

In-store Shopping: Physical Presence and Sensory Perception

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ABSTRACT

This paper studies the value of in-store shopping. By understanding the practice and motivations, and combining it with knowledge from relevant theory, this paper seeks to show how the act of in-store shopping is deeply influenced by senses.

General terms

Research; Theory; Design Experiment

Author Keywords

Online Shopping; In-store Shopping; Sensory Perception

INTRODUCTION

Since the arrival of ‘the World Wide Web’ in 1993, experts have constantly developed new functions and worked towards endless possibilities within online use, including online shopping. During the years the number of online shoppers has continually risen [1,2]. Yet physical in-store shopping continues to be attractive for many [9].

By describing shopping behavior in the context of a supermarket, this text aims to comprehend the value of in-store shopping, as an important element of the multi-channeled shopping possibilities that exist today. The outline of the paper is as follows: first, the methodology is described. This is followed by a discussion of how we are affected by senses in a shopping situation, and how theory supports the importance of a multi-sensorial atmosphere in a physical shopping setting. In the conclusion the paper reflects on the value of physical in-store shopping.

METHODOLOGY

This empirical study is based on findings from 3 days of field study in Bilka Tilst (Denmark’s only hypermarket) with in-store shoppers. The opening hours of Bilka Tilst are from 6am till midnight; we, Jesper Mumm Sylvest and I, planned our visits to cover most of those hours. Furthermore, the study is based on a Design Experiment containing 8 pictures of different white textiles and the same 8 textiles in physical form. Notably, the experiment was performed on different in-store shoppers.

We have produced and gathered data through a combination of observations, photography, creative writing, informal interview and a design experiment conducted with in-store shoppers [7]. This combination of methodologies was used to gain a broad and deep

understanding of the act of in-store shopping. First, the observations were used to obtain knowledge about the act of physical shopping. Creative writing was used to establish instinctive and precise knowledge of the happenings in Bilka Tilst at the specific time of the writing, in order to get a deeper knowledge of the place and the people there. Furthermore, creative writing and photography makes it possible to access the information at a later state of the study. Finally, informal interviews were conducted during the visits to Bilka as a way of understanding thoughts and feelings towards physical in-store shopping, as relevant to the design experiment.

The purpose for this study was to generate data about how people shop in a physical store in contrast to online shopping.

Although we exposed ourselves to the in-store shopping experience in Bilka, it was our objective to manage the field study as discreetly as possible, in order to achieve a realistic picture of the customer’s shopping experience.

FIELDWORK AND DESIGNEXPERIMENT

Many observations and experiences were done in Bilka during the 3 days of fieldwork, most of which dealt with physical presence and the interference with physical objects [7].

In the following paragraph, I will first describe one focus from the observations in Bilka: physical presence and sensory perception, followed by a sensorial design experiment.

A visit to Bilka

The field study took place in Bilka in Tilst, a suburb of Aarhus. Bilka was chosen because of its size and its selection of merchandise; as you would choose an online store. We entered the field with an interest solely in in-store shopping, and with no specific research question; open to whatever would appear, and make our research revolve around that. We tried to be openminded and eliminate any prejudice, since we were both familiar with the place beforehand.

When we entered Bilka in Tilst we were met by the smell of freshly baked bread from the Bakery and a bunch of big yellow signs suggesting several offers. Then we had the choice of entering the supermarket to the right or succumbing to the scent of food by going left into the Bakery and Bistro. We went right, into the huge

supermarket, where we were met by an overload of signs hanging from the ceiling trying to guide us further into the shop, down the wide aisle. These signs had different colors, aimed to fit the department they represented.



Figure 2. Bilka

Bilka has it all. The first department we encountered was women's fashion and beauty. Whilst walking around there we asked a mother, shopping clothes with her two daughters, what the purpose of their visit to Bilka was. She told that they were actually going there to buy food, but that she saw a shirt, that she just had to touch. We continued to children- and men's clothing, kitchenware, sport and a surprisingly big fishing gear department. In the end of the shop was the food department, including another bakery, a butcher and a wine department, which provided us with scents and tastings depending on the time of the visits. We continued further to the electronics department, where all hanging televisions were broadcasting the same nature documentary in different resolutions. Moving along, the interior department consisted of funny smelling animal care, toys, books and finally a small department with bicycles. The whole visit was accompanied by slow ambient music as Bon Iver and soft Beyoncé, when suddenly it stopped abruptly by a voice that introduced Bilka as Denmark's only hypermarket and reminded us that they also provided home shopping via 'Bilka-to-go'. Our initial observations made it clear how the senses were constantly evoked by these sensory inputs. The following is an example of the creative writing from one of the visits:

"You don't notice the music nearly as much as you used to. It's quashed by the sound of people talking, and the wheels on the trolleys driving on the linoleum floor. Simultaneously, the sound on the televisions ring in electronics department, and there are more tills open today – 5 to be exact, that all beep in concert..."

Sensorial design experiment

We conducted our design experiment on 10 voluntary in-store shoppers aged 24-69; all with different backgrounds. The experiment was carried out individually – one shopper at a time. During each experiment the respondent was presented 8 photos of 8 different white textiles. We asked the respondent to tell us

what came to mind when looking at one photo at a time. Afterwards the respondent was asked to do the same when presented the physical materials. This time the materials were presented all at once, to be able to gain knowledge about affection and interest, by observing what materials the respondent pays most attention to. The textiles were carefully chosen for the experiment; one 95% cotton, 5% elastane jersey knit; one 100% cotton jersey knit; one 95% polyester, 5% elastane jersey knit; one 100% polyester weave; one 100% cotton thick weave; one 100% cotton weave; one 100% acetate interlinings; one 100% polyester satin. We chose this selection of different material composition and textures, all in white, to avoid too much attention to the color, focusing more on the material itself. However some materials purposefully looked quite alike, in order to see the reactions from the participants. Most of the respondents' descriptions of the photos were very technical, such as: structure, knitted, weaved, with a back and a front, thin/thick. One respondent associated the cotton/elastane with "*plastic or a kind of metal – zinc maybe?!?*", another compared the same sample to wet paper. Yet another respondent associated the thick cotton weave with a coffee sack or a textile for car seats. It is important to have in mind that the pictures were presented on a telephone screen, therefore the technical disabilities of the specific screen might have had an influence on the answers. Yet we chose to do so, as a representation of the online shopping experience.



Figure 1. design experiment

When the physical textiles were presented to the respondents the reactions were completely different than the photos. Full of expectations one asked: "*Can I touch them?*", another started to lay them all out to get an overview of the full material selection. One respondent, Mathilde age 24, said to one of the pictures: "*this one is weird, a little special – let's say it's ugly.*" to the same physical sample she said: "*this is a fun one, pretty beautiful actually – sexy.*" For another physical sample she said: "*yes, mmh, funny*", followed by "*disgusting material*" still with excitement.

DISCUSSION OF THE RESEARCH

In the fieldwork we exposed ourselves to a physical shopping experience in Bilka. We tried to be susceptible

towards any situation that might occur, without letting possible prejudices get in the way. Our experiences in Bilka contained many theoretical associations with Helmeffalk and Hultén who investigates the importance of different sensory inputs in a shopping experience [4]. By affecting the senses in a positive manner, they show a coherence to the time you spend in the store. Furthermore, they state that the longer a stay, the more money is spent. In addition, it became clear to us, that for many people it was important to pick out the red tomato or feel the clothing before purchase [6, 8], which let us to the design experiment.

It was important to perform the experiment like an informal interview, so to get all the details. Mathilde said: “*mmh*” but used ‘disgusting’ afterwards when she expressed her intuitive reaction. This would probably have been completely different if we had asked her to answer on an online survey [10].

When only looking at the photos in the design experiment people tend to guess and associate with items, surfaces or textiles they are already familiar with. Whilst the physical samples invite to much more sensorial perceptions [4, 6, 10]. Participant Marie age 34 puts it like this: “*when having the physical material in my hands, it tells me about the qualities of the material before even seeing it*”. Every participant showed a clear enthusiasm towards the sensorial aspect in the experiment.

When online shopping is the most preferred, it is often due to convenience or because it is an easy way of comparing and evaluating items before purchase [3, 5]. Though this does not provide other aspects than visuals and sometimes sound i.e. for electronic devices. Amongst most of the participants there was a consensus about not buying clothes without having tried them. They felt a lack of information when buying clothes online, due to the very static impression of an online photo: “*...but, how does it look on a body in movement?*”. Also, information about quality and color were missing. However, sometimes the participants acknowledged the advantage of looking in-store and buying online to get the cheaper price [3].

It is important to distinguish between types of products. [3] The answers might have been different with another focus than textiles.

CONCLUSION

Shopping can be done online, conveniently, fast, with pleasure, slow, in-store or just for fun. In this paper I have presented a number of the values that can be found within in-store shopping, by observing several shoppers during their way around Bilka, by exposing myself to in-store shopping, as well as observing the participants reactions respectively to online photos and to physical textiles. We might conclude that the sensory aspect of shopping means a great deal to most people. However, online shopping has come to stay as one of multiple channels. The act of

shopping has become not only a way of obtaining a product, but a multi-sensorial, stimulating and entertaining experience.

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