

Designing retail - Unravelling coping strategies through emphatic  
interviewing owner managers

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**Abstract**

This research aims at demonstrating how retail designers through empathic interviewing and listening to the story that retailers tell about their retail concept, can program the retail design task, identify inconsistencies not thought of using the “retail design thematic map” developed and give better advice to retailers.

Using independent retail as case the article sheds light on the empathic interview as method, strengthens retail design as a relevant discipline for retail strategy, and clarifies the role of emotion in the client – retailer relation regarding strategizing.

**Keywords**

Retail design, design process, empathic interview, coping strategies, Strategy-as-Practice, Life-Mode

**1. Introduction**

Retail Design is a new discipline only recognized in its own right within the last decades (Quartier, 2017), as a contextual dependent and multidisciplinary discipline placing itself as a mediator between the retailer and the customer (for exhaustive reviews and contextual embedding, see Petermans and Kent, 2017). The retail design process is largely neglected in research (Haug and Münster, 2015). Conducting a literature search on

the same terms Haug and Münster's 2015 study applied (that is, store/shop/retail design process and store/shop retail designer) on Web of Science and Ebsco databases including Business Source Complete, produced only two results. Adding a search on the same terms in Scopus limiting to journal articles broadened the outcome to the one as presented in table 1.

*TABLE 1(from separate file)*

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As table 1 demonstrates, the articles cover many lenses to investigate retail design through. The diversity of journals underlines the complexity of retail design, and the slender body of academic articles underlines its under researched state (Quartier et al., 2016). For the time being, retail designers strive to define their profession (Quartier, 2017), understand the boundaries of their discipline (Quartier et al., 2017) and how they can help retailers best, especially as a result of the digitalization of retail (Hagberg et al., 2016).

Using independent retail as case, this article aims to contribute to retail design knowledge by shedding light on the programming phase via applying empathic interviews (Fontana and Prokos, 2016; Nelson and Stolterman, 2012) as a source for strategizing in retail. Firstly, this method is used to develop a

thematic map of retail design based on interviews with experts; secondly, and through emotions attached to language used in the interviews, it is used to unravel the retailers' tacit strategies, and it reveals so-called 'problematic areas'.

By doing so, the article responds to a call for research regarding emotions in strategy as practice and taking company size and ownership into consideration (Brundin and Liu, 2015). The article responds to this considering independent retailers and their strategizing in corporation, with retail designers in the role as consultants.

The study's data corpus consists of two datasets: expert interviews and interviews with owner managers.

Based on the expert interviews and backed up by literature, the article will first propose a thematic map for digitized retail design. The thematic map can work as a material anchor (Hutchins, 2005) assisting the conversation between retailer and retail designer during the programming process preceding the design phase (Lawson, 2005; Volf, 2009).

The presented thematic map will outline the landscape the retail designers navigate and help retail designers' possibility to program for relevant retail spaces and understand when spatial design in itself might not be of any assistance instead pointing

to other parts of the concept for solution, thus providing better advice to retailers.

## **2. Theory**

Apart from giving more detail on retail design in section 2.1, the theoretical introduction of this paper will elaborate on strategy-as-practice (2.2) and the concept of coping as well as Life-Mode theory (section 2.3). All these insights are relevant to understand the independent retailer and his strategizing.

### *2.1 Retail design*

Theoretically and practically, retail design is rooted partly in interior design, originating from arts/architecture, and partly in retail, marketing and branding (Quartier, 2017).

As retail design is a new discipline just forming its theoretical foundation, the majority of research on retail design can be found in the marketing and retail stream of literature, considering retail design as part of interior design and focusing on investigating various atmospheric variables and their influence on consumer behavior. Central to this literature stream is Turley and Milliman's list of variables and its connection to the SOR model (Turley and Milliman, 2000).

The atmospherics stream of literature is developed to an extent where literature reviews are appearing providing overviews of the last twenty years of research (Mari and Poggesi, 2013) and

pointing towards future research in congruent cues and web atmospherics. From a retail designer perspective and starting from Turley and Milliman's (2000) list of atmospheric cues, these have been inscribed into the interdependent variables a retail designer needs to navigate through in the design process (Haug and Münster, 2015).

Literature on retail design often points to the Brand as starting point when developing designs (Kent, 2003; Kirby and Kent, 2010; Klingmann, 2007; Mesher, 2010; Tongeren, 2013). This connection is supported in marketing literature where Bitner's (Bitner, 1992) servicescape framework recognizes the physical environments' ability to communicate brand image and linking retail design to retail strategy (Turley and Chebat, 2005) as also visible in retail concept building models in educational resources (Levy and Weitz, 2012).

When retailers and retail designers meet, the latter often realize that strategy is not clearly described or, it seems, not really considered (Christiaans and Almendra, 2012).

However, strategy can be developed both consciously and unconsciously, as described in the Strategy-as-practice-literature stream (Chia and Holt, 2006; Golsorkhi, 2015). The retail designer will have to bring it to the fore in discussions with retailers, in order to design accordingly and give sound advice on how retailers can respond to changing customer demands (Hagberg et al., 2016) and maintain a viable business.

At the same time, the retail designer is obliged to deliver design that is at least contemporary or innovative, due to the investments that the concerned retailer needs to make in this respect (Münster and Haug, 2017).

A stream of academic literature seeking to bridge branding, marketing and retail design has emerged following a first International Colloquium on Design, Branding and Marketing in 2011 (McIntyre, 2016; Petermans and Kent, 2017). This bridging is also visible in professional literature (Tongeren, 2013). Furthermore, relevant insights in this field of knowledge are available in the discipline of art, in concepts of installation and pop-up retail (Teufel and Zimmermann, 2015). The context of retail design has also been studied and argued theoretically through different lenses; relevant lenses to mention in this respect are customer retail experience (Petermans et al., 2013), and stakeholder context (Haug and Münster, 2015; Kent, 2007), but also in a broader context of urban landscape, and bridging space and place (Cachinho, 2014; Giovanardi and Lucarelli, 2018). From an interior design perspective, personal identity and interior is linked (Caan, 2011).

Also visual merchandising as part of retail design evoking emotions in customers as aspect of retail design has attracted attention both online and offline (Haug and Münster, 2015;

Kent and Stone, 2007; Krasonikolakis et al., 2018; Park et al., 2015; Sundström et al., 2019). Further, and as showed in table 1, virtual reality and web shops, both parts of the digitized retail, are entering the discussion of retail design, thus affecting the retail designers' profession.

This concise overview of relevant literature underlines the multidisciplinary nature of retail design (Christiaans and Almendra, 2012; Quartier et al., 2017) covering both branding and marketing as well as interior design, art, web shop design and virtual reality, and at the same time demonstrates the contextual embeddedness of retail design in both culture and personal identity. Finally, it connects retail design to strategy.

### *2.2 Strategy-as-Practice, coping and a stress full environment.*

Strategy as practice (S-A-P) is linked to the general practice turn in social science research during the 1980s, continuing through to today. Emerging from a wish to render open the black box of what takes place in planning, implementation and other activities dealing with strategy, the focus of this stream of literature is in a micro level (i.e., social action and its construction in real social contexts or fields). Which links S-A-P to prevailing practice, agency and structure (Golsorkhi et al., 2015).



A central theme in Strategy-as-Practice is **coping strategy**.

Coping strategies in business develop when strategies are not consciously build, but are the result of everyday decisions based on personal values (Chia and Holt, 2006).

Apart from Strategy-as-Practice, ‘coping’ is also a well-known concept in psychological literature. Dealing with stress and strained situations in life caused by challenges/threats is approached in different ways on a personal level conceptualized as “personal coping strategy” (Lazarus and Folkman, 1991). Following this, coping strategy lies within the narrative of the person coping.

Karen Munk (Munk, 2012) lays out a procedure to follow when aiming to perform coping interviews. Central to Munk’s procedure is that a person has a build-in goal hierarchy that determines good, bad and neutral for this person’s wellbeing. Munk explains: “From time to time we only discover what was valuable to us once it is threatened or lost.” (translation by author) (Munk, 2012, p.27).

Karen Munk explains in the introduction to the manual that a ‘coping interview’ is an “open qualitative method, applicable to analysis of any type of strain/load affecting anybody transversely of cultural differences.”(translation by author) (Munk, 2012, p. 11)

The purpose of this study is to shed light on the empathic interview (Fontana and Prokos, 2016; Nelson and Stolterman, 2012; Thompson et al., 1994) as valuable to understand independent retailers' coping strategies so that in the end, a retail designer can help him to the best possible extent. For this reason, it is the authors' belief that the vocabulary as presented in Karen Munk's manual (Munk, 2012, p 81-87) describing emotions and linking them to handling of strained situations connecting this to a personal goal hierarchy, could prove helpful.

Digitalization of retail (Hagberg et al., 2016), combined with the centralization of public service and governmental power in a few cities, has put independent retailers in smaller towns in Denmark in the forefront of competitive forces and changes of and in the retail landscape (Dilling-Hansen, Mogens & Jensen, 2012). These explanations are also supported internationally (Cachinho, 2014). It is fair to say that the retail market is highly competitive, indeed, and it is thus relevant to argue that independent retailers operate in a stressful environment.

Analyzing empathic interviews can be used to render open how retailers cope with a "new" goal being introduced, potentially

disrupting their business model. This could be valuable insight that could help program a retail designer's task.

### *2.3 Life-Modes - intertwining personal and business goals*

Karen Munk stresses that coping analysis is linked to personal goal hierarchies. However, following Højrup's theory of Life-Mode (Højrup, 2003) the personal and business goals of the owner manager entwines to become one, thus making Munk's approach relevant for OM interviews.

Anthropologist Thomas Højrup (2003) proposed a Life-Mode concept as a coherent, unified and ideology leading class specific praxis. Each Life-Mode is characterized by differences in:

- Markets, ownership, and personal qualifications
- Differences in means-end hierarchy in praxis
- Differences in work/leisure- and family terminology
- Perception of what a "good life" is.

Three basic Life-Modes forms the basis of the theory and the most relevant traits are:

Life-Mode 1 = Self-employed - possesses the enterprise and production facilities, constructing *superior defense* they will do anything to reproduce the Life-Mode and do not distinguish

between free time and work time. The goal is the enterprise and the means is everything including the family. There is no such thing as non-work.

The first and self-employed Life-Mode is supplemented by two Life-Modes of employees:

Life-Mode 2 = wage earner finds its goal in non-work, and work becomes the means to provide and enjoy free time.

Life-Mode 3 = career-professional finds no juxtaposition between work and free time and aims at developing talent and qualification to be valuable. Their freedom consists of freedom to make a career. We are urged not to confuse the labeled names with the daily use of the terms they include referring to people's actual occupation, hence the numbering (Højrup, 2003).

An unsuccessful attempt to develop a quantitative inquiry method based on questionnaires imply qualitative interviewing as best suited to investigate Life-Modes (Hjorth Andersen, 1993).

Considering the distinct differences of goals in work or non-work between Life-Mode 1 and 2 makes these Life-Modes especially interesting to detect in OM (Owner manager) interviews in combination with their emotional resonance to the "new goals" imposed by change in their environment. Further, the Life-Mode theory makes it reasonable to argue an

intertwined nature of the OM's personal goals and the goals for the business. Based on this, we argue to use Munk's (2012) vocabulary to analyze the interviews.

## **2. Methodology**

In order to unravel the black box of the retail designers' empathic interview (Fontana and Prokos, 2016) as source for programming the design task (Nelson and Stolterman, 2012), we apply exactly that same method in our qualitative interview study (Thompson et al., 1994). Using experienced designers' trained ability to listen for both what is expressed directly as well as what is pressing for expression (Nelson and Stolterman, 2012; Thompson et al., 1994), we seek to reflect themes in reality as well as unravel latent themes in the interviews. Due to our pragmatic approach 'home-based in our own experience in design practice', the context dependency of the subject and the difference in expertise of the interviewees, we apply thematic analysis, as it can serve both purposes (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

### *2.1 Sampling*

To gain an overview of trend based strategic possibilities, nine empathic interviews with participants from the retail industry were performed, including three retail designers of physical retail spaces, three web(shop) designers and three retail strategy

consultants. This in-depth qualitative research forms the first data set. We carried out the interviews between June and September 2016. Each interview took between 31 and 60 minutes and resulted in 116 pages of transcription.

Participants were theoretically sampled (Miles et al., 2014), seeking variance in educational and experiential background ensuring different design as well as strategic logics. Table 2 displays the educational and experiential background of the participants.

*TABLE 2 (from separate word file)*

*one column wide = 90 mm*

We asked the participants for their views on trends and developments in retail today and specifically about their view on independent retailers and retail in smaller towns. During the interviews, a common perception of retailers in smaller towns not acting on the changes in retail became clear and informed the sampling of independent retailers as well as the choice of interviewing about their strategy.

Following the nine expert interviews, we conducted empathic interviews with nine independent fashion retailers, in order to learn about their coping strategies regarding the experts'

expectations. These interviews constituted the second data set for this paper.

Alexander Osterwalder's (2010) Business Model Canvas framework (BMC) was used as guidance for the interviews with these participants, paying special interest to issues relevant to the design of retail spaces as well as to the handling of products (i.e., visual merchandising). Retail spaces are defined here as digital and physical spaces which are controlled by a retailer; in other words, spaces where customers and products meet (Quartier, 2017).

All interviewees concern independent fashion retailers owning shops situated in the region of central Jutland in Denmark. In such cases, an OM (owner manager) is in control of the total concept and needs to have both a holistic understanding and agency ranging from idea and strategy through to execution. In retail, this encompasses all levels of control, ranging from strategic, tactic to operational control, as well as diverse functions as purchase, branding, marketing, management and retail design including Visual Merchandising (Levy and Weitz, 2012; Sørensen and Sørensen, 2010). This constitutes the OM as relevant informant when studying retail in a holistic perspective.

As mentioned before, all retailers are fashion retailers owning shops situated in the region of central Jutland in Denmark, the majority based in areas classified as towns and suburbs by Eurostat, holding 10.000 – 65.000 inhabitants (Kotzeva et al., n.d.). A single shop situated in a village with just below 1000 inhabitants but which has a large tourist population was also included. Three retailers who participated own more than one shop, and one of them owns a shop situated in an area classified as a city. However, in a European context, it is still a ‘smaller city’ with 270.000 inhabitants.

Approximately half of the Danish population is still living outside big cities such as Copenhagen, Aarhus, Odense and Aalborg (Christensen et al., n.d.). Apart from serving these in some of their needs, independent retailers active outside these big cities contribute to the country’s economy, ensure employment of local inhabitants as well as contribute to the local culture.

Identification of participants happened in two ways. In connection to a case-study that was performed for other research purposes, the first five independent retailers were identified due to their ability to attract attention from retail trend/strategy consultants or educators, which indicates that they are somehow responding to the challenges of



contemporary retail, following the idea of theoretical sampling (Miles et al., 2014). We conducted these interviews from November 2016 to March 2017.

Transcribing the interviews with these participants revealed a variation in ways the informants expressed themselves about their possibilities and challenges experiencing the digitized reality, as well as clear differences in sentiment intuitively detected by the interviewer. Some retailers seemed very confident and content, whereas others had worries. Some left the impression that they did not know how to cope with the challenges of changing conditions in the retail industry.

The shift from having been able and capable of action to not having this position anymore and being aware of it, reflected and resonated with core themes in the Strategy-as-practice literature (Chia and Holt, 2006).

In order to investigate this further, we interviewed an additional four retailers. Checking for representativeness (Miles et al., 2014) we broadened the sample sampling for variety (Flick, 2006), seeking out retailers in geographical places not yet in the sample and retail concepts with seemingly different traits than the ones already in the sample. These interviews took place during February and March 2018. The interviews themselves

each lasted between 43 and 82 minutes and resulted in 182 pages of transcription.

## *2.2 Analysis*

The data set consisting of the transcriptions of the expert interviews was analyzed applying inductive thematic analysis, searching at both a semantic and latent level (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In order to unveil latent concepts, an open mind was maintained throughout analyzing the data following the idea of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The result is applying a hermeneutic approach in moving from part to whole and vice versa (Thompson et al., 1994).

The analysis of the retail owner managers' data set was theoretical seeking to unravel latent themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and consisted of three steps: first, applying the themes derived from the expert interviews as codes. Second, the coded sequences were labeled with an emotional description using the overview of emotions presented by Karen Munk as a starting point (Munk, 2012). Third, the interviews were analyzed using lifeform analysis searching for traits of the earlier discussed types of Life-Modes 1 and 2 ('Self-employed' and 'Employee'). This step in data analyses also was in line with the designers "consciously not knowing" (Nelson and Stolterman, 2012) following the idea of grounded theory

(Strauss and Corbin, 1998). All thematic analyses were done by hand, going forth and back between print outs, and organizing the data in tables in a digital way.

### **3. Empirical findings**

Below we first present a thematic map based on our analysis of the first data set (i.e., the expert interviews) in section 3.1.

Next, in section 3.2, we focus on the results of the empathic interviews in the second dataset (i.e., the OM interviews) regarding emotions and their connection to themes and Life-Modes (section 3.2.1). Finally, we present unraveled coping strategies and examples of use of the thematic map to show the problematic areas (section 3.2.2).

For analyzing the second dataset, we benefit from emotional descriptions conceptualized in psychology to interpret and understand the configuration of a OM's *superior defense* (Højrup, 2003) – or design of a viable retail concept and its spaces, and we use the thematic map to display problematic areas.

#### *3.1 Thematic map of strategic trend themes derived from expert interviews.*

The aim of the expert interviews was to gain insight into trend based goals expected to be found in the OM's goal hierarchies.

In an effort to demonstrate the wide variety of perspectives regarding trend themes that came to the fore in the expert interviews, and at the same time striving to present a comprehensible and useful structure, in accordance with our pragmatic approach, we have organized the themes accordingly. Therefore, table 3 displays an overview of the themes which were demonstrated in our analyses of the data and Figure 1 presents a thematic map of these themes and their connections.

*TABLE 3 (from separate file)*

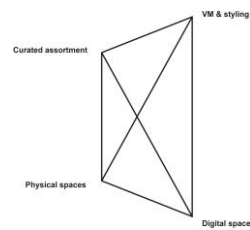
*FIGURE 1 (from separate file)*

*2 columns wide = 190mm (the figure itself is 175mm wide)*

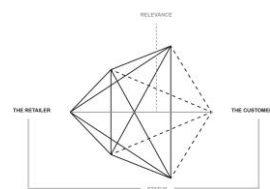
The thematic map is systemic in nature, following Kent (2007) and Haug (2015). Kent's level of analysis was *stakeholders* in the context of retail companies to which Haug added a system of the *retail designers'* process giving form to physical space and furniture. However, retail design concerns all sizes of companies, and due to digitalization of retail becomes broader than the physical realm, thus changing the retail designers' field of work, if not the definition (Quartier, 2017). The level between the "stakeholder" and the "design form giving" systems is the gap we need to address. It is where the retail

designer and her client meets and the retail designer programs the design task. To do so, (s)he needs to step back, or zoom out, to gain an overview of the intentions (Nelson and Stolterman, 2012). In other words – (s)he has to consider a broader system, which this thematic map presents.

In what follows, we elaborate about the different aspects of Figure 1 in detail. We start from the center of Figure 1.



*The design layer* in-between retailer and customer constitutes a small sub-system in itself, comprising of the curated assortment, the visual merchandising, the physical spaces and the digital spaces, all interconnected. In this layer, the detailed system of mechanisms that Haug (2015) described is active.



*The small system* of the retailer – the design layer – customer is central as showed in black on figure 1. This system balances between two navigators “relevance” and “status”, marked with dark grey.

The navigator “status”, is what the retailer seeks to deliver to the customer. Here, we consider ‘Status’ to be understood as whatever lends status to a consumer at any given time in any given context, as found in the interview with expert no. 3:

*“Talking about lifestyle, living in a world where everyone is able to purchase everything is most important. To express it somewhat bold. (...) The problem is that when my daughter can purchase a Prada bag the status attached is lost – and that is exactly what we are looking for.”*

In contrast, “relevance” is effective directly in the relation retailer (shop) – customer. Relevance is understood as concerning the ability of the retailer to fit into the life of the consumer and help deliver the sought-after status at any given time and context. Thus, relevance become the retail designer’s navigator regarding all decisions concerning the design of the particular retailers’ system as well as the design layer of that system. As semantic example, the theme relevance is present in the interview with expert no 2:

*”But also to a large extent produce relevant experiences and perhaps rethink the business model. Is it possible to add another realm of business so the customer does not just purchase a product !”*

Another latent example is from expert interview no. 5:

*”It (the curated assortment) relates to the target group. It is the gin they purchase and drink for the time being. It is the book they ought to read or the notes book (they use).”*

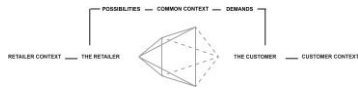
A group of themes concerns theories/methods and techniques known from branding and marketing and heavily used in retail design to engage the customer, be relevant as retailer and provide the sought-after status. The customer experience web (Petermans et al., 2013) includes both experience theory, storytelling and sensorial design all found in the themes at sublevel 2 (see table 3). It further encompasses the hedonic and utilitarian aspects as well as the engagement and involvement at different levels of the customers effectuated by utility and content marketing as talked about by the interviewees in the following citations:

*“We cannot sell arguing good traits of our products any more so we need to find something else and that is called utility marketing. (...) This means that we focus our marketing on what makes our customers lives easier, more fun, better, more meaningful or the like, rather than talking about our products.”*

Expert interview no. 3 on utility marketing.

*“Working with ambassadors gives us a series of win, win, win all the way through, building content around it. That is what all brands, shops and web shops are struggling with, building content marketing.”* Expert no. 7 on content.

*"We also need "content" in the physical shopping experience providing inspiration as an example."* Expert no. 2 on content.



*The context* surrounds the small

system of the retailer - retail spaces - the customer. These themes impose both possibilities/demands onto the retailer/concept and reflect preference/demands in relation to the consumer. They emerge from ongoing development in retail, technology and culture, the themes in sub level 1.

A part from common context both retailer and customer has individual contexts. The themes found in these interviews affecting the retailer consists of "the urban culture" including local chamber of commerce and retailer community in general as well as supplier trends. As described by one expert the latter can take the form of demands:

*"...to be allowed to purchase this brand the order you place will have to be of a certain size."* Expert no. 8.

The context of the customer is a latent theme from the analysis, but reflects where the status provided by the retailer will be effective.



Intertwined at the core of the concept is the retailer, his/her values and identity which is confirmed in Michell et al. (2012) and the ability to monitor and benefit from the trends and developments in the context reflected in Bucolo and Mathews (2011).

The consumer is present in the themes through identity and behavior relevant for innovation, as was reflected upon earlier in Bucolo et al. (2011).

What differentiates the visual model in Figure 1 from existing literature in the retail design domain concerns firstly, the systemic understanding of design programming. System thinking is the logic part of design; design logic and reasoning (Nelson and Stolterman, 2012, p. 58) and the system approach are well developed in business research today (Arbnor and Bjerke, 2009, page 111), making the visual model understandable from both domains. Secondly, the two navigators; status and relevance cannot be found in other research overviews presented after the millennium, for example atmospheric variables (Turley and Milliman, 2000), aspects of designing a store (Quartier, 2017); design variables and constraints in fashion store design process (Haug and Münster, 2015) and The Experience Web (Petermans et al., 2013).

The implications hereof are that retail designers and retailers need to understand the culture of their target group in order to understand what lends status to their customer's life.

### *3.2 Empathic interviewing and displaying problematic areas.*

The aim of the OM interviews was to demonstrate insight into coping strategies through empathic interviews and display problematic areas on the retail design thematic map assisting the retail designers' programming of the design task and in giving advice to the retailer. First, we report on the emotions in the OM interviews and their connection to themes and Life-Mode (3.2.1). Second, we report on unraveled coping strategies and give examples of display of problematic areas using the retail design thematic map (3.2.2).

#### *3.2.1 Emotions, themes and Life-Modes in OM interviews*

Having both interviewed and transcribed the OM interviews was valuable during analysis, as impression of positive or negative emotion was easy to recall, in line with the ideas of both thematic analysis and grounded theory (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

Karen Munk's (2012) list of emotions and their description, is the foundation of coding this second data set (i.e., the owner manager interviews). It is very important to notice that each emotion has more both strong and slender expressions with a

predominance of the slender in the performed interviews. The emotions are divided into five groups according to Munk (2012) as showed in table 4.

*TABLE 4 (from separate file)*

*1 column = 90mm wide*

We attached emotional labels to the identified sequences based on the tone of voice, ambiance and vocabulary employed in the interviews as well as the memory of the emotional impression left in the interviewer. Not all emotions were present in the interviews, for example the empathic emotions and the emotions expressing love. In order to present the results in a comprehensible way, we analyzed the remaining emotions on descriptive traits and attached five values; three negative and two positive as showed in table 5 (for reasoning please see appendix A).

*TABLE 5 (from separate file)*

*1 column wide =90mm*

Three groups of emotions are perceived negative and displayed with a □ in table 5, whereby the position in the table indicates if it is a little negative (anxiety and fear), negative (anger, shame and guilt) or very negative (sorrow and hope).

Emotions considered positive are marked with ● in table 5 and the position of the dot indicates if it is considered positive (happiness/joy) or most positive (pride and hope 2).

A group of themes from the expert interviews was not spoken of in the interviews with OMs. These related to large enterprises ‘going to market strategies’ like Cosmopolitan (placing flagship stores in major cities), and Go big (integration of entertaining digital aspects as big screens, direct transmission from the factory etc.). Further the sharing economy trend and two trends connected to new channels; catwalk and fair shopping was not mentioned. Last the technological trends as for example augmented reality and other ‘in store technologies’ was not mentioned. An explanation could be the investment typically related to implementation at the time of the interviews. For this reason, they are left out of table 6 which otherwise displays the emotions attached to themes found in the interviews.

Finally, the Life-Mode analysis is seeking to elicit latent themes in the interviews. For example: *“In the beginning, there were only 30 persons (to the fashion show) then we were 200, which was the max capacity, but we just started doing two nights in a row. Then we talked about the fun it could be making a large show including other companies in town and*

*having 1000 guests. Honestly, I gambled with all the savings and was so nervous I hardly slept the night before ticket sales started.*” is interpreted an indication of Life Mode 1.

Contrasting this, the following is an example interpreted as indication of Life Mode 2 and a possible shift in the personal means end hierarchy: *“We spent many hours (on the business) and we need to spend a lot of time to visit suppliers. For this reason, we have decided not to (go to fashion fairs).”*

*TABLE 6 (from separate file)*

*2 columns wide = 190 mm*

### *3.2.2 Unraveled coping strategies and problematic areas*

In what follows, we demonstrate how the analyses of emotions through the empathic interview helped to gain insight firstly, in the OM’s coping strategies commenting on general aspects across cases (niche, urban culture, Life-Mode and ‘hardly no negative emotions’) and secondly, to display problematic areas in the retail design thematic map. The latter exemplified through three of the cases.

All the cases discussed by the owner managers display consistently that the retailers perceive their proper retail concepts as ‘niche concepts’ regarding the retail business polarization theme. The traits that make them niche, however,

are diverse and include the channel spaces and theory/method/technique both located in the retail design layer and as such a matter for the retail designer.

As demonstrated in table 6, half of the retailers attached very strong negative feelings to the theme of urban culture. This theme concerns the local retailer community, local chambers of commerce and the municipality. The retailers felt left alone with the task of driving and paying for keeping the town center alive and municipalities' not understanding independent retailing. Further research into this aspect would be interesting.

Further, as demonstrated in table 6, most of the retailers show a clear Life-Mode 1 regarding the mindset of the OM. However, two show traits of Life-Mode 2 (i.e., case 2 and 7). In both cases, we detect negative emotions in connection to the mindset in general and the interviews did either *not* touch upon or display negative emotions regarding theory/method/technique. They also display negative emotions concerning the digital aspects of the themes 'channels' and 'channel spaces' whereas case 7 do not talk much about this aspect at all. Exactly pinpointing how and if these aspects are connected, is not evident from the interviews. However, it seems relevant to propose a hypothesis that they are connected which could lead to discussions on resources, knowledge supply and future

engagement. First steps in this respect has been taken (Kent et al., 2003) and further research into this aspect would be interesting.

Finally as demonstrated in table 6, one group of retailers (cases 1, 3 and 8) does hardly display any negative emotions apart from those that connected to 'hope'. However, in these interviews hope ought to be interpreted positive, (see appendix A for reasoning). The life-Mode analysis for these cases indicates a clear Life-Mode 1 and as there is no negative emotions attached to the core, mindset or context, they seem content with the choices they make. Both living out ones true Life-Mode as well as flow theory of challenges and ability being balanced resulting in flow (Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, 1997) poses explanatory power as does a retail design thematic map in balance.

The conduct of this group might indicate a change in independent retail – and put forward a hypothesis that a balance of ability and challenges are a precondition for a balanced retail design thematic map. This point to the discussion on knowledge supply mentioned above. Further, it is not enough to know and serve your target group well, but you need to thoroughly and continuously study their culture and the embedded meaning of status or even better, be a part of the culture yourself.

To demonstrate the use of the retail design thematic map we use three concepts with price as an important positioning parameter but having different coping strategies (i.e., case 1, 6 and 7) thus needing different advice from the retail designer.

For case 1 table 6 demonstrates that all themes are addressed. Only diving into the sub themes (indicated with grey in table 6) reveal that channel spaces from a visual merchandising point of view displays negative emotions. For discussion with the OM this indicated on the retail design thematic map as showed in Figure 2.

*FIGURE 2 (from separate file)*

*1 column wide = 90 mm*

The advice to case 1 would be to conscious consider the visual merchandising aspect checking for consistency with the retailer, the customer and the navigators and then design for consistency in the retail design layer. Further, considering if new trends in the context reveals new opportunities thus demanding reconsideration of the map in full is sound advice.

For case 6, table 6 demonstrates that the navigator “relevance” has not been addressed in itself. Further, some negative



emotions attached to the theme of theories/methods/techniques indicate that uncertainty is at play. Figure 3 display this on the retail design theme map for discussion with the OM. The uncertainty can affect the design layer as no certain measure regarding good and bad can be called forward, with a risk of “anything goes”.

*FIGURE 3 (from separate file)*

*1 column wide = 90 mm*

The sound advice would be to establish this measure through carefully considering theories/methods/techniques relevant to connect the retailer and the customer culture before moving to redesign of the design layer for consistency.

In contrast to the two former cases, case number 7 is attaching some negative emotions to the core and mindset as well as indicating Life-Mode 2 quite strongly. Figure 4 displays this on the thematic retail design map for discussions with the OM.

*FIGURE 4 (from separate file)*

*1 column wide = 90 mm*

The advice would be to consider design on the strategic level clarifying the core as well as the mindset and resources

available, before considerations of the design layer. If the core and mindset is not stable, the navigators has nothing to attach to and the thematic map will ‘tilt’.

#### **4. Conclusion**

As this paper demonstrated, in the retail designers’ programming process, the empathic interview can help to identify problematic areas in need of alignment. The proposed systemic map can communicate this in a visual language shared by design and business, thus helping retail designers in assisting retailers in composing a sound retail concept, make them aware of its need to be constantly fine-tuned and design spaces that will play along.

The article contributes to retail design theory by confirming retail design’s connection to strategy and establishing retail design as a discipline relevant to retail strategizing.

Further, it contributes to strategy as practice theory in understanding the role of emotion in the client – consultant relationship in strategizing.

Starting from the finding that retail designers and retailers need to understand the culture of their target group better, future research can explore how this can be linked to insights on

Consumer Culture Theory, and how this can be translated in research methodologies in the retail design stream of research.

Further development of research into the supply and effect of knowledge into independent retail would be interesting and could prove helpful.

Finally, elaborating further on the present research and broadening the scope to include larger organizations with other possible Life-Modes represented by decision makers as well as broadening the geographic scope, is an interesting perspective for future research, considering other cultural contexts.

## Appendix A – Reasoning for grouping of emotions

The negative emotions ‘anxiety’ and ‘fear’ are difficult to distinguish for people who are not psychologists, as the description is more or less the same. Differentiation lies within the cause of the emotion, according to Munk (2012): anxiety is caused by an unknown threat, and fear by a known threat (Munk, 2012). However, we argue that because they both inhibit an action possibility, they seem to be the most desirable negative emotions in connection to retailers’ business concepts. For this reason, we classify them less negative.

‘Shame’ and ‘guilt anger’ are unproductive emotions concerning an OM’s view on strategic possibilities. Shame leads to hiding problems connected to breakdown in own ideals or offending moral imperatives, and guilt to seeking penance. Anger only leads to wish for harming the cause of the loss. However, a reason to consider these three less negative than ‘sorrow’ is not connecting directly to an irreversible loss. For this reason, we classify them as negative.

The negative emotions ‘sorrow’ and ‘hope’ are most negative. Sorrow, because it relates to an irreversible loss and giving up, and hope, because it connects it to not engaging with clearly unpleasant realities. However, we found it difficult to attach

hope as a negative emotion to the OM interviews as hope was typically expressed in connection to new business initiatives. In this context, it only seems natural to express hope for a good result. The pride and joy detected in ambience and facial expression only supported the decision to consider this kind of hope at least neutral if not positive.

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