

Reading Between the Aisles:
A Contextualised Study of Young
Fashion Consumers' Experiences of
Retail space

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DECLARATION

This thesis is my own work and has been composed entirely by me.

Clare A.M Thomson

ABSTRACT

Previous research exploring the impact of the retail environment has presented consumers as passive participants who can be managed in the space. Much of this research has focused on measuring consumers' responses and behaviour using experimental and survey-based approaches, detached from the complexity and diversity of consumers' lived experiences. However more recent research in advertising, services and leisure, and inter-disciplinary studies on consumption has highlighted the consumers' role as active meaning makers across a variety of activities and contexts.

This thesis focuses on young consumers' retail brand experiences and in particular their experiences of retail space. Drawing on diverse research from marketing and consumer behaviour, environmental psychology, geography and anthropology, this study offers a more contextualised understanding of consumers' interactions with retail space. Research focused on the youth fashion market and three mixed fashion retail chains located in Glasgow. Adopting an interpretive approach, multiple methods of data collection were used, including in-depth interviews, mini group discussions and a series of accompanied shops.

The study indicates that, far from passive participants, young fashion consumers are active co-constructors of space who derive their own meaning from these space encounters. The research extends the concept of literacy into a retail context to illustrate that consumers are capable of 'reading between the aisles'. Informants not only had a sophisticated knowledge and understanding of retail design issues, but were also able to interpret and construct their own meaning from the physical, sensory and social space. Building on Relph's (1976) model of insiders and outsiders the study further proposes that young fashion consumers have varying orientations in their interpretation of the retail space. The thesis concludes by exploring the implications of these findings for retailers and suggests possible avenues for future research.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

'we live, act and orient ourselves in a world that is richly and profoundly differentiated into places, yet at the same time we seem to have a meagre understanding of the constitution of places and the ways in which we experience them' (Relph, 1976; 6)

1.1 Introduction to Thesis

Over the last decade there has been a rise in the number of destination leisure retail environments but to date there has been little empirical research on the types of shopping experiences enjoyed in these retail spaces. Research in consumer behaviour has traditionally been dominated by experimental methods and survey based approaches that have attempted to measure and define these experiences. In this context the retail environment has often been positioned as a fixed or static space constructed by the architect or designer, with consumers seen as a component element to be managed and controlled. There has therefore been little consideration of the active role played by consumers in constructing and managing their own experiences in the retail space.

This thesis aims to enhance our current understanding by presenting a more holistic and contextualised description of consumers' experiences of the retail space. Moving away from traditional research that has its foundations in marketing, consumer behaviour and environmental psychology, the study aims to explore alternative literature and methodologies which offer new insights and perspectives on the issues of concern. By using a qualitative approach the study seeks to prioritise the voice of the consumer in an exploration of the diversity and intensity of their 'everyday' experiences of fashion retail space.

1.2 Genesis of Research

This research stemmed from my own personal interest and experiences of fashion shopping and a review of the literature and empirical research in the field of consumer behaviour and marketing. A family background in retailing and summer jobs in retail stores stimulated an interest in shopping and consumer behaviour. From these observations and personal experiences it was evident that consumers were not simply interested in making purchases but rather fashion shopping was a highly social and playful activity in which people were actively engaged and immersed in the retail space. I became interested in why people walked past some shops and were drawn into others and how people experienced the retail space once inside.

These personal reflections and observations led to an exploration of the literature that has examined consumers' interactions with the retail space. However this literature, which often relied on simulated retail environments and experimental studies, appeared to be detached from the reality and complexity of consumers' everyday 'lived' experiences of retail space. This perspective appeared to be supported by Sherry (1998b).

While our literatures have occasionally probed the nature of grocery stores, we actually know more about the placeways of supermarkets than we do about the placeways of groceries. Such disparity is remarkable, given the everyday nature of such shopping and the importance our discipline assigns to 'place' in our comprehension of marketing. It is also suggestive of the range of everyday phenomena that escapes our disciplinary scrutiny. 'Shoppportunities' should become the focus of our enquiries (Sherry, 1998b:2)

While Sherry (1998b) pointed to the 'shoppportunities' for examining the nature of grocery shopping and the placeways of supermarkets, a review of the literature indicated the limited empirical research exploring fashion shopping and retail spaces. In order to develop a more contextualised and enhanced understanding of consumers' experiences of fashion retail space the study moved beyond research within marketing and consumer behaviour. Studies in geography and anthropology provided

further insights as they have been more concerned with peoples' meanings and attachment to place and consumers' consumption experiences. Such studies also indicated the value of ethnographic approaches for exploring retail experiences. However despite their contributions their concern was with more 'spectacular', 'heroic', and 'extraordinary' settings, potentially ignoring the subtlety and significance of people's ordinary everyday 'lived experiences' of place. Many of these studies have also tended to overlook the practices and experiences of consumers and instead prioritise the interpretation of the researcher.

A further broadening of the research agenda was felt valuable in line with the aim of developing a more contextualised account of consumers' experiences. Literature in the area of experiential consumption provided insights into the nature of consumers' experiences across a broad range of events and activities. Research in advertising focusing on adults as active consumers of advertising was a source of considerable inspiration. Further research drawing on themes from the post-modern literature also helped to re-conceptualise the role of the consumer and their relationship with retail store brands. These alternative sources of literature therefore provided further theoretical insights and understandings that could be applied when exploring consumers' holistic experiences of the retail space.

1.3 Research Design

In order to develop an in-depth thick descriptive account of consumers' fashion consumption experiences across a range of retail settings, an interpretive approach using mixed methods was adopted. Primary research was conducted in Glasgow between May 1999 and June 2001. As part of the emergent design the study involved several stages of data collection. A preliminary study focused on six fashion retail chain stores located in Glasgow. This study utilised a combination of observational techniques and unstructured qualitative interviews in the retail space.

Building on these preliminary findings the main study focused on consumers from three fashion retail chains in Glasgow. The study consisted of two main phases of

data collection. The first phase involved 12 in-depth interviews and 9 mini group discussions. In order to elicit enriched qualitative information concerning events and experiences as participants perceived them, several enabling and projective tasks were employed. This included a sorting and repertory grid task using photographic stimuli as well as a collage construction task. The second phase of data collection consisted of a series of accompanied shopping trips with consumers. The purpose of this method was to gain a deeper understanding of consumers' experiences through their eyes by observing how they interacted with the retail space across a variety of retail environments.

1.4 Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is divided into three parts that provide an introduction and review of the literature (Chapters 1-3), consideration of methodology (Chapter 4), and the presentation of the analysis and conclusions (Chapters 5-10).

Part One

Chapter Two introduces literature in the field of marketing and consumer behaviour that has contributed to our understanding of consumers' experiences and interactions in the retail space. It begins by exploring contributions from the retail atmospherics literature. This introduces research that has examined the influence of specific atmospheric elements, as well as studies that have drawn on environmental psychology frameworks to explore the impact of the holistic retail setting. The chapter then outlines research that has attempted to define and measure the service quality construct as well as studies that have focused on consumers' interpersonal encounters and interactions in the retail space. Literature located in geography and anthropology is then introduced as a means of broadening our understanding of these retail space issues.

Chapter Three draws on literature from experiential marketing to explore how consumption experiences across a broad array of activities and events have been

defined and researched in the past. The chapter introduces literature from advertising research including the concepts of persuasion knowledge and literacy to help conceptualise the role of the active consumer. Discussion then focuses on consumers' relationships with retail brands and the role that brands play in the construction of consumers' identity. The notion of consumption communities and postmodern tribes are then introduced to explore the broader social context in which brands are consumed. In an effort to provide further insights into consumers' interaction and experiences of the retail space the concepts of 'linking value', space appropriation and re-appropriation or twist are introduced.

Part Two

Chapter Four introduces the research methodology. It outlines the objectives of the research and describes the adoption of an interpretive approach using multiple methods of data collection. Findings from the preliminary study are discussed and details of the methods and procedures adopted in the main study are presented. The rationale for the store choice and the selection of participants is provided. The final part of the chapter outlines the process of data analysis and provides an evaluation of the study.

Part Three

Chapter Five provides an orientation to the research by introducing Glasgow as the broad location for the study and describes the three stores involved in the research. This includes a brief historical overview of the stores, their broad retail strategy and details of their current retail rankings. Descriptions of each of the servicescapes and photographs of the retail space are also presented.

Chapter Six explores young fashion consumers' retail brand experiences. It describes the personal meanings they attached to brands, and how they used these as symbolic resources for the creation and maintenance of identity. The chapter explores these meanings in the context of consumers' experiences and impressions of the retail store

and retail product brand. Key themes concerned with consumers' shopping identities and roles are presented. These themes include the notion of the consumer as lay marketer, shrewd and seduced shoppers and the 'mish-mash' generation.

Chapter Seven introduces the concept of retail space literacy to help us understand how consumers read, interpret and derive meaning from retail spaces. The notion of retail space literacy therefore provides a conceptual framework which helps to structure this and subsequent chapters. This chapter focuses specifically on the role of the physical space. It explores consumers' readings of different spatial configurations which have been defined along the dimensions of spaciousness, predictability and authenticity. Consumers' understanding of these configurations are explored in terms of physical artifacts in the space, merchandise display and customer flow. Finally, the chapter compares consumers' space orientations across the themes of comfort, freedom and immersion.

Chapter Eight explores the role of the sensory space. In emphasising the importance of considering consumers holistic or 'synesthetic' experiences of the sensory space it identifies three different types of spaces including calming, neutral and energised spaces. The chapter considers the meanings consumers derive from different sense appeals in terms of the cognitive, emotional and behavioural 'tricks' employed by retailers in the space. The chapter finally explores consumer sensory orientations.

Chapter Nine examines the social space. It introduces the concept of consciousness of kind to illustrate the importance of the role of other people in the retail space. It explores these roles beginning with service personnel as unacquainted influencers identifying their roles as advisors, conversational partners and antagonists. It then goes on to describe the role of other customers in the retail space as supporters and spectators. Finally the influence of purchase pals as social companions, shopping partners and shopping obstructers is presented. The chapter concludes by considering consumers social space orientations under the themes of affiliation and control.

Chapter Ten summarises the main findings and contributions of the research. Building on Relph's (1976) model of insiders and outsiders the study proposes that young fashion consumers have varying orientations in different retail spaces. These orientations are categorised into four broad groupings that include emphatic insiders, virtual insiders, incidental outsiders and existential outsiders. Implications of the research for retail practitioners are outlined and areas for future research are discussed.

Part One: Review of the Literature

CHAPTER TWO

THE RETAIL ENVIRONMENT

2.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces previous research that has examined the impact and role of the retail environment on consumer behaviour. It begins by exploring contributions from the retail atmospherics literature which have examined the influence of specific atmospheric elements, as well as studies that have drawn on environmental psychology frameworks. The chapter then presents literature that has focused on the role of the service experience. This is informed by research on service quality, specifically the SERVQUAL model and the service encounter. The limitations of these studies in terms of understanding consumers' subjective and multisensoral experiences are outlined. Finally research located in geography and anthropology is introduced in an attempt to provide alternative insights and methods which contribute to our understanding of these retail space issues.

2.2 Retail Atmospherics

The term 'atmospherics' was first coined by Kotler (1973) to describe the conscious planning of atmospheres to produce specific emotional effects in the buyer that enhance purchase probability. Kotler recognised the importance of the retail atmosphere characterising spatial aesthetics as a 'silent language' in communication. Similarly Markin, Lillis and Narayana (1976:43) described the social-psychological significance of store space, observing that

'the proximate environment that surrounds the retail shopper is never neutral. The retail store is a bundle of cues, messages and suggestions that communicate to shoppers'.

Since these early studies a great deal of literature has focused on the influence of the retail environment on consumers' attitudes and behaviour.

The atmospherics literature can largely be separated into two main areas of concern. The first has examined the influence of specific atmospheric elements on consumer behaviour. The second area has explored the broader holistic impact of the behavioural setting, borrowing largely from environmental psychology frameworks and models. This section will discuss and critically review each area, highlighting some of the main empirical and theoretical contributions to the field.

2.2.1 The Influence of Atmospheric Elements

Kotler (1973) identified visual, aural, olfactory and tactile dimensions of store atmosphere and suggested that further research was needed regarding the impact of these in-store factors on purchasing choice. Since that time a great deal of research has examined the influence of a single environmental cue upon shopper behaviour. This includes research that has looked at the effect of colour (Bellizzi, et al 1983; Crowley, 1993; Grossman and Wisenblit, 1999), music (Kellaris and Kent, 1992; Milliman, 1982;1986; Oakes, 2000; Yalch and Spangenberg, 1988), lighting (Areni and Kim, 1994; Veitch, 1997), aromas (Bone and Ellen, 1999; Mitchell et al, 1995; Spangenberg et al., 1996), tactile stimulation (Hornik, 1992), crowding (Eroglu and Harrell 1986; Eroglu and Machleit, 1990; Hui and Bateson, 1991), and point of purchase display (Phillips and Bradshaw, 1990; Quelch and Cannon-Bonventre, 1983).

While each of these studies has focused on different atmospheric elements they have two main themes in common. Firstly, studies have illustrated that different elements have a variety of physical and psychological effects on consumers that influence their behaviour in the service environment. Secondly, this research has revealed that by skilful manipulation of certain variables consumer behaviour can be altered. This clearly has implications for retailers who wish to elicit certain behaviours in consumers. For example studies exploring the impact of music in the retail space

have demonstrated that tempo, volume and musical genre can alter shoppers mood, length of stay and purchase patterns. Similarly, the colour used in a retail environment has been shown to have both an arousal component and an influence on consumer evaluations of the store and the type of merchandise carried.

Despite the success of research examining specific environmental cues the majority of studies suffer from several limitations. Firstly, they are primarily based on experimental studies carried out in laboratory settings that rely on verbal (eg. Gardner and Siomkos, 1986) or visual (eg. Areni, Sparks and Dunne, 1996) simulations of retail environments. While these laboratory simulation techniques offer the advantages of methodological expediency and experimental control, their ability to realistically capture the store atmosphere or the holistic experience is questionable (Areni and Kim, 1994). Secondly, the range of consumer reactions examined in these studies has been rather narrow. Research has tended to emphasise overt 'quantitative indicators', or behavioural outcomes, such as time spent in the store and number of purchases. This ignores important dimensions of the shopping process such as the symbolic, experiential, and emotional aspects of behaviour (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982). Lastly, single-element studies do not take into consideration the interactive effects likely to occur between different elements in the same store environment.

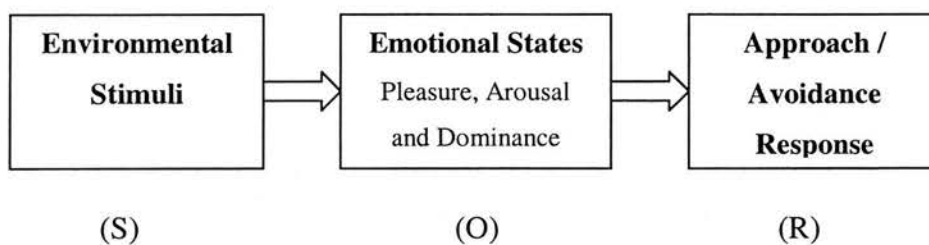
2.2.2 An Environmental Psychology Framework

In contrast to the first area of research that examined the influence of specific environmental dimensions, the second main approach endeavours to determine the holistic or global influence of store atmosphere on consumer behaviour. Much of this research draws from work in environmental psychology which is concerned with providing a systematic account of the relationship between a person and the environment (Stokols and Altman, 1987). While research in environmental psychology has traditionally studied work, residential and institutional environments such as schools and hospitals, attention has also been extended to retail store environment (Donovan and Rossiter, 1982). The majority of this research is grounded on the Mehrabian and Russell (1974) environmental psychology

framework or model.

This model is based on the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) paradigm (see Figure 2.1). This relates features of the environment (S) to approach-avoidance behaviours (R) within the environment, mediated by the individual's emotional states (O) aroused by the environment. It therefore maintains that an individual's response (perceptions, behaviour) within a certain environment is affected by the emotional states created by that environment (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). Each element of the model will now be discussed in order to provide the theoretical background for the remaining sections.

Figure 2.1 The Mehrabian and Russell Model



Source: Donovan, R.J and Rossiter, J.R (1982) 'Store Atmosphere: An Environmental Psychology Approach'. *Journal of Retailing*, 58(1), 42.

The stimulus factors (S) in the model refer to the physical features (e.g. colour, lighting, layout etc) in the environment. These dimensions are measured as the rate of information or 'load' of the environment and are defined as the degree to which the environment is novel (i.e. new and unfamiliar) or complex (i.e. the number of elements or characteristics present in the environment). In this model the 'load' of an environment is assumed to be directly linked to the degree of arousal it induces. Therefore in a 'high load environment' a person will feel excited and stimulated, while conversely in 'low load environment' a person will feel calm and relaxed.

The second element of the Mehrabian-Russell model refers to the emotional states (O) induced by the environment. It is proposed that there are three basic emotional

states, these include pleasure-displeasure, arousal-nonarousal and dominance-submissiveness, often know by the acronym PAD. The pleasure-displeasure refers to the extent to which a person feels good, relaxed and happy in the environment. Arousal-nonarousal is concerned with the extent to which a person feels excited, alert, active and stimulated. Dominance-submissiveness refers to the degree the person feels free to act and move around in the environment (Donovan and Rossiter, 1982). Although the Dominance-submissiveness dimension is included in the original model (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974) it was later deleted (Russell and Pratt, 1980) as it was argued that dominance requires a cognitive interpretation by the individual and is therefore not purely applicable in environments calling for affective response. It is proposed that there is a conditional interaction between pleasure and arousal in determining approach and avoidance behaviour. In a neutral (i.e. neither pleasing nor displeasing) environment, moderate arousal enhances approach behaviours, whereas very low or very high arousal leads to avoidance behaviours. In a pleasant environment, the greater the arousal, the greater the approach behaviour. In an unpleasant environment, the higher the arousal, the greater the avoidance behaviour (Donovan and Rossiter, 1982).

The final element of the model relates to the behavioural responses (R) to the environment. These are categorised as approach or avoidance behaviours and are considered to have four dimensions. Approach behaviour involves a willingness or desire to move towards, stay in and explore an unfamiliar environment as well as a desire to communicate with others and perform a large number of tasks in the environment. Avoidance behaviours relate to the opposite set of responses including deteriorated performance and dissatisfaction, feelings of anxiety and boredom, unfriendliness to others, and a desire to leave the environment and not return (Donovan and Rossiter, 1982).

2.2.3 A Retail Context

The Mehrabian and Russell (1974) model has been very influential within the retail atmospherics literature. It has given rise to a large number of studies that have

examined the impact of the physical surroundings on consumer behaviour in a variety of service settings. Donovan and Rossiter (1982) were the first to find support for the model in a retailing context by investigating the relationship between emotional states induced by different store environments. The study was designed to explore the relationship between emotional states and behavioural intention in that environment. Using a student sample, informants visited a range of retail environments and completed a three part questionnaire to measure their emotional states¹, the environmental load² and intentions to behave in the store³. In an extension to the original study (Donovan et al, 1994) the authors used a broader sample of shoppers, measured emotions during the shopping trip rather than after or before and recorded the effects on actual shopping behaviour. Overall both studies indicated that pleasure-displeasure and arousal-nonarousal were significant mediators or predictors of intended shopping behaviours in the store. However, the dominance-submissiveness dimension exhibited limited explanatory value in a retail setting. Predicted behaviour included willingness to spend time in the store and explore the environment, feelings of friendliness towards others and intentions to spend more money than originally planned.

Since the introduction of the Mehrabian-Russell model to retail settings by Donovan and Rossiter, a number of researchers have adapted and modified the framework across a variety of service contexts. For instance, Baker (1986) developed a useful model to classify in-store stimuli, defining three critical dimensions for a store environment. These comprised of ambient factors (temperature, music, sound and light) social factors (contact with sales staff, other customers) and design factors (aesthetic and functional elements). This marked a move away from models focusing exclusively on the impact of the physical environment to considering it also as a

¹ Emotional states were measured using the Mehrabian and Russell (1974) PAD semantic differential measure which included items such as contented-depressed, happy-unhappy, relaxed-bored, excited-calm.

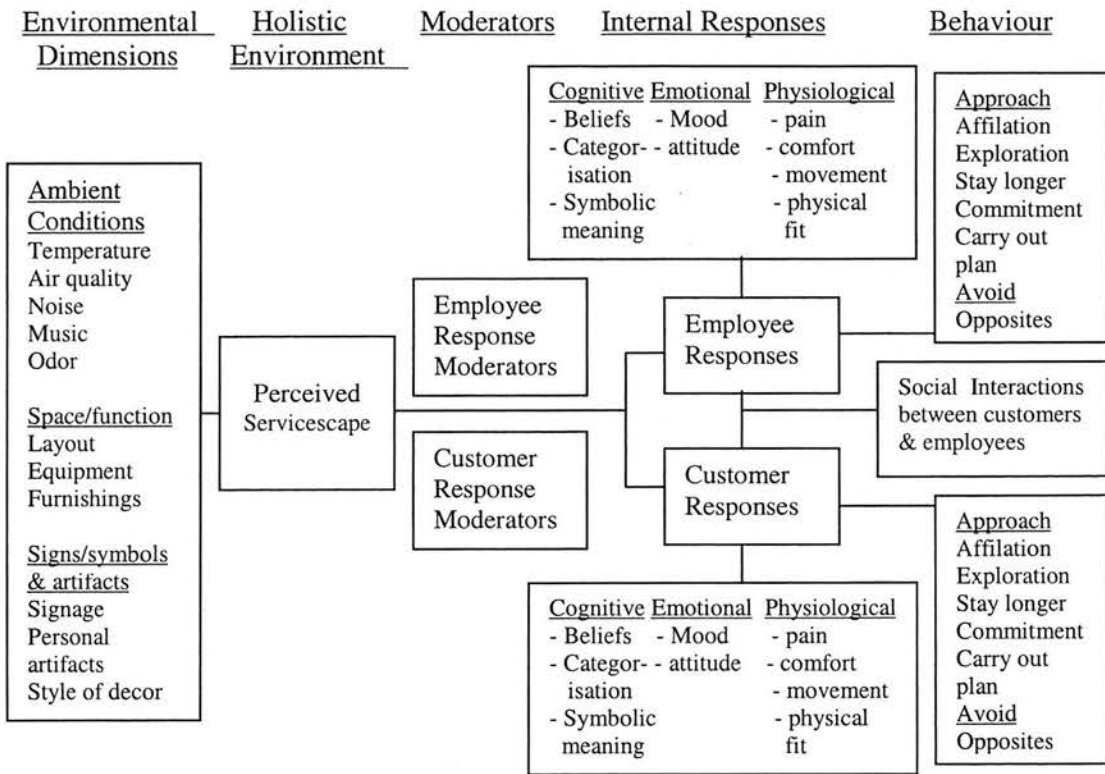
² Environmental load was measured on dimensions such as familiar-novel, uncrowded-crowded, simple-complex.

³ Intentions to behave in the store included questions such as 'Would you enjoy spending time in this store?', 'how much time would you like to spend browsing?', 'would you want to avoid looking around or exploring this environment?'.

social construct, in which human factors play a determining role on behaviours. Following on from Baker, and taking into account the complexity of customer-environment interactions, several researchers have examined different variables affecting shopping behaviour such as personality (e.g. Anderson 1986; Grossbart, et al., 1990), mood states (e.g. Sherman and Smith, 1987) and shopping motives (e.g. Dawson, Bloch and Ridgeway, 1990). In addition, research has specifically focused on the behavioural responses that are induced by store atmosphere. For instance, Grewal and Baker (1994) have indicated that certain environmental factors at the point of sale can alter the psychological price consumers are willing to pay for the same product. The authors reported that high social store environments, defined as the number of employees in the environment, professional dress and use of a greeting, resulted in a product at a particular price being viewed as more acceptable than the same product in a low-social environment.

More recent research has become increasingly complex and diverse as studies have attempted to build on and extend the environmental psychology framework into new models. Most notable is the model developed by Bitner (1992) which explores the impact of physical surroundings on the behaviour of both customers and employees in service organisations or the 'servicescape'. Bitner proposes that customers and employees respond to the environment not only emotionally but also cognitively, and physiologically. The model (Figure 2.2), indicates that a complex mix of environmental features, including ambient conditions, spatial layout and functionality and signs, symbols and artifacts combine to give a holistic impression of the perceived servicescape. These perceptions lead to certain emotions, beliefs and physiological sensations which in turn influence approach and avoidance behaviours. However, these behaviours are modified by different situational influences (e.g. purpose, time available) and personal factors (e.g. personality, mood states), referred to in the model as 'response moderators'. In addition to the environment effects on individual behaviours, Bitner also recognises the servicescape influence on the nature and quality of customer and employee interactions.

Figure 2.2 Bitner's Model of Environment-User Relationships



Source: Bitner, M.J. (1992) 'Servicescapes: the impact of physical surroundings on customers and employees'. *Journal of Marketing*, 56, 57-71.

Several authors have expanded upon Bitner's (1992) model. For example, Baker (1998) presents a theoretical framework to support the role of the cognitive consumer by viewing the store environment from an informational perspective. McGoldrick and Pieros (1998) have developed a model highlighting the influence of response moderators, including shopping motives, expectations and familiarity with the environment. Meanwhile other studies have focused on modifying and exploring the Mehrabian-Russell model within and across different retail formats. For instance Tai and Fung (1997) assessed the applicability of the model in two different types of music stores while Kenhove and Desrumaux (1997) examined the validity of the model across three diverse retail formats including clothing retailers, furniture stores and garden centres.

Additional research has also sought to combine existing models with the environmental psychology framework proposed by Mehrabian and Russell (1974). For example, Foxall (1997) criticises previous applications to consumer environments for 'lacking a systematic, theory consistent classification of consumer environments' and 'choosing test situations on an ad hoc basis' (p505). Using the Behavioural Perspective Model (BPM) as a classification framework, the author found support for the PAD model across eight different consumer situations or contexts, from luxury to grocery shopping. Wirtz and Bateson (1999) have also integrated environmental psychology perspectives with research that uses satisfaction to evaluate consumption experiences instead of approach and avoidance behaviours. Using an experimental design to examine consumers experiences of home-banking the research found evidence for the pleasure dimension indicating that the more pleasure respondents experienced during the consumption process the higher was their satisfaction.

Overall studies drawing on environmental psychology frameworks have made a valuable contribution to exploring the impact of the retail environment on individuals' behaviours and attitudes. While research has focused on examining consumers' emotional responses, studies have also attempted to build on existing models and develop new frameworks to further understand consumers' holistic encounters with the retail space. However, one criticism that can be levelled across studies is that they have failed to fully understand and explore the range of consumer responses to the physical space such as important social, experiential and hedonic dimensions that form part of these shopping processes. This is perhaps largely due to the methods that have been utilised in these studies. For instance, many studies have used survey methods based on standard emotions lists developed for the purposes of studying human emotions generally and are therefore not readily applicable in a retail context (Yoo, Park and MacInnis, 1998). Furthermore, many surveys rely on consumers' verbal descriptions and so neglect many of the unconscious shopping behaviours and experiential dimensions that exist. The following sections will now turn to explore alternative research in service marketing that has attempted to explore how consumers assess quality across a range of retail environments.

2.3 Service Quality

The quality of the 'service encounter' has become an increasingly important issue or topic of investigation. This interest comes from both those within the academic community who are anxious to define and measure the construct, and from practitioners involved in the development and implementation of service quality initiatives (Smith, 1995). Industry interest in the construct is largely due to the strong correlation or relationship it has to costs (e.g. Crosby, 1979), profitability (e.g. Zahorick and Rust, 1992), customer satisfaction, loyalty and retention (Rust and Zahorick, 1993; Reichheld and Sasser, 1990).

Service quality research attempts to examine the role and impact of the complete service setting or servicescape gestalt on consumer behaviour based on cognitive evaluations of the service experience (Wirtz and Bateson, 1999). While measuring the influence of the holistic environment is similar to the objectives of many studies in retail atmospherics, research in service quality differs as emphasis is placed on capturing consumers' cognitive rather than affective or emotional responses. Furthermore the measurement of outcomes also varies as service quality research evaluation is based on consumers' level of satisfaction rather than approach and avoidance behaviour. Satisfaction is measured as the difference between customer service expectations and perceived performance. This approach, often referred to as the disconfirmation-of-expectations model, has been used widely and has received a great deal of empirical support (Churchill and Surprenant, 1982; Cronin et al., 2000; Westbrook and Oliver, 1991). The predominant measurement method described in the current service quality literature is SERVQUAL, a multiple item scale for measuring consumers' perceptions of service quality developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985).

2.3.1 The SERVQUAL Model

The conceptual foundation for the SERVQUAL scale was derived from a comprehensive qualitative research study that defined service quality and illuminated

the dimensions along which consumers perceive and evaluate the construct (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, 1985). Although there appears to be some discrepancy in the literature over the definition of perceived quality, Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985;42) describe it as

‘the consumers’ judgement about an entity’s overall excellence or superiority which is related but not equivalent to satisfaction and results from a comparison of expectations with perceptions of performance’.

Initial exploratory research revealed that the criteria consumers utilise to assess service quality could be categorised into ten dimensions however, later testing and scale purification suggested five underlying dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. These five dimensions are measured by a 22-item SERVQUAL scale, and are posited to be generic to all service industries. Each of the 22 items are operationalised into two statements. The first measures customers’ expectations about companies in general within the service sector being investigated and the second measures customers’ perceptions about the particular company whose service quality is to be assessed.⁴ Both measures are recorded on a seven-point Likert scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree. According to Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988; 1991), the difference between the rating of these two statements represents a measure of perceived service quality. The higher the perception-minus-expectation score, or what is known as the ‘gap’ score, the higher the level of perceived quality will be.⁵

Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1991) claim that SERVQUAL is a concise multiple-item scale with good reliability and validity that companies can use to better understand the service expectations and perceptions of consumers. The authors argue

⁴ An example of a SERVQUAL statement is as follows:

(1) Expectations - ‘Their physical facilities should be visually appealing’.

(2) Perceptions - ‘ Company XYZ facilities are visually appealing’.

⁵ The overall measure is an unweighted SERVQUAL score as it does not take into account the relative importance that customers attach to the various dimensions. However, a relative weighted SERVQUAL score can also be obtained.

that as a result of the generic nature of the SERVQUAL scale, it can be applied across a broad spectrum of service industries. It therefore provides a basic skeleton that can be adapted or supplemented to fit the characteristics or specific research needs of a particular organisation. Moreover, the authors suggest that by examining the various gap scores a company can not only assess its overall quality of service perceived by customers, it can also identify the key dimensions, and facets within those dimensions, on which it should focus its quality improvement efforts. The authors also suggest that the SERVQUAL instrument has numerous applications. For instance, the scale can facilitate the benchmarking of service quality delivery levels with competitors and can also effectively be used in order to segment customers into perceived quality categories on the basis of their individual scores.

Although the SERVQUAL instrument has been widely used by both academics and practising managers, it has been subject to criticisms and heated debate in the literature with regard to its conceptual or theoretical foundations (e.g. Babakus and Boller, 1992; Brown, Churchill and Peter, 1993; Cronin and Taylor, 1992;1994; Teas, 1993) and methodological or operational limitations (Babakus and Boller, 1992; Carmen, 1990; Fick and Ritchie, 1991; Finn and Lamb, 1991; Gagliano and Hathcote, 1994) particularly concerning the reliability and validity of the scale. (For a detailed account of criticisms see Buttle, 1994; Smith, 1995). These criticisms have been highlighted by a substantial number of SERVQUAL replication studies which have been applied in a variety of industrial, commercial and non-profit settings such as tyre retailing (Carman, 1990), travel and tourism, (Fick and Ritchie, 1991), hospitals, (Babakus and Mangold, 1992), and retail firms (Finn and Lamb, 1991; Teas, 1993; Gagliano and Hathcote, 1994). The present study is concerned with the value of the framework in conceptualising the holistic shopping experience and how this can be expanded and/or adapted to consider the impact of the physical environment. Consequently the implications and limitations of this model in the context of the present study are discussed below.

2.3.2 A Useful Framework?

While Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1991) argue that the SERVQUAL model provides a useful framework to measure and better understand consumption processes across a variety of service settings, the model fails to capture the dynamic nature of the service experience and the multifaceted dimensions within it. This is largely concerned with the nature of the measurement instrument, specifically the reliance on attribute-based measures and verbal responses. The use of a survey design emphasises the service organisation's terminology rather than the themes and issues relevant to consumers. As a result much of this research may be asking questions based on inappropriate assumptions and concerns which do not correspond to those of individual customers (Johns, 1999). In addition, reliance on verbal reports may fail to capture consumer's complex behavioural processes, unconscious responses and range of consumption experiences that are frequently highly social and symbolic in nature (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982).

The SERVQUAL scale has also largely ignored the impact of the physical environment or servicescape. Although the instrument does contain items which measure the tangible aspects of the service environment (e.g. modern-looking equipment, appealing physical facilities) these have tended to have a functional orientation. However, it has been argued that the servicescape acts as an important signifier of service quality in which different environmental cues serve as a mnemonic or shortcut device (Baker, 1998). In this sense the environment can be conceptualised as a form of non-verbal communication imparting meaning through 'object language' (Bitner, 1992). The importance of this dimension has recently been acknowledged by Wakefield and Boldgett (1999) who integrated environmental psychology frameworks within the SERVQUAL model. Based on consumer surveys in three leisure service settings the authors found that the physical environment played a critical role in assessments of service quality as well as influencing customers' re-patronage intentions. Together this literature highlights that the physical environment needs to be looked at beyond these utilitarian dimensions in order to explore the symbolic, hedonic and playful aspects of consumption within the

servicescape setting.

Finally, although research has attempted to account for the range of consumption processes across different service settings, the need to examine specific service contexts has been acknowledged (e.g. Oliver, 1989; Bitner et al 1990; Finn and Lamb 1991; Bolton and Drew, 1991; Cronin and Taylor 1992). This is largely because the claims of a generic model may have failed to capture the key issues that affect consumer evaluations across different service settings (Smith, 1995). For instance, Finn and Lamb (1991) evaluated the use of the SERVQUAL instrument in a retail setting with customers from stores such as Wal-Mart and J.C. Penny, but concluded that the scale was not able to capture the essence and range of the service quality constructs in these contexts. In particular the scale was unable to elucidate on the measures of empathy and responsiveness that were of concern to consumers in this context. Overall these limitations clearly illustrate the need to explore and develop alternative measures or methods to examine dimensions of the consumers' experiences of the retail space. One area of research that has moved us closer to understanding the increasing role played by consumers in the retail space are studies that have focused on the nature of the service encounter. It is to this dimension that we now turn.

2.4 The Service Encounter

The SERVQUAL model has served to illustrate the range of dimensions affecting service quality, however a great deal of literature has focused specifically on the influence of interpersonal interactions on assessments of customer satisfaction (Crosby, Evans and Cowles, 1990; Solomon, Surprenant, Czepiel and Gutman, 1985; Surprenant and Solomon 1987). The majority of this literature has focused almost exclusively on the personal interactions and exchanges between customers and employees in service encounters (Solomon et al, 1985; Williams and Spiro, 1985; Bitner, 1990; Bearden, 1998). Indeed the importance of the role of service personnel in the setting has been emphasised by the SERVQUAL model in which three of the five constructs (empathy, assurance and responsiveness) focused on these

interpersonal dimensions. Research has explored the importance of 'service relationships' (Czepiel, 1990), or 'personalisation' in service encounters (Surprenant and Solomon, 1987; Mittal and Lassar, 1996) in which sales personnel are encouraged to assume the role of 'relationship managers' (Crosby et al., 1990) in their exchanges with customers. This personalisation of the encounter is perceived to influence customers' experiences and evaluation of a service and is therefore viewed to be an important mediator of perceived service quality, customer satisfaction and patronage behaviour (Mittal and Lassar, 1996).

Service interactions are controlled by 'ritualising' (Nikolich and Sparks, 1997) or 'scripting' (Tansik and Smith, 1990) contact personnel's behaviour during the customer interaction or encounter. However, increasingly research has moved away from conceptualising service as a process to considering it as a 'performance' (Deighton, 1992) 'imbued with artistic, dramatic or craftsmanlike possibilities' (Johns, 1999). These ideas therefore move the notion of service from the mechanical fulfilment of a function into the realm of entertainment, not only 'empowering service employees' (Bowen and Lawler, 1995) but also enrolling consumers into the service providers production (Solomon et al, 1985; Johns, 1999).

Employees and customers are both perceived to play important roles within this service performance, indeed researchers have advocated that service organisations view customers as 'partial' employees (Mills, Chase and Margulies, 1983; Mills and Morris, 1986). While much of this research has focused on employees roles, behaviours and responses (Bitner, 1990), some research has also explored the 'vital roles' consumers themselves play in enhancing their own satisfaction and value received (Solomon et al., 1985; Broderick, 1998). For example, Bitner et al (1997) has identified three roles that customers can play in service delivery. 'Productive resources' (e.g. filling a supermarket trolley), 'contributors' to their own service quality, value and satisfaction (e.g. personal benefits such as gaining fitness when joining a gym), and 'competitors' (e.g. home improvement enthusiast as a competitor to an established painting/decorating businesses). Similalry, Guiry, (1992) identifies three separate roles adopted by consumers across a range of service contexts

including that of dependence⁶, autonomy⁷ and mutuality⁸.

The presence of other customers in the service space has also been increasingly recognised as a key component or dimension of the service encounter, however empirical examination of the effect of others on customers' satisfaction/dissatisfaction has been limited (Grove and Fisk, 1997). For instance, SERVQUAL (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, 1988; 1991; 1993) did not conceptualise the interaction among customers as a factor affecting service quality. The limited literature that has explored the impact of other customers has focused on diagnosing favourable and unfavourable incidents (Bitner, Booms and Tetreault, 1990; Grove and Fisk, 1997), concentrated on negative experiences such as the impact of customer density and perceived crowding (Hui and Bateson, 1991) or more positive, highly sociable experiences with other customers sharing the service encounter (Arnould and Price, 1993).

One notable exception has been research carried out by McGrath and Otnes (1995) who studied the interactions between unacquainted customers across a variety of retail settings. The authors suggest that these 'stranger encounters' can 'result in a variety of emotional responses and behaviours' (p263). For instance they state that consumers adopt a number of overt roles (proactive and reactive helpers, admirers and complainers) and covert roles (followers, observers and judges) in the service environment. In the role of a reactive helper, for example, a fellow customer may offer advice on merchandise, give directions and/or engage in discussion, often relating to merchandise on sale. In many ways, a customer acting in this way is adopting roles that are normally associated with sales assistants. Indeed it has been argued that other customers' presence and behaviours may have a more profound

⁶ The dependent consumer feels vulnerable and uncomfortable in the service setting and needs the service employee to take an active role providing guidance and assistance during the consumption experience.

⁷ The autonomous consumer wants independence to be free to make decisions and choices on his/her own and to move throughout the retail environment devoid of any outside interference.

⁸ The role of mutuality emerges when consumers and employees understand their independent roles and work together in giving and receiving service.

impact upon assessments of service quality than contact with service personnel (Lehtinen and Lehtinen, 1991). Consequently, several authors have stated that companies should engage in 'compatibility management'⁹ to increase the likelihood of the appropriate customer mix and customer-to-customer relationships in the service environment (Martin and Pranter, 1989; Pranter and Martin, 1991; Martin, 1995).

Research on the service encounter, incorporating interactions between customers, sales personnel and other customers in the service environment, has utilised a range of methods to measure and evaluate these relationships. This has encompassed survey methods based on pre-determined scales (Crosby, Evans and Cowles, 1990; Mittal and Lassar, 1996), critical incident techniques (Grove and Fisk, 1997; Bitner, Booms and Tetreault, 1990) and experimental designs using simulated service settings (Surprenant and Solomon, 1987; Gabbott and Hogg. 2000; 2001). Research has also focused on recording and measuring different dimensions of 'observable oral participation' between both customers and contact personnel as well as interactions between customers (Harris, Baron and Ratcliffe, 1995; Baron, Harris and Davies, 1996; Harris, Davies and Baron, 1997). The authors argue that by focusing on spoken interaction within the confines of the service space conversations can be accurately observed, 'measured' and recorded both for frequency and content which allows the potential for managing and controlling these interactions. More recent research has however acknowledged the limitations of recording verbal exchanges and interactions and has turned to exploring the impact of non-verbal communication on service evaluation (Gabbott and Hogg. 2000; 2001). These evaluations encompass a number of aspects of body language including facial expression, eye contact, posture, gesture and inter-personal distance which, it is argued, all convey meaning and therefore have a direct effect on how individuals behave in the space.

⁹ Compatibility management refers to the active role that service organisations can play in attracting homogeneous customers to the service environment, managing both the physical environment and customer interactions in order to maximise satisfying encounters between customers (Pranter and Martin, 1991;44)

While these methods have provided insights into the range of behavioural dimensions and reactions of consumers in retail spaces, most of the studies suffer from similar limitations previously outlined in the SERVQUAL instrument. For instance, although there have been some recent moves to incorporate the impact of non-verbal communication in service evaluation, the majority of studies have focused on verbal methods which fail to capture the full range of consumer responses and experiences. Similarly, while there has been a few studies that have utilised qualitative interviews and observational methods (e.g. Guiry, 1992; McGrath and Otnes, 1995), the majority of studies have concentrated on measuring and recording behavioural outcomes and responses rather than developing an in-depth experiential understanding of consumers service encounters.

2.5 Identifying the ‘GAPS’

The existing literature provides a thorough insight into issues related to the management of various servicescapes created for the purpose of facilitating the individual service encounter. However, it is proposed that these models and frameworks do not go far enough in exploring consumers’ experiences, ‘environmental encounters’ (Clarke and Schmidt, 1995) and interactions with the retail design space. While the majority of frameworks have incorporated dimensions of the physical environment and the role of interpersonal influences, many have had a managerial focus, looking to measure responses and behavioural outputs. Consequently few studies have explored or addressed how consumers themselves experience the service setting. Instead the consumer is seen as a passive element of the environment and not as an active participant in the retail space (Aubert-Gamet, 1997). This is has largely due to experimental designs and survey-based approaches that have been unable to capture the range of experiential, symbolic dimensions and processes at the point of sale. In order to develop a more contextualised and enhanced understanding of the consumers’ experience of retail space it is perhaps necessary to move beyond the boundaries imposed by research within retail atmospherics and services marketing to explore alternative literature and methodologies. As a means of bridging the gap between this literature and our

understanding of these issues the following sections will explore some of the valuable contributions and insights revealed from research with its roots in geography and anthropology.

2.6 Bridging the Gap: Studies in Geography and Anthropology

Research in atmospherics and service marketing has enhanced our understanding of various consumption processes and dimensions of the service experience and has proposed how we can measure them within the service environment. However, despite these contributions, little is known of consumers' actual behavioural processes and experiences at the point of sale (Hetzl, 1995a). Studies in geography and anthropology offer the potential of fresh insights, approaches and research methods that may have some relevance or application to research on consumers' experiences of retail spaces. This section begins by introducing some of the issues and themes explored in geography that have examined individuals' long term attachments to place and research on more contemporary sites of consumption. This is followed by research located in the field of anthropology that has explored consumer behaviour across various retail and non-retail contexts.

2.6.1 Geographies of Consumption

Geographical research on consumption has expanded dramatically in the last decade, transcending traditional divisions in the subject between economic, social and cultural positions (Jackson and Thrift, 1995). Lowe and Wrigley (1996) argue that a 'new' retail geography is in the process of creation which incorporates an exploration of the economic geographies of retailing with an analysis of the cultural logic of retailing. This section will focus on the contributions from social and cultural geographies of consumption, drawing on the work of Tuan (1977) and Relph (1976). Furthermore it will examine contemporary studies of consumption sites assessing the relevance these may have for exploring consumers' experiences of retail design space.

The interaction between retail environments and consumer shopping behaviour has traditionally been an area of concern in geography and urban planning. Numerous studies have focused on analysing the consumer retail search process and the accuracy of consumers' spatial knowledge (Golledge, Dougherty and Bell, 1995; MacKay et al., 1975; Timmermans, 1993; Titus and Everett, 1995). However, some studies have developed a more intimate understanding of the so-called 'environmental encounter' as embodied within the extensive research on 'place'. Place, in this context, has a very different meaning from that in the marketing literature, including temporal, spatial, natural and social dimensions (Clarke and Schmidt, 1995).

This alternative approach to understanding the environment was largely stimulated by the seminal works of Tuan (1977) and Relph (1976) in response to dissatisfaction with existing literature in geography. Existing work, the authors argued, was couched in the terms of 'objectivity, fact and theory' which ignored much of the subtlety and significance of peoples' everyday experiences of place (Relph, 1976). Both authors were concerned, not with these abstract models and theories, but with the 'lived world', with the settings and situations people live in, know and experience directly in going about their daily lives. Their work attempted to elucidate the diversity and intensity of peoples' holistic experiences of place and in particular to explore individuals' sentimental and cultural attachments to locations or places.

There is for virtually everyone a deep association with and consciousness of the places where we were born and grew up, where we live now, or where we have had particularly moving experiences. This association seems to constitute a vital source of both individual and cultural identity and security, a point of departure from which we orient ourselves in the world...' (Relph, 1976, 43).

The essence of this argument was that distinctive and diverse places trigger a deeply felt involvement with these places by the people who live in them, and that for many such a profound attachment to place is like a close relationship with other people.

To account for our experience Relph (1976) distinguishes between the geography of places which are characterised by variety and meaning, and the geography of the 'placeless', which is the eradication of distinctive places and the making of 'standardised landscapes' characterised by a 'labyrinth of endless similarities' (p141). He states that feelings of 'placelessness' are more prevalent in postmodern society which, it has been argued by others, has led to a demand for more 'authentic' experiences (Cova and Cova, 2000).

A characteristic of much of the writings on place has been that places attain meaning for the individual person as a result of constructed experiences (Clarke and Schmidt, 1995). Relph (1976) introduces the notion of 'identity' of place suggesting that it is not static and undifferentiated but varies as circumstances and attitudes change. He argues that each place is in a sense subjectively 'evaluated'. Each space, like a text, is 'read', experienced and interpreted in different ways and has different meanings and significance for different people. It is therefore not just the identity *of* a place that is important, but also the extent to which a person or group identifies *with* it. In particular whether they are experiencing it as an 'insider' or as an 'outsider'.

'.....being inside is knowing where you are. It is the difference between safety and danger, cosmos and chaos, enclosure and exposure, or simply here and there. From the outside you look upon a place as a traveller might look upon a town from a distance; from the inside you experience a place, are surrounded by it and part of it (Relph, 1976;49)

While Relph (1976) presents place identity as a simple dichotomy, he recognises that there are also different levels of intensity with which we experience outsidersness and insidersness. Indeed altogether he identifies seven different levels¹⁰ which range from Existential Insidersness, a complete and unselfconsciousness commitment to a place, to Existential Outsidersness involving a profound alienation from people and places and a sense of not belonging. For example Relph compares feelings of existential

¹⁰ In order of intensity from Insidersness to Outsidersness the seven levels include: Existential Insidersness, Emphatic Insidersness, Behavioral Insidersness, Vicarious Insidersness, Incidental Outsidersness, Objective Outsidersness and Existential Outsidersness.

outsiderness to visiting a foreign town or city. This is contrasted with existential insiderness which he describes as the experiences individuals have to their own home and farmers with their land. Existential insiders know the place and the people, and feel accepted there.

In line with Relph, Tuan (1975) also suggests that place is a 'unique entity', 'a special ensemble' that has history and meaning, and incarnates the experiences and aspirations of people. He argues that 'place is not only a fact to be explained in the broader frame of space, but it is also a reality to be clarified and understood from the perspectives of the people who have given it meaning' (p213). He also provides a framework for understanding the range of experiences of places in which he proposes that experiences are constructed of emotion and thought which are both end points on an 'experience continuum' (Tuan, 1977; 8). He states experiences are therefore *outwardly* driven by thoughtful consideration of the environment or directed *inwardly* as a result of emotional reaction to signs. Together these develop an individuals 'sense of place'. He proposes that all places have a 'spirit' or 'personality' and argues that a sense of place has two meanings. The first is the visual or aesthetic. Places are locations that have visual impact. The second is through our other modal senses of hearing, smell, taste and touch. He states

'we can know a place subconsciously, through touch and remembered fragrances, unaided by the discriminating eye. While the eye takes in a lovely street scene and intelligence categorises it, our hands feels the iron of the school fence and stores subliminally it's coolness and resistance in our memory. Through such modest hoards we can acquire in time a profound sense of place' (Tuan, 1975;235)

Tuan (1975) therefore argues that it is important to understand and explore how people feel about space and place, to 'take into account the different modes of experience' (sensorimotor, tactile, visual, conceptual), and to interpret space and place as images of complex, often ambivalent feelings' (Tuan, 1977; 6).

This emphasis on 'humanistic understanding' (Tuan, 1975;214) has fuelled a great deal of interest and appreciation of the way in which individuals and groups

experience and interpret their surroundings (Buttimer and Seamon, 1980; Feld and Basso, 1996; Steele, 1981; Sack, 1988; Urry, 1995; Walmsley and Lewis, 1993). Studies have explored issues of community and place, nationalism and society and space. While this research has provided valuable insights into these interactions, the majority have focused on the profound psychological and emotional ties individuals develop between the people and the places they live and experience. Only a limited number of studies have explored whether these ideas and themes have any relevance or significance for consumers and retail spaces (Clarke and Schmidt, 1995).

More recent work in the field of geography has focused on 'modern urban landscapes' (Relph, 1987) such as shopping malls, and 'spectacular', 'heroic', and 'extraordinary' retail sites. The majority of this research has been located in a North American context, and include studies of shopping centres like Canada's West Edmonton Mall (Butler, 1991; Hallsworth, 1988; Hopkins, 1990; 1991; Jackson, 1991; Shields, 1989), and the Mall of America (Goss, 1993; 1999). There has also been some comparable research on British shopping centres such as Brent Cross, Wood Green (Holbrook and Jackson, 1996; Miller et al., 1998), and the Metro Centre (Chaney, 1990). The more unusual retail and entertainment site of Disney (Johnson, 1981, Warren, 1996; Bryman, 1995), Las Vegas and other 'themed environments' (Gottdiener, 1998) have focused attention on retailing and landscape as spectacle (Ley and Olds, 1988).

One of the most significant limitations of these studies is that they have tended to overlook the practices and experiences of consumers, privileging the authors' own interpretation and reading of these contexts (Jackson and Thrift, 1995). For instance many focus on the form and function of the retail environment (Goss, 1993), emphasising the tactics and strategies of control used by designers. Although some research has focused on the consumer's leisure experience (Holbrook and Jackson, 1996), and the opportunity these sites provide for new kinds of 'lifestyle shopping' (Shields, 1992a), research has rarely moved beyond a very traditional, passive conception of the consumer. Indeed Jackson and Holbrook (1995) argue that in these studies consumers 'are stripped of their human agency, becoming mere pawns in the

hands of the faceless hidden persuaders'(p1914).

A further criticism of the studies in geography has been their emphasis on a limited range of locations, in particular their concentration on 'spectacular' sites such as mega malls. Studies have therefore neglected the 'more mundane places where most people regularly shop' (Jackson 1994 cited in Lowe and Wrigley, 1996), such as the supermarket and the high street. Miles (1998) suggests this may be due the 'distinct lack of creativity' expressed in the character of Britain's high street where city centres have become more like 'identikit centres'. Nevertheless, Jackson (cited in Walmsley, 1993) argues that in order to have a deeper understanding of these consumption issues there is a need for research to explore the meaning that different 'spectacles' have for shoppers and the way in which that meaning is contested and negotiated. Research attention to uncover and explore consumers' experiences of these 'hidden geographies' (Jackson and Thrift, 1995; 220) can identify and understand the enormous range of highly textured multiple layers of meanings that lie dormant within the apparently mundane world of contemporary consumption (Harvey, 1989).

2.6.2 An Anthropological Perspective

The desire for alternative perspectives that are able to capture the full range of consumer responses and unconscious shopping processes at the point of sale has prompted the emergence of what Sherry (1998b) refers to as a 'marketing and consumption-based research tradition' that he calls the 'phenomenology of emplacement'. This view or approach has largely stemmed from the diffusion of anthropological perspectives into marketing and consumer research (e.g. Sherry, 1987; McCracken, 1990) which has emphasised the need to understand native perception and experiences of locality (Feld and Basso, 1996). A great deal of research from this anthropological perspective emanates from early work carried out by several authors in the mid 1980s, often referred to as The Consumer Behaviour Odyssey Project (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry, 1989; Belk, 1991).

The overriding aim of the project or series of studies was to explore American consumption practices across a vast array of consumer settings. These ranged from restaurants and museums (Belk, 1991) to farmers' markets (McGrath, Sherry and Heisley, 1993; Heisley, McGrath and Sherry, 1991), swap meets (Belk, Sherry and Wallendorf, 1988), and flea markets (Sherry, 1990). The majority of studies employed extended case study methods similar to traditional anthropological and sociological field studies. However, they differed in that they were not conducted within one context or setting. Instead many of these studies were able to explore and understand consumption themes beyond individual settings to examine the deeper meanings and issues related to these exchange processes at a macro level. For instance, McGrath, Sherry and Heisley (1991) examined patterns of farmer-vendor behaviours and buyer-seller interactions at a mid-western farmers market in order to interpret the role of retail institutions in the social construction of community. Sherry and McGrath (1989) and McGrath (1989) conducted an ethnographic study of two American gift stores in order to derive propositions about the contextual embeddedness of gift giving behaviours.

The Consumer Behaviour Odyssey project, and research derived from this series of studies, was important as it offered an alternative approach and methodology to study and explore consumption processes and consumer behaviour at the point of sale, namely extended case study formats and ethnography. This shift away from traditional quantitative methodologies allowed for a more in-depth account of consumption processes and meanings. Indeed it has resulted in a deeper and richer examination of the experiential, symbolic and hedonic aspects of consumption activities across a range of settings. However, it has been argued that although ethnographers are increasingly aware of the everyday practices of consumers, they have largely ignored the site of consumers' interaction and encounter – the servicescape (Sherry, 1998ab).

Recent studies have acknowledged this disparity and have attempted to move closer towards an understanding of consumers 'lived' experiences across a variety of servicecapes (Sherry, 1998b). For example research has explored consumers'

encounters in retail stores (Penaloza, 1998; Sherry 1998a; Wallendorf, et al., 1998), beauty and bridal salons (Otnes, 1998; Fischer, Gainer and Bristor, 1998), art galleries and museums (Duhaime, 1995; Joy, 1998), and alternative 'placeways' such as cybermarketscapes (Venkatesh, 1998), and wilderness servicescapes (Arnould, Price and Tierney, 1998). While these studies have acknowledged the importance of space as a multisensory 'experiential venue' they have still largely neglected to understand the role of the consumer and their own understanding and reading of the space.

In conclusion it is clear that both geographic and anthropological perspectives hold many advantages over previous research approaches. They have therefore gone some way to 'bridging the gap' in our understanding of consumers' experiences of different consumption spaces. However, despite the benefits of these approaches, studies have still not breached the gap for two reasons. Firstly, the majority of these studies are comprised of extended case study formats and introspective accounts which have failed to fully understand consumers' perspectives and the 'active' role they play in constructing their own experiences. Secondly, these studies have either explored individuals' long-term emotional and sentimental attachment to places or have focused on unconventional or spectacular retail sites. This highlights the need for further research to explore the consumers' perspective and experiences in more mundane and conventional retail contexts.

2.7 Conclusions

This chapter has introduced a diverse range of literature from retail atmospherics, services marketing, geography and anthropology that has attempted to understand consumers' interaction and experiences of retail space. Research concerned with retail atmospherics has shown the physical and psychological impact of different elements in the environment such as music, colour and lighting on consumers' moods, purchase probability, and time spent in store. It has also illustrated the holistic influence of store atmosphere. The majority of this research has drawn on environmental psychology frameworks which have demonstrated the emotional as

well as cognitive and physiological influence of the environment resulting in consumer approach and avoidance behaviours. The chapter then introduced literature that has focused on measuring service quality. Drawing on the SERVQUAL model, this research demonstrated the variety of cognitive evaluations consumers use to assess measures of satisfaction with their service experience. Research also illustrated the importance of interpersonal encounters and interactions at the point of sale with sales personnel and other customers in the retail space.

Overall this research has provided valuable insights into consumers' interaction with the retail space. However, it has conceived the retail environment as a fixed or static space constructed by the architect or designer in which consumers have been embodied as a passive element to be managed and controlled. In this way studies have failed to fully understand the diversity and complexity of consumers retail experiences. This is in part due to experimental methods and survey-based approaches favoured by marketing scholars which have tended to focus on measuring consumer responses and behavioural outcomes rather than listening to the voice of the consumer.

In an attempt to move away from the boundaries of this research the chapter introduced literature in Geography and Anthropology that has been relatively more substantial in their concern with peoples' meaning of place and consumption experiences. While these studies have gone some way to closing the gap in our understanding of these issues by providing alternative methodologies such as ethnography, there is still some way to go before understanding the subtlety and significance of people's everyday experiences of retail space. Chapter Three will therefore introduce and explore alternative literature which may provide additional insights on these issues of concern.

CHAPTER THREE

FROM 'SERVICESCAPES' TO 'EXPERIENCESCAPES'

3.1 Introduction

Chapter Two provided an introduction and overview to research that has explored the impact of the retail environment on consumer behaviour as well as literature in the fields of geography and anthropology. This chapter explores alternative contributions from the literature that may offer further insights into consumers' consumption experiences and interactions in the retail space. The chapter begins by presenting studies that have explored the dimensions of experiential consumption across a range of settings and activities. This is followed by research on creating retail brand experiences and retail theatre. The chapter then draws on alternative concepts of persuasion knowledge and literacy to illustrate the role of the consumer as an active audience. Focusing more specifically on consumers' interaction with retail brands, literature on consumer brand relationships and the role that brands play in the construction of identity are then discussed. The importance of the social context in which brands are consumed is highlighted with reference to literature on communities of consumption and postmodern tribes. The chapter concludes by exploring issues of the postmodern consumer of space and introduces concepts of 'linking value', space appropriation and re-appropriation.

3.2 Experiential Consumption

In recent years there has been a new wave of interest in exploring the issues related to the consumption experience both in academic (e.g. Falk and Campbell, 1997), and industry contexts (Pine and Gilmore, 1998;1999; Schmitt, 1999ab; Payne, 2000). However, the notion of experiential consumption is not new as there has been a relatively long tradition in marketing and consumer research concerned with identifying and understanding consumers' experiences across a broad range of

consumption contexts. One of the earliest and most comprehensive conceptual contributions to our understanding of the consumption experience is the 'experiential consumption' research agenda established by Holbrook and Hirschman (1982). In contrast to traditional consumer decision making models which regard the consumption experience as an information processing event (Nicosia, 1966; Engel et al., 1968; Howard and Sheth, 1969) these authors argue consumption is phenomenological in spirit

'a subjective state of consciousness with a variety of symbolic meanings, hedonic responses and esthetic criteria...involving a steady flow of fantasies, feelings and fun' (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982;132).

Research has explored the nature of consumers' experiences across a broad array of consumption events and activities such as an appreciation of music and dance (Lacher, 1989; Golding et al., 2001), the movies and arts (Cooper-Martin, 1991;1992; Duhaime et al., 1995), leisure activities such as sky diving, white water river rafting and rock climbing (Celsi et al., 1993; Arnould and Price, 1993; Ewert and Hollenhorst, 1994), and games and gambling (Holbrook et al., 1984; Cotte, 1997). Studies specifically exploring shopping processes and activities have focused on the dichotomy of shopping as an instrumental versus hedonic¹ activity, or 'shopping as work' and 'shopping as recreation' (Babin et al., 1994; Crowley et al, 1992; Batra and Ahtola, 1991; Prus and Dawson, 1991). Recent research however emphasises the importance of shopping as a pleasurable personal and social activity which includes various playful leisure activities, sensory pleasures, daydreams and emotional responses (Falk and Campbell, 1997). Other studies have examined various consumption processes at the point of sale such as browsing behaviour (Bloch and Richins 1983; Bloch, Ridgeway and Sherrell, 1989), impulse buying (Rook and Hoch, 1985), and compulsive shopping (Elliot, 1994).

¹ Hedonic Consumption relates to the multi-sensory, fantasy, and emotive aspects of one's experience with products where 'multi-sensory' means 'the receipt of experience in multiple sensory modalities including tastes, sounds, tactile impressions and visual images' (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982;92)

The majority of research in this area however has focused on classifying and defining the elements or dimensions of the experience. While many studies have explored the hedonic and emotional dimensions (Ahtola, 1985; Havlena and Holbrook, 1986; Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982; Richins, 1997; Westbrook and Oliver, 1991), other literature has provided a broader appreciation of the range of different experiences consumers enjoy. For instance, Hirschman and Holbrook (1986) provide a conceptual definition of general types of consumption experience in their Thought-Emotion-Activity-Value (T-E-A-V) model. In this model the consumption experience itself emerges from three mutually reinforcing concepts of personal, environmental and situational as 'thought' (including dreaming, imagining, and fantasising), 'emotion' (involving diverse types of feelings, expressive behaviours and physiological responses), 'activity' (including physical and mental events relating to both action and reaction), and 'value' (pertaining to evaluative judgements in consumption). Lofman (1991) also identifies six similar elements of experiential consumption including 'setting', 'sensation', 'thought' 'feeling', 'activity' and 'evaluation'.

Building on the concept of experiential value developed by Hirschman and Holbrook (1986), Mathwick et al (2001) have recently developed the experiential value scale (EVS). This involves four dimensions of value including consumer return on investment (perception of affordable quality and utility derived from encounter), service excellence (expertise and task related performance), aesthetics (visual appeal and entertainment in the service environment), and playfulness (escapism and fantasy). The authors state that the defining distinction between playfulness and aesthetic appeal is the active role the consumer adopts as the exchange experiences is elevated to play. In this context the customer crosses the line from spectator and a distanced appreciation of aesthetic appeal, to participant and co-producers of value.

Recently Schmitt (1999a b) has offered a framework to help organisations design and manage these customer experiences more effectively. The framework bears a resemblance to the models outlined above. However, it focuses on two key concepts namely strategic experience modules (SEMs) and experience providers (ExPros).

Five distinct types of experiences or SEMs are identified that marketers can create for customers. These include sensory experiences (SENSE), affective experiences (FEEL), creative cognitive experiences (THINK), physical experiences, behaviours and lifestyles (ACT), and social-identity experiences that result from relating to a reference group or culture (RELATE). These experiences are implemented through experience providers (ExPros) which are the ‘tactical implementation components’ at the disposal of the marketer for creating a sense, feel, think, act or relate campaign. They include communications, visual and verbal identity, product presence, co-branding, spatial environments, electronic media and people’ (Schmitt, 1999b;72). An ‘Experiential Grid’ (figure 3.1) with the SEMs and the ExPros can be constructed which Schmitt (1999) argues is the key planning tool of experiential marketing.

Figure 3.1 The Experiential Grid

	Communication	Identities	Products	Co-branding	Environment	Web sites	People
Sense							
Feel							
Think							
Relate							
Act							

**Strategic Planning
of
Experiential Marketing**

Source: Schmitt, B. (1999b) Experiential Marketing. New York: Free Press, p74.

From this grid it is proposed that managers can decide which ExPros should be used to create which SEM in order to define the experiential image of the organisation

and/or brand appropriately². However, it is argued that experiential appeals rarely result in only one type of experience, consequently experiential hybrids can be employed that combine two or more SEMs in order to broaden the experiential appeal. The goal of experiential marketing is therefore to create holistically integrated experiences that possess sense, feel, think, act and relate qualities simultaneously.

Schmitt's model therefore illustrates that consumption experiences are diverse and complex processes but also emphasises the interdependency among its constructs. More importantly, these definitions also illustrate the role of the physical space or designed environment as one element affecting an individual's consumption experience. This model of experiential consumption therefore appears to offer a potentially useful and rich conceptual basis to develop our understanding of consumers' experience of retail design space. However, there are two main areas of concern. Firstly, although the spatial environment is acknowledged as an important experience provider, little understanding of the nature of these experiences is given. For example, while Schmitt emphasises the importance of creating 'experiential spaces', referring to examples such as Niketown and Warner Brothers, he omits any discussion of how these spaces have used different experiential appeals. Secondly, the model has a strong managerial focus which emphasises how companies can develop, manage and control consumers' experiences. Little understanding of the consumers' perspective and role they play in these consumption experiences is offered. Furthermore, Holbrook (2000) has criticised the model for strongly paralleling the experiential consumption 'fantasies feelings and fun' framework (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982) thereby failing to produce any further insights on these dimensions of experience.

² The author cites an example of the use of the Sense SEM and the communication ExPro in the re-launch of Clairol Herbal Essences Shampoo. In contrast to conventional claims the product would promote beautiful, shiny hair the advertising campaign promoted the experience of using the product with the slogan 'a totally organic experience'.

Overall interest in the consumption experience, or what has been referred to as 'consumption phenomenology' (Hetzl, 1995a), marks a significant shift in focus in the literature from an emphasis on the purchasing context to an interest in the consumption process (Belk, 1995). Schmitt (1999) argues that today's consumers are becoming more demanding and are no longer content with functional features and benefits, product quality, and a positive brand image. Rather, the author argues, consumers desire products, communications, and marketing campaigns that 'dazzle their senses, touch their hearts and stimulate their minds' (Schmitt, 1999a;57). He states that consumers want to be 'stimulated, entertained, educated and challenged' and are looking for brands that provide them with experiences and thus become part of their lives' (1999b;32). Pine and Gilmore, (1998; 1999) propose that this perspective represents not only an entirely new approach in marketing but also to business as a whole. Indeed the authors argue that we are now living in an 'experience economy' in which experiences have emerged as the next step in the 'progression of economic value'. The competitive battlefield lies not just in 'selling services' but rather in 'staging rich and compelling experiences' (Pine and Gilmore, 1999;25). It is to the creation and staging of these retail brand experiences and the concept of 'retail theatre' that we now consider.

3.3 Retail Brand Experiences

Experiences have always been at the heart of the entertainment business – a fact that Walt Disney and the company he founded have creatively exploited. But today the concept of selling an entertainment experience is taking root in businesses far removed from theatres and amusement parks (Pine and Gilmore, 1998; p99)

Creating exciting, rewarding and memorable 'brand experiences' which encourage jaded consumers to spend time emotionally engaged with a brand has become the current marketing buzz word and objective (Brown, 2001; Ardill, 2000). The staging and purchase of experiences in the marketplace is not a new concept; creating enjoyable experiences has always been an integral part of the entertainment and leisure industry. Examples include Disney's theme parks and the Warner Brothers Studios. However, with the development of Disney and Warner Brothers stores the

concept of providing unique experiences has spread beyond the entertainment industry and has moved into the realm of retail thereby blurring of the boundaries between retail and leisure. According to Shields (1992b) these modern consumption sites are therefore characterised by a new spatial form which is a synthesis of leisure and consumption.

Retailers have long acknowledged the importance of the retail design space not just as an effective tool for building and reinforcing their overall brand image but in generating store differentiation, customer loyalty and ultimately profitability and performance (Birtwistle, Clarke and Freathy, 1999). Retailers are striving to find new and exciting ways of promoting and selling their products and as a result 'a need for well designed environments has become increasingly important' (Din, 2000; 6). This is something that major leisure brands such as Nike have recognised in the development of the 'Niketown' concept. This 'sports theme park' is more than a retail establishment or shopping space and has been described as an 'interactive museum or information centre on sports' (Schmitt and Simonson, 1997;282). Indeed Sherry (1998a) describes the store as a

'paean to design which crosscuts genres of experience to evoke in consumers a range of synergistic thoughts, emotions and behaviours that encourage active engagement with its servicescape' (p 110).

As retail spaces such as Niketown are conceived and built there has been a call for more empirical research to acknowledge the wide diversity of 'new retail' spaces and formats (Din, 2000), and 'new landscapes of consumption' (Lowe and Wrigley, 1996) that now exist. For instance, Lowe and Wrigley (1996) describe retail spaces targeted at the 'captured' consumer such as airports, hospitals and office complexes as well as the opportunity to pursue the 'leisured' consumer in stores like Walt Disney and Warner Brothers. Longmore (1994) also comments on the rise of football club superstores 'crammed with everything from club duvets, to gnomes, aftershave, jeans, teddy bears and mountain bikes'. The author comments 'these stores boast the loyalty that other retail brands would die for' (p27). The last decade has also seen the rise of retail 'flagship' stores such as the 'Dr Marten's Department store' in

Covent Garden London and the Donna Karan store in Bond Street which sells DKNY mineral water, New York bagels and New England cheesecake.

These retail spaces, 'three-dimensional adverts', 'brand museums' (Marketing, 1997), 'brand cathedral's' (Marketing, 2000), or 'brandsapes' (Sherry, 1998a) immerse contemporary consumers in a brand's imagery allowing them to 'lose' themselves in the ultimate 'own label' experience. This immersion, Firat and Schultz (1997; p 189) argue, create a 'simulated', 'hyper-real', or sensational experience which 'stimulates the imagination' and 'excites and titillates the senses'. The shopping experience itself becomes an escape from the real world where the prime commodity, Sack (1992) argues, is the actual experience of these commodified landscapes.

The association in these new consumption landscapes of product and place identity is profound (Lowe and Wrigley, 1996). Indeed Hetzel (1995b) argues that the retail environment has therefore become more than just the physical setting or stage for the display of products, rather it has become the product itself providing the context where meaning is continually emplaced in consumers' experiences (Sherry, 1998b). Consumers therefore return to retail spaces or reject them in favour of another not simply on the basis of the product offering or price, but rather on more complex dimensions or criteria. Retail spaces need to be better conceptualised and understood not as servicescapes or brandscapes but perhaps as experiential spaces or 'experiencescapes'.

3.4 Retail Theatre

'the challenge is to create/invent new kinds of retail environments that are both efficient (in terms of space, flexibility and cost) and effective (to communicate the retailers brand values and encourage consumer activity) in order to meet ever tougher consumer demands' (Din, 2000; 10)

The role of retail design is gradually being transformed from one of 'retail engineering' where the focus was very much on the functional dimensions of space

creating solutions to physical problems, to one of 'retail theatre', brand communication or 'experiential communication' (Klein, 2000). These design issues are now being considered at a strategic level and are being applied to every dimension of the retail operation from point of sale and advertising to visual merchandising and store interior. Retailers are therefore making powerful statements to the consumer that they hope will ultimately reinforce the values of the brand.

The retail theatre metaphor has been enthusiastically embraced as a way of creating new consumer interest in stores and as a means of differentiation in an increasingly competitive marketplace. Indeed an increasing number of retailers appear to be using theatrical terms in statements about their offers (Harris, et al 2001), as well as supporting the use of theatrical tools and techniques to enable the delivery of 'distinctive preference building experiences' (Carbone, 1999;7). For example Baron et al., (2000) recently conducted a study of theatrical terminology used in retailing in which they identify a variety of retailers drawing on the retail theatre metaphor.

'The store was built as a theatre, where consumers are the audience participating in the production' (Niketown, Chicago)

'This is part of retail theatre, and will become the new way to sell electrical goods...retail theatre allows the customer to touch, feel and experience the product...when you walk into this store, it's like being in Disneyland. You have the 'wow' factor and shopping is fun'. (Comet, UK)

'...little girls want shops where they can browse through products designed to appeal to them...they increasingly see shopping as a form of play. This is retail theatre'. (Girl Heaven, UK)

The authors separated these specific claims into three interrelated themes. Firstly, there is a desire to create an elaborate theatrical physical environment in store, recognising the flexibility of the design setting. Secondly, there is an emphasis on fun, excitement and entertainment. Thirdly, there is a desire to encourage greater audience/customer participation in the performance. The authors suggested that this might take the form of knowledge sharing as well as active engagement in activities such as trying out and playing with cosmetics and accessories in the Girl Heaven store.

In terms of the retail space, one very important part of creating retail theatre has been a move towards appealing to consumers' 'aesthetic needs' (Schmitt and Simonson, 1997) through a variety of sensory experiences. Schmitt (1999b;100) argues that it is often the sensory experience that attracts a customer to an organisation or brand and that needs to be considered in strategic decisions. The power of 'sensory retailing' (Din, 2000;80) has been recognised by many retailers. Flowers and perfumery departments located at the entrances of stores and in-store bakeries all emit smells which are powerful, instantly recognisable and tempt the consumer to buy. Many retailers have also recognised the potential value of artificially dispersing pleasant smells into stores while in-store television, video walls and music are more established ways of seeking to excite customers interest.

Although there have been many studies dedicated to measuring the impact of these individual senses in isolation (Chapter two, section 2.2.1), Hetzel (1995ab) emphasises the importance of examining the consumer's five senses as a whole, preserving their synesthetic or global impression. Drawing on the example of the Polo Ralph Lauren store in Paris, Hetzel (1995a) illustrates how the consumer's five senses can converge to give the overall impression of a 'homely', 'warm' space. This impression is created by the rooms furnished as they would in someone's home with cabinets, paintings, armchairs and wardrobes full of clothes. The smells in the store are natural scents such as the perfume of flowers, wood and leather while carpets muffle the footsteps and noise in the space.

Similarly Hetzel (1995b) describes the case of Nature and Decouvertes³. This retail environment is designed around five major themes intended to appeal simultaneously to all of the consumer's five senses. The themes and elements at the point of sale include 'abundance' (demonstrated by a large product range and number of products on display), 'magic' (diffusing light creating the atmosphere of a forest clearing, natural fragrance, fountains, fresh flowers), 'the awakening' (product carrying education information, assistants dressed as mountain guides), 'authenticity' (décor

³ Nature and Decouvertes is a French company selling a wide array of products that are connected with nature such as rucksacks for hikers, maps and decorative objects.

containing natural materials – wood, leather, plants, flowers), and ‘simplicity’ (lighting and product display). Hetzel (1995b) argues that while these themes and elements can be considered individually, collectively they make up a meaning system and a feeling of ‘nature rediscovered’, an experience whereby the individual becomes ‘at one with nature’.

Recent research has also highlighted the role of service employees as an increasingly important element of the consumer’s ‘aesthetic experience’ (Warhurst and Nickson, 2001). Although previous research (Chapter two, section 2.4) explored the interpersonal dimensions of the service encounter, Lowe and Crewe (1996) argue that there is a need to consider the ‘qualitative elements’ of employees role in the encounter which, they state, are often ignored in these traditional empirical studies. For instance, they have addressed the issue of image in retail employment suggesting that consumers want to be served by people who are like them. Hence there are certain retail employers who consider youth and ethnicity, for example, to be important attributes (Lowe and Crewe, 1996).

Warhurst and Nickson (2001), in their research of the ‘style’ labour market, have highlighted that companies are increasingly selecting employees on the basis of their ‘aesthetic skills’ over and above their aptitude or prior retail work experience. These aesthetic skills are characterised as their interpersonal skills and physical appearance or dispositions including language and dress code, manner, style, shape and size of body. They suggest that the capacity of employees to ‘look good and sound right’ has become a highly marketable asset for employers. In this way service employees have become reconfigured as organisational ‘human hardware’ or ‘physical capital’ intended to create commercial benefit. Therefore just as Hetzel (1995b) has argued the physical retail space has become the product itself, Warhurst and Nickson (2001) argue that people have become part of the retail product and experience too.

The research that has been presented thus far has focused on how organisations have attempted to position and manage their retail brand experiences. While some work has focused on measuring dimensions of the experience (e.g Hirschman and

Holbrook, 1986), research has not gone far enough in considering the active role played by consumers in constructing and managing their own experiences in the retail space. This is in line with Urry (1995;1) who states that places themselves can be 'consumed' as a 'sense of place' is not something that is given or static rather it is something that is constructed by the consumer. The following sections will therefore now turn to literature offering insights and perspectives on the nature and role of the active audience.

3.5 An Active Audience

Literature beyond consumer behaviour, retailing, and marketing has the potential to offer new insights or areas of research interest previously not considered within these subject areas of our discipline. The section begins by introducing the concept of persuasion knowledge. This emphasises the active role played by consumers in identifying, evaluating and responding to marketers' persuasion attempts. The second section draws on research in advertising where the concept of literacy has presented consumers as active meaning makers able to read, understand and interpret advertising texts.

3.5.1 Persuasion Knowledge

The concept of persuasion knowledge suggests that over time consumers develop personal knowledge about the tactics used by marketers in persuasion attempts. This knowledge, attained from everyday social encounters, observations and media commentary, helps individuals identify how, when and why marketers try to influence them. It also helps consumers to adaptively respond to these persuasion attempts so as to achieve their own goals (Friestad and Wright, 1994). In contrast to Schmitt's managerial focus, the concept of persuasion knowledge concentrates on the role of the 'active' consumer and their perceptions of the marketing stimuli used in these persuasion attempts.

Friestad and Wright (1994) present the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) to help describe how consumers' persuasion knowledge influences their responses to persuasion attempts⁴. The model uses the term 'cope' to describe how consumers respond to a persuasion attempt. The authors argue that consumers are active, resourceful individuals who pursue their own goals and are able to select 'response tactics' from their own repertoire similar to how marketers select persuasion tactics. This does not assume that individuals will necessarily resist a persuasion attempt, rather it is suggested that their main goal is to maintain control over the outcome(s). Friestad and Wright (1994) state that for consumers, 'persuasion coping behaviour' encompasses not only their cognitive and physical actions during a persuasion attempt, but also their behaviour in anticipation and after a persuasion episode. Expectations and memories about persuasion are therefore an important resource to consumers.

The authors argue that individuals access persuasion knowledge under several different conditions. Firstly, when individuals want to understand 'topic knowledge', which consists of beliefs about the topic of the message (e.g. when evaluating claims about a product or service). Secondly, 'agent knowledge', which consists of beliefs about the traits, competencies and goals of the persuasion agent (e.g. an advertiser or salesperson). Lastly, 'persuasion knowledge' when consumers are interested in thinking about the way in which ads or marketing stimuli are constructed. This persuasion knowledge then enables consumers to

'recognise, analyse, interpret, evaluate and remember persuasion attempts and to select and execute coping tactics believed to be effective and appropriate' (Friestad and Wright, 1994;3).

Persuasion knowledge includes consumers beliefs about marketers' motives, strategies and tactics; the effectiveness and appropriateness of persuasion tactics; psychological mediators of tactic effectiveness; and ways of coping with persuasion

⁴ Friestad and Wright (1994) use the term 'persuasion attempt' (rather than advertising, sales presentation or message) to describe a consumer's perception of a marketers strategic behaviour in presenting information designed to influence an individual's beliefs, attitudes, decisions or actions.

attempts. These coping tactics or strategies might be the ability to disengage and re-engage themselves during an persuasion attempt, the ability to ignore persuasion attempts or select parts to focus on, or defer the use of persuasion knowledge until the attempt has ended.

While the notion of persuasion knowledge has been used to examine advertising persuasion attempts (Boush et al., 1994, Friestad and Wright, 1995), it has also recently been applied in evaluating the influence of a salesperson in a retail setting (Campbell and Kirmani, 2000). The authors suggest that persuasion knowledge is used when consumers draw an inference that a persuasion motive may underlie a salesperson's behaviour. These motive inferences then affect perceptions of the salesperson.

The concept of persuasion knowledge may therefore be useful in considering how consumers interpret and evaluate a whole range of persuasion attempts in the retail space as well as illustrating how consumers develop their own coping strategies and response tactics. Having looked at the role of the active consumer in the persuasion knowledge model, the following section will now turn to discuss the concept of literacy in an attempt to explore how consumers read and interpret visual texts.

3.5.2 Consumer Literacy

The notion of literacy has received a great deal of attention in recent years both in the post-modern literature (e.g. Firat and Venkatesh, 1993) but particularly in the field of advertising research (e.g. Ritson and Elliot, 1995ab). The term literacy has traditionally been understood as the ability to read and understand texts however it has been increasingly recognised that the mass media, music, art and even ads can be treated as texts to be read (Fairclough, 1995). Early accounts of literacy focused on it as a set of skills and competencies that an individual acquires to become literate, consequently many accounts have equated the term 'literacy' with consumer sophistication (O'Donohoe and Tynan, 1998). However more recent theories drawn from the field of literacy studies (e.g. Heath, 1983; Scribner and Cole, 1981; Street,

1984) have suggested that an understanding of literacy is far more complex and advocate the need to focus on the social uses to which literacy is put. Ritson and Elliott (1995) argue that a definition of literacy cannot be achieved without first observing to what particular purpose the understanding of the text will be put, and under what cultural influences that process occurs.

The concept of literacy has been used extensively in the field of advertising research. Scott (1994) has argued that advertising texts, as the 'literature of consumption', form an extremely rich and complex signifying system in which the notion of literacy may be particularly useful. The advertising literacy literature conceptualises advertising as 'texts' to be read where consumers are actively involved in the construction and negotiation of advertising meanings (O'Donohoe, 2000:151). Ritson and Elliott (1995a; 1036) indeed argue that advertising audiences are not

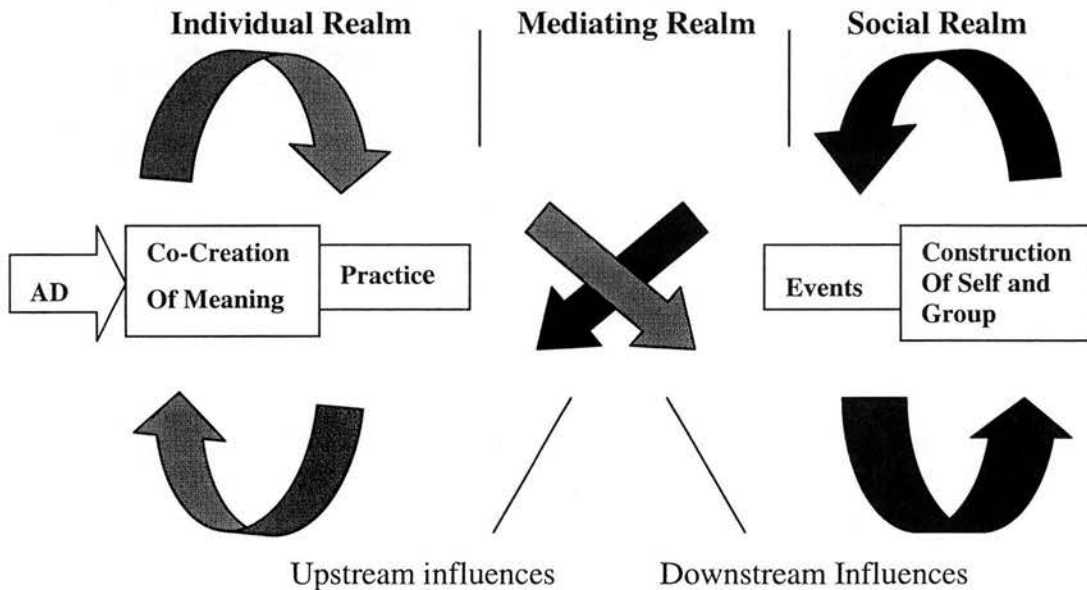
'passive, homogeneous receivers of ads containing prespecifiable, intended meanings but are active co-creators of meaning who display an ability to read, co-create and then act on polysemic meanings from ads that they view'

This suggests that consumers not only have a good working knowledge of how advertising works and are adept at 'decoding' advertising meanings, but also that they are active 'co-creators' of meaning. The authors present a model of advertising literacy based on contemporary literacy studies (Ritson and Elliott, 1995a). From this perspective the ability to 'read' an ad is not simply based on understanding its meaning but also the ability to apply that understanding by using those meanings within a social context (Ritson and Elliott, 1995b). Their model distinguishes between advertising literacy practices and advertising literacy events (see figure 3.2).

Literacy practices refer to the skills and uses surrounding the 'reading' of different ads. Advertising 'skills' refer to how an advert is read by consumers. This might refer to an individual's ability to recognise the motivations of advertisers or the ability to remember and understand advertising after exposure. Advertising 'uses' explores not simply how an advert is read but to what use that reading is put. For instance, ads could be used as a means of controlling or initiating interactions with

others. The circular arrows on the model represent the constant flow of meaning revolving around the reception of advertising – the co-creation and potential fluidity of advertising meanings.

Figure 3.2 A Model of Advertising Literacy



Source: Ritson, M and Elliott, R (1995a) 'A Model of Advertising Literacy: The Praxiology and Co-creation of Advertising Meaning in Marketing Today and for the 21st Century': Proceedings of the 24th Annual Conference of the European Marketing Academy, (Ed.) Bergadaa, M. et al. ESSEC, Cergy-Pointoise, France: Imprimerie Basuyau, p1039.

Literacy events represent the social interactions that surround the reading of ads and how these are used to construct both self and group identities. Again there is a constant, circular flow of meaning. However this time the meaning centres not on the reception of the ad and the uses (practices) to which it will be put, but is driven instead by the social consumption of advertising meanings (events). In this way meanings circulate and alter as individuals engage in advertising discourses with others in their social group. The connection between the individual and the social realm lies in the mediating realm where the two combine and interact.

The authors argue that the advertising audience is encouraged intentionally and unintentionally to co-create meaning from the texts they read. They propose several

ways in which ads may be 'weak' texts and 'advertising audiences' are 'strong' readers. They argue that weak texts are those which encourage meaning co-creation and 'hermeneutic endeavour'. Ads can be seen to have 'gaps' that encourage the reader to derive their own meanings from the text which may or may not be in line with the intended meanings of the author. Alternatively, advertising audiences can be seen to be 'strong readers' of the text whereby they choose to read the text differently by organising, selecting and connecting different aspects of the text to the ones proposed by the author. In this way the model illustrates that it is the active and creative advertising audience that is the engine powering this constant flow of meaning.

The social and cultural dimensions of advertising consumption, particularly in the young, has been demonstrated in several studies. In their 'meaning based model of advertising experiences' Mick and Buhl (1992) looked at three Danish brothers and compared how their readings and interpretations of ads could be understood within the context of their individual life histories and life worlds. O'Donohoe and Tynan (1998;472) also report on a study exploring young adults' advertising literacy. The study found that literacy could be categorised into three broad groupings, each of which allowed consumers to adopt particular roles in relation to advertising texts. These groupings were 'competent consumers' who demonstrated a sophisticated appreciation of advertising conventions, styles and trends. 'Surrogate strategists' who were able to draw on the industries language and concepts, discussing advertising objectives and guessing the intentions behind particular ads and campaigns. Lastly 'casual cognoscenti', who were sensitive to production values, often used specialist terms to describe ads and discussed the techniques and costs involved in the making of ads. Furthermore Willis (1990) has described how teenagers use ads as 'tokens in social exchange' and Bauman (1990 cited in Ritson and Elliott, 1995a) suggests that it may be possible to note the use of advertising meanings as 'neo-tribe paraphernalia' in the creation and maintenance of subcultural groups, united by a similar advertising literacy.



This section has introduced and described the notion of literacy within the context of how consumers read, interpret and understand advertising texts. Drawing on a model of advertising literacy, it has illustrated that consumers are not passive recipients of these advertising texts; rather they are active co-creators who derive their own meanings from the ads that they view. The literature thus far has focused on consumers' experiences of advertising. The following sections will consider the implications of an active audience perspective for consumers' interactions with retail brands.

3.6 Consumers and Brands

Brands have traditionally been defined as a 'distinguishing name, logo or symbol intended to identify a product or service' (AMA, 1960). However, more recent literature has emphasised the multi-dimensional nature of the brand construct (e.g. Kapferer, 1997; Aaker, 1997). For example in a content analysis of the branding literature De Chernatony and Dall'Olmio Riley (1998) identified twelve main themes which represented the repertoire of metaphors used to define this elusive construct. These ranged from the brand as 'logo', 'asset', and 'risk reducer' to the brand as 'value system', 'personality', and 'relationship'. However, De Chernatony and Dall'Olmio Riley (1998) argue that although the company is very much in control of the brand image and personality that is projected, existing and potential customers make their own interpretation of this which may or may not be consistent with the way the organisation had intended. This is supported by a recent study of menswear fashion retailers by Birtwistle et al., (1999) who examined the degree of congruence between retailer and customer perceptions of store image. The authors demonstrated that there was a significant difference in the composition and importance of attributes of store image between customers and retailers. This included differences based on dimensions such as product selection, quality and price as well as service, store layout and design. Consequently the authors suggested an understanding of how companies could improve the retailing mix stems from the evaluation of consumers' attitudes towards the store image and brand.

The following sections therefore focus on exploring and understanding how consumers themselves interpret and experience these brands. This begins with a discussion on consumer brand relationships and the role that brands play as a symbolic resource in the construction and maintenance of identity. The section then introduces the notion of communities of consumption and postmodern tribes which highlight the importance of interactions with other users of the brand as part of consumers experiences.

3.6.1 Brand Relationships

Relational principles are competing with transactional or exchange notions in marketing as organisations have increasingly acknowledged the need to nurture and maintain existing customers (Fournier, 1998). Relationship marketing has been heralded by some as the 'new paradigm' within marketing (Gronroos, 1994; Brodie et al., 1997) and has become 'embedded in the rhetoric and lexicon of marketing discourses' (Fitchett and McDonagh, 2000). However, it has been criticised for being 'powerful in theory but troubled in practice' (Fournier et al., 1998) because relationship ideas and the assumption of relationship benefits have been applied without the proper development of the core construct.

While the majority of research on relationship marketing has focused on business markets, there have been attempts to apply and evaluate the concept in consumer markets (Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995; Pine et al., 1995; Christy et al., 1996). These lines of enquiry have become the focus of some criticism. For instance, O'Malley and Tynan (1999) have questioned the extension of the relationship metaphor into consumer markets relating to its lack of accepted definition, fragmented and limited theory development and boundary-less domain. They argue that the majority of studies have focused on low involvement purchasing situations where there is little or no interpersonal interaction, such as f.m.c.g. products, white and brown goods and services such as supermarkets and petrol retailers. Consequently, due to the limited interpersonal interaction the ensuing relationship is not conceptualised as occurring between people but rather between the customer and the organisation.

Fournier's (1998) has also focused on relationship theory in consumer markets. She has emphasised the importance of exploring the demand-side issues as opposed to supply side issues by highlighting that consumers are also capable of discerning, and desiring, relationships with their brands. While acknowledging the importance of loyalty as a fertile relationship concept she states that research in this area has tended to focus on notions of repeat purchase and utilitarian decision making. She argues that this research therefore ignores many other potentially valuable and complex relationship forms that may characterise consumer brand bonds.

There have been other attempts to explore the notion of consumer-brand interactions in terms of building brand relationships (Blackston, 1993) and the meanings and value consumers take from brands (McCracken, 1993). However, Fournier (1998) has argued that current research falls short of developing a grounded and fully articulated relationship-based framework. As a result she has developed a framework for characterising and understanding the variety of relationships consumers form with a collectivity of brands that they know and use. Fifteen relationship forms were identified in total ranging from 'committed partnerships' involving strong loyalty and emotional attachment to a brand over time to interim 'courtships' and short-term, highly emotional 'flings' and high risk 'secret affairs' with brands.

The brand was therefore not conceived as a passive object of marketing transactions but rather an active contributing member of the relationship dyad in which they were animated, humanised or somehow personalised (Fournier, 1998; 344). Consumers were therefore not only very open and receptive to marketers' attempts to humanise brands but were also very active in personalising products and brands themselves suggesting a willingness to 'entertain brands as vital members of the relationship dyad' (Fournier, 1998; 345). It is the relationship or meaning derived by the consumer rather than the meaning intended by the organisation that is of particular concern in this study. The following sections will therefore explore the symbolic role that brands play in consumer's lives.

3.6.2 Brands and Identity

Over recent years there has been a vast theoretical literature dedicated to the subject of postmodernism and the postmodern consumer (Brown, 1995; Firat, and Venkatesh, 1993;1995; Thompson, 2000). Central to the notion of postmodernism is the recognition that the consumer does not make consumption choices solely from a product's utilities but also from its symbolic meanings (Belk, 1988; Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998; Gabriel and Lang, 1995). Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998) argue that the functions of the symbolic meanings of products operate in two directions: outward in constructing the social world, social-symbolism; and inward in constructing our self-identity, self-symbolism. The authors state that these meanings are then transferred onto brands and it is the brands that are often used as 'symbolic resources' for the construction and maintenance of identity. In this way Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998) argue that the self is conceptualised not as a given product of a social system nor as a fixed entity which the individual can simply adopt but as something the person actively creates, partially through the activity of consumption.

Clothing and fashion brands have long been recognised as key elements in young people's expression, exploration and making of their own individual and collective identities. Indeed Willis (1990) states that

...clothing still remains amongst the most visible forms of symbolic cultural creativity and informal artistry in people's lives in our common culture' (p85)

Willis (1990) argues that young people do not buy passively or uncritically but rather they transform the meaning of bought goods, appropriating and recontextualising mass market styles. He suggests that this appropriation entails a form of 'symbolic work' and 'creativity' as young consumers often reject the normative definitions and categories of 'fashion' promoted by the clothing industry, preferring to choose their own colours and styles and personalising their purchases. While Willis (1990) acknowledges the importance of fashion brands in reflecting subcultural affiliations or collective social identities, he suggests that clothes are also a crucial medium for

young people to explore their own individual identities. He argues that young people learn about their 'inner selves' by using fashion in their symbolic work to express and develop an understanding of themselves 'to signify who they are, and who they think they are' (p89). Clothes can therefore be used playfully for the pleasure of putting together a costume or fabricating an identity.

In commenting on the youth market and their relationship to fashion brands McGowan (2000) states that young identities have become more 'fluid and multifaceted' which he suggests has led to a 'hyper-individuated marketplace' (p37). As a result, McGowan argues, the youth market have become increasingly more difficult to pinpoint as their interactions and relationships to brands are continually developing as young peoples' values and attitudes change at these crucial transitional stages. This is in line with Firat and Shultz (1997; 191) who describe the emergence of 'bricolage' markets as a result of the loss of commitment to any single way of being. By this they mean that

'...consumers do not present a united, centred self and, therefore, set of preferences, but instead a jigsaw collage of multiple representations of selves and preferences even when approaching the same product category' (p191).

In light of some of these developments Valentine and Gordon (2000) suggest that there is a need to re-conceptualise the role of the 21st Century consumer and their relationship with brands. The authors provide a framework in which they identify and describe six different roles and meanings of 'the consumer'⁵ at the present time and trace the historical context of each. Despite their diversity, the authors argue that all of these models are similar as they assume that the consumer and the brand are fixed points in a fixed space and time which allows individuals to be targeted, segmented and controlled. They argue that this control model of the consumer is no longer appropriate for the 21st century as 'it is too rigid, too static, too concerned with stability and predictability and is framed in the past tense of 'what we

⁵ The six models include 'the marginalised consumer', 'the statistical consumer', 'the secretive consumer', 'the sophisticated consumer', 'the satellite consumer' and 'the multi-headed consumer'

know'(p194). Instead they propose a new model of the consumer and his/her relationship with brands and illustrate the power of the new model for meeting the marketing demands of the new millennium.

This new model of thinking confronts the notion that a consumer has an existing and defined identity and argues that the 21st century consumer continually constructs identities by entering into the process of consumption.

'Rather than being a person who we can get to know, and therefore control, 'the consumer' becomes temporary, precarious point of identity, which is ever-changing, ambiguous and unpredictable. We have called this the moment of identity' (p200)

The authors introduce the idea of consumer mutability and consumer stability which are two positions from which individuals continuously shift⁶. They argue that we achieve identity by inserting ourselves into a discourse which is made coherent by the cultural assumptions and meanings we share about the product field in which it is embedded. However, because the consumer is both mutable and stable, any identity we construct for ourselves is only temporary. The authors argue that consumers therefore shift identities using a vast repertoire or 'wardrobe' of brands. The brands within consumers' personal 'brandscapes' are then constantly invented and edited from the selection. Shields (1992b;15) states that identities are therefore being experimented with, 'browsed through' and 'tried on' in much the same way that individuals might shop for clothes.

The literature presented thus far has explored consumers' individual relationships with brands and the role that brands play in the construction and maintenance of identity. While reference has been made to the socially symbolic nature of these relationships, little attention has been given to the broader social context in which brands are consumed. McWilliam (1999) argues this constitutes a 'monologue not a

⁶ The authors argue that stable subjectivity is when we can see ourselves clearly in one identity or another. Mutable subjectivity is a dynamic process where meaning is not constant or objective rather the we are in a sense 'between identities'.

dialogue' ignoring other people involved in these interactions and relationships. The following section introduces the notion of communities of consumption in order to enhance our understanding of consumers' encounters with retail store brands.

3.6.3 Communities of Consumption

Previous research exploring consumer brand relationships have provided a number of interesting insights into role of brands in consumers' lives. However, studies have tended to focus on an individual level of analysis. Gainer and Fischer (1994;137) state that this focus 'stems from biases of our dominant perspectives and theories, where the goal of most consumer behaviour studies has been to explain how individual cognition, perception, or traits influence individual behaviour'. Several authors have argued that by pushing the boundaries beyond this individual level we can increase our understanding of consumer behaviour more generally (Cova, 1997; Ostergaard and Jantzen, 2000). The study of community and its relationship to consumption is one means of achieving this goal. By introducing the concept of community we are not only examining the one-to-one (dyadic) relationship between consumers and the brand but also a more dynamic and interactive relationship or alliance involving a network of users and consumers of the brand. This may be particularly important when exploring the relationship consumers have with fashion stores as individuals interact with store personnel and other customers in the retail space.

The notion of community has been of interest to human geographers for many years however, the concept has been interpreted loosely, and has been susceptible to a wide variety of meanings and assumptions about what the core elements may be. This has resulted in the term having a 'high level of use, but a low level of meaning' (Walmsley, 2000). One key element of the debate has been the nature of the bond between community members. Traditionally, community was conceptualised and defined by a common geographic locality

a relatively homogeneous human population, within a defined area, experiencing little mobility, interacting and participating in a

wide range of local affairs, and sharing an awareness of common life and personal bonds (Dalton and Dalton, 1975 cited in Walmsley, 2000;5)

However, there was a realisation that geographic communities are just as likely to be held together by shared interests, values and relations rather than propinquity (Walmsley, 2000). Consequently there was considerable agreement that 'any attempt to tie particular patterns of social relationships to specific geographic milieux is a singularly fruitless exercise' (Pahl, 1968 as cited in Fischer et al., 1996;178).

With the advent of new communication technologies, able to unite geographically dispersed individuals with a common purpose and identity, the notion or definition of community has again been fairly substantially debated in the literature (Armstrong and Hagel, 1996; Baym, 1998; Jones 1998; Fischer et al., 1996; Rheingold, 1993; Walmsley, 2000; McWilliam, 1999). Critics have argued that computer-mediated communities are not 'real communities' as they are based on choice, contain demographically similar members and can be exited easily (Lockard, 1997; Healy, 1997). Others have argued that communities *can* be created through consumption of technology and have demonstrated that virtually all of the hallmarks of a traditional geographic community can be simulated or replicated in a mass-mediated world (Fischer et al, 1996).

Anderson (1991) argues that in reality most communities, without face-to-face contact, are 'imagined communities'. They are imagined as members 'will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion' (Anderson, 1991; 6). While Anderson (1991) was referring primarily to issues of nationalism the concept alludes to a compelling notion of identity and sense of belonging whether the 'imagined community' is with a nation or with others who consume the same cultural products. However, Peck (1987 as cited in Jones, 1998) has criticised the notion of computer mediated communities suggesting that these are 'inauthentic' communities or 'pseudo-communities' where people lack the genuine personal commitments to one another that are common in traditional geographic communities.

Social scientists have long viewed consumption activities as potent symbolically charged practices that play a central role in the development and maintenance of community (Thompson and Holt, 1996). For instance, a number of consumption activities such as immersion in the spectacle of sport (Elias and Dunning, 1986), collecting (Belk et al., 1991), and membership of fan clubs (O'Guinn, 1991) all create affiliative bonds and a sense of shared purpose among individuals. Langman (1992 cited in Miles, 1998) contends that late twentieth-century shopping malls provide centres of social life, or 'pseudo-communities'. From this point, shopping malls provide consumers with a sense of community that is perhaps missing in the outside world. Similarly, Belk and Bryce (1993; 293) argue that

'we go to the mall to experience at least the illusion of community...we desire to escape the electronic sterility of our homes and join a human community even if it is a community in which we are anonymous actors...a community based on shared beliefs in the value of consumption and the shared communion of purchasing the same brands'

The notion of 'community' has also been introduced and explored in consumer research across different consumption contexts. McGrath, Sherry and Heisley (1993) have described the 'periodic community' in a farmers market which unites participants in an old fashioned market experience. Celsi et al (1993) has described skydivers' 'communal bond', while Arnould and Price (1993) comment on 'the communion' between individuals on a river-rafting expedition. Holt (1995) explains communal processes in relation to the sense of affiliation that emerges from the shared and ritualised experience of attending and watching baseball games and Gainer (1995) illustrates how individuals in attendance at live arts performances use the consumption event to define themselves as part of a 'collectivity' in which consumers join together 'in small worlds'. McAlexander and Schouten (1998) also report on community events and 'brandfests' of both Harley Davidson and Jeep brands which provide an opportunity for consumers to meet and share experiences, engendering a sense of community and belonging among participants. Although this research has focused on the concept of community in 'extraordinary' or 'spectacular' consumption settings perhaps these issues have some relevance or bearing on ordinary contexts. In particular these concepts may be useful to understand the

choices and experiences individuals have of high street fashion brands and brand spaces.

While the majority of studies exploring community and consumption in consumer research have focused attention on consumption settings in which members have been physically proximal to one another, more recent research has looked at communities that are distant or 'imagined'. Schouten and McAlexander (1995) conducted an ethnographic study of the 'new bikers' in which they explore the 'subcultures of consumption' involving Harley Davidson motorcycle riders. The authors describe how consumption activities, product categories and brands all serve as the basis for interaction and social cohesion among the riders. The connection with the brand becomes a way of life, so powerful as to be 'in effect, a religious icon, around which an entire ideology of consumption is articulated' (p50).

More recently Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) have introduced the notion of a 'Brand Community' which they define as 'a specialised, non-geographical bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand' (p412). Their study explored two brand communities in the USA namely Saab car owners and collectors and Macintosh computer users in both face-to-face and computer mediated environments. From this study the authors propose that there are three core components or definitions of a brand community including a 'consciousness of kind',⁷ 'shared rituals and traditions'⁸ and a 'sense of moral responsibility'⁹. Overall the authors propose that brand communities are legitimate forms of community which can form around any brand, but are probably most likely to form around brands with a strong image, a rich and lengthy history, threatening competition and those that are publicly consumed. They argue that such communities, due to the ubiquitous nature of brands

⁷ Consciousness of Kind is the intrinsic connection that members feel toward one another, and the collective sense of difference from others not in the community.

⁸ Shared Rituals and Traditions perpetuate the community's shared history, culture and consciousness and typically centre on shared consumption experiences with the brand.

⁹ A Sense of Moral Responsibility is a sense of duty or obligation to the community as a whole and to individual members of the community.

'may transcend geography and may include a multitude of consumer members. These social groups may be fairly stable and committed to both the brand and the group. They would be explicitly commercial and possess a mass-media sensibility' (p451).

Furthermore, the authors argue that brand communities are not homogeneous lifestyle segments or consumption constellations (Solomon and Englis, 1992). Here community is formed around one good or service, not many; they are explicitly 'commercial social collectives centred around a brand, not incidental contact with commercial space' (p426)

While the authors note many similarities with Schouten and McAlexander's (1995) study of Harley Davidson subculture (e.g. shared ethos, acculturation patterns, status hierarchies) they argue that there are also important differences. Firstly, they state the subculture is more unusual than brand communities in that it has a significant degree of marginality and an outlaw culture. Secondly, the authors argue that Schouten and McAlexander (1995) describe the brand as having a socially fixed meaning whereas, Muinz and O'Guinn (2001) conceptualise brand communities as having an active interpretive function, with brand meaning being socially negotiated. Lastly, Muinz and O'Guinn (2001) state that the authors tend to minimise the notion of collective identities in favour of the transformation of the self whereas they take a more social constructivist perspective.

In conclusion this section has introduced the concept of communities of consumption in order to illustrate the importance of social interactions and networks that are formed around consumption activities and brands. It is anticipated the emphasis on consumers' social interactions with other users of brands may help to understand consumers' experiences in retail settings. This may indeed underline the importance of community around place. Building on these themes the following section suggests we are living in 'the time of the tribes' (Maffesoli, 1996). In contrast to communities of consumption which are relatively stable in nature it is argued these neo-tribes better reflect the fluidity and multi-faceted nature of consumers' relationships to brands.

3.6.4 The Time of the Tribes

While there is some evidence of communities of consumption discussed in the previous section, this concept seems to contradict many of the ideas proposed in the post-modern literature which have emphasised individualism and the fragmentation of society (Firat and Venkatesh, 1993; Firat and Shultz, 1997). However, a number of authors have argued that there is now a reverse movement: a search for maintaining or (re)creating the social link (Maffesoli, 1996; Cova, 1997; Cova and Cova, 2001). Indeed it has been suggested that we are now experiencing the reaggregation of hyperindividualist society in the form of 'heterogeneous fragments', or what have been referred to as 'neo-tribes' (Maffesoli, 1996). These 'neo-tribes' are not tribes in the strict anthropological sense; rather they are 'marked by membership in a multiplicity of overlapping groups in which the roles individuals play become sources of identity which, like masks, provide temporary 'identifications' (Maffesoli, 1996;12). Cova (1997) argues these postmodern tribes are not necessarily communities defined in spatial terms, rather they are

'inherently unstable, small scale, affectual and not fixed by any of the established parameters of modern society; instead they can be held together through shared emotions, styles of life, new moral beliefs, senses of injustice and consumption practices symbolically and ritually manifested' (p300).

An example of these tribal gatherings might be the anti-corporate protests in Seattle, Prague and Genoa described by Klein (2000) or the Reclaim the Streets (RTS)¹⁰ campaigns held in the UK in the early to mid-nineties.

These tribes form, disperse and re-form as something else, reflecting the constantly shifting identities of postmodern consumers. Cova and Cova (2001b) contend that an

¹⁰ The RTS campaigns emerged in resistance to the criminal justice act of 1994 which gave police far-reaching powers to confront and close down raves in public spaces. Members of the club scene forged new alliances with other subgroups alarmed by new police powers such as squatters facing eviction, new age travellers and radical 'eco-warriors'. The common bond uniting these different groups was the right to uncolonised space – for homes, trees, gatherings and dancing (Klein, 2000;312).

individual can belong to several tribes simultaneously. However, within each tribe, members share strong emotional links and develop their own complexes of meanings and symbols that members can identify with. It is argued these signs or traces are both temporal and spatial in nature. In temporal terms these tribes 'emerge, grow, reach their zenith, languish then dissolve' such as during events and performances (Cova and Cova, 2001a;70). Tribes also exist and occupy space physically where members can

'gather and perform their rituals in public spaces assembly halls, meeting places, places of worship or commemoration. These spaces are 'anchoring places'...which provide a momentary home for the tribe' (Cova and Cova, 2001a;71).

A case study of French in-line roller skaters is presented to illustrate the notion of the tribe (Cova and Cova, 2001ab). The authors suggest that like all tribes, in-line skaters have their 'in groups' and 'out groups' in which the 'ins' share an experience which produces a bond and distinguishes them from others. It is suggested that this urban tribe is identifiable in a number of ways. For example members meet at local and national gatherings, public meetings and interact on specialist websites. The authors suggest that there are also more invisible signs of the tribe as individuals skate for leisure, as a means of transport or as a sport. This invisible side also incorporates individuals who are part of the in-line skating vogue who are perhaps not skaters but well informed individuals who can relate to the more active members of the tribe.

As individuals play different roles and wear different 'masks', the authors state neo-tribes virtually preclude segmentation. For instance Cova and Cova (2001b) argue that while tribes have some similarities to traditional notions of subcultures, reference groups and market segments there are also fundamental differences. For example they differ from subcultures as individuals can belong to more than one neo-tribe in contrast to sub-cultures which are relatively more constraining stable groupings. Tribes are not directly comparable with reference groups as they do not focus on the normative influences of the group or of individual group members on each other instead, tribes are concerned with the bonding or linking elements that

keep individuals in the group. Lastly neo-tribes differ from traditional market segments as

'a tribe is defined as a network of heterogeneous persons – in terms of age, sex, income, etc – who are interlinked by a shared passion or emotion. On the contrary, to the tribe, a segment is defined as a group of homogeneous persons – they share the same characteristics – who are not connected to each other.' (Cova and Cova, 2001a;69)

Postmodern tribes are similar to brand communities, discussed in section 3.6.3, in the sense that both are structured around the consumption of products, brands and services however several differences also exist. Firstly, neo-tribes tend to be conceived as interpersonal and local in contrast to brand communities which are seen as 'liberated from geography'. Secondly, brand communities are explicitly commercial social collectives that are 'informed by a mass-mediated sensibility' (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001;415). The authors argue that this is not a secret or naïve commercialism but rather is very transparent with communal self-awareness and self-reflexivity.

'late twentieth-century consumers are very aware of the commercial milieu in which they live, and are more comfortable in their level of grounding than modernist tradition has been willing to grant. The postmodern consumer is in fact quite self aware and self-reflective about issues of authenticity and identity' (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001;415)

Lastly, neo-tribes are temporary groupings 'characterised by fluidity, occasional gatherings and dispersal' (Maffesoli, 1996;76) in contrast to brand communities which are stable communities with relatively strong degrees of commitment.

Building on the work of Maffesoli, (1996), Cova (1997) argues that consumers are less interested in the objects of consumption than in the social links and identities that accompany them. Consequently it is maintained that consumers seek products and services less for their 'use value' than for their 'linking value' to other members in the tribe where 'the link is more important than the thing' (Cova, 1999). While there has been limited empirical support for the existence of these neo-tribes it is

proposed that these themes may be useful in exploring consumers' experiences with retail store brands. In particular it is the potential 'linking value' of the retail space that is of interest in this study. As such the following sections will discuss these themes in relation to postmodern consumers of space.

3.7 Post Modern Consumers of Space

The literature on communities of consumption and postmodern tribes has emphasised the importance of consumers' social interactions and experiences around consumption activities and brands. However missing from these discussions has been the role of the physical space as part of these retail brand experiences. This section focuses on previous research that has made specific reference to consumers' interaction with the servicescape. It begins with a discussion of the importance of the notion of the 'linking value' of the servicescape. The concepts of space appropriation and re-appropriation are then introduced and discussed. In line with the concepts of persuasion knowledge and literacy presented in section 3.5, these themes suggest that consumers are not just passive participants but rather are considered to be active meaning makers in the space.

3.7.1 The 'Linking Value' of the Servicescape

Aubert-Gamet and Cova (1999) suggest that notions of 'communities of consumption' and the 'new tribalism' necessitate a redefinition of the role and value of the servicescape as 'modern atmospherics moves into a postmodern mist' (p38). In order to examine whether the servicescape can support the social link the authors trace the history of service places from the traditional market as a meeting place, a site of communications and social exchange to other 'common places' such as the local shop, pub and wash house. These places were often perceived as extensions of the home and privileged places for the exercise of the social link. These 'common places' are contrasted sharply with the 'non-places' of the modern world in which individuals are anonymous actors characterised by 'disembodied service

experiences'. The authors argue that postmodern individuals are therefore desperately searching for linking value

'the individual after having tasted the ambiguous fruits of liberty and solitary consumption in huge depersonalising modern megapolises, is searching for the meaning he/she can give to his or her life through shared emotion with others. The modern individual wanted to be liberated from others rather than a postmodern individual who wishes to form links with others' (p39)

The authors propose that service places do not necessarily isolate but can on the contrary become 'vectors of communion' or 'poles of attraction for postmodern tribes' (p40). In this way the physical environment itself assumes a facilitating role by encouraging and nurturing certain forms of social interaction among customers (Aubert-Gamet and Cova, 1999). This clearly illustrates the importance of understanding the consumption and meaning of physical spaces beyond the product brand.

The authors argue that these linking places can be divided into 'closed' and 'open' places. Closed places are described as 'anchoring places' reserved or restricted for certain 'tribes' for instance fashionable places such as night clubs that serve as 'identity markers' for gangs of teenagers. In contrast, open places, such as laundrettes, cafes, it is stated, represent 'exposure places' with limited risk. There individuals are neither at home nor feel like they are in the home of others.

The literature is littered with examples of the social nature of shopping and the linking value of different service spaces such as shopping centres which Shields (1992) argues have been 'diverted from their initial commercial function by postmodern tribes to become privileged places of communication and communion'. However, Aubert-Gamet and Cova, (1999) argue that in spite of these claims and perhaps as a result of their high frequentation, these spaces actually resemble 'non-places' in which individuals are still anonymous and invisible to others. They therefore argue that there is a need to some how create or restore the linking value in these non-places

'it is a matter of re-enchanting the disenchanting world of services born of modernity by removing from them a little transparency, rationality, and rigor, which prevent individuals from coming together'(p43).

For example the authors suggest that there is a need for organisations to move away from focusing narrowly on the functionality or 'use value' of the space to take account of the community dimension of the service experience. This dimension clearly transcends the narrow notion of consumer-employee interactions discussed in chapter two, to encompass all types of interactions in the servicescape such as interactions among and between customers in the retail space. Aubert-Gamet and Cova (1999) suggest this might involve encouraging or reintroducing in the servicescape 'microevents, incidents, and happenings that make people gather together' (p42). Having looked at the notion of the linking value of the servicescape attention will now turn to the active role played by consumers in appropriating the space.

3.7.2 Space Appropriation

Aubert-Gamet (1997) suggests that although previous research has developed a considerable understanding of environmental influences on consumer behaviour, studies have conceptualised the built environment as a given, bounded and well-defined data, constructed only by the architect or the space designer. In this context the author argues, consumers are embodied as component part of the servicescape and as such research has failed to take into consideration the process of 'construction' of the space by the consumer. Instead it is proposed that 'the servicescape is not only acting on users in order to achieve marketing goals but is also acted on by users in order to frame existential goals' (Aubert-Gamet, 1997;26). In this way post-modern consumers are actually conceived to be 'customising consumers' taking elements of market offerings and crafting a customised consumption experience out of these.

'In modern society, space has direction, area, shape, pattern and volume as key attributes, as well as distance, and it has been considered as an objective thing which can be measured and thus

pinned down...The postmodern conception of reality rubs off on space as uncontrolled and unpredictable....there is no reality to any physical world apart from the meanings attributed by those who perceive them' (Aubert-Gamet, 1997;30)

Consequently while Aubert-Gamet (1997) acknowledges that there is no escaping the effects of physical surroundings on the consumer, she suggests that the relationship between them is more productively articulated on the basis of co-construction. That is to say that 'the environment shapes the consumer and the consumer frames the environment in an ongoing process' (p32). This resonates with the notion of consumers' persuasion knowledge and advertising literacy discussed in section 3.5 however, here the emphasis is placed on the servicescape or space as text to be read and interpreted.

Aubert-Gamet (1997) develops the concept of appropriation in order to shed light on the ability of 'users' to co-construct the environment. She argues that the appropriation of space refers largely to how people appropriate space making it into their own 'personal plots & plays, intentions & intentionalities' (Aubert-Gamet, 1997;32). For example, Cova and Cova (2000) cite Arnould and Price's (1993) study of participants' experiences of river-rafting expeditions in which members were able to construct an 'extraordinary experience' from their interaction with the natural physical environment. The authors argue that retail spaces can also be appropriated and become socially important not only for their facilities but for their qualities as 'schmoozing spaces' (Whyte, 1980) supporting activities such as meeting and socialising with friends. Urry, (1995) argues that individuals are not only therefore consuming goods and services they are also 'consuming places'.

Aubert-Gamet (1997) provides a conceptual model of the various modes of appropriation according to those offered by the service space. Three different approaches or strategies of the company's control over the space are offered. These include a strategy of 'suggestion' which offers a high level of potentiality for appropriation by the user. A strategy of 'seduction' which influences, drives and directs the users towards specific meanings and practices which are mainly intended

to support the service process. Lastly, a strategy of 'prescription' which forces the user to feel and to act according to single and planned meanings and practices.

While little empirical evidence is offered by Aubert-Gamet (1997) to demonstrate practices of appropriation by consumers, one context in which consumers' co-constructive process have been acknowledged is within studies of museum visitors and their interaction with historical artifacts. Davies (1999) suggests that recent reconceptualisations of the museum visitor have shown them as an interacting and creative 'chorister' who enjoys an affective form of 'mindfulness'¹¹. This study suggests that although visitors are not primarily concerned with factual information acquisition, they are sensitive to what they are viewing and find other symbolic, aesthetic, emotive and personal meaning in what they see.

'postmodern tourists use the power of their intellect and imagination to receive communicating messages constructing their own sense of historic place to create their individual journeys of self-discovery' (Nuryanti, 1996; cited in Davies;4)

However Goulding (2000) contends that visitors do not just attend to museum communications and exhibitions as individuals but also as a social unit using these spatial texts to build conversations.

Very little work of this nature appears to have been carried out in retail spaces. One notable exception is Penaloza's (1998) study of Niketown where the importance and role of consumers' co-creative behaviours in this spectacular retail space are recognised.

¹¹ Mindfulness is defined in this context as the product of novelty, surprise, variety and situations that require effort on the part of the individual to attend to dimensions of the space.

'The environment was consumed directly; the sources of its value lie as much in the rhetorical qualities of its design and displays as in consumers' discursive abilities in reading them. Together, the marketer-produced design and displays supplied materials which consumers drew from and reinscribed in producing cultural consumption experiences and meanings' (p37)

Nike's architecture and displays therefore provided materials for consumers' meaning making. Penaloza argued that consumers' participation with the store design and displays not only imbued them with meanings, but also normalised the otherwise spectacular venue as consumers interjected themselves among its contents. For example the architectural design, with its atriums, passageways and concept rooms and spectacular displays such as the two-storey image of Michael Jordan, provided multi-sensory stimulation and invited imaginative associations. Given the limited work in the area and the potential value these concepts may have for helping elucidate on consumers' experiences of retail space, there is clearly a need for further empirical research in the area. The following section introduces the concept or process of re-appropriation in order to demonstrate the creative behaviours used by consumers to remain in control in the servicescape.

3.7.3 Twisting Servicescapes

Aubert-Gamet (1997) suggests a tension often exists or emerges between consumers' freedom and willingness to be immersed in the environment and their desire to control or exert their own power against the normalised process of services. She argues that consumers develop some subtle tricks, creative behaviours and resistance tactics in order to escape from this rigidity, thereby re-appropriating the space and its intended uses and functions in their own way. It is argued that individual consumers are therefore not always obedient and passive but rather they 'twist' or divert the built environment to renegotiate intended meanings and practices to correspond to their own self constructs.

Cova and Cova (2000) suggest that there is a duality between the practices of appropriation and re-appropriation which takes into account the order of the environment. For example in a space without order, such as the wilderness

servicescape described by Arnould and Price (1993), an individual can easily appropriate the space making it his or her own. However when individuals are faced with a space that is controlled, such as a retail environment, there is no longer such a large degree of potential for appropriation. It is here that the authors suggest a dialectical tension comes into play between the power of the owner of the space and the autonomy of the individual. In this case the authors argue consumers re-appropriate the space. That is they develop resistance tactics in order to make the space their own. Service spaces are therefore described as being 'twisted' by the consumer (Aubert-Gamet, 1997). There is also the possibility for the individual to conform or 'adapt' to the established order in the space. In this way

...every individual is caught up in a tension between the necessity of adhering to the system (adaptation) and that of protecting oneself from it (re-appropriation), seeking one and the other at the same time, attempting to escape from the control and the hold of the organisation while at the same time taking advantage of its offer' (Cova and Cova, 2000;36).

Aubert-Gamet (1997) argues that as service spaces become increasingly standardised, users want to be considered as participants in the process of construction where they are increasingly free to resist the power of the provider. In an empirical study of consumer behaviour in two bank servicesapes, Aubert-Gamet (1996 cited in Cova and Cova, 2000) noted numerous instances of twisted behaviour. These included customers sitting on the ground, using the space for socialising with friends or using the cashier as a baby sitter. These re-appropriation processes were part of the everyday practices of consumers who sought to escape the power of the space owner.

Overall this literature suggests that consumers are no longer a component part of the environment or a passive participant in the service space, rather individuals are perceived to be active meaning makers and co-constructors of space. However while the literature offers a number of conceptual frameworks for understanding consumers' complex interactions with the servicescape, few have been explored empirically. Most notable is the absence of any research within fashion retailing.

This lack of empirical exploration clearly indicates the need for more research in this area.

3.8 Conclusions

This chapter has introduced alternative literature in the field of marketing and consumer behaviour that has provided additional insights on the subject of consumers' retail brand experiences and interaction with the retail space. The chapter began by presenting research on the nature of the consumption experience. Research in this area has focused primarily on measuring and defining consumer experiences across a variety of contexts and activities as well as proposing how organisations can design and manage these experiences more effectively. While this literature offers rich insights it fails to consider the role of the physical environment as an integral part of consumers experiences of retail brands.

The chapter then focused specifically on the nature of retail brand experiences and introduced the notion of retail theatre. However, the limitations of this research were acknowledged as studies failed to take into account the active role of the consumer in constructing and managing their own experiences in the retail space. As such alternative research was drawn upon. This included the concept of persuasion knowledge which illustrated consumers' personal knowledge about the tactics used by marketers in persuasion attempts, as well as the coping strategies employed. Further research on advertising literacy demonstrated consumers' ability to read, understand and interpret visual texts.

The chapter explored consumers' relationships with brands and the roles that brands play as symbolic resources in the construction and maintenance of identity. Moving beyond consumers' individual relationships with brands, the literature introduced research on communities of consumption and the notion of postmodern tribes. This research highlighted the importance of social interactions and networks that are formed around consumption activities and brands. Building on these themes the last section of the chapter focused its attention on consumers' experiences and interaction

with the servicescape. It introduced the idea that the servicescape has 'linking value' assuming a facilitating role by encouraging and nurturing certain forms of interaction among customers. The concepts of space appropriation and re-appropriation or 'twist' were then discussed. Together these themes indicated that consumers were active co-constructors in the space crafting customised consumption experiences.

Taken as a whole the literature reviewed in chapters two and three suggest that there is a need to re-conceptualise the role of the consumer and their interaction with the retail space. Firstly there is a need to explore the environment beyond a defined stimuli where responses are measured in order to consider the role of space as a social and personal construct. It is proposed the retail environment has use value but also has 'linking value'. Secondly it is important to acknowledge consumers as active participants who construct their own meanings from retail brands and their encounters with the retail space. Building on these themes generated from this review of the literature, Chapter Four will discuss the main objectives of the present study and the methodological approaches taken.

Part Two: Methodology

CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

Chapters two and three have described the approaches and methods used to explore consumers' consumption experiences across a range of settings and activities in previous studies. This chapter presents the methodological approaches adopted in this study designed to provide a contextualised understanding of young consumers' experiences of fashion retail brands and retail design space. The chapter begins by providing an outline of the research objectives. Consideration is then given to various philosophical perspectives, providing justification for the application of an interpretive approach incorporating multiple methods of data collection. The methods of data collection, including in depth interviews, mini groups and a series of accompanied shopping trips, are described in detail. This is followed by a description of the analysis phase. Finally, the chapter concludes by providing an evaluation of the research.

4.2 Research Objectives

A review of the literature, provided in chapters two and three, has described the limitations of previous research in understanding and capturing the dynamic nature of consumers' retail experiences. Alternative research frameworks and methodologies have been proposed in order to explore the active role played by consumers in constructing and managing their own experiences. This study aims to build on these alternative frameworks to develop a more contextualised understanding of young fashion consumers' everyday experiences of fashion retail brands and the retail design space. More specifically the studies objectives are outlined below.

The study aims to develop a rich understanding and in-depth descriptive account of consumers' fashion consumption experiences. Giving voice to the consumer by privileging informants' experiences this study aims to understand how fashion consumers read and interpret the retail space. Given previous research emphasis on measuring and defining consumers' individual experiences, the study aims to build on research that explores the broader socio-cultural context (Aubert-Gamet and Cova, 1999). Consistent with this aim a decision was made to move away from quantitative measurement to conduct a rich qualitative multi-method study.

Previous research exploring consumers' interaction with the retail environment has been dominated by studies of 'extraordinary' and 'spectacular' retail sites in an American setting, such as mega malls and stores such as Niketown (Sherry, 1998a). In line with recent research which has called for an exploration of more mundane consumption sites (Lowe and Wrigley, 1996), this study aims to explore fashion consumers' 'everyday' experiences of retail fashion brands on the high street. Furthermore the study is located in Glasgow to explore these experiences in a Scottish context.

The study focuses specifically on young adults' experiences of fashion retail brands and the retail space, where the youth market is defined as adults between the ages of 18-26. While much research has focused on youth culture and marketing to Generation X (Ritchie, 1995), studies exploring consumers' experiences of retail space have tended to ignore this market, concentrating on the adult population as a whole (e.g. Jackson and Holbrook 1995). However, due to their increasing sophistication, purchasing frequency and 'free spending power' (Intel, 2000), it is believed that young adults are an interesting segment to explore. In addition, the literature has also emphasised the increasing diversity of this market as young peoples' identities have become more fluid and multifaceted (McGowan, 2000).

Finally the research aims to compare young fashion consumers' experiences of retail space across different retail environments. While research has emphasised the importance of creating memorable brand experiences (Schmitt, 1999), few studies

have explored the range of experiences consumers have across different retail spaces. Instead research has focused on one consumption site (Penaloza, 1998). This study aims to overcome this limitation to explore whether consumers' behaviour or preferences vary across different retail contexts.

4.3 Research Approach

In line with the research objectives defined above, this study is based within the interpretive paradigm. It is a qualitative multi-method study that draws on various research approaches including ethnography and phenomenology in order to provide a greater understanding or 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) of consumers' experiences of retail space. The following section discusses the research approach taken within the context of the debate surrounding the positivist and interpretive paradigms which serves to highlight the fundamental differences between the methodological positions. The aim is not to suggest that interpretivism offers a more legitimate or valid methodology over positivism, as both have strengths and weaknesses, but rather that in the context of this study an interpretive approach provides the most appropriate methodology to explore and understand consumers' retail brand experiences.

4.3.1 Research Paradigm

'to engage in methodological understanding is to enter into a quagmire of contradictions and conflicting philosophies, within, as well as across paradigms' (Goulding, 1999;862)

Although research conventions in marketing and consumer research have become increasingly eclectic over recent years, certain methodological practices, namely those derived from scientific empiricism, remain the dominant research paradigm within the field. However since the 1980s, in response to growing dissatisfaction with these traditional methods of investigation, there has been a gradual move towards a variety of interpretive frameworks and qualitative methodologies. This has been variously described as 'the new consumer behaviour' (Belk, 1995), the

'interpretive turn' (Sherry, 1991), or what Hirschman (1986) argues are 'humanistic modes of enquiry'. These methodologies represented a departure from the traditional positivist paradigms and are more concerned with focusing on consumers' subjective consciousness and 'meaning systems or frameworks' (Marsden and Littler, 1998), rather than the manipulation of experimental variables.

These methodological innovations were exemplified by the seminal contributions of a group of American researchers on the 'Consumer Odyssey' project which aimed at generating 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) of American consumption behaviour. This fuelled a heated debate in the literature in which these new approaches received much criticism (Calder and Tybout, 1987, 1989; Hunt, 1989; 1991; Anderson, 1986) but were equally vigorously defended (Holbrook, 1987; Holbrook and O'Shaughnessy, 1988; Ozanne and Hudson, 1989). However, in spite of these philosophical differences, the debate has led to the development of a variety of innovative interpretive consumer research techniques including phenomenology (McQuarrie and McIntyre, 1990; Thompson et al., 1989;1990), introspection (Gould, 1995; Wallendorf and Brucks, 1993), critical relativism (Anderson, 1986) critical theory (Murray and Ozanne, 1991), and hermeneutics (Arnold and Fischer, 1994; Thompson et al., 1994; 1997). In support of an interpretive approach, Woodruff (1996) notes while there may not be one philosophy which encapsulates the essence of the consumption experience, there is a need to espouse research methods which go beyond those common to positivistic science and logical empiricism.

In an effort to highlight the different philosophical approaches and the practical implications of these research methods, several authors have made comparisons across paradigms (e.g. Guba and Lincoln, 1998; Hirschman and Holbrook, 1986; Ozanne and Hudson, 1989). Ozanne and Hudson (1989) present a framework that compares and explores the axiological, ontological and epistemological assumptions of both positivist and interpretivist approaches. Similarly, Guba and Lincoln (1998) discuss the differences between approaches in terms of their ontology, epistemology and methodology. While considerable diversity exists within both the positivist and interpretive paradigms the authors focus on those within the interpretive

paradigm. They present these varying approaches in a continuum from Positivism to Postpositivism, Critical Theory, Constructivism, and more recently, Participatory approaches (Lincoln and Guba, 2000). For the purpose of this discussion the framework outlined by Ozanne and Hudson (1989) (see Table 4.1) has been adapted to include further detail on methodology described by Guba and Lincoln (1998). The following sections outline each of these positions in more detail and discuss how these assumptions relate to the present research objectives.

Table 4.1 A summary of the positivist and interpretivist approaches

BASIC ASSUMPTIONS	POSITIVIST	INTERPRETIVIST
AXIOLOGICAL		
Overriding Goal	'Explanation' via submission under general laws, prediction	Understanding
ONTOLOGICAL		
Nature of Reality	Objective, tangible Single Fragmentable Divisible	Socially constructed Multiple Holistic Contextual
Nature of Social Beings	Deterministic Reactive	Voluntaristic Proactive
EPISTEMOLOGICAL		
Knowledge Generated	Nomothetic Time-free Context-independent	Idiographic Time-bound Context-dependent
View of Causality	Real causes exist	Multiple, simultaneous shaping
Research Relationship	Dualism, separation Privileged point of observation	Interactive, cooperative No privileged point of observation
METHODOLOGICAL		
Approaches	Experimental/manipulative Verification of hypothesis Primarily quantitative methods	Hermeneutical/dialectical Researcher immersion Primarily qualitative methods

Source: Adapted from Ozanne, J.L and Hudson, L.A (1989) 'Exploring Diversity in Consumer Research', in Hirschman, E.C. (ed.) *Interpretive Consumer Research*, Association for Consumer Research, Provo, UT, 3

Firstly, in terms of the axiological assumptions, positivists central goal is to develop law-like generalisations about phenomena that can be verified through empirical testing. In contrast the interpretive researchers' goal is not 'the truth' but rather understanding which involves exploring and identifying both an individuals perceptions and the meanings they share and exchange with others.

Secondly, approaches differ on the basis of their ontological assumptions concerning the nature of reality and social beings. Ozanne and Hudson (1989) argue that positivists believe that a single unchanging reality exists in which a phenomenon can be removed from its natural setting and studied in a controlled environment. In this way they believe that human behaviour is determined by outside influences. Interpretivists however believe that multiple realities exist in which the social context influences the meaning of the phenomenon, therefore these can not be separated from their natural setting and studied in isolation. They argue that individuals actively create and shape their environment rather than just reacting to it.

A third point of differentiation is based on their epistemological assumptions where each approach strives towards different types of knowledge. Positivists emphasise 'proper' scientific protocol involving a controlled environment in which the researcher and subject are separate to ensure validity, reliability and generalisability of results. Interpretive researchers, on the other hand, do not seek causal relationships rather they wish to identify patterns of behaviour and develop 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973). The aim is therefore not to test theory but rather the research design evolves as researchers immerse themselves within the changing environment.

Finally, approaches vary on their methodological assumptions. Positivist approaches employ primarily experimental approaches where hypotheses are proposed and verified through the application of empirical testing and quantitative methods. In contrast, the interpretive researcher is more involved in the research process in order to understand from a consumer's perspective, rather than imposing a predetermined structure of the researchers' making (Szmigin and Foxall, 2000). This allows an account that captures the richness and detail of individuals' experiences.

There is clearly a huge diversity in consumer research which, it has been recently argued, has been both 'destructive' (Hunt, 1991) and 'liberatory' and 'emancipatory' in nature (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995). Indeed there have been many attempts since to elucidate and develop these positions (e.g. Goulding, 1999, Szmigin and Foxall, 2000, Shankar and Patterson, 2001). However, this is a long-running debate which still remains unresolved. Based on these broad philosophical differences, it is possible to highlight the limitations of previous research that has explored consumers' experiences of retail space, and the strengths of adopting an interpretive approach in line with the study's objectives.

At the heart of interpretivism is the goal of understanding rather than explanation and prediction. Similarly this study aimed, not to explain and measure the impact of retail design space as traditional research in the area has attempted, but to develop a meaningful understanding and in-depth descriptive account of young consumers' experiences of retail space.

Interpretivist research has also emphasised the existence of multiple realities and the importance of the social context. As Brown (1995; 142) comments.

'although an external world may exist 'out there', it is impossible to access this world independently of human sensations, perceptions and interpretations. Hence, 'reality' is not objective and external to the observer but socially constructed and given meaning by human actors. What counts as knowledge about this world is relative to different times, contexts and research communities' (p142)

This approach is consistent with the objectives of the study which aims to give authority and voice to the consumer with an emphasis on exploring their experiences within the broader social and cultural context. This contextualised approach also has implications for the role of the researcher, marking a shift from the traditional scientific posture of personal distance and a priori theories, to a more interactive role. In line with this approach, the researcher recognises the need for greater interaction and participation with informants in an effort to provide a more holistic representation of their experiences in their own terms. This resonates with Thompson

et al. (1989) who emphasise the importance of 'being-in-the-world' and describing the consumer's experience as it emerges or is 'lived'.

Lastly, interpretivist research advocates the role of qualitative methods in order to capture the richness of consumers' experiences. Previous research exploring consumers' retail experiences have had a strong emphasis on analytical, quantitative and verbal methodologies (Schmitt, 1999). This methodological bias has been illustrated by Otnes, McGrath and Lowrey (1995) who conducted a census to compare and contrast the types of methods used in shopping-related studies across a number of marketing journals from the period 1960 to 1995¹. Table 4.2 clearly illustrates the predominance of quantitative research methods such as experimental designs and survey-based approaches and the limited number of qualitative research approaches such as observation, focus groups and shopping with consumers.

Table 4.2 Comparison of Methods used in Shopping Related Studies

Method	JCR	JM	JMR	JR	Total
Experiment	86	18	84	30	218
Survey	61	35	74	97	267
Interview	18	23	30	63	134
Panel/Diary	13	27	55	11	106
Scanner/Sales Data	3	13	14	3	33
Observation	7	4	3	5	19
Conjoint Analysis	3	0	0	2	5
Focus Groups	0	1	0	3	4
Shopping with Consumers	3	0	0	1	4
Simulated Shopping	5	3	5	5	18
Content Analysis	0	0	0	1	1
Garbology	1	0	0	0	1
Q-Sort	0	0	1	1	2
Total	200	124	266	222	812

Source: Otnes, C., McGrath, M.A. and Lowrey, T.M. (1995) 'Shopping with consumers: usage as past, present and future research technique'. Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services, 2 (2), 97-110.

¹ The journals included in the census were: The Journal of Consumer Research (JCR), The Journal of Marketing (JM), The Journal of Market Research (JMR) and The Journal of Retailing (JR).

While these quantitative methods have provided valuable insights, the researcher recognises the need for more innovative qualitative research methods in order to understand the experiential and symbolic dimensions of consumers' retail brand experiences and other unconscious consumption behaviours.

Given the emphasis on understanding, the importance of exploring consumers' experiences within the socio-cultural context, the need for researcher interaction and methods better able to capture the range of dimensions of consumption experiences, an ethnographic approach was selected. The following section outlines this approach in detail with reference to other studies that have utilised this method.

4.3.2 An Ethnographic Approach

'Understanding the role of context is still the lost continent in our map of the consumer, and the only way to really explore it is through observational and ethnographic research' (Jones, 1999)

The inclusion of alternative research approaches has led to a call for the 'diversification of our tool kit' (Sherry, 1998b) and adoption of a variety of methods to gain a more thorough understanding of the consumer's service experience. Recent research has attempted to become more cross-disciplinary, borrowing methods and techniques from a variety of subject areas. One such method is ethnography which is largely derived from the anthropological tradition but also has roots in sociology and cultural studies. However, despite the wide use of this approach, a great deal of debate surrounds its definition. Borchard (1998; p243) argues that it can range from 'personal, poetic evocations of experience and culture to more systematic and empirically based accounts'. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995;1) describe ethnography in its most characteristic form as

'involving the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions'.

Arnould and Wallendorf (1994) give a more precise definition of market-oriented ethnography stating that there are four essential characteristics of ethnographic interpretation. Firstly, ethnography gives primacy to systematic data collection and recording of human action in natural settings. Secondly, it involves extended, experiential participation by the researcher in a specific cultural context, following human action as it occurs rather than initiating it. Thirdly, interpretations should be able to convince the people studied of their credibility and the intended reading audience of their trustworthiness. Lastly, ethnography involves incorporating multiple sources of data in order to generate multiple and divergent perspectives. Data are typically collected through observations, interviews and participation in events and daily occurrences, through informal conversations with participants and through material artefacts and photographic records (Penaloza, 1998).

This study builds on numerous ethnographic investigations conducted across a range of contemporary market places (e.g. McGrath, 1989; Sherry 1990;1998; Belk, Sherry and Wallendorf 1988;1989). Many of these studies, conducted as part of the Consumer Behaviour Odyssey project described in chapter two (section 2.6.2), employed ethnographic and extended case study methods similar to traditional anthropological and sociological field studies. However the Odyssey studies were not conducted within one context or setting. Instead they employed what Whyte (as cited in Belk, 1991) calls 'hunt and peck ethnography' where the guiding assumption was that deeper themes or issues exist across locales, across sites and across people.

Many studies of more conventional retail spaces have employed a range of different methods such as observation, interviews, projective tasks, archival analysis and photography. However, as Sherry (1998b;5) states, most are 'grounded in ethnography and have a phenomenological cast'. Of particular relevance to this research were studies of various retail spaces. For instance, Penaloza's (1998) and Sherry's (1998a) studies of Nike Town in Chicago both employed ethnographic methods. Penaloza observed and took photographs of consumers in their interaction with the servicescape as well as conducting intercept interviews while Sherry

describes his research as a 'hybrid effort that seeks to combine both ethnographic enquiry with the reflexivity of introspection' (p113). He states

'I strive to produce a phenomenological account of my own engagement with a particular market place hedged about with observations and interpretations drawn from other participants in the process of enacting the servicescape. In tacking between self and other I construct an account that is at one 'producerly' and grounded in 'reader response'. In conveying my own experience of 'being-in-the-market-place' in tandem with that of fellow consumers, I offer a perspective that is comparative rather than privileged, and probative rather than definitive' (p113)

In his study of Niketown Sherry used multiple data collection methods including non-participant and participant observation, intercept interviews, shopping with consumers as well as photographing dimensions of the servicescape and autodriving interviews. These studies provided a much richer and insightful holistic understanding of individuals' experiences and encounters with the servicescape.

In the spirit of ethnography, this research employs multiple methods of data collection in order to provide an in-depth account of consumers' experiences of fashion retail space. However it deviates from traditional ethnographic studies in two ways. Firstly research combines both observations and interactions with consumers in the retail space as well as research beyond the retail setting. Secondly, in line with the Odyssey project, the study explores consumers' experiences across a range of retail settings rather than focusing on one context.

In summary, while this study may not be considered to be 'pure' ethnography the aim of generating rich, 'thick' description and holistic understanding of consumers' experiences were central to the research. The following section provides an outline of a preliminary study that represented the first phase of data collection.

4.4 A Preliminary Study

A preliminary study was conducted in the summer of 1999 as the first stage of the research. This phase was intended to explore some of the issues and themes discussed in the literature. More specifically, the objectives were to explore and understand consumers' complex behavioural processes and consumption experiences across various retail spaces. The study examined the youth fashion market and centred its investigations on six mixed retail chain stores located in Glasgow. Stores included French Connection, Next, Jeffrey Rogers, Monsoon, Warehouse and Miss Selfridge. Given the exploratory nature of the research the aim was to capture rich data focusing on consumers experiences of 'being-in-the-market place' (Sherry, 1998b). A combination of methods including detailed observation, video recordings and unstructured qualitative interviews were utilised.

The study was conducted in May and June 1999. Permission to conduct the research in store was gained from head office but visits to the store were co-ordinated with store managers. The study entailed approximately three visits to each of the store sites during which time over 60 customers were intercepted and interviewed. Visits to each store were conducted on alternative days of the week and different times of day in order to gain an overall understanding of the customer profile. Customers were unobtrusively observed in their encounter with the servicescape and video recordings were discretely made in the majority of store environments.

Interviews within the confines of the store were designed to be flexible allowing the course of the dialogue to emerge naturally in relation to the characteristics of the consumption experience, observations and meanings expressed by individual customers. Information was collected and documented in a number of ways including audio-tapes of intercept interviews, detailed fieldnotes, photographs and video recordings.

This preliminary study indicated the richness of the area and its amenability to interpretive research. Findings provided empirical support for a number of

experiential themes that emphasised the highly social, symbolic and imaginative consumption activities and processes that take place across different retail environments. For instance the research illustrated the hedonic value gained by customers from browsing activity and impulse buying, as well as the importance placed on the social interactions in the retail environment. The study further emphasised the role of the retail space as different configurations were used as navigational tools and symbolic cues which conveyed holistic impressions of store image and market positioning.

Preliminary research also highlighted a number of difficulties in exploring consumers' experiences of the retail space. The study indicated that while participants were able to comment on the functional dimensions of the environment they found it difficult to articulate and describe more personal meanings and feelings about the space. This suggested that because participants were being asked to verbalise their responses they naturally rationalised them. This clearly illustrated that ethnographic methods were unable to fully access and reproduce the range of latent processes and dimensions that were more subconscious and private in nature.

The study also illustrated some of the difficulties involved in conducting research in the retail space. A number of practical difficulties were encountered such as consumers' time constraints, disruption to the store and sound recording problems. The study also raised a number of ethical issues concerned with conducting covert observations in the retail space. This was primarily related to the right of the researcher to access different areas of the retail store such as the changing rooms.

Overall the study illustrated the scope for a more in-depth analysis of consumers' experiences of retail space. In particular it indicated the need to incorporate alternative methods of enquiry such as various projective techniques to assess these highly complex and largely unconscious processes. The following sections describe the main study and the data collection methods employed.

4.5 The Main Study

The main study aimed to build on the findings from the preliminary research in order to explore these themes in more depth using alternative methods of enquiry. The study focused on the youth fashion market, this time focusing on three mixed gender fashion retail chains located in Glasgow. Three methods of enquiry - individual in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and a series of accompanied shops - were utilised. As part of the emergent design, the research programme was divided into several phases of data collection. This iterative and reflexive process allowed time for issues that emerged from one form of enquiry to be explored further in the next phase of the research.

4.5.1 A mixed methods approach

A mixed method approach was adopted in order to generate varying perspectives on the behaviours and contexts of interest so as to capture a rich understanding of the constituents of fashion shopping, design and the impact of design on shopping experiences. These complementary methods and techniques provide a holistic representation of various consumption phenomenon and allow the generation and interpretation of insights rich in detail that would be difficult to achieve with one or two methods alone. The combination of methods provides an opportunity to 'triangulate' results (Miles and Huberman, 1984) where the aim is to gain a more holistic understanding of various perspectives (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) in order to establish the trustworthiness of the research (Wallendorf and Belk, 1989). In this way triangulation may be used not only to explore the same phenomenon from multiple perspectives but also to enrich our understanding by allowing for new or deeper dimensions to emerge (Jick, 1979).

The following sections describe the store sampling framework and the main data collection methods used in the first phase of the research.

4.6 Phase One: Data Collection Methods

In order to capitalise on the emergent and reflective research design the research process consisted of two distinct phases of data collection. The first phase of the research included a total of 12 in-depth interviews and 9 focus group discussions while the second main phase of data collection consisted of six accompanied shops. The following sections concentrate on the first phase of data collection. The section begins with a description of the store sampling framework. It then goes on to describe the interviews and groups and their composition. As individual interviews and groups involved a variety of similar tasks using visual stimuli, these will be discussed in one section.

4.6.1 The store sampling framework

Of the six major high street stores included as part of the preliminary research, French Connection and Next were selected to participate in the main study. Follow-up letters were sent to contacts at head or regional office thanking them for their participation in the first phase of the study and inviting them to be part of the next stage of the research. Additionally Topshop/Topman was included in the selection as the store was frequently mentioned in discussions with young consumers and as such was deemed to be an important reference point.

These three stores were selected as they reflected different market positions on a continuum from the lower price/quality stores to higher priced/quality prestige outlets. Furthermore each had a distinct retail environment. This framework also delineates the stores in terms of segments of the youth market. Although all of the stores target the youth market, defined in this study as age 18-26, each store has more specific target markets. This sampling framework provides the basis of the study and the methods that are utilised. A description and background to each of these stores is provided in Chapter Five.

Consideration was also given to the possibility of examining female and male solo retail chains in order to compare and contrast store environments and explore whether behaviour varied across different contexts. In practice this proved to be very difficult, as although there are a great number of solus female outlets there are few specific male chain stores. Potential errors were therefore avoided from looking for symmetry in the store sample design divorced from high street reality.

4.6.2 Phenomenological Interviews

In-depth interviews, together with focus groups, are perhaps the most popular form of qualitative data collection in consumer research (McCracken, 1988). Interviewing includes a wide variety of forms and a multiplicity of uses, however qualitative interviews usually refer to in-depth or semi-structured forms of interviewing. Burgess calls these 'conversations with a purpose' (1988), indeed they must be recognised as specific forms of social interaction (Silverman, 1993). Interviews are therefore not neutral tools of data gathering but active interactions leading to negotiated, contextually based results (Fontana and Frey, 2000). As McCracken (1988) states

The purpose of the qualitative interview is not to discover how many and what kinds of people share a certain characteristic. It is to gain access to the cultural categories and assumptions according to which one constructs the world...qualitative research does not survey the terrain, it mines it. It is, in other words, much more intensive than extensive in objectives (McCracken, 1988:17)

In keeping with the research objectives of developing rich, thick descriptive accounts of consumers' consumption experiences, the study adopted a phenomenological interview technique based on the format outlined by Thompson et al (1989). This highly flexible technique places the emphasis on exploring consumers' 'lived experiences'. This allows each participant to articulate the network of meanings that constitutes 'their personalised understandings of consumption phenomena' (Thompson and Haytko, 1997b;19).

Thompson et al. (1989) provide a number of guiding principles for conducting phenomenological interviews. Firstly, the course of the dialogue is largely set by the informant. Rather than following a predetermined guide, the interviewer's questions are formulated in line with the participants' reflections and are directed at exploring descriptions of specific experiences. Secondly, the interviewer and informant are in positions of equality. The interviewer does not want to be perceived as more powerful or knowledgeable as the respondent is the 'expert' on his or her own experiences. Thirdly, questions and probes used by the interviewer are aimed at eliciting detailed descriptions of consumers' experiences. For instance, interviews employ descriptive questions², use the interviewee's own terms and phrases and avoid 'why' questions. Thompson et al (1989) argue that 'why' questions are ineffective at generating rich descriptions as these are perceived by informants as requests for rationalisations and can engender feelings of prejudgement and defensive responses. Such questions also put the informant in the position of 'naïve scientist' seeking to find a plausible explanation for his or her actions³. Overall the interviewer aims to become a 'non-directive listener' rather than adopting an overly intrusive role. According to Thompson et al (1989:139)

'the ideal interview format occurs when the interviewer's short descriptive questions and/or clarifying statements provide an opening for a respondent's lengthier and detailed descriptions'

While the interviews conducted in this study followed these guidelines, they deviated from this approach in two main ways. Firstly, although participants largely defined the course of the interview dialogue, some general discussion themes and questions had been developed from the preliminary study. Furthermore, as part of the emergent design of the research, interviews were constantly modified in line with issues and themes identified in previous interviews and groups. Secondly, interviews included a number of standard enabling tasks using visual stimuli. Appendix 1 provides an

² Examples of descriptive questions might be 'can you tell me about a time when...?' , 'how did you feel when...?' and 'what was X like?'

³ For example, if a respondent states 'I generally don't compare prices when I buy things'. A follow-up question such as 'why don't you compare prices?' demands a rationalisation for not comparing prices.

outline of the interview format and an illustration of the types of questions and tasks employed.

4.6.3 Mini Group discussions

Like interviews, group interviews or focus groups been widely used in marketing research circles and over the years an excellent literature on focus group methodology has developed (Bers and Smith, 1990; Krueger, 1994; Merton, 1990; Morgan, 1997;1998). According to the definition provided by Bers and Smith (1990;21)

‘a focus group is a small, six to twelve member, relatively homogenous group that meets with the help of a trained moderator in a non-threatening, relaxed environment for a 90 to 120 minute discussion’.

The benefits of focus groups over other forms of researcher-respondent interaction is that it allows a dynamic dimension to be introduced. As Morgan (1997; 5) states ‘the hallmark of focus groups is the explicit use of the group interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group’. The idea then is that responses from one person may become the stimulus for another, thereby generating an interplay of responses that may yield more than if the same number of people had contributed independently (McDaniel and Gates, 1996). For informants who may find one-to-one interactions intimidating, focus groups offer the advantage of a safe environment where individuals can share ideas, beliefs and attitudes in the company of people with similar backgrounds (Madriz, 2000). The use of focus groups was deemed particularly valuable in this study due to the highly social nature of consumers’ experiences of fashion shopping highlighted in the preliminary study.

Despite these advantages several criticisms have been levelled at the technique including less researcher control, a tendency towards conformity and polarisation of responses and the presence of shy or more dominant members which may lead to

conflict in the group. Indeed Patton (1990;336) states that ‘conflicts may arise, power struggles may be played out, and status differences may become a factor’.

Variations in the group interview method such as the mini-group, friendship groups, conflict groups and extended groups have all been developed to overcome some of the perceived limitations of the basic format (Gordon, 1999). For the purpose of this study a series of mini-groups, defined as groups consisting of four to six people, were selected as the most appropriate format. Mini groups were selected to provide an intimate and detailed discussion forum where individual experiences could be explored and probed in more depth and where there was potentially more opportunity for participants to share ideas (Krueger, 1994). Smaller groups were deemed to be more in line with the overall objectives of the study where there was a need to explore consumers ‘lived experiences’ and consumption stories (Thompson, 1989) in detail.

4.6.4 Interview and Group Composition

Given the focus on generating rich experiential texts rather than generalising findings to a wider population, the study employed analytical rather than statistical sampling. In line with Gordon and Langmaid (1988) a sampling plan was built from the various subgroups forming the population of interest. This sampling framework provided a starting point to allow comparisons to be made between customers from the three stores participating in the study.

Table 4.3 provides an illustration of the framework in which interviews and groups account for gender and store type. Consequently, this framework allowed potential gender differences in experiences to be explored across all three stores as well as provide an interesting comparison between the way different groups interact together.

Table 4.3 Group and Interview Composition

	Topshop/ Topman	Next	French Connection
12 Individual Interviews	4 interviews - two male - two female	4 interviews - two male - two female	4 interviews - two male - two female
9 Mini Groups (4 Participants in each Group)	3 Groups - One mixed (2 male 2 female members) - One all female - One all male	3 Groups - One mixed (2 male 2 female members) - one all female - one all male	3 Groups - one mixed (2 male 2 female members) - one all female - one all male

In total twelve phenomenological interviews and nine mini group discussions were conducted. Four interviews were conducted with customers from each of the three stores. In order to explore and compare the experiences between gender, interviews were conducted with two female and two male participants for each store.

Three mini groups were conducted with customers from each of the three stores. Groups contained a total of four participants with one mixed group, one all female group and one all male group. Mixed and single gender groups were used for several reasons. Single sex groups were used to develop a more in-depth understanding of male and female consumers' experiences. It was thought that single sex groups would provide a more relaxed setting which would facilitate more personal discussions without participants feeling intimidated by group members of the opposite sex. As observations from the preliminary study illustrated that participants frequently shopped with members of the opposite sex, such as girlfriends/ boyfriends and family members, mixed groups were used to reflect this natural context. While groups contained members of different socio-economic status each was relatively homogenous as all participants were approximately the same age and customers of the same store.

4.6.5 Recruitment of participants

As the sampling framework required participants to be customers of one of the three participating stores, a number of different recruitment strategies were considered. This included advertising in the local paper and recruiting participants from local youth groups and community centres. These methods were rejected on the grounds that the sample may not contain customers from each of the participating stores. Furthermore, research has indicated that advertisements in local newspapers may fail to produce a reasonable response (Miller, 1998). While a student sample would have been convenient and in line with the stores' target market, this method of recruitment was also rejected as research has indicated this group of consumers are unrepresentative of population as a whole (Sears, 1986). Recruiting participants from store mailing lists or focusing on store card holders was also considered however this was deemed unrealistic as stores were unwilling to provide access to this type of information. The researcher was also deterred by the requirement of retailers to alter the project to fit their own goals and requirements. Due to the inadequacies of these methods it was decided to use a professional recruiter located in Glasgow. The recruiter was affiliated with the Market Research Society and was selected on the basis of personal recommendation from another academic researcher.

The recruiter was thoroughly briefed about the aims of the project and the details regarding the screening of participants. This included demographic details (age/gender/social class) occupational status and whether they were customers of the store (purchase within last six months/possession of store loyalty card). In order to operationalise the intended sample design, the method of recruitment was to screen customers exiting the store. Informants were provided with a financial incentive for participating in the research on the completion of each interview and group session. While consideration was given to providing customers with store gift vouchers, financial incentives were deemed most appropriate in line with current market research practice.

The next section reviews the data collection procedures. This discussion includes details of the procedures involved in conducting the phenomenological interviews and mini groups as well a description of the variety of enabling and projective tasks employed.

4.7 Data Collection Procedures

A small pilot study, using a student sample and consisting of two individual interviews and two mini groups, took place in March 2000 to assess the feasibility of the general research approach. This pilot not only provided the researcher with practical experience of timing the interviews and groups as well as managing the recording equipment, but also formed a valuable means of testing and developing the selected methods. This resulted in modifications to the timing and order of tasks as well as the format and presentation of the stimulus materials. These adaptations will be outlined in the following sections.

The main phase of the research was completed between April and July 2000. Interviews and groups were conducted in the recruiter's home in Bridge of Weir, Glasgow. These sessions were alternated between informants from different stores as well as between interview and group formats so that experiences across stores could be compared and contrasted. Interviews and group discussions lasted from between one hour to two hours 15 mins. Interviews generally did not last longer than one hour 40 mins as no collage task was included. Sessions were held in the evenings and took place in the recruiter's living room. This provided informal and relaxed surroundings for the interviews and groups in which comfortable chairs were arranged around a coffee table. Sessions were tape recorded using a flat microphone so as not to be intrusive and detailed notes were taken immediately after each session.

Both interviews and groups followed a similar format. Participants were welcomed as they arrived and provided with refreshments. At the start of the session informants were thanked for agreeing to take part in the study. Permission was sought to record the discussion and anonymity was guaranteed. The general purpose of the research

was explained as being concerned with young people's experiences of fashion shopping but in particular their experiences of the retail store they were a customer of. It was reiterated that the study was independent of the stores in question and anonymity regarding their names and personal details was guaranteed.

As advised by McCracken (1988) and Thompson et al. (1989), the researcher sought to create a context in which participants felt at ease and comfortable in discussing their experiences. As such interviews began with general background information on the participant such as their occupation and general interests which acted as an effective icebreaker. Similarly, in helping the group to 'form' (Foster, 1989), individuals were invited to introduce themselves to the rest of the members. This format was modified after conducting pilot groups as it became evident that participants learned only to talk when directly addressed making it difficult for group members to enter into a dialogue with each other. Gordon (1999) argues this creates a 'dependent group' that is leader centred and unlikely to take any risks in revealing any intimate thoughts or deeply held views. To overcome these difficulties, while still allowing all participants a general introduction to the group, participants were divided into pairs and asked to introduce their partner to the rest of the group. Paired introductions were not only effective at alleviating any tension and nervousness within the group but also allowed each member to speak openly in front of the others without researcher intervention.

Following these 'grand tour questions' (McCracken, 1988), participants were asked about their fashion shopping experiences. Questions and probes flowed from the course of the dialogue rather than from predetermined questions in order to provide a context in which participants could freely describe their experiences and impressions in detail. In line with the guideline presented by Thompson et al (1989) open-ended questions such as 'can you tell me about a time when...?' were used to encourage participants to provide in-depth descriptions of an experience 'as it was lived'. This naturally led onto a dialogue with individuals and group members about their perceptions and impressions of a variety of retail stores. Informants frequently

compared and contrasted retail store brands they were familiar with or that came to mind for any reason.

The second half of the interview and groups incorporated a number of different tasks using visual stimuli in order to elicit deeper meanings and constructs. The following section provides a brief introduction to the use of visual methods in qualitative research, outlining the value of using these approaches. Each of the methods used in the interview and group scenarios are then described.

4.7.1 The Use of Visual Stimuli

The use of visual methods in qualitative research has increased over the years across a variety of fields including consumer behaviour, sociology, psychology, psychotherapy and anthropology. Indeed numerous discussions in the literature have focused on the substantive value, reliability and validity of research using visual medium (Collier and Collier 1986; Schwartz, 1989; Crang, 1997; Scott, 1992;1994). The majority of these methods have been built on the premise that thoughts are image-based not word-based (Zaltman, 1997); therefore these methods are frequently used as a stimuli for projective interviewing in order to elicit enriched qualitative information concerning events and experiences as participants perceive them. Pictures as stimuli can therefore serve as 'entry points' for exploring other consumer concepts and represent a natural and efficient way for consumers to convey higher order constructs (Ball and Smith, 1992). Collier (1979 as cited in Heisley and Levy) notes the effectiveness of photographs as interviewing stimuli.

Photographs as probes in interviewing ask their own questions which often yield unpredictable answers. The imagery dredges the consciousness (and subconsciousness) of the informant, and in an exploratory fashion reveals significance triggered by the photographic subject matter. The content of the imagery which photographically is an outside view is used projectively with the informant to give us an inside view of the research territory. (p274)

Consumer behaviour researchers have often employed photographs as stimuli to elicit useful insights into consumers' thought processes, feelings and behaviours. For

instance, the Consumer Odyssey project made extensive use of still and video images (e.g. Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry, 1989). Wallendorf and Arnould (1991) used photographs of thanksgiving events to understand the rituals associated with the holiday and Heisley and Levy (1991) used photographs, video and audio recordings as a projective vehicle for *'autodriving'*⁴. Furthermore photographs and/or videotapes have also been employed to study consumers' reactions to the physical features of the servicescape setting. For instance, Bitner (1990) used photographs as stimuli to assess the effects of physical surroundings on attributions and satisfaction in a service failure context while Hui and Bateson (1991) and Bateson and Hui (1992) examined the effects of crowding and consumer choice on the service experience.

Consideration was given to several different methods incorporating visual stimuli to explore young consumers' experiences of retail space. One option was to video consumers' interactions within the servicescape and then conduct autodriving interviews in the retail space. This method was rejected due to practical limitations for instance, a lack of facilities to view video material, customers' time constraints and disruption to business. Consideration was also given to providing informants with disposable cameras to take photographs of a typical shopping trip. This method was also rejected as the majority of stores prohibit in-store photography.

In addition to the practical limitations outlined above these methods were also discarded on the basis that more valuable insights might be gained from incorporating stores that participants were not necessarily a customer of. In order to gain a more in-depth understanding of consumers' experiences across a broad range of retail contexts it was decided to incorporate a series of different tasks using photographic images as stimulus material. This builds on the work of Zaltman and Coulter (1995) who described the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET).

⁴ The term *'autodriving'* indicates that the interview is *'driven'* by informants who are seeing and hearing their own behaviour. In this way it provides a *'perspective of action'* which describes the participants effort to make his behaviour meaningful to others and helps respondents *'manufacture distance'* from their own perspective (Heisley and Levy, 1991; p257)

This technique employs a personal interview and multiple tasks involving visual stimuli to elicit the metaphors, constructs and mental models that drive consumers' thinking and behaviour.

Three main tasks incorporating photographic stimulus materials were used in both interview and group contexts. This included the presentation of interior photographs, a sorting task and repertory grid task. A fourth collage construction task was also used within the mini groups. The following sections describe each of these tasks in turn.

4.7.2 Interior Store photos

As an introduction to the series of tasks, participants and group members were presented with a selection of photographs of the store interior of which they were a customer. The aim of using photographic images was both as a memory aid and as a means of eliciting more detailed descriptions of consumers' experiences of the retail space. Informants were invited to comment on any of the photographs and were asked whether the images were a fair representation of the store. This provided the opportunity for participants to describe how the photographs were similar or different to how they remembered the store in their own minds.

Initial descriptions of the store, without the use of photographic stimuli, were often vague and participants focused on more tangible dimensions such as the range of products sold or functional dimensions of the space such as the facilities provided. However, in line with Ball and Smith (1992), these images were effective 'entry points' for exploring consumers' experiences of the retail space in more detail. In particular, photographs were a valuable means of stimulating discussion and debate among group members and often had a 'snowballing effect' (Morgan, 1998) leading to more detailed descriptions, stories and experiences about the store. Images also facilitated discussion about more abstract, multi-sensory dimensions such as the overall 'feel' of the space.

4.7.3 Sorting Task

Following the discussion of the store servicescape, and as an introduction to the repertory grid task, a sorting task was introduced. While this exercise moves away from the phenomenological interview format outlined by Thompson et al., (1989), Spradley (1979) argues that these 'card sorting tasks' can be usefully employed in ethnographic interviews to explore the organisations of an informant's cultural knowledge. He states that 'more than finding out what people know it also involves discovering how people have organised that knowledge' (p131). Zaltman and Coulter (1995) also advocated the use of sorting tasks as part of the ZMET in order to help establish the major themes or constructs relevant to the participant.

A selection of over 30 photographs of high street fashion store exteriors were presented to each participant or group as stimulus material. Informants were then asked to sort the selection of stores into meaningful groups or categories and to explain their choices. Any store participants or group members felt had not been represented and that they wanted to include was written on a separate card and added to the selection. Stores that informants did not know were discarded. No restrictions were placed on the number of groups required or the number of pictures in each group. This task took a similar format in both the interviews and groups however there was clearly more debate and discussion between participants on how to categorise the stores in the groups.

The task took approximately 15-20 minutes to complete. Discussions often provided additional insights, revealing consumers' divergent thought processes and illuminating the different bases of comparison between stores. Overall the method indicated how informants compared a range of stores and their attributes, establishing the main constructs relevant to the participant(s). Additionally it helped to elicit enriched qualitative information concerning individuals' experiences and encounters with different retail stores.

4.7.4 Repertory Grid Technique

In order to generate a more detailed understanding of how participants compared and contrasted criteria they used to form impressions of various stores, a sorting task (loosely based on the Repertory Grid technique) was employed. Originally derived from Kelly's (1955) personal construct psychology, the repertory grid method has been applied in a variety of different contexts including clinical, educational and business applications (Francella and Bannister, 1977; Stewart and Stewart, 1981) and more specifically in consumer research (for reviews, see Hallsworth, 1988; Jankowicz, 1990). However, studies in Geography have also demonstrated its utility in studying images of the retail environment (Harrison and Sarre, 1972; 1975; Hudson, 1974; 1980).

The main aim of the repertory grid is to enable informants as 'experts' to articulate and explore their own understanding and interpretation of the world; the researcher's role is to listen, probe and clarify constructs (Easterby-Smith, 1996b). The technique normally comprises four main stages or procedures including element selection, construct elicitation, element comparison and data analysis (Marsden and Littler, 2000). Elements normally comprise people, places, ideas or inanimate objects and can be supplied, defined from a selection or elicited through discussion. In this case elements comprised different retail stores and were supplied by the researcher.

Constructs are the 'qualities' which the participant uses to describe and differentiate between the elements which are normally viewed as bipolar and can be elicited from techniques including 'triading' and 'laddering' (Easterby-Smith, 1996a). In the triading technique used in this study the participant is presented with the three elements, in this case three retail stores, and asked to consider ways in which two are alike and different or opposite from the third. There is no limit imposed as to how many constructs are elicited but the process of comparison normally continues until the participants' repertory of constructs for that particular element are exhausted. Typically responses are arranged in a grid or matrix which illustrates how each

construct is used in describing the set of elements and which elements and constructs are seen to be alike or different.

Although the method has been traditionally employed in quantitative studies it has attracted criticism for being overly complex and generating 'valueless' information (e.g. Sampson, 1972). Marsden and Littler (2000), however, argue that various operational and conceptual 'misunderstandings' have resulted from the attempt to incorporate the repertory grid technique onto the dominant positivist paradigm in consumer research. Instead they maintain that the assumptions of personal construct psychology are more consistent with those of the interpretive paradigm. Consequently they have examined the way in which the repertory grid technique can be used as an interpretive research framework for exploring consumer behaviour and experience. They summarise the benefits of the application of the technique as

...helping to understand the process of meaning construction as well as the organisation of individual and shared meaning systems...and at the methodological level the RGT can produce a more holistic picture of consumer experience as it identifies the categories that consumers use to group different products and services, which are often treated separately, and is capable of eliciting a wide variety of constructs (cognitive, affective, conative) from consumers at different levels of psychological abstraction (p829)

In line with Marsden and Littler (2000), the aim in this study was to use the technique to explore consumers' retail brand experiences. The aim was to stimulate discussion about the stores in terms of their differences/similarities in order to understand how and what dimensions consumers use to evaluate them. This study uses a more flexible and open approach. As Easterby-Smith et al (1996c;13) acknowledge

'in some instances the grid becomes secondary to the process, acting as a trigger to spark off discussion...where the person is able to play around with constructs organising them into a system which represents his or her world'.

In contrast to the majority of studies that have used verbal stimuli it was decided to use photographs of the stores exterior as elements for the grids. This is similar to Hussey and Duncombe (1999) who used photographs or 'photo sets' as projective stimuli in the repertory grid to elicit motivations behind brand choice.

A maximum of three grids were presented for discussion based on time constraints, issues of depth of response, and participant fatigue revealed in the pilot study. Overall the task took approximately 20 minutes to complete and took a similar format in the individual interviews and groups. However there was clearly more debate and discussion in the groups between participants as to how the stores were similar or different. Easterby-Smith (1996b) suggest that the repertory grid can be useful in groups to build up an understanding of how members view different situations or problems with the objective of building up shared understandings.

The elements of the grid were a combination of supplied stores which consisted of the three stores in the study (Topshop, Next, French Connection) as well as elements defined from the pool of stores used in the sorting exercise. Participants were asked to select a total of five stores that they were familiar with from this pool. If participants wanted a store that was not represented, the name of the outlet was written on a separate piece of card. This flexible method, which allows the mixture of supplied and elicited elements, has been advocated by Harrison and Sarre (1975). The communality between the three principal stores allowed comparisons to be made between participants' grids while remaining sensitive to individual variation in store choice and preference.

Once each element had been selected the photographs were presented in triads. Participants were asked to think of any ways in which two of the stores were alike but different from the third, or more simply which store was the 'odd one out'. The first triad always consisted of the three stores used in the study while the second contained the store at which the participant(s) was a customer and two of the stores that they had selected. If time permitted and the participant(s) was willing a third triad, consisting of the participants' own selection of stores, was presented. Each

photograph had been numbered and a note of the triads presented was kept for reference and comparison.

Building on the sorting task, the Repertory Grid method was successful at opening up a more in-depth discussion with participants about the similarities and differences between retail stores. This not only illustrated a range of responses, thoughts, feelings and interpretations of various servicescape dimensions but also sensitised the researcher to the type of vocabulary used by customers when talking about retail store brands. By asking participants to elaborate on various constructs it was possible to probe into areas of which participants may not have been consciously aware. Easterby-Smith (1996a;4) also suggest that at a personal level, it may be a creative way of generating 'self-insights'. However, whilst the repertory grid allowed consumers freedom in their responses, the method nevertheless imposed a degree of structure in terms of the way responses were elicited. As a result participants responses initially tended to express rational rather than emotional difference between retail store brands. In order to explore these emotional issues in more depth a further projective technique was employed. The following section describes the benefits of using projective stimuli and describes the use of the collage construction task employed in the mini groups.

4.7.5 Use of Projective Techniques

Projective techniques have been used widely in marketing and consumer research however over the years they have been lauded for their unique data elicitation capabilities and derided for their scientific shortcomings (Rook, 2001). Gordon (1999;165) defines projective techniques as consisting of a situation or stimulus that encourages a person to project part of him or herself or an idea system or on to an external object. These techniques are therefore designed to enable the individual or group to express these feelings through light-hearted and safe exercises which reveal insight both to individuals themselves and the researcher.

The techniques are most commonly grouped into five categories according to the nature of the response task. These include association, construction, completion, choice ordering and expression (Gordon and Langmaid, 1988). Although the nature of the research stimuli and the type of data elicited are different for alternative projective instruments, the techniques are similarly capable of tapping (sub)unconscious aspects of behaviour, and eliciting profuse and/or rich responses (Hassay and Smith, 1996). They 'encourage emotional expression and elicit data that are more symbolic, metaphorical, imaginal and aesthetic in both form and level of abstraction' (Rook, 2001) thereby 'liberating respondents from the confines of bounded, rational, or co-operative responses' (Day, 1989). They are therefore used when consumers are reluctant or unable to express themselves which may be due to being unable to remember, not being able to understand, know or an inability to express or verbalise their thoughts (Rook, 2001). As preliminary research indicated that participants find it difficult to articulate and describe dimensions of space and more emotional experiences of retail brands, it was thought that the use of projective stimuli may facilitate descriptions and consumer insights.

The use of projective methods in consumer research have been advocated by many authors to explore different areas of consumer behaviour and experience. For instance, Sherry et al., (1992;1993) and McGrath, Sherry and Levy, (1993) used a projective animation technique⁵ to explore gift giving behaviour. Furthermore, Hassay and Smith (1996) introduced the apperceptive analogue test to examine shopping motives, and McGrath (1998) has employed a projective storytelling methodology to elicit unconscious thoughts about ideal retail environments. A collage task, subsumed under the family of 'construction' techniques, was employed in this study in an attempt to explore consumers' symbolic and emotional responses in more depth. The following section will outline previous studies that have used the technique and will describe the procedures used in the groups.

⁵ This comprised of a written questionnaire which included sentence completion tasks, a modified thematic apperception test (tat) and a dream fantasy.

4.7.6 Collage Task

Collages are simply an assortment of images, words and pictures cut from magazines and newspapers. The method has its roots as a projective technique in psychiatric evaluation and therapy (Carter, Nelson and Duncombe, 1983; Froehlich and Nelson, 1986). However it has been widely used in commercial settings to explore the complexity of brand images (Gordon, 1999), and in the design of advertising campaigns (Rickard, 1994). Despite the prevalence of this technique in these contexts, few references or guidelines are provided in the academic literature.

Hogg et al (1998) have used the method to examine fashion brand preferences among young consumers where participants worked in friendship groups to create the collage. Belk, Ger and Askegaard (1997) have utilised the method to examine dimensions of consumer desire across three cultures, while Zaltman et al., (1993; 1995) has illustrated a similar method using digital imaging techniques to create a montage of images. This method was considered appropriate for this study as it allows free-flowing associations with the emphasis on consumers' responses and their own interpretation of the images selected. This was particularly useful for consumers who find it difficult to verbalise their thoughts as relies on non-verbal expressions. It was therefore intended to stimulate discussion and help express thinking rather than to develop an aesthetically pleasing image.

Consideration was given to the structure and format of the collage task. Groups of four were divided into two pairs to work on the collages independently. In mixed groups pairs included both single and mixed sex pairings however, choice of pairs was left for participants to decide. The construction of two separate collages meant that a wider variety of responses and interpretations could be identified and compared. An extensive selection of pages from popular magazines, aimed at the youth market, were provided. This included magazines such as *FHM*, *GQ*, *Company*, *Journal* and *Cosmopolitan* as well as sports and general entertainment magazines such as *Heat*. Pages were torn from the magazines rather than presented complete as the pilot study indicated that this encouraged more interaction and discussion

between participants over the selection of images. Scissors, glue, pens and a sheet of A1 paper were also available for each group to complete the task.

Participants were invited to construct a collage based on their overall impressions and thoughts of the store they were a customer of. Instructions were deliberately vague to allow participants to define and interpret the task in their own way. In line with Belk, Ger and Askegaard (1997), informants were encouraged to 'let themselves go and express their feelings, intuitions, imaginings, fantasies and associations'. Verbal descriptions as well as visual images could also be used in the collage and participants were encouraged to include images or words of their own if there were unable to find anything appropriate. Approximately 20 minutes were allocated to complete the task. Participants were physically separated for the duration of the task and were therefore unaware of the activities of the other pair. Groups then reconvened to explore, discuss and compare collages.

Participants generally approached the task by selecting and browsing through a pile of images independently and then discussed with their partner which images should be included. This stimulated discussion about the retail store brand in general and their experience and thoughts about it. Participants clearly enjoyed the process and often laughed and joked amongst themselves. In addition to the advantages of the technique outlined above, the task broke the monotony of questioning thereby helping the group to re-focus. When the group reconvened it was evident that participants were much more relaxed and talkative as they had had a chance to bond with other group members. This was in line with Gordon and Langmaid,(1988) who suggested the technique creates new energy in a group discussion and lightens the mood or tone of the proceedings.

Once the group had reconvened each pair was asked to describe and interpret their own collage and the images they had selected. This was an important process which focused participants on the themes and meanings they had identified and presented. This invariably stimulated discussion with the other pair who often asked about the

images that had been selected. Gordon (1999;196) states that this discussion is an insightful part of the process

‘in a group structure, it is the projections that the group now ‘owns’, placed in the metaphorical open space of the group, that form the basis of discussion.....these ‘projections of projections’ and the reasoning behind them can produce powerful insights’

Discussion then encompassed a comparison between the collages and participants were asked to describe any images that they would have liked to have included that perhaps they were unable to find. Zaltman and Coulter (1995:41) suggests that this is an important step as it allows participants to address issues that might have come to mind earlier or during the process. Participants were also asked for the most representative image or to give examples of the opposite image.

4.7.7 Task sequence

Consideration was given to the order of tasks presented in both the interviews and groups. Based on the trial of different sequences in the pilot study the sorting task and repertory grid were placed after the presentation of the interior store photographs (see Table 4.4). This order was selected for a number of reasons. Firstly, focusing on the store of which the participant was a customer provided a good introduction to the series of tasks by allowing participants’ time to adjust to the photographs as stimuli. Secondly, if the sorting task and repertory grid had been completed prior to focusing on the individual store informants may want to continue to compare and contrast stores rather than focusing on the store in question. Thirdly, in the group context, it was believed that rapport between members needed to be established before the repertory grid method was introduced as this was perceived to be a more demanding task and would require compromise and debate with other members of the group. Finally, in the group context, the collage task was placed before the sorting task and repertory grid to introduce variety to the range of tasks and stimuli presented thereby avoiding or alleviating participant fatigue.

Table 4.4 Task Sequence

Order of Tasks
Introduction and Welcome
General discussion of shopping experiences
Servicescapes
Interior store photos
Collage Task (<i>groups only</i>)
Sorting Task
Repertory Grid

This section has provided an overview of the variety of different tasks used in the phenomenological interviews and mini group sessions. The next section considers the final phase of data collection procedures, which involved a series of participant shops. This section details both the methodology and the procedures involved.

4.8 Phase Two: Shopping with Consumers

Increasingly researchers are moving away from more traditional methods of data collection such as interviews and surveys in order to gain a better understanding of consumers' behaviour and experiences as they emerge at the point of sale (Grove and Fisk, 1992b). In particular, as noted in chapter two, the methods of observation and participant observation have been used extensively across a variety of retail settings. Observational methods are well suited to capturing the processual nature of service phenomena due to their ability to examine service interactions unobtrusively as they occur. As the aim of the study was to achieve greater insight and understanding of consumers' experiences through their eyes, participant observation was deemed a more appropriate method. In contrast to observation, where the researcher assumes a passive role, in participant observation the researcher is an active member of the process which, it is argued, allows for a much deeper understanding of the phenomena being examined (Stafford and Stafford, 1993). This method therefore allows greater proximity to consumers in the retail setting in order to observe and understand how they interact with the retail space across a variety of retail environments. In this way, changes in behaviour, responses, and preferences can be

explored across different retail spaces and explored in the broader context of consumers' lives. As part of the emergent design the method also provided an opportunity to examine and build on some of the key issues identified in the analysis.

Accompanying consumers into various retail environments is not new to consumer research. While many previous studies have had a strong experimental focus, utilising controlled field experiments or generating detailed transcripts of verbalised thoughts and actions of consumers (e.g. Park et al., 1989; Iyer, 1989), others have been vague on the methods employed. Early studies using accompanied shopping were largely descendent of the wave of ethnographic studies carried out as part of the Consumer Behaviour Odyssey project (e.g. Sherry, 1990; McGrath, Sherry and Heisley, 1993). More recent studies have used the method to explore consumer behaviour across a range of product categories and service settings such as Niketown (Sherry, 1998a; Penaloza, 1998). The use of 'accompanied trips' e.g. accompanied shopping, drinking, eating, cooking are also becoming an increasingly widely used qualitative methodology within industry contexts (Gordon, 1999). For instance, Gordon and Valentine (1996) have used the technique to understand the communication and purchase dynamics of how consumers shop for a range of FMCG, while more recently Fuller and Adams (1999) accompanied three different groups of girls on a girls' night out, a girls' night in, and on a shopping trip in order to explore their relationships with men. However, while the method has been advocated by a number of academic researchers and practitioners, very little information has been provided on the processes and procedures involved.

One exception has been Otnes et al., (1995) who discussed their experiences of shopping with consumers in their studies of Christmas shopping. The authors argue that the method can be used to understand how consumers process in-store information and also to generate experiential understandings. The researcher can therefore actively participate, interact and observe consumer's naturalistic behaviour and experiences across a variety of retail contexts. Together these studies highlight the opportunity participant observation provides as a means of acquiring immediate information from informants in situ, rather than requesting consumers to recall

motivations and behaviours after shopping trips are completed (McGrath and Otnes, 1995). This unrestricted proximity to the consumer in the retail setting means that researchers can accompany participants to areas of the store, for example queues for the checkout or changing room areas, that may be inaccessible to, or ethically inappropriate for, researchers engaged in passive observation. Furthermore, the method facilitates access to language and behaviour that is more exclusively reserved for companions and friends thereby allowing the researcher to become privy to the 'private ramblings' and 'secret aspirations' of participants which would otherwise remain uncovered (Fuller and Adams, 1999). Nevertheless, despite claims of generating 'naturalistic text' it has been acknowledged that the presence of the researcher will ultimately change the dynamics of the experience (Fuller and Adams, 1999; Gordon, 1999). Consequently the role of the researcher in this context needs to be considered in more detail.

Otnes et al., (1995;107) described their role as 'accompanying informants as they shopped, walking alongside them, observing and making frequent abbreviated notes'. While participants often attempted to involve the researchers in interactions and consulted them on purchase decisions the authors stated they were 'careful to give neutral responses'. The role of the researcher in this context appears to be in line with the category of 'participant-as-observer' identified by Jorgensen (1989). One criticism that has been made of this method is that participants may alter their behaviour in line with what they perceive to be the goals of the project. However, several authors have shown prolonged engagement, debriefing and being personally active rather than neutral can compensate for this limitation.

Woodruff (1996) advocates a more active, participatory role taken by the researcher. She suggests that the researcher must be 'personally involved with the subject', remain subjective where consumption must be explored in the context of the interplay and interaction between meanings and social structures taking the individuals perspective. This is supported by Hirschman and Holbrook (1986) who suggest that a researcher must become personally involved with the phenomenon through role-taking and personal immersion as researchers are the 'measuring

instruments' and their 'personally experienced knowledge serves as scientific data' (1986; 236). Fuller and Adams (1999) also advocate the benefits of researcher participation for creating greater depth and understanding.

'we do not pretend not to be there or to make ourselves invisible but we endeavour to be part of the consumer experience, soaking it up in all its complexity, logging questions and thoughts in our heads to be followed up at a later date. We listen to the language employed and the tensions, frustrations and excitement voiced. We remain with the group of consumers for a sufficient length of time that showmanship is replaced by the reality of behaviour and attitudes' (p3)

In line with these authors and the overall aims of the study, it was felt that the researcher should assume a more involved, dynamic role, becoming in effect a collaborative 'participant in the process' and an interactive 'member' of the shopping party. In this way, participants would be put at ease and the researcher could deliberately create scenarios or be challenging and provocative for instance by taking participants to stores that they might not normally visit. Now that the role of the researcher has been established discussion will turn to the practicalities of conducting the research.

Despite the advantages of conducting participant observation many authors have acknowledged the difficulties and limitations of the method. Firstly, it is demanding of researchers' time and is frequently more costly than other methods as financial incentives are often required for informants' participation. Secondly, it has been argued that the method has limited value as a stand-alone method and is best used in conjunction with other techniques, such as phenomenological interviews (Otnes et al., 1995). Thirdly, in order to minimise psychological distance between the researcher and participant it has been advised that researchers need to approximate the age and lifestyle of the informant (Fuller and Adams, 1999). The authors suggest that this is perhaps even more important when researchers shop with consumers than when they merely interview them. Lastly, criticisms have also surrounded the value of information gathered in participant observation studies and the ethics of

conducting this type of research (Stafford and Stafford, 1993). Each of these concerns will now be addressed in the following sections.

As conducting participant observation is demanding of researchers' time a total of six were conducted. Concerns over its value as a stand-alone method were not a consideration in this study as the method was used in conjunction with a series of in-depth interviews and mini groups. As the researcher was of a similar age and background to participants and a relationship had been established before the accompanied shopping trips took place, this minimised the psychological distance and ensured participants felt at ease in the presence of the researcher. Consent was obtained from participants before the trips took place therefore ethical issues, surrounding covert observation, were not an issue. However other ethical questions and concerns still had to be considered for example whether to accompany participants into the changing rooms. Clearly this was not possible with male shoppers however it was decided that these issues would be assessed on an individual basis with female participants.

Concerns have also been expressed over how information is collected and recorded during the trips. Traditionally, pencil and paper have been used to record observations and interpretations in field research. However, increasingly researchers are using audio recordings and video cameras to record consumers' behaviour in the retail environment (Chandler and Evans, 1999; Miles, 2000; Stevens, 1999). The benefits of these methods are that they produce an accurate and detailed record which can serve as an aid to memory (Jorgensen, 1989). Although video recordings were effectively used in the pilot study to discretely record people shopping it was decided not to utilise this method in the main study. This was primarily because, in contrast to the pilot study where observations were isolated to one store, accompanied shopping trips would involve visiting a wide range of stores which may prohibit the use of cameras. Although consideration was given to attaching a small microphone onto participants' clothing to record discussions and interactions, it was decided that this would be impractical as the sound quality would be affected by the background noise in the stores. In addition to these practical limitations it was believed that the

presence of any recording devices would be too intrusive and therefore may impact on the participants' 'natural' shopping behaviour and responses (Stafford and Stafford, 1993).

For the purposes of recording information during the accompanied shops it was decided to use a notepad and pencil to take abbreviated notes, which would then be written up in detail after the trip had been completed. Although this method of data collection has been criticised as being unreliable, due to cognitive processes affecting accuracy of the information retrieved by researchers (Morrison, Colman and Preston, 1997) these methods are still used extensively, particularly where covert observation is necessary such as in mystery shopping studies (Bromage, 2000; Miller, 1998; Wilson, 1998ab). While recommendations have been made to minimise the errors arising from memory failures such as restricting task complexity and establishing standardised objective measures (Morrison et al., 1997), these concerns were clearly inappropriate in this study as the aim was to understand and explore consumers' unsolicited ideas, actions and behaviours rather than developing assessment criteria. The following sections will outline the process and procedures involved.

In line with Otnes et al., (1995) this method was utilised in conjunction with the series of individual interviews conducted between April and June 2000. At the end of each interview participants were asked whether they would be willing to take part in an accompanied shop. Limited details on what this would entail were supplied. Participants were simply told that this would involve the researcher accompanying them on a shopping trip in Glasgow on a time and day that was convenient for them with the purpose of gaining a better understanding of their 'real' experience of fashion shopping. Participants were also invited to bring with them anyone that would normally accompany them shopping such as a friend, family member or partner. In this way interactions and discussions between the third party could also be observed and recorded. The sum of £20 was offered as an incentive, and to cover any travel expenses participants might incur.

Although all twelve interviewees agreed to take part, six were selected for the next stage. Participants were not necessarily chosen based on the original sampling criteria such as their gender and being a customer of one of the three stores in the study, rather, selection was based on several different criteria. The first was based on how well a rapport had been established with the informant during and immediately after the interview process. For instance, informal conversations often continued after the interview had concluded and on several occasions participants who lived locally were offered a lift home which provided more time to interact. The importance of establishing this rapport and trusting relationship has been reiterated by others (e.g. Otnes et al., 1995; Jorgensen, 1989). Secondly, selection was based on the depth and range of responses provided during the interview and how articulate participants were when describing and thinking about the retail store brands. The last criterion was based on interesting responses, experiences, shopping styles and approaches. For instance, one participant was selected because she was perceived to be a 'strategic shopper' in which the activity was viewed as a highly skilful process. Another informant was selected because he appeared to be an 'experiential shopper' for whom shopping was primarily a social experience.

Each individual was telephoned in December 2000 and asked whether they would still be interested in participating. Two of the six were unable to partake, one due to University placements outside Glasgow, and the other had moved away from the city with her job. An additional two participants were contacted, and agreed to take part. After confirming their interest and availability a letter was sent to their home thanking them and outlining what would be involved (appendix 2). Initially, February was proposed as a suitable time to complete the accompanied shops. As one of the overall aims of the study was to explore consumers' ordinary, everyday experiences of shopping January was rejected as a time to complete the accompanied shops due to the January sales as participants' behaviour and experiences would be different. The researcher's telephone number was supplied in case they had any further questions or problems. It was agreed that informants would be contacted after the Christmas break to arrange a suitable day and time to meet. Christmas cards were sent out as a friendly gesture and to maintain contact. However, while the research

was initially due to be carried out in February, research was later re-scheduled for May 2001. The decision to delay was based on a reflective evaluation of the research process, as it was felt that there would be more benefit gained from conducting the research after more analysis of the interview and group transcripts had been completed. This would allow some of the themes and issues raised in the analysis to be explored in more detail.

A total of six accompanied shops were conducted in May 2001. This included 3 females and 3 males between the ages of 18- 26. The trips took place both during the weekend and weekdays at different times of the day, lasting between two to four hours. Participants were accompanied into a variety of retail outlets in the city centre of Glasgow. While informants directed the trip the researcher, as an 'active' participant in the process, also encouraged informants to visit stores they were not necessarily familiar with, that they didn't enjoy shopping in or that had been mentioned previously in the interview. Participants were accompanied around the store and observed in their encounter with the servicescape, and in their interactions with other customers and service personnel. Female participants were also sometimes accompanied into the changing areas as both researcher and informants tried on clothes and exchanged advice and opinions. This was very much a reciprocal process. Although male shoppers could not be accompanied into changing areas many still actively sought advice and opinions. Abbreviated notes were taken where appropriate during the trip for instance, while the participants were in the changing rooms. After the main shopping trip informants were invited for coffee. This provided a further opportunity to talk about the trip and to ask more detailed questions about their thoughts, behaviour and experiences in relation to some of the themes that had emerged from the analysis. In addition, a number of themes that had emerged from the analysis were discussed and explored further. A tape recorder was used to record responses and immediately after the trip more detailed fieldnotes were written.

The accompanied shop method therefore provided a different level of understanding or dialogue with the consumer. While interviews and groups provided a rich

understanding of participants' consumption experiences, accompanied shops allowed the researcher to gain a much richer understanding of the process and experiences in a more natural setting. The researcher was therefore able to become a co-operative shopping partner or 'participant in the process' in contrast to assuming the role of a passive, 'neutral' observer. In this way the researcher was able to observe interactions with sales staff and other customers and on a more practical level, the brands participants were interacting with and indeed those that they avoided. Conversations over coffee allowed the opportunity to discuss participants experiences and also encouraged participants to reflect on the meaning behind some of their behaviours, shopping decisions and preferences.

4.9 Data Analysis

In line with Thompson et al., (1989) this study attempted to use a phenomenological interpretation to analyse the interview texts in order to develop a multileveled 'thick description' of consumption meanings. This approach relies on several methodological criteria including the emic approach, autonomy of the text, bracketing and hermeneutic endeavour.

The emic approach focuses on the participants' terms and 'lived' experiences where the researcher's conceptual categories are second to the participants' experiential ones. The text of the interview is treated as an autonomous body of data. There is therefore no attempt to corroborate a participant's descriptions with external verification and the interpretation does not 'incorporate' hypotheses, inferences, and conjectures that exceed the evidence provided by the transcript' (Thompson et al., 1989;140). In order to do this preconceived theoretical notions about the phenomena are 'bracketed' or held back rather than imposed on the data. Lastly, interpretation is an iterative process which attempts to relate a part of the text to the whole. This begins with an idiographic (individual) understanding of each interview and then separate interviews are related to each other in order to identify common patterns or global themes.

In line with the emergent design, the timetable for research supported the use of joint collection, coding and analysis of the data. Interview and group audiotapes were transcribed between data collection phases. Transcribing conventions are displayed in Table 4.5. Together with field notes this allowed initial insight and reflection on various emerging categories and themes to inform the following phases of data collection.

Table 4.5 Transcription Conventions

Transcription Conventions	
I:	Interviewer Talking
P:	Participants' speech indicated by a selected initial
...	Pause in speech
.....	Omitted speech which is irrelevant to issue being discussed
(...)	Description of other vocalisations or gestures e.g. (laughs)
TS / TM	Topshop or Topman Customer
N	Next Customer
FC	French Connection Customer
P-shop	Participant Shop Method

In line with Thompson et al., (1989), analysis of the verbatim interview transcripts involved an iterative, part-to-whole reading strategy. Following the completion of the data collection phase, transcripts were reviewed individually to gain a sense of participants' individual experiences. During this initial reading the interpretation process began as various key phrases, broad categories and themes were developed. Summary tables were used to help collate material and key themes identified from each of the tasks.

After the transcripts were analysed individually as separate 'parts', the themes were compared across wider groupings within the 'whole'. For instance transcripts were analysed across participants from the same store groupings and then across participants from all of the stores. Through each iteration, the interpretation was

developed and common themes, experiences and categories were developed. While Thompson et al., (1989) advocates the use of 'bracketing', in practice this method was difficult to implement as the research was continually informed by the literature. However the researcher tried to remain sensitive to these issues and was careful not to make claims that could not be substantiated by the texts in the transcripts. Once this initial interpretation had been made, the transcripts were imported onto QSR NUD*IST Vivo, a qualitative research computer software package.

The decision to employ this software was based on its strengths as a sorting tool that would enable the speedy and systematic collation, coding and retrieval of information from the transcripts. However other advantages of the software including the ability to organise themes into hierarchies, adding memos to documents, colour coding and modelling. These were invaluable tools in helping to manipulate data and explore emerging themes.

After individual transcripts had been imported into the programme preliminary codes were assigned to each document. The package allowed information to be coded using a system of free⁶ and tree⁷ nodes. Initially themes were coded as free nodes however these were later incorporated into a system of hierarchical tree nodes as links and patterns between themes emerged. For example four broad tree nodes were developed. These included themes of 'self', 'environment', 'store' and 'product'. Each of these tree nodes then had a variety of sub-themes. In the case of the 'self' node, sub-themes included gender differences, body image, social activity, shopping orientation, lay marketer, age and stage and shopping styles and activities. As themes and patterns began to emerge and develop, ideas were linked back to other documents and project data. As part of the iterative process, coding was continuously challenged and modified in an attempt to capture the essential dimensions common to all participants' in the interviews and groups.

⁶ Free nodes were the most basic codes that had no links to other nodes.

⁷ Tree nodes were hierarchical structures. This included one main tree node linked to a variety of other more minor nodes in its tree.

While the use of qualitative analysis software packages such as NUD*IST Vivo, have been criticised for 'distancing individuals from the data' (Seidel, 1991) the researcher constantly moved between the individually coded themes, the transcripts as a whole and other fieldnotes. In this way the programme was conceived as just one tool in the analysis armoury.

The themes emerging from the repertory grid and sorting tasks were summarised in tables in order to compare and contrast individual and group constructs across participants. While guidelines in the literature exist on how to construct grids, little advice exists on how to analyse or interpret completed collages. Previous studies have based their analysis on the researcher's interpretation of the images (e.g. Belk et al., 1997), or have used more structured techniques such as content analysis to identify themes (e.g. Hogg et al., 1998). However, consistent with the phenomenological basis of the research inquiry, analysis of the collages was based on participants' own interpretation and discussion of the meanings behind the images selected. The taped commentaries and discussions which accompanied the collages were also transcribed and examined along-side the collages. Similarly, field notes from the participant shops were re-read and the conversations over coffee transcribed and added to the analysis.

Throughout the interpretive process, the developing themes were continuously explored and modified by returning to the concrete experiences described in the interviews, groups and accompanied shops. In presenting this account the goal was therefore to derive a number of themes or dimensions which would allow the presentation of information to readers in a way that retained the holistic quality characterising participants' descriptions and experiences.

4.10 Evaluation of the study

While there exists a vast literature dedicated to discussions of various qualitative research methodologies and procedures, less work has considered the evaluation of research. Thompson (1990a) argues that the evaluative process for qualitative

research is difficult due to important methodological and philosophical differences that underlie each approach as well as the absence of less formalised evaluative criteria. Consequently 'quality' in qualitative research appears to be more of an elusive phenomenon (Seale, 1999: 20).

In an attempt to evaluate qualitative work many researchers have applied positivist criteria. A case in point is Miles and Huberman (1984) who contend that qualitative research must address issues of verification (validity of conclusions), reliability and generalisability. In opposition to this position, Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed alternative criterion for naturalistic enquirers to evaluate the 'trustworthiness' of their research. This included credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. However, despite Lincoln and Guba's (1985) efforts, many have argued that these bear a strong conceptual parallel to positivist criteria of internal validity, external validity, reliability and objectivity (Thompson,1990a; Holt, 1991).

Denzin (1988) argues that by attempting to make qualitative research 'scientifically' respectable, researchers may be imposing schemes of interpretation on the social world that simply do not fit that world as it is constructed and lived by interacting individuals (1988;432). This is consistent with Seale (1999) who states the criteria of 'validity' and 'reliability' are no longer adequate to encapsulate the range of issues that a concern for quality must raise. This, the author suggests, reflects the 'difficulty in regulating and constraining an endeavour whose guiding philosophy often stresses creativity, exploration, conceptual flexibility and a freedom of spirit' (Seale, 1999:43).

An alternative position is proposed by Thompson (1990a) who argues for the importance of evaluating interpretive research in line with its philosophical roots. Drawing on gestalt psychology he emphasises the importance of the holistic perspective which seeks to develop and use methods that allow for a first-person description of lived experience. However while Thompson takes a different stance to positivist positions both share a common commitment to conducting rigorous, empirical research which produces a credible interpretation as it has emerged from

the data. These issues have been resolved in a number of ways in this study by the use of an emergent design and multiple methods of data collection, prolonged engagement within the retail setting and an effort to prioritise the voice of the consumer.

The use of multiple methods of data collection were well suited to exploring and capturing the experiential, multi-sensoral dimensions of young fashion consumers' consumption behaviour and their experiences of retail space. While in positivist research, multiple methods are used to establish convergent validity, in this study multiple methods of data collection have been used to access different realms of experience. In this way different methods have generated new and alternative insights which together provide a more holistic representation of consumers' experiences. This is consistent with Arnould and Wallendorf (1994) who suggest that rather than asking which type of data provides greater validity, ethnographic research uses each data type to give voice to a particular perspective on behaviour. According to Geertz (1973) the researcher is faced with

'... a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which he must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render' (p10)

As part of the emergent design each method was able to build and add to our understanding of these issues in a number of different ways. Preliminary research incorporating different observational methods allowed the researcher to explore some of the themes discussed in the literature in order to gain a greater understanding of young fashion consumers' experiences at the point of sale. The combination of phenomenological interviews and mini groups provided an in-depth thick descriptive account of these experiences. This allowed a greater exploration of the meanings consumers ascribed to their fashion consumption experiences and the significance of store design issues. Finally prolonged engagement with participants during the accompanied shopping trips provided an insight into consumers' experiences through their eyes. In this way changes in behaviour and preferences could be explored across a variety of retail environments in the broader context of consumers lives.

Consistent with the emergent design of the study, accompanied shopping trips also provided an opportunity for the researcher to explore themes that had been raised in previous stages of the analysis.

Throughout both the data collection and analysis phases of the study the researcher aimed to give voice to the consumer by privileging the experiences of informants. For instance, phenomenological interviews and mini groups placed the informant as expert where emphasis was placed on their own experiences of fashion shopping. Tasks were left very open for participants to compare and contrast retail stores in their own terms.

Similarly, during the process of data analysis the researcher attempted to hold to Thompson et al's (1989) autonomy of the text so that any interpretation was supported by evidence in the transcripts. Furthermore informal discussions of the transcripts with fellow colleagues served as an additional means of questioning the emerging analysis, providing new insights and sensitising the researcher to important issues and themes. However, consistent with Shankar and Patterson (2001), the researcher was aware that all that can be offered is *an* interpretation not *the* interpretation as multiple meanings are inherent in each text. In this way the researcher acknowledged that every interpretation is authored; the reader is the ultimate judge as there is no single interpretive truth rather there are multiple interpretive communities, each with its own criteria for evaluating an interpretation (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000).

'You either grasp an interpretation or you do not, see the point of it or you do not, accept it or do not. Imprisoned in the immediacy of its own detail, it is presented as self-validating, or worse, as validated by the supposed sensitivities of the person who presents it' (Geertz,1973:24).

4.11 Conclusions

This chapter has outlined and provided rationale for the research objectives, approach and methods taken. It has justified the broadly interpretive research

approach adopted by contrasting this position to the positivist philosophy. The chapter has described the application of an ethnographic approach and outlined details of a preliminary study that provided an indication of the richness of the area and its amenability to interpretive research. The main study was then introduced using a mixed methods approach, which included in-depth interviews, mini group discussions and a series of accompanied shops. Finally, the study was evaluated in terms of its ability to provide a holistic account of consumers lived experiences.

The emphasis of prioritising the voice of the consumer across the research design holds many advantages over more traditional deductive approaches as they are able to capture a range of responses across different service settings, providing a more holistic understanding and generating new insights. Chapter Five provides a brief orientation to the stores participating in the study. Subsequent chapters explore the themes that have emerged from the analysis, highlighting some of the theoretical perspectives and literature that supports them. Extensive use of quotations is made to support the emerging themes whilst maintaining as much of the essence of peoples' experiences as possible.

Part Three: Analysis and Conclusions

CHAPTER FIVE

AN ORIENTATION TO THE STORES

5.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a brief orientation to the research by introducing the three retail fashion chain stores participating in the study. It begins by providing background on the 'New' Glasgow, illustrating its emergence as a key destination for fashion retailing. The chapter will then introduce each of the three stores participating in the study namely French Connection, Next and Topshop/Topman. Background information on each of the brands will be provided along with a description of the servicescape and photographs of the store interiors.

5.2 The 'New' Glasgow

Like many industrial towns and cities in the UK, Glasgow has witnessed a transformation in its economy from its previous reliance on shipbuilding, locomotive and engineering industries to its reinvention as a service-based post industrial economy (Van den Berg et al, 1995). As the largest city in Scotland, the 'New' Glasgow (Warhurst et al, 2000) is the third most visited city as a tourism destination in UK and acts as a key destination for clothes shopping. Over recent years the city has grown a national and indeed international reputation for fashion retailing and continues to be ranked second only to London amongst the UK's retail centres (Warhurst, 2001).

In addition to the presence of a wide variety of national and international chain stores on the high street, the city has a number of shopping centre developments such as the St Enoch Centre, Buchanan Galleries and the Braehead retail park in Paisley. Along with the high street retailers the city also has a flourishing designer fashion retail market with the prime focus being Princes Square and the Italian centre located in

the recently renovated Merchant City area. The new Glasgow, Davidson (1998;14) states, now has a 'quixotic image as a city of free-spending, label-loving, high fashion consumers'.

The following sections provide background information on the stores participating in the study, based on a variety of corporate documents supplied by each of the companies.

5.3 French Connection

The French Connection Group was founded in 1967 by Stephen Marks with a range of exclusive tailored womenswear marketed under his own name. However, recognising the need for a less expensive and more accessible collection aimed at a broader market he launched the French Connection Label in 1972. Since then French Connection has grown steadily over the years, launching menswear in 1976 and childrenswear in 1986. In the early 1980s, when the company was floated on the London Stock Exchange, its operations included a portfolio of distinct but closely related fashion labels, shops worldwide, a buying office in Hong Kong and substantial businesses in France and in the United States. From the mid 1980s the company began to invest substantially in updating its image and presentation. Initiatives were begun in areas such as shop design, graphics, advertising, packaging, PR and marketing.

French Connection has continued to expand and now has 30 stores in the UK and over 50 stores worldwide. The UK division spans nation-wide from solus shop outlets to department store concessions. Successful worldwide trading is reflected in the Group's turnover which increased by 25.2% from £93.7 million to £117.3 million during the year 1998-1999. £13.1 million of this increase came from the retail division reflecting a 34.2% increase in selling space (French Connection PLC Annual Report 1999). The French Connection image today is high fashion and fun personified by the edgy FCUK brand logo. Within the fashion industry, the company is well known for its injection of strong design content into commercial high street

merchandise. Internally it is the Group's policy to consolidate the areas of business which have provided the backbone of its growth, while consistently tackling new challenges in the market-place.

French Connection Glasgow is part of Princes Square shopping centre located on Buchanan Street. The store is split on two levels of the centre with womenswear on the first floor and menswear collections on the second. The simple glass frontage (Plate 5.1) and minimal window displays not only make for a dynamic and eye-catching entrance but also draw attention to the interior of the store, inviting the customer into the space.



Plate 5.1 French Connection Exterior

The store is very spacious and has a light and airy atmosphere. The white interior and cream marble floors create a clean and fresh feel to the space. The lighting is subtle, a combination of spotlights and larger modern industrial fittings. Minimal displays incorporating wood, glass and aluminium fittings create simple clean lines and shapes, giving the store a very contemporary feel (Plate 5.2). In the centre of the



Plate 5.2 French Connection Womenswear

space, hanging merchandise is displayed on free-standing fixtures as well as a selection folded on tables. Life sized mannequins on raised platforms and separate displays for the FC: Face cosmetics, bathroom and lingerie ranges are also strategically placed around the store, which has the effect of breaking up the space.

Merchandise is also displayed on simple front and side-facing metal wall fixtures (Plate 5.3). There are also separate wooden shelving displays for shoes and other accessories. These simple, clean uncluttered displays are spotlighted, highlighting individual pieces of merchandise. This almost gives the impression that one is observing precious objects or art in a gallery setting.



Plate 5.3 French Connection Menswear



Plate 5.4 FC Slogan

Hanging on the walls, amongst the displays, are enlarged photographic images of the latest collections (Plate 5.3). In addition there are smaller images on cards placed on the shelving around the store. Many feature the latest FCUK advertising brand slogans that include a clever play on words (Plate 5.4). These bold, eye-catching logos are also clearly visible on products such as T-shirts, packaging and hangers enhancing brand awareness within the space itself.

Towards the back of the first floor, in the middle of the space, is a rectangular carpeted area with four large brown leather easy chairs (Plate 5.5). These comfortable chairs, combined with the mellow soul and jazz music playing in the background, create a relaxed and laid back atmosphere.



Plate 5.5 Leather Easy Chairs

5.4 Next

J.Hepworth & Son, Gentlemen's Tailors was established in Leeds in 1864. In 1981 Hepworths bought the chain of Kendalls stores to develop a womenswear group of shops called Next. With the successful launch of the womenswear chain in 1982, Next expanded into menswear in 1984 and opened the first mini-department store format in Edinburgh incorporating womenswear, menswear, shoes and a cafe. Since then the company has continued to expand into different areas including Interiors in 1985, childrenswear in 1987 and Next Directory home shopping in 1988.

The company currently has over 300 stores throughout the U.K. and Ireland and a further 33 stores trading in 16 countries worldwide. The Next target customer is between 20-44 years, of ABC 1 social grouping with a core age of 23-35 years and average age of 26. Approximately one half of sales are womenswear, one third menswear and of the remainder childrenswear is the largest product group. The Next brand is designed to appeal to customers who have a contemporary and modern classic fashion profile. The year to January 2001 was a period of growth for Next as retail sales turnover increased 11% to £1,588m with profit before tax increasing from £195m in 2000 to £218m (Next Annual Report and Accounts).

The Next store in Glasgow, located on the corner of Argyle Street and Queen Street, is the largest of four stores in the city centre. While the main entrance to the store is on Argyle street (Plate 5.6) the store can also be accessed from the Queen Street entrance. The store has a simple cream exterior with the black and cream Next logo. Each window stages a carefully themed display with the latest season's colours and styles brought to life with enlarged glossy photographs.



Plate 5.6 Next Exterior

The store has three floors. The womenswear collection is located on the first floor (Plate 5.7), menswear and homewear on the second floor and childrenswear and homewear in the basement. Due to the size of the space store directories are situated at each entrance and clear illuminated signs throughout direct customers to the appropriate areas of the store such as the changing rooms and cash desks (Plate 5.7).



Plate 5.7 Next Womenswear

Each floor of the store has been arranged into a variety of clearly themed areas such as formal/business wear, everyday casualwear and eveningwear. In the summer months the store also had a 'holiday shop' area which contained a selection of holiday accessories such as sunglasses, swimwear and summer footwear. The rear of the store contains accessories, footwear and two main cash desks. Changing rooms are also situated along the back wall of the store on each floor.

The flooring is wooden but free standing hanging fixtures have been placed centrally on large square carpeted areas which has the effect of slowing customers down. Despite the density of these display areas, wooden walkways provide a clear pathway through the store. The walls and ceiling are cream, gently highlighted by subtle spotlights and uplighting along the top of the wall displays and behind fixtures which creates a light and airy atmosphere.



Plate 5.8 Next Menswear



Plate 5.9 Next Shirt Display

Merchandise is also displayed on hanging metal front and side facing fixtures along the walls (Plate 5.8). In menswear there are also a number of wooden wall fixtures that present a co-ordinated display of ties and shirts highlighting the versatility of the merchandise (Plate 5.9). Photographs of the current collections also break up the uniformity and density of the displays. Overall the subtle fixtures and lighting, clear signage and co-ordinated displays creates an interesting and inviting space.

5.5 Topshop / Topman

Topshop and Topman are part of the Arcadia group, UK's second largest clothing retailer. Formally the Burton Group Plc the company was founded eponymously as 'Montague Burton' in 1900. Since its inception the company has grown through a series of acquisitions and expansion programmes which recently saw the incorporation of the Sears womenswear business in 1999. The group now has a total of twelve brands, selling men's and womenswear from over 2,600 outlets in the UK and more than 200 internationally¹.

Topshop/Topman brands were launched in the mid 1960s and since then have maintained a reputation for putting new ideas on the high street first. The brands provide affordable clothing for young fashion conscious consumers between the ages of 16-24. Topman has 145 solus stores and Topshop a total of 181, but both also have concessions in Arcadia group outlets and Debenhams department stores. Reflecting the strength and popularity of the brand, Topshop was recently voted High Street Retailer of the Year by the British Fashion Council. While figures for Topshop/Topman brands are unavailable the Arcadia group as a whole reported disappointing results for the year end in 2000 with a loss of £8.5m before tax compared with a profit of £41.8 m the previous year.

Topshop / Topman, the largest of two stores in the city centre, is located on Argyle street. The windows feature life sized mannequins and are crammed full of the current season's must-have clothes and accessories. Large posters of the latest collection form the background to the busy displays, which mask the store interior (Plate 5.10). The store is clearly separated into Topshop, located on the ground floor, and Topman, on the lower level, which is accessed by an escalator from Topshop.

¹ Menswear brands include Topman and Burton Menswear. Womenswear brands include Dorothy Perkins, Miss Selfridge, Topshop, Warehouse, Evans, Wallis and Principles. Arcadia also have an additional four brands: Outfit, out-of-town stores that offer a range of Arcadia and external brands; Racing Green and Hawkshead, which are primarily home shopping brands and were sold by the company in late 2001.



Plate 5.10 Topshop Exterior

The raised platform on entering the store allows an overview of the whole space. On descending the stairs customers are faced with a sea of clothes displayed on free standing metal fixtures, each crammed full of merchandise. There does not appear to be any clear pathway through the space, rather customers are left to find their own route through the store. There are lots of small alcoves and corners to explore, often hidden by the large pillars throughout the space.

Merchandise is displayed in different areas of the store representing different fashion styles and Topshop/Topman brands. Walls are crammed with layers of merchandise and brightly coloured price points catching customers' attention (Plate 5.11). Large photographic images interspersed among the displays as well as life-sized mannequins help to break up the space.



Plate 5.11 Topshop Interior



Plate 5.12 Topman Interior

The store is quite dark but makes use of a wide range of lighting formats such as large industrial lights, strip lighting and spotlights, illuminating merchandise displayed on wall fixtures. The open roof exposes the twisted pipes and metal fixtures which gives the space a very modern, urban feel (Plate 5.12).



Plate 5.13 MTV Screens



Plate 5.14 Table Football

The store has a very stimulating, lively atmosphere. Loud chart music plays in the background while MTV images are projected onto large video walls throughout the store (Plate 5.13). The latest fashion, music and entertainment magazines are also

available for customers to browse. In Topshop there are numerous large displays of accessories as well as make-up 'tester zones' and customised sticker machines. In Topman, interspersed among the merchandise displays are game stations and table football (Plate 5.14). These entertainment stations, the diversity and range of displays, and sheer quantity of merchandise creates a lively, interesting and engaging space.

5.3 Conclusions

This chapter has briefly introduced Glasgow as the location for the research and has provided background descriptions and visual images of the stores participating in the study. It is hoped that these descriptions, while not inclusive of all dimensions of the retail space, have provided a flavour or character of the space highlighting some of the main design features. This provides some context for later chapters that will explore consumers' interpretation and reading of these retail spaces in more detail. Chapter Six now presents insights into consumers' experiences of these retail brands.

CHAPTER SIX

RETAIL BRAND EXPERIENCES

6.1 Introduction

Chapter Three introduced literature concerned with retail store brands and explored some of the innovative ways in which retailers are attempting to create exciting and memorable retail brand experiences. The emphasis in this analysis however is not on the means by which retailers can build and strengthen their brands, but on consumers' 'lived experiences' of these brands. The chapter proposes that consumers are not just passive participants who react to the stimuli presented by retailers; rather they are sophisticated 'lay marketers' who have a wide knowledge and experience of a vast number of retail store brands.

The chapter begins by exploring the impersonal meanings related to the utility of the brand in terms of dimensions such as price, quality and product range. Attention then focuses on the personal and symbolic attachments young fashion consumers have with various retail store brands. This illustrates the depth and range of experiences individuals have with the retail store and product brand. Finally the chapter presents several over-riding themes concerned with consumers' shopping identities and roles. These themes include the notion of the consumer as 'lay marketer', tensions between shrewd and seduced shoppers and the 'mish-mash' generation.

6.2 Impersonal Meanings: The Utility of the Brand

The majority of discussions with informants began with conversations and statements surrounding fashion and their involvement with various retail store brands. Participants compared brands with which they were familiar and evaluated

these by identifying their personal favourites and comparing these with brands that they avoided or disliked.

I suppose I'm quite conscious of fashion trends and what's current. I've got my own set of shops that I always visit like French Connection, Reiss, Topshop and River Island whereas there's others, like USC, that I avoid like the plague and more commercialised brands, like Kappa or Tommy Hillfiger, that I wouldn't be seen dead wearing! (Interview 4 FC Male)

Participants appeared to have a personal repertoire of retail brands that they regularly visited and/or purchased, and with the aid of the sorting task and repertory grid they were able to compare and group these stores together across multiple dimensions. Salient categories centred on functional and practical constructs such as the range and type of products sold, quality and price dimensions. Participants also frequently commented on store location and issues such as the store's market position and target customer. For example one group of male and female French Connection customers compared retail brands on the basis of product attributes (style, price, quality), target customers (age, lifestyle) and the store format/positioning (high street, chains, department store, designer) (see Table 6.1). The category descriptions (middle column) provide some key words used by participants to describe the basis on which the groups were defined.

Table 6.1 Group Sorting Task

Category Number	Category Description	Affiliated Stores
1	'Similar style, age of customer and layout'	Gap, Jigsaw, French Connection
2	'Up to the minute'	Oasis, Warehouse
3	'Big prints and floaty skirts'	Monsoon, Laura Ashley
4	'High street stores, teenagery'	Miss Selfridge, Topshop, H&M, USC, Jeffrey Rogers, River Island, Dorothy Perkins
5	'Big chains'	Next, Wallis, Principles
6	'A British institution'	Marks and Spencer's
7	'Real cheapies...spit pea through tops'	Internationale, New Look
8	'Preppy'	Racing Green, Hobbs
9	'High Fashion'	Diesel, Karen Millen

While several overlapping categories were used by informants, a number of more personal constructs were alluded to based on participant's own experiences of the store brand. Most of these dimensions were captured in individual interviews as opposed to group discussions as individuals were perhaps less inhibited in this context and in contrast to the groups, no consensus or compromises had to be reached. For instance, one female Next shopper (Table 6.2), categorised stores across a number of dimensions which included the store location and interior (layout, 'feel', format), customer base (age, gender), sales personnel (sales approach, age, style), product (range, price, quality) and promotions (advertising campaigns, use of catalogues).

Table 6.2 Interview Sorting Task

Category Number	Category Description	Affiliated Stores
1	'cluttered', 'bargain basement feel', 'disorganised' 'cheap & cheerful', 'noisy', 'young',	Internationale, New Look, Miss Selfridge, H&M
2	'expensive yet affordable', 'well tailored', 'modern clean lines', 'minimalist', 'located in Princess Square', 'trendy and with-it staff'	French Connection, Karen Millen
3	'casual everyday wear –denim'' 'TV promotions – Gap for everyone' 'different formats –baby, kids, adults', 'American' 'International brand - same store format world-wide'	Gap
4	'similar product range' 'subtle' 'everyday wear', 'mature staff', 'possess both store cards'	Next, Principles
5	'real high street shops', 'standard', 'behind the times', 'mumsy, 'over-sized'	Wallis, Dorothy Perkins, River Island
6	'pushy staff', 'obnoxious' 'designer' 'over-priced',	Diesel, USC
7	'individual' 'broad appeal - from teenagers to pensioners',	Marks and Spencer's
8	'same designers', 'similar merchandise and accessories, 'similar layout – wooden floors, iron fixtures' 'both solo female stores'	Oasis, Warehouse

While individual sorting tasks varied in the level of detail provided by informants, the repertory grid exercise consistently elicited a much broader range of dimensions and more in-depth exploration of different brand constructs. Many of the constructs that emerged from this task resembled those found in the sorting task such as those based on product attributes, market positionings, target customers as well as components relating specifically to the retail space such as the type/level of service offered, location, layout etc. However, the repertory grid provided greater opportunity for participants to expand upon these dimensions, commenting in more detail about the meanings of each construct and drawing on their own personal experiences of the brand. Table 6.3 provides an illustration of one female French Connection informant's grid.

The main constructs defined by the participant are listed down the left side and the three stores or elements being compared are illustrated across the top of the grid. In this case three grids, which included a total of seven different stores, were completed. As French Connection was the store the participant was recruited from it was used consistently in each grid. Each grey shaded cell indicates the store that was selected by the informant as the odd one out and on what basis this was defined. For instance, in the first grid both French Connection and Next are perceived to be similar as their products are high quality with a classic design. This is contrasted with Topshop/Topman which was labelled as the odd one out on this construct as the stores products were perceived to be high fashion but of a lower quality. Cells without shading were constructs in which the participant was unable to define one store as the odd one out as each was differentiated on their own basis. For instance, in the first grid each store was perceived to have a distinct market positioning (high, medium, low).

Table 6.3 Repertory Grid

Constructs	French Connection	Next	Topshop / Topman
Positioning	High	Medium	Low
Product	High quality Classic Design	High quality Classic Design	Poorer Quality High Fashion Larger Product Range
Price	Higher Price (exclusive)	Inexpensive (basics)	Inexpensive (throw- away)
Store	Located in Princess sq Minimalist (airy, light) Pleasure	High Street Locations Cluttered, cramped, dense Battle	High Street Locations Cluttered, cramped, dense Battle
Atmosphere	Quieter, calmer	Quieter, calmer	Loud, brash, 'in your face'
Customers	Young (18-30) Fashion conscious	Mature (18-55+) Less fashion aware (conservative)	Young (13-20) Fashion conscious
Sales Personnel	Always available Attentive, helpful, knowledgeable	Few available to consult Limited knowledge	Few available to consult Limited knowledge

Constructs	French Connection	Diesel	Racing Green
Image	Continental Feel	Continental Feel	American Feel
	Aggressive / controversial advertising and promotion 'Brands with attitude'	Aggressive / controversial advertising and promotion 'Brands with attitude'	Simple – 'plain Jane' Conforming
Product	Higher Price, quality Eveningwear	Renowned for denim- wear More risqué / unique fashion	Less Expensive Poorer Quality Casualwear Prints and Patterns
Customer	Younger Trendier, fashion conscious	Younger Trendier, fashion	Mature / Old fashioned Price / Value conscious
Brand	Well respected and recognised brands Logo displayed on merchandise	Well respected and recognised brands Logo displayed on merchandise	Primarily catalogue brand 'no label'
Store Layout & Merchandising	Use of Posters and photographs in display Larger stores	Unusual and innovative Clothes are the 'advert' used in the display Smaller store	Use of Posters and photographs in display Larger stores

Constructs	French Connection	Laura Ashley	New Look
Product	High quality well made clothes	High quality well made clothes	High stock turnover Variety of fashion styles/trends Designer imitation Poor Quality
		Range includes homewear & furnishings	
Store Layout	Spacious – meander around store	Cluttered & Cramped – ‘forced’ in one direction	Cluttered & Cramped – ‘forced’ in one direction
Merchandising	‘Lifestyle displays – displayed in outfits	‘Lifestyle displays – displayed in outfits	Displayed in blocks of colour not cut or style of product
Lighting	Subtle, natural feel	Subtle, natural feel	Bright, artificial, tacky
‘Feel’	Friendly	Boring	Claustrophobic/ Cramped
Customer	Modern / Fashionable	Old fashioned -Caught in a time warp	Modern / Fashionable
Image	Sophisticated, up-to-date	Twee, flowery, classic	Tacky, cheap, current

The repertory grid analysis appeared to confirm store market positionings as detailed in the sampling framework in Chapter Four. Informants also showed an awareness of other high street retail brands and were able to compare different constructs such as product type and range, price, store layout and location across a wide selection of stores. The majority of responses were pragmatic and analytical illustrating participants’ apparent detached and indifferent feelings toward these brands. In line with Rook (2001) one reason for this lack of personal involvement is perhaps due to consumers’ difficulty in expressing or verbalising their thoughts. Participants may therefore rationalise their thoughts, reducing the retail brand into functional attributes and dimensions. These impersonal descriptions may also be due to the nature of the tasks that had a practical orientation or were perhaps as a result of participants’ expectations about the goals of the research. Nevertheless, there were some indications from discussions that there was a greater level of depth to individuals’ experiences and understandings of retail store brands. For example, several informants alluded to more personal accounts and experiences when asked to expand upon elicited constructs. Some of these personal constructs, symbolic meanings and experiences will be discussed in the following section.

6.3 Personal Meanings: Brands as a 'Symbolic Resource'

Participants were very aware of the symbolic nature of retail store brands and discussed how the perceived image of the stores often reflected the image that they wished to portray as a shopper. For instance one customer described the importance he placed on buying and wearing established brands and the feeling of reassurance this gives him.

Everything I've bought is a brand name. I would never buy anything else. It's *got* to be. I just can't walk around wearing a pair of jeans that don't have a good name on them. I think the worst pair of jeans I've probably got is a pair of Levis. I keep seeing people wearing Easy jeans...I just couldn't be seen wearing those...it's not that they're not comfy, it's just I don't feel right when I wear something that's not a brand name. I don't know if that's just me, the way I've been...obviously when I was younger, you know, you didn't get much of a choice, your mum buys you what you need. But once you get to that age you just start buying things and I suppose you work yourself into an everyday kinda system. (Group 5 TM Male)

These brands appear to be used as a symbolic resource in constructing his identity and as a means of establishing and asserting his own independence. This form of 'symbolic work' (Willis, 1990) was reflected in many discussions with young informants who used brands to explore and express their individual identities. This was particularly evident among informants of this age group as many were at transitional phases or stages of their lives from depending on parents to make informed decisions to negotiating their own independence, style and identity. For instance many customers described going through a 'label phase' where it was important to have visible logos and brands on clothing to a greater extent than other attributes such as the quality and price of the merchandise.

When you're younger you do tend to go with what everyone else is wearing...it's just a label phase...I remember when everything I owned had to have a label on it but when you mature a bit you're not so fussed...you still like to fit in, but you're not so worried about the style you do it in. It's your own individuality that you're looking to fit in...(Group 6 FC Male)

While a few participants commented on the importance of wearing brand names the majority of informants described actively avoiding or resisting overtly branded clothing or what seem to be viewed as highly 'commercialised' retail brands. Indeed many talked about the increasing 'commercialisation' or over-exposure of certain brands such as Next and Gap.

...Next, I hardly ever go in there, it's too commercialised. Next, everybody wears Next clothes, that bugs me. I know this is a pure shopping snob coming out here but it's just because I go shopping a lot, because I know what people are wearing and I don't think Next has it's own identity...everybody goes there, even my mother and my gran (Interview 3 FC Female)

I don't like Gap. I think its just too kinda....BLA....you know what I mean...just too kinda GAP. Where did you get your top mate (laughs)...you know what I mean? (laughs) (Interview 4 Male FC)

Both informants reject these brands in an effort to differentiate themselves from other customers. These retail brands are therefore socially symbolic and in this case appear to reflect a lack of individuality. Just as the second informant commented on the conspicuous Gap Logo tops, many other participants mentioned the Gap retail store brand. One Topman customer stated that although he liked the store he didn't usually buy from it because it is 'on TV so much and it's sort of mass consumerism'. Klein (2000) suggests that this may be part of a broader emerging backlash against large corporate brands with high name-brand recognition.

Many of these descriptions of the store brand are extended or derived from the product attributes themselves. However it was also evident that consumers derived symbolic meaning from other dimensions such as carrying branded bags.

I think a lot of its to do with the image that you want to perceive...the image that you want to take on. Like you might not want to walk down the street with a certain carrier bag but you'd be happy to swing along a different one. I mean you wouldn't want to walk down the road with a Quiz bag but you'd be quite happy with a Jane Norman bag. A lot of it's to do with the image you want to give other people. Like who you are as a shopper and what

you are prepared to pay for clothes and stuff. So it's the whole kind of image that that shop gives to everyone...

I: and what's the image that you would like people to associate with you?

S: well obviously I wouldn't want to walk down the street with a 'What Every Women's'¹ bag because everyone would think 'she's a bit of a cheap-skate!' I just like to shop in shops that I know provide nice fashionable clothes that aren't snobby or that aren't really cheap and tacky as well.... (Group 9 FC Female)

In this example the informant recognises that the bag an individual carries is socially symbolic reflecting the actual self or ideal self. A few customers also admitted re-using designer bags or bags that they perceived to be from more prestigious stores. This was a means of signalling their aspirations to membership of a particular group of shoppers, or symbolising their affiliation to a fashion store brand.

...sometimes if I've bought something really special and expensive I save the bag and use it for other things...I've got a wardrobe stuffed full of them ! I don't really know why I do it...I suppose it's because it's nice having people recognise the shop and to think 'oh lucky you !' (Interview 5 TS Female)

It is evident from the examples above that retail brands are multi-dimensional constructs. At this transitional stage consumers not only use retail brands for their utility but also as a symbolic resource for the creation and maintenance of identity (Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998). Retail brands are therefore used both to establish membership of social groups or to differentiate individuals from others in their search for independence and autonomy. This is consistent with some of the literature outlined in Chapter Three which recognised that the post-modern consumer searches for identity through consumption and the symbolic meanings of brands. Consumers therefore appear to have a much deeper more meaningful relationship with retail store brands than described in section 6.2. The next section focuses on informants' retail store experiences.

¹ 'What Every Woman's' refers to the retail store 'What Every Woman Wants' part of What Everyone Wants Limited (WEW), a discount clothing chain.

6.4 Retail Store Experiences

The store brand was conceptualised across a number of broad dimensions. These included informants' impression of high street brands in terms of their location, format and range of brands, their market positioning defined along a continuum from higher priced/prestige outlets to lower priced/quality stores, as well as their target customers based on typical and idealised users of the brand. While these definitional frameworks were fairly consistent across informants and reinforced retailers positioning statements (see section 6.2), the analysis revealed that customers personalised the store brand drawing on their own metaphors and analogies. These personal meanings and interpretations therefore contribute to a richer and deeper insight into these themes.

6.4.1 High Street Brands

In general participants were very comfortable talking about the notion of a 'retail store brand'. Informants appeared to differentiate between prestigious high fashion designer and couture brands such as Armani and Versace which were only seen on the catwalk and fashion magazines, and more 'common' fashion brands located on the high street. These familiar high street brands were then grouped or categorised in the consumer's mind along a number of different dimensions. One of these dimensions was concerned with where the store was physically located, highlighting the importance of the tangible and physical location in constructing the brand.

Participants distinguished between stores located in shopping complexes both out of town, such as the new Braehead shopping centre in Paisley, and in the centre of Glasgow, such as Buchanan Galleries and the St Enoch's centre, to more prestigious locations like the Italian Centre and Princes Square. Stores were also differentiated on the basis of which shopping area or street they were located in. For instance, Buchanan Street was considered by many shoppers as a more 'exclusive' and 'up-market' high street location compared with Argyle Street and Sauchiehall Street. Indeed many informants often commented that Buchanan Street was the place to be

seen shopping. Each street therefore appeared to assume a shopping identity of its own

These shops (points to Monsoon, Hobbs, Jigsaw, French Connection, Diesel) are all along Buchanan street which is a bit more up-market, a bit more expensive and exclusive whereas these stores (New Look, River Island, Oasis, Warehouse) are around the St Enoch centre and Argyle street which I think has most of the stores you seem to see in any big city...(Interview 1 Next Female)

Participants were also very aware of different retail store formats as one informant compared different Oasis locations and formats in Glasgow.

They've got a new great big Oasis in Princes Square and then lots of smaller shops all around Glasgow like the one in Argyle street and Buchanan Galleries and they've also got a tiny wee one in Frasers...they're all Oasis shops but just different sizes with different stock. I suppose it's like Tesco having the bigger stores out of town and the smaller Tesco Metro stores in the middle...(Group 4 Next Female)

Many participants were interested in the current business climate in terms of the winners and losers on the high street and their main competitors. For instance one participant described the problems Marks and Spencer and C&A were facing in contrast to other high street competitors such as Next and Levi's.

I think over the last couple of years a lot of brands have had to change. I mean Marks and Spencer's have just had their store renovated and new ranges brought in...they had to change their image big time because all their stuff was stone age...C&A is another one. They used to be absolutely huge and now they've disappeared...the problem was they were such big stores and they thought 'oh we're a precedent for setting a standard of clothing design' but in the end they haven't listened to what's been going on outside and noticed the rise of Next, Topshop and Levi's. I think they thought they were untouchable because they're such a big store but at the end of the day people vote with their feet... (Male FC, P-Shop)

Informants also distinguished between high street store brands and the product brands that were stocked.

In my mind I would think of Gap as a store but I would say that the clothes within the shop are also the brand...I suppose it's a pure brand but within some shops its not as clear as you've got lots of different brands like when we were in USC they've got French Connection and Diesel and Miss Sixty and all these different brands...(P-shop FC Female)

In this example the informant differentiates between 'pure' retail store brands such as the Gap in which the brand name relates both to the store itself and the clothing product brand, and stores such as USC which carries a range of different product brands. Its image is therefore somewhat diluted in the consumers mind.

6.4.2. Market Positioning

Another way in which consumers differentiated between these high street brands was in terms of their perceived market positioning. Indeed this was a frequent means of grouping stores together in both the sorting and repertory grid tasks. While informants were not always necessarily accurate in their assessments it was the reasoning behind these judgements that was of interest. Stores were primarily ranked on a continuum from high priced, prestigious stores to lower price/quality outlets.

In terms of the stores participating in this study, French Connection was described as the top end of the high street market bordering on what consumers frequently referred to as a 'designer label' or 'designer brand'.

I would say French Connection is on the border between sort of mainstream fashion and designer label so it's in between, it's got a bit of credibility as well about it and it's a wee bit different whereas Next and Topshop you can buy more or less the same thing as any other shop...whereas French Connection is more label or brand oriented...(Group 6 FC Male)

Comparisons were made with other high street stores and retail spaces in order to contrast its market positioning. One Next customer describes the store's positioning in terms of other places he was familiar with. In doing so he draws on his own metaphors and analogies.

Next is like going into the Tunnel night club in Glasgow whereas River Island is like going to Bonkers which is a bit more down market....like going to a classy wine bar or going for a pint and a pie'.

Next store could be like Marks and Spencer's wee brother, son or daughter or even trendy cousin, that kind of idea. They are definitely related whereas I couldn't see Next with Littlewoods...it's just a bit more down-market' (Interview 2 Next Male)

Overall, Next was perceived to be a relatively 'safe' brand in the sense that it reflected current fashions while still remaining accessible and mainstream 'moving with the times at its own pace'. In contrast Topshop/Topman was viewed as a high fashion brand positioned at the lower end of the market.

I suppose Topshop is one of the cheapies...it's better quality than say New Look but overall it's at the lower end of the market with stores like River Island...no matter which city you go to you'll always find a Topshop...just like you'll always find a Boots...but you don't always find Karen Millen or French Connection....(Interview 11 TS Female)

Not only are informants therefore assessing retail store brands relative to their high street competitors in terms of price and quality dimensions, but participants are also forming judgements about retail brands based on their prevalence and location on the high street.

6.4.3 Target Customers

Along with market positioning, one of the most salient themes to emerge by which consumers differentiate between retail store brands was in terms of their 'target customer'. The majority of participants made some reference to the stores' customers

based on both typical and idealised users of the brand. Knowledge of the stores' customer appeared to be derived from informants' experiences of using the brand, observations of others in the store as well as their interpretations of marketing communications depicting the stores' customers. While informants were proficient at defining the target customer in terms of traditional socio-demographic categories, as observed in the sorting task and the repertory grid, most were able to expand on these descriptive categories and comment on customers' personalities, lifestyles and attitudes using their own metaphorical descriptions and visual images.

For example, French Connection was described by participants as 'targeting the youth market' of consumers aged between seventeen and thirty-five. Although many were described as students, the majority were labelled as 'young professionals'. Customers were described as 'sophisticated', 'sexy', 'confident' and 'sociable'. One group of French Connection female customers dedicated their collage to images and words they associated with the French Connection Customer (Figure 6.1).

Figure 6.1 The French Connection Customer



These images clearly depict and reinforce the French Connection customer as 'sexy', 'young', 'successful', and 'trendy'. Other participants commented on French Connection customers' lifestyles and interests stating that they are

Career conscious, middle class people who think a lot about the image they portray, the places they go and the decisions they make' (Interview 3 FC Female)

their customer is someone like me...young people, late teens early twenties ehh...people who have a social life, who like going out and meeting people...they want to feel smart and they want people to look at their clothes and think 'auhh...where can I get that?' (Interview 8 FC Male)

In terms of their lifestyles, informants distinguished between two groups or types of French Connection consumers. The first group was described as 'clean-cut, healthy and good living'. As one participant described 'she could imagine them all going off to surf or sail their boats'. In contrast the second group were described as people who enjoyed going out to clubs.

A lot of it is club culture...a lot of people that shop in places like this are clubbers so that's the market they're trying to target...people who are looking for something a bit different, something a bit fun...none of it's dead serious...(Group 6 FC Male)

Many of these images were reinforced in the collage task. For instance one group of female informants selected images of famous people including Sharleen Spiteri and Matt Damon that they associated with the type of individual who would shop in the store. One participant also personalised or characterised the store brand as male.

I think the store would be a bloke, which is a terrible thing to say but I think it would be good looking, goes to the gym, has a good job, is very career oriented, likes to have a laugh but definitely likes to totally unwind and go out clubbing, go out drinking has a wide network of friends...kinda hip and in the middle...(Group 6 FC Male)

Other images used in the collage were more abstract and symbolic. For instance objects such as a mobile phone were selected to represent the French Connection customer because the phone was 'millennium - up to date with its finger on the pulse'. Molsen beer was also included in one of the collages as one participant described the French Connection male customer as the type of person who would probably drink fashionable bottled beers 'it's Molsen not your ordinary Tennents...it's a bit different' signifying the brand's overall exclusive appeal.

In contrast to French Connection, Next was regarded as having a 'universal appeal' for all the family, at all ages and stages of the life cycle, emphasising the enduring nature of the brand. Participants commented on different members of their family who were customers of the store and reflected on the changing nature of their relationship with the brand over the years.

I remember...I mean obviously it's changed since then but when I was young and I started shopping in Next with mum I thought it was really trendy. I remember having my first Next paper bag and I thought I was really cool. And over the years I've kept going back through school and as a student and I'm still a regular customer now that I'm working...and I'll probably still go when I'm forty and have children of my own (laughs). I think that's the same for all my family...I think mum must have weaned us onto it! (Group 4 Next Female)

In this example the store brand appears to have played a significant role at major stages or periods in this participant's life, from shopping with her mum and her first next paper bag through school, university and now work. This reflects the notion of the 'self in transition' (Schouten, 1991) from dependent child to independent, self sustaining adult.

Other informants identified different market segments in terms of consumer's age, profession and lifestyle.

It's marketed at a bit older than us I think, maybe mid-twenties, just got your first proper job but you're not quite wanting to go into Slaters...an up-market type person, smart....but not too up-market, someone who knows the value of money type thing (Group 8 Next Male)

...it's people of my age, it's just 'us' ...I would say they were twenty something, professional maybe in their first job, having to dress smartly during the week but at the weekend still quite happy to slop about in jeans in a top and whatever but not cheap, they want something that's comfortable but that looks good. Definitely, I can see all my friends shop there and we are all doing the same sorts of things. (Interview 1 Next Female)

These themes were also reflected in the collage task as one group of Next male and female participants described the typical Next male customer.

Figure 6.2 The Next Customer



‘On one hand he’s really casual and understated...not overly trendy just normal, like Johnny Vaughan but on the other he’s a typical businessman in his thirties who doesn’t like taking risks...I suppose overall he’s a follower of fashion rather than a leader’
(Group 1 Next Mixed)

Overall Next customers were described as ‘easy-going’, ‘friendly’, ‘unpretentious’, and ‘middle of the road’. One group of female Next shoppers described the store in terms of famous personalities.

S: it could be quite a George Clooney for a guy....

P:...I think its very Kirsty Young (laughs)...I must say that the models they use are very nice but also very natural looking not like supermodels or anything more like the girl next door and the guys they use, you can always imagine having a chat with them...

S: yeah, all the wee girls are pretty but without being that kinda bizarrely pretty...

K: They’re not dead dead skinny as well they are always just normal looking

S: Like Kate Moss, she’s pretty, there’s some models you think they’re big high Armani models or whatever yet I don’t think they are particularly pretty, they have just got this look but the ones they

use are just conventionally pretty, just like somebody you would know... (Group4 Next Female)

The store brand was described as being a friendly, approachable person like Kirsty Young in contrast to an Armani model. This clearly reflects the accessible image of the store brand and how comfortable participants feel with the store in contrast to others which seem to be characterised as more unapproachable and aloof. When describing the store in terms of an animal one customer associated it with a cat as it had 'feline qualities' in the sense that it was 'reserved' and quite 'passive' in contrast to a dog which he described as 'wild' and 'in your face'.

When commenting on the type of person who would shop in Topshop / Topman, customers talked about the store 'targeting the youth scene' and one customer described the store as attempting to 'brand out for everyone'. The store was perceived to cater for primarily school age individuals and students who were defined as ages 14-25 years old however the upper age range for men was considered to be slightly older at about 35. Customers were described as 'young', 'carefree', 'fun-loving', and 'down-to-earth'.

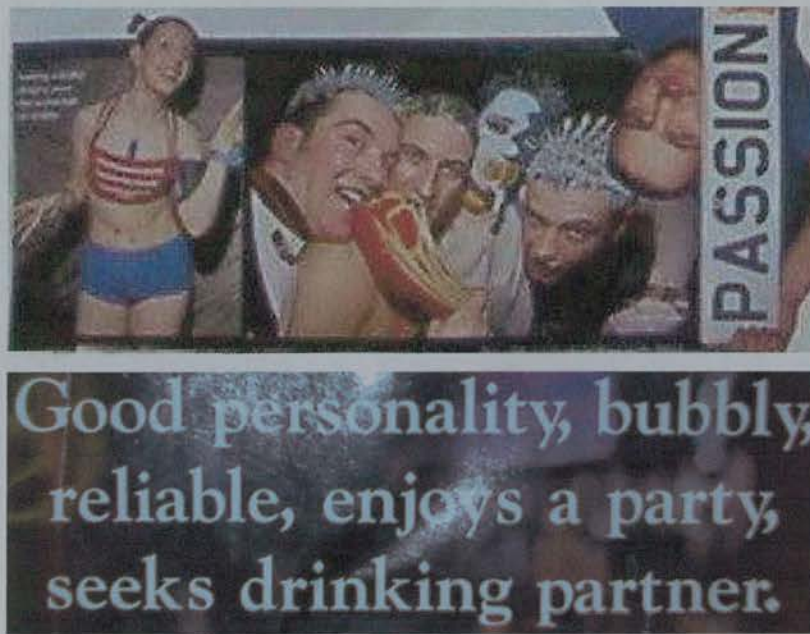
...quite a happy person...doesn't have to have lots of money or have to have their head high above everyone else kinda thing. Likes to get on with things...just average, not snobby, not poor just your average Joe (laughs) (Group 7 TS Female)

Once again the themes of transition from dependence to independence and the search for identity were prominent as one informant commented 'a lot of kids who go there are just starting to go out on a Saturday night and go shopping on their own'. While the majority of participants were over the age of 18, many recalled shopping in the store from a young age.

...it's a real awkward age...I suppose Topman was the first shop I went to with my mates without mum dragging me around town all day and going into Marks and buying school shirts (laughs)...I suppose you're just figuring out what you like and don't like and the right places to go...now its just an everyday thing...(Group 5 TS Male)

The Topshop store brand as a personality was likened to Donna Air or Denise Van Outen 'a bubbly dizzy blonde' who likes having a laugh' while Topman was characterised as being like Johnny Vaughan because he's 'somebody that's happy with the way he is. He's not trying to impress anybody else'. Overall Topshop/Topman customers were portrayed as fun-loving party people and party images were predominant in the collages (Figure 6.3)

Figure 6.3 The Topshop/Topman Customer



One informant even likened or characterised the store to a monkey.

'A Monkey who just likes running about and having fun...quite cheeky...they will come right up to you and have a good look and then just wander away as if nothing happened as if it didn't have a care in the world...' (Interview 5, TS Female)

This section has explored consumers' understanding and perceptions of the retail store brand and has illustrated a number of dimensions on which stores are often conceptualised and defined. These dimensions have been concerned with the similarities and differences between high street brands, the stores' overall positioning in the market, and their target consumers. Each of these themes has illustrated participants' ability to describe, characterise and personalise the retail store brand. It has also illustrated deeper themes and issues concerned with participants' search for identity during this sensitive transitional phase of their life. These personal meanings and experiences of the brand contrast with the rational impersonal responses illustrated in section 6.2. The following section will build upon these themes and discussions to explore customers' experiences of the retail product brand.

6.5 Retail Product Experiences

Despite consumers' understanding and knowledge of dimensions of the retail store brand, for many participants it was initially synonymous with the physical product being sold. Indeed many retail brands were characterised or defined on product dimensions alone. For instance, in the sorting task one female Topshop customer grouped stores together on the basis of the type and range of clothes that she would expect to purchase in different stores. Groups were categorised as 'designer', 'occasion wear', 'old-fashioned', 'casual and sporty', 'young and cheap' and 'high street fashion'. Similarly other stores were consistently characterised by the type of products they sold. Laura Ashley was synonymous with 'big flowery prints and floaty skirts', New Look for the 'real cheapies' and USC for 'branded clothes'.

While these tasks illustrated a broad range of dimensions, more detailed discussions with participants and the accompanied shops revealed that customers had a much more sophisticated and extensive knowledge of different retail product brands. Customers were able to distinguish between stores selling own branded products, stores such as USC stocking multiple brands and department store concessions.

I suppose the main difference between all the shops we've visited today is that some just stock their own label or own brand like French Connection...they make quite a big issue of all the Logo t-shirts. Then there's shops like Topman which have their own label and other fashion labels...and department stores like Fraser's and Debenhams which have their own labels and concessions within the shop...it's like Sainsbury's selling their own cola but also selling Coke... (P-shop Next Male)

Informants were also very knowledgeable about the different own brands carried in each of the stores such as Moto in Topshop and NX sports in Next as well as new brands that had been introduced or old brands that had been discontinued.

Although many participants held similar perceptions of different high street product brands, their preferences for these brands varied significantly. Some informants' stated their priorities were 'value for money' and 'reliability', while others claimed that they only purchased 'high quality' and 'exclusive' brands. However, it became evident that priorities continually shifted, as informants' relationships to different brands were fluid and changing. For instance, accompanied shopping trips with customers revealed that while many had stated they only purchased certain brands or visited particular stores, their decisions seemed more impulsive and spontaneous. In general participants visited a much broader range of stores, varying significantly on price and quality, than they admitted to in the interviews. The following sections provide a brief overview of some the relationships consumers have with these product brands and their preferences with particular reference to the three stores in the study.

6.5.1 'Catwalk to Sidewalk'

French Connection was perceived by consumers to be one of the most exclusive 'designer' retail brands on the high street. Indeed in their collage one mixed group of French Connection participants described the brand as high street fashion from the 'catwalk to the sidewalk' and 'fashion in the fast lane' (Figure 6.4)

Figure 6.4 Catwalk to Sidewalk



We put the 'catwalk to sidewalk' because you see sort of very, very trendy things on the catwalk and then you see them in French Connection so they make it more wearable and affordable... 'fashion in the fast lane!' (Group 3 FC Mixed)

Many participants related to this product brand through its prominent and often controversial 'fcuk' advertising campaign featured in recent television and magazine ads, on in-store point of purchase displays as well as the simple black and white 'fcuk' logo (see figure 6.4) placed on merchandise.

...it's crazy, don't care...and just kind of wacky like the t-shirts and the whole kinda advertising campaign with the FCUK image...that's just the image that they are trying to put across... (Group 6 FC Male).

Oh yes those adverts and the logos on the t-shirts, you know how they have different words in different places like one that goes 'football or friends mates girlfriend sex' ... and there's is another one that says emm...what is it? 'Body cover peanut butter' and that's quite cool as well... (laughs) (Interview 3 FC Female)

These 'humorous', 'sexy' black and white images and logos 'with attitude' were strongly associated with the branded products and merchandise in the store. However, while many customers appeared to have a strong awareness and affinity with the brand, participants' relationship with the brand varied quite considerably.

I absolutely love going into French Connection...you get loads of ideas and I always try stuff on but I never normally buy very much, sometimes Christmas and birthday presents...I always just look around and stand with my mouth open looking at the clothes and some of the prices (laughs)...(Group 9 FC Female)

...their clothes are casual but styled...it's also usually ahead of the rest of the high street but that's good because then no one else can get what you want if they are not there that week and also you are not going to see hundreds of people wearing the same thing which makes me happy quite a lot.....(Interview 3 FC Female)

Many participants described how they aspired to buy in French Connection. As the first informant comments she frequently visits the store to look, explore and try on the clothes secretly flirting and fantasising about the brand but not necessarily making a purchase. Others had a more committed relationship, frequently purchasing a range and variety of products. For instance, for the second informant, the appeal was the exclusiveness of the brand as she knows that she will stand out as an individual. The brand also appeared to have a role in participants' own identity construction: one informant described how she loved to wear the brand as it made her feel calm and more confident (see figure 6.4)

I put the 'calm more confident, more positive' because they are just clothes but when you put them on you do feel good about yourself, more confident. They are not flashy clothes either, they are quite calming with their colours and shape and everything...(Group 3 FC Mixed)

6.5.2 'Old Faithfuls'

In contrast to French Connection, Next was perceived by many informants to be a highly 'practical' and 'reliable' clothing brand which was always a 'safe bet' and good value for money. One male participant described the brand as 'not trying to be too trendy or too out going or dramatic or controversial, it's just simple'. Emphasis was placed on value, quality and endurance rather than 'flashy, designer labels' which were perceived to be a 'rip off'. These 'basic' products were perceived to be very 'sensible', offering reassurance and stability demonstrated in a collage by one group of Next shoppers (Figure 6.5).

Figure 6.5 A Sensible Purchase



Another sensible purchase...that says it all really...somewhere you can always go to buy the basic essentials whether it's a suit for work or just some simple accessories (Group 1 Next Mixed)

Many participants likened their relationship to a close partnership in which they were very 'loyal' to the store and 'trust' and 'have confidence' in the brand and its products. This relationship was similar to Fournier's (1998;362) metaphoric description of a 'committed partnership' defined as a 'long-term, voluntarily imposed, socially supported union high in love, intimacy, trust and a commitment to stay together despite adverse circumstances'. For instance, one Next female shopper comments that the store is always one of her first stops when she goes shopping with her friends.

It's certainly one of our first stops when we go shopping...emm or if we are looking for something and we don't see something anywhere else you know you are going to get something you like. Certain things like their swimwear is great and lasts really well and their summer shoes are super and we always go in there you know if we need sandals and things for holiday. There is certain sort of

old faithfuls in Next that you know you are always going to get. And their home stuff as well, everyone is starting to look at that as we are all starting to move out' (Interview 1 Next Female)

This participant describes the 'old faithfuls' that are repeatedly purchased in Next that testify to its endurance over time. Indeed the retail brand appears to have accompanied the participant through various transitional stages in her life such as moving flat. Similarly another male participant comments on the relationship or attachment he has formed with Next brand over the years.

...I've probably only been going up there myself for the last four years, since I was about seventeen or something, I'm only twenty one just now but at the start it was a whole family thing with my mum and because my brother always used to shop in there. He's seven years older than me so I always looked up to him. Whenever he was away at uni I would steal his clothes and thought I looked really good in them. I knew where he got them so then it was just oh I'll go there because that's where my brother goes and that's just how it started, it wasn't really any major choice from me but now I suppose as I've got older I just enjoy the shop...my wee brother even goes there now too... (Interview 12 Next Male)

The brand therefore appears to have acquired meaning for informants by their involvement in the socialisation process within the family. This is supported by Olsen (1995) who has suggested that family brands become part of the tool chest in strategies for the survival during critical life passages. Additionally Holbrook and Schinder (1994, cited in Elliott et al., 1998) have suggested that there is a 'sensitive period effect' for brands, particularly in early childhood and adolescence, when we are most likely to develop these preferences. They argue that brands that we have lived experiences with may acquire a depth of meaning during sensitive periods unattainable by brands at later stages in our lives.

Many of the comments made by participants related to the perceived risks of consuming the brand. For example one informant described 'using' the brand as a reassuring benchmark in an uncertain world, reducing the social risk involved in purchasing and wearing the products.

I have seen guys wearing these gillets...I call them body warmers... they just started to appear and I thought, I wonder if Next are doing them so I got the catalogue, oh right good, so they must be trendy right enough whereas if I just went out and bought one or if the fact if Next hadn't started making them I would have thought 'oh no they can't be that good if Next aren't making them' (Interview 2 Next Male)

In contrast, for many other participants, its 'universal' appeal and its accessibility increases the social risk involved in wearing the brand as they may see others wearing the same merchandise.

....it's good value as well although you do run the risk of if you buy something you see ten other people walking down Argyle street wearing it. Certainly for work and weekend casualwear it's one of the best in the high street I would say (Interview 1 Next Female)

For other informants the brand was purchased as it was perceived to be of 'value' reducing the financial risk involved.

The main thing about Next is the price...you are getting good quality stuff for a reasonable price. I mean my friend Stephen he'll go and spend £90-£95 on a Reiss shirt or whatever. He'd one on when we were away and it looked exactly the same as mine and it was him that said to me, 'did you get that out of so and so?'. And I said 'na it's out of Next' and he said 'oh it's dead similar'. And I was like 'how much did that cost you?' '£95 how much was yours?' '£40'. And they looked identical and no one's going to notice. It's just the name....So the price helps a lot, it's value for money - good quality gear for a reasonably cheap price. (Interview 12 Next Male)

This informant appears to gain great satisfaction in relaying the story about the savings he made purchasing a shirt in Next which was similar to his friend's who had paid more than double the price. This story appears to enhance or confirm his status as a 'smart or shrewd shopper' where his low investment or financial risk produced a high return in terms of his social status.

6.5.3 'Value for money'

Topshop / Topman was generally perceived to be the 'value for money shop' where individuals could pick up a bargain or an inexpensive high fashion item. Informants frequently commented on the wide range and quantity of merchandise available in the store catering for a variety of fashion tastes and preferences. Many of these themes were represented and talked about in a collage constructed by a group of male Topman customers (Figure 6.6)

Figure 6.6 Value for money



Well the whole thing revolves around the heart of coins which is supposed to represent the value for money idea that we talked about... we're not sure if it's British or not but we get the feeling it is. This (points to Tommy Hillfiger label) is because there is none of these labels. It ties into the idea of the 'the islanders' because it sits on its own... its own kinda product and it's not as if it's casual or if it's conservative - it's a mixture of both, it doesn't matter what style you're into, you can always find something in there to suit whether it's something smart for work, like the guys in the suits, something for your holiday (points to picture of the beach), or something for the weekend (Group 5 Topman Male)

A range of different types of relationships existed with the store. Both male and female informants reminisced about shopping in the store and often recalled that it was one of the first brands they had purchased. It was therefore closely associated with their early teen years when participants were experimenting with fashion in the search for their own independence and identity.

It reminds me of being a teenager and having clothes that looked awful on you. At that age I suppose you tended to buy what everyone else is buying even though your body shape is completely wrong for it. I mean the quality is not great but I still pop in now and then out of habit I suppose...I quite often buy cheap tops and things for holidays that I know I'll get the summer's wear from (Group 7 TS Female)

This relationship with the product brand was similar to Fournier's (1998;362) description of a 'childhood friendship' which was characterised as an 'affectively laden relationship reminiscent of earlier times which yields comfort and security of past self'. For other participants their relationship to the store was situation specific as many described purchasing inexpensive 'throw-away' items for holidays or particular occasions. The enjoyment was therefore perhaps buying a high fashion or fun item that could be discarded at the end of a season.

...it's more sort of fun clothes, not something you would buy for a wedding or anything....I mean they have all those silly accessories and things like that....and their underwear is quite good as well, the fun underwear and things like that I mean not your work bras or anything like that, fluffy pink things!....they're not too expensive so you could just wear them a couple of times just for a laugh and that's it (Interview 11 TS Female)

For some this was a 'secretive' purchase that was not revealed or exposed to others

...if you didn't know where an outfit was from and somebody bought things out of Topshop they could easily get away with it...(Group 5 TS Male)

However the majority of participants were proud of their purchases and often shared information with others.

The belts and stuff now...like I was in before and there was the copy of the Gucci one and it was only like £15 and like Gucci, well you can imagine how much that would have cost, the belts and all that...so even if you can't afford to buy the actual top you could buy the bracelet or the necklace to go with the top and make it look quite similar. (Group 7 TS Female)

For many young female participants the 'value' and challenge of shopping in the store was in obtaining look-a-like designer fashion at high street prices. For example one group of female Topshop participants discussed the Oscars and the 'Oscar look' as they were constructing their collage. Informants were clearly influenced by what the models and actresses were wearing and described the importance they placed on the store for providing authentic copies of these designer labels. Similarly participants also emphasised the importance they placed on the store as a valuable resource for informing them about the latest fashion trends from the catwalk. This knowledge also appeared to be a form of social capital as informants, particularly females, placed great emphasis on sharing this information with others in the group.

In summary, this section has explored consumers' experiences of different retail product brands, focusing specifically on the three stores in the study. It has illustrated that while many participants frequently hold similar global impressions of these product brands in terms of the style and range available, in line with Fournier (1998), informants clearly have different types of relationships with them. These ranged from committed and enduring partnerships with brands, which were often part of family brands or childhood experiences, to short term flings and affairs where brands were purchased for particular occasions.

6.6 Consumer Shopping Identities and Roles

So far the analysis has focused on consumers' perceptions and experiences of the retail store brand and the retail product. However, in the process of exploring these themes the analysis has also revealed a great deal about informants' own shopping identities and roles. The following sections will therefore summarise and explore

these themes' namely the consumer as 'lay marketer', 'shrewd and seduced shoppers' and the 'mish-mash generation'.

6.6.1 The Lay Marketer

Young fashion consumers appear to be sophisticated 'lay marketers' who have an extensive knowledge, understanding and awareness of retail fashion brands, marketing concepts and practices. Consumers are therefore not passive recipients of marketing stimuli but rather active meaning makers who are aware of brands and the 'commercial milieu' in which they live (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). This theme is in line with research discussed in Chapter Three that explored the role of the active audience in terms of their persuasion knowledge and literacy, as well as literature that examined the role of the post-modern consumer. This section will identify the nature and the extent of this knowledge, its sources and perceived benefits or payoffs.

The majority of informants were very knowledgeable and articulate about marketing concepts as evidenced by their ability to talk about general marketing practices, strategy, retail stores and fashion products. Participants made very plausible comparisons with retail store brands across a number of different dimensions including their location, product range, pricing strategies, promotional activities and customer base. In describing these concepts informants were also very adept at using marketing language and terminology. For example one participant commented on C&A's marketing strategy and the difficulties they were facing in an increasingly competitive market.

Shops are constantly changing and repositioning themselves because they've got to keep up if they're to attract customers into the place. I mean C&A are fighting a losing battle...they've lost so much in profits because people don't like the image of it and its had to...well I think its just had a big make-over but that's not any good if they can't judge who they are trying to target. It's just falling further behind the rest of the big brands on the high street (Group 9 FC Female).

Similarly another informant commented on Marks and Spencer's and their customer profile.

I don't think Marks and Spencer's knows who its customer is. I honestly think they are trying to appeal to too many people and they are not doing any of it right. I think, like you said [refers to fellow participant], they are definitely aiming at 25-35 year olds...I think I read somewhere that they thought their main customers were thirty five year olds but actually when they did a survey their main customer is late forties, early fifties. So they are targeting too old or what they think their customer is, is not really. (Group 3 FC Mixed)

Consistent with Freistad and Wright's (1994) model of Persuasion Knowledge participants showed an awareness and knowledge of marketers' persuasion attempts. For example one informant commented on the pricing strategies used in retail stores to encourage customers to purchase.

You always get these offers like 'three tops for the price of two' and some shops seem to be permanently on sale or say that they're 'closing down', like that shop Eisenegger. But you know it's just their tactics to make you come into the shop and spend money on things that you know you probably don't really need (laughs)...it's just like supermarkets putting sweets at the checkouts so that while you're waiting to pay you might buy something on impulse (Group 1 Next Mixed)

Several informants also commented on the French Connection advertising campaigns and were able to recall many of the slogans and logos used. Most found the slogans and 'play on words' challenging and fun and enjoyed discussing these with others in the group. Indeed, in line with Ritson and Elliott (1995a) many informants took pleasure in displaying their own interpretive skills at decoding and making sense of the ads, and their use within different contexts.

I've noticed that Tennents have copied the FCUK campaign. In some of the magazines there is a photo and there is a girl and a guy and another guy standing at a bar and in the corner it says velvet and then you turn it over and it says 'siht' and it says bars closed. I mean when you first look at it looks like an advert for a new perfume or something like that and then it says in the corner

Tennents. I mean that must be a good advertising campaign if somebody else is copying it, you know ? (Interview 2 Next Male)

However, despite informants' understanding of marketing communications and retail strategy, there were clearly limitations to this knowledge which were subject to personal opinions and rumour. For instance one informant inaccurately commented on the development of the Braehead shopping complex in Paisley while another participant compared stores in the repertory grid task.

I heard somewhere that it cost billions to make and that they're going to extend it even further and...I mean it must have like over a thousand shops in it spread out over like five miles (Group 8 Next Male)

I would say that Gap is the odd one out because Topman and Diesel have similar prices of clothes and they aim for the same type of person (Interview 10 Topman Male)

Many participants described the importance of being aware of 'what's going on' and 'what's current' in the world of fashion retail. This knowledge was acquired from a variety of sources, one of which was from participants' practical experience working in the retail industry. This primarily entailed part-time or summer holiday jobs as sales assistants in fashion, footwear or general retailing. For example one participant talked about his sales experience working in Benetton

...I often got bagged for being friendly to people and not concentrating on selling. The guy said 'you have got to push the jeans, you have got to push this and that'. I said 'look, guys are wanting sweatshirts that say United Colours of Benetton on them, end of story, £30 lets see how many we can get out the door on a Saturday afternoon'. The guy said 'it doesn't work like that, you're missing the concept'...but I ended up being the top sales man in there because I knew what people in Glasgow wanted. I could read the situation. Just from working in there I got to know about what people like, what sells well, just the whole kinda system...(Interview 2 Next Male)

Young consumers also appeared to place greater emphasis on actively surveying or seeking out information, advice and fashion ideas through visiting and comparing different retail outlets during their shopping expeditions.

...I often go in on a Thursday night just to get a wee feel of shopping...my wee fix...even if it's not to buy anything, I've just got to go and have a wee look. It's nice just to see what's going on, what's new in and I quite often come home with ideas about things I might get next week but mainly it's just to see what's happening in the shops (Interview 11 TS Female)

Many informants also described using the internet to search for information accumulating knowledge about the latest fashion trends, products and stores. One participant described this as a good way to 'preview' clothes.

It's good to preview clothes because you get a look and you think I like that and then you go into Warehouse or wherever and try it out so it gives you a wee advantage over everyone else of looking at things and buying things before they do...(Group 7 Topshop Female)

Participants also frequently described watching documentaries and popular television programmes such as 'shop till you drop', 'she's gotta have it' as well as reading magazine and newspaper features on fashion, retail and design topics. The majority of informants regularly purchased fashion magazines, while others used mail order catalogues and fashion related internet sites. Some also commented that they had been to fashion events and shows such as the Clothes Show Live and one customer described her experiences of being colour analysed. Several participants had studied business and/or marketing at school or at university, or mentioned that they had contact with others that had. Participants' lay knowledge therefore appeared to have been acquired from various sources and personal experiences.

This lay knowledge of retail store brands was clearly used by participants in making purchasing decisions as many saw themselves as smart or 'shrewd' shoppers. However, it emerged from discussions and accompanied shops that both male and female informants also used this knowledge in social exchanges with their friends,

family members and partners. For instance many participants described sharing and exchanging information with friends about the stores to visit or current fashion trends and bargains to be found.

It's quite a regular thing we all go in together and then talk about what we've seen or what we're going to buy or if someone sees there's a new shop open or whatever...it's like Chinese whispers...(laughs) (Interview 1 Next Female)

Guys aren't really supposed to talk about shopping...I mean we don't sit around endlessly and gossip like girls do but I suppose you do sometimes talk about the things you've seen, especially if there's a good deal on or something new out (Group 3 FC Mixed)

Several informants also described using this knowledge to receive benefits in term of their status among friends. For instance, one informant prided herself on the knowledge she had and described the importance she placed on knowing about the latest fashion trends in order to impress her friends

...my friends are always really impressed with how much I know and they always come to me for advice on fashion so I like to keep up to date with what's going on...(Interview 3 FC Female)

This is in line with research by Willis (1990) who described how young teenagers used ads as 'tokens in social exchange' which are often invested in carefully to gain dividends in terms of social status and self-esteem. Similarly, the significance of the social context was also highlighted by Ritson and Elliott (1995a) in their model of advertising literacy where literacy events constitute the social interactions used to construct self and group identities.

Information about fashion products and retail stores was readily exchanged between informants in the group discussions. However, this theme was particularly evident in the accompanied shopping trips as both male and female shoppers saw their role as the 'knowledgeable expert'. Several participants viewed this as an opportunity to demonstrate or 'show off' their knowledge and were quick to give advice and share their fashion 'tips and secrets' with the researcher.

You should really go, I got so many bargains last time, like these jeans, they were only £25 and they're normally over £60 but the best time to go is at the beginning of the month and first thing in the morning because that's when they get in their new deliveries...but I warn you, if you go you have to spend time and really rake about before you find all the goodies! (laughs) (Female Next P-shop)

I always find that black jeans lose their colour really quickly but I'll let you into a secret what I do is buy black dye and then just re-dye them in the wash...you should try it...it really works! (Interview 3 FC Female)

This theme has resonance with the notion of the 'market maven' defined by Feick and Price, (1987;85) as 'individuals who have information about many kinds of products, places to shop, and other facets of markets, and initiate discussions with consumers and respond to requests from consumers for market information'.

6.6.2 Shrewd and Seduced Shoppers

Building on the notion of the consumer as 'lay marketer', this section describes the roles of consumers as shrewd and seduced shoppers. While informants sometimes acknowledged they felt seduced into purchasing and lacked control over their spending and shopping habits, others presented themselves as shrewd or smart shoppers in control of their finances, driven by a sense of value and wary of marketers' attempts to persuade.

Many customers described shopping as a form of 'seductive', 'compulsive' or 'addictive' activity in which they appeared to assume the role of a helpless victim. This feeling of uncontrollable excitement was often likened to taking drugs where participants felt a natural 'buzz' or 'high' from the activity.

I love shopping, you can't tear me away from it (laughs). I spend way too much money...all the cards are at their limit and everything. I love the feeling you get after buying something and you just think *yeah!* ...I can't stop it (laughs)! You get a pure high from it...a total high from buying something...it's like no other feeling I can describe...(Interview 7 FC Female)

Informants described the overriding need or desire to purchase a small 'token' or 'reward' from their shopping trip. These small purchases or 'self-gifts' (Mick and DeMoss, 1990) appeared to give as much pleasure as buying a more expensive item.

You *have* to come away with something...otherwise you'll feel really disappointed and it's been a waste of time and you go home in a worse mood than if you had spent loads of money. It's just...I have to get something. I can't go home...even if it's a wee thing...a nail varnish or a necklace or something like that just for something to buy. I can't go home empty handed, I need a wee token... (Interview 11 TS Female)

In several cases participants described feeling out of control of their spending and the difficulties they faced in repaying store credit cards bills. For example one participant commented the ongoing struggle she had to remain in control of her 'shopping addiction' and the guilt she felt purchasing items she did not need.

...I spend my life, well I've curbed it a bit now, but up until probably Christmas all I ever bought was trainers...I've probably got about forty pairs...I used to come home and it was like hiding bags in the car so my mum didn't see what I was buying. Then I would bring them in, sneak them in under a jumper or something (laughs)...I didn't *need* any of them...but I just had to have them...it's terrible (laughs)...my mum cracks up. She's like 'I can't believe you are bringing more stuff in, there's no more room'. You're trying to hide things and saying 'no, no this doesn't fit me...' (hysterical voice) and you're just making up daft excuses and at the same time thinking this is terrible...I really do have to stop...(Group 4 Next Female)

While many informants were aware of the persuasion 'tactics' employed by retailers to encourage them to purchase, some appeared powerless and unable to resist these attempts.

...I mean you saw what I was like today. I do just tend to buy on impulse. When I see something I just have to get it...like when we walked past River Island and I saw that belt in the window (laughs). I know that's what they're trying to do but I just had to have it (P-shop Next Female)

In contrast many informants presented themselves as cautious 'shrewd' shoppers in control of their budgets and spending habits. For example many stated that they only went shopping when they had the money to spend and often described saving up their wages or money they received as gifts to spend on clothes.

I never go shopping unless I know I've got the money in the bank to spend...I mean when you're about sixteen or seventeen you don't really care because your parents are footing the bill but mum and dad don't help out as much so I've got to be more careful how I spend my money (Group 5 Topman Male)

It really depends on how much money I've got...I actually bought a flat last year but before I had that if I saw something I liked I just bought it because I knew I could afford it but now I've got to think a wee bit more about it and plan ahead...I spend more on the flat now than myself and I find I spend more in the sales than I used to...it feels great when you find a real bargain! (Group 4 Next Female)

This attitude to money was clearly a characteristic of the 'transitional' stage of this group of consumers, many of whom had just moved away from home, had started working or were students learning to control their own finances. However, it was evident that this theme was not just as a result of participants' life stage, rather many young consumers appeared to be very concerned with the 'value' of the products they purchased and did not like to feel they were being 'conned' or 'ripped off'. Indeed many described how they often avoided buying branded or 'commercialised' merchandise stating that they actively 'shopped around' to compare prices, frequently buying less expensive 'copycat' labels or high street alternatives. For instance, two shoppers discussed buying clothes from a range of lower priced stores.

...If I get a top that I like and I feel comfortable in and it's flattering it doesn't bother me where it's out of. I would pay £10 for a top out of Bay Trading or Logo or something if I feel comfortable in it whereas I would still probably pay £30 for a top out of Jane Norman but I think for a lot of people it is the label you know. I know people that have basically bought something because it's got the name of something hanging from it... (Group 9 FC Female)

a lot of the things you see in the clothes section in Asda you see exactly the same in Next and at the end of the day if the skirt that's hanging up in Asda could be hanging up in Next with £20 added on to it what's the point in paying that if it's going to be the same quality...I would be quite happy to say that I got my skirt out of George... (Group 4 Next Female)

In this way participants presented themselves as resourceful shrewd shoppers seeking out alternative options by visiting discount outlets or waiting for the sales before they purchased. Their decision criteria were therefore based on comfort, fit, style and quality of clothing rather than the brand name.

Informants were wary of marketers' persuasion attempts as one Topshop participant commented 'you've got to keep one step ahead'. In addition to 'shopping around' for value merchandise young fashion consumers appeared to have a range of 'coping strategies' aimed to stay ahead of retailers. For example one female participant described customising her own clothes.

I love all these worn-looking jeans we've seen and the ones with the fake diamonds and jewels but they're so expensive...that's why I decided to do my own...I had seen these studs from John Lewis and did it myself and to be honest I don't think you can tell the difference...I think it's worked quite well but then I haven't washed them yet ! (P-shop Topshop Female)

For many shoppers the hunt for a cheaper alternative to branded clothing or designer labels was viewed as a challenge or skill in which they appeared to 'get one over' on the retailers. For example one French Connection shopper proudly described buying an imitation Calvin Klein leather jacket from New Look.

New Look has high turn over of stock, with the most disgusting and vile clothes in the world to some really nice pieces. I have a leather jacket from New Look. It cost me fifty quid right, and it's a Calvin Klein imitation and you know I couldn't tell the difference do you know what I mean. Everyone was like pure 'wow how much was that?' and I was just like 'fifty quid!' (laughing). They didn't believe me and I think it sold out within, I think it was about two hours (Interview 3 FC Female)

Not only was this participant pleased she had made a huge 'saving' but she seems to take great pride in telling her friends who admired her for her resourcefulness or 'shrewd' shopping. The fact that she states the jacket sold out within two hours appears to somehow confirm or verify this view. Again this has resonance with Willis (1990) who suggests young consumers gain dividends from these exchanges in terms of their social status within the group.

6.6.3 A 'Mish-mash' Generation

The findings presented in this chapter seems to indicate that consumers' experiences of retail store brands are perhaps more complex than previously conceptualised in the literature. Indeed, in line with McGowan (2000), it appears that young identities have become more 'fluid and multifaceted', making the youth fashion market increasingly difficult to pinpoint as their interactions and relationships with brands are continually changing. This appears to be reflected in the vast range of retail brands consumers have in their repertoire, the notion that brands are used as symbolic resources and the awareness young fashion consumers had in the role that brands play in their own identity construction.

The analysis thus far indicates that young fashion consumers have a wide repertoire or wardrobe (Valentine and Gordon 2000) of retail store brands which they draw upon and continually change as they move through different identity phases. For example many informants described brands that they had strong attachments to as teenagers or family brands they had grown up with. However, in contrast to these strong enduring relationships, young fashion consumers also had a much more fluid relationship with brands. This theme was particularly evident in the accompanied shopping trips as informants shopped across a variety of store brands depending on their mood, situation or purchase occasion. Consequently while participants were originally recruited as Topshop/Topman, French Connection or Next customers, the analysis has illustrated the difficulty in defining or segmenting consumers on this basis as their relationship with 'living brands' are constantly changing.

In line with Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998) the analysis has also illustrated the importance informants place on retail fashion brands as symbolic resources used in the creation and maintenance of identity. For example many participants described the importance of wearing 'the right brand' and carrying the appropriate branded bag as a means of signalling their aspirations to membership of a particular group of shoppers or symbolising their affiliation to a particular fashion store brand. However, tensions have also been noted in the analysis as young fashion consumers appear less concerned with brand names, often rejecting designer labels and highly 'commercialised' high street brands such as the 'Gap'. Instead participants claimed their decisions were based on value as they presented themselves as shrewd shoppers wary of being 'ripped off' by retailers.

Despite these contradictions, informants in this study showed an awareness of the role of consumption in the construction of self and group identities. For example one participant commented on the role of young consumers as part of 'generation X'. When asked to define or explain what he meant by the definition he stated

...we've not got any real identity emm...like in the sixties they were hippies, the seventies they were glam rockers, the eighties they were power dressers...the nineties I don't know but we're the kinda nineties...I think it's just not having any real identity, it's a real mish-mash generation...but it's all cool...because like you see these Pepsi adverts a while ago where they were talking about generation X and the spice girls. I think they were taken as the figure head for our generation because they represented it like as the black girl, the baby girl, the posh girl and that's the kinda epitome of it you know, we're all different but still part of a group...(Group 8 Next Male)

By drawing on the Pepsi ad campaign this informant describes 'generation X' as young consumers who have their own independent style and identity while also emphasising their role as part of a social collective, group or 'mish-mash generation'. Similarly other participants were very aware of brands being directed or 'targeted' at them but most emphasised or acknowledged the difficulty in 'defining' the youth market. Indeed there appeared to be fluidity between brands, images and identities

as informants stated they enjoyed changing and experimenting with their image and style which meant that they could not truly be 'defined'.

I'm very changeable. I love dressing up sometimes and then I love changing my image a lot of the time, I don't like people having to define me like I can't really define myself in that sense because sometimes I'll go for the casual and then I love getting dressed up and the whole rock chick thing or whatever...I just change all the time...

K: yeah, I'm the same. Sometimes I feel like being really girlie in the things I wear and then sometimes I want to be smart...it just depends on my mood really...I mix and match to create my own look (Group 7 TS Female)

These themes appears to be in line with Valentine and Gordon's (2000) notion of the 21st century consumer who continually constructs identities by entering into the process of consumption, shifting between identities and using a vast wardrobe of brands to create him or herself into whoever (s)he wants to be.

6.7 Conclusions

This chapter has introduced and explored a number of important themes that have illustrated consumers' multi-faceted experiences of various retail store brands. It began by introducing the impersonal meanings consumers attribute to various brands in terms of their utility and function where brands were compared across constructs such as price, quality, product range and location. However the chapter argued that while consumers may provide reasoned and 'rational' responses for their brand preferences, it was evident that decisions were not necessarily based on these practical criteria. Instead retail brands held more personal meaning and were often used as a symbolic resource in the creation and maintenance of identity. The chapter explored these personal meanings in terms of informants' retail store and retail product experiences. Overall these themes illustrated consumers' ability to compare and contrast retail store brands drawing on their own personal experiences, metaphors and analogies. Further these themes demonstrated the range and diversity of relationships young fashion consumers have with these brands.

Finally, the analysis revealed a great deal about young fashion consumers' shopping identities and roles. It introduced the role of consumers as sophisticated 'lay marketers' who have a wide knowledge of retail fashion brands, marketing concepts and practices. It proposed that this knowledge was acquired from a variety of sources and was often used as 'tokens' in social exchange where young consumers derived benefits in terms of their social status. The chapter went on to illustrate the role of the shrewd and seduced shopper. This theme highlighted the tensions between the consumers' loss of control and their wariness of marketers' persuasion attempts. Lastly the chapter proposed that young fashion consumers are part of a 'mish-mash generation' reflecting the fluidity and multifaceted nature of their relationships with retail brands.

Discussion thus far has focused on informants' accounts of the retail store and product brand. However, analysis also indicated that the retail space plays a significant role in young fashion consumers' holistic experience of the retail brand. These retail space experiences encompass a range of different dimensions including consumers' interaction with the physical space, their sensory experiences and interpersonal encounters at the point of sale. The remaining three analytical chapters therefore explore each of these dimensions in turn. Chapter Seven begins by introducing the concept of retail space literacy focusing on young fashion consumers' readings, interpretations and understandings of the physical space.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE PHYSICAL SPACE

7.1 Introduction

This aim of this chapter is to explore consumers' experiences of the physical space. It begins by introducing the concept of retail space literacy in order to help us understand the active role played by consumers in reading and interpreting the retail space. The chapter compares consumers' descriptions and personal accounts of different spatial configurations across the themes of spaciousness, predictability and authenticity. Drawing on the concept of persuasion knowledge the chapter examines consumers' understanding of these space configurations. Consumers' personal knowledge of these persuasion attempts are defined in terms of the physical artifacts, merchandise display and customer flows in the space. Lastly the chapter will compare consumers' space orientations across the themes of comfort, freedom and immersion.

7.2 Retail Space Literacy

The concept of literacy was introduced in Chapter Three which discussed its role in the field of advertising research. The advertising literacy literature conceptualised advertising as 'texts' to be read where consumers are actively involved in the construction and negotiation of advertising meanings. Building on this literature, it is proposed that the concept of literacy can also be used to explore the retail space as a text to be read. This suggests that like a language space has meaning that we all understand but that is not easily described.

While Sherry (1998a;113) states that he has attempted to 'read' vernacular architecture 'as text to be decoded in terms of the values of its human inhabitants' he has prioritised his own reading and interpretation of the space. In contrast the aim of this analysis is to prioritise the voice of the consumer to explore how informants themselves derive

meaning from this three-dimensional visual text. It is proposed that consumers can be thought of as 'retail space literate': not only can they actively 'read' and describe space but individuals can also actively interpret and co-construct meaning from it. The notion of co-construction of texts also has resonance with literature in Chapter Three that focused on post-modern consumers of space. The aim of the following chapters is therefore to explore and understand how individuals read and experience different retail spaces. This begins with consumers' understanding of the physical space.

7.3 Spatial Configurations

In discussions with participants, retail stores were frequently compared on the basis of their physical form in terms of their location (high street, shopping centre), exterior (window displays, frontage, signage), and interior physical layout and facilities (changing facilities, cash desks, signage, display fixtures and fittings, promotions, seating areas etc). Many of these accounts were very descriptive focusing on the functional and practical role of the design space. However, it was evident that consumers also actively used the space as a symbolic resource in which they derived their own meanings about the retail store brand. This section focuses on informants' accounts of the spatial configuration of the store which are presented as three main themes. The first theme introduces the dimension of spaciousness which is defined along a continuum from open to cluttered or crowded spaces. The second theme considers the notion of predictability that is concerned with the novelty and originality of the space. Authenticity is the final theme to be identified where comparison is made between natural and contrived or themed spaces.

7.3.1 Spaciousness

One of the most salient themes to emerge from discussions about the servicescape was informants' awareness of the spaciousness or density of the retail space. Participants described different retail spaces along a continuum from 'open' and 'spacious', to 'cluttered', 'cramped' and 'crowded'. Although Tuan (1977;51) and others (Eroglu and Harrell, 1986; Hui and Bateson, 1991) have also made the distinction between

'spacious' and 'crowded' places their research has primarily been concerned with the crowding of people rather than the impact of the physical space itself. However, participants in this study did not appear to differentiate between the two dimensions. In this way informants talked about both the static space, which remains consistent and includes the displays and materials used in the space, and the dynamic space which is constantly changing such as the movement and flow of people.

Informants defined spaciousness primarily as their freedom to move around the space without being disturbed by other people or obstructed by objects. For example, French Connection was described by the majority of customers as being very 'open', 'spacious' and 'minimal' with several images in the collages depicting a sense of spaciousness in the store such as expanses of beach and sea.

...you can always move around the shop really easily without bumping into other people even when it's busy. It's never crowded or cramped or full of people fighting over the last items...you can look without being disturbed basically...(Interview 7 FC Female)

Similarly Next was also described as 'open' and 'spacious' however, in contrast to French Connection, the feeling of spaciousness was perceived to be relative to the size of the store. In this way the space had a facilitating role enabling informants to navigate their way around the store easily.

It's set up like a really big supermarket...it's very logically spaced out so it's easy to find your way around and see things you like (Interview 12 Next Male)

In contrast Topshop and Topman were described as being very 'cluttered', 'dense', 'crowded', and 'crammed' spaces where 'you have to have a real look through and spend time in'.

It's a really cluttered store...there's maybe just enough space for two people to walk past but if you're walking with your friend and you've got to squeeze past everything and you start brushing up against all the clothes and then they fall everywhere (Group 7 TS Female)

It's really crammed and crowded...people are squeezing past each other, knocking stuff off the shelves and twisting and contorting themselves around all the stands and racks in the way...in fact it's almost like a game of twister (laughs) ... (Group 6 FC Male)

Rather than having a facilitating role in terms of consumers' ease of movement around the servicescape, the space in these examples is constricting or constraining as informants describe having to 'squeeze' past people and displays, knocking items off hangers and shelves. The second informant compares this to a game of twister, which was also represented in the group's collage (Figure 7.1). In this way the space could also be perceived as enjoyable as twister is a game where physical contact and contortion is seen as fun, perhaps even intimate.

Figure 7.1 Twister



For many participants spaciousness was defined as their ability to appropriate the space in their own way.

It's laid back, it's not an 'in your face store'. It lets you do your own thing, it lets you wander about yet there is so much to look at. It doesn't push ... (Interview 3 FC Female)

I suppose it's kind of neutral, nothing totally jumps out at you...it's very much a place that you can just potter about in...I suppose because it's such a big store you can almost get lost in it... (Group 1 Next Mixed)

In this way the space allowed or enabled participants 'to do their own thing' and have control over their own movements in the space, compared to other spaces which were

more constraining or controlling - 'it doesn't push'. For the second informant this allowed her the freedom to escape and 'get lost' in the space. This anonymity allows her to become fully immersed in the space where she is able to 'potter about' and manage her own experience in the store.

Finally informants actively used the spaciousness of the store as a cue to determine the stores' product quality and price as well as its overall market positioning. For example spacious, minimalist stores such as French Connection were perceived to be more 'up-market looking' compared to more cramped spaces like Topshop/Topman which were viewed as 'tacky and cheap'.

It's a really open, spacious airy store...very minimalist and up-market looking. From the outside you can see right through into the shop which makes it feel very open almost as though it's part of the outside because it's airy and light. Some shops it's like walking into a different world but it's not all tacky and cheap with sale stickers and big racks and shelves jam packed with things (Group 3 FC Mixed)

...cluttered shops like that don't really put me off...sometimes even you think 'messy oh it'll be a wee bit cheaper, maybe they'll be bargains to be had'...so I'd maybe make more of an effort to have a wee look than if it was all neat and tidy and expensive looking... (Interview 11 TS Female)

While Bitner (1992) has also suggested that certain spatial configurations are used by consumers as a mnemonic device, she fails to distinguish between different servicescapes. It is therefore proposed that spaciousness is an important cue or dimension used by informants in fashion retail servicescapes.

7.3.2 Predictability

The predictability of the display and layout of the space was another important dimension of the physical space mentioned by participants. This primarily related to the 'innovative', 'different', and 'novel' use of the space, and physical displays, in contrast to environments that were perceived to be more 'bland', 'boring', and 'predictable'. For example, French Connection was described by informants as a very 'innovative', 'modern', 'arty', and 'visual' space 'to be proud of'.

I: what do you mean by visual?

Ge: it's just all designed to be sort of ...I don't know...looks kinda striking, not striking but you notice all the colours and they seemed well laid out. It's quite different as well, it's quite abstract with pictures everywhere. It's not mainstream...they've tried to go a wee bit different which is good because it adds to the feel of the store. It makes it feel a lot more funky, not all fuddy duddy like say Marks and Spencer's....(Group 6 FC Male)

The importance of the visual was illustrated by participants as several groups incorporated images in their collage of innovative, modern products, shapes and materials to represent the arty, visual feel of the space (Figure 7.2).

Figure 7.2 Modern and Arty



I cut that out because I think it's just a radiator but it's quite weird as well, it's the whole visual thing, it's just a bit different, a bit quirky! (Group 6 FC Male)

...that's (points to the image of the car and the oven) to represent the kinda modernness like the stainless steel cupboards... the whole shop feels really arty with all the black and white photographs as well (Group 9 FC Female)

Informants were very responsive to the innovative use of space which appeared to have a strong visual impact. In particular participants commented on the enlarged photographic images displayed on the walls as well as the configuration of the space which was perceived to be more 'innovative' and 'random'. For example one informant compared the space to the Arctic or Alaska with white geometric shapes and designs placed in a non-uniform way. Similarly another participant used an analogy of child's play blocks to describe the apparent illogical pattern or method used in the space.

...it's white, geometric...cubes, it's kinda like if you give a child white blocks and you get them to put things in, they will put things in certain places but they won't necessarily know why they did it emmm but there must be a pattern to it obviously...different levels....because of the way its laid out, it's not snobby, do you know what I mean? I mean when you go into some designer stores, not just in Glasgow but in London or something, like everything is like uniformed and it gives the impression of being very unapproachable. But French Connection is kinda different (Interview 3 FC Female)

Consistent with the previous spaciousness theme, this participant appears to derive meaning from the space in terms of the nature of the store brand and its market positioning. In this case a more uniformed space was deemed to be a characteristic of a higher positioned 'designer store' which was perceived to be more unapproachable.

Topshop/Topman was also described as a very 'modern', 'different', and 'distinctive' space

It's quite a distinctive shop, there's nothing really else like it around...I mean they've got DJs playing in the store and big MTV walls...my brother could spend hours on the football machines downstairs (laughs)...(Group 2 TS/TM Mixed)

Other retail spaces were also experienced on the accompanied shopping trips. One informant commented on the Ted Baker store which used innovative displays such as fish tanks and sand, and the window displays which were described as 'quirky and fun'... 'something a bit different that you remember'.

Ted Baker was really good...it had that fish tank display and wee pebbles and sand and nice wee displays like that...like in the women's display underneath the glass there's sand and stuff and bikinis on top of that so it all kind of puts it into perspective for you...there's a lot more thought that has gone into a shop like that whereas in Next it just seems like 'there's a shelf, we'll put the clothes there and we can squeeze that display in there' (P-shop Next Male)

In contrast to these innovative spaces, informants described retail spaces which were perceived to be 'predictable' and 'uniform'. Participants referred to the shape of the space, as well as the way in which products were presented and displayed. For example,

Next was generally described as being 'logical', 'regular', 'uniform', 'bland', and 'neutral' compared with other spaces which were more memorable and exciting..

It's just not got a very good shape, it's just dead square...rigid shapes with big blocks...it's really flat...there isn't any different things with different shaped tables ...like you think when you walk into the shop it's a rectangle and what they've done is left everything as a rectangle, left everything as it is, stuck things on the walls any space they put a wee square table and put stuff on it. But some places have said 'right, what we're going to do is go wild and add all these things' and you do remember it. You remember them for it... (Group 8 Next Male)

It's a very understated store, you can see by the lines...there's a very regular, symmetrical shape to it, the pillars in the middle are all very square and all the little lights in the same place give it the impression of length... (Group 1 Next Mixed)

Participants also commented on other retail spaces that were perceived to be predictable and lacking in character. For example two participants comment on the Gap.

...it's just so predictable and samey...every Gap is laid out in the same way, it doesn't matter where in the world you are it's all the same...they've got wooden blocks with clothes folded on them and walls full of jeans...even the changing rooms and mirrors seem to be in the same place (laughs)...

S: yeah I totally agree its just so bland and characterless...there're not saying anything new (Group 9 FC Female)

While Hirschman (1980) has identified and discussed the notion of innovativeness and novelty-seeking, these constructs have been primarily related to product attributes. However this study indicates that the predictability of space in terms of its novelty and innovativeness is an important dimension for many consumers in their reading of the space and brand as a whole.

7.3.3 Authenticity

Authenticity was a third dimension of the space configuration mentioned by many of the informants. This was concerned with the 'naturalness' and authentic, or 'real', feel of the space compared to spaces which were defined as more 'artificial', 'themed', and

'contrived'. Participants described both the French Connection and Next space as being very 'natural', 'fresh', 'healthy' and 'clean'. For instance one Next participant used the analogy of the store being a summer or outdoor experience.

... it's got quite an outdoors feel... I can't explain it, it's just like a nice warm summers day type thing... even in winter it's quite a summer experience... it's just quite a calm nice bright feeling I am getting from it, definitely summery or spring feel (Interview 1 Next Female).

This theme was also represented in many of the collages that were constructed by Next informants which incorporated images of the outdoors such as mountain scenes, trees and flowers to represent the fresh, natural feel of the space. Participants also included sporty images to symbolise the 'natural', 'healthy', 'active', feel of the store.

Figure 7.3 Sporty and Outdoors



Informants also commented on the natural feel of the stores in terms of the physical materials used in the space. For instance, French Connection customers frequently made reference to the wooden floors, leather couches as well as the natural shape of the space.

... even though it's got quite a modern edge to it, it also feels really natural and earthy almost organic... I think the lighting has a lot to do with that but also just the natural, subtle colours they've used of the wood and the leather couches and stuff...

yeah...there's also very few really harsh lines or edges...it's quite curvy and flowing rather than being all boxy and square....(Group 3 FC Mixed)

Reference was also made to the subtle colours and textures of the merchandise that appeared to reinforce the natural feel of the space. Customers described the merchandise as using 'earthy', 'natural' colours such as browns, creams and greys and the use of 'natural' materials such as linens, cottons and silks.

The store was also compared to other places participants were familiar with where the combination of materials in the space appeared to create a 'classy' and 'sophisticated' image.

It's quite sophisticated.... I think everybody knows, well the majority of people know this scheme of the kinda piney with the aluminium or steel whatever it is, it looks really good and the glass...you kind of feel good when you are about it....it reminds me a bit of All Bar One, its got the same sort of spacey layout and the same use of the wood and the steel, I think it is maybe a wee bit similar that way...and the marble makes you think of a Mediterranean villa, do you know what I mean with a kitchenette or patio with the nice elegant marble floors. (Interview 4 FC Male)

In contrast to Next and French Connection the Topshop/Topman retail space was perceived to be more artificial and contrived as informants commented on the different 'themes' in the store. Participants described the store as 'artificial', 'industrial' and 'urban', and many likened the space to a nightclub or bar as well as a factory and warehouse.

I used to work in the big Comet store in Paisley beside the motorway and I always think this store feels a bit like it...it feels just like a big warehouse not just because of its size but also because of things like the bare roof, it's dead high and tinny with all the metal and the huge big lights...it almost looks as if they haven't finished it...(Interview 6 Topman Male).

Informants also frequently commented on the materials used in the space such as the use of steel, pipes and screens and lighting which was described by one participant as 'something out of Star Trek'. The retail space was therefore perceived by informants to

be 'artificial' and engineered representing a 'modern', 'mechanical' 'urban' even 'futuristic' feel to the space.

Steel, steel floors you know like they've got grids and the big screens, you know like Virgin's got downstairs. It's all kinda metal with pipes. It's like the Futuristic zone in the Crystal Maze....It's not quite as bad as Virgin but there's all kinds of technical stuff in the gents' bit and there are a couple of screens and then upstairs there's a big screen... (Group 5 TS Male)

Participants commented on other themed or engineered spaces for instance one customer described his experiences of the Levi's store.

I like a theme to a shop you know. I mean Levi's is quite a nice shop, it's kinda based on the history of it. Well not based on the history but you can see where it's coming from. Even the stools are covered in the old jeans that they've had and things like that and there's brass displays like the buttons that's got Levi Strauss and it tells you all about it. I quite like that. It wouldn't make me walk in and say right 'because the shops nice I'll buy that shirt' but it's quite nice I really like to shop in an environment like that. It helps it. (Group 5 Topman Male).

This participant not only illustrates his space literacy and awareness of the intended 'themes' being proposed by the retailer, but is sensitive to the use of different materials in the space that support the 'history of the store theme' he identifies. He clearly appears to enjoy the challenge of exploring the environment and demonstrating his skills at decoding the retailer's intended meanings behind the display.

From the analysis thus far it is evident that consumers are imbuing space with meaning and are reading and interpreting different retail spaces in different ways. These readings have been concerned with the spaciousness of the environment, the predictability and authenticity of space. These themes are consistent with the role of the active audience described by Ritson and Elliot (1995) in Chapter Three where informants are active meaning makers displaying an ability to read and decode meanings from texts that they view. The following sections will now explore consumers' persuasion knowledge of these spatial configurations.

7.4 Space Configurations and Persuasion Knowledge

It was evident from discussions that informants were, in their own view, knowledgeable and familiar with the 'rules' and conventions of retail space: how it was constructed and intended to influence them. Not only does this theme support the notion of the 'Lay Marketer' discussed in Chapter Six, but it also has resonance with the concept of persuasion knowledge presented in Chapter Three. In contrast to the retail atmospherics literature which has focused on the impact of the physical environment on consumer behaviour, this section aims to explore consumers' interpretations, understandings or 'schemer schema' (Wright, 1986). This will be discussed in terms of the meanings derived from the physical artifacts in the space, the merchandise display, and the movement or flow of consumers in the space.

7.4.1 Physical Artifacts

Participants frequently commented on the physical artifacts or objects present in different retail spaces, such as the fixtures and furnishings and the facilities and signage used in the space. Not only did informants derive their own meanings from these artifacts but they frequently presented their own intuitive theories about their role in the space and the retailers intention's or tactics. For instance informants frequently made reference to the presence of seating areas in the retail space.

...the wooden floor gives it a bit of a living room feel and I know it's obvious but even the big comfy leather seats, just the feel of it makes it look like a living room area...but I think shops are going down that line anyway...it's just to make you feel comfortable in the shop...I mean even book shops are coffee shops and book shops at the same time (Group 3 FC Mixed)

The participant argues that this method of creating more lived in spaces is employed by retailers to make customers feel more relaxed and comfortable in the space, creating, in a sense, a home from home with familiar surroundings. This is recognised as a tactic that is employed across other retail spaces such as book shops having coffee shops inside.

Several informants commented on the use of the video displays and games in Topshop/Topman. These are perceived to be part of a persuasion attempt employed by retailers to 'tap' into or identify in some way with the 'MTV' culture just as the football table is a link to the sitcom friends.

It looks modern with the big wall of TV screens like that. I remember seeing them but don't remember if they were showing anything on them...it's as if they thought it might be a good idea to put TV screens up as if they are trying to tap into a certain culture I don't know...

I: what do you mean a culture?

Well you know a sort of youth culture, like the MTV culture and by putting the football table in because its associated with things like *Friends*...(Interview 6 TS Male)

Many customers described the physical facilities such as the changing rooms, cash desks and signage in the store, deriving their own meaning about their use and role within the space. For example one informant stated call buttons in changing rooms were used to encourage customers to try more items increasing the likelihood of purchase. Similarly another participant stated poor layout and signage in department stores was a tactic used to increase the time spent in the store.

...the changing rooms are great because there's call buttons so when you need something you don't have to wander out yourself or shout on a friend ... I suppose it's quite good from the shop's point of view because it might make people want to try stuff on rather than them getting annoyed and just leaving the clothes when they can't find anyone to ask for help... (Interview 1 Next Female)

...I always get totally lost...its really badly laid out and sign posted...I never know which way is out or which department I'm in and end up wandering around for ages... that's what they want you to do so you end up spending more time and probably more money as well...(Group 2 Topshop Mixed)

Accompanied shopping trips with informants also emphasised the importance of tangible experiences, or small 'tokens', that could be taken home with informants. For instance many participants picked up store postcards and leaflets or were given free perfume samples and confectionery with their purchases. One informant proposed that

these 'freebies' were used by retailers to positively reinforce the store in the consumer's mind.

I'm not sure why they put sweets in the bag, it's like restaurants giving you mints...I suppose it's to make you feel as though you're getting something for nothing so that you think more positively about the store (P-Shop FC Female)

7.4.2 Merchandise Display

Participants frequently commented on the way in which merchandise was displayed in the space. Customers distinguished between retail spaces that had mainly folded or hanging displays and those that used mannequins and other props in the store and window displays. Not only were spaces compared and contrasted on this dimension but participants' comments reflected their constant search for meaning in terms of their perception of the retailers' intended 'tactics' for displaying merchandise in particular ways.

They put certain things in certain places so that you see them going past. I'm quite conscious of that you see it then you think 'oh that's obviously the new range that they want you to see' which is fair enough, they're wanting to sell and you might want to buy it so I don't mind things like that being pushed. I'm there all the time and so maybe you do see the same thing so if they have got something new you would expect them to shout about it and put it at the front, that's fair enough (Interview 11 TS Female)

They were probably trying to lead people's eye's so they kinda lead it into the tops and they've probably got skirts near by so maybe they are trying to entice people to buy more than one thing and by having all the colours together they are giving people the choice so they don't have to go and look which always saves you the bother ! (Interview 9 Next Female)

...I think they try and put bright colours near the front to attract people in or probably the more fashionable things like if you put them at the front they're kinda in at the moment so more people are likely to buy them so...and then put the kinda basics among them so that they think I haven't actually had one of them for a while that's a good idea to have that with that so... (Group1 Next Mixed)

Informants were very aware of retailers' merchandising strategies in term of product placement in the space. For instance, displaying new merchandise in more visibly prominent places such as near the entrances, placing complementary products together to encourage purchase and displaying 'basics' among more fashionable items. In this way consumers presented themselves as 'surrogate strategists' (O'Donohoe and Tynan, 1998) drawing on industry concepts, discussing merchandising objectives and shrewdly second-guessing the intentions behind particular strategies.

Although the majority of participants viewed these strategies as beneficial to both the retailer and the customer in terms of offering greater choice, showing off 'what's new' and providing them with new fashion ideas other participants described feeling 'manipulated' and 'controlled' in the retail space.

...sometimes you do feel manipulated because it's like 'this is for my benefit' so that I'll buy something in this shop.... (Group 7 TS Female)

I suppose that's the whole ploy, you see the nice trousers and then the nice top that goes with it whereas I personally just prefer to pick out what I want...fair enough if you were going looking for an outfit then that would be ok but then they are pushing what they think will go whereas I like to be able to pick (Group 2 TS/TM Mixed)

This has some similarity to Aubert-Gament's (1997) understanding of the 'appropriating consumer', reflecting a tension between consumers' own freedom and willingness to be immersed in the space and their opposition to the space provider's intentions. However while informants commented on the persuasion tactics used by retailers, few appeared to demonstrate any 'creative behaviours' or 'resistance tactics' in re-appropriating the space in their own way.

7.4.3 Customer Flows

In addition to discussions about the merchandise display, informants frequently commented on the spatial dynamics and configuration of the store in terms of customers' movement around the space. Many talked about the use of 'paths' and

'walkways' around the space drawing on their knowledge from television programmes and their own experiences of working in retail.

...I don't know if this is going to make sense or not but you go into some stores and it's as if 'this is the way we want you to walk'. I used to work in Comet and they are like 'this is the way customers will walk around the store'. Whereas you go into other stores and there's maybe a table there and a diagonal unit there. It's as if they just want people to come in and have a casual wander around rather than expecting them to walk a certain way through things. That makes it seem more informal and in that case you are quite happy to look about. (Interview 6 TM Male)

In reference to his own experiences of working in retail this participant differentiates between more standardised settings and informal spaces. In spaces arranged formally the retailer has control of the setting and attempts to regulate or manipulate customers around the space. This is contrasted to what he perceived to be more 'informally' managed spaces where customers are free to 'casually wander' at their leisure. This is similar to Ritson and Elliott's (1995) notion of ways in which ads may be 'weak' texts and advertising audiences as 'strong' readers. In this way it can be argued that the retail space as a visual text can also encourage strong and weak readings. This also resonates with Aubert-Gamet's (1997) conceptual model of different modes of appropriation offered by the service space. This ranges from 'suggestion' offering a high level of potentiality for appropriation by the user to 'prescription' which forces the user to act according to single and planned meanings and practices.

Accompanied shopping trips revealed that the majority of informants followed the intended paths around the retail space. However participants frequently diverted from their intended routes through the space on encountering other customers, or being drawn to something of interest in the space.

Oh yes...I've seen a lot of things on the telly about the walkway that you are supposed to go round and see things. I was conscious of that for a while and you do sort of do it a wee bit, the way that they suggest you walk around the store but if I get distracted and see something then you just go off and do your own thing (Interview 11 TS Female)

Other customers also appear to actively resist or oppose the intentions of the retailers.

...I heard once that people design their stores so that their customers go left and for some automatic reason I always go right, I don't know I don't want to be forced to go that way, I want to go this way. I don't know why....I just thought that was really weird. I always go this way (motions hands anticlockwise). I mean I know I should probably go that way so I see everything. Sometimes I feel that I know that they want us to look at this first and then that but it depends what type of store you go into, quite often I do the opposite... (Interview 3 FC Female)

In this case the participant deliberately re-appropriates or 'twists' the space (Aubert-Gamet, 1997) by walking in the opposite direction from the way she believes is intended thereby asserting her power or control over her own movement in the space. While this appears to provide an example of space re-appropriation it also demonstrates the limitation of her knowledge as she confuses or misinterprets the predominant direction of movement in the space.

7.5 Space Orientations

It is evident from the analysis thus far that consumers have different experiences of retail space but that overall they appear to be actively 'reading', interpreting and deriving meaning from these space encounters. This section of the chapter explores the idea that consumers have different 'spatial orientations' and that retail stores were often compared or chosen on this basis; certain individuals had a more positive preference for being in one space over another as they felt a stronger affinity, or sense of 'belonging'. The idea of there being a 'zone of comfort', or a sense of belonging to certain spaces resonates with many ideas presented in the literature such as the notion of insiders and outsiders developed by Relph (1976) (Chapter Two, section 2.6.1) and the idea that individuals can belong or become members of a community or tribe (Chapter Three). The following section seeks to compare participants' space orientations defined along the themes of comfort, freedom and immersion.

7.5.1 Comfort

Participants were instantly able to recognise and distinguish between different retail spaces from the visual stimuli presented. For instance, when commenting on photographs of the store one Next customer stated that the retail space was instantly recognisable as Next. He remarked 'to me that's Next, ding ding ding ding...it just screams Next...everything about it'. Similarly another informant commented

All I can say is that it's just Next. If you hadn't have told me it was Next I could have told you that but if you asked someone else 'where's that?' they could have quite easily said Marks and Spencer or Debenhams or something like that but because I have been in the store, I know the layout of the store, the guys in the pictures, the cut of the jumpers, just even the packaging...that's pretty sad actually (laughs)...(Interview 2 Next Male)

Such familiarity with the retail space was an important dimension of many consumers' experiences and participants often expressed a preference for spending time in spaces they were familiar with. However it was evident that this was more than just familiarity with the space as many participants described feeling a strong sense of belonging or identity where they felt more 'at home', 'comfortable', 'relaxed' and 'at ease' in these environments.

It's quite comfortable I suppose...it's a nice feel you know...it's a pleasant atmosphere and now that you've got these televisions and things like that. It makes you feel really at home...that's a better description, quite welcoming you know? Things that you like around you...(Interview 10 Topman Male)

In describing how comfortable they felt in these familiar places informants made frequent reference to more personal spaces and places such as their living room at home and their own bedrooms.

The shop is actually really like my bedroom... I feel that you could use my bedroom, just the kind of layout that's in it and actually make it part of a Next store, that's what it's like...It's got the varnished floors and all that kind of stuff and it's got bold colours in it. Reds...it's really bold which I think a lot of the stores are like and

attractive to the eye, there's a lot of use of wood and stuff like that and the fact that I feel comfortable in it as well. (Interview 12 Next Male).

...that picture there of the shelving [shirt and tie selection] it's got quite a homely feel...I don't mean you have something like that in your house but I mean that kind of idea would be nice in your house, like an open plan thing. It would be great just to have that and grab a shirt and work here we go...it's just like your favourite wardrobe... (Interview 2 Next Male)

It would definitely be like my bedroom with things on the floor and stuff that's half worn and stuff hanging up and like the wardrobe lying half open and things like that...' (Group 2 TS mixed)

In the collage task one group of French Connection informants selected an image of a living room to represent the 'homely' feel of the space (Figure 7.4)

Figure 7.4 A 'homely' space



The picture of someone's living room is just because the shop reminds me of mine... just the feel of it, the whole brightness and warmth and homely atmosphere with the pictures on the wall, the wooden floor, the rug and big comfy seats... (Group 9 FC Female)

In all of these examples participants compare the store to their own living room, bedroom and favourite wardrobe which appears to indicate that these spaces hold some

personal meaning or 'personal connections' (Krugman, 1965) for participants. For example for the first informant the space appears to be almost a physical extension of his own bedroom (Belk, 1988). Similarly the last participant compares the space to her own bedroom which was contrasted to her living room as 'our bedrooms are more personal to us whereas you wouldn't say a living room because your mum and dad's furniture is in your living room'. The theme of 'honeyiness' has also been recognised by McCracken (1989) which who suggests it has both physical and symbolic properties reflecting feelings of sociality, rootedness and comfort. This is also perhaps consistent with Relph's (1976) notion of 'emphatic insiderness' which concerns an emotional participation and involvement with a place.

A feeling of comfort in the space was also concerned with the configuration of the space in terms of how easy it was for participants to navigate and negotiate their way around the environment. This theme links back to the predictability theme outlined in section 7.3.2. In particular Next was described as 'predictable', 'ordered' and 'uniform'. Many participants expressed a preference for this type of space as they felt comfortable and secure knowing how the store was structured and laid out. It was perceived to be 'a straight forward shop with no frills' 'simple', 'idiot proof' and 'fool proof'.

..Next you kind of know the layout, you know it's going to start with the jeans and the cargo pants and then the sweatshirts and the jackets and then if you are wanting up the back for shoes and suits and ties and all that kind of thing...it's kind of idiot proof ! (Interview 2 Next Male)

Male informants in particular described feeling at ease and relaxed in this familiar environment as they found it quick and easy to navigate their way around the space and easy to select and purchase the merchandise. In general male customers liked that 'combinations' were put together for them which often 'sparked off an idea' or saved them having to 'think about it'. This therefore limited the amount of search activity required and consequently the amount of time spent in the store.

Participants also described feeling comfortable in less ordered or structured spaces where they were able to rummage around.

Have you been in that TK Max shop? It's fantastic I could spend hours in there just rummaging through everything, you can always find real bargains in these places...there's just so much stuff to look through. I prefer that to shops where you go in and it's so bare with just like two or three things on a hanger (Group 2 TS Mixed)

These feelings of comfort, belonging and security were strongly contrasted with unfamiliar retail environments as many informants described feeling 'lost', 'uncomfortable' and 'frustrated' in these spaces.

I: you said you felt comfortable shopping in Jigsaw can you think of a time when you felt uncomfortable in a shop?

Emm...yeah. I was in town the other day in Fraser's with mum...I haven't been in there in years it's such a vast shop...I feel totally lost in places like that...but mum's in there all the time, she knows it like the back of her hand so I just follow her about...I don't know there's just something reassuring about being somewhere you know... (Interview 7 FC Female)

...it's so frustrating when you can't find what you're after...it was so embarrassing one time when I got caught by one of the guys in there looking at the women's stuff...that's why I much prefer being in somewhere I know where I am and what I'm looking at...it's definatley less risky (laughs) (Interview 2 Next Male)

This theme was supported in the accompanied shopping trips as two participants became visibly flustered when they were unable to find what they were looking for as a result of sections of the store being altered. On one occasion this was due to a store that had been recently renovated and culminated in the informant leaving the store. When later asked about the incident the participant commented

I suppose I just felt really lost...you know what it was like in there, there's just a sea of things in front of you and it was quite busy as well...as I said at the time it was like trying to work your way around a maze...I know I'd picked some stuff up to try on but when we couldn't find the changing rooms that was the last straw! I just had to get out! (laughs) It was just so much easier before when I knew exactly where everything was...(P-shop FC Female)

Although familiar with the original store this participant describes feeling lost in the space when she was unable to locate certain things and navigate her way around the space. These feelings of frustration were compared to being in a maze. This theme has resonance with Relph's (1976) category of 'existential outsidership' which he describes as selfconscious and reflective uninvolvedness, feelings of alienation, and not belonging to a place.

7.5.2 Freedom

A recurring theme across all participants appeared to be a feeling of freedom to move in the space in contrast to feeling constrained or restricted by the space. While this theme was briefly alluded to in section 7.3.1, it also had an impact on informants' space orientations as many described feeling more at ease and comfortable shopping in these spacious, open environments. For instance participants described French Connection as an 'inviting', 'comfortable', and 'calming' space where they felt relaxed and at ease.

...the sofas make it look really good, I think they look really great, even just the way they are set out like that but emm...it just makes it look inviting, there's somewhere for you to sit down and I don't know....it's a really relaxed atmosphere, you're not stressed, you don't need to rush about. You can just take your time and you are free to do whatever you want... (Interview 7 FC Female)

I prefer being in places like French Connection and Jigsaw because you can just wander around at your own pace and do your own thing whereas in shops like New Look you're forced to walk down tiny cramped isles...(Group 3 FC Mixed)

Preference for more spacious environments appeared to be linked to informants' own sense of freedom and control over their own movements in the space where they didn't feel rushed, pressured or 'forced' in and around the space. This highlights the tension noted by Cova and Cova (2000), between the power of owner of the space who controls the environment and the autonomy and freedom of the individual.

The appeal of larger stores such as Next was attributed to a feeling of independence in the space or informants' own 'personal' space in which they were free to move around

at their own leisure without being 'disturbed' or 'interrupted' by others where they could become immersed and lost in the space.

Next is a bit like when you go into Fraser's. They're maybe dealing with someone else or it's a bigger space so you kind of look at your leisure and you take things from all different bits and go into the changing rooms and then just leave them on the rail and nobody is barging in and saying 'how did you get on with that' and in your face kind of thing (Group 4 Next Female)

...you can just mooch around and loose yourself in the space...it's like a different world where you can just shut yourself away and forget about everything else that's going on (Interview 1 Next Female)

Both participants clearly enjoy shopping in larger spaces where they feel free to move around at their leisure. While the first participant enjoys the privacy of the space in terms of being free to try on clothes without being interrupted, the second customer emphasises a sense of escapism and immersion in the space.

The importance of feeling free to move around the space easily was often taken for granted as participants only appeared to comment on this dimension when they encountered spaces where their movements were constrained or restricted. Customers frequently described feeling frustrated when they were unable to freely move around the space or confused and lost when they could not find what they were looking for

emm...if it's a hot day and I'm in a hurry I get *really frustrated, really frustrated* and I just want to walk out basically. I mean they don't come up to you in that shop [Topshop] and ask you if you want help all the time which I do like but eh, it's too cluttered for my liking. I just can't be bothered with it. I like simple and spaced out things... that I can go round in an order, otherwise I forget, see all these big circular rails and all that. I get really confused by that and I just think 'oh my God where do I start?' it's just like one big sale shop...my idea of hell! (Interview 7 FC Female)

....they just put things out and there's just no method, it's just like a big jungle of stuff. It's just crazy. If you actually want to find anything it takes you ages to look at it...you just feel so overwhelmed by it all... (Group 6 FC Male)

These cluttered and disorganised spaces were perceived to be more confusing, lacking in structure and 'method' which impaired participants' ability to navigate their way around the store and required more search activity. Informants experienced feelings of a loss or lack of control which forced them to limit their search activity and leave the store.

Similarly several other customers described shopping in more confined spaces as being in 'a totally different world' in which they felt restricted or constrained by the space.

I hate shopping in stores like that [Ikea] you feel like you're a rat on a treadmill and you're being forced round the whole store whether you like it or not (laughs) (Group 1 Next Mixed)

...there is nothing worse when you walk in and it's as if...as if you are walking through a jungle you know what I mean, you have got to fight your way through the store (Interview FC Male).

It has lots of stands in your way, you try to walk and you try to look but there's things, you are being forced really to almost walk into things and down narrow aisles...its like being an animal in a cage (Interview 3 FC Female)

Metaphors such as 'walking through a jungle', 'a rat on a treadmill' and a 'caged animal' suggest participants' sense of losing control as they are 'forced', manipulated and controlled by the physical space rather than being in control of their own movements and experiences. Again this highlights the tension between the power of owner of the space who controls the environment and the autonomy and freedom of the individual (Cova and Cova, 2000).

Other customers describe similar effects

when you go into somewhere like French Connection or even Jigsaw there's a lot of space to move about and you can almost actually think about it. I think when you are in somewhere like New Look or International, you cannae think, you just don't know what you like anymore, you just want out of it....(Group 3 FC Mixed)

...I just see all these clothes and I don't know where to start and I think ohhh...and I get all panicky and hot and flustered and think I'll never have time to go round it all...

I'm the same sometimes I just get really claustrophobic and faint like I can't breath anymore and I just *have* to drop everything and get out (Group 4 Next Female)

For these participants shopping in more confined spaces not only appears to impair their own judgement to the extent 'you just don't know what you like anymore' but also sometimes induced more extreme physiological reactions such as feelings of claustrophobia or panic.

7.5.3 Immersion

Immersion or activity in the space was another theme to emerge in the analysis. Some participants appeared to differentiate between 'wasted' or 'exposed' spaces which held little meaning or interest. This was contrasted with more meaningful retail spaces in which customers could become immersed and involved in the space where they could 'hunt', 'rummage' and 'play'.

Several informants described visiting retail spaces which were characterised as 'empty' and 'neutral' spaces which failed to engage or involve them in any way

It's just got a really empty feel to it...I never really seem to see anything there but in saying that I always pop in for a look when I'm in town...I've never really thought about it. I don't know, I don't really have any feelings about it one way or the other (Interview 11 TS Female)

Some shops you could go in and out of in about two minutes because there's just nothing to see like Next's a really boring, neutral shop to shop in and every Next is exactly the same...there's never anything new or eye catching...they have the same displays, the same posters the same everything...(Group 1 Next Mixed)

I don't particularly like shopping in places like Gap and Benetton because it's all too tidy to look at, you just don't want to touch anything...it's not because I'm embarrassed to pick up the clothes but

it just seems that they are not encouraging you to look at it...(Interview 10 TM Male)

This theme was particularly evident in the accompanied shopping trips as participants often drifted in and out of shops in a matter of a few minutes without interacting with the space in anyway. This bears some similarity to Relph's (1976) category of 'incidental outsidership' in which a place is experienced as little more than a background or setting for events and activities. It also appears consistent with Aubert-Gamet and Cova's (1999) notion of 'non-places' in which individuals are anonymous actors where interactions with the space are characterised by disembodied service experiences.

Several participants described feeling uncomfortable 'lost', 'exposed' and 'intimidated' in these spaces.

The design can really put you off...

L: yeah in fact there's one in Braehead where there looks as if there's nothing in it because it's all against the wall and there's all this wasted space and you just feel as though there's nothing there, nothing to do...you look obvious, you feel quite exposed...you're standing and people can see you too much (everyone agrees). In fact there's even a clear window, there's absolutely nothing there and you feel as though you're stuck out in the middle of nowhere...(Group 7 TS Female)

This lack of affinity, involvement or identity to the retail space was also described by one informant as he compared shopping in Next to other less 'structured' spaces.

'It makes me feel like I can go there and get an item of clothing that is ok but not special. It doesn't make me feel special or warm, it makes me feel like I am not in something that is absorbing me. I feel like I want to be in a more warmer store, less structured and ordered and designed and square that I can rummage around in. Even like a charity shop, where things are just chucked in....you feel like you are inside it, whereas this you don't, I feel like I am in a less warm more sanitised environment. On something rather than in something' (Interview 12 Next Male)

Although this informant was a regular customer in Next he does not appear to identify or feel he 'belongs' in the space. He has no personal attachment or affiliation to the space as it is not involving or 'absorbing' him. It is not a particularly rewarding

engaging or stimulating experience as he describes it as being 'on something rather than in something'. This is contrasted to the feelings of belonging in more unstructured environments like a charity shop where he feels like he is 'inside it'. This is similar to the theme of comfort discussed in section 7.5.1 and resonates with the work of Relph (1976) who characterises the dimension of 'emphatic insideness' which he describes as an emotional participation and involvement with a place. Indeed it could be argued that the space in this context is perceived to be an 'extension of the self' (Belk, 1988).

Informants actively engaged with and immersed themselves in the space where they spent time selecting merchandise, experimenting and playing with make-up, scents and accessories and trying on merchandise. While this active form of play in the retail space was not explicitly talked about in the interviews and groups it was something that emerged very strongly in the accompanied shopping trips. For instance female participants in particular spent a great deal of time experimenting and playing, with trying on clothing, make up and accessories forming a large part of their experience in the space. For instance, one female Topshop participant in particular spent a great deal of time looking at and experimenting with the make-up and accessories. When asked about her experiences she stated

I just love trying on all the different types of make up, they've just got some lovely bits...and I love all the accessories you get in there...I'm forever buying belts and different hair clips and things...I'm not actually looking for anything, I'm not looking at anything. I'm just sort of touching things and going through and just totally oblivious to everything else that's going on...lost in my own wee world...(P-shop TS Female)

Similarly a French Connection customer described the importance of touching and trying on merchandise.

I literally feel my way around the store...it's not something I really think about doing at the time but I suppose it's a really important part of shopping...it just wouldn't be the same if you couldn't feel and touch what you were looking at. Like in there [French Connection]

there were different materials like leather and wool and different textures...you have to be able to hold it and feel it and try it...(P-Shop FC Female)

These tactile experiences appeared to be very important to participants as many described shopping in spaces where they could actively rummage around where the lack of structure and uniformity to the space was appealing.

It's not tidy...it doesn't look uniform or whatever or over the top but it feels quite inviting that you can come in and have a look whereas if that was just a wall of the same thing, the same colour you know you would be quite put off and quite intimidated but that looks fun, that you would want to go over and have a rummage and see....(Interview 11 TS Female)

For this participant it is the process of 'space exploration' that is attractive as she prefers to shop in a space where she can rummage around. This type of space is clearly more challenging and exciting to explore where more search activity is required. Many participants therefore viewed shopping in this type of space as a skill or game. For instance one Next shopper talks about her skill of 'homing in' on certain items and boasts about her ability to 'sift through' everything quickly to find what she wants.

I like looking for a bargain....yes, I go in knowing what I want and then 'home in' on whatever, I can quickly sift through everything and if, you know, I can't find anything in that time then that's it I will just get out. I am not one of these people that will spend hours in shops (Group 1 Next Mixed)

Like a game she seems to have time penalties imposed therefore if she is unable to find what she is looking for within a certain time frame she leaves the store. Similarly other participants describe the pleasures they have 'touching' and 'feeling' the merchandise and 'filtering' and 'raking through seeing things'. One participant likened this to a 'hunter-gatherer type instinct' where the pleasure is 'going out and getting it yourself rather than having it presented to you...that's almost too easy'.

For other participants shopping in these spaces was a novel experience that they often indulged in on occasion. Indeed as these cluttered spaces were often associated with

lower priced outlets many appeared to be quite embarrassed to 'admit' they shopped in these spaces.

I like shopping in Topshop, New Look and International... nobody really admits shopping there but I suppose everybody does (laughs)...They have that sort of bargain basement type of feel to them which is fun and exciting where everything is not particularly ordered or well set out .. (Interview 1 Next Female)

This customer appears to enjoy indulging in the experience of 'bargain' hunting which is fun and exciting, like a temptation she can't resist. This theme appears consistent with literature discussed in Chapter Three which suggests that post-modern consumers are actively co-creating and customising their own experiences in the retail space.

7.6 Conclusions

This chapter has introduced the notion of retail space literacy to suggest that young fashion consumers can actively read, interpret and derive meaning from these three dimensional texts. It began by comparing informants' accounts of various retail space configurations in which three broad themes were identified. Firstly, spaciousness, defined along a continuum from open to cluttered or crowded spaces. Secondly, predictability, concerned with the novelty and originality of the space and lastly 'authenticity', related to natural and contrived or themed spaces. The chapter went on to examine retail space configurations and consumers' persuasion knowledge. This section demonstrated that informants were active meaning makers who had intuitive theories about the tactics used by marketers in persuasion attempts. These were presented in terms of the meanings derived from the physical artifacts in the space, the merchandise display and the movement or flow of consumers in the space.

Finally the chapter proposed that informants have different 'space orientations' where individuals felt a strong bond, sense of 'belonging' or insideness (Relph, 1976) in different retail spaces. This identity to place was manifest in feelings of comfort and homeyness, freedom to move around the space and immersion, activity and tactile engagement. In contrast participants also felt uncomfortable, constrained and

manipulated in various retail environments moving them to an outsider status (Relph, 1976). Overall this account differs from traditional research in atmospherics that has focused on measuring the impact of the physical space on consumers' behavioural responses. Instead this study shows the importance of an individual level of analysis where consumers readings, understanding of persuasion and orientations are prioritised. Chapter Eight explores consumers' experiences of 'the sensory space'.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE SENSORY SPACE

'The senses are the gates and windows to the mind, through which all new information passes; so that there can be no thoughts, ideas, conceptions in our head that do not derive originally from our experience of surface stimuli impinging on our bodies' (Humphrey 1992 cited in Zaltman and Coulter, 1995;38)

8.1 Introduction

The role of consumers' five senses at the point of sale has been illustrated throughout the literature review. This has focused primarily on measuring customer responses to different sensory stimuli (Chapter Two, section 2.3.1), as well as on how sensory appeals can be managed and controlled by an organisation (Chapter Three, section 3.2). This chapter explores the impact and role of the 'the sensory space' from the consumer's perspective. However instead of examining consumers' visual, auditory, olfactory and tactile experiences as discrete entities or dimensions to be measured, the chapter aims to provide a holistic understanding of how consumers combine or synthesise their sensory experiences to create or feel the 'sense of space'. This 'synesthetic' impression (Hetzl, 1995a) was clearly illustrated by one participant who contrasts her sensory experiences in different retail spaces

You just look around and there are just clothes everywhere, and you just think I'm lost, ...just a rambling, sprawling mass of things everywhere with things just not put back in the right place...with the pounding music. I mean I just love going into a book store with that calming feeling you get and you can just go into a corner and browse...the colours that they use sort of dark wood colours and the smell of fresh coffee. It makes a big difference. You contrast this to stores like Virgin where you feel more energised by the whole environment and you walk upstairs into the classical section and it's got a very different feel about it more calming with more subdued lighting (Group 1 Next Mixed)

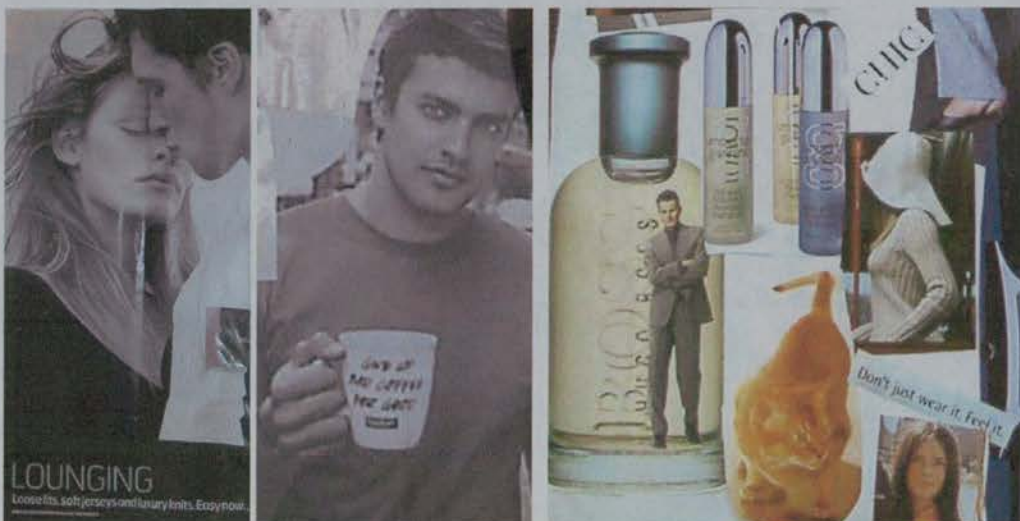
This excerpt demonstrates how consumers' senses are combined to create the overall 'feel' or sense of space across diverse retail settings. This includes the visual impact of the space in terms of the merchandise displays, the auditory space in the form of background music, the lighting as well as the different colours and smells associated with the space. For instance the combination of the dark wood and the smell of coffee in the bookstore induce a calming feeling.

The chapter begins by exploring consumers' holistic impression of the space which has been conceptualised in terms of calming, passive and energised spaces to highlight the contrasts in sensory experience. The chapter then goes on to explore consumers' understanding of these sense appeals. In line with Chapter Seven this section draws on the concept of persuasion knowledge to illustrate consumers' intuitive theories about the cognitive, emotional and behavioural 'tricks' employed by retailers in the servicescape. Finally the chapter explores consumers sensory orientations.

8.2 'Calming Spaces'

One theme to emerge when informants commented on their experiences of different spaces was the role of calming or relaxing spaces. These spaces were characterised by participants as 'calm', 'tranquil', 'soothing' and 'relaxing'. This overall impression was strongly associated with the French Connection space and was depicted in the collages constructed by one group of mixed French Connection informants (Figure 8.1).

Figure 8.1 A Calming space



This says it all for me 'LOUNGING – loose fits, soft jerseys and luxury knits – EASY NOW...it just gives off quite a relaxing, calming feel, somewhere that you do feel you can lounge around and just be yourself...(Group 3 FC Mixed)

...there's not any really, really bright colours, it's all kind of calming...that's a great way to describe it...'don't just wear it, feel it'... (Group 3 FC Mixed)

These images and comments were used by informants to capture the calming, relaxing feel of the space. As the first participant states the store was somewhere that he could 'lounge around' and 'be himself'. Similarly the image of the man holding a cup of coffee was used to represent the calm feel of the space where he was described as looking 'very relaxed and chilled out'. Other images in the collage represented the scent of French Connection which participants characterised as being very subtle, 'clean', and 'classic', 'nothing overpowering' as opposed to a highly perfumed 'aggressive', or 'intense' smell. As one informant stated

It's a very refreshing shop to walk into...like a cool breath of fresh air...it's not aggressive, you don't get bombarded with all these 'have ten percent off today if you open this account' and all that rubbish. It's just a bit more relaxed (Interview 7 FC Female)

Participants often commented on the combination of other sensory experiences such as the lighting and music in the space that contributed to the calming feel of the space.

It's quite quiet so you're not all worried about things...it's quiet, it's peaceful, there's no loud music or people bustling about so it's a calming effect really, you feel at ease (Interview 7 FC Female)

...it's just a comfortable level of lighting. I mean it's the same, see if you go into a club, I don't think you would have the same atmosphere in a club if the music was playing and the lights were on. The lights have got to be off, I mean you have got to have the right lighting and music to set the overall mood, do you know what I mean? (Interview 4 FC Male)

Informants showed an awareness of the combination of sense appeals used to create the appropriate mood or atmosphere in the space such as the use of lighting and

music in a nightclub. The muted colours of the merchandise and materials such as the wood and steel fixtures used in the retail space were also an important part of creating the calming or 'soothing' feel of the space.

I always associate black and white with French Connection I mean if it was a season it would be winter with all the muted shades not because its cold...but it's got a crisp and clean feel to it...(Interview 3 FC Female)

If you can imagine a kinda cold sensation...not cool as in 'cooooool' but 'cool' not so much cold but a relaxing, soothing cool...the colours also give that impression because there's never really any bright colours like reds or whatever and because of the colour of the wood and the white and the stainless steel...it just feels restful...very easy on the eye (Interview 4 FC Male)

This calming space was also representative of other retail spaces commented on by informants.

It's [John Lewis] like walking into a timewarp, it feels like walking into the old Arnotts or something. It's so quiet and old fashioned feeling compared to the rest of the shops you go into with music blaring and people rushing around and big adverts and signs all over the place. It's quite relaxing in that sense...you can just walk around at your own pace (Group 4 Next Female)

...it's all wooden floors, couches and big wooden displays with jumpers and shirts just thrown on the table. They're not all neatly folded piles like Benetton or wherever so you don't need to rake through and ruin the display...it's just a really chilled, relaxed atmosphere. I don't know if they deliberately only let a certain number of people in but it always seems dead quiet and the shop assistants back off and let you do your own thing...the new one [Jigsaw for Men] in Royal Exchange Square is also really relaxing...they've got a set of decks in there and there's a guy that plays Café Del Mar chilled out tunes (Group 8 Next Male)

Again these excerpts illustrate that it is the combination of different sensory appeals such as the merchandise displays and furnishings, other customers and sales personnel and the music that create these relaxing and calming spaces. This is in line with Schmitt (1999) and Hetzel (1995a) who have argued that elements of the

sensory space or these ‘sensory experiences’ collectively form a meaning system that creates an overall global or synesthetic impression.

8.3 ‘Neutral’ spaces

In several retail settings participants’ rarely mentioned or discussed their sensory experiences of the space. This was both based on their memories of the space and from visiting the store during accompanied shopping trips. For example Next was one environment in which there appeared to little overriding ‘feel’ or sense of space. Indeed several informants described the space as ‘bland’, ‘predictable’ ‘neutral’ and ‘nondescript’.

I suppose it’s kind of neutral, nothing really jumps out at you...you don’t really notice much about it...it’s fairly nondescript (Group 1 Next Mixed)

It’s got a real Marks and Spencer’s feel about it...it’s very samey and mainstream...the same as every other store but I suppose they have to be quite ordinary because they’re trying to appeal to everyone, they can’t be too outrageous or wild...they’d scare all the customers away! (Group 4 Next Female)

I always think of it as quite a quiet, peaceful store. There’s never really hard music on or that many people in there...the staff are always sort of passive rather than running about mad (Group 1 Next Mixed)

While participants appeared to have a strong attachment or affiliation to the Next store brand, many seemed to be indifferent to the space. This was often perceived to be a very ordinary, expressionless, and characterless place. Several informants commented on the colours in the space where the store was described as having quite ‘bland’ and ‘neutral’ shades such as greys and blues. These colours and shades were represented in the collage task (Figure 8.2).

Figure 8.2 A Neutral space



When commenting on the collage images one participant explained she found it very difficult to think of her other senses as she said that for her the store was very much a visual experience

Overall this is Next for me...the greys and whites or silver are very Next...the silver is very classic and plain...I know they do some brighter colours but for me the feel is very much these quite subtle shades of blues and grey... (Group 4 Next Female)

Overall participants found it difficult to describe the space in terms of their sensory experiences. For instance several informants were unable to recall if there was music played in the store.

I can't remember if they play music or not...they probably do but it would probably be with a company like Next 'the Next CD' that they would play across all of the shops. This month we're playing this CD kinda thing...it's like Gap they probably have a similar thing (Group 8 Next Male)

Reference to the same music being played emphasised the highly commercialised or standardised nature of the space. When asked about why this might be the case one group of informants suggested that it was because the store was attempting to appeal

to a large audience and therefore did not want to 'offend' or 'define' themselves in any particular way. In this case the space was seen to be very 'neutral', 'plain' and 'bland'.

This theme was supported by reference to other retail spaces that were also frequently described as 'characterless', 'non-descript' places. For example the first participant comments on high street retail stores in general while the second informant talks about Marks and Spencer's.

I think most of them are really similar...they're all very...I don't know how to describe it but you go in and they've got the same layout with different shelves and the big circular or square tables with their t-shirt piled on it and their wooden floors and the dance music playing in the background...they're all the same...they seem to conform to one way of shopping. It's as if this is the way it's got to be done...it's just so non-descript...nothing really grabs you, you just flow in and out of these places (Interview 12 Next Male)

It's just really monotonous...aisle after aisle. There's nothing that really gets you going it's quite bland in that sense, there's no music or silly displays...just row after row of the same thing (Interview 5 TS Female)

These 'neutral' retail spaces appear to be consistent with Aubert-Gamet and Cova's (1999) notion of 'non-places'. This theme also has resonance with Relph's (1976) concept of 'placelessness' where the author suggests there has been an eradication of distinctive places and the making of 'standardised landscapes' characterised by a 'labyrinth of endless similarities' (p141).

8.4 'Energised Spaces'

In contrast to calming and passive spaces, participants frequently remarked on retail spaces that were perceived to be more active, noisy and alive. These 'energised spaces' were highly stimulating places engaging all the senses. For instance, Topshop/Topman was described by participants as being a 'lively', 'fun', 'colourful' and 'busy' space.

There's a buzz about the place you know there seems to be lots going on like if the staff are running about doing stuff or if there's just folk in there at the games machines and stuff. Like there's a whole corner of noise...the mood I like is when you go into places and there's lots going on with swish swish toosh toosh....or if you go into a place like M&S it's like ding de ding (twiddles thumbs looks bored!)...and then you come down the escalator...this has got a bit more life to it... (Group 5 TM Male)

It's quite a busy sounding store, I mean you have got the fancy music playing and there is sort of younger people that are in it so there's a lot of people talking and lots of different groups of people mixing...it's like the subway, the underground in a way...(Group 2 TS/TM Mixed)

This energetic 'buzz' is attributed to the combination of different elements of the sensory space such as the music playing, the sound of the games machines as well as the interactions of the sales personnel and other customers in the space. The first participant uses highly immersive imagery and onomatopoeic references to convey the overall sense of space. This is strongly contrasted with Marks and Spencer's which is perceived to be less stimulating and lifeless in comparison. The second participant compares this experience to the underground and emphasises the role of the space as a place for young people to meet and socialise. The significance of this 'social space' will be explored in more detail in chapter nine.

This vibrant feel was also reiterated by participants in the accompanied shops and in the images constructed by two pairs of informants in the collage tasks where strong bright colours were used to convey the 'fun', 'lively' and 'wild' feel of the store brand (Figure 8.3).

...it's just really bright and colourful...these wacky shoes and the bouncing balls...just a really fun place to be...

K: Yeah we found those shoes too ! (laughs) they're really wild which I think says it all (Group 2 TS/TM mixed)

Figure 8.3 An Energised space



Participants frequently compared the space to other 'lively' spaces such as bars and restaurants however the overall feel of the space was primarily likened to being in a nightclub. For instance one participant described the combination of the lighting, dance videos and music played in the store as well as the presence of a DJ which created clubbing atmosphere.

I think it reminds me of the dancing...it's kinda clubby clothes and you always hear clubby music like 'Tokas Miniquote' when you go in....It's a bit more jazzed up with the lights and music and dance videos and stuff and they've also quite often got a DJ in mixing tracks...so it's like a pub club type thing you're in with clothes in it....(Group 2 TS/TM Mixed)

Several other 'energised' retail spaces were commented upon again reflecting the synesthetic impression created by the combination of different sensory experiences.

It's [Gravity] all blue neon lights...it's quite dark and clubby inside but it's really funky and it plays great music that really gets you going...it's just a great atmosphere (Group 6 FC Male)

...Miss Selfridge is one that's got a really lively feel, it always cheers you up! the music's great...everyone in there looks as if there're having a good time...all the assistants are just walking about and singing and dancing and stuff...just being themselves (Interview 7 FC Female)

This section has highlighted the range of sensory experiences participants have described across calming, passive and energised retail spaces. In contrast to previous research that has explored the consumers' five senses as individual dimensions to be measured, it has demonstrated that consumers appear to combine their senses to create a synesthetic impression or overall sense of place. The following section will examine consumers' understanding of the use of these sense appeals and the meanings they have derived from this.

8.5 Sense Appeals and Persuasion Knowledge

In line with Chapter Seven participants appeared to form their own intuitive theories about the ways in which the sensory space was used by retailers to influence them. The following sections explore some of these interpretations and meanings presented in terms of the cognitive, emotional and behaviour tactics or tricks believed to influence what consumers 'think', 'feel' and 'do' in the retail space. While these themes appear to parallel dimensions of Bitner's (1992) model discussed in Chapter Two (section 2.2.3), the focus is on consumers' understanding and interpretation of these dimensions rather than on their emotional, cognitive and physiological responses.

8.5.1 Cognitive

Participants often commented on various dimensions of the sensory space that were perceived to have an impact on their judgements and beliefs. For instance two participants discussed the mirrors used in different stores which they believed were

deliberately distorted to alter consumers' perceptions about their body shape in order to encourage them to purchase.

...sometimes I think that mirrors in different shops are distorted. Some of them make you look terrible and some of them make you look good and then you get home and you are like hmmm....

Yeah, even the clothes you are going shopping in some mirrors it looks fine and then in other mirrors you are like 'I can't believe I am out like this!'. I think a lot of them are made to be more slimming or more flattering almost...it's because they want to make you *think* you are slimmer than you actually are so that you buy the clothes... (Group 4 Next Female)

Similarly a number of other customers discussed the different types of pricing strategies used in the retail space.

...it's like the two for one offers or the buy one get one free...you're always really tempted to buy the wee T-shirts or whatever because it just seems like such a good deal...

Yeah but it's really annoying because they say 3 tops for £9.99 or what ever...I think they want us to think it sounds cheaper than three for a tenner but to be honest it makes no difference...we know it's just a penny more, we're not that daft! (Group 2 TS/TM Mixed)

While participants' state they are often 'tempted' by these offers they also acknowledge that these are tactics or strategies employed by retailers to make them believe they getting a 'bargain'. This theme also emerged in the accompanied shopping trips as one French Connection male participant talked about the Swedish Eisenegger retail brand. After visiting the store he stated that the reason the store could afford to sell stock at such heavily discounted prices was because the company exported surplus stock from their Swedish stores. He stated 'it's just to make you think you are buying a bargain when in actual fact it's just left-overs you're getting'.

Other participants in the accompanied shops also derived meaning from retailers' pricing strategies. One female Next shopper stated that she always judged a retail store by how they priced their merchandise. For instance if prices were obviously

displayed on products with price points around the store and on displays she believed it to be a cheaper store with more inexpensive products. She stated that the more up-market a store the harder it was to locate a price. She commented that the old saying 'if you have to ask you can't afford' was true in this instance!

Customers also frequently commented on the role of music in the retail space. For instance one male FC participant in the accompanied shop compared different types of music in the retail space.

The thing that struck me about Diesel was all their clothes are skateboarderish...like baggy trousers and big T-shirts but they were playing hard core trance music and I was thinking...that's a bit of a mismatch. I mean you don't want your cheesy Safeway violins but maybe if they had charty music or whatever. It all depends...if you've got a shop that the general public are going to go into like Topman or Next then you're going to want to have music that's in the charts at that time whereas if it's more of a refined shop like St Andrews knitwear or something then you are going to expect music that an older person would listen to...reflecting on the type of person that would shop in there do you know what I mean? (P-Shop FC Male).

In this example the participant comments on the role that music plays in the retail space in terms of setting expectations about the type of merchandise sold and the store's target customer. This is in line with Oakes (2000) who suggests that the type of music played in a service setting can go a long way towards defining customer expectations.

8.5.2 Emotional

In addition to dimensions of the space that were perceived to have an influence on consumers thought processes, participants frequently commented on the 'tactics' or 'tricks' believed to be employed by retailers to alter their psychological or emotional states. Just as the previous section illustrated that music can define customers' expectations about service levels and the type of merchandise sold, music was also perceived to be used as a mood altering device.

I think that's part of...well they obviously do it deliberately coz like emm...you study it in psychology, it makes you hyper and makes you think 'oh I might like to go out tonight' and then you think 'oh I need to get something to go out tonight in'...I think music plays a big part in it...(Group 7 TS Female)

The participant draws on her own knowledge of psychology to suggest that music is used strategically to arouse and stimulate the shopper's senses. In this case she argues that dance music is used symbolically to link a dance club with the purchasing context in order to encourage the customer to purchase clothes for that occasion. The type or genre of music was also proposed to influence the style or type of clothing purchased. For instance, it was implied that a rock song may influence customers to buy the 'rock chic' style of clothing.

While the majority of participants' comments were concerned with the impact of the music in the store or the aural stimulation, informants also commented on various other sense appeals used in the retail space.

Some shops actually release, like in chocolate shops or something there's actually a company that sells like...chocolate smells...all different scents that you can have in your shop because its all to do with the psychology of it basically and like I don't know if Topshop does that or what but many shops do that. I suppose in a way it is quite manipulating because they're playing with your senses.... (Group 7 Topshop Female)

This informant describes the way in which retailers are 'playing with your senses'. In particular she comments of the use of olfactory cues used in different spaces to subconsciously seduce or manipulate consumers into making a purchase. The accompanied shopping trips were also helpful in illustrating how aware participants were of these sense appeals and the meaning they derived from them. For instance, when shopping in a retail store that had a coffee shop on the premises one female TS participant remarked that she could smell the coffee aroma drifting down throughout the store. While acknowledging this was a 'tactic' employed by the store to encourage consumers to visit the in-store cafe she said that she nearly always 'succumbed'.

Similarly another participant comments on the emotional tricks used in the retail space to encourage consumers to buy.

In Fraser's...emm...they put that stuff in the air-conditioning, you know that stuff that's supposed to make your mind...spark something off in your mind that makes you want to buy things so they say...what is it they use...[other boys question what he means]..have you never heard of that? It's some scent in the air conditioning.... 'you must buy, you must buy' (laughs) (Group 8 Next Male)

While previous passages have illustrated consumers understanding and awareness of different sense appeals this excerpt perhaps highlights the limitations to this knowledge. This reflects the informants' naïve understanding about the nature of these appeals which have almost become retail myths based on rumour and gossip.

8.5.3 Behavioural

Lastly participants commented on dimensions of the sensory space that were perceived to alter or influence their behaviour in the space. This was primarily concerned with music as a stimuli that was perceived to influence consumers' purchases, time spent in store and their pace/movement around the space.

I prefer walking around somewhere it's a bit more relaxed because that mimics the way you walk around the store because if the music's fast and all blasting and in your face you're more likely to go along with the music and walk quickly and go over and see it and if you don't like it stop and go out the store fast (Group 8 Next Male)

In this example music was thought of as 'mimicking' device where an increase in the tempo and volume of music was believed to increase the speed at which an individual moves around the space. This is in line with Milliman's (1982; 1986) experiments where music tempo was found to influence consumers' pace of shopping and length of stay. In this context the informant acknowledges the role of music in controlling or influencing their movements in the space.

In describing Topshop / Topman one participant alluded to technical details and costs involved in setting up the music system in the store.

A good example is Topshop and Topman every single store recently has purchased these ten thousand pound flat screens and each store's got about twenty of them and they play their music but they also put the videos of it through these screens and like if you see a song you like and you watch a video, I always like sit there and watch the video and as you watch the video you walk around and you look at some clothes. It's a totally good device for keeping you in the shop for longer (Group 8 Next Male)

This informant appears confident talking about the costs involved in implementing the systems in the space however well or poorly informed his knowledge may be. He engages in gossip about the cost and number of screens put in place but states that they are not just part of the aesthetics of the store rather they are a tactic or strategy 'deliberately' used by retailers to control consumers behaviour in the space. This is similar to O'Donohoe and Tynan's (1998) role of 'casual cognoscenti' who were aware of general issues of cost, production techniques, and trading of 'behind the scene' stories about the making of particular ads.

Similarly another Topshop/Topman informant commented on the role of the video games in the space

When I was in there were folk playing on them...I think the theory behind all that sort of stuff is like if you're in with your girlfriend or if your girlfriend's in with a man one's shopping and the other one isn't. It's like you don't have to trail around with them, they can do something...that would maybe make people go back to a store and then when they're back in...they maybe just went to get a shot at the playstation or the football but then they do see a shirt so it can attract business as well... (Group 5 TM Male)

These games were therefore perceived to be like a 'babysitting device' but also as a means to encourage consumers to return to the store on another occasion. Another participant constructs meaning from the ways in which items are displayed in fashion stores suggesting that folded merchandise is a tactic used to encourage customers to touch the product which will ultimately lead to purchase.

I think they are trying to go for, they are wanting you to touch the items...when I go into this sort of store [Benetton] I don't tend to pick up anything or touch it. I think when you do start to pick up and touch the items there is more chance of you obviously going and trying it on or taking it somewhere but because they are on hangers, you can see what they are like and you don't...the only time I would go to touch it is if I was looking for a size...whereas in other more pricey stores, if they are on the tables, obviously you are going to have to pick it up to see what the whole item is like. (Interview 6 TS Male)

This section has demonstrated that consumers are actively constructing meaning from different sensory appeals used by retailers in the space. These appeals were perceived to influence individuals' overall psychological states in terms of their thoughts, emotions and propensity to act in the retail space. This overall theme is supported by Friestad and Wright's (1995) model of persuasion knowledge which suggests that consumers form beliefs about the psychological tactics marketers use to influence them. The following section explores consumers' sensory orientations.

8.6 Sensory Orientations

The beginning of the chapter explored informants' descriptions of varying sensory spaces in terms of calming, neutral and energised spaces. From this analysis it was evident that participants appeared to have different orientations or preferences for different types of sensory experiences. For example when a retail space contained the appropriate combination of sensory experiences informants described feeling comfortable and relaxed in the space. However when there was a mismatch, customers described feeling uncomfortable and uneasy in the space. These orientations appear to be similar to those developed in Chapter Seven and consistent with Relph's (1976) notion of insiders and outsiders. This section aims to highlight some of these orientations in more detail.

Informants who described feeling comfortable and 'at home' in the space appeared to enjoy different sensory spaces and experiences. For example participants who enjoyed shopping in calming spaces described how they enjoyed spending time in less crowded spaces with subtle lighting, music and colours.

It's never really that busy, never people rushing around it's just somewhere you can happily spend time without feeling rushed off your feet.....somewhere you can just relax and take your time walking around...it's not somewhere you just walk in and back out again... (Group 9 FC Female)

It's not totally overboard on the music and it's not like when you walk into some shops and it feels like UV lights in your face which is dead intimidating. It's more subtle colours and all the clothes are gently spotlighted, you feel more comfortable walking about and picking things up...(Group 8 Next Male)

In contrast many young consumers described how they felt more at home in lively, energised spaces because they could 'sing along to the music', 'have a laugh', 'enjoy yourself trying on the clothes' which 'gets you in the mood for going out'.

I much preferred being in places like New Look and Topshop...somewhere that's a bit more lively and fun and young, you want to stay there and have a good rummage around. The difference between that and when we went into Gap was like night and day...it's just so tame and samey...(P-Shop TS Female)

The role of the 'musicscape' (Oakes, 2000) in particular was an important part of informants experience of the sensory space.

...I always have a wee sing along to the music or whatever that's on, you don't have to bother who's in whereas in say Kooki and Warehouse in there I think there's something more kind of snobby about it and you wouldn't, well I wouldn't belt out a song in there either but you wouldn't walk about singing along as much. But in there you can be yourself you don't have to kid on oh...I've got loads of money I'm in for this kind of thing...(Interview 5 TS Female)

...I like going clubbing so if you walk into a shop and it's got the lights and a bit of a dancy tune you can actually enjoy yourself trying on the clothes and wandering about. You can have a laugh with your mates whereas you go into other shops and it's all dull and dreary and it's like this shop is rubbish I don't like coming in here... (Interview 8 FC Male)

Overall participants clearly feel a strong connection or affinity to these sensory spaces where they could relax and 'be themselves'. Again this clearly resonates with

Relph's notion of insiders. In contrast, many informants described how they felt 'out of place', 'awkward' and 'exposed' in different sensory spaces.

...you feel a wee bit awkward when it is kinda quiet in a store when you are going round, as if everyone is watching you.... maybe they're (sales assistants) not noticing you but maybe they are. But if it's noisy you are just going about looking, you're not thinking about anything...(Interview 6 TS Male)

a good plus point about that store (Topshop) is that it was good to have lots of thing going on in the background because it takes away the attention of people walking around...it's just more enjoyable...it's a distraction. I think the atmosphere plays a big part...there's just such a different atmosphere in a lot of different shops...like in Karen Millen all you hear is ladies high heels and see people watching everyone else whereas it more kinda fun in place like Topshop...it's much less scary and intimidated. (P-shop, Next Female)

Similarly these feelings of discomfort were also evident when participants were confronted with what were perceived to be more 'active' or energised spaces.

...you just feel so out of place in shops like that it's so noisy and hot and sticky and people screaming over the music and jumping about the place...it's just too intense (laughs) (Group 3 FC Mixed)

...It's hammering in your head and it's really busy and there's screaming kids everywhere and you've got about ten bags and it's raining and you just think auwww...just give me something tranquil and peaceful so I can just sit and wander in peace (Interview 9 Next Female)

Overall it was evident that while participants may have a strong orientation for different sensory combinations, these can, as in the case of the second informant, also be dependent on the situation or context. For instance the sensory space may encroach upon individuals social experience in the store for instance if they want to chat with their friends or partners.

8.7 Conclusions

The chapter has illustrated that the 'sensory space' is an important part of young consumers' experiences of fashion shopping. In contrast to traditional research in atmospherics which has tended to explore each of the consumers five senses in isolation, this chapter has demonstrated how these senses converge to give a global or 'synesthetic' impression. These sensory experiences were often used as a means of comparing and contrasting retail environments. The chapter identified three different types of sensory spaces including calming spaces, neutral spaces and energised spaces.

The chapter further illustrated informants' active role in reading and interpreting the use of different sense appeals in the retail space. Consistent with Friestad and Wright's (1994) persuasion knowledge model these intuitive theories were presented in terms of the cognitive, emotional and behavioural tactics or tricks believed to influence what consumers 'think', 'feel' and 'do' in the retail space. Lastly the chapter illustrated that participants have different sensory orientations. In line with Relph's (1974) notion of insiders and outsiders, this highlighted that different consumers feel more comfortable and at home in different sensory spaces. Insiders in the space described feeling comfortable and at home in the environment where they could sing along to the music, relax and be themselves. In contrast outsiders in the sensory space felt out of place, exposed and awkward. Chapter Nine considers the role and significance of the 'social space' in consumers' experiences of the retail store brand.

CHAPTER NINE

THE SOCIAL SPACE

‘...people are their place and a place is its people, and however readily these concepts may be separated in conceptual terms, in experience they are not easily differentiated. In this context places are ‘public’ – they are created and known through common experiences and involvement in common symbols and meanings’ (Relph 1976; 34)

9.1 Introduction

In addition to the physical dimensions of the store and the importance attached to consumers’ sensory experiences, social interactions and encounters in the retail environment are an important part of the holistic experience of retail space. The value of exploring consumers’ contextualised experiences is supported by literature in Chapter Three which discussed the concepts of consumption communities, postmodern tribes and the ‘linking value’ of the servicescape. The chapter begins by introducing the concept of ‘consciousness of kind’ to illustrate the importance of the role of others in the retail space based on the concepts of social and psychic distance and physical appearance. The chapter explores each of the roles others play within the consumer’s experience. It begins by examining the role of service personnel as ‘unacquainted influences’ and explores consumers understanding of service strategies. The role of other customers as ‘unacquainted strangers’ and the influence of ‘purchase pals’ as accompanied shoppers are then considered. Finally the chapter explores consumers’ social space orientations in relation to issues of affiliation and control.

9.2 Consciousness of Kind

One theme to emerge very strongly across participants in the social space was their preferences to be among individuals that were similar to themselves. This similarity

or likeness was based on consumers' and sales personnel's perceived social status, personality and interests as well as their physical appearance. This theme was captured by one participant who described how comfortable he felt in the retail space as a result of the people around him.

...everyone in French Connection is quite similar...that's what I quite like about it...you always feel quite comfortable in there not just because everyone obviously has the same sort of fashion sense but they're also the same sort of people...people you could quite easily picture yourself hanging out with (Group 3 FC Mixed)

This theme has resonance with the 'consciousness of kind' dimension of a brand community (Muinz and O'Guinn, 2001) in which members share a 'we-ness' or an important connection to the brand, but more importantly, they feel a stronger connection toward one another. The authors describe this as a triangular rather than dyadic 'social constellation' which is a central facet of brand community. This theme also echos Cova's (1999) assertion that 'the link is more important than the thing'. The following sections explore the themes of social and psychic distance and physical appearance.

9.2.1 Social and Psychic Distance

Many informants described feeling uncomfortable and intimidated in the retail space as a result of perceived differences in social status between service personnel and other customers.

I feel more at home with the likes of River Island, Topman and Next...just because it's the general public that's in there as well but you'll find it's the 'hooty snooty hotty totty' ones that are in Hugo Boss and maybe Lacoste.....the Hugo Boss thing has a lot to do with money. It's a totally different way of communicating with people when you are at that level. Like she (sales assistant) was a totally different person. I just don't associate with people like that...I think she was expecting us to be like that as well but I think when she found out that we weren't I think she knew that we weren't going to buy that jacket. Obviously it's difficult to class a

brand because all sorts of different people will wear all sorts of different things but in general Hugo Boss is a higher class of person (P-shop FC Male)

....in some shops they'll act as if they're above you sometimes when you go in, like you're not good enough for this shop and you'll think oh no...if the person is trying to sell you something and you don't get it they'll like hold a grudge against you and you'll be scared to go back in the shop so that's why it's better shopping in the shops in Glasgow on the High Street because people don't do that you can just look around and see what you like (Group 7 TS Female)

Drawing on his experiences shopping in Hugo Boss the first informant describes the discomfort he felt shopping in the store compared with how at home he feels shopping in other high street outlets. These feelings were attributed to his inability to identify or relate to employees and other customers in the retail space due to perceived differences in social class and status. Similarly the second participant describes feeling intimidated in some stores, stating a preference for less pressurised shopping environments on the high street. This theme is in line with research conducted by Dickson and MacLachlan (1990) which suggests that people tend to avoid stores that they perceive to be socially distant from themselves.

In relation to social distance, many participants also commented on what could be conceptualised as the perceived psychological or psychic distance between fellow customers and sales personnel in these retail spaces. For instance, customers commented that they felt uncomfortable when co-consumers and personnel were perceived to have different tastes in fashion as well as differences in terms of their demographics, personality, and lifestyle.

I:how does it make you feel ?

I think I don't belong in here, I really don't...I've got friends that I went to school with that shop in Karen Millen and they feel quite at home and comfortable in it but me personally, I go in and I feel like I stick out like a sore thumb (laughs) but everyone's different. The staff look at you as if you're not dressed right to be in here, you don't have the right fashion approach and you don't

feel confident enough to go in and buy the clothes whereas my other friends that do enjoy it, they have the confidence to go in. They feel like they belong in there... (Group 9 FC Female)

....most people who shop in there are a bit younger, school age, so they've got a totally different mind set...they're into going clubbing and stuff whereas I feel I've sort of passed that stage (laughs) I mean I enjoy going in for a look now and then, but it's not really me...Next is just a bit more up my street....(Interview 1 Next Female)

These feelings of distance and exclusion from the space again resonates with Relph's (1976) notion of outsiders as well as Aldo van Eyck's (1969 cited in Relph, 1976; 109) assertion that the physical space not only serves to unite communities but also makes them explicit. This he terms as a 'collectively conditioned place consciousness'.

9.2.2 Physical Appearance

The physical appearance of service personnel and other customers in the store was found to be an important dimension of the consciousness of kind theme. This was concerned with the apparel, body language, and body shape of others.

I think one of the most important things is the way the staff are dressed. The difference between say going into Next where they all seem to have their wee areas and they are standing with their arms folded and their suits on. You do feel intimidated walking in and the person is just standing there whereas ehhe maybe other stores like The Gap or whatever they are dressed in the clothes that you buy there. It's a wee bit more informal and you feel more comfortable, I think that's really important. (Interview 6 TS Male)

Both male and female informants were particularly concerned with sales personnel and other customers' body image.

...you go in these shops and half the girls are like sticks and you just feel so uncomfortable looking at them because you just think I am never going to look like that. I am never going to get into anything that she's wearing. The staff are all obviously wearing the clothes of the shop you notice and you just think oh god, there's

just no point...I feel so uncomfortable. I would rather go into a shop like French Connection or Jigsaw where they look, well slightly similar to me...something a bit more real, definitely... (Group 3 FC Mixed)

...in a lot of guys' clothes shops, you get the guys who work in there. They're not your typical people, they're all model types. They're very pristine and are always clean shaven and if they're not clean shaven they've got designer something going on and their hair is always perfect and they are well dressed. Most guys just aren't like that and you kinda walk in in your jeans and whatever and they look at you as if to say 'oh right is that you dressed for going into town?'. Now that makes me feel uncomfortable, the whole situation, it's kinda pretentious whereas if you go into Comet or a sports shop everyone is on an even kinda platform...they just come over and start talking about gadgets or whatever you are looking at...(Group 3 FC Mixed)

These examples again highlight the consciousness of kind theme as both participants feel uncomfortable and to an extent alienated, or excluded from these spaces due to their inability to identify with the sales personnel in the store. These spaces are compared to others where informants feel more comfortable as people are similar to themselves where 'everyone is on an even platform' and other customers are perceived as 'something a bit more real'.

This theme has highlighted the importance consumers' place on the social space as part of their overall experiences of the retail space. It was therefore deemed appropriate to explore the different roles that these individuals play in consumers' experiences. Beginning with the role of service personnel as unacquainted strangers the following sections will examine each of these roles in more detail.

9.3 'Unacquainted Influencers': The Role of Service Personnel

The role of the service personnel as 'unacquainted influencers' was one of the most salient dimensions that both male and female participants referred to when commenting on their experience of the retail space. These roles were identified and compared across various retail spaces on the basis of differences in their overall approaches, style, and level of service. In contrast to previous research described in

Chapter Two that measured consumers' responses on the predetermined criteria of assurance, responsiveness, and empathy (Parasuraman, Berry and Zeithaml, 1988; 1991), this section focuses on exploring consumers' experiences in terms of the roles of service personnel as advisors, conversational partners, and antagonists.

9.3.1 Advisors

While informants clearly acknowledged the service personnel's primary role as sales advisors in terms of helping to 'match things up' and 'give you ideas', participants were very aware of the contrasting sales approaches and forms of advice they would receive in different spaces. For instance during an accompanied shopping trip one participant compared his experiences of shopping in Topman to Hugo Boss in terms of the type of advice received.

In Topman you do your own thing...I just picked up a few shirts, tried them on and then simply put them back on the rack and walked away without having to deal with the staff. You know that by the type of shop that it is. As soon as you walk in you know what to expect but when we were in Hugo Boss it was a different story. I mean when I was trying on that jacket they made you stand in front of them...she gave us her opinion whether we liked it or not...'oh yeah you should really buy that it suits you' or 'you should do this or do that'. It's a totally different culture...they just have different rules and you just can't do the same things in there as in Topman. (P-Shop FC Male)

The participant uses the space to form expectations of the level of service he will receive in that particular store and his role in that encounter. In Topman the informant was very independent with a high level of control where the sales personnel have a low level of contact and involvement. This was contrasted with Hugo Boss, in which the informant describes the lack of control and independence he had in the store where there was a high level of personalised contact.

In terms of the sales personnels' role as advisors customers discussed a number of different attributes which included their honesty, ability to relate or empathise with the customer on a personal level, and their perceived knowledge and expertise. For

instance, one participant described a positive service experience where the sales personnel's honesty was appreciated.

.... I remember on one occasion one of the assistants said to me 'mmm no, I don't like that on you' and I really appreciated that because you don't want to feel as if they are 'yes buy it' you want to have an honest opinion emm...I mean I suppose it's against the rules and they might get in trouble but she was really helpful and I appreciated that...(Interview 1 Next Female 15)

In this example the sales advisor assumes the role of a trusted friend or confidant who is able to provide an honest opinion. This encounter was remembered and valued by the customer as she appreciated the assistant breaking the rules and conventions of selling which was perceived to be a highly manipulative process. The importance of being able to personally relate or empathise with the sales personnel was a theme that was reiterated by both male and female participants. For instance, many commented that it was important to have sales advisors who were the same age as them, had similar tastes in fashion and who were knowledgeable about the latest fashion trends.

9.3.2 Conversational partners

For many individuals, but in particular female participants, sales personnel were important forms of social contact, frequently assuming the role of conversational partners. For instance, one female Next customer described how she enjoyed shopping in the Gap because the staff 'always say hello and smile at you when you pass' and 'chat to you loads when you're trying things on'. Another participant describes her experiences in Topshop.

...you can tell the ones you can have a wee blether to in the changing rooms or at the cash desk....sometimes (at the cash desk) they just take it but it's nice when they chat...they say 'auww are you going out?' if you are buying a dress or whatever and you talk away to them and I think it just makes it a lot nicer when you're buying something because there is no need for them to shrug you off...(Interview 5 TS Female)

In this example being able to casually 'blether' and chat with the sales staff in the store was important part of this participant's shopping experience. Although this theme was not particularly salient in the interview and group discussion the accompanied shopping trips indicated that it played a significant role in both male and female participants' experiences in the retail space. For example, participants engaged in conversations with sales assistants from topics such as the weather, the latest fashion items in store and clubs and bars in Glasgow. This desire for social interaction with sales personnel was also highlighted by Forman and Sriram (1991) who suggested that some individuals rely on interpersonal interactions in the retail setting as a form of surrogate social contact. The authors argue for many consumers a casual conversation with a member of staff may be a source of comfort adding a sense of community to an otherwise 'transient local social landscape'.

Clearly not all customers either valued or were prepared to take part in conversations with sales personnel in the retail space. In particular many male participants stated they preferred be left alone in the space. This is similar to the role of 'privacy seekers' (Harris et al., 1997) and 'autonomous consumers' (Guiry, 1992) who deliberately try to avoid contact with sales personnel and other customers.

I prefer just to walk about in my own time, look for myself, take things over try them on, take them back or go and buy them...instead of people pulling stuff off racks and saying 'go on that'll look good try that on' (Interview 8 FC Male)

Concrete Skates and Dr Jives and all that, it's a dead dead relaxed atmosphere in there, the guy will be behind the counter reading a magazine or whatever and it's just sort of chilled out but any place that doesn't push the whole customer service thing...you just want to lie back and look yourself, see what you like rather than being pressured into anything (Group 6 FC Male)

I think the staff are very, very polite and friendly, you know they back off you, they don't barge in on your private space and over you shoulder say 'do you like those shoes, would you like me to get a size for you?' they wait for you to ask 'can I have a wee hand here?' and that's the best way to serve anybody (Interview 4 FC Male)

For male customers in particular this theme not only illustrates their desire for privacy and their own personal space but is also concerned with their need to maintain control in the retail space. For instance participants want to explore the retail space in their own time and make their own selection rather than being shown by the sales personnel. Any interaction is therefore usually initiated by the customer themselves.

9.3.3 Antagonists

In contrast to the roles of 'advisor' and 'conversational partner' sales personnel also assumed the role of antagonist where they were perceived to be menacing and harassing 'obstacles' in the space to be avoided as well as 'manipulators' who could not be trusted. Participants described the sales personnel as 'waiting to pounce on you', 'grab', 'chase', 'hunt', and 'jump you'. This menacing role was particularly associated with sports and jeans retailers.

It's like as soon as you go in they'll like tackle you, there's one there, one there and one there... (Group 7 TS Female)

I see them as an obstacle just someone who's getting in my way when I know I can go in and out and do it myself but they just seem to get in the way (Interview 12 Next Male)

I would guarantee that a lot of companies loose out on a sale just purely because of the harassment... it's as if you are being timed, as if you only have a certain amount of time to get around the shop (Interview 4 FC Male)

Participants describe feeling they were in a sense the prey being hunted, trapped and caught where the retail space was perceived to be the battleground or obstacle course. These analogies and metaphors emphasised the loss of control participants felt in certain spaces. Once 'caught', informants were often highly sceptical of their intentions believing them to be untrustworthy attempting to manipulate and seduce them into making a purchase. As one male participant stated 'I think they will try to sell you anything just to get your money'.

...shop assistants always lie to you. They are never going to tell you 'ohhh your arse looks huge in those' (Laughs)...you can tell if they are genuine or if they are just working on commission and want a sale. I do tend to feel quite a lot of the time that a) they don't really want to be there coz no one really wants to be at their work or b) they are just saying it to make the sale. But you can tell the difference I think. (Interview 1 Next Female)

...see when you try things on and you come out and they go 'oh that looks really nice', it kind of gives you a bit of a boost but at the same time you think oh she's just saying that but emm...certainly when I went into Gap recently and I tried something on she was like 'oh they're really nice where are they? I'll have to go and get a pair' and I thought is she just saying that or is she being genuine? You've got to kinda watch because they are trying to sell you something so fair enough. I think Gap are because every time you get to the till they're like 'did anybody help you at all today?' (Interview 9 Next Female)

There is a clear tension between participants positioning themselves as smart shoppers, knowledgeable and aware of these persuasion attempts, and their willingness or desire to be seduced and flattered. This has resonance with the 'shrewd and seduced' shopper theme outlined in Chapter Six as well as Campbell and Kirmani's (2000) contention that consumers draw inferences about persuasion motives underlying sales persons behaviour. Clearly consumers' understanding of these service strategies is important and is therefore considered in the next section.

9.4 Service Strategies and Persuasion Knowledge

Discussions with consumers indicated that many were aware of the use of different service strategies and approaches employed by service personnel to influence them. Building on the work of Friestad and Wright (1994) and Campbell and Kirmani (2000), this section discusses some of these meanings and interpretations in terms of the sales personnel's 'sales tactics' and the significance of what in this study is seen as 'social aesthetics'.

9.4.1 Sales Tactics

Participants were knowledgeable about the use of different sales tactics and approaches employed by retailers and contrasted these across different retail spaces. For example one informant distinguished between three retail stores on the basis of the style and type of interaction he would expect and his level of participation in the encounter.

It depends on the store. In Topman I've never been approached. The only thing is that I have had to ask if they had a size in a shirt but to do that you had to walk over to them and ask them which is not something I mind but like in the Levi's store it's the total other extreme, it's as soon as you get into the store it's like 'have you had a nice day, where have you been?'. They are trying to get you...they say exactly the same thing every time, you know trying to get you relaxed and then talk about the clothes and then buy things. Then again places like Next I don't think they approach you at all in Next but they seem to have designated areas where they're standing so you can go and ask them so...it just tends to be different in every store...(Interview 6 TS Male)

Consistent with Campbell and Kirmani (2000) this informant draws on their persuasion knowledge to infer the extent to which the motives underlying the sale personnel's behaviour involves the intent to persuade. Personnel in the Levi's store are therefore perceived as 'trying to get at you' where they are trying to make customers feel more comfortable and relaxed in the space so as to encourage purchase. Similarly other informants commented on the set 'scripts' and sales scenarios used by sales personnel in different contexts.

They say the same thing every time...like in Gap they always try to be friendly and say their first name...but I suppose it's not these people's fault because they get told 'oh when you go up this is what you've got to say (Group 6 FC Male).

I think they've all done their research and tried to find different ways of getting rid of customers easily (laughs) no...like maybe they've got a one minute approach that you've got to go up to a customer and say hi or acknowledge them in some way and then after three minutes you've got to go up to them again and ask them

if they need a hand with anything or if they want to see anything...so you've like got like a system (Group 8 Next Male).

These 'systematic' approaches were perceived by informants as a means of retailers further enforcing their control over the retail space. Consumers clearly derive meaning about the broader company culture and policy regarding the rules and scripts of behaviour of its personnel. For instance, the first participant comments that Gap employs an informal, friendly approach as sales assistants use their first names in interactions with customers. This is contrasted with the second participant who describes the highly systematic and structured approach used to greet and approach customers. This was likened or perceived to be like a ritual 'performance' in which the service personnel were merely 'actors' where their autonomy was limited.

Many customers also made inferences about the types of payment structures in place as well as the methods used by retailers to monitor sales targets.

...yeah and some of them work on commission, like Slater's, it's the worst...Slater's is really bad because like every sales assistant in there works on commission so the minute you walk in you're swamped by them...

It's worse than working on commission in Slater's though because it's not commission it's a quota that they've got to get. If they don't sell so many suits then they're out the door (Group 8 Next Male).

I like Gap as well but I always find when you go in there its quite false coz you can see when you go up to the till and they always say to you 'did someone help you?' I know that the reason they're saying it is so that if someone did help you their code goes on it to go towards whatever but you always feel that they're checking up on their staff to see if they've done what they are supposed to do. (Group 4 Next Female)

In discussing the reasons for different interactions in the retail space the first two participants argue that this is due to the way in which sales personnel are rewarded. They state that sales personnel are often overly pushy as they work on commission based targets and sales quotas. Similarly the second informant comments that employees sales are monitored at the till points. These remarks not only illustrate

consumers' awareness of retailer's strategies but more importantly highlights the active role played by informants in constructing meaning from these social space encounters.

9.4.2 Social Aesthetics

The previous section has focused on the verbal interactions and sales approaches employed in different retail spaces and the meaning consumers derive from these persuasion attempts. However, in line with Gabbott and Hogg (2000; 2001), discussions with consumers revealed the emphasis participants also placed on different forms of non-verbal communication in the social space.

In quite a lot of shops now all the staff are dressed in the shop's own clothes...all the staff get discounts and freebies...it's just a way of keeping them happy and trying to sell more clothes because you see what people are wearing and that might make you want to buy it....(Group 1 Next mixed)

In this example the employee's apparel communicates the retailer's intention of creating an incentive for employees as well as their objectives of increasing the visibility of the retail brand thereby enhancing sales. The visibility of the brand was also emphasised by a female French Connection customer who stated that sales personnel were employed as 'a walking advert for the store'.

While Warhurst and Nickson (2001) have described the increasing importance retailers are placing on employee 'aesthetic skills' in an effort to reflect the lifestyle and image of the brand, it appears consumers are also making their own inferences and judgements based on these aesthetic appeals.

There're all quite quirky and different looking...like that girl that had that mad pink hair and I noticed that quite a few of them also had piercings...I suppose they're just trying to emphasise the difference of the store...it's like all the mad adverting and the FCUK image.... (P-shop FC Male)

the shop is all geometric and square looking and all the assistants in there are really tall and they all have square sculpted faces and the models in the posters as well are quite sculpted looking but their clothes are not which I think is a bit of a contradiction...it seems to go against the overall feel (Interview 3 FC Female)

Informants' comments on the employees' physical appearance are associated with the overall identity and character of the retail store brand. For instance the first participant comments on the 'quirky', individual appearance of the personnel which is related to the eccentric FCUK advertising appeals and image. Similarly the second participant comments on the 'square' and 'sculpted' appearance of sales assistants who are perceived to be a physical extension of the retail space itself. This is in line with Solomon (1998) who argues that apparel and the meaning it conveys influence the overall corporate identity, and suggests that as a matter of 'semiotic consistency', these aesthetic cues must be co-ordinated with the remainder of the physical environment.

This section has explored the nature of consumers' relationships with the sales personnel in the retail space, defining their roles as advisors, conversational partners and antagonists. It has also explored consumers' persuasion knowledge about the sales tactics employed in the retail space revealing what these mean to informants in terms of the retail stores corporate culture and identity. The following section explores the role of other customers as 'unacquainted strangers' in the retail space.

9.5 'Unacquainted strangers': The Role of Other Customers

'Unacquainted shoppers help and hinder each other, dicker and disparage, and devitalize and revive each other' (McGrath and Otnes, 1995; p271)

The majority of literature examining the nature of the service encounter has focused on the interactions that take place between customers and contact personnel. However analysis has also revealed the role of other customers in the retail space. The significance of these interactions in the retail space was particularly evident in the accompanied shopping trips with informants. For instance this involved face-to-

face encounters as customers frequently initiated and engaged in conversations with unacquainted strangers in the changing rooms, in queues for the cash registers, seating areas and when selecting merchandise. In line with Harris et al., (1997) the majority of customer to customer interactions in the retail space were between female shoppers. The following sections describe the roles of other customers as supporters and spectators in the retail space.

9.5.1 Supporters

Observations and interactions during the accompanied shopping trips illustrated that informants frequently initiated and engaged in conversations with other customers in the retail space. Many of these interactions were supportive as informants helped to direct customers in the store, pointed out merchandise and helped to pick up fallen garments from the floor. One customer described interactions between unacquainted strangers in the queue for the cash register where participants appeared to interact as part of a social collective (Gainer, 1995).

...if there is something going on like some kind of drama you quite often speak to other people....like I was in H&M a couple of weeks ago standing in this massive queue, it was so disorganised and there was four of us in the queue all having a good moan about it...we'd been waiting for ages and everyone was just getting fed up (P-Shop Next Female,)

In line with McGrath and Otnes's (1995) role of customers as 'reactive helpers', the most significant form of support in the retail space was the role of customers in actively providing or seeking advice and help from each other.

Other customers if you are in communal changing rooms especially if you are trying on similar items then you've got something to talk about...some people are just born to talk...(P-Shop Next Female)

You quite often find that [other customers asking for advice]. I mean if you are in the store and you are having a nice time and you are relaxed and with your friends people often do go 'oh what do you think of this'? Or 'which one is better?' or whatever...I

remember one time there was this girl who was having a nightmare deciding between two outfits. I think it was for a wedding or something and she asked which one we thought looked the best....I think she took our advice in the end but I suppose she just wanted a second opinion...(Interview 9 Next Female)

In the second excerpt the participant and her friends take on the role of advisors acting as a form of surrogate friend or family member. Perhaps advice was sought from this 'neutral' source as the customer felt she could identify with the other shoppers as opposed to a sales advisor who may be perceived to be socially distant or not trusted to provide honest advice. Female participants in particular described complimenting other customers in the store as well as being complimented by others.

...another thing we do is when we see people in stores, in the changing room and stuff, I mean if we think what they have tried on is nasty we won't say anything but if we think it is really nice then we always just say 'oh you should really buy that, it's really nice' but we never say a bad word about what people buy. If we like what they are wearing then we will tell them. I mean if it was one of my best friends at school then you can go 'oh no way' but if it is someone you don't know, you just don't say anything.
(Interview 3 FC Female)

In this example the informant describes how she and her friends often admire and compliment fellow customers on what they are wearing, often encouraging them to purchase. However she clearly distinguishes between the roles of friends, who provide honest advice and opinions, and unacquainted strangers where only positive opinions and words of encouragement are provided.

Similarly, during an accompanied shopping trip, one female participant was complimented on the dress she was trying on by other shoppers in the changing room. When later asked about the encounter she stated:

...it was a bit embarrassing when I first came out to show you as I didn't think I'd have an audience! The sales girl was nice but...it was really nice of those girls to say that it looked good...I mean they didn't have to say anything but it made me feel really good....

it was quite reassuring...I mean they seemed quite genuine didn't they?...I wasn't that sure about it (the dress) but they definitely helped me decide to get it! (P-Shop FC Female).

Despite the compliments and advice received from the sales assistant it was the reassuring comments from other customers as neutral observers and admirers that was the significant factor in helping the participant decide to purchase the dress. This appears to be supported by Lehtinen and Lehtinen (1991) who have proposed that the presence and behaviours of other customers may have a more profound impact upon assessments of quality than contact with service personnel. While it seemed apparent that interactions between unacquainted strangers was largely a trait of female shoppers, this was perhaps a consequence of the researcher being female and as such was not able to observe interactions and encounters in the male changing rooms.

9.5.2 Spectators

Although many of the encounters between strangers in the servicescape consisted of face-to-face interactions, there were also a number of what McGrath and Otnes (1995) have referred to as 'covert roles', which emphasised the significance of non-verbal communication in the setting. For example many participants commented on the importance of a sense of shared activity and shared experience of being in the retail space.

I quite often go for a wander around the shops myself...it sounds really weird but I like looking at people...people watching...and just checking out what's happening...like if there's a guy with a weird haircut or if there's something happening on the street...that kind of thing, it's just an experience...(Group 8 Next Male)

...you feel you're really part of something...it's good just to have a look at what's going on... I mean I quite often get ideas from the posters and what other people in the shop are wearing...and how they put different things together...(P-shop FC Female)

While initial discussions with customers gave some indication of the salience of customers as spectators it was only until the accompanied shopping trips that the

subtlety and significance of this theme was revealed. For instance it was evident that informants appeared to actively observe or survey other customers and often commented on what other customers were wearing, picking up and trying on in the space. This was particularly evident with female participants who commented on other customers' physical appearance in terms of their body shape and image, attractiveness, and fashion sense and style.

It seems that for many participants the social space is used to define themselves as part of a collectivity. For example just as participants used the sales personnel as aesthetic cues to form judgements about the store, participants also made inferences about the store based on the other customers they encountered in the retail space. Participants are therefore aware that there is a relationship between their self image and the store image, where they are more motivated to patronise stores that match their own self-perceptions.

I mean some of the things you see people wearing in there...all those tiny tiny wee tops...I suppose that's the type of people they cater for, that's the market they aim for. Especially the wee young ones that want to go out with their skirts up to here and you're like 'that's not the image I want to have' (Group 4 Next Female)

You could tell it was a really up-market shop because everyone in there was really dressed up and they were carrying really fancy bags...I love going in there but I wouldn't go unless I had dressed for the occasion (laughs) (Male, FC, P-shop)

Again this reflects the significance of 'consciousness of kind' and has resonance with the notion of consumption communities discussed in Chapter Three. In line with Belk and Bryce (1993) this is a community based on shared beliefs in the value of consumption and the shared communion of purchasing the same brands. While the first participant disassociates herself from this social collective the second informant aspires to be part of this fashion community. However, unlike traditional communities that are relatively homogeneous and stable, these gatherings appear to be more tribal in nature. This is marked by their temporary nature as individuals can

feel like they belong to many shopping communities or tribes over the course of one shopping trip that encompasses several different retail spaces.

This section has highlighted the role of unacquainted influencers in the retail space identifying the role of other customers as supporters and spectators. While there has been limited research on the role of other customers in the retail space, analysis has illustrated the significance of this dimension as part of consumers' experiences in fashion retail space. The following section turns to the role of 'purchase pals' in the social space.

9.6 Accompanied Shopping: The Role of 'Purchase Pals'

While previous research has examined the relationships between customers, service personnel and other customers in the retail space, very little research has explored the role of 'purchase pals'. This section focuses on the different roles that are assumed when acquainted participants go shopping and the nature of these interactions in the social space. As interactions take place between family members, friends and partners, the over-riding themes will be presented in the context of these three relationships. The roles identified included social companions, shopping partners and shopping obstructers.

9.6.1 Social Companions

The primary role of accompanying individuals during a shopping expedition was as social companions or 'purchase pals' (Woodside and Sims, 1976). This companionship or camaraderie was observed as participants described the importance of these shared shopping experiences and social rituals surrounding the activity of shopping as well as in the retail space itself. For instance participants described the excitement and fun they had shopping with others which often involved going for a meal, or coffee, or culminated in a night out after their trip.

It's usually a Saturday and we'll be going out on the Saturday night so we always want to get something new for the night. It adds a wee bit of excitement for the whole day because then we go back to each other's houses and get ready together and stuff and try on everything that each other has bought (laughs) (Group 7 TS Female)

...we make a whole day of it and then end up going out at night. We usually take some clothes in with us or maybe we've bought something that day then dash back to somebody's house, get ready, have a few beers and then head out (Interview 8 FC Male)

For both male and female participants this shared consumption ritual involves gathering together at a friend's house to get ready together and try on their purchases. This appears to be a means of creating and maintaining social relationships or bonds between friends, which is an important part of their overall shopping experience. This is emphasised by one participant who described the consumption 'stories' that link or bond members of the shopping community together.

...you always have stories when you come back from shopping. The best is when you go with friends and say if you're walking around and you happen to walk into a shop and then there's these three beautiful women, you know and one of your friends would be eyeing them up then when you come out it's like 'ohh, did you see them?' or maybe you get chatting to one of the guys in the shop or you see someone shoplifting or whatever...there's always wee stories or things happening or things that you've seen which you talk about in the pub or back in the bus...(Group 8 Next Male)

For others the social interaction surrounds the clothing brands and retail stores themselves.

...all five of us normally meet in town in the morning and have a good rummage round the shops. We always go somewhere for lunch and that's when we have a good gossip about all the shops we've been to and the stuff we've seen...we totally analyse everything and decide what we're going to go back and get...and we help each other so it usually comes down to what everyone else thinks too....(Group 1 Next Mixed)

For this group of friends lunchtime is a chance to compare the stores they have visited and the products that they've seen. This appears to be an organised, co-

ordinated activity whereby members of the shopping party help endorse or veto products or stores that they have seen while planning their next move. These informal discussions are very much part of the shopping 'banter' which establishes the communal activities and boundaries whereby the social relationships within this 'small world' (Gainer, 1995), or shopping fraternity, are created and maintained. These bonds are not formed around one product or brand in terms of a brand community (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001), but rather it is the shared experience and consumption activity, involving interaction with many retail store brands that together creates a linking value (Cova, 1997).

The retail space itself also creates and supports this shared experience or social link (Aubert-Gamet and Cova, 1999) among informants. Many retail stores indeed facilitate and encourage this social interaction by including seating areas and in the case of Topshop interactive 'play areas' containing table football and computer games. However, retail stores were often used informally as a meeting place for friends to gather and socialise. Changing rooms in particular were often the setting or stage for young female participants to socialise and experiment with fashion.

I remember having a lot of hilarity with a couple of friends in the fitting rooms. We weren't being loud or anything we were just laughing and I remember the shop assistant just looking at us as if 'what are you all about?' And I thought 'we are just having a laugh, you know, what's your problem?' So I didn't particularly like that. (Interview 1 Next Female)

...we totally carry on and say things like 'ohhhh check this out'. There's usually about three of us in one changing room...one time I made my friend Kirsty try on this boob tube thing, it was the worst thing I have ever seen in my whole life but I just had to get her to try it, it was the funniest thing but that's what we do all the time. Like leather suits, I mean I would never ever wear a leather suit but she made me try on this really deep purple leather suit, it was awful, really horrible...(laughs) (Interview 3 FC Female)

This dressing room camaraderie illustrates the way in which the retail space facilitates these social interactions among friends as well as how consumers individualise and appropriate the retail space for their own uses. For instance female

participants described regularly sharing dressing room cubicles with friends so that they were able to 'compare' and 'swap' outfits.

9.6.2 Shopping Partners

In addition to their role as 'social companions' accompanying parties also assumed the role of shopping partners in the space encounter.

...it's good to have someone with you to help make a decision but, I mean if you have got different stuff and you stand there and think this one, this one, or this one you need someone to say 'get that one' or 'just don't get any of them'...someone decisive... (Group 1 Next Mixed)

Trusted shopping partners were often brought along to give their 'honest' advice. However, companions appeared to differ in terms of their level of honesty. For instance family members were frequently labelled as being the most honest.

I don't know that they [friends] are as honest with you as like my mum or my sister...friends sometimes just tell you what you want to hear like nobody ever says 'auch no it doesn't really suit you', they just say 'yeah ! It's really nice' and then you take it home and show your mum and your boyfriend and they are like 'hmmmm...well...no'. They are quite honest with you...(Group 4 Next Female)

I used to go with my friends a lot but now it's mainly my sister because I always love to have her opinion and if she doesn't like something I go off it so I always like to know what she thinks of it as well...she will give me an honest opinion... she has even got the same taste as me, we like the same shops...(Group 9 FC Female)

This theme was particularly characteristic of female participants who often described shopping with family members, in particular their mothers. In addition to receiving advice, guidance and reassurance the emphasis was very much on the shared experience that allowed individuals time to spend together. The activity itself therefore appears to facilitate a form of bonding or intimacy that helps to develop and maintain these social relationships.

In contrast male participants seem to value and rely on friends' advice rather than turning to family members. Indeed it appeared that 'purchase pals' often had a strong impact on informants' purchasing decisions, directing and guiding friends to the 'best buys' and influencing their physical movement around the retail space.

The last time I went shopping with my mate and I tried on a jacket and I didn't know which one to get you know and he said 'get that one' and that was it as soon as he said that 'and don't be so indecisive!' (Group 1 Next Mixed)

Like you wander about somewhere and then maybe your mates will go out somewhere else or a different part of the store and then you can say 'oh what do you think about this?' and that sort of thing but you don't all troop around together like girls do...(laughs). It's just like you go your own separate way but it's cool coz you've got people there to like get an opinion from...like if you are looking at the rack and you'll say 'what do you think of that?' and they'll either say 'oh that's rubbish' or 'oh that's nice, that's cool' and on that basis you'll go 'well, ok maybe it is' (Group 6 FC Male)

The second participant differentiates between men and women's approaches and styles of shopping together in the retail space. He suggests that while women shop in groups or packs and move around the space together men are more independent shoppers.

In commenting on the role of shopping partners many participants described the differences between gender. For many male participants the retail space was still perceived to be the female realm of knowledge and expertise. For example one informant described taking advantage of a female friends fashion knowledge and advice over his male contemporaries.

I always take a female with me because they'll be able to tell you what you look best in...whenever you take your pals they always go 'oh I like that' and then they'll start seeing things that they like and you're like 'no, look are you going to tell me if this looks alright?' and they just go 'aye, aye that looks fine' but I would rather take a girl in, they know exactly where to go and what looks right...(Interview 12 Next Male)

Female participants were also self-confessed shopping 'experts' and often boasted about their superior knowledge of fashion and shopping. Some described how 'useless' and 'hopeless' their partners were and how they tried to 'encourage', 'train' and 'wean' them into trying different styles and visiting different stores. One female participant described how her husband followed her around the shop 'like a lost puppy'. However, despite this gender stereotype, accompanied shopping trips revealed that male participants were not only equally interested in shopping and fashion but were in some cases much more enthusiastic participants. They also had a sophisticated knowledge about fashion product brands, and fashion outlets.

...it's just a bit of a macho thing...men aren't supposed to like shopping and talking about what they're wearing or the newest shops that have opened but I think in general men have become much more interested in these things...I mean everything has changed, about eight or ten years ago all there was just Marks and Spencer's and Gieves and that was it, but now there's just so much choice, everyone is so image-conscious...you have to keep up to date with what's going on...(Group 3 FC Mixed)

This theme perhaps indicates that the gendered nature of shopping is changing as men become more interested and involved in fashion shopping. This theme is supported by recent research carried out by Otnes and McGrath (2001) who argue that actual male shopping behaviour belies many of stereotypes of men as instrumental shoppers. For example, they argue that men often evaluate alternatives, go bargain hunting and even shop in 'feminine' stores.

9.6.3 Shopping Obstructors

While shopping with friends, family and partners was typically described by participants as a fun and co-operative partnership, many stated that there was often an element of competition and conflict between individuals and groups. Several participants commented that they often 'playfully argued' over who was going to buy a particular item describing it as 'just a bit of friendly competition'. One informant actually describes using his friends to source or seek out the 'best buys' while he later secretly returns to make the purchase.

...if friends are going out shopping...I quite like going with them because sometimes they'll see something and then they won't buy it and you'll think 'ahhh that's quite nice' and then you'll just nick in and get it...'oh, I saw this top and I thought I would just purchase it' (laughs)(Group 8 Next Male)

Many participants describe feelings of frustration and irritation shopping with others where there is a clear conflict in shopping 'styles'.

...if somebody is with you it's a real pest and then they stop to look at things and feel things and play with things or talk to people and you're like 'gonnae hurry up' and they just begin to annoy me, especially if you are pressure shopping and there is something you really need to get, you've got no time to look at other people's stuff. You are like 'that's lovely, whatever, buy it'! (raises voice) and let's get out of here (Group 4 Next Female)

...shopping can sometimes really get on my wick. Like especially if you go shopping with my friend Kirsty she is just the worst shopper in the world. She floats round and just doesn't pay attention to anything, and you are just like 'just look' if you look for something you will find it and then my other friend Michelle she knows exactly what she wants and if she can't find it she gets quite moody...(Interview 3 FC Female)

You are also very aware that it can be frustrating for other people where it is a vague experience, where you are just flowing in and out of shops and having someone who is very directive in terms of what they are trying to buy which is difficult in a group situation. My sister for example would love nothing better than direct my shopping and suggest where to go etcetera...she's a 'supper shopper' much like my mum ! (Group 3 FC Mixed)

These excerpts clearly illustrate the frustration felt by participants when shopping with friends who enjoy spending time immersed in the retail space in contrast to others who have a more purposeful or directive style. As a result many informants expressed a preference for shopping on their own where they feel more in control and could 'potter about' the space in their own time. Different shopping styles appear to influence the type of retail space that consumers enjoy shopping in. For instance, the first two participants describe shopping with friends who are highly experiential and immersive shoppers. They enjoy spending time exploring the space, looking, touching and feeling as well as trying on and chatting to others. These

individuals may therefore enjoy more personal contact in the space or more interactive and immersive spaces in which there are things to see and do.

A conflict in shopping styles was particularly evident when partners or friends of the opposite gender shop together.

I find shopping with my boyfriend very frustrating, I mean I mull over the whole decision making process endlessly, and obviously drive him insane doing it, but he's a very instinctive buyer, this...this...this...it's a very ordered, logical process, but I think you get that a lot in the male / female relationship when you go shopping. I think it's very frustrating for some people trying to fit into somebody else's shopping style... (Interview 9 Next Female)

I get really annoyed shopping with my girlfriend because I don't like to spend ages in a shop. I will have a browse but generally there has got to be something there that jumps out at me and says 'BUY ME !'...I know more or less what I like and what would look good on me so it's not a case of rummaging through everything trying to find 'a wee thing to go with my jeans or something' (imitates girlie voice)...I don't pure kinda rummage through racks and stuff...like it's some kind of challenge...that really, really annoys me...(Interview 4 FC Male)

...women take so long trying on and prancing about, they are so indecisive they say 'what do you think' and you say 'oh it's nice' God help you if you say 'I don't know'...'what do you mean you don't know, do you not think it fits me?' and it just turns into a massive fight and next thing you know you're storming out of the shop ! (Group 1 Next Mixed)

Men were described as more task-oriented or purposeful shoppers who approach the activity in quite a structured and logical way. In contrast women were described as more indecisive and emotional shoppers who enjoy spending time exploring and 'rummaging' in the space. This highly experiential activity was likened to a playful, challenging, and skilful game or process. While this theme reflects research that has explored the gender differences in shopping styles and activities (Campbell, 1997), it also has resonance with the work of Stern (2000) who suggests that there are significant gender-related differences in willingness to engage with advertising texts. The author suggests that males are detached readers exploring texts from an outside

perspective. In contrast females participate, reading, experiencing and empathising with texts from an inside perspective.

In summary this section has illustrated the relationships and range of roles that friends family and partners assume when shopping together. These roles include that of social companions, shopping partners and shopping obstructers. Analysis has also highlighted various gender differences in shopping styles and approaches which appear to indicate that the gendered nature of fashion shopping is changing. The following section will now explore consumers' social space orientations under the themes of affiliation and control.

9.7 Social Space Orientations

In line with previous chapters which have examined consumers' orientations in the physical and sensory space, this section explores consumers' social space orientations. It begins by discussing consumers' orientations in terms of their affiliation or sense of belonging in the social space. The section then considers the theme of control. Both orientations are discussed in line with consumers' interactions and encounters with sales personnel, other customers and those accompanying them in the retail space.

9.7.1 Affiliation

The beginning of the chapter introduced the theme of consciousness of kind that emphasised the importance informants placed on feelings of belonging in the retail space. This theme is consistent with Schmitt's (1999) notion of 'relate' which illustrates the importance individual consumers place on retail brands in forming connections with other people or other social groups. From this analysis it was evident that consumers have clear orientations towards different retail environments on this basis. Social encounters in the retail space are therefore important in their ability to facilitate 'emphatic insideness' (Relph, 1976). For instance several informants described how comfortable they felt in various stores based on their

positive encounters with friends in the retail space and the connections or affinity they felt towards the sale personnel.

I: How would you describe them? [customers of Topshop]

Just people like me I suppose, and most of my friends for that matter...people who like going out and having fun who care about what they look like. It's somewhere we always go, most Saturdays actually. We normally spend ages in there trying on stuff, just having a laugh (laughs). It's good coz you don't get hassled like other places (Group 7 TS Female)

There's certain stores that I just like being in and others I don't. I suppose it depends on the circumstances but I think a lot of the time it comes down to the attitudes of the staff...it's just the image that goes with the shop. Like I really enjoy being in French Connection, the staff are always really approachable and usually genuinely nice people who you can chat to quite happily...(P-Shop FC Female)

Many of the roles discussed throughout this chapter support this insider orientation. For example in describing the role of other customers in the retail space many participants indicated the importance of feeling part of a social collective. Others emphasised the importance of being able to personally relate to or identify with the sales personnel in the space. This orientation in the space also has resonance with the theme of comfort discussed in chapter seven.

In contrast many informants described feeling uncomfortable and intimidated in different retail spaces by both sales personnel and other customers in the space.

I just don't feel comfortable in that type of shop [Cruise]...I think I'm just one of these people that just walk in and the security guards and staff start looking at you when you are walking around as though I'm going to nick something...I just don't feel right in there, it's not me...(Group 3 FC Mixed)

...places like New Look...their clothes are that cheap that people with less money can afford to go in there and that's probably why people with more money maybe don't like going into these shops. They think 'I'm not going into a shop that somebody like that's shopping in' and they just by-pass it.

yeah because you go into International and it's all girls, and I'm not snobby or anything, but it's like 'Ohaa aye that's relly nice' and you're like 'oh no I don't want to be seen in the same place as you!' (Group 9 FC Female).

It's a beautiful shop [French Connection] where beautiful people go to be seen and to mix with other beautiful people. I find it quite pretentious, everyone has smart labels on so when I go there I always feel totally out of place, a right scruff (laughs)...it's just not the type of shop I feel I fit in (P-shop Next Male).

This lack of identity or affinity with others in the space resulted in feelings of outsidersness (Relph, 1976). This theme was supported in discussions with consumers throughout the chapter. For instance many informants described feeling uncomfortable in various retail environments due to the perceived social and psychic distance between sales personnel and other customers in the space. Overall it was evident consumers not only differentiated between stores on the basis of their affiliation to others but that they actively avoided spaces where they felt intimidated or uncomfortable.

9.7.2 Control

Participants also appeared to have orientations for different retail spaces based on the amount of control they feel they have over social encounters in the environment. In particular informants frequently commented on the interactions with sales personnel in the retail space. Consistent with their role as advisors and conversational partners many participants described a preference for retail spaces where they could have close contact with sales personnel while still remaining in control of the interaction. Other participants described feeling more at home in environments where they were left alone to explore the space independently. .

I love going in there! [Reiss for Men]...they give you a lot of attention but it's not like a hard sell...they give you their opinion

as well like 'auw that could be tucked in or your trousers could do with being lifted half an inch' and stuff like that which is great coz I just don't have a clue! It makes you feel kinda special I suppose...and they're normally pretty cool guys so you kinda trust what they're saying but they don't push it. At the end of the day it's up to you...you can walk away...(Interview 8 FC Male)

I mean Topman is just a pretty relaxing, chilled out place to shop...you just wander about and do your own thing which is what I like.....there's always other guys like you milling about, no one pesters you. I just feel more comfortable in places like that (Group 5 Topman Male)

In these excerpts both participants feel comfortable and relaxed in the retail space. While the first informant enjoys the attention and support he receives in Reiss, the second participant feels like an insider in Topman when he is left to do his 'own thing'. This has resonance with the theme of freedom described in Chapter Seven. As observed in section 9.3.2 this freedom or control in the space was particularly important for male informants. This is consistent with Riley and Blanchard (1996; 3) who argue that male shoppers 'are most at home in shopping environments that allow them to operate as individuals, giving them space and time to think and decide'.

In contrast to these positive experiences where participants feel like insiders in the space, many informants described feeling 'uneasy', 'intimidated', and 'uncomfortable' in various retail environments. For instance, after an accompanied shopping trip one participant described his encounter with a sales assistant.

It just felt like you were like in a test tube or something...you were getting peered upon. I felt really edgy and uneasy in the shop...I just couldn't relax...and then I was forced into wearing that jacket and I just felt as though I was getting pushed into doing something, as if I was a test subject. I suppose I just tried it on to make them happy and then just fed them an excuse and left...I didn't want to offend them, they're just doing their job. It was almost like a car salesman 'I've got a great one here come and sign this form and we'll get this done for you and that done for you and before you know it you've got a new car...well before I knew it I could have been signed up for a Hugo Boss account and a new jacket' (laughs) (P-shop FC Male)

These feelings of a loss of control and discomfort in the space resonated with many participants who described feeling as though they were being 'watched' and 'judged' by sales personnel in the space. One participant likened this feeling to being a criminal under surveillance. While Cova and Cova (2000) have argued that individuals frequently seek to regain control over their experience and actions in the space through re-appropriation, in this context there appeared to be little evidence of consumers' re-appropriation tactics. Instead informants simply avoided stores, opted to leave, or limited the time spent in the retail space.

I hate being pressurised into buying something. See when you walk into a store and you get jumped on by somebody, that's the worst thing in the world...there are stores that I just won't go into because I know that there are so many people standing about watching you or people just standing there doing nothing, like the Grieves up in Buchanan Galleries, I won't go in because they have got about seven, eight or nine people just standing there and you just feel that they are looking at you [everyone nods in agreement] (Group 1 Next Mixed).

I like having a look about but see if I go into a sports shop or jeans shop I just walk in and then straight back out again because I know somebody is just going to jump on me. If I don't walk in and out quickly, they are sort of loosing it because I am going to spend money you know...but then if they are going to be intimidating and if somebody keeps coming up and saying 'are you going to try that on?' or 'how about this one?' you are just like 'can I make my own decision please?'...I usually just walk away then...(Group 4 Next Female)

For the second participant in particular these encounters appear to be a constant battle to remain in control. In this scenario the female participant views herself as the winner as she remains in control to the detriment of the store who are 'loosing' out on a potential sale.

While many participants described feeling uncomfortable in retail spaces where they had little control over their interactions with sales assistants, this theme was also evident when informants were accompanied with friends, family and partners. For instance the role of shopping obstructers, described in section 9.6.3, illustrated the conflict in shopping styles participants often experienced when shopping with others.

This conflict often stemmed from feelings of a loss of control over the service context and the shops visited.

I'm quite a selfish shopper because once I've looked at a shop I'm ready to leave. I don't want to look at anything else and I'm just sort of hanging about. There's one friend I've got that always tries everything on especially in department stores. We were in Debenhams one day, we must have been in there for an hour and a half and I was ready to go after about five minutes. I much prefer just going on my own at least then you can do exactly what you want when you want without having to follow other people about or do what they're doing (Interview 11 Next Female)

I absolutely *hate* shopping with other people because you always end up going into shops that you really don't like and pretending to look interested but at the same time desperate to get out! (Group 8 Next male)

This theme was particularly prevalent among male participants who described accompanying their female partners shopping. Many talked about the 'ordeal' of shopping and being 'dragged' around by their partners. Informants also alluded to the discomfort they felt when visiting certain retail spaces shopping. One participant described it as being in 'alien' or 'unfamiliar territory' while another informant felt lost in the space when waiting for his girlfriend. In this example the sales assistant clearly empathises with the participant.

I remember waiting in...I think it was Jigsaw. I had a quick look upstairs and then came to find Jodie. Of course she was trying on about the eighth thing. I must have looked really lost or that I was loitering outside the changing rooms because one of the guys in the shop came over and gave me a magazine to read (Group 6 FC Male)

These feelings of discomfort and a loss of control in the retail space whether through interactions with sales assistants or accompanying others are consistent with Relph's (1974) notion of outsiders. This section clearly illustrates where lack of control in the retail space moves an individual to an outsider status.

9.8 Conclusions

This chapter has illustrated the importance of social interactions and encounters in the retail environment as part of consumers' holistic experience of the retail space. It began by introducing the notion of consciousness of kind. This theme demonstrated the importance participants placed on being in retail spaces where employees and co-consumers were perceived to be like themselves. This was defined in terms of social and psychic distance and physical appearance. The chapter also explored the different roles others play in the social space. This began with service personnel as unacquainted strangers identifying their roles as advisors, conversational partners and antagonists. Consideration was then given to informants' understandings of service strategies that illustrated their awareness of 'sales tactics' and 'social aesthetics'. The influence of other customers as unacquainted influences assuming roles of supporters and spectators was then discussed. Finally the chapter explored the role of purchase pals describing them as social companions, shopping partners and shopping obstructers.

The chapter concluded by considering consumers' social space orientations. The themes of affiliation and control highlighted the importance consumers attach to being in retail environments where they can identify with other customers' and sales personnel and remain in control of these encounters. This affinity with others and control in the space facilitated feelings of insiderness (Relph, 1976). In contrast when informants were unable to relate to others and experienced a loss of control in the space individuals experienced feelings of outsiderness. Chapter Ten will discuss consumers space orientations in more detail. Furthermore it provides a summary of the main themes that have emerged from the analysis, outlines future areas of research and suggests some implications for retailers.

CHAPTER TEN

CONCLUSIONS

'In our everyday lives places are not experienced as independent, clearly defined entities that can be described simply in terms of their location or appearance. Rather they are sensed in a chiaroscuro of setting, landscape, ritual, routine, other people, personal experiences, care and concern for home, and in the context of other places' (Relph, 1976 p29).

10.1 Introduction

This thesis has explored young consumers' experiences of fashion retail brands and in particular has focused on their interaction with, and experiences of, the retail space. It has demonstrated that consumers are not passive participants simply reacting or responding to stimuli presented by retailers, but active co-constructors who derive their own meaning from these space encounters. This chapter begins by drawing together some of the key themes that have emerged throughout the study in terms of consumers' retail brand experiences and retail space literacy. Building on Relph's (1976) model of insiders and outsiders, it proposes that consumers have various orientations in their reading and relationships to different retail spaces. The chapter then outlines some of the main theoretical contributions of the research. Finally the chapter considers the managerial implications and discusses the limitations of the study and areas for future research.

10.2 Consumers' Retail Brand Experiences

This study has revealed much about consumers' experiences of retail fashion brands. Overall, it has emphasised the highly complex nature of consumer brand experiences and the multifaceted nature of the fashion brand construct. Although for many consumers fashion retail brands were initially synonymous with the physical product on sale, further discussion indicated the diversity of the construct. For example,

consumers compared High Street brands in terms of their market positioning, target customers, store layout and location.

Of particular conceptual contribution the study has demonstrated that fashion retail brands are highly symbolic and have personal meaning for consumers. While informants initially focused on the utility of retail store brands in terms of their range of products, quality and price dimensions, the study illustrated that there was a greater level of depth to consumers' experiences. For example in describing retail store and product brands informants actively drew on their own personal experiences, metaphors and analogies. The study also found that young fashion consumers have a wide constellation or repertoire (Gordon, 1994) of retail fashion brands that they use to reflect the needs of a particular context. In line with Fournier (1998) these repertoires included committed and enduring partnerships with brands, which were often part of family or childhood experiences, to short terms flings and affairs where brands were purchased for particular occasions. Consequently the study indicated the difficulty of conceptualising the brand as a uni-dimensional construct, such as the brand as product or store, as consumers related to the brand across many overlapping dimensions.

The study has also revealed much about consumers' shopping identities and roles. It has demonstrated that young consumers are sophisticated 'lay marketers' who have an extensive knowledge and understanding of marketing concepts and practices. They are therefore not passive recipients of marketing stimuli, but rather active meaning-makers, aware of the commercial milieu in which they live. This awareness was attributed to the large number of young consumers employed in the retail sector, their own personal observations and experiences in retail stores, and their general interest in fashion, design and marketing issues highlighted in the media. This knowledge was often used as tokens in social exchange with friends in order to gain rewards in terms of their social status and self esteem (Willis, 1990).

Building on the notion of the consumer as lay marketer, the study identified the roles of consumers as shrewd and seduced shoppers. In the role of the shrewd shopper, informants presented themselves as cautious, resourceful, and value conscious consumers, wary of being 'conned' or 'ripped off' by retailers. In contrast seduced shoppers struggled to remain in control of their spending and appeared unable to resist marketers' persuasion attempts.

Finally, the study indicated that young fashion consumers were part of a 'Mish-mash Generation' in which their identities and relationships with brands were fluid and multifaceted. Consumers had a wide repertoire of retail store brands that they drew upon and they showed an awareness of the role of these brands in the construction of group and self identities. Indeed many informants described how they enjoyed changing and experimenting with their image, style and identity. This has resonance with notions of the postmodern or 21st century consumer (Valentine and Gordon, 2000) who appear to be members of a multiplicity of overlapping groups which, like masks, provided temporary identifications (Maffesoli, 1996).

10.3 Retail Space Literacy

In order to present a contextualised account of consumers' retail brand experiences the study focused on informants' situated or emplaced experiences (Sherry, 1998b) of the retail space. Building on the notion of literacy in advertising research (Ritson and Elliot, 1995; O'Donohoe and Tynan, 1998), the study proposed that consumers were 'retail space literate'. Not only could they read, describe and compare retail spaces, but individuals also actively interpreted and co-constructed meaning from these three dimensional texts. For instance young consumers frequently presented their own personal theories about the 'rules' and conventions of retail space, how it was constructed and intended to influence them. This supported the notion that consumers possess 'schemer schema' (Wright, 1986) or 'persuasion knowledge' (Friestad and Wright, 1994), drawing on their own intuitive theories to recognise, interpret and respond to marketers persuasion attempts.

It was argued that space literacy was enacted through consumers' experiences of the 'physical' space, the 'sensory' space, and the 'social' space. The physical space was concerned with the physical landscape or configuration of the space where informants compared servicescapes on the basis of their spaciousness, predictability and authenticity. Consumers' reading and understanding of retailers' persuasion attempts were defined in terms of the physical artifacts in the space, the merchandise displays and the movement or flow of customers in the space. Informants' reading of the sensory space emphasised the importance of the combination of sensory experiences that created a holistic or synesthetic impression. Retail spaces were defined as calming, neutral and energised spaces. Consumers constructed their own meanings from the different sense appeals used in the space in terms of the cognitive, emotional and behavioural tricks believed to be employed by retailers in the servicescape. Finally, the social space was concerned with consumers' interpersonal interactions with others in the servicescape where informants emphasised the importance of being among others that they perceived to be like themselves. This included the role of the service personnel, other customers and those accompanying participants on their shopping trip. While each of these dimensions of space were separated for the purpose of analysis, it is the combination or interaction of these dimensions that form consumers' holistic experience of the space or the consumers' personal 'experiencescape'. This is in line with Relph (1976;48) who argued that space constitutes a 'series of dialectics that form one common structure and it is their fusion that constitutes the identity of that place'.

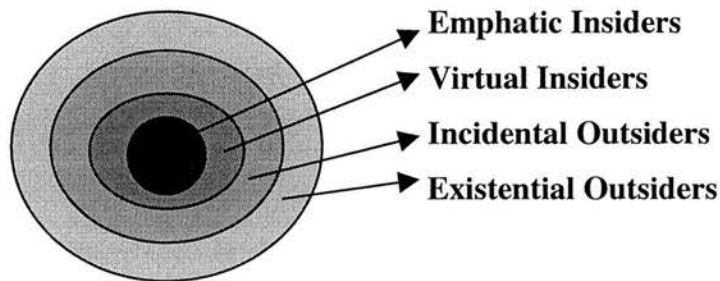
10.4 Consumers' Space Orientations

Based on the reading and interpretation of these spatial texts, consumers appeared to have varying orientations defined in terms of how 'comfortable' or 'out of place' they felt in different retail environments. These orientations were expressed differently within the physical, sensory and social space. For example informants described feeling a sense of belonging, comfort and homeyness in both retail spaces they described as 'spacious' and 'calming' as well as more 'cluttered', 'disorganised' and 'energised' environments. In contrast informants also described feeling

uncomfortable, lost and exposed in different spaces. This reveals that individuals have an orientation to alternative retail spaces, some to which they feel comfortable and others in which they feel out of place. These emotional relationships with retail space are affected by the retail design attributes, but more importantly this study has shown that retail consumers vary significantly in their relationships with alternative retail designs, highlighting that 'reactions' to space attributes are not homogenous but vary across individuals. Furthermore, these emotional relationships are not dependent on more obvious demographic differences but are maintained at a fairly fundamental and emotional level.

Building on Relph's (1976) model of insiders and outsiders, it is proposed that these orientations can be categorised into four broad groupings - emphatic insiders, virtual insiders, incidental outsiders and existential outsiders. These orientations reflect the strength of emotional attachment or bond that consumers have to different retail spaces. For example emphatic insiders in the space demonstrate the strongest sense of belonging and affiliation while existential outsiders have the weakest emotional attachment where they feel uncomfortable and out of place in the retail space. These orientations can be thought of in terms of layers with the centre core illustrating the strongest sense of belonging or insideness in the space and outer layers the weakest (see figure 10.1).

Figure 10.1 Consumers' Space Orientations



This provides a conceptual model of an individual consumer's relationship to different retail spaces on the high street. An individual will therefore read some retail

spaces as an emphatic or virtual insider and others as incidental or existential outsiders. The insider-outsider status relates to consumers' interaction with the physical, sensory and social space and offers insights and understanding of consumer's behaviour and patronage across a range of retail store brands available for them to choose between. The following sections will now explore each of these orientations in more detail.

Emphatic Insiders

Emphatic Insiders feel a strong bond or sense of belonging as consumers described feeling 'at home' and 'comfortable' in the retail space. Informants emphasised the importance of comfort and familiarity in the retail space in terms of its 'homey' feel and their ability to find their way easily around the store. Freedom and independence in the space as well as environments where consumers could become immersed and engaged were also important dimensions for emphatic insiders. They feel comfortable in retail spaces that have the appropriate sensory combinations these can range from both 'calming' spaces such as French Connection or highly stimulating 'energised' spaces like Topshop. They also feel a strong affinity to others in the retail space such as store personnel or other customers. For example, store personnel are enrolled as conversation partners and consumers perceive exchanges to be both credible and authentic. Emphatic insiders enjoy spending time in the space and are frequent visitors to the store.

Virtual Insiders

Virtual Insiders feel quite at home and relaxed in the retail space but in contrast to emphatic insiders they do not have such a strong bond or affinity to the store. However these spaces may have had more meaning for consumers at different life phases or identity phases. For example many informants described family brands that they grew up with or stores that they visited when they were younger. Virtual Insiders feel comfortable in these familiar environments and actively browse and engage with the space and interact with others. This orientation appeared to be

strongly associated with informants' experiences of 'neutral' spaces and in particular the Next store brand which appealed to a wide range of consumers. While Virtual Insiders clearly feel comfortable in these environments, they do not necessarily visit them every time they go shopping.

Incidental Outsiders

For Incidental Outsiders the space is merely the background or setting for consumers' fashion shopping activities. This orientation has much in common with Relph's (1976) definition of the term in which the space itself holds little importance or relevance to the consumer. Incidental Outsiders do not identify with the space and often feel uncomfortable in the environment. They spend little time browsing and do not engage with the space or interact with others. While they occasionally visit these stores this is often for a specific purpose and as such for incidental outsiders functional and task orientation are dominant. This orientation was particularly evident when consumers described shopping with friends, partners and family members and also appeared to be predominant among male shoppers.

Existential Outsiders

Existential Outsiders feel uncomfortable and out of place in the retail space. Consumers describe feeling lost and frustrated in unfamiliar spaces where they are unable to navigate around the store. Existential Outsiders feel both 'exposed' and 'isolated' in more spacious environments and 'cramped', 'claustrophobic' and 'frustrated' in more cluttered spaces such as Topshop. Energised spaces were described as both noisy, interfering and distracting while more calming spaces were boring and mundane. Existential Outsiders cannot relate to or identify with others in the space. They are often highly sceptical of sales personnel's intentions and feel out of control and intimidated by these interactions. While perhaps aware of these stores, customers rarely visited them. This orientation has resonance with Relph's (1976;51) definition involving 'a self-conscious and reflective uninvolvedness, an alienation

from people and places, homelessness, a sense of the unreality of the world, and of not belonging’.

10.5 Contribution of the Research

In line with the research objectives this study has provided an in-depth exploration of young fashion consumers’ everyday experiences of retail brands and their interaction with the retail space. In contrast to previous research that has focused on consumers’ extraordinary and spectacular retail brand experiences, the study has offered an account of individuals’ ‘everyday’ interactions and encounters. It has focused on the previously unexamined youth fashion market and has compared consumers’ experiences across a variety of retail environments rather than concentrating on one consumption site. Building on literature in geography, advertising research and themes in the postmodern literature, the study offers an alternative way of conceptualising the role of the consumer. It has demonstrated that far from being passive participants who simply react to marketing stimuli, consumers are active meaning makers engaged in a dialogue with retail fashion store brands.

In demonstrating consumers’ active role the study has made several contributions. Overall it has illustrated that the retail store brand is an integral part of young fashion consumers’ identity and has personal and symbolic meaning for individuals beyond its utilitarian value. The study has found empirical support for the notion that consumers have a more fluid relationship with brands illustrating informants’ wide repertoire or constellation. In line with Willis (1990) young consumers were found to actively look towards fashion brands and consumption experiences as lifestyle solutions where they ‘pick and mix’ brand images to help construct one or more identities. In addition the study has also emphasised the importance of moving beyond exploring consumers’ individual interactions and relationships with brands to consider the broader social context. For example research indicated that not only did young fashion consumers use retail brands as ‘tokens in social exchange’, but retail store brands also appeared to have a role in the construction and maintenance of

social relationships. This clearly lends some support to the notion of consumption communities in retail space.

A principal contribution of the study has been to extend the concept of literacy into a retail context to show how consumers actively read, engage and create meanings from retail space encounters. This active view of consumers and their interaction with the retail space extends previous research in the field of marketing and consumer behaviour and in particular the research in atmospherics. While many of the environmental dimensions identified in the space are similar to earlier models of atmospherics and servicescapes, for example Bitner's (1992) ambient conditions, space, signs symbols and artifacts, this study has identified the contribution of consumers' understanding and reading of these dimensions, rather than measuring their responses to these stimuli. This privileges the consumer's perspective and highlights their active role rather than previous models that are producer or retailer focused where consumers are viewed as passive participants to be managed in the retail space. This has resonance with Aubert-Gamet's (1997) assertion that the servicescape is not only acting on users in order to achieve marketing goals, but is also acted on by users to frame existential goals. This also relates to Willis (1990) who comments on young adults practising existential consumption.

The study has made a further contribution by finding empirical support for the concept of persuasion knowledge in a retail context. It has illustrated that consumers not only have a sophisticated understanding of retail design issues, but that they actively construct their own meanings from marketers' persuasion attempts. The notion that consumers have various space orientations in their interpretation of the retail space also forms a significant contribution to existing work. By building on Relph's (1976) notion of insiders and outsiders the study has provided a more indepth insight and understanding of consumers' interaction with the retail space and has highlighted various dimensions of the space which influence consumers patronage and behaviour.

This study also provides a methodological contribution to the field. The use of mixed methods were well suited to capturing the experiential, multisensoral dimensions of consumption behaviour. Incorporating various stages in the research design provided the benefits of analysing and reflecting on the data thereby sensitising the researcher to various issues and themes. Overall this allowed a more holistic, contextual understanding of consumers' experiences. The use of visual methods in particular provided enriched qualitative information concerning consumers' experiences, personal constructs and meaning systems. The study has also made a significant contribution to the field in terms of establishing the value of the accompanied shopping method. By assuming the role of an interactive shopping partner rather than a neutral observer, the researcher was able to gain a more in-depth understanding of how consumers think, behave and interact with the servicescape across a variety of retail environments. This method was also extremely valuable in helping to elucidate on and develop themes that were less prominent in the interviews and group discussions.

10.6 Managerial Implications

In an increasingly competitive environment in which retailers are finding it difficult to create differential advantage on the basis of product, price, promotion and location, focus has turned to creating effective, memorable and exciting retail 'brand experiences'. The opportunities available for retailing strategy are marked by the avid experience-seeking characteristics of contemporary consumers and shoppers' acceptance of simulated immersive environments such as Niketown and the Disney store. It is proposed that the accumulation of detailed understandings of consumers' complex experiences and interactions with these store brands can therefore help to provide astute retailers with a competitive edge. This proposition is supported by Pine and Gilmore (1999) who argue that the next competitive battlefield lies not just in the selling of services but rather in the staging of experiences.

This study has demonstrated that consumers are not passive spectators, rather they are highly sophisticated and knowledgeable audiences who are often aware of the

tactics and strategies employed by retailers to encourage them to purchase and spend time in the retail space. While these findings have allowed us to question the perception of retailer omnipotence, the study has found little evidence to suggest that consumers actively resist or rebel against these persuasion attempts. Rather it appears consumers enjoy being immersed in the store's imagery and are willing to play along with retailers' intended practices in the space. This view is supported by Trevaskis (2000) who acknowledges that 21st century consumers are very difficult to manage but suggests that they are willing to be marketed to as long as their literacy and power are acknowledged.

At one level they are interested and conscious, if at times cynical, collaborators, who expect their needs to be understood, acknowledged and met speedily. On the other hand consumers look to brands and business for leadership, fantasy and aspiration. They want to be constantly excited and surprised by having their needs met in new and unexpected ways, uncovering areas of want they didn't know they had and delivering memorable experiences...' (Trevaskis, 2000; 209).

These findings clearly have implications for ways in which retail spaces are designed and managed. By identifying the various insider-outsider 'orientations' consumers have in different retail spaces this study has illustrated the ways in which retail store brands are evaluated and understood by consumers. It is proposed that the insider outsider conceptualisation can further be operationally developed to offer retailers the ability to match their environments to their target market based on an understanding of how to encourage or create an insider orientation. Retailers can therefore provide superior retail settings that actively engage consumers' interest and facilitate individuals' desired shopping experiences and activities.

It was evident from the study that emphatic insiders enjoy engaging and interacting with the retail space. This clearly has implications for retailers in terms of their use of innovative merchandising techniques and creative displays that encourage consumers to interact, experiment and play with the product. The study has also recognised the importance of the sensory space that creates a synesthetic or global impression in the consumer's mind. Retailers therefore need to carefully consider

how they construct, combine and use these sensory appeals so as to attract and engage consumers with different sensory orientations. This may present opportunities for retailers to create different sensory spaces within the one retail environment. Finally, the research has recognised the importance consumers attach to social interactions and encounters with others in the retail space. This illustrates the opportunity available for retailers to create 'linking value' (Aubert-Gamet and Cova, 1999) in the space as well as considering the needs of others who accompany customers in the store. This need has recently been recognised by Oasis who have introduced 'partner check-in' areas designed to keep male partners entertained with magazines and television stations. These are all clearly very important managerial issues that should not be overlooked.

The study also has broader strategic implications for retailers as the insider-outsider model could be used as a conceptual foundation for segmentation. As young consumers become increasingly difficult to identify through traditional consumption variables, such as gender and social class, this may be a useful alternative basis. This might be achieved by identifying key constructs or themes related to the insider orientation such as 'homeliness' and 'comfort' and using this as the basis to define market segments, choose target markets and develop competitive retail positioning statements. Further use for the conceptual model could be in competitor analysis in retail service provision. For example retail stores could be compared to competitors on the basis of their ability to profile and attract emphatic insiders in the retail space.

Finally the study clearly indicates the need for retailers and research organisations to develop more creative research methods and techniques that allow a more contextualised and in-depth understanding of consumers retail brand experiences. For example the use of visual methods encourage emotional expression and elicit data that are more symbolic and metaphorical, thereby revealing issues and themes that are perhaps more difficult for consumers to verbalise. Additionally accompanied shopping trips with consumers provide an alternative approach allowing retailers greater insight into the nature of consumers' experiences across a broad range of retail brands. In line with Fuller and Adams (1999) it is only through this depth of

understanding that retailers can make creative leaps into propositions, positionings and brand strategies.

10.7 Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study has provided valuable insights into consumers' experiences of retail fashion brands and the retail space, however, the research inevitably has limitations which leaves considerable scope for further research in the area.

Firstly, the study has concentrated on the youth market defined as young people aged between 18-26. Consumers in this age group are at important transitional life phases and this is reflected in their consumption choices and experiences. For instance the study demonstrated that young people often use fashion brands as a symbolic resource for the construction and maintenance of identity (Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998). In this way individuals are forming and developing relationships with different retail brands at different life stages or identity phases 'to signify who they are, and who they think they are' (Willis, 1990:89). From the study consumers adopting the role of an 'emphatic insider' clearly have a strong emotional bond or attachment to the retail store brand at that moment in time. While experiences may vary in terms of different situational constraints, such as time available and purchasing context, these bonds appear to be more meaningful, tied in with consumers' life or identity phase. What is unclear from the findings is therefore the nature of these bonds in relation to consumer's life phases. Consequently there is scope for future research to explore the relationship between life or identity phases and consumers emotional attachment to retail store brands. This could consider the nature and form of these phases, how long they last as well as how they change and develop over time. For instance this may involve a longitudinal exploration of the experiences of individuals from pre-teen years as they progress through adolescence and enter adulthood and beyond.

Secondly, the study has identified gender differences in experience between informants, particularly in shopping styles and orientations. While there has been

some research into the gendered activity of shopping (Campbell, 1997), few studies have explored differences between gender in their experiences and reading of retail space. In examining men and women's involvement in reading advertising texts Stern (2000) has suggested that there are differences in a willingness to engage with women as participatory readers and men as detached readers. Building on this research there is considerable scope for future studies to explore differences between genders in their retail space literacy. In future research, consideration needs to be given to the gender of the researcher. This is particularly important in the accompanied shopping trips as clearly a female researcher is limited to the areas of the store they can accompany male participants, such as the changing rooms.

Thirdly, while the study has compared other fashion retail stores in discussions with consumers and during accompanied shopping trips, this research has primarily focused on informants' experiences and readings of three retail chains stores located in Glasgow. Consequently the research was unable to identify whether informants' orientations differed across store location and how this orientation relates to consumers' overall affiliation to the retail store brand. For example if a consumer was an emphatic insider in the Next retail space, would this role be consistent in all Next retail spaces which may differ in size and format? Could the space itself moderate the orientation adopted by informants? There is therefore scope for further research to explore this dynamic. Future studies could also focus on alternative retail formats or stores of similar market positionings. Indeed studies could move beyond fashion retailing to examine consumers' retail space literacy and roles in diverse retail spaces such as food retailing.

Fourthly, given the complexity of consumers' interaction with the retail space, the use of mixed methods has provided a more contextualised understanding of young people's experiences and space literacy. However it is proposed that there is considerable opportunity for methodological development. Building on the work Zaltman and Coulter (1995) the use of creative visual tasks and projective methods may help to elicit enriched qualitative data concerned with consumers' own personal metaphors and constructs. For example this might include autodiving tasks (Heisley and Levy, 1991) using images consumers themselves have collected, or may involve

using three dimensional graphics and moving images to explore consumers' impressions of the retail space. Not only do consumers enjoy completing these tasks but they appear to be particularly valuable when exploring dimensions of the space, such as consumers' sensory experiences that are perhaps more difficult to articulate.

Furthermore there is also great potential to develop the accompanied shopping method in order to provide greater insight and understanding of consumers naturalistic experiences and behaviours across a variety of retail contexts. This method may be particularly valuable due to the importance young fashion consumers place on social encounters and interactions in the retail space. In line with Fuller and Adams (1999), further research could use friendship or family groups on an accompanied shopping trip. In this way the social context can be taken into consideration in more depth allowing the researcher to observe interactions between third parties.

Finally the study has focused on consumers' experiences of the retail space however future research could incorporate other stakeholders such as retailers and retail space designers. This would allow a comparison between the intended messages and brand experiences retailers wish to create in the retail space and the meanings consumers themselves derive from these space encounters.

While there are clearly many areas that can be explored in more detail it is hoped that this study has provided a useful basis for further research in the area. Overall it presents an in-depth understanding and account of young consumers' experiences of retail fashion brands and the retail space. By using a mixed methods approach and qualitative data collection methods the research has prioritised consumers' understandings and readings of space. In line with Relph (1976;44), 'it is only through exploring the meaning people attach to different contexts that we can truly reveal the subtlety and significance of individuals' everyday experiences of place'.

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APPENDIX 1

INTERVIEW AND GROUP GUIDE

Introduction

- Introduce myself (in groups introduce other members), welcome, and refreshments.
- Thank participant(s) for agreeing to take part in the research.
- Inform participant(s) that the research is part of an independent study and that I do not work for a retail store group. Ensure confidentiality and anonymity regarding their names and personal details and ask permission for the interview to be recorded.
- Advise interviewees/group members that the purpose is gain a better understanding of *their* experiences of fashion shopping with a particular emphasis on their experiences of store x. State that interview/group is not based on a rigid question/answer format and reassure participant(s) that there are no right or wrong answers. Invite participant(s) to talk as openly as possible and take their time to answer or think about their responses. In groups state my role as facilitator

Background

- General background information/conversation as icebreaker. Open discussion by stating that I am interested to hear about their experiences of clothes shopping. Ask participant(s) to think of one thing they like about clothes shopping and one think they dislike. Encourage informants to share their experiences and provide examples. Additional questions :
- Where do you normally go shopping?
- Who do you shop with (prefer going on your own or accompanied?)
- Are there times when you feel good / bad about shopping?

- Can you think back to the last time you went clothes shopping, or a time you remember. Was this typical shopping trip? (or an unusual experience?)

The Servicescape

State that in this part of the interview/group I would like to concentrate more specifically on their personal feelings and impressions on the store itself, in particular its design, layout and image. Reiterate that these are their own personal opinions therefore there are no right or wrong answers.

- Can you think of any stores that you particularly like or dislike in terms of their layout and design?
- If I mention store x what springs to mind?
- How would you describe the store to someone who doesn't know it?
- How does this compare/contrast to other stores you are familiar with?

Interior store photographs

Show participant(s) selection of interior store photographs as stimuli

- Do you think these photographs do justice to the store? Is this how you imagine the store to look like?
- Is there anything that you particularly like or dislike about the store?
- Does it remind you of anywhere?
- Can you comment on the layout of the store
- Can you describe the 'feel' or personality of the store?
- Can you compare this to other stores you are familiar with?

Collage Task (Groups Only)

Ask participants to think more specifically about the store they shop in and invite them to get into two pairs to complete the task. Provide selection of magazines, A1 sheet of paper, scissors and glue. Invite participants to look through the images and select those that come to mind when they think of the store. Encourage them to use

their imaginations. State that they can also add to the collage by drawing pictures or writing words that spring to mind. State that they have about 20-25 mins to complete the task and then the pairs can get together to compare and contrast collages and talk about the images/words they have selected. Once groups reconvene ask participants to consider;

- Are there any images that you would have liked to have included in the collage, that you couldn't find ?
- If yes, what would they have been? Can you describe them?
- Is there one image that you think is most representative?

Sorting Task

Present exterior store photographs. Invite informants to sort the stores into different groups or categories and explain their choice. Explain that stores can be grouped on any basis and that participants can have as many or as few categories as they liked. Stores that were not represented in the selection that informants would like to include could be written down on a separate card. Unfamiliar stores could be taken out from the selection. After task invite participant(s) to talk about what each of the categories represented.

Repertory Grid Exercise

Select Topshop/Topman, French Connection and Next from the sorting task photographs and ask participants to select a further five photographs of stores they are familiar with. Explain that additional stores can be added to the selection on a separate card if there is a particular store that informants would like to include. Present the store photographs in groups of three (First, Topshop/Topman, French Connection and Next. Second, the store the participant(s) recruited from and two stores from their selection. Third, the remaining three stores from participant(s) selection). Ask participants to describe which store is the 'odd one out?'

At the end of the interviews and groups thank informant(s) for their participation and enquire whether they would be willing to take part in a further stage of the research involving the accompanied shopping trip.

APPENDIX 2

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09/11/00

Dear participant X,

Thank you very much for agreeing to participate in an 'accompanied shop'. Further to our phone conversation yesterday I thought I would send you a quick note to let you know a bit more about it.

I'm planning to do a number of accompanied shopping trips as part of my study following on from the initial interview. What I propose to do is to come clothes shopping with you and whoever you normally shop with (family, friends, partner, etc) on a day that is convenient for you. That could be on a weekend or perhaps during the week sometime. The incentive or fee would be £15. I plan to do them after Christmas/New Year, probably towards the end of January / early February but I will be in touch nearer the time. If you have any questions or problems you can reach me during the day on the phone number above. Hope you have a good Christmas !

Thanks again,

Kindest Regards,

Clare Thomson