



Get the picture? Visual servicescapes and self-image congruity



Michael Breazeale ^{a,*}, Nicole Ponder ^{b,1}

^a Marketing, School of Business, Indiana University Southeast, 4201 Grant Line Road HH-214, New Albany, IN 47150, United States

^b Marketing, College of Business, Mississippi State University, Box 9582, Mississippi State, MS 39762, United States

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ABSTRACT

Examination of consumers' relationships with brands is available in depth only for the last decade. As brand relationship theory evolves from the early stages, researchers across disciplines have examined multiple theoretical traditions for guidance. To explore the reasons that consumers form relationships with some retailers, the authors borrow a method from the field of anthropology – the photo-elicitation technique. This method allows researchers to explore the deeply-held emotional responses that consumers have to retail servicescapes and provides insight regarding the specific factors that encourage the formation of lucrative relationships between consumer and retailer. The study finds and names five categories of relationships that differ on perceived self-image congruity and involvement: Perfect Matches, Mismatches, Fair-Weather Friends, Best Friends, and Acquaintances. A better understanding of these relationships may benefit both researchers and practitioners.

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1. Introduction

On the website for catalog retailer, The J. Peterman Company, founder John Peterman writes, “People want things that are hard-to-find. Things that have resonance, but a factual romance about them.” This concept is the basis for his successful retail operation and the inspiration for a popular recurring character on the television sitcom *Seinfeld*. As brands are positioned more on the basis of intangible attributes and benefits that exceed actual performance, a growing realization exists that the creation of a strong retailer personality and rich in-store experiences play a vital role in building retailer brand equity (Ailawadi & Keller, 2004).

Self-image congruence (SIC) is one mechanism through which retailer personality acts on consumer attitudes. “SIC” includes cognitive and affective assessments that a focal brand possesses qualities consistent with the consumer's own self-image (Sirgy, 1982). Marketing research has examined the role of SIC in consumer evaluations of malls (Chebat, El Hedli, & Sirgy, 2009; Chebat, Sirgy, & St James, 2006), services (Yim, Chan, & Hung, 2007), celebrity endorsements (Marshall, Na, State, & Deuskar, 2008), and brand sponsorships (Sirgy, Lee, Johar, & Tidwell, 2008). Empirical evidence suggests that SIC impacts consumer attitudes, preferences, and purchase intentions toward products and brands (e.g., Aaker, 1999; Sirgy, 1985; Yim et al., 2007).

Products consumed conspicuously or visibly versus inconspicuous and invisible products are more likely to invoke consumer personality

associations such as SIC (Sirgy, 1982). While consumers consume many products and services publicly, the bricks-and-mortar retailer may be the most visibly-consumed product of all. For other conspicuously consumed products, research focuses on the importance of reference groups in the formation of consumer-brand connections (e.g., Moore & Homer, 2008; Swaminathan, Page, & Gurhan-Canli, 2007; White & Dahl, 2007). No uncovered research, however, examines the role of the retail servicescape in creating personality associations for consumers. As a factor more easily manipulated by the retailer than a consumer's reference groups, this subject is worthy of research.

Therefore, the purpose of this research is to combine qualitative techniques (the photo elicitation method and content analysis) and quantitative methods (cluster analysis) to explore the ability of the visual retail servicescape (VRS) to help retailers form relationships with consumers. The study addresses the following specific research questions. (1) What are consumers' reactions to the VRS of a particular retailer? (2) How do consumers connect the retailer's VRS with their own self-concept? (3) What level of involvement with the retailer do consumers exhibit, based on the retailer's VRS? Based on answers to these questions, the authors discover five categories of consumer relationships with retailers: Perfect Matches, Mismatches, Fair-Weather Friends, Best Friends, and Acquaintances.

2. Literature review

2.1. Retail personality

Functional qualities and psychological attributes combine to suggest a retailer's personality, defining the store in the customer's

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 812 941 2523; fax: +1 812 941 2672.

E-mail addresses: mbreazea@ius.edu (M. Breazeale), nponder@cobilan.msstate.edu (N. Ponder).

¹ Tel.: +1 662 325 1998; fax: +1 662 325 7012.

mind. Intangible traits of retailer personality that include store layout and display, styling, and service facilities play a vital role in attracting customers to a particular retailer (Rich & Portis, 1964). This perceived personality then helps the consumer to form relationships with the brands whose personalities the consumer perceives as similar to his own (Aaker, 1997). The effects of such relationships include increased levels of consumer trust and loyalty (Fournier, 1998). But how does the perceived retail personality impact consumer decision making?

2.2. Atmospheric impact

Interior designers say that good design tells a story (Yanow, 1995). Whether the subdued drama of an elegant restaurant or the exotic romance of a carefully designed hotel room, the design should speak to the people who share the space. This idea is at the core of the retailing phenomenon called atmospherics (Kotler, 1973). An effective retail atmosphere allows for maximum “projection” (Kotler, 1973, p. 61) by a multitude of patrons, allowing consumers to interpret a meaning from the combined atmospheric cues in the environment. As Kotler (1973) predicts, atmosphere has become the primary product of many retail establishments and that atmosphere is a chief form of competition for retailers of similar product classes.

Emotional responses to environmental stimuli impact the length of time and the amount of money consumers spend in an environment (Donovan & Rossiter, 1982; Greenland & McGoldrick, 1996; Turley & Bolton, 1999; Turley & Chebat, 2002). Emotions also impact perceptions of time/effort and psychic costs (Baker, Parasuraman, Grewal, & Voss, 2002) and directly influence the amount of unplanned purchases (Kent, 2003). Indeed, Baker et al. (2002) find that consumers' perceptions of design cues contribute more to favorable retailer attitudes than either social cues (employee attitudes and actions) or merchandise cues (quality and value).

While multiple elements combine to create retail atmosphere (e.g., sounds, scents, crowding, haptic sensations), the visual element is the most diagnostic for consumers because visual stimuli are immediately accessible (e.g., Bellizzi, Crowley, & Hasty, 1983; Lurie & Mason, 2007). The human mind can only process a given amount of complex stimuli and often attempts to oversimplify circumstances and surroundings, abstracting only the meanings that appear most salient. Typically, consumers see a servicescape before they have the opportunity to process other pertinent cues, and as a result, form their opinion based on that visual impression. Thus VRS has important ramifications for retailers and their profitability.

3. Method

The focus of this study is ten national retailers (see Table 1), based on their advertising expenditures (e.g., Andrews & Boyle, 2008; Johnson, 2007), inclusion in popular press listings of top U.S. retailers, and references to the retailer in prior academic retailing literature. These retailers expend resources to attract customers by creating customer-pleasing store environments. Similarity in resources, focus on creating a unique environment, and national presence facilitate inclusion of these retailers in a grounded theory approach (Warden, Huang, Liu, & Wu, 2008).

Table 1
Retailers in the study.

Bass Pro Shop	Kohl's
Bath and Body Works	Lowe's
Best Buy	Starbucks
Fresh Market	Target
Hollister Co.	Wal-Mart

3.1. Photo elicitation

Surveys may tap the consumer's conscious thought processes, but are somewhat less effective at capturing affective processes (Morse, 2002; Zaltman & Coulter, 1995). Consumers often experience difficulty verbalizing their responses even immediately after leaving the servicescape in question (Donovan & Rossiter, 1982). The presence of other shoppers or sales personnel can also cloud attempts to uncover consumers' feelings while actually in the servicescape (Eroglu & Machleit, 1990; Michon, Chebat, & Turley, 2005). A method utilized by environmental psychologists to overcome such difficulties is the photo-elicitation technique (PET), which employs photographs to guide interviews or surveys.

The value of PET relates to the fact that visual imagery reaches a deeper level of human consciousness than words alone (Harper, 2002). Inclusion of images tends to evoke more emotional responses. A second benefit of PET is longer, more comprehensive responses than questions asked without visual prompts (Collier, 1957). Finally, PET can also increase the validity and reliability of a study by ensuring that all respondents have a common point of reference (Becker, 1975; Collier, 1987; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The technique is useful for consumer behavior research (e.g. Sherry, 1990; Wallendorf & Arnould, 1988; Westbrook & Black, 1985), and specifically for the study of consumer responses to servicescapes (e.g. Rosenbaum, 2005; Venkatraman & Nelson, 2008).

3.2. Sample

A team of forty-eight trained recruiters who were senior undergraduates in a personal selling course undertook a final course project of recruiting ten participants for this study. All recruiters participated in a three-hour training session stressing the use of their selling skills in qualifying participants and obtaining their commitment to thoughtfully complete the online instrument. Each recruiter followed up with their participants to ensure that they had completed the survey. After the recruiters returned the lists of participants, a randomly selected 10% of respondents received confirmation e-mails to ensure no discrepancies. Four hundred eighty-eight consumers participated in the survey. After removal of incomplete responses, 446 usable responses remained. The resulting sample was 55% female with an average age of 34.4 years (the youngest respondent was 18 and the oldest was 83).

3.3. Instrument

This research employs PET to explore consumers' attitudes toward the VRS. The primary researcher took high-quality digital photographs of the interiors of the ten retailers rather than securing photographs from the retailers themselves to obtain realistic images of average locations. Three judges familiar with the retailers examined the photographs to determine their representativeness and consistency of quality. To avoid potential bias created by recognizable brand names, photo manipulation software removed all retailer logos and pricing information. The researchers also took special care to avoid the inclusion of consumers in the images to negate any potential bias to respondents. See Fig. 1 for a sample photo block.

Each recruited participant completed an online survey regarding only one of the retailers and answered open-ended questions regarding their opinions of that retailer only. Each recruiter distributed ten website addresses, one for each of ten identical surveys designed to elicit responses regarding photographs of only one of the ten retailers. The recruiter randomly selected from that group the retailer website given to the participant. Participants had no knowledge of the name of the retailer they would be evaluating. A random drawing for a \$100 Amazon gift certificate given to one participant provided incentive to provide thoughtful responses.



Fig. 1. Sample retailer photo block.

A block of five photos of the retailer remained on the screen during the entire survey. Respondents described the impression that the retailer in the photos was trying to convey, the typical customer they would expect to see shopping in the store, and how they would feel if they were shopping in the store. As a manipulation check to ensure that previously-held attitudes were not a significant factor, respondents were asked to identify the retailer in the photos if they recognized the retailer. Additionally, respondents provided the name of their favorite place to shop and described the way they feel when they shop in that store.

An index created for this study asked respondents to indicate in which of forty-seven retailers they have previously shopped. The resulting RetailQ score, representing the percentage of selected retailers, is an indicator of how familiar the consumer is with various retailers. Quantitative items included in the survey are used to measure SIC, attitude toward the VRS, involvement, and attitude toward the retailer. These items are available from the authors.

Before the completion of any analysis, the researchers compared the mean quantitative responses of respondents who reported that they recognized the retailer in the photos (70.2% of the usable sample) with the mean responses of the respondents who did not recognize the retailer. The respondents who did not recognize the retailer had only the servicescape photos upon which to base their responses. No significant differences existed at the 0.01 level of significance in any of the indicators other than that for RetailQ ($p=0.05$). Because this indicator is a measure of a consumer's familiarity with a variety of retailers, a significant difference between the two groups is appropriate. The lack of significant differences in the two sets of scores for the other indicators provides evidence that the responses were indeed based upon the VRS.

Consistent with grounded theory, data analysis employed an iterative process through a three-stage constant comparison process (Strauss & Corbin, 1988). During the first stage, open coding identified categories of responses forming initial concepts. In the second stage,

axial coding integrated those categories across the responses into central categories.

Finally, in the third stage, selective coding reduced the central categories into emergent themes. Additionally, the researchers explored connections between the relationships among the categories and themes. Three experienced researchers independently coded the responses producing 88% agreement upon initial inspection; all discrepancies were resolved via a face-to-face meeting. A fourth coder then studied the results of these coding sessions for verification.

4. Findings

An interesting trend emerging during the open coding phase was the propensity of respondents to describe their reactions to the retailers much as they would describe relationships with people (e.g., "This store would make me feel like I'm not really that important. I don't think my purchase would matter at all," and "You can tell this retailer goes out its way to make sure you feel comfortable when you're there. They would treat you like company!"). This finding is consistent with research on brand relationships (e.g., Aaker, 1999; Fournier, 1998) that indicates consumers form relationships with brands that they perceive to possess an image similar to their own self-image. Unique, however, is the suggestion that such relationships can be formed based on the VRS.

During axial coding, five broad categories of relationship types emerged from the data: Perfect Matches, Mismatches, Fair-Weather Friends, Best Friends, and Acquaintances. Below is a description of each relationship along with emergent themes uncovered during the selective coding phase.

4.1. Perfect Matches

Perfect Matches report a high degree of similarity between themselves and the retailer. Describing the type of shopping experience

they would expect, they use positive superlatives such as “greatest” and “best.” Members of this group rate the store environment the most positively and describe the most positive attitude toward the retailer. Representing over 11% of the sample, Perfect Matches use words such as “inviting” and “welcoming” to describe the retailers that they report to “love.”

A consistent theme emerging from this group is the belief that the retailer is trying to earn their patronage or to make their shopping experience more positive. While this goal is stated by every retailer in the study, Perfect Matches represent the only group that seems to consistently recognize the effort:

I think they're trying to say, “We care about what the customer thinks about our store. We take great pride in the display, organization, and cleanliness of our store. We want it to be comfortable, attractive, and inviting.” I would feel comfortable and welcome. (44 yo married female/Fresh Market)

More often than any other group, Perfect Matches specifically discuss the impact of the VRS:

I love the spa-like feel I get from this store. It looks clean and sleek and modern but traditional at the same time. I think the atmosphere is all about the customer seeing the products in a pleasing, comfortable setting. I bet I could find what I wanted easily. They would have stuff I want, but there would also be lots of things I could find there that I didn't even know I wanted! (28 yo partnered male/Bath and Body Works)

Their enthusiasm for the VRS transfers to other customers they expect to see in-store. Comments highlight the importance of aspirational self-concept in formation of SIC. Perfect Matches take pride in being the kind of customer that would shop with these retailers:

People who shop here would take care of themselves. They're concerned with their outward appearance and the choices of food they consume. They would like nice things but still be down-to-earth. I would feel special and excited walking into a store like this. I love the atmosphere! (25 yo single female/Fresh Market)

This respondent encapsulates the attitude of Perfect Matches:

It looks like this store is trying to send a message that they have everything like some of the other BIG retailers but they care enough about their customers to present it in a unique way. I would expect to see people like me shopping there — people who appreciate value but want something a little more unique than you could find somewhere else. It would make me happy to shop there. It seems like it would be easy to move around and there would be a lot to see. (36 yo married male/Target)

The retailer who can achieve the Perfect Match status with consumers is in an enviable position. For many of these respondents, just entering the store makes them feel good. They like the merchandise even more because of the setting. They think more highly of themselves just for being in the store. They also are extremely willing to discuss their affection.

4.2. Mismatches

Mismatches, slightly more than 10% of the sample, exhibit consistently negative attitudes toward the retailer. Their reaction to the VRS is the most unfavorable and in line with their overall attitude toward the retailer and that retailer's customers. In direct opposition to the “welcoming” feeling that Perfect Matches experience with the retailer, Mismatches often express feeling “overwhelmed” or

“annoyed.” A common thread is their belief that the retailer is trying to be something *more* than the store actually delivers, a sentiment that translates to the store's typical customers. Contrary to the Perfect Matches' aspirational groups that patronize the retailers, Mismatches tend to expect “posers” and “nerds” to roam these stores' aisles. Many proclaim emphatically, “I would not shop here!”

Consistent with the animosity they feel for retailers whom they perceive as trying too hard without actually proving themselves, Mismatches group the store and expected patrons together:

I think you'd see upper-middle-class suburbanites with little imagination and a desire to 'look the part.' I would feel bored, irritated, and sheep-like if I were in this store. (29 yo single female/Kohl's)

For some Mismatches, their dislike of the retailer stems from what they perceive to be an inhospitable vibe they get from the VRS:

It's so bland in there. I don't think I would feel warm or like they want my business. (37 yo married male/Wal-Mart)

Lack of SIC drives the complaints of some Mismatches:

This looks like more of a hangout than a retail store. You'd probably see lots of teeny boppers that want to fit in and willing to pay \$100 for a pair of jeans. I would feel completely out-of-place. (83 yo married male/Hollister Co.)

This respondent typifies the total lack of appeal that Mismatches feel for these retailers:

In my opinion the retailer is trying to convey a sense of nonconformist originality that still fits into a mainstream market. I would feel completely alienated and out-of-place. I would never venture into such a dark, uninviting store. The props and the clothes themselves look like they would be priced at a premium and I much prefer a basic no-frills store. (21 yo single male/Hollister Co.)

Mismatches present a challenge to retailers. They possess very strong feelings about the retailer, the VRS, and the retailer's patrons, but their negativity is in response to an unappealing servicescape. They are the type of consumers who would merely choose not to return rather than become actively antagonistic brand adversaries. Attempts to manipulate the VRS and lure them back may only result in a more strongly held negative opinion and more active dislike. In the case of this group, perhaps retailers should simply let sleeping Mismatches lie.

4.3. Fair-Weather Friends

The group called Fair-Weather Friends comprises more than 40% of the sample. They describe both positive and negative impressions of the retailer and the retailer's customers. What sets them apart from the two previous groups is the strength of the words they use to describe their opinions. Unlike the love of the Perfect Matches, Fair-Weather Friends tend to use words like “comfortable” or “at ease” to describe the way they would feel in the servicescape. Regarding typical customers, the comments of Fair-Weather Friends again range from positive (“stylish” and “hip”) to negative (“know-it-all,” and “think they're trend-setters”).

A distinguishing characteristic of Fair-Weather Friends is that their primary focus is practicality. Their moderate enthusiasm is perhaps a result of the perceived benefits they could receive from the retailer. Regardless of the retailer they are describing, they use phrases such as “all in one place” or “easy to shop.” Of Target one respondent says,

This store looks very appealing. It looks 'busy' to a small degree, but the displays look inviting — like I wouldn't have a problem

interacting with them. I wouldn't mind spending time in here at all. (49 yo married male).

The VRS is the primary draw for several members of this group:

I wouldn't stay in here very long because I have certain key items like these products that come from another store and I don't plan to change. It does have a nice atmosphere, though, and I would enjoy the experience enough that I would probably buy something. (27 yo single female/Bath and Body Works)

This group commonly enjoys the anticipated shopping experience enough that they would consider shopping in the store even though they have no need for the products offered:

The clothes they carry really aren't my style, but I really like the lighting and the fans, so I would feel comfortable looking around to see if I might find something I could wear on the weekends. (54 yo married female/Hollister Co.)

Fair-Weather Friends seem to be a valuable resource for retailers. They feel positively enough about the VRS that they are willing to overcome potentially negative perceptions of other customers. They consider shopping in that store even when they do not have a need for the merchandise they carry. They also appreciate the practical benefits the retailer has to offer.

4.4. Best Friends

Best Friends comprise 15% of the sample. They exhibit stronger positive attitudes toward the servicescape and for the retailer overall than Fair-Weather Friends. Best Friends often make comparisons to other retailers, implying that they tend to shop around. Describing Target, one Best Friend explains, "It's so much nicer than a Wal-Mart!" They describe some of the same practical issues as Fair-Weather Friends, using words such as "reliable," "organized," and "quality," while displaying some of the enthusiasm of Perfect Matches, using words such as "exciting," "cool," and "amazing." More than any of the other groups, they tend to describe the typical patrons of the retailers as being of "a wide variety" and "all types," demonstrating the broad appeal that they believe the servicescapes deliver. They also express an enjoyment of the retailer based on the way that the VRS makes them feel:

I would feel at home in this store. It's welcoming and inviting and I would feel trendy and hip if I shopped here. (22 yo single female/Bath and Body Works)

Describing the VRS, Best Friends are the only ones to use the word, "hopeful":

I feel hopeful when I look at this store. It makes me think of organizing and cleaning my house and that makes me happy. (48 yo married female/Lowe's)

I would feel hopeful because I know they would have things that I would like to use. It looks like they would enjoy having me shopping there and I could shop unhurried and not pressured. (33 yo married female/Bath and Body Works)

The following respondent summarizes the practical enthusiasm of Best Friends:

The design of this store is very welcoming. From the minute you would walk in the door, you would be intrigued. They're really successful at drawing the customer's eye toward the products. I

think they want you to feel at home. I would expect to get a lot for my money here and I would feel good knowing they were a reliable company. (50 yo married male/Best Buy)

Best Friends, as the name implies, are a valuable asset to the retailer. They focus on the practical benefits they can attain and still manage to be excited by the extra touches that set the retailer apart.

4.5. Acquaintances

Acquaintances comprise nearly 21% of the sample and display somewhat disinterested opinions of the servicescapes and retailers they examine. They are not as negative as Mismatches, but lack even the moderate enthusiasm of Fair-Weather Friends. Similar to Best Friends, they reference other retailers, indicating they have experience with multiple retailers.

Perhaps a result of their lack of interest in the VRS, Acquaintances seem to offer only minimal descriptions of the typical consumer they would expect to find in the retailers. Positive responses are rarely more enthusiastic than "calm" or "cautious," while negative responses are also fairly mild, using words such as "bored" or "stifled." The focus of their comments also tends to be fairly moderate. Acquaintances are the only respondents who report feeling nothing from the VRS:

This place looks nice, but it doesn't make me 'feel' anything. As soon as I walk in, I would be ready to leave. (26 yo married female/Bath and Body Works)

Similarly, other Acquaintances report being bored or getting a "cold" feeling from the retailer:

This retailer looks like they're trying to say that they have everything you could need, but it's just cold and uninteresting. (53 yo married male/Kohl's)

An interesting theme for this group that does not appear in the comments of any other group is overstimulation. Only Acquaintances discuss feeling particularly innervated:

There is too much going on in there, and it would make me feel anxious to get out of there. (27 yo married female/Bass Pro Shop)

The middle-of-the road attitude of the Acquaintances would not deter many of them from shopping with the retailers, but their patronage would be conditional and brief:

"It's too big and would be hard for me to find things. It would be OK to go and look around but I wouldn't want to spend much time in there. I bet it gets really crowded around holiday time. Yuck!!! (39 yo married female/Bass Pro Shop)

Acquaintances do not seem to be the valuable retailer asset that Perfect Matches and Best Friends are, but their cautious reactions to the VRS suggest that they do not hold any animosity. Modifications to the servicescape could win them over and, barring that, they still express willingness to patronize the retailers if they have a need for the products they carry.

5. Quantitative verification

The tenets of methodological pluralism dictate that quantitative analysis should follow any qualitative research technique. To verify that respondents were correctly categorized, the researchers classified respondents into groups based upon their responses to the SIC scale and their RetailQ, two indicators that appeared to vary fairly consistently across the themes. Scores on these items were used in a

multi-step cluster analysis (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2006) using Ward's method.

A five-cluster solution emerged based on an examination of the changes (scree plots) in the root-mean-square standard deviation (RMSSTD), semi-partial R^2 (SPR), R^2 (RS), and the distance between clusters for a two, three, four, five, and six cluster solution (Sharma, 1996). Then, a K-means cluster procedure produced the final five clusters using the initial seeds provided by the hierarchical analysis. Table 2 presents the results of the cluster analysis and means for each response group.

The clusters formed by the quantitative analysis were remarkably consistent with the qualitative assessments of the researchers, achieving greater than 90% agreement. An important finding that surfaced in the quantitative analysis is that respondents' involvement significantly and consistently varied with the clusters. More positive attitudes toward the VRS coincide with higher levels of involvement, and vice versa. Cluster interpretations are below.

Perfect Matches (n = 146, 33% of the sample) These consumers exhibit the highest SIC and an average RetailQ. They represent the highest scores regarding their attitude toward the VRS, overall attitude toward the retailer, and involvement.

Mismatches (n = 56, 13% of the sample) Nearly the exact opposites of the prior group, these consumers demonstrate the lowest SIC and an average RetailQ. They score the lowest on their attitude toward the VRS, overall attitude toward the retailer, and involvement.

Fair-Weather Friends (n = 107, 24% of the sample) These middle-of-the-road consumers represent average SIC scores but below average RetailQ. Their scores for attitude toward the VRS, overall attitude toward the retailer, and involvement are very near the mean of the entire sample.

Best Friends (n = 44, 10% of the sample) These consumers exhibit above average SIC and the highest RetailQ of all the respondents. They also score above average on the measures of attitude toward the VRS, overall attitude toward the retailer, and involvement.

Acquaintances (n = 93, 20% of the sample) These consumers demonstrate below-average SIC but above-average RetailQ. Their scores for attitude toward the VRS, overall attitude toward the retailer, and involvement fall below the mean of the entire sample.

The high level of agreement between the qualitative and quantitative analyses provides clear evidence that consumers' evaluations of a retailer's VRS have a positive relationship with their feelings of SIC and involvement with that retailer.

6. Discussion

This research establishes that the VRS has an impact not only on consumers' attitudes toward retailers but also on the involvement that

those consumers experience when immersed in the servicescape. The five groups they comprise, Perfect Matches, Mismatches, Fair-Weather Friends, Best Friends, and Acquaintances, are distinctly different from one another and provide a useful tool for the examination of qualities consumers consider when forming retailer evaluations.

The finding that no significant difference exists in the responses of those who recognize the stores in the photos and those who do not (other than RetailQ), confirms that the respondents do indeed base their evaluations upon the VRS. While other elements combine to form a holistic assessment of the servicescape, this study confirms the primary importance of visual stimuli (Harper, 2002). Quantitative analysis of the survey responses provided by the respondents and qualitative analysis of their comments combine to provide evidence that a retailer's VRS impacts consumers' SIC with that retailer as well as their involvement levels.

Respondents' impressions of the VRS have obvious associations with their sense of SIC and their attitudes toward the retailer and the other patrons. Multiple respondents report feeling that the retailer is just like them. Consumers who think of themselves as "outdoorsy" and "rugged" tend to enjoy Bass Pro Shop when they perceive that the retailer exhibits the same personality. Other respondents who perceive the same retailer as being more like people who "want to seem outdoorsy but really just like the stuff" tend to resent Bass Pro Shop as a "poser."

Similarly, the same descriptors that some respondents use when describing Hollister Co. – words such as "trendy" and "young" only seem to be positively applied when the respondent perceives himself to represent those same qualities. Those respondents who describe the same retailer with the same words, yet who think of themselves as "more mature than that," tend to be negative in their assessments of the retailer overall. The positive association that SIC has with consumer assessments of the retailers could explain why the construct has demonstrated linkage in previous research to consumer attitudes, preferences, and purchase intentions. This research is unique, however, in linking the VRS to those associations through SIC.

The finding that involvement increases along with SIC in response to the VRS is especially interesting in light of recent calls for research on the drivers of involvement in retail settings (e.g., Liang & Wang, 2008; Puccinelli et al., 2009). This information will be useful to researchers studying involvement and to practitioners eager to reap the benefits of more involved consumers. Respondents who report positive assessments of the VRS also often report enhanced interest in the products the retailer carries.

Many fans of the VRS report that they would "go to the store just to see what I could find," or comment, "I know I could find things in there that interest me – it's so cool." The implication is that consumers who are not necessarily involved in a product category may still experience product involvement as a result of placement in a pleasing servicescape. For example, anyone who has ever bought a set of mouse ears at the self-proclaimed happiest place on earth would experience difficulty explaining why they paid a premium for something that would not normally be on their shopping lists.

Table 2
Results of the nonhierarchical cluster analysis and cluster means.

Variable	Cluster 1 Perfect Matches n = 146 32.74%	Cluster 2 Mismatches n = 56 12.56%	Cluster 3 Fair-Weather Friends n = 107 23.98%	Cluster 4 Best Friends n = 44 9.87%	Cluster 5 Acquaintances n = 93 20.85%
Self-image congruity	4.6	1.3	3.0	3.6	2.2
RetailQ (out of 100)	49.0	46.4	41.1	70.8	63.7
Attitude toward the VRS	4.6	3.3	3.9	4.3	3.7
Attitude toward the retailer	4.7	2.5	3.8	4.3	3.5
Involvement	5.8	2.7	4.5	5.3	4.1
Average age	33.0 years old	36.3 years old	35.7 years old	33.6 years old	31.7 years old
Gender	62.5% Female	56.8% Male	57.6% Female	79.6% Female	51.4% Female

All items significant at the 0.000 level.

7. Implications for retailers

The categories described in this study can provide a useful tool for both academics and retailers who wish to better understand their customers, potentially allowing them to expand the scope of their target market. Understanding each of these relationship types allows for the possibility of winning over the less-than-enthusiastic customer.

Retailers should take note of the finding that involvement increases along with SIC toward the visual servicescape. The comments of many of the Perfect Matches mention going to the retailer just to see what they have. This is very different from the concept of product involvement driving retailer selection that has been suggested by earlier research (e.g., Bronnenberg & Mela, 2004; Dash, Schiffman, & Berenson, 1977). The finding highlights the importance of the VRS not only as a means of communicating the retailer's personality but also in creating a more positive assessment of its merchandise. Prior research questions the justification for making substantial investments in creating a more atmospheric servicescape through design execution and merchandising (Babin & Darden, 1996). If involvement does increase because of the product's placement within a pleasing servicescape, then a more substantial investment in the design elements that encourage involvement would be much easier to justify.

Big box retailers should also take note of the willingness of consumers to quickly determine the personality of the retailer based on the VRS. Stores that carry multiple lines of merchandise for different types of consumers might be best served by ensuring that their entryways, the consumers' first visual contact with the store, exhibit as much general appeal as possible. Rather than allowing all customers to enter directly into a men's department or a women's makeup department, for example, store entries should display broad appeal that conveys the retailers overall personality to all of the demographic groups that might actually enjoy the individual departments once inside.

Specialty retailers and small, local retailers should be pleased with the results indicating that consumers tend to utilize such basic visual cues as color or neat displays to form impressions of SIC. The implication is that any size retailer with even limited budgets can create a relatable personality that speaks to consumers.

Another important outcome of this research lies in the comments of the respondents. Nothing that they mention as important to them in forming their opinions is unique to the abilities of large national retailers. Even single-location retailers have the resources to create environments that are visually pleasing. Some respondents report strong emotional bonds with just such retailers, hinting that those may be even easier to create at the more personal local level. Indeed, many of the respondents, when asked about their favorite place to shop, describe "a small book store in my home town" or "an independent video store where I take my family." Often these same respondents use emotional terms to explain their feelings – words such as "love," "happy," and "sweet." One respondent, a perfect example of SIC, comments that her favorite local grocery store "reminds me of who I really am" (54 yo female).

Future research should examine the strength of the associations between attitude toward the VRS, SIC, and involvement. More in-depth research with those consumers who report extreme emotional reactions to retailers to determine what factors influence their feelings and how those feelings translate to behaviors would also be useful. Given the prevalence of reported emotional responses to the VRS, a scale that measures atmospheric affect would also be a worthwhile undertaking. One such scale exists (Turley & Bolton, 1999) but does not capture the dimensions suggested by the current research.

8. Limitations

As with all empirical research, certain limitations apply to this study. First, the sample does not necessarily represent a cross-section

of U.S. consumers, a factor which limits the generalizability of the study. While the sample is relatively diverse demographically, there is no substitute for a truly random sample.

Another limitation lies in the survey instrument itself. Exploratory research such as this study is often conducted with face-to-face interviews to allow the researcher to probe for more information. In this case, the online survey allowed for a much larger sample size than that allowed by face-to-face interviewing. The benefit of the larger sample was deemed to offset the value of the potential depth of personal interviews. Also, this study was limited to only retail servicescapes. The same principles that apply to consumer SIC with a retailer should apply to other types of servicescapes as well. The factors that impact consumers' reactions to other servicescapes such as professional offices, restaurants, travel terminals, movie theaters, and hotels are equally important.

The mosaic of thoughts and feelings that form the basis of consumer behavior is often complex and elusive to researchers. The interplay of the cognitive and affective is the very thing that makes such research fascinating and rarely boring. While no single study can explain all the inner workings of the consumer's brain, this one attempts to establish a basis for future research that will illuminate the relationships that consumers experience with the retailers in their lives.

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