

Pictures are Worth a Thousand Words: Utilizing Photographic Narrative Inquiry to Identify Retail Atmospheric

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Purpose of Study: In the past, studies of retail environments have explored number of atmospheric stimuli to influence consumer shopping behavior. One of the major challenges for retail educators is getting students to differentiate the diverse functions of retail atmospheric. Our teaching innovation focuses on increasing student engagement and understanding retail atmospheric through photographic narrative inquiry. Thus, we propose the *Photographic Narrative Inquiry Retail Atmospheric* (PNIRA) exercise. This is a field-based exercise that requires students to visit a retail store, take notes, pictures and synthesize information into a short essay, using the concepts/theories related to the course as a way to understand the components of retail atmospheric.

Method/Design and Sample: Seventy-one upper year undergraduate marketing concentration majors were given a survey to evaluate the *PNIRA* exercise.

Results: The students seemed to have a favorable impression towards the exercise. Students reported that the retail atmospheric exercise achieved its learning objectives, as well as enhanced their learning experience, increased their creative input, bettered their knowledge of marketing principles, increased their interest in the topic, and increased their enthusiasm for the course.

Value to Marketing Educators: The paper benefits marketing educators by providing an experiential exercise that helps students understand the concept of retail atmospheric. The technique (photographic narrative inquiry) can be applied to other courses or formats (i.e., online). The *PNIRA* exercise also meets the learning objectives (5 components of retail atmospheric) via experiential learning. Assessment strategies and limitations are also discussed.

Keywords: Photographic Narrative Inquiry, Retail Atmospheric, Experiential Learning

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Retailers have long focused on influencing consumer decisions in subtle ways (Ailawadi & Keller, 2004). Marketing managers maneuver retail ambience and service offerings to influence consumers' perception of the store, the money they spend, and the time they occupy in the store (Baker et al., 2002). In literature, retail atmospheric is composed of five atmospheric categories: external variables (e.g., entrances, parking, building architecture), general interior variables (e.g., flooring, sounds, temperature, scent), layout and design variables (e.g., floor space allocation, traffic flow, product groupings), display variables (e.g., racks and cases, product displays, decorations), and human variables (e.g., crowding, customer characteristics, employee characteristics) (Turley & Milliman, 2000). However, one major challenge for retail educators is getting students to differentiate the diverse functions of retail atmospheric.

Here, we propose a field-based exercise (*Photographic Narrative Inquiry Retail Atmospheric exercise - PNIRA exercise*) that requires students to

visit a retail store, take field notes and pictures (along with interviewing customers/managers/employees), and synthesize what they have gathered into a short essay using the concepts/theories related to the course. Further, we establish photographic narrative inquiry through experiential learning as an effective tool to teach students about retail atmospheric. Narrative inquiry is the study of the ways humans experience their surrounding environment (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). While there are several methods of conducting narrative inquiry (e.g., engaging with subjects, autobiographical notes), we propose using photographs as a way to understand people, places, and events. That is, this exercise aims to employ photographic narrative inquiry as a way to understand retail atmospheric components. Photographs are able to provide a different way to understand and interpret the context (Pinney, 1992). For example, students might capture an important detail in a photograph that they dismissed while visiting the store (e.g., differing heights of displays and tables, lighting fixtures). Further, we utilize this technique via experiential

learning. Experiential learning encourages students to combine their direct experience with reflections of that particular experience to generate knowledge (Kolb, 1984). Together, we employ these techniques to enhance students' knowledge and their learning experience about retail atmospherics. We elaborate on these techniques below.

PHOTOGRAPHIC NARRATIVE INQUIRY

The study of narrative inquiry is to capture how humans experience the world (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). One form of narrative inquiry is how people organize events and objects as a meaningful whole (Chase, 2005). Thus, narrative inquiry is a useful tool for students to capture the various components of retail atmospherics and connect these elements to construct a representation that best captures the retail store as a whole. Moreover, in narrative inquiry, it is important to understand people, places, and events as a process (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007). That is, not only is it important to observe the different components of retail atmospherics, it is important for students to also capture how these retail atmospheric elements influence consumption behavior.

To encourage such discourse, we recommend students to take photographs of retail stores (both inside and outside). Not only do photographs trigger stories and identification markers, it also has the potential to trigger social contexts, symbolisms, and feelings (i.e., emotions) (Barthes, 1981; Harrison, 2002). Photographs provide visual clues that can elicit interpretations and critical analysis from the viewer (Emmison & Smith, 2000; Edwards, 2012). More importantly, it can be used to augment one's narrative inquiry. By taking photographs and analyzing them, students can uncover how the five retail atmospheric components influence consumer behavior. To facilitate this process, we use experiential learning techniques.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Experiential learning is a technique that stimulates interaction among students and the retail environment. In this school of thought, learning is best conceived as a process (Kolb, 1984). That is, the primary focus of experiential learning is to engage students in a process that yields concrete learning outcomes (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Based on literature, there are four components essential to experiential learning (Kolb, 1984; MacNab, 2012):

- 1) *Students are engaged in a relevant experience* – i.e., students visit a retail store and take photographs of its surroundings.
- 2) *Students reflect on their experience* – i.e., students take field notes of their observations and perform interviews to help synthesize and reflect on the information.
- 3) *Students use analytical skills to frame the experience* – i.e., students utilize theories and concepts that they have learned from the lecture (i.e., make sense of the information). Students use

photographic narrative inquiry to bridge theories with the retail context.

4) *Students apply lessons from their experience to other contexts and future actions* – i.e., students use their newfound knowledge to complete a summary report.

Next, we outline the instructional details for the *PNIRA* exercise. We also discuss its flexibility and its applicability to other courses. We also gathered data on students' evaluation of the activity and subsequently conclude with benefits and limitations associated with this exercise.

TEACHING INNOVATION: THE PNIRA EXERCISE

Instructions

Prior to the days leading up to the activity, the course instructor should have covered lecture materials related to the topic of retail atmospherics. It is important that the instructor covers the five key atmospheric categories (external, general interior, layout, displays, and human variables) (see Appendix A for details). This is necessary as the evaluation of the exercise will largely depend on how well the students have managed to articulate these five characteristics. Students are given approximately two weeks to complete the exercise. Each group should have access to a photographic-capturing device (digital camera, smartphone, etc.). The *PNIRA* exercise is conducted in teams, although it can be completed as an individual exercise.

Each team will receive written instructions regarding the exercise (see Appendix B). Students should be granted freedom to choose any retail store that they want to investigate. In week 1, the students should visit the retail store of their choosing. They will be required to take pictures of the store along with field notes. They are also encouraged to interview managers, employees, and customers to get a comprehensive feel and overview of the retail store. Here, the goal is not to focus on the operations, but more on the atmospheric components of the retail store.

In week 2, students should prepare a short essay (2 pages, single space) documenting their retail store experience. While we recommend 2-pages, the instructor can modify this into a bigger project with a more in-depth analysis if he/she desires. Thus, the scale of this project can also be modified at instructor's discretion. Additionally, students should prepare a collage of pictures that best represent the theme or the atmosphere of the retail store. In their report, they should directly refer to the pictures that they have taken. Lastly, we recommend students to take a group picture with the brand/store to ensure that the team visited the store together.

The essay should focus on elaborating on the five atmospheric categories using the images that they have taken at the store. Students are encouraged to use theoretical terms and concepts learned from prior lectures to elaborate on the detail of their photographs. Grading should be based on how well the photographs

(along with the related theoretical discussion) best capture the five atmospheric categories. Alternatively, instructors can ask students to present their research rather than having to prepare a short essay. This will provide students with an opportunity to share with the rest of the class on what they have found and provide new perspectives on the retail elements. Additionally, the instructor can hold a "poster fair" to showcase their projects (more suitable for smaller classes). In this set-up, posters are displayed in different locations throughout the classroom. This approach allows students to interact and share their experiences via their photographs. The instructor can also invite third party members (e.g., other professors, other students) to help evaluate the posters.

In the past, students have visited popular retail stores such as Macy's, Victoria Secret, Build-a-Bear, Spencer, Toyota Auto Dealership, Target, Best Buy, among many others. To offer more choices, students may pick restaurants or Cafes (e.g., Starbucks) for their assignment. Regardless, we recommend that the students receive direct approval from the instructor on the appropriateness and suitability of their retail store choice. It is also important that students receive permission from the store (e.g, manager) to avoid any legality issues. Professor should provide students with a waiver for the store management to sign, which includes school name, class code, professor's name, and explanation of the project. Students are strongly advised to collect written permission to be able to use the contents of the interview or photos for the project.

This *PNIRA* exercise can also be modified to accommodate instructors who are teaching online or for those who desire to use this as an in-class assignment. While the experience is enriched from having students to actually visit the stores, we understand that there may be limitations. Hence,

students may use photographic images from various websites (i.e., Google images, Trip Advisor, Yelp, etc.) to complete this exercise. However, the downside of using such method is that the essay may lack the personal experience and observational content that are associated with photographic narrative inquiry and experiential learning techniques.

STUDENT EVALUATION OF THE *PNIRA* EXERCISE

Seventy-one upper-year undergraduate students enrolled in a Consumer Behavior class were given a survey to anonymously evaluate the *PNIRA* exercise. We asked students to complete a 10-item survey as part of their end of the term course assessment before their final exam. Items 1-5 were created by the primary author that relate to the learning objectives of the course. Items 6-10 were a combination of items partially adapted from Lee and Hoffman (2014, 2015). Student responses were recorded using a nine-point Likert scale (1 = "strongly disagree" and 9 = "strongly agree").

Overall, students seemed to have a favorable impression towards the assignment. The results also demonstrate that the exercise meets the primary learning objectives. Regarding learning objectives, students mostly agreed with how the exercise better helped them to understand the five components of retail atmospherics. All learning objective questionnaire items scored 7.5 and above. Students also believed that the exercise increased their enthusiasm, increased their learning experience, increased their creative output, increased their knowledge of marketing principles, and increased their interest in the topic. The survey questions (along with means and standard deviations of the results) are provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Student Evaluation of the Retail Atmosphere Exercise (n=71)

	1-Strongly Disagree / 9-Strongly Agree	Standard Deviation
1. Helped me to understand the importance of "external variables" in retail atmospherics+	7.77	1.59
2. Helped me to understand the importance of "general interior variables" analysis in retail atmospherics+	8.23	1.63
3. Helped me to understand the importance of "display variables" in retail atmospherics+	7.52	1.77
4. Helped me to understand the importance of "layout variables" in retail atmospherics+	7.87	1.61
5. Helped me to understand the importance of "human variables" in retail atmospherics+	7.62	1.52
6. Enhanced my learning experience.	7.72	1.65
7. Increased my creative input.	7.52	1.59
8. Increased my knowledge of marketing principles.	7.50	1.54
9. Increased my interest in the topic.	7.52	1.58
10. Increased my enthusiasm for the course.	7.87	1.67

+ Specific learning objectives related to the five components of retail atmospherics.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

This exercise utilizes experiential learning and photographic narrative inquiry to stimulate interaction among students and the retail environment. There are several benefits associated with this exercise. First, this exercise provides students with a chance to apply what they have learned in their classroom. Not only are they observing and absorbing the components of retail atmospherics, they are concurrently taking field notes, interviewing customers/managers, and performing primary research. More importantly, because students are out and active in the field, another benefit of using experiential learning technique is that it minimizes student distractions (Hoffman & Lee, 2014). Second, based on the data collected, it appears that the students seem to find this exercise to be an enriching experience. Students rated the exercise favorably in regards to how it a) met its learning objectives, b) enhanced their learning experience, c) increased their creative input, d) increased their knowledge of marketing principles, e) increased their interest in the topic, and f) increased their enthusiasm for the course. Third, this exercise is quite flexible. The scale of this project can be a big or small, it can be implemented in both offline and online classes, and it can be a team- or individual-based exercise. Fourth, this exercise may be appropriate for a wide array of courses. The exercise can be used in any course that discusses retail atmospherics (i.e., Retailing, Consumer Behavior, Visual Merchandising, Principles of Marketing, etc.). Fifth, this exercise can also be used in “flipped classrooms”, where students learn retail atmospheric related materials through readings or watching videos on their own outside of

class time (Mok, 2014). The assigned readings serve as a resource to help students to gather information and photographs from the store to synthesize into a report. This method of teaching may encourage independent learning for students at their own speed, designate more time to engage with the environment, and create more opportunities for students to interact and learn from one another. Overall, with this teaching method, graduates are more knowledgeable in the topic of retail atmospherics and have the ability to apply this learning experience to a real world context.

Despite these benefits, there are several challenges associated with this exercise. First, Shuman (2006) points out that one of the bigger challenges with narrative inquiry is that people conflate their personal experience. Thus, students’ observation and personal experience may not be authentic. This may especially be the case if the students are attempting to exaggerate their experience for the sake of producing a well-rounded discussion. Second, some managers may not permit students to take photographs within the confines of their retail store. As photographs are an integral part of this exercise, such impediment may restrict students’ retail store selection. Third, there appears to be a bias towards big-box retailers. Generally, big-box retailers allow more opportunities for analysis (e.g., more shelves, more employees, diverse decorations, etc.). It may also be the case that students are more comfortable with brand-name retailers. Here, we encourage students to explore local retailers and reward those who visit stores with unique retail atmospherics. Finally, to date, the exercise has only been applied to a consumer behavior course across two sections. Hence, the results are instructor/class specific. More observations are needed in different types of classes with different instructors to confirm the applicability of the *PNIRA* exercise.

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Appendix A (Adapted from Turley & Milliman, 2000):

1. External Variables:

- | | |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------|
| a. Exterior signs | b. Entrances |
| c. Exterior display windows | d. Height of building |
| e. Size of building | f. Color of building |
| g. Surrounding stores | h. Lawns and gardens |
| i. Address and locations | j. Architectural style |
| k. Surrounding area | l. Parking availability |
| m. Congestion and traffic | n. Exterior Wall |

2. General interior variables:

- | | |
|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| a. Flooring and carpeting | b. Color schemes |
| c. Lighting | d. Music |
| e. P.A. usage | f. Scents |
| g. Tobacco smoke | h. Width of aisles |
| i. Wall composition | j. Paint and wall paper |
| k. Ceiling composition | l. Merchandise |
| m. Temperature | n. Cleanliness |

3. Layout and design variables:

- | | |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| a. Space design and allocations | b. Placement of merchandise |
| c. Grouping of merchandise | d. Work station placement |
| e. Placement of equipment | f. Placement of cash registers |
| g. Waiting areas | h. Waiting rooms |
| i. Department locations | j. Traffic flow |
| k. Racks and cases | l. Waiting ques |
| m. Furniture | n. Dead areas |

4. Point-of-purchase and decoration variables:

- | | |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| a. Point-of-purchase displays | b. Sign and cards |
| c. Wall decorations | d. Degrees and certificates |
| e. Pictures | f. Artwork |
| g. Product displays | h. Usage instructions |
| i. Price displays | j. Teletext |

5. Human variables:

- | | |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| a. Employee characteristics | b. Employee uniforms |
| c. Crowding | d. Customer characteristics |
| e. Privacy | |

Appendix B: Retail Atmosphere Exercise Instruction

In this assignment, you are being asked to find a “retail” store of your choosing. Once you have chosen a store, observe and absorb the retail atmosphere. Refer back to the lecture content. Using the theories and concepts that we have learned in class, please prepare a 1-2 page paper on the learning objectives. In this report, your discussion should include the five key atmospheric categories (external, general interior, display, layout, and human variables). Further, it is recommended that you do additional research on the store itself via primary research (interviews with customers/workers) and/or secondary research (website) to support your discussion. Lastly, please suggest any recommendations that you would like to make to improve the store's retail atmosphere.

In addition, please take a camera with you to the store and take pictures. These pictures are necessary as it provides me with a general idea of retail store. I am also going to require you to take a “group picture” at the store to show me that all of you participated in this exercise together. Please attach these pictures as an appendix. Please develop a collage that best represent the retail atmospherics of the store. More importantly, please reference these pictures in your essay. For example, if you are discussing the store layout, you should have pictures that relate to your particular discussion. I also ask that you gain permission from the manager/worker before conducting the exercise. Please include a contact number/email for this person. Your assignment is due on X.