

Chapter 70

Consumer–Retail Structure Interrelations as Seen in the Young Consumers’ Photographs of Retail Environments

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to understand the multidimensionality of urban consumption and the nature and the levels of consumer – retail structure interrelations. A holistic conceptual framework of urban consumption is proposed. It views the needs, wants, and desires as the motivating forces for consumer behavior, and conceptualizes the dimensions of consumption space and the forms that consumption takes within these dimensions (the platforms of consumption). Qualitative data (respondent-generated photographs and written explanations) is used to exemplify the forms of consumption within the proposed platforms.

INTRODUCTION

Urban consumption contexts, city centers and down town shopping areas are multidimensional spaces where consumer behavior can take diverse forms depending on the nature of the consumer – retail structure interrelations. From the economic point of view urban consumption contexts are, at the aggregate level, dynamic interchanges between

supply and demand. On the supply side, retail structure (e.g., location, number and variety of stores) and on the demand side, market characteristics (e.g., market size, income) affect the nature of consumption. If this view is adopted, quantitative indicators like households’ monetary spending for commodity consumption in a given geographic area could tell about the nature of consumption.

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However, many aspects of urban consumption cannot be apprehended only with quantitative terms. When shopping consumers not only use their monetary and time related resources but also their cognitive and emotional resources. Besides, consumption does not necessarily have to involve the use of money to acquire material possessions. Consumption context itself can be the primary object of consumption, an experienced space where the experiencing takes place beyond shopping and the commodity world. Such aspects of urban consumption, at the level of lifestyles, individual's experiences, concern more qualities than quantities. They arise from the interplay between consumer intrinsic motivations and extrinsic retail structural and environmental factors. The intrinsic and extrinsic factors enable and impede consumer behavior, the behavioral patterns, activities and experiences that place in urban consumption context.

The postmodern view of consumption questions and contradicts many assumptions in modern marketing and economic theories concerning for instance the nature of consumer market, consumer's role in the market, and the rationality of consumers' decision-making. Furthermore, fulfillment of needs or wants are not regarded the primary drivers for consumption. Instead, an emphasis is placed on the qualities in consumption, consumers' passions and desires, subjective and holistic experiences, and on the use of products, brands and symbols for identity construction. Processes such as globalization retailing and fragmentation of consumer demand have on their part created and facilitated market conditions for such aspects of consumer behavior to come into view (e.g., Smart & Smart, 2003). The omnipresence of global fast fashion chains for instance allows consumers across cultures to be engaged with similar lifestyles, visual and symbolic consumption and forms of self-expression. Consumers have access to global brands and store formats. They can have relationships with brands, stores, and commercial places.

Urban consumption contexts, not anymore just shopping malls, shopping centers or other managed and branded retail establishments, but increasingly also public commercial parts of city centers are purposely developed or regenerated as places to be consumed and experienced and where the boundaries between public and private consumption spaces are blurred (e.g., (Hernandez & Jones, 2005). Often shopping experiences, entertainment and leisure are emphasized. Despite this tendency, it is misleading to view urban consumption contexts, city centers in particular, merely as places where the consumption is driven by consumers' desires or their hedonic motivations. They are also places for more ordinary forms of consumption, the routine type of purchasing and buying activities that are linked to person's daily lives.

The purpose of this article is to explore and conceptualize the consumer – retail structure interrelations. The multidimensionality of urban consumption spaces and the seemingly diverging views on the motivations and drivers of consumptions calls for a holistic and integrative conceptualization of the character of urban consumption. The article has two objectives. The primary objective is to conceptually model the dimensions of consumption space and the forms that consumption takes within these dimensions (the platforms of consumption). The secondary objective is to empirically exemplify the forms of consumption within the proposed platforms. Qualitative visual research approach is adopted for the empirical analysis. The data (the respondent-generated photographs and written explanations) was collected among Finnish university students (61 respondents). The consumption context is Finnish retail structure, a modern retail setting that is dominated by large retail groups and their relatively uniform chains. The empirical aim is to inquire, first, how young consumers (as a homogeneous consumer group in Finland) are related to at different levels to the prevailing retail structure, and second, what the visual and textual

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