently. The use of visualization to present research findings can help to immediately relate research results to the essence of the phenomenon under study, which is fundamental in phenomenologically inspired research (Tattersall, Watts, & Vernon, 2007).

By opting to visualize our data, we aimed to provide a multidimensional view of the connotations that the interviewees attach to each of the concepts relating to customer experience. The visualization as shown in Figure 8 was based on counting how many of the interviewed retailers, designers and customers discussed the terms contained in Figure 2. When for instance five of the six interviewed designers discussed a particular term, we opted to visualize this as "aspects discussed by the majority of the interviewees" in a densely dotted pattern.

In order to provide feedback to our interviewees, we presented the visualized research results to a select group of them. Accordingly, these informants helped us to crosscheck our data.

Research Results

In the discussion of the results, besides the use of visualization to display data, selected typical verbatim quotations (translated from Dutch to English as naturally as possible) are added for the sake of argument and illustration (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Fetterman, 1997).

Coding the interviews using the terms discussed in Table 1 and Figure 2, resulted in Figure 8.

In what follows, we firstly report on the results of analyzing the aspects in the upper part of Figure 2 (from "subjectivity" to "holism"). As we indicated in the literature review, retailers and designers cannot always control these aspects. As a consequence, they can only try to work out and manage experiential contexts. In the interviews with stakeholders, almost all of these aspects were discussed.

Before presenting the results of our analyses, we want to stress that the inclusion of certain aspects of Figure 2 during the interviews does not automatically mean that these are also considered to be important, very important, or even indispensable when reflecting on customer experiences in retail environments. As will be illustrated later in this section, some aspects relating to customer experience were, for instance, discussed in positive
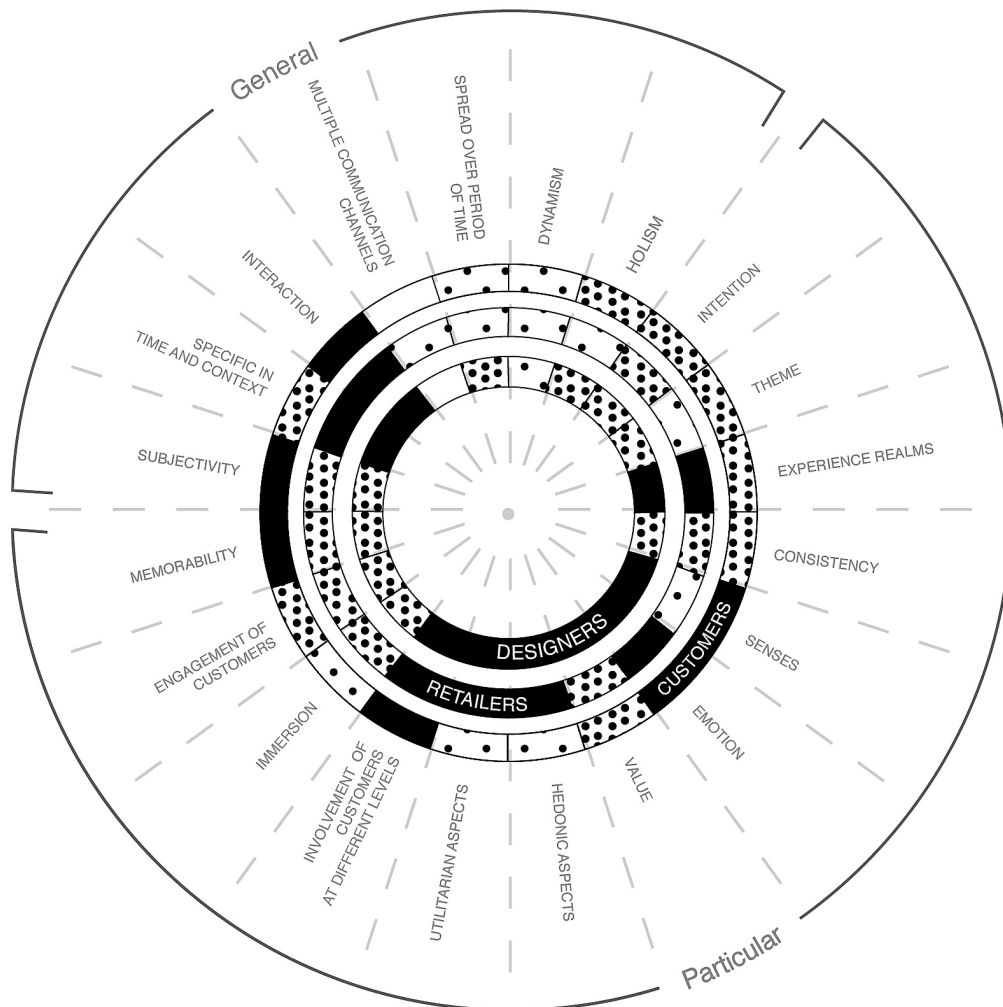
The aspects of the theoretical conceptualization of customer experience were discussed by ... of the interviewees:

- ■ all
- ▦ the majority
- ⊡ half or less
- ☐ none

Figure 8. Visualization of customer experience by retailers, designers, and customers.

terms by certain interviewees and in more negative terms by others. The fact that they are visualized in Figure 8 thus simply indicates that the concerned aspects were discussed during the interviews with stakeholders.

Stakeholders' Viewpoints Concerning "General" Aspects of Customer Experience

Subjectivity

Most of the interviewed designers stated that experiences are inextricably connected with *subjectivity*. As it is hard to take this aspect into account when designing retail interiors, one designer indicated that he designs retail interiors while reflecting on the question of whether he himself would be triggered to visit the store. Retailers equally mentioned subjectivity, but they reflected on the issue while developing a more rational discourse. One retailer, for instance, linked subjectivity with the issue of friendly store personnel. According to him:

> ... it is important for store personnel to be friendly. But if customers feel that the store personnel are only interested in getting the money out of their pockets, to get them to buy products, … then store personnel may be very friendly in their own opinion, but may be too friendly in the customers' opinion. And then customers feel manipulated and not well assisted during their store visit.

All customers discussed the subjectivity of experiences. They did not use the term "subjective" as such, but always used the "I" form, most often in combination with the verbs "find" or "feel," when reflecting on their own in-store experiences.

Specificity of time and context

As Figure 8 illustrates, almost all interviewed stakeholders indicated that customer experiences are *specific in time and context*. All interviewed retailers related this to the location of the retail environment, and they all confirmed that the choice of a particular location is very important in relation to the price category of the products that the retail environment sells. One retailer also indicated that when clients personally own the premises of their retail environment, it will have repercussions on the retail design of the concerned retail environment. All interviewed designers reflected on the aspect of time and context specificity when referring to the potential architectural qualities of the host space and the budgetary possibilities of the involved retailer. In the interview transcripts of customers, we found references to the aspect of time and context specificity when customers discussed a store's location and the choices made concerning the architecture and retail design of the store they visited.

Interaction

Figure 8 also demonstrates that *interaction* was mentioned by all stakeholders. We noticed that the interviewed retailers often reflected about interaction when discussing the importance and value of every square meter of the store surface. The interviewed designers used a different vocabulary to reflect on the issue. They discussed interaction for instance as:

> Every designed space needs to grasp potential customers already from before the first threshold, and guide them through the store in order to eventually send them back home fully satisfied and happy.

According to them, the architecture of the host space and its retail design can contribute greatly to this purpose. Throughout the interviews, retailers also discussed multimedia. They indicated that they try to interact with customers in various ways, including social media such as Twitter and Facebook. These developments were not discussed by designers, nor by the interviewed customers. The customers, when reflecting on the aspect of interaction, mentioned the importance of store personnel and their attention to customers visiting their stores. Most of the time, they used positive terms to reflect on the behavior of in-store personnel of the stores they had visited. However, the interview transcripts also revealed that according to the interviewed customers, over-friendliness of store personnel can disturb customer experiences. Evidently, this evaluation is linked to the subjective character of customer experiences. What one customer considers to be "too friendly" may be considered "normally friendly" by another customer.

Multiple communication channels

As Figure 8 shows, there is one aspect that was mentioned only by retailers: the importance of *multiple communication channels*. They pointed to the importance of paying attention to communication with customers via diverse channels (online as well as via the physical store environment), but were highly convinced of the value of communication in and via the actual store environment.

Spread over period of time

When discussing customer experiences in retail environments, the designers indicated that experiences do not necessarily start in the retail environment; they are "*spread over time.*" One designer, for instance, specified that there are various moments when a retail environment has contact with a potential customer, and that all of these moments need to be streamlined with one another. Designers can play a role in this process. As Figure 8 demonstrates, only a few retailers mentioned this aspect, but one who did indicated that he found it very important that his customers would tell him and/or their network that they had had a wonderful experience at his store. This retailer was convinced that when customers told others about their experiences, they would feel triggered to return to the store in the future. We also found references to the concept of "spread over time" in the interview transcripts of customers. The customers who discussed it indicated that they felt triggered to revisit a particular store for several reasons, ranging from a combination of rather rational arguments (e.g., good evaluation of the price level of the products), affective arguments (e.g., liking the in-store service, liking the presence of others) to a positive evaluation of the retail environment itself, with all the retail design elements that a retailer and/or a designer can and cannot fully control.

Dynamism

As Figure 8 illustrates, the *dynamism* of customer experiences was not discussed very often by the interviewed stakeholders. Of the interviewees who did discuss this aspect, a retailer referred to this aspect while developing rational, sales-inspired arguments, whereas the interviewed designers tried to take this aspect into account when working out design concepts whereby visitors experienced a feeling of "coming home." One designer said, "*When people feel at home, when they feel good in a space, ... they will come back.*" The interviewed customers referred to the dynamic aspect of customer experiences when stating that they were triggered to revisit a particular store for a number of reasons, ranging from rational considerations to more affective ones. One customer for instance said:

> I like this store; it is pleasant to walk through. You can visit this store without the store personnel immediately asking you questions. The store also has a broad product range. It also is close to my home. And it's easy to park nearby.

Holism

According to our literature review, the aspect of the *holistic nature* of customer experiences seems inextricably bound up with designers' approaches to design concepts and assignments. As

a consequence, we expected this to be embedded in designers' vocabulary. Throughout the interview transcripts, we found clear references to "holism," but not in all of them. When discussing customer experiences, one designer stated, "*It is everything together that triggers a certain experience.*" Different designers used examples of well-known retail environments to clarify their viewpoints on experience and holism (e.g., Corso Como in Milan, Tom Ford store in Milan). While describing their experiences in these stores, they referred to the architecture of the host space, its retail design, and the store's product offerings, but also the feeling they got when visiting such a store. One of the interviewed retailers indicated that retail environments need to reflect the core values of the company. He indicated that the story needs to fit with the company's values, and that in the end, "*it is the whole*" that triggers customer experiences. The interviewed customers also valued this aspect. One interviewee, for instance, evaluated her in-store experience by referring to various tangible aspects of the store's retail design (e.g., the choice of certain materials to furnish the store) but she also discussed more intangible or atmospheric aspects of retail design such as the choice of particular music and colors throughout the store and how she experienced that in the overall environment.

Stakeholders' Viewpoints Concerning "Particular" Aspects of Customer Experience

Having discussed the results of the aspects that were summarized in the upper part of Figure 2, we now turn to the interviewed stakeholders' viewpoints on the aspects in the lower part: from "intention" to "memorability."

Intention

When trying to trigger memorable customer experiences, designers have the *intention* to try to appeal to customers in the interiors they design. As Figure 8 illustrates, this is an aspect that was also discussed by retailers during the interviews. But customers mentioned that they were not always so fond of retailers' and designers' efforts concerning this aspect. One customer, for instance, discussed her experience in a fashion store. On entering this store, she noted that there was a difference in height created by a set of steps. She did not appreciate this spatial feature, which creates a true "*threshold*" in her opinion, and which could potentially hinder interested visitors. The concerned designer however argued that this particular feature was meant to create a first stopping-place in-store, which allows customers to truly come inside the store, leave the busy shopping street behind them, become at ease within the store and enjoy the store's retail design and product offerings.

Theme and consistency

The interviewed designers indicated that they often intentionally try to work with a particular *theme* when designing a shop interior, whereby they aim to work out *consistency* in their interiors, so that all tangible and intangible design elements match one another and together form "a whole." One designer said:

> When customers go to a store, it is very important for them to be able—so to speak—to immediately step into a world, a world that forms a whole and that triggers a very strong emotion.

Throughout the interviews with customers, they referred to the same issues. One customer who visited a specialist food store said:

> In this store, you truly are surrounded by chocolate. You smell it, you can see the production of the pralines, you can taste it, buy it… [In this store] the store interior, where lots of brown tints and wood are being used, truly reflects the warmth, the coziness and the pleasantness of the chocolate.

As Figure 8 illustrates, during the interviews with retailers, the aspect of "theme" was hardly mentioned. Only one retailer reflected on this aspect and indicated that when he needed to think about refreshing the retail design or elements of it, he always needed to take the company's core values into account and take care that all new actions within the store corresponded well with these values.

Experience realms

When working out a theme for a company's offering, retailers and designers can try to combine elements of what Pine and Gilmore (1999) defined as "realms of experiential value." Different interviewed retailers and designers indicated that they used elements of these "*experience realms*" throughout the design phase for new store concepts. They hardly referred literally to these four experience realms (aesthetics, education, entertainment, escapism) when discussing their initiatives concerning the development of a new retail design concept. But reading through the transcripts, we could label their initiatives as "experience realms." For instance, the designer of a specialist food store said:

> The original store setting already had a chocolate white ceiling. The front room of the store already was in a chocolate brown tint. So at that moment, I said: "The colors which we will use for this store are light chocolate tints and tints of dark and milk chocolate." We needed to build a store that smelled like chocolate. Moreover, the retailers had cacao leaves. They had those leaves in their possession. So I said: "OK, let's hang the walls with those leaves."

When reading through this statement, we notice that he is discussing the aspect of "experience realms." Throughout this citation, we learn more about aesthetic issues concerning the discussed store case. The designer also indicates how he strives to build an environment that almost "breathes" chocolate, and which will make it possible to trigger a feeling of entertainment and escapism for its visitors. The reference to the cacao leaves can be considered to be an educational effort of the designer. The cacao leaves, which are integrated into the retail design of the discussed retail environment, refer to the origins of chocolate. Both retailers and customers also noticed the importance of this aspect.

Senses

Interviewing the selected designers taught us that they pay a lot of attention to trying to appeal to customers' *senses* and values in the designed environment. Different designers discussed the

stimulation of sensory appeal in retail environments, but most of them agreed that they only "used" sensory stimulation to work out consistent environments.

Values

Concerning *values*, one designer for instance talked about the importance of "*trying to create a kind of world that visitors can enter, a place where it is pleasant to stay and that brings rest. That people can understand. There also can be accents to familiar spaces. ... [E]nvironments where people want to stay all day, so to speak.*" The aspects of "senses" and "values" were not discussed to the same extent by the interviewed retailers. Customers on the other hand all pointed to the triggering of their senses throughout their store visits.

Emotion

As Figure 8 makes clear, there are several terms, discussed in Table 1, that were mentioned by an equal proportion of retailers and designers. For instance they both discussed the importance of *emotion* when designing shop interiors. One designer said:

> For me, emotion is a "*conditio sine qua non.*" It is impossible to think about retail today without emotion. It is one of the most important words concerning experience. For me, a good store is a store that triggers emotion.

A retailer discussed emotion as follows:

> You need to take care that you have a store that people emotionally retain. People who come to our stores know our prices, they know what to expect. This makes them visit our stores at ease. I've always said to our customers: "Our store is your home. Please do feel at home in our store. Do as you would do at home." That is what I've always done.

The interviewed customers also indicated the importance of emotions. Throughout the interviews, they used various adjectives referring to emotions that they experienced while visiting the selected retail environments. Mostly, when reflecting on emotions they used "positive" adjectives (e.g., feeling at ease; pleasant). "Negative" emotions that customers experienced, however, also came to the fore during the interviews.

Hedonic and utilitarian aspects

Concerning *hedonic* and *utilitarian or functional aspects*, customers who visited a particular retail environment in which they did not consider themselves part of that store's target audience, did not give us clear statements about their perception of the importance of these aspects. When they discussed these stores, they seemed to place themselves in the viewpoint of representatives of the target audience and then for instance said, "*This store is aimed at a young public ... it has a kind of 'street look' atmosphere. Young people surely will like that.*" For the other retail environments, we got rather straightforward viewpoints of the interviewed customers concerning the importance of functional or hedonic aspects. All interviewed retailers and designers admitted that stores need to be satisfactory on a functional level and that attention needs to be paid to designing hedonically pleasing interiors. As one retailer said, "*Of course we have to be functional. But today, 'fun shopping' is important. People want to be amused. And then it is important that they can shop in beautifully designed retail environments.*"

Involvement of customers at different levels

All interviewed stakeholders indicated that in the context of customer experiences, one needs to strive to obtain the *involvement* of customers at different levels (for instance cognitively and affectively). The retailers reflected on this issue with rational arguments, designers with more emotional ones. They also indicated that when the products they sell are rather expensive, retailers need to give extra attention to good customer service. When reflecting on their designs and customer experiences, designers indicated that they try to create spaces where it is nice to stay. In that way, they try to involve the customer. The interviewed customers related this aspect in the first place to the product offerings of the concerned retail environment and their price level. After having approached "involvement" in this way (i.e., rather rationally), they discussed how they felt involved by the retail design of a particular retail environment (i.e., rather affectively).

Immersion

When studying the interview transcripts of the participants on the aspect of *immersion*, we noticed how designers see this as an automatic effect, something that automatically results or should result from a particular design concept. They do not particularly strive for their design concepts to evoke immersion; usually it just "happens." One designer indicated that it is also dependent on what the client (in their case, the retailer) exactly wants. The interviewed retailers confirmed the importance of immersion in experiential contexts, and one retailer specified that they try to trigger immersion by using different presentations, such as tailor's dummies, throughout the store, to try to create a particular in-store atmosphere to immerse their customers. As Figure 8 demonstrates, customers hardly referred to immersion, probably due to their subjective motivations when visiting a store. Customers, for instance, cannot be truly "open" to immersion when they are in a hurry while shopping or not really in the mood to experience immersion.

Engagement of customers

The majority of the interviewees discussed the issue of *engagement* of customers. Retailers indicated that they found it important to strive to learn who their customers are. According to the interviewees, it is only when one gets insight in the target group that initiatives can be taken to appeal to the target customers and to engage with them, to achieve them leaving the store with a good feeling. Designers indicated that they want to create environments that engage with customers, and that contain elements that people rather easily retain. To achieve this, one

of the interviewed designers was convinced that designers have to undertake different initiatives so as to let people feel at ease. According to him, when you can achieve that kind of feeling from customers, you engage with them personally, and they feel good in the designed environment. Also the majority of the interviewed customers discussed this aspect, and they mostly discussed it in positive terms. Most of the interviewees seem to have appreciated retailers' and designers' initiatives in the retail environments they visited. The initiatives they discussed ranged from choices of certain materials, colors, etc. to the use of certain music styles in store.

Memorability

On the aspect of *memorability*, we noticed that retailers and designers attached different connotations to the same term. For instance, when we discussed memorability of experiences with one designer, he said, "*For me, memorability is … the feeling of 'coming home,' in many different ways. You feel at ease with your surroundings, you feel good in a designed space.*" When we discussed the same topic with one retailer, she started discussing the store's loyalty card, which can be considered a very concrete initiative when reflecting on memorability. The customers considered store visits to be memorable when they fulfilled logical, more rational considerations (e.g., "*You can buy products here cost-consciously*"), more affective or emotive arguments (e.g., "*It was a pleasant environment,*" "*I felt at ease,*" "*I feel attracted to revisit the store out of curiosity*") or when they felt impressed by certain retail design elements (e.g., "*The presence of the giraffe or the Mini Cooper in this store attracts me to revisit this store*").

Discussion

During the interviews, we noticed the existence of a wide spectrum of viewpoints concerning the 20 terms that we were able to trace in the literature.

First of all, studying the interview transcripts taught us that most of the aspects in Figure 2 were discussed by the interviewed stakeholders. "Multiple communication channels" was the only aspect discussed by the retailers but not by designers or customers. A possible explanation seems to be that attention to this aspect is not automatically part of a retail designer's job. Some retailers will ask designers to reflect on the development of an online retail platform, but few retail design offices will develop these platforms themselves. That the customers did not discuss this aspect can be explained by the fact that in the framework of this study they were only asked to visit and reflect upon their experiences in a physical retail environment. During the interviews, none of the customers spontaneously discussed experiences with the concerned retailer via other communication channels, such as the Internet.

Secondly, while studying the interview transcripts, we noticed that the interviewed retailers seem to approach the design process of a retail environment with more rational, logical arguments than the interviewed designers. When retailers reflected on issues such as "interaction" or "holism," they developed rational arguments, for instance by referring to the value and importance of every square meter of store surface. Designers, on the other hand, developed another kind of argument on the same topics, using a different vocabulary. They discussed issues such as "interaction" or "holism" in a rather narrative style of reasoning without focusing on the development of a rational argument. In their reasoning, they regularly referred to emotions.

Thirdly, while retailers and designers generally discussed their concepts in positive terms, the customers reflected rather critically on their store visits. This also focused attention on aspects of customer experience, but not always in the same positive sense as retailers and designers. Moreover, Figure 8 shows that rather few customers discussed utilitarian and hedonic aspects, and customers did not often mention the issue of immersion. In our opinion, it seems important that customers feel themselves to be part of a particular retail environment's target audience before they seem able to truly appreciate the concerned retail environment to its full extent. This has repercussions for the setting up of research on customer experiences.

Fourthly, studying the interview transcripts and visualizing the results in Figure 8 taught us that several aspects that the majority of the designers discussed also were echoed by most of the customers (for instance the aspects of senses, holistic character of customer experiences and theme). The interviewed retailers, however, did not follow suit.

Fifthly, Figure 8 demonstrates how aspects of the theoretical conceptualization of customer experience were discussed by the interviewees. Often, aspects were discussed spontaneously during the flow of the interviews. At other times, the interviewer specifically invited the interviewees to reflect on certain aspects. The main function of Figure 8 is thus limited to summarizing the interview results in a visual manner.

Sixthly, Figure 8 illustrates which aspects concerning customer experiences were discussed by the majority or by all interviewed customers (e.g., emotion, experience realms, value). In our opinion, these aspects demonstrate that the customers thoroughly discussed issues or "means" relating to the "design for experience" approach. Designers and retailers can, however, only try to create experiential contexts (hence the expression "design *for* experience"). They cannot "control" customer experiences, and throughout the interview transcripts, we learned that our interviewees were well aware of this.

Conclusions

Despite the shared positive connotations of customer experience in retail practice, there appears to be a lack of a clear conceptualization of customer experience. In addition, research on customer experiences in retail environments in which a holistic perspective is applied seems to be truly scarce. As retail design is an emerging discipline, literature from different adjacent disciplines was consulted with the aim of getting insight into existing research on retail settings and the user–environment relationship. The paradox between the facts that existing literature typically focuses on the influence of *isolated* aspects on experience and that designers intrinsically function as *holistic* practitioners soon inspired us to compose our own conceptualization of customer experience.

Contribution to Knowledge

To the best of our knowledge, the overview of data as presented in Table 1 is the first attempt to summarize aspects that are inextricably bound up with the concept of customer experience in retail environments. In addition, the development of the Experience Web may also become a valuable contribution to the development of a body of theory relating to experiences in designed environments. In our view, the conceptualization of customer experience and the development of the Experience Web can be regarded as a first step in the creation of a taxonomy of user experience. Moreover, our research has focused attention on the phenomenologically inspired thinking and holistic attitude of retail designers and (interior) architects. By involving retailers, designers and customers in our research project, we hope to have triggered our design peers' interest in academic research. By integrating their tacit knowledge (Collins, 2010; Polanyi, 1967) in our research we hope to have included designers in contributing to the development of the discipline's own body of theory.

Implications

With regard to the implications of this study, the authors believe that the Experience Web can become an instrument that allows retailers and designers to work out a shared terminology and vocabulary when discussing issues relating to "design for experience." This seems all the more interesting and valuable when one takes into account that our research results have demonstrated that currently these stakeholders do not always attach the same connotations to these issues. In addition, the Experience Web offers a particularly interesting starting point to help guide a design brief or concept development for design stakeholders with a particular interest in "design for experience." The Experience Web can help them to try to design experiential contexts, but will not enable them to design customer experiences as such; these always need to be filled in by the end users themselves.

The research approach we followed for this project is in line with Edwards' (2011) appeal to strive to support the development of the body of knowledge of interior architecture by combining the advancement of the discipline's theoretical knowledge base with insights into the actual design processes. In our research approach, we confronted our theoretical conceptualization of customer experience with the viewpoints of stakeholders active and involved in design practice. Following Fetterman (1997), who stated that "triangulation is basic in ethnographic research" (p. 93), we visualized information coming from different sources (i.e., literature and viewpoints of retailers, designers and customers) so as to gain greater rigor and a deeper understanding of the studied phenomena. Figure 8 demonstrates how each of the groups of interviewed stakeholders relates to aspects of the theoretical conceptualization of customer experience. Our analysis of the interview data also pointed to the existence of various viewpoints among practitioners with regard to aspects of the theoretical conceptualization.

Future Research

It seems valuable for future research on customer experience in which customers are involved to also involve customers who truly feel themselves to be part of the studied retail environments' target audiences. Working with a quota sample instead of selecting customers via a snowball method may yield additional insights into customers' viewpoints on customer experience. This study focused on conceptualizing and studying customer experiences by interviewing stakeholders, all based in Belgium, who have been involved in the process of designing retail environments located in different shopping cities in Belgium. It would be worthwhile to broaden our perspectives in the future to studying customer experiences in other geographic regions. Furthermore, it seems particularly interesting to find out whether our conceptualization of customer experiences is also applicable to interiors and experiential contexts other than retail environments. Likewise, it seems worthwhile to study in depth other approaches relating to the Experience Web, for instance with a focus on the "means" or "goals" of designing for experience. To conclude, a valuable future research opportunity may be to transform this theoretical conceptualization of customer experience into an accessible evaluation instrument that would enable retail and design practitioners to evaluate retail environments with a particular focus on elements or points of attention relating to "design for experience."

Acknowledgments

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