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## **‘Experiential Retail Environments’ in the fashion sector**

Servais Elisa\*, Quartier Katelijn<sup>1</sup>, Vanrie Jan<sup>2</sup>

*Faculty of Architecture and arts, Hasselt University, Hasselt, Belgium*

\* Corresponding author. Mailing address: Universiteit Hasselt, Campus Diepenbeek, Agoralaan Gebouw E, Kantoor E-B08, B-3590 Diepenbeek, Belgium; tel.: +32(0)11 29 21 13; e-mail address: [elisa.servais@uhasselt.be](mailto:elisa.servais@uhasselt.be)

<sup>1</sup> E-mail address: [katelijn.quartier@uhasselt.be](mailto:katelijn.quartier@uhasselt.be)

<sup>2</sup> E-mail address: [jan.vanrie@uhasselt.be](mailto:jan.vanrie@uhasselt.be)

**Servais Elisa** is a PhD researcher at the Faculty of Architecture and Arts, Hasselt University, Belgium. Building on her ten years of professional experience as a retail designer, she is conducting research on the value of experiential retail environments and in-store experience with a view of finding practical support for retail professionals and more specifically retail designers.

**Quartier Katelijn** is an assistant Professor in retail design at the Faculty of Architecture and Arts of Hasselt University, where she is also the academic director of the Retail Design Lab knowledge center. She and the Lab are researching what the store of tomorrow should look like, including the topics of experience and sustainability. Starting from scientific insights, Katelijn advises both large retail chains and SME’s to improve their store experience. In addition to research, she teaches retail design theory and practice to both students and professionals. She has presented her work at various international conferences and has published in respected international journals.

**Vanrie Jan** (PhD, Psychology) is Associate Professor of Human Sciences and Research Methodology at the Faculty of Architecture and Arts, Hasselt University, Belgium. His research interests lie at the intersection of environmental psychology and perception, (interior) architecture, and design research and education. He works with several colleagues in the research group “ArcK-Designing for More”, investigating how people experience and interact with the built environment and looking for ways to support designers in design approaches such as design for subjective wellbeing, design for experience and universal design/design for all.

### **Declaration of interest statement**

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

## **‘Experiential Retail Environments’ in the fashion sector**

ABSTRACT – This paper examines the phenomenon of ‘Experiential Retail Environments’ (ERE’s) in the fashion sector in view of being useful to retail design practice. A discovery-oriented research approach was applied to understand: (i) what an ERE is; (ii) how in-store experience is triggered; and (iii) how the experiential dimension is integrated in the retail designer’s processes. Data was collected through [the combination of a literature review and interviews](#) conducted with representatives of the stakeholder groups most concerned with fashion retail design projects: retailers, retail designers and [customers](#). The research provided valuable clarifications. First, it helped to propose two definitions for the term ERE, one more specifically suited to a retail professional audience and the other accounting for the [customer](#) perspective. Second, it showed in-store experience to be created at two levels: through the combination of tangible aspects which generates varying customer perceptions, representing a more conceptual level for the experience. Finally, it surfaced that though there is a call for more experience integration in the fashion retail sector, currently, there is no systematic approach for this in the physical retail design process. In most cases, experiential considerations are left to the retailer and dealt with after the store concept has been designed.

Keywords: experiential retail environments; in-store experience; retail design; design process; fashion retailing

### **Introduction**

The retail landscape is currently in the midst of a true ‘experiential’ revolution. It is simply not enough to sell products anymore, physical retailers must now also deliver valuable in-store experiences to their target audience (Verhoef et al. 2009; Alexander 2019; Baker et al. 2020; Greenhalgh 2020; MacInnis 2020). This is mainly caused by the simultaneous growth of online shopping ([further enhanced during the Covid-19 pandemic](#)) and the experience economy, which have added competitive pressure to the market (Pine and Gilmore 1998; Petermans 2012; Alexander and Kent 2017; Van Ekris 2018; Csikszentmihalyi 2000). This, in turn, has consequences for [physical retailing](#). Indeed, in the years to come, retailers will probably have to deal with a reduced number of customers feeling enticed to visit their physical stores

(Quartier et al. 2021). However, customers do and most likely will continue to shop in brick-and-mortar stores, in great part because of the experiences these specific outlets offer (Marhamat 2021). This entails customers will be looking for more quality shopping contacts in physical stores (Quartier et al. 2021). Looking at the different retail sectors, fashion in particular is currently feeling immense pressure from online competition (McCauley Bowstead 2021). In order to gain or simply retain market shares, fashion retailers are therefore more than ever seeking to differentiate themselves through their customers' shopping experiences and the physical store has become a key instrument in this strategic game. This, in turn, has put more demand on retail designers to design physical stores which can trigger valuable customer experiences (Verhoef et al. 2009; Grewal, Roggeveen and Nordfält 2017; Morrell and Goulding 2017; Vandooren 2017). In the retail industry, these stores have come to be known as 'experiential retail environments' (ERE's) or 'experiential stores' (Borghini et al. 2009; Ballantine, Jack and Parsons 2010; Foster and McLelland 2015; Klein et al. 2016). This evolution has, of course, not gone unnoticed in academia and a growing number of studies are looking into in-store experience (Bäckström and Johansson 2006, 2017; Petermans 2012; Lemon and Verhoef 2016; Triantafillidou, Siomkos and Papafilippaki 2017). However, in practice, retail professionals (both retailers and retail designers) still appear to struggle when making decisions related to the design of ERE's (i.e. how to best integrate experience in a store concept). Indeed, thus far there is still little research specifically looking to apply this in combination to the daily concerns and practices of retail designers. Three points which could benefit from clarifications stand out: i) as regards the terminology and its meaning; ii) in terms of relevant components which characterize an in-store experience; and iii) on how this experience is approached by those tasked with designing it. These led to the three research questions for this study:

RQ1 – How is the term ‘Experiential Retail Environment’ (ERE) or ‘experiential store’ defined?

RQ2 – How is experience triggered in the physical store?

RQ3 – In practice, where do experiential considerations fit in the day-to-day processes of retail designers?

The lack of clarity or consensus on these points can easily be explained by the fact that information is spread over a wide range of sources: both academic and practice-based, marketing oriented or rooted specifically in the retail design field. To date, little has been done to combine this knowledge in order to ease the design process. In what follows, we report on an explorative study conducted to bring a more comprehensive view on ERE’s and their design process in the fashion sector, with the aim of being useful to practicing retail designers. A discovery-oriented research approach was applied following the example of Homburg, Jozić and Kuehnl (2017). Similarly to their work, this research procedure involved integrating field-based insights, in this case from the three key stakeholder groups concerned with fashion retail (retail designers, retailers and customers), with supplementary literature on the notions of ‘experience’ in the physical retail context. Such a research procedure allows the researchers to synthesize extant relevant literature and field-based insights to develop an integrated, novel and generalized understanding of the topic of research. In what follows we [detail](#) the research set-up, [discuss](#) the results of the exploratory study and [finish](#) with answering our three research questions.

## **Methodology**

### Literature review

Retail design is still quite new as an academic discipline (Quartier 2011; Petermans and Kent 2017). Thus, the amount of field-specific academic literature remains scarce. However, as part of an omnichannel approach, there is an opportunity to also consider marketing sources when conducting retail design research. As a more established academic discipline, the available marketing literature is extensive. However, careful consideration must be taken when using marketing sources for retail design research as the two fields have different focuses, objectives, methods and terminologies (Servais et al. 2018).

Furthermore, as an applied field, much of the retail design field's knowledge remains with its practitioners and is therefore not available in academic sources. Practice-based sources (e.g. books by renowned practitioners, industry reports, blogs, newsletters) may provide access to this part of the knowledge and thus also represent a valuable addition to a field-specific review of literature.

This combination of sources (retail design academic literature, marketing academic literature and retail design practice-based literature) makes it difficult to conduct a systematic literature review in a 'traditional' manner. Thus, a semi-systematic approach as defined by Snyder (2019) was used to map theoretical approaches or themes and identify knowledge gaps within the literature. However, a critical assessment of the sources, especially in the extent marketing literature, was also conducted to guarantee their applicability to the 'retail designer lens'.

According to Snyder (2019),-most important in terms of methodological validity when conducting a semi-systematic literature review is to clearly document and be transparent about the research process applied. In the case of this study, the following academic databases were investigated in a first instance to identify retail design and marketing sources for review: EBSCOhost (including Art and Architecture Source; Avery; Business Source Complete), Science Direct, Scopus and Google Scholar. Table 1 below aims to provide the necessary

transparency on the academic source selection process applied. For each research question (RQ), it provides a list of the word associations searched, the initial amount of results found, the step-by-step exclusion criteria applied and the final number of sources these generated for the analysis review process.

*(Insert Table 1 about here)*

In a second instance, similar word searches were conducted in the most commonly used non-academic search engines to identify practice-based sources for review. The selection of all sources was conducted between February and September 2018.

#### Collection of field data

To complement the literature review, an empirical study involving data collection via semi-structured interviews with representatives of the three key stakeholder groups involved in retail design projects (i.e. retail designers, retailers and customers) was conducted. These interviews were conducted between October and December 2018. To ease the discussions on this rather abstract topic, we decided to provide a context for the study through a set of five fashion (and lifestyle) stores. These were selected through the following process – in part inspired by the work of Ballantine, Jack and Parsons (2010). First, they all had to be located in one city to make visits more convenient for participants. We chose the city of Antwerp in Belgium as it offers a high potential for stores suiting the purpose of the research (Van De Poel 2017; Vandooren 2017). Second, in order to limit the risk of participants discussing the offer over the physical environment, which is the focus of this research, we decided to limit the selection to mid-level stores, offering similarly priced items. As opposed to the luxury and mass markets this better represents the perspective of the consumer majority, and also offered more potential

for outlets to use as context. Third, in order to offer a good representation but not overwhelm participants, the number of stores was set at five. Finally, to ensure an adequate discussion on the research topic, the stores were selected to represent different types of in-store experiences. As the literature showed that, in practice, the appreciation of ERE's is an implicit process, we called on expert practitioners to determine this based on their personal experience. This resulted in a final store set which included one Belgian chain, one international chain and three local boutiques. This same context was used for all interviews.

### *Participants*

Representatives from each stakeholder group were interviewed to collect the necessary data. For the retailer group, face-to-face interviews with representatives actively involved in the store design process of the five selected stores were conducted (i.e. three owners, one head of sales and marketing and one creative director), as Table 2 shows.

*(Insert Table 2 about here)*

Five face-to-face interviews were also organized for the retail designer group. Two of the respondents were designers who had worked on three of the selected stores. To provide a more 'unbiased' view, an additional three designers known for their retail design work but with no prior involvement with the selected retailers were invited to participate (see Table 3). [These three designers](#) were asked to familiarize themselves with the five stores prior to the interviews.

*(Insert Table 3 about here)*



Finally, for the [customers](#), a focus group was conducted as the topic is quite field specific and might prove more difficult for them to address in one-on-one interviews. Eight respondents took part in the discussion. They were recruited using a call for participation by mail and social media, which included a link to an online registration questionnaire. This allowed us to select the respondents to ensure they represented (1) the participating retailers' target group (e.g. demographic mix in terms of age and gender plus at least one visit to one of the retailers' stores in the previous year); and (2) a range of shopping motivations. This second criterion was used to account for how customers approach shopping: either as fun or as a task (also referred to as 'run' shopping), and the potential impact this could have on their perception of ERE's (Babin, Darden and Griffin 1994). For this criterion, participants were asked to rate their typical attitude towards shopping on a 7-point differential scale going from 'fun' to 'run'. Table 4 shows the final respondent set. These respondents were asked to visit the selected stores in the month prior to the focus group.

*(Insert Table 4 about here)*

### *Questions*

Using recommended interview techniques, session-specific interview scripts and questions were drafted (Krueger 1998a, 1998b). Although individual question sets were designed for each group (to account for varying interview formats and stakeholder types), each aimed to directly address the first two research questions. First, participants were asked about their familiarity and use of the term 'experiential store' or 'experiential retail environment'. Then, they were asked to define it. In following questions, they were asked if they considered the stores given as context as experiential, if they could also provide additional examples and what their decision criteria were. Finally, they were questioned more specifically about the physical

environment's role and if they could name specific environmental elements which for them triggered experience.

The **customers** as well as designers not involved in the design of the selected stores were asked the questions in the context of the complete store set, while the other designers and retailers were only asked these **questions** in the context of the stores they were involved with. For all interviews, the data collection was done through audio recordings and field notes.

The recordings were transcribed verbatim and combined with additional support material (e.g., notes, photos, forms completed during the interviews) to create the data set for analysis.

### **Data analysis**

Data analysis was conducted manually using a thematic content analysis methodology. This combined both deductive and inductive methods in different steps of the overall analysis process (Elo and Kyngäs 2008; Alhojailan 2012). In a first instance, the three **research questions (RQ's)** were used to deductively guide the analysis process. **As recommended in the 'Focus Group Kit' (Krueger 1998a), the interview scripts were designed so that each RQ was covered through the use of multiple interview questions. The analysis process thus began with an initial review of the data for the purpose of generating lists of terms per interview question and this for each of the stakeholder groups. Once all the lists of terms for each interview question to address a specific RQ were complete, they were combined to create one comprehensive list for each RQ. This was done both per stakeholder group and for all groups together. These **three RQ** lists were **then analyzed more** in depth to inductively identify recurring themes per RQ, first within and then between groups.**

**An additional note should be made on RQ3, relating to the integration of experience in the daily practices of retail professionals. As **customers** are not directly concerned with the**

retail design process but retail professionals would undoubtedly discuss it naturally, **this** third research question was not formulated as such in the interviews. Rather, the data collected for the other questions was analyzed separately to address this specific research question, as the findings below will further exemplify.

## **Findings**

**RQ1:** *“How is the term ‘Experiential Retail Environment’ (ERE) or ‘experiential store’ defined?”*

Although most literature sources build on an implicit understanding, some do provide more solid ground towards setting a definition for the **two** terms. By reviewing these in combination with what surfaced in the empirical study, some commonalities of ‘experiential stores’ and ‘experiential **retail** environments’ were identified. Namely, three defining factors appear to be agreed upon by all source types and concerned stakeholders.

First, an ‘experiential retail environment’ or ‘experiential store’ is one which is ‘more than’. Depending on the sources, **this** refers either to ‘more than’ a traditional/ normal store, ‘more than’ just the offer (product or service) or ‘more than’ what customers expect. The academic sources often combine these different aspects and also include a dimension of grandeur to these retail spaces. For instance, in retail design academia, Borghini et al. refer to an ‘experiential retail environment’ as a place where *“a form of spectacular consumption occurs...It contains a range of myths, narratives and stories that deeply involve the customer”* (Borghini et al. 2009, 365). In marketing literature, the first authors to really provide a clearer view on the meaning for the term ‘experiential store’ are Sachdeva and Goel (2015). In their work, they associate this with one offering *“an enhanced, truly memorable and distinctive shopping experience to its customers”* (Sachdeva and Goel 2015, 293). The examples provided in the practice-based literature also appear to share the view of the above academics on the

spectacular or grandiose nature of these stores. In commenting on one such example, Brown (2017) for instance states: *“The Sweaty Betty store on Carnaby Street is so packed with experiential features it is barely a shop any more – the cafe, studio and beauty area take up well over half of the shop space.”*

This is also a view shared by the retail designers from the empirical study as illustrated here by RD03: *“...the experience should be over the top, should be completely different.”* RD04 stated: *“It should be overwhelming.”* Some of the interviewed retailers also agreed on this point as illustrated by this statement from RE05: *“It’s a store that gives you something to wow, something to look at, something to stop and something to breathe and take in... Like something beyond just... going in, getting it done, getting it paid and taking it out.”* The in-depth discussion held with the participating customers on the matter brought forward some of the same elements as for the other groups – e.g. these stores are ‘more than’ a normal store and/or just the product. However, the data analysis showed this group focused more specifically on how a visit to these stores delivered in comparison to their (varying) expectations. CU08 mentioned: *“To me, once you get the store, like, the position. Ok, I know this is the store. After that, what more they offer me beyond my expectation.”* Such comments would tend to show the participating customers focus first and foremost on how ‘experiential stores’ can meet or exceed their expectations rather than these stores’ grandiose nature as mentioned by the professional sources.

The second defining factor which surfaced throughout the reviewed sources, concerns these stores’ focus on customer experience. The analysis of the empirical data showed this defining factor as the highest in the participating customers’ priorities versus taking a third place for the two retail professional groups. This special attention on customer experience is also supported in the literature. For instance, in marketing academic literature, Healy et al. (2007) suggest that experiential retail environments provide a holistic customer retail

experience through mechanisms allowing flow between static (tangible/ functional aspects of the store) and dynamic elements (customer-staff-store interface) (Healy et al. 2007). This focus on customer experience is also shared in the practice-based sources. For instance, when discussing examples of ‘experiential stores’, Brown (2017) states the following: *“In a bid to lure evermore online centric customers into stores, and once there, offer them a differentiated and personalised experience, retailers are offering a wide range of value-add activities”* (Brown 2017). In retail design academia, Ballantine, Jack and Parsons (2010)–suggest that: *“the experiential retail concept has evolved into a fuller hedonic experience desire for customers, and in this respect an holistic approach which looks to understand the hedonic immersion a customer seeks and experiences because of the atmospherics present is more relevant for today’s shopper environment”* (Ballantine, Jack and Parsons 2010, 642). These authors further conceptualize ‘experiential stores’ by listing characteristics or constructs associated with it such as the notions of ‘hedonic shopping trip’, ‘hedonic experience’, ‘immersion’ and ‘customer relevance’ (Ballantine, Jack and Parsons 2010). This last point seems of particular importance when reviewing the data of the empirical study. In discussing the customer experience focus of these stores, retail designers made repetitive links to customer expectations which they consider highly person-dependent, since these relate to an individual customer’s mindset, needs, fun versus task shopping motivation and personality. For instance, when asked why some stores in the set were not experiential for him, RD04 stated: *“...those stores for me, didn’t respond to my, I think, to my personality... And to my, also my values. And that’s why I didn’t like them.”* Although they did not discuss it in as much detail, the interviewed retailers also shared this view on the high variability of customer profiles which in turn impact their expectations, their in-store experience and finally their appreciation of whether a store is experiential or not. The most striking data in this regard comes from the customers themselves. When asked to select or name experiential stores, the data shows that

although some stores met a high level of agreement regarding their experiential status, a general consensus was never achieved. The variation in views was mostly witnessed in the case of the ‘mid-experiential’ stores in the given store set. In these instances, which stores were considered experiential seemed to be a matter of personal perception.

The third defining factor identified through the combined integrative review of the selected data sources is a strong link to the brand. In the empirical study, this took the first priority for the two retail professional groups. For instance, RD02 said: *“the retail design or the interior design SHOULD make the brand or what they sell, bring it to a higher level.”* Some of the interviewed retail designers also considered the brand and/ or store’s goal in their evaluation process towards naming ‘experiential stores’. For them, two distinct goals exist: product sales or brand building, which is more likely associated with experiential retail environments. Again, though they were less verbose, retailers mainly agreed on the above points. Although not as high in importance as for the retail professional groups, customers also brought forward a link to the brand (identity) in their discussion of the selection criteria for deciding on a store’s experiential status. When asked why she picked a store as experiential, CU02 for instance said: *“It’s more of a brand experience.”* The role played by the brand in defining a store as ‘experiential’ was also appreciated in the different literature sources. This is more explicitly true in the practice-based sources. For instance, Brown (2017) states: *“Many of the services offered a compelling temptation to spend longer in store. Particularly striking were the retailers that captured their brand identity in their services – Burberry’s luxury cafe, for example, and Sweaty Betty’s ‘fitness paradise’”* (Brown, 2017). Although also present in the academic literature, this third factor was mainly brought forward in terms of the customer/ brand relationship and not as much, as above, in regards to translating the brand identity in the space (Borghini et al. 2009; Lin and Yi-Fang 2010; Reinares and Garcia 2012).

In reviewing the above, we see that although these three defining factors are agreed upon throughout the complete set of sources, there are also nuances in approaches which need to be acknowledged. The empirical study, further supported with the literature, has indeed shown that their order of priorities and in-depth meanings vary. **The most significant nuance is perhaps the difference in views between the retail professional sphere and customers as to the first defining factor of the ‘more’ associated with ‘experiential stores.’** As detailed above, whereas the field links these stores to an element of grandeur, customers do not specifically consider this.

To conclude on this research question, it **therefore** appears that two definitions for the terms ‘experiential store/ experiential retail environment’ may be necessary. First, the following may best describe how retail professionals view these spaces: *‘an experiential retail environment or store is one where the store environment/ atmosphere is treated in an enhanced, differentiated and spectacular manner in order to provide a holistic hedonic in-store experience for the customer to connect with the brand beyond the sale of a product or service offer’*. Accounting for the customer viewpoint brings forward this second, more nuanced definition: *‘an experiential retail environment or store is one which provides customers with a holistic branded in-store experience going beyond their (varying) expectations.’*

#### **RQ2: “How is experience triggered in the physical store?”**

As shown in Table 1, ample research, especially in marketing academia, already exists on aspects relating to this RQ. Looking at the **sources selected for review**, it became apparent that quite a number of marketing publications apply a rather conceptual approach by considering how customers process retail experiences. Many either focus on antecedents of the retail experience process (Singh and Singh 2017; Yoon 2013), or try to conceptualize and/ or measure **the customer’s experience** more specifically (Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello 2009;

Bustamante and Rubio 2017; Kim et al. 2011; Klaus and Maklan 2013; Zarantonello and Schmitt 2010). **By contrast, in the retail design publications (both academic and practice-based),** in-store experience seems to be approached as a ‘whole’, integrating merged considerations about **the experience triggers in the physical store** and the customer’s own personal experience with these triggers. The sources reviewed propose visualizations, scenarios and/ or good practice examples for ‘ideal’ in-store experiences. For instance, Mroz (2018) says the following: *“To wow shoppers, experiential retailers are employing colorful displays and showmanship in their in-store environments.... Apple continues to lead in experiential retail, spending hundreds of millions on stores worldwide, including a new Milan Apple Store that will feature an outdoor amphitheater for hosting cultural events.”*

**In the empirical study, all** three participating stakeholder groups agreed that in-store experience is created through a combination of: staff/ service (most important to the participating customers), environment (second for customers; most important and sometimes sole focus for the participating retail designers) and offer (most important to retailers). The following three quotes from the different stakeholder groups illustrate these different priorities: *“The experience of a store means... the store location and uh, uh, arrangement of these (product) icons and the behaviour of the store peoples means uh, like when we enter they will greet or when you leave the store, then they repeat a nod.”* - CU06. *“I think good... shops, first you, you can only absorb the, like the interior and the feeling.”* – RD02. *“We believe that uh, when you speak about a consumer experience, the main thing in each company is the product.”*– RE01. All groups further agreed it is important to create a ‘whole experience’, meaning one where the above store experience components are considered together. CU06 stated: *“Well, if you talk about experience, that, I think so, that’s a broad term that includes everything.”* **For all three groups interviewed, in-store experience also appears to be tightly connected to customer feelings and emotions. Although similar associated feelings were**



mentioned by the different interviewed groups, each tended to favor one particular term: difference/ uniqueness (most overall and favored by the customers), novelty (retail professionals, especially retailers, but less so by customers) and discovery/ mystery (only retail professionals and more particularly designers). To illustrate this point, RD04 said: *“It’s an experience in a way that you uh, discover things and you’re triggered.”* While RE02 stated: *“If you’re talking about the REGULAR customer, uh, for us it is the challenge to surprise them and, and offer them everyday something new.”* All three notions, though slightly different, can be related back to the feeling of ‘experiencing something unexpected’. Finally, for retail professionals, creating a ‘whole experience’ is also linked to design and operational considerations and more particularly finding the right balance between functional (flow, routing) and experiential store (sensory design, digital elements) design elements.

When discussing the role played by the physical environment in triggering customer in-store experiences lower levels of agreement between groups appeared, probably due to each group’s specific background and focus and/ or the variations in approaches within each retail professional group. The data analysis shows that designers place a lot more importance on this topic than the retailers, while customers did not think about this at all. One role which both designers and retailers agreed upon is that the environment can enhance the brand or offer. RD01 for instance stated: *“...about the store itself, it, it’s nice that the furniture is not prominent. That uh, like, the products are more important.”*

Critically reviewing all of the above brings forth our main conclusions on RQ2. Throughout all source types, there appears to be a two-level view on the topic of how in-store experience is triggered. A higher, more conceptual level considers the customer’s own personal and mostly internal (i.e. perceptions) experience process (for instance the sense of difference), and a lower, more tangible level which focuses on tangible elements which can trigger this

customer experience (i.e.: functional store design factors such as furniture and displays or experiential ones such as digital elements).

**RQ3:** *“In practice, where do experiential considerations fit in the day-to-day processes of retail designers?”*

RQ3 comprises two aspects. First, what are the project phases a retail designer typically follows to generate a store concept? Second, identifying where ‘experience’ considerations fit within this process.

In marketing academia only two sources were identified on the topic of the ‘retail design process’. The first approached this purely from a managerial perspective calling for the (retail) design process to be integrated in a retail firm’s business strategy (Montana, Guzman and Moll 2007). The second source, from Seifer (2007), did provide more practical information though less detailed than that found in the retail design field specific literature. Indeed, in retail design academia, there are multiple valuable studies looking specifically at various aspects of the retail design process from the practitioner’s perspective. For example, Kent (2007) focuses on creativity in the scope of the retail design process, while Morone (2016) looks at (brand) concept books as a tool used in this process. Only one article provided a comprehensive review of the design process (Claes, Quartier and Vanrie 2016). These authors worked with twenty-seven retail designers to develop the ‘retail design process model’. This visualization was meant to be as exhaustive as possible a representation of a holistic retail design process illustrating how active designers see their day-to-day practices. As this model remains, to our knowledge, the most comprehensive representation of the practicing retail designers’ view on their design processes, it was used as a foundation to address the second aspect of RQ3, on the management of ‘experience’ in the daily practices of retail designers.

As the model itself does not make it clear where experience fits within this process, further analysis was conducted in the previously collected sources to identify where experience integration would appear to fit in comparison to Claes, Quartier and Vanrie (2016)'s work. As shared in the findings for RQ2, the topic of 'experience' tends to be addressed in a two-level manner, a higher and more 'conceptual' level and a second, lower level focusing on the tangible factors. In retail design publications, this second approach often seems to be favored. This was also confirmed by both retail professional groups in the empirical study. First, none of the participating retail designers seemed to have a specific approach to experience as part of their day-to-day practices. RD02 stated: *"In a way, we just start like, working or something. It's not that, that we start with the client: ah, we got to create an experience!"* Multiple similar comments would show that currently designers are adding experiential factors after the concept generation. Comments made also suggest that often these considerations are left to the retailers, each taking their own approach, something which did not transpire in the literature.

## **Conclusions**

The combined review of the different literature sources and the view from the field gathered through the various stakeholder interviews lead us to the following conclusions. First, we were able to identify three defining characteristics of an 'ERE'. However, we have also seen variations in the understanding and appreciation of this term. Thus, when using it, careful consideration must be given regarding the audience it is aimed at.

Second, the combined literature and empirical studies have confirmed that in-store experience is either discussed at a higher level relating to customer perceptions (e.g. emotions, expectations) or at a lower more tangible level through specific store elements (e.g. furniture, digital integration). The empirical study specifically has added to this two-level conceptualization by making a connection between the levels and providing a clearer picture

of the key elements to consider at the lower more tangible level. In short, the combined empirical data shows that in-store experience is generated through a combination of staff, environment and product which should aim to generate something the customer does not expect (e.g. perceptions of difference, novelty, discovery). The environment should more specifically contribute to this by appropriately balancing experiential (e.g. atmosphere, storytelling) and traditional (e.g. operational / functional) store design elements.

Third, the interviews have provided clarifications on how experience is currently being considered as part of the day-to-day processes of practicing retail designers, at least in this particular context. It seems that in most cases the ‘traditional’ way of working (cfr. Claes, Quartier and Vanrie, 2016), is still (at least partly) being applied and that as a result experience is often considered only once the concept has been generated. This is also what was found in the literature. This would therefore lead to the conclusion that currently retail professionals are designing stores which integrate experiential factors but not specifically designing experiential store concepts as such. The interviews have further shown that experiential considerations seem to be led by the retailers and that each has a different view and approach to it.

Overall, we can conclude that although there appears to be a consensus on the need for in-store experience in the fashion retail sector, as well as on what this means and how it can be generated, there is still a lack of translation in practice. As the focus on in-store experience is only growing, we would therefore suggest that retail designers need to reconsider their design methods to more explicitly integrate experiential considerations. Based on the above, we would more specifically question whether experiential considerations should not materialize in the pre-concept phase versus the post-concept ones.

## Contributions, limitations & further research

With this research, we have contributed to the existing knowledge base in multiple ways. First, to practice, the results offer a more comprehensive view on what ERE's in the fashion sector are, how they are created and how this relates to the day-to-day considerations of retail designers. It points out potential adjustments to the current ways of working (e.g. when to consider experiential considerations in the retail design process). Second, to academic knowledge, it adds to the still limited retail design theory. More specifically a definition of an ERE in the fashion sector, though with consideration to the audience, is set out.

Still, multiple questions remain and we propose some research lines for future studies. First, as regards this research project specifically, limitations linked to the selected research context (Belgium) and sets of respondents need to be acknowledged. As such, multiple similar studies should be conducted internationally to gather a more complete picture and generalize results. It would be interesting to look at contexts which are very similar but also to compare more traditionally operated retailers with the opposite end of the 'experiential spectrum' looking at the newest fashion retail formats. Second, our study highlighted the need to reconsider current design methods, but not how. Indeed, extra practice-oriented research is needed which would provide more guidance and support for retail designers on how best to integrate experience as part of their day-to-day processes. Finally, this research project formalized at the very start of the Covid-19 pandemic. This had a major impact on the retail landscape, and as it is still an open question what will be the longer-term implications, future research should definitely take this into account.

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## Tables

Table 1. Research conducted in the academic databases between February and September 2018

RQ	Search terms	ACADEMIC SOURCES			
		Initial results	Steps taken to select sources (i.e. exclusion criteria)		Sources selected
			Retail Design academic sources	Marketing academic sources	
1	Experiential retail environment	31	Step 1: limit to publication date between January 2003 and September 2018 Step 2: excluding repeats of the same sources found in different databases Step 3: excluding publications which were NOT either academic journal papers or book chapters Step 4: excluding sources NOT In English Step 5: excluding sources that did not focus on physical retail Step 6: running a word check in the entire publication to guarantee the use of the exact term sought		4
	Experiential store AND physical	138			14
2	Experience AND retail design	3188		Step 1: limit to publication date between January 2003 and September 2018	27



	Physical experiential retail AND creation	1	<p>Step 1: limit to publication date between January 2003 and September 2018</p> <p>Step 2: excluding repeats of the same sources found in different databases</p> <p>Step 3: As the amount of publications in this source type was more limited, all academic references were considered also including conference proceedings and PhD dissertations.</p> <p>Step 4: excluding sources NOT In English</p> <p>Step 5: excluding sources that did not focus on physical retail</p>	<p>Step 2: excluding repeats of the same sources found in different databases</p> <p>Step 3: I sought to identify either papers offering a comprehensive summary of existing knowledge on the topic or publications by 'experts' in the field (number of references) due to the large amount</p> <p>Step 4: excluding publications which were NOT either academic journal papers or book chapters</p> <p>Step 5: excluding sources NOT In English</p> <p>Step 6: checking the title and abstract to ensure the relevance to the retail design approach of the study at hand</p>	
	Physical experiential retail AND design	0			
	In-store experience AND creation	2623			
	In-store experience AND design	3462			
3	Retail design process	44	<p>Step 1: publication date between January 2003 and September 2018.</p> <p>Step 2: excluding repeats of the same sources in the diverse databases</p> <p>Step 3: excluding publications which were NOT either academic journal papers or book chapters</p> <p>Step 4: excluding sources NOT In English</p> <p>Step 5: excluding sources that did not focus on physical retail</p> <p>Step 6: running a word check in the entire publication to guarantee the use of the exact term sought.</p>		9

Table 2. Retailer participants

Study reference	M/F	Role within the retailer organization	Approx. years of professional experience*
RE01	M	Brand owner	-
RE02	M	Brand owner	28
RE03	M	Head of sales and marketing	12
RE04	F	Brand owner	10
RE05	M	Creative services director	30

\* This data was found via the participants' LinkedIn profiles.

Table 3. Focus retail designer participants

Study reference	M/F	Worked on the design of	Trained as <sup>o</sup>	Approx. years of professional experience*
RD01	F	Store 4 (collaboration with RE04)	Retail designer	2
RD02	M	Stores 1 & 2 (collaboration with RE01 & RE02)	Interior Architect	19
RD03	M	-	Industrial Designer	17
RD04	M	-	Graphic Designer	19
RD05	F	-	Interior Architect	23

<sup>o</sup> This data surfaced during the interviews. \* This data was found via the participants' LinkedIn profiles.

Table 4. Focus group participants

Study reference	M/F	Age	Frequency of visits to the stores in the past year					Shopping motiv.	
			Store 1	Store 2	Store 3	Store 4	Store 5	0=Fun <	> Run=7
CU01*	F	18-24	never	never	ever. few wk	never	once	1	
CU02*	F	18-24	a few times	a few times	ever. few mo	once	a few times	0	
CU03	F	25-34	never	never	ever. few wk	never	ever. few wk	5	
CU04	F	35-44	never	never	ever. few mo	once	a few times	3	
CU05	M	25-34	never	never	a few times	never	once	0	
CU06	M	25-34	once	a few times	ever. few mo	once	ever. few mo	6	
CU07	M	35-44	never	a few times	a few times	once	a few times	6	
CU08	M	35-44	once	never	never	never	a few times	1	

*\* During the discussion, it surfaced that these two respondents were marketing students with some pre-existing knowledge of the notions under review. This represents a limitation to acknowledge.*